

*E-learning in EFL Education in Algeria's Higher
Education: Students' Views*

واقع التعليم عن بعد في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية
بالجامعة الجزائرية من منظور الطلبة

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Abstract:

This study delves into the perceptions of EFL students regarding the benefits and drawbacks of employing e-learning in EFL education. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Algerian universities have increasingly turned to e-learning to ensure continuous educational engagement, and consequently, started to integrate it into its different programmes. Through this research, we seek to uncover the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning as perceived by learners. To achieve this, we conducted an electronic questionnaire among 30 EFL students from diverse Algerian universities. The results indicate that students' views on the effectiveness of e-learning are tempered by its associated challenges and drawbacks, leading to a less than overwhelmingly positive stance.

Keywords: E-learning, EFL education, EFL students; higher education; benefits and drawbacks.

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ملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة أهم مزايا ومساوئ التعليم عن بعد من منظور طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. فبعدما أصبح هذا النمط سائدا في الجامعة الجزائرية كحلا أثناء فترة كوفيد 19 لضمان استمرارية المهام التعليمية، بدأ يأخذ مكانه في جميع البرامج الجامعية. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على استبيان موجه إلى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية من جامعات مختلفة وتشير نتائجه إلى أنه وبالرغم من أن هذا النمط له فاعلية إلا أن الطلبة لا يزالون يواجهون صعوبات وتحديات تقف أما اندماجهم الكلي في عملية التعليم عن بعد.

كلمات مفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، التعليم العالي، مزايا ومساوئ.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since April 2020, our Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has implemented remote learning to ensure the continuity of educational activities in response to the sudden closure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This led universities nationwide to swiftly adopt online education using various platforms and eLearning resources to fulfill educational obligations. This shift to online instruction presented significant challenges, prompting the issuance of directives and protocols by the ministry to facilitate this transition. A framework protocol was delivered on August 6th, 2020, aiming to streamline the completion of the 2019-2020 academic year and the commencement of the 2020-2021 academic year, considering the diverse needs of higher education institutions, which collectively

enroll 1,514,300 students. Distance education was maintained for certain teaching units, while hybrid education was adopted for others, tailored to the specific subjects and requirements. These modes persisted through subsequent academic years, granting universities flexibility in selecting the most suitable approach for their students. This educational shift has spurred interest among Algerian researchers and academics, promoting theoretical discourse and educational research in the digital age. However, challenges persist in the effective implementation of these models, necessitating support for both educators and students to navigate this technological transition securely.

2. Literature Review

Online classes started to gain momentum in the Algerian universities during the last five years. In addition to this, our ministry is planning to invest more in online education because the pandemic that all the world has been going through has significantly shown the effectiveness of this type of education. It is worth noting that online education has been adopted in the United States since 1989 when the university of Phoenix became one of the first institutions to offer Internet-based courses (Casey, 2018, p. 7).

2.1 Definition of e-learning

Online teaching and learning can be defined as that type of education taking place through the Internet (Casey, 2018, p. 1). As a matter of fact, the terms ‘online education’, ‘virtual education’, ‘eLearning’ and ‘distance education’ are used interchangeably to refer to **‘institution based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive**

telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors.'

The above definition has gained a wide acceptance among scholars and has been tackled from four main angles (Michael Simonson, 2015, p. 31)

1. Online education is institution-based education: it should be differentiated from self-study or a non-academic learning environment.

2. Separation of teacher and students: teachers and students are not within the same location, and sometimes this separation may be thought of in terms of time.

3. Interactive telecommunications: student-student and teacher-student interactions are important. However, in this type of instruction, interaction occurs through different resources such as: electronic media, and the Internet. With the emergence of more sophisticated technologies, the connections between teachers and students does not depend on physical proximity but rather on the availability of instructors, learners and resources and their readiness to interact with each other at a distance.

4. Connected learning community: education depends on the existence of instructors who interact with learners using instructional resources which are in this case electronic including videos, audios, etc. These resources allow the learning process to take place and should therefore be accessed and well designed.

Other definitions of e-learning may include: **'Distance education, e-learning, and virtual university are similar terms for a trend of modern education. It is an integration of information technologies, computer hardware systems, and**

communication tools to support educational professionals in remote teaching.' (Shih & Hung, 2007, p. 1). This type of education has become popular nowadays even in the developing countries and mainly after the spread of the pandemic and thus the importance of implementing these related technologies is recognized by education professionals and information technology researchers.

