

# The Emerging of Online Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Response to COVID-19 Case Study: EFL Classes at the University of HBB, Algeria

ظهور التعليم عبر الإنترنت في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية نتيجة  
كوفيد 19

فصول اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الشلف نموذجاً

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## Abstract

The present work directs the limelight on the experience of teachers and learners at the English department at the University of Hassiba Ben Bouali, Algeria, with online education as an inevitable measure in response to the Corona virus pandemic. While several institutions had already been accustomed to E-learning, others were new to the online learning environment. Albeit the fact that E-learning has become widely used in the 21st century, Algerian higher education faced several hurdles in meeting the urgent needs for E-learning after the outbreak of COVID-19. In connection with this matter, the article examines the online teaching/learning experience of English language teachers and learners at Hassiba Ben Bouali University in Algeria, conducting a survey directed towards teachers and students. The study revealed that both teachers and learners at the English department were not satisfied with the experience of E-learning, facing several challenges and constraints. Among these were the lack of ICTs, poor access to the net, and other obstacles. In an attempt to improve the Algerian teachers' and learners' experience with E-learning, the work presents a set of ventures aimed at enhancing the online education environment.

**Key-words:** Online Learning, High Education, English as a Foreign Language, Corona virus, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

## الملخص

يهدف العمل الى تسليط الضوء على تجربة كل من أساتذة وطلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة حسيبة بن بوعلي بالجزائر مع التعلم عن بعد كإجراء وقائي ضد الوباء المنتشر كوفيد 19. على الرغم من الانتشار الواسع للتعليم عن بعد بمختلف المؤسسات التعليمية فان بعض منها لا تمتلك أي تجربة سابقة. فبرغم ان التعليم الالكتروني أصبح واسع النطاق فقد واجه التعليم العالي بالجزائر العديد من الصعوبات في تلبية الاحتياجات المستعجلة والضرورية للتعليم عن بعد خاصة في ظل الانتشار الرهين لكوفيد 19. وهذا الصدد يتناول المقال تجربة أساتذة وطلبة قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة حسيبة بن بوعلي مع التعليم عن بعد من خلال استبيان موجه لكلا الطرفين. وقد كشفت الدراسة عن عدم رضا غالبية الأساتذة والطلبة عن تجربتهم وذلك راجع الى عدة صعوبات وعراقيل. من بين اهم

العراقيل نقص الكفاءات في تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات. وبغرض تحسين الوضعية وتدارك النواقص يقدم العمل مجموعة من الاقتراحات التي من شأنها تحسين التعليم عن بعد.  
الكلمات الدالة: التعلم الإلكتروني، التعليم العالي، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة اجنبية، فيروس كورونا، تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصالات.

## **1. Introduction**

Besides the traditional methods of learning, various higher education institutions have been involved in online learning. Due to the new restrictive measures against the Coronavirus that required social distancing and confinement, E-learning has become an inevitable procedure. Given their unprecedented experience, many Algerian educational institutions have faced challenges and limitations in launching effective e-learning programs. The switchover to online education has been met with great difficulty among both teachers and learners. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Algeria took a number of distance learning initiatives. However, the scarcity of resources combined with the lack of experience in ICTs slowed the pace of the e-learning process. With regard to the importance of online learning, mainly due to the current conditions under COVID-19, the present work examines the situation and aims at providing suitable resolutions. It addresses the following questions: first, what are the different constraints and limitations faced by EFL teachers and learners in online education? Second, what are the possible solutions to improve the online education environment? Hence, this article incorporated two main hypotheses. First, EFL teachers and learners were not accustomed to using ICTs and lacked basic materials, which made their experience with online education difficult. Second, to overcome these hurdles, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research should take into consideration a set of regulations to improve both teachers' and learners' E-learning conditions. Besides, teachers and students should take into account the set of recommendations provided by educators who are experienced in online education.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Use of ICTs in Teaching/Learning English as a Foreign language in Higher Education Institutions**

The evolution of online learning in education dates back to the 1960s, during which the use of technological tools in teaching and learning occurred (Fernández-Manjón, Sánchez-Pérez, Gómez-Pulido, Vega-Rodríguez,

&Bravo-Rodríguez, 2007, p. 1). Perceived differently, E-learning has received various definitions. Muneer Abbad and David Morris went as broad as to define E-learning "to any learning that is electronically enabled" (2009, p.2). Besides, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) combined e-learning with using information and communications technology (ICT) to enhance and support various educational processes (2005). Simply, Bryn Holmes and John Garden defined e-learning as "online access to learning resources, anywhere and anytime" (2006, p14). That is to say, the combination and convergence of highly developed information and communication technologies, including live broadcasts, mobile video, and audio telecommunications, 3D graphics, emails, the web object-oriented interfaces, to create and produce an effective educational environment and material (Ibid).

