


Bridging the Digital Gap in Algerian Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities of E-Learning at Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella University

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Abstract

As Algerian universities transitioned to remote learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the challenges faced by students in e-learning environments has become crucial to discern the specific hurdles and subsequently address them. To gain insights into these obstacles, an online questionnaire was conducted among undergraduate students belonging to the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature at Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella University, comprising a total of 182 participants. The present descriptive research yielded a number of satisfactory results, indicating that students have the ability and adaptability to cope with e-learning, especially when addressing the obstacles encountered by the majority of the learners, notably: poor Internet connectivity, lack of training, procrastination and insufficient engagement on the part of some learners. In addition to identifying these challenges, the study aimed to explore students' perceptions of the effectiveness of e-learning tools and platforms used during the remote learning period. The results suggest that although students faced technical and motivational difficulties, many of them developed autonomous learning skills and demonstrated a positive attitude toward digital education. However, the lack of continuous technical support and limited interaction with instructors were reported as factors that negatively affected learning outcomes. The findings also reveal disparities in students' access to digital resources, which influenced their level of participation and academic performance. These results underline the importance of institutional support, teacher training, and the integration of interactive teaching strategies to enhance students' engagement. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for sustainable e-learning policies that address both technological and pedagogical dimensions in order to improve the overall quality of higher education in Algerian universities.

Keywords; Adaptability; Algerian context; Challenges; E-learning; Success factors,

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Introduction

The advent of e-learning has transformed the landscape of education, offering new opportunities for remote learning and virtual instruction. This latter has become an increasingly popular method of education in Algeria, specifically since the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many educational institutions to shift to online modes of instruction. Despite this progress, significant challenges remain, particularly in understanding students' perceptions and the hurdles they encountered during their e-learning journey. This represents a critical research problem, as such insights are essential for improving the effectiveness of e-learning in Algerian Higher Education. Addressing this gap is pivotal for enhancing e-learning practices and ensuring that students receive the necessary support to succeed in virtual learning environments. By focusing on the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, this study highlights the specific difficulties faced by students while learning online, contributing valuable information to both educators and policymakers. This study aims to explore the perceptions of first-year and master's students regarding their e-learning experience during the 2021/2022 academic year, identify the main challenges they faced, compares experiences from 2019–2020 and 2021–2022, and assesses students' adaptability and progress.

The study seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the main perceptions of students regarding e-learning in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature?
- What challenges and obstacles did students face during their e-learning journey?
- To what extent do the e-learning experiences of 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 differ or align?
- What factors contribute to students' adaptability and the success of e-learning in this context?

A descriptive methodology was adopted, encompassing a total of 183 students from the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature during the academic year 2021/2022. Both first-year and master's students were surveyed to share their perceptions and highlight the difficulties they confronted. Data were collected via an online questionnaire, and comparisons were made with responses from a similar study conducted during the 2019/2020 academic year (Sarradj 2022, p67). The focus was on the English module, which was delivered entirely online, designed in the same way and instructed by the same tutor. By analysing students' feedback, this research aims to shed light on e-learning challenges and identify key factors that can improve its effectiveness in Algerian higher education.

1. Literature Review

E-learning, also known as online learning or digital learning, is a mode of education where electronic media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are used to deliver and support learning. E-learning can take many forms, such as online courses, webinars, podcasts, and virtual classrooms (Matar N. Hunaiti Z. Halling S. & Matar Š. 2011, p184)

E-learning has roots that can be traced back to the early 20th century when schools began using radio broadcasts to deliver educational content to students who could not attend classes in person. In the 1960s, computer-based training programs emerged, and by the 1980s, schools and universities began using CD-ROMs to deliver educational content (Kentnor 2015, p27).

However, it was not until the late 1990s, with the advent of Internet, that e-learning really began to take off. Online courses and virtual classrooms became possible, and learning management systems were developed to facilitate the creation and delivery of online courses. The Internet has indeed revolutionized e-learning by making it possible for learners to access educational resources and interact with teachers and classmates from anywhere in the world (Kentnor 2015, p22).