It should also be noted that courses may be classified according to the proportion of content delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2008, p. 4). Thus we may have:

Traditional courses: which is a face-to-face course with 0% technology- used content.

Web-facilitated course: which uses from 1 to 29 % of web based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course.

Blended or hybrid course: which blends online and face-to-face delivery. From 30 to 79% of the content is delivered online.

Online course: is a course where most or all of the content is delivered online (80+ %).

We may say here that the type of instruction that is applied in our Algerian universities is a hybrid or blended one, because we offer face-to-face courses for nearly all the fundamental and methodology teaching units and distance course for discovery and transversal units.

2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

Our higher education system has realised the importance of integrating technology in its sector for all the disciplines and

EFL education is no exception. In this regard, issues related to using and implementing e-learning activities have attracted the attention of scholars and academics to investigate the opportunities offered by this mode of instruction and its possible drawbacks.

Several studies have shown that there some positive perceptions and attitudes of learners regarding the use of e-learning in higher education programs. Some studies have proved several advantages associated with the implementation of new technologies in the university (Rawashdeh, Youssef Mohammed, Rebhi Al Arab, & Alara, 2021). In their study entitled '**Advantages and Disadvantages of Using e-Learning in University Education: Analyzing Students' Perspectives**', the researchers stated that e-learning can achieve the educational objectives in the shortest time and with least effort. They also added that e-learning activities provide equal access to all the learners regardless of their locations, ages, ethnic origins and gender. Furthermore, this mode of instruction encourages students to be more autonomous and organize their own learning process. The findings of that study revealed that the students have positive attitudes towards e-learning and asserted that it ensures communication with the teachers and contributes in developing their skills and providing interesting material. However, they expressed their need for a well-established e-learning environment.

It has been observed in the above-mentioned study that the students encounter several challenges which lead to negative attitudes and outcomes. The authors supported other findings like those stated in (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014). In their study,

Arkorful & Abaido outlined that students undergo contemplation and remoteness in e-learning which results in the lack of interaction. They added that e-learning doesn't improve the students' communication skills and is less effective than traditional education in transmitting knowledge and providing explanations as well as administering tests for assessment.

Another previous study has also dealt with the challenges and prospects of using e-learning among EFL students in Bisha University, and has shown that there are many academic, technological and administrative challenges facing both teachers and learners while using e-learning (Ja'ashan, 2020). The findings of the study revealed that there are no significant differences between male and female EFL students' e-learning activities. Moreover, the participants in the study proved to be aware of the benefits of e-learning and have highly positive attitudes towards its implementation as it facilitates communication and enrich students' learning experiences. The study also highlighted some challenges facing the students like the lack of technical knowledge; problems with internet access, need to teacher's guidance and advice, inadequate computer literacy skills and some students even admitted that they cannot practice speaking skill online.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

To achieve the goals of the study, we conducted an electronic questionnaire of 16 items; the first 8 items deal with the advantages of using e-learning in EFL education and the other 8 items deal with the disadvantages of using e-learning in

EFL education. The questionnaire applied in this study consists of two parts: the first part provides information about the gender, age and the participants' BA level and level in English and three other items regarding the use of e-learning software in learning English, the type of the software used and how they feel while learning online; whereas the second part contained 16 statements regarding the students' attitudes towards the advantages and disadvantages of using e-learning in English education. The participants were asked to indicate the degree of their agreement with a statement as follows: 1 – I agree, 2 – Neutral, 3 – I disagree.

3.2 Participants

The subjects of the study included 30 male and female students of 1st, 2nd and 3rd year BA programme of English, from different Algerian universities. The reason behind targeting students from different universities is that the questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms and shared on a Facebook group gathering students from different universities. The name of the group is: **LMD English Students (All Universities) Algeria** and the link to this group is:

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/718816374949468/>).

3.3 Data Collection

This study was carried virtually during the academic year 2022-2023. The participants were informed of the goals of the study and were requested to credibly respond to the statements. The students were also told that their responses will be analyzed in confidentiality.

3.4 Data Analysis

Before revealing the results drawn from the questionnaire, we should admit that the sample was not really representative regarding the number of the participants, and this is one of the issues that should be pointed out to investigate why the participants are reluctant to answer questionnaires though they don't take a lot of time. But the main concern of the study is to open the scope for more investigation and research with regard to the increasing importance and interest in e-learning.