Despite their diverging explanations, all educators agree on the disproportionate role of Information and Communications Technologies in E-learning. This led to a widespread need among teachers, mainly those engaged in E-learning, to acquire, at least, basic knowledge of ICTs (Soong, 2012, p. 88).

Several higher education institutions have adopted E-learning to enhance teaching and learning. While primarily centered on computers, E-learning has also relied on mobile devices connected to the Internet. To support specific pedagogical requirements, higher education institutions have adopted a wide range of technologies. Technological tools used in E-learning include, but not limited to, asynchronous communication tools; such as Email and the discussion forum, and assessment and survey tools, including quiz, survey tools, and eExaminations. Besides, there are management and administration tools that are used for administration of students' grades, reporting of student progress, and online detection of plagiarism. Aimed at providing a more effective online learning environment, higher education has relied on Podcasts, allowing for the making of audio and video files as educational resources available for download from the Internet to a computer or mobile device. Social networking sites, mainly Facebook, have also been largely adopted by several higher educational institutions (Craig, Coldwell-Neilson, & Beekhuyzen, 2012). For instant interaction and feedback, synchronous tools, like video-conference and chat rooms, are used. These tools provide teachers and learners with the opportunity to create a virtual environment in which they discuss their ideas and interact with each other at the same time (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014, p. 400).

E-learning has captured the attention of several educators in many fields, including EFL teachers. Both processes have become highly integrated, to the

point that some teachers argue that e-learning is the most effective way for EFL students to learn English (Soong, 2012, p. 87). As points out by Dr. Alan Clarke, the Associate Director for ICT and Learning at the National Institute for Adult Continuing *Education* (NIACE), E-learning provides learners with further freedom in terms of "place, pace and time" for language learning (Clarke, 2004, p. 32). More importantly, E-learning allows for "repeated practice and ease of review" (Long, 2004), considered essential for EFL learners.

In contrast, others assume that the teacher's role in EFL classes is pivotal and cannot be replaced by e-learning. Besides a lack of face-to-face interaction and immediate correction, both teachers and learners may experience technical problems that hinder a successful teacher/learning process. As part of the emerging consequences of the Coronavirus imposing social distancing and quarantine, both supporting and rejecting elements found themselves compelled to the use of E-learning.

### **1. The Emergence of Online Learning in EFL Classes During the Coronavirus Pandemic**

By the end of 2019, the world witnessed the emergence of a new disease, known as the Coronavirus. Due to its contagious nature and widespread, teachers around the globe have found themselves in an exceptional situation, as they become obliged to rely entirely on online education. As an essential preventive measure against the pandemic, the Algerian government ordered an immediate shutdown of numerous institutions (Herman, Maarek, & Wilde, 2020). Thus, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) adopted exclusively online teaching and learning.

To ensure the continuity of the educational process, the Department of English at Hassiba Ben Bouali University, Chlef, Algeria, had to adopt online education. Among the primary technological tools used was the E-learning platform, known as Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). Although it was used previously, it was not until the outbreak of COVID-19 that Algerian teachers were compelled to use Moodle to deliver their courses and assignments.

As a Learning Management System (LMS) that allows for the production of Internet-based courses, Moodle aims at creating an effective online collaborative environment between teachers and learners (Chourishi, Buttan, Chaurasia, & Soni, 2011). In this regard, the MHESR has followed the asynchronous e-learning method to ensure learners have unlimited access to documents and their full interaction with their teachers and peers.

## **2. The Experience of Teachers and Students at the English Department at the University of HBB with E-learning**

Based on a survey directed at teachers and students at the Department of the English language at the UHHB, the online education experience was viewed from different perspectives. Among the key inquiries was the experience of teachers and learners in online education. In both parts, the majority had no previous experience with online education before the emerging consequences of COVID-19. That created many obstacles in the online teaching and learning processes.

## **3. The Challenges Encountered by Teachers During the E-learning Process**

When asked to give their opinion concerning the e-learning initiative, the largest share of teachers in the English department of Hassiba Ben Bouali University expressed negative views. While some said that the experience was quite modest, average, and in need of further development, others described the initiative as chaotic and not fruitful. Only a few, about 2 teachers, considered the online learning experience addition to the department. They argued that this prompted teachers and students alike to learn more about ICT. Also, it is an opportunity for real genuine integration of online education at the Algerian university.