According to Traifeh (2019, p. 1), although public education is free in most Arab countries, the educational systems often fail to adequately prepare students for the job market or equip them with the skills needed to thrive in a globalized world. He argues that instructional methods remain teacher-centered and do not foster critical or analytical thinking. In this context, Traifeh emphasizes

that adopting e-learning technologies is crucial, as they offer potential solutions to many of these challenges.

Indeed, digital technology and the Internet have had an impact on education in the Arab region. In 2011, two initiatives, The Aldarayn Academy and The Arab E-learning Academy, were established to provide video-recorded lessons that were uploaded to a YouTube channel. Later, several MOOC platforms that target Arabic speakers emerged, including Edraak, which was launched in 2013 as an initiative of Queen Rania Foundation in Jordan. Edraak provides free online courses, including originally created courses and translated versions of edX courses. Other popular MOOC platforms that offer courses in Arabic include Riwaq, KKUx, and Doroob (Traifeh 2019, p2).

1.1 Transitioning to E-learning in Algeria: Background and Challenges

Historically, remote learning in Algerian Higher Education was introduced by the University of Continuing Education (UFC) instituted in 1990 (Journal-officiel 1990). This University provided high school pupils who did not pass their baccalaureate exam or were unable to pursue higher education in a conventional university an opportunity to do it remotely. Initially, the UFC used printed correspondence courses to deliver its programs, focusing on three main fields: history, mathematics, and accountancy. Later, the University adopted radio and television as means of delivering distance education. In 2005, the UFC started incorporating modern techniques of remote learning, including the use of online platforms such as Ifada, which was developed by an Algerian computer science student (Bouachour 2018, p 353).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic propagation in March 2019, education has been affected worldwide, including Algeria. With the closure of schools and universities to alleviate the spread of the virus, distance learning has emerged as a prominent instructive mode in Algeria during this difficult period. Before the onset of the crisis, remote learning was not a widespread practice in Algeria, and the integration of technology in education had been limited in its scope and application.

During the COVID-19 pandemic; however, higher education institutions rapidly shifted to e-learning to continue delivering education remotely. Many Algerian universities adopted various e-learning modalities, including e-learning platforms, virtual lectures, and social media to facilitate remote learning for students. Yet, the adoption of this new mode of instruction was a risky step due to the distinctiveness of the whole experience.

Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning and online learning became exceptionally recognized in all Algerian universities. Prior to this lockdown period, it was uncommon for university teachers to deliver instruction electronically or remotely to their students. The Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) has taken concrete steps to ensure continuity of learning by issuing two ministerial decrees, namely n°633 on 26 August 2020 and n°055 on 21 January 2021, which officially acknowledged distance education and hybrid education as recognized forms of learning in all Algerian universities (MESRS 2020, MESRS 2021).

However, this unexpected conversion to online education encountered multiple challenges.

Some of the faced obstacles include:

- Limited infrastructure and technology: despite multiple efforts displayed by the Algerian government to modernize the sector of higher education on both administrative and educational levels, Algerian Higher Education Institutions still face challenges in terms of limited technological infrastructure, including inadequate Internet connectivity and lack of access to necessary e-learning tools and resources (Bellatrache and Aloutti 2020, p275).
- Pedagogical adaptation: teachers had to adapt their teaching methods to the online environment, which required training and support to design and deliver effective e-learning materials and

assessments, and the majority of teachers received no prior training (Khattala and Houichi 2021, p1202).

- Digital literacy skills: some students and instructors may lack the necessary digital skills to effectively navigate and utilize e-learning platforms and tools, and aged teachers usually have more difficulties in dealing with digital devices (Elottri and Gasmi 2022, p535).
- Cultural and social factors: Algerian Higher Education Institutions may also face challenges related to cultural and social factors, such as resistance to change, lack of awareness and acceptance of e-learning among teachers and students (Benadla and Hadji 2021, p61).

Algerian higher education institutions have implemented various strategies to address these challenges, such as providing free access to universities' e-learning platforms—primarily Moodle—during the pandemic, and working to improve the digital skills of both teachers and students. Yet, did students continue to accept and engage with this newly adopted mode of instruction after the COVID-19 pandemic?

This study aims to shed light on the main challenges students faced while learning English remotely during the gradual return to face-to-face instruction in 2021-2022. The goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of these obstacles and develop effective plans to address them in the future.