Table 1. Demographics of the participants

Items		Freq	%	Total
Gender	Female	22	73.3	100%
	Male	08	26.7	
Age	18-22	22	73.3	100%
	23-30	05	16.7	
	Over 30	03	10	
BA level	L1	01	3.3	100%
	L2	13	43.3	
	L3	16	53.3	
Level in English	Very good	09	30	100%
	Good	17	56.7	
	Average	03	10	
	Less than average	01	3.3	

The table shows that the respondents included 22 females and 08 male students. Their age ranged from 18-22 for 22 participants, from 23-30 for 5 participants and over 30 for 3 participants. We also notice that they are from all BA levels. Hence 53.3% of the participants are in L3 and 43.3% of them are in L3 which means

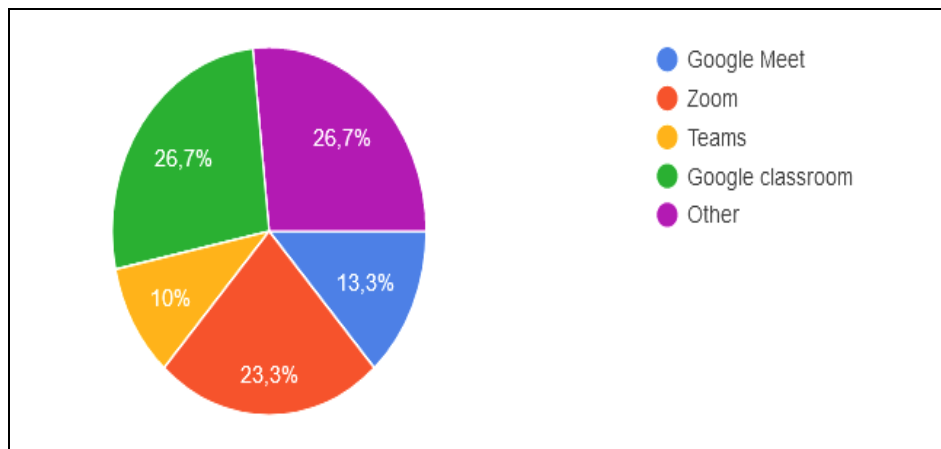
that they experienced some kind of e-learning and had enough experience to express their attitudes towards its advantages and drawbacks. This section also included the level of students in English as it is intended for students of English, and the results revealed that 30% of the participants have a very good level and 56.7 have a good level in English. This is important for the findings of the study because the students who have a good or very good level tend to enjoy learning and give great importance to their course and hence participate actively in e-learning activities.

This part also included three questions to see if the students carried out online activities in their studies and how they felt about these activities. In the first question, 90% of the participants said that they have taken online courses and only 10% said they didn't. So, it's quite clear that the participants have an experience in online educational activities and their attitudes are based on what they experienced during those activities.

Figure 2 below shows the different e-learning apps used by the students in online sessions. About 26.7% of the respondents used Google classroom which is a free blended learning platform that streamlines sharing files between teachers and students. Also about 23.3% of the participants said they use ZOOM which is a cloud based video communications app for virtual video and audio conferencing, webinars, live chats, screen sharing, etc. It can also be seen in the chart that 13.3% of them used Google Meet and 10% used Teams. Both of them are video and audio conferencing apps like ZOOM but there are slight differences in terms of the offered options and number of participants. We also

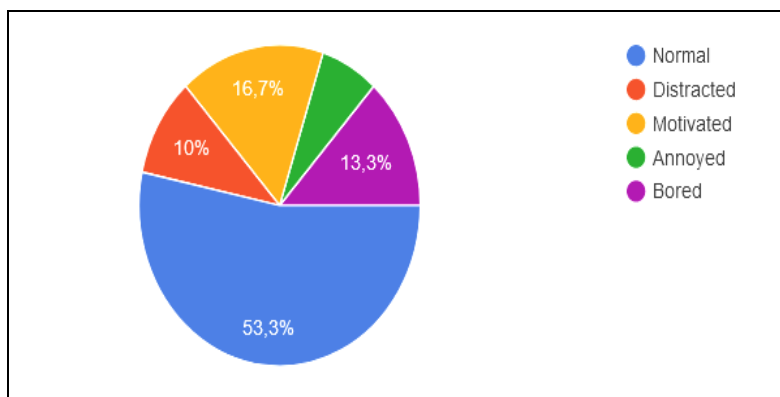
noticed that there are other apps that can be used for educational purposes but are not mentioned, and the chart reveals that 26.7% of the respondents use other apps that may include Moodle, Email, Messenger, etc.