Given their new experience with online learning, most teachers said they possess moderate ICT capabilities. Only a few, about 3 teachers in the department, have advanced skills. This will be largely the reason behind the common supportive view of merging e-learning and traditional learning styles. Even with high ICT skills, teachers are also likely to face other challenges.

The majority of interviewed teachers complained about poor and slow internet connection. Some teachers cannot have access to the internet at home due to poor network coverage in the areas where they live. Others cannot even afford the necessary hardware, particularly teachers working under temporary contracts. Other than that, teachers face many technical issues, especially on the Moodle and Progres<sup>1</sup> platforms. On several occasions, both platforms encountered system glitches, causing a temporary setback in uploading courses or publishing student results.

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<sup>1</sup>A platform set by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to manage students' educational process. Students can access the platform to see their final results.

Most importantly, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has made student attendance and courses uploaded on Moodle not mandatory. This meant that students' attendance in classes was optional and teachers were required to prepare exams based solely on the lessons they taught in the classroom. As a result, most teachers complained about the students' lack of interest. These others still see the classroom as the only place of compulsory learning, ignoring everything that was taught online, teachers argued.

Another more challenging issue was the evaluation process. As part of the online education process, students were asked to deliver some of their tests and assignments online, either through a google form or by mail. This has made it difficult, much more impossible, to detect cheating, not to mention the widespread use of plagiarism and copy-paste answers among students.

### **5. EFL Students' Experience with Online Learning**

When asked about their preferred method of learning, none of the interviewed students chose an exclusive learning system. Instead, they favored either face-to-face learning or a combination of online and traditional learning systems. This could be largely related to the fact that they faced several hurdles during their e-learning process. Starting with the necessary equipment to conduct an effective e-learning process, most students complained about the lack of free access to the internet and their inability to purchase computer hardware. Besides, from the students' perspective, the traditional method of learning requires mandatory class attendance and provides them with the opportunity to meet their teachers face to face, thus allowing for more effective explanation and interaction.

In terms of using the MOODLE platform, nearly 90 percent of students found it difficult, or at least manageable. In contrast, about 10 percent said it was easy. Despite the free access to MOODLE provided by the MHESR, most students prefer the use of Facebook, with 60 percent. While both platforms have free access, students argued that Facebook is more flexible, practical, and easier than MOODLE, especially that they spend a lot of time on it. Nevertheless, an important share, about 40 percent, was in favor of MOODLE, arguing that it is an official platform and more secure for educational information. More importantly, they argued that lessons on MOODLE are collected in one session and organized making it easier to search and find. Besides, unlike Facebook, MOODLE is free from notifications' disturbance, thus ensuring a clear and convenient learning environment.

In this regard, some teachers, mostly administrative staff, in UHBB's English department have posted lessons, tasks, and assignments already uploaded to MOODLE on Facebook. An initiative that most students praised. Other than its easy use, students argued that Facebook allowed them to create groups and chatrooms to help each other, especially those who did not have access to the Internet by providing them with the latest updates and pictorial data.

However, the process was interrupted by some inconvenience related to a number of misplaced comments from some students. An act that drove some teachers to stop using Facebook as a medium of online education and rely solely on MOODLE. Moreover, given their novice experience with the MOODLE platform, many students faced difficulties downloading the courses, not to mention the number of times the platform encountered glitches.

Despite the flexibility of e-learning, allowing learners to choose what suits them in terms of the appropriate place and time, students encountered inconvenience in the space. As one teacher interviewed mentioned, most Algerian students struggle to find a comfortable area at home that is free from noise or other inconvenience to attend online courses.

Importantly, while e-learning helps eradicate barriers of place and time (Holmes & Gardner, 2006, p. 72), it may lead to cultural barriers, particularly in some conservative Algerian families. It is commonly thought that many female students cannot attend online courses held via video conference due to conservative morals adopted by their families.

Among the noticeable disadvantages of e-Learning is the complete absence of vital personal interactions, whether between learners and instructors, or among colleague learners (Young, 1997). In effect, EFL students at UHBB complained about the lack of communication and interaction between the student and the teacher. A missing point in e-learning that raised difficulties in exchanging ideas and seeking a further explanation, students argued. Also, students faced difficulties completing work/assignments within a given time. Besides, a large part fell into the trap of plagiarism, which led to the deterioration of their scores. Regardless of those challenges, most interviewed teachers and students agreed to continue using online education in their teaching career even after the disappearance of COVID-19.