2. Methodology

The present study was conducted via an online questionnaire designed by Google Forms to collect data on the perceptions and challenges faced by students while implementing e-learning for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Algerian higher education. The data collected through the online opinion poll were then analyzed using Excel for quantitative analysis. Additionally, qualitative analysis was conducted to further examine open-ended responses provided by the participants.

The present study aimed to address mainly the following issues:

- What factors facilitated students' registration and account creation on e-learning platforms, and how do these reflect their overall perception of online learning?
- What specific difficulties did students face while engaging in online courses and assessments?
- How did students evaluate their remote learning experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how did these differ from those in 2019–2020?
- Which modes of learning and evaluation did students prefer, and what do these preferences reveal about their adaptability?

2.1 Research Design

The online questionnaire was completed by 182 participants, the majority of whom were female, representing 87.4% of the sample. The group consisted of 142 first-year students and 40 master's students from two specialties: Applied Linguistics and Modern and Contemporary Arabic Criticism. All participants were from the same department and accessed the English module exclusively through the university's Moodle platform, including lessons, exercises, and final evaluations.

Before enrollment, proactive measures were implemented to streamline the student registration process. These included creating and publishing a YouTube video on how to use the platform, organizing a face-to-face session to resolve any registration challenges, and establishing a Facebook group to provide ongoing support for students.

As for the course design, the following criteria were considered to enhance the learning experience:

- Each lesson included a diagram, a recorded explanation, and a manuscript for comprehensive understanding.
- Auto-evaluative exercises were provided after each lesson to assess students' progress.

- Regular reminders were sent to students to complete their tasks, stay motivated, and be informed of any updates or additions.
- Instructions were attached to each task to clarify the number of attempts, the exercise duration, and the deadline, which was usually one week.
- Feedback and corrections were delivered immediately after the closure of each exercise.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The online questionnaire was published on the university's e-learning platform after the end of the first semester, and students were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions, which allowed participants to provide both quantitative and qualitative responses related to the challenges encountered in EFL e-learning experience. The data collection period lasted for four weeks during the academic year 2021/2022, and reminders were sent to participants to increase response rates.

Quantitative data collected from the closed-ended questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis to identify common patterns related to the obstacles faced by EFL students. Ethical considerations were also taken into consideration, and participants were informed about the study's objective, and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

3. Results and Discussion

The study's results indicated that out of the 182 participants 162 used their smartphones to attend the online lessons, possibly for their convenience, as smartphones can easily be accessed anytime and anywhere.

Additionally, the study found that 163 out of 182 participants reported that online learning was a novel experience for them, indicating that a significant proportion of the participants had no previous experience in remote learning.

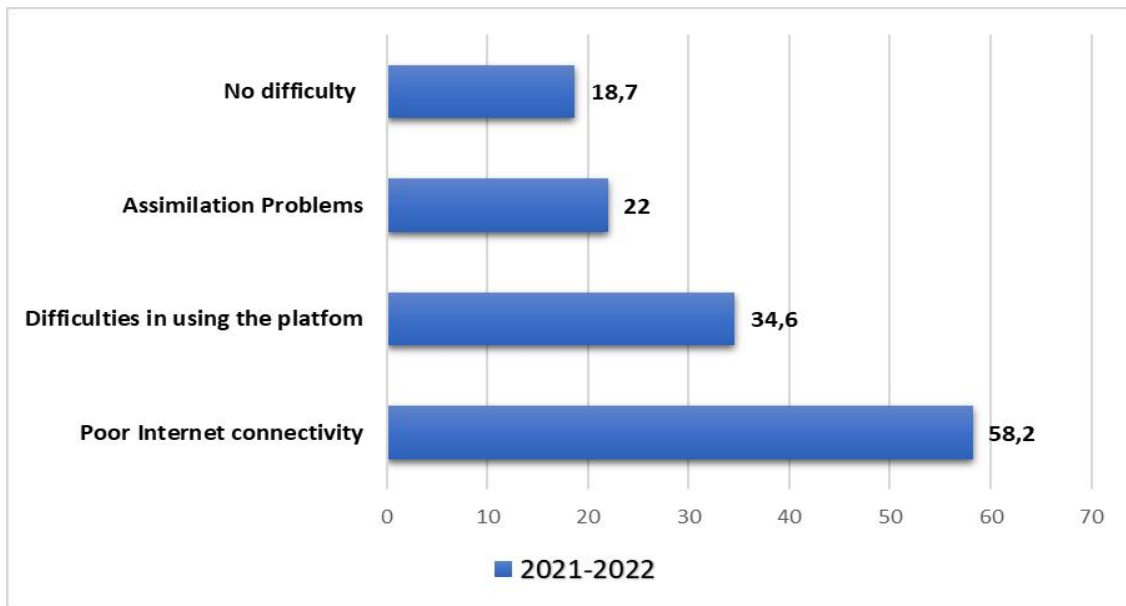
Regarding students' registration on the platform, the majority (67.6%) responded that they completed the process independently, relying on the explanatory video on YouTube (57.1%) and the Facebook group (36.3%) created by the instructor. These findings suggest that students may require some support to facilitate their registration process.