## **6. Recommendations**

Despite the set of challenges met by teachers and learners, the integration of e-learning at the Algerian high educational institutions is considered a strong incentive to improve the learning environment. All that is needed is to apply e-learning in a proper way. The benefits of e-learning are more likely to be attained if used and applied in proper ways. Initiatives that may contribute to creating a successful virtual learning environment include:

1. The introduction and expansion of a range of E-learning tools and equipment at the Algerian universities.
2. In a digital age, teachers and students should be trained to acquire at least basic ICTs skills.
3. Providing teachers, especially those with temporary contracts, and students with free internet access. Otherwise, Internet access is provided at a bargain price. The most practical is to make Internet access free at the campus and the main building of the university, using one of the following options:
  - Free daily portion with vouchers by each student is allowed limited time to access the internet, open for use all day.
  - Free internet access in particular places such as the library, halls, amphitheatres, rooms ... etc).
4. Organizing study days and workshops on the use of E-learning
5. Considering E-learning mandatory by including the uploaded courses on MOODLE in the exams. That would prompt students to take online learning more seriously and strive to improve their ICT skills.
6. Higher Educational institutions should integrate e-learning partially within the curriculum
7. Teachers should incorporate more digital videos and use various kinds of online teaching tools such as blogs, chat forums and voice chat, and podcasts. Besides, they should involve and use a range of ICT tools in the classroom.
8. Training teachers in course design for online learning in terms of the materials and the online components to be used for the course.

## **7. Conclusion**

Despite the barriers that both teachers and learners encountered during their recent experience with online education, they have managed to acquire some new technological skills. The compulsory e-learning process requires teachers and learners to improve their basic ICT skills. In a digital age, ICT skills have become an essential component of successful teaching and learning processes. The emerging of e-learning as a consequence of COVID-19 has prompted teachers and learners to acquire and enhance their capacities

in ICT capabilities. A combination of traditional and online learning systems can enhance the learning process by providing students with several opportunities to choose the suitable environment that meets their needs and circumstances.

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### Appendix 1: Students' Questionnaire

**Age:**

**Gender :**

**Level:**

Q1-Are you a working student?

Yes

No

Q2- Are you more satisfied with?

Exclusive E-learning system

Face to face learning

A combination of both

Q3- How do you find the use of E-learning platforms (MOODLE)?

Difficult

Manageable

Easy

Q4- Do you have a constant access to the internet at home?

Yes

No

Q 5-What are the different challenges you faced with E-learning?  
.....

Q 6- Has your learning process progressed with Online education?

Yes

No

Q 7- What device do you use for distance learning?

Laptop

Tablet

Smartphone

Q8- How much time do you spend per day on an average on E-learning platforms?

2-5 hours

5-8 hours

+8 hours

Q 9- On which of these platforms would you have preferred the online courses to be held?

Skype

E-learning Platfoms (Eg. Moodle)

Facebook

Zoom

Google Meet

Q 10- Why?

.....

Q 11- How do you rate the assistance provided to you by the English Department in UHHB in terms of your E-learning experience?

Not good

Moderately helpful

Very helpful

Q 12- Would you be willing to test future e-learning courses in the future?

Yes

No

**Appendix 2:** Teachers' Questionnaire

Q 1- Have you ever been engaged to E-learning before the Coronovirus pandemic?

Yes

No

Q 2- How would you describe your Information and Computer technologies' (ICTs) capacities?

- a. Advanced
- b. Medium
- c. Weak

Q 3- What do you suggest as an effective measure to provide knowledge during the COVID-19 crisis?

- a. Exclusive E-learning environment
- b. Traditional modes with precautions
- c. A mix between both systems

Q 4- What are the main difficulties you encountered while teaching online?

.....

Q 5- What do you suggest to improve the Algerian E-learning system?

.....

Q 6 – How would you describe the experience of E-learning at the English department of Hassiba Ben Bouali?

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Q 7- What are the techniques you use to ensure effective E-learning environment for your students?

.....

Q 8- Which of the following means available for teaching online courses you use?

- a. Documents posted on the platform (Word, PDF, PowerPoint)
- b. Forum discussions / Chat discussions
- c. Course audio-video registered sequences
- d. Tasks in word/pdf format (that only the teacher could see)
- e. Task posted in databases (that were seen by the entire class)

Q 9- On which of these platforms would you have preferred the online courses to be held?

- a. Skype
- b. E-learning Platforms (Eg. Moodle)
- c. Facebook
- d. Zoom
- e. Google Meet

Q 10- Why ?

.....

.....

Q 11- Will you continue to rely on online education in your teaching career after the disappearance of COVID-19?

Yes

No