Concerning learners' computer skills, most of them rated their computer proficiency as moderate (56.6%), while (21.4%) described it as poor. These results suggest that limited computer proficiency may negatively affect online learning, as 20.3% of participants did not even have an email prior to the experience.

Likewise, Arsyad et al. (2023) explored the effect of digital literacy skills and learning motivation on students' online learning outcomes in Indonesia. The study found that digital literacy skills accounted for a 90% influence on online learning outcomes, while learning motivation accounted for an 88% influence. The combined impact of both variables on online learning outcomes was 82%, highlighting the significant role of digital literacy in student success.

Students were also invited to select the primary obstacles they faced while studying online. Three main problems were identified: poor Internet connectivity, difficulties in navigating the platform and some comprehension problems (see Fig.1).

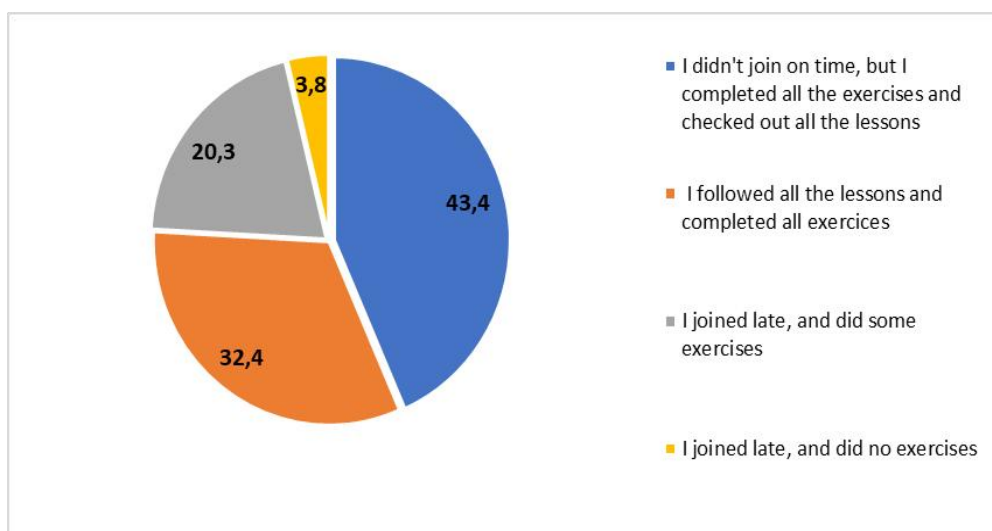
Figure 1: Students' obstacles while learning online



Indeed, same findings were identified in the first study that was carried out in 2019-2020; yet, with some improvements especially in navigating the platform with an amelioration of (11.2%) and in assimilating the lessons with an improvement of (32.1%) (Sarradj 2022, p67). These results suggest that students need ongoing encouragement to engage with and understand this learner-centered mode of instruction. Similar observations were highlighted by another study that was carried out at Saida University, which tried to analyze 157 master students' perception on online learning. The study deduced that students complained mainly about frequent technical problems while utilizing the platform, lack of prior knowledge of online learning and the challenge of Internet connectivity in rural areas (Benadla 2021, p 62, 63, 66).

Concerning students' assimilation problems, the obtained results showed that (24.1%) of the participants did not follow the online lessons on a regular basis (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Attendance and exercise completion



Based on the results shown in Fig. 2 it is evident that limited engagement during online learning can hinder students' ability to absorb and retain the material. As a matter of fact, e-learning is a self-directed type of learning that promotes flexibility and autonomy (Ghounane 2020, p29). That is, the learner has the freedom to choose when to learn, how to learn and where to learn, making him responsible for his own learning process. However, this freedom may engender procrastination, leading students to submit rushed and unfinished assignments, and consequently obtaining lower grades and decreasing their perception about the whole experience (Goda 2015, p 72).

Student responses to the survey question on lesson and assessment difficulty provide insightful trends; it was observed that 76.9% of participants reported that the lessons were easy to follow, attributing this to the availability of recorded explanations. This finding suggests that incorporating varied and accessible instructional materials can enhance learners' comprehension and engagement. Moreover, 81.3% of students found the assessments to be easy, though they noted that completing them required focused attention. These results underline the importance of thoughtful content design in supporting an effective and pleasant e-learning experience.

Overall, pertaining to students' evaluation about their e-learning journey, the majority rated it positively indicating an encouraging reception despite the multiple encountered challenges (see Fig.3).

Figure 3: Evaluation scale of students' e-learning perception

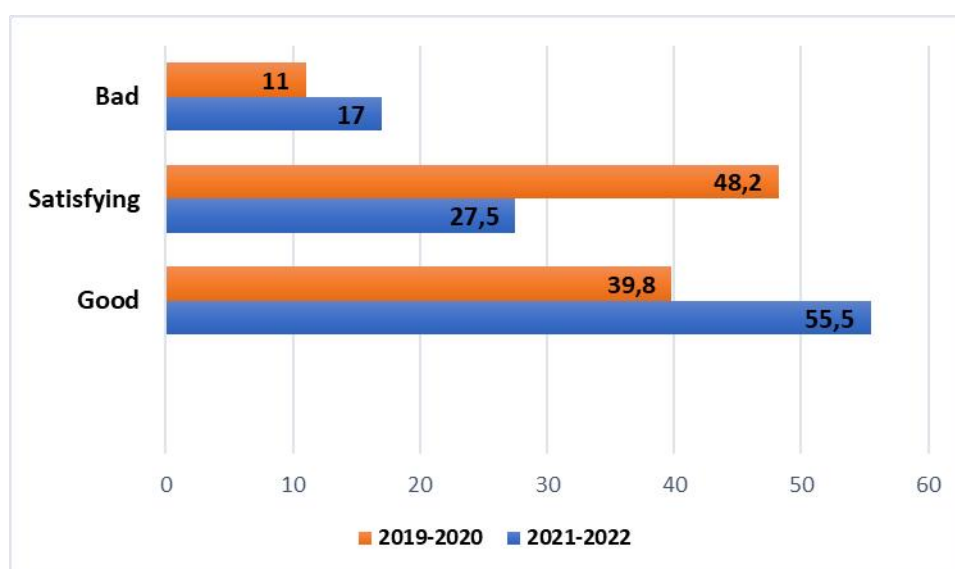


Figure 3 illustrates students' overall evaluations of their e-learning experiences during the academic years 2019–2020 and 2021–2022. A notable improvement is observed in the “Good” category, which rose from 39.8% in 2019–2020 to 55.5% in 2021–2022, suggesting a significant enhancement in students' satisfaction over time. Conversely, the percentage of students who found the experience merely “Satisfying” decreased from 48.2% to 27.5%, indicating that many students who were previously moderately satisfied shifted to a more favorable view. Interestingly, the proportion of students who rated their experience as “Bad” increased slightly, from 11% to 17%, highlighting that while overall perceptions improved, a portion of learners continued to face challenges. These shifts reflect both the progress made and the areas that still require attention to ensure a more inclusive and effective e-learning environment.

Regarding the factors contributing to the success of e-learning, students insisted on the following requirements:

- Train students on how to use the platform at the beginning of the academic year (55.5%).
- Improve Internet quality to enhance access and reduce connectivity issues (48.9%).

- Organize occasional in-person sessions with instructors (48.8%).
- Provide supportive facilities, such as an Internet café within the department (45.1%).
- Train students’ representatives and appoint volunteers to assist their peers (12.1%).

Last but not least, students were also asked to vote for their favorite type of learning. The preferred mode of instruction chosen by most of the respondents was the hybrid type of learning as it was the case in the first survey (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Students’ favorite type of learning

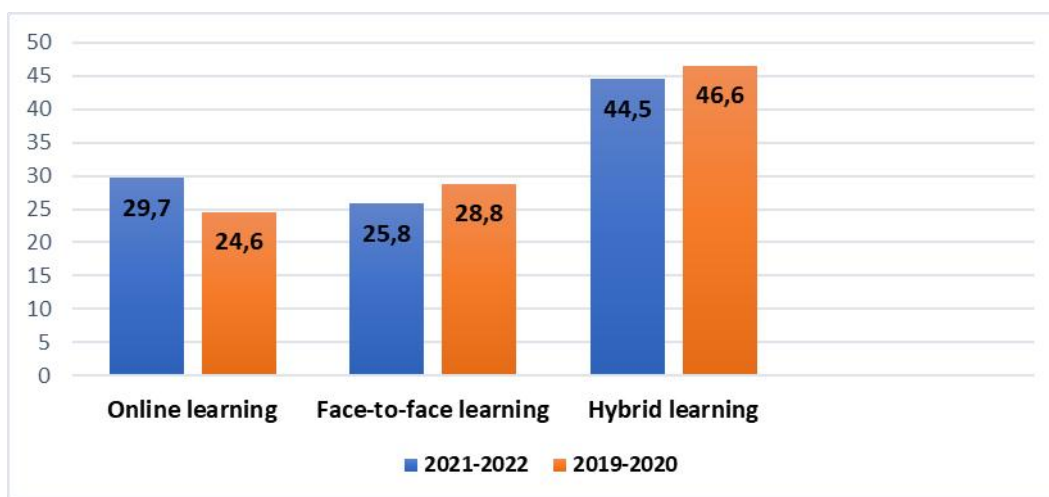


Figure 4 demonstrates students' preferences for different learning modes—online, face-to-face, and hybrid—across the academic years 2019–2020 and 2021–2022. Hybrid learning emerged as the most preferred mode in both years, with 46.6% of students favoring it in 2019–2020 and 44.5% in 2021–2022. This consistent preference highlights students' appreciation for the flexibility and balance that hybrid learning offers (Sutisna 2020, p 104). Online learning showed a slight increase in preference, rising from 24.6% in 2019–2020 to 29.7% in 2021–2022, suggesting growing comfort and familiarity with digital platforms. In contrast, face-to-face learning remained relatively stable, with 28.8% preferring it in 2019–2020 and 25.8% in 2021–2022. Overall, the data reflect a shift in students' learning preferences toward more flexible and technology-integrated approaches, likely influenced by their experiences during the pandemic.

Conclusion

E-learning is a relatively new concept in Algeria and is still evolving. Its success requires time, effort, and adequate resources. Despite the challenges encountered by students at the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, during their online English language experience, the obtained results serve as clear evidence of human adaptability and resilience. Overall, it can be said that online learning has been well-received by the majority of students during their first and second experiences alike. Despite students' concerns about absence of adequate equipment, poor Internet connectivity and lack of training, they were able to embrace the experience, acquire new skills, and keep up with technological advancements. In the future, ensuring effective e-learning will require sustained support, appropriate infrastructure, and a gradual shift through the adoption of hybrid education. Furthermore, the findings indicate that students gradually developed greater autonomy and responsibility for their own learning, which contributed to improving their digital literacy and time-management skills. Many learners reported increased familiarity with online platforms and communication tools, allowing them to

participate more actively in virtual classrooms. However, the transition also highlighted the need for continuous pedagogical guidance and technical assistance to maximize learning outcomes. The role of instructors remains crucial in designing engaging online activities and providing timely feedback. Additionally, institutional policies must prioritize equitable access to digital resources to reduce disparities among learners. By addressing these factors, Algerian universities can benefit from students' positive attitudes toward e-learning and transform emergency remote teaching into a sustainable educational model that complements traditional face-to-face instruction.

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