Figure 1: E-learning software used by the respondents



The figure below illustrates the feelings of EFL students during online sessions. About 53.3% of the respondents feel normal and only 16.7% of them feel motivated, while 10% feel distracted. The figure also shows that 13.3% feel bored and 6.7% feel annoyed.

Figure 2: Feelings of the respondents in online sessions



1. Findings and discussion

Table 2 shows the attitudes of EFL students from different academic levels and Algerian universities towards the use of e-learning in their educational activities. Items (6) and (8) got the highest percentages of agreement 56.7%. Thus, more than half of the students e-learning enhances their speaking and listening speaking skills and helps them learn at their own pace. It has been observed that 50% of the students find that e-learning provides interesting material and facilitate communication with teachers. Also about half of the students agree that the variety of resources in online settings allow a better understanding.

The highest percentage for disagreement was obtained in item (3) where 73.3% of the students disagree with the statement about being motivated by online sessions more than face-to-face sessions. We have also noticed that 43.3% of the respondents don't believe that e-learning encourages them to become more autonomous and active. Other 50% of the students were neutral about expressing their attitude regarding the flexibility and convenience of e-learning.

Table 2: Student's attitudes towards the advantages of e-learning in EFL education

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.E-learning allows more flexibility and convenience	09	30	15	50	06	20
2.E-learning provides interesting and up-dated material	15	50	09	30	06	20
3.Online classes motivate me more than face-to-face classes	03	10	05	16.7	22	73.3
4.E-learning allows me to	15	50	06	20	09	30

***E-learning in EFL Education in Algeria's Higher Education:
Students' Views***

communicate with my teachers anytime and anywhere						
5.E-learning helps me learn at my own pace	17	56.7	06	20	07	23.3
6.E-learning encourages me to become autonomous and more active	11	36.7	06	20	13	43.3
7.The variety of resources in online classes gives me the opportunity for a better understanding	14	48.3	07	24.1	08	26.7
8.E-learning enhances my listening and speaking skills	17	56.7	05	16.7	08	26.7

Table 3 below indicates the percentages of ‘agreement’, ‘disagreement’ or ‘neutrality’ regarding the disadvantages of e-learning from the views of learners. It has been noticed that the respondents have varying attitudes towards the disadvantages of e-learning. 66.7% of the responses revealed that internet access constitutes the main hindrance to e-learning since it is essential to carry out this type of learning. Also 50% of the responses to items (1), (4) and (8) have shown that e-learning decreases social interaction and expressed their home and technical unreadiness to learn virtually. The responses to some items were approximately the same like in item (2) and item (5). Thus 40 % of responses were obtained for both ‘agree’ and ‘neutral’ regarding the teachers’ full experience in teaching online. Also about 46.7% disagree with the fact that online test are more difficult than face-to-face ones.

Table 3: Student’s attitudes towards the disadvantages of e-learning in EFL education

Items	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
1.E-learning doesn't allow face-to-face interaction and decreases social interaction	15	50	12	40	03	10
2.E-learning makes it hard for me to keep track of my course work and assignments	10	33.3	07	23.3	13	43.3
3.The dependence on technology is a major drawback in online learning	13	44.8	07	24.1	09	31
4.I think I'm not technically ready to learn in an online environment	15	50	04	13.3	11	36.7
5.I think teachers are not fully qualified and experienced to teach in an online environment	12	40	12	40	06	20
6.E-learning requires Internet access which hinders learning for many students	20	66.7	09	30	01	3.3
7.Tests in an online setting are more difficult than in a face-to-face setting	11	36.7	05	16.7	14	46.7
8.My home environment doesn't allow me to learn virtually at ease	15	50	04	13.3	11	36.7

The findings of the study have indicated that e-learning has been adopted in Algerian universities and in EFL education as a fully recognized mode of education due to the spread of Covid 19 and the necessity to ensure the educational continuity in universities and higher education institutions. It is worth noting

here that what characterizes e-learning in our country is that it is an emergency learning. Teachers and students had to resort to it as the only possible way to communicate with students and allow them to get their lessons.

The study has also revealed that the Algerian teachers and students use different video and audio conferencing apps to communicate with their students according to the availability of these apps and their free options. And though our higher education institutions have implemented Moodle platforms, some students and teachers still lack training and awareness raising. The students need to feel that the value of the session is the same but with a shift from onsite to online setting.

The responses of the students have made it clear that they don't really have a great experience in the area of e-learning and the varying answers reflect the fact that the learners don't make the difference between a traditional setting and online setting which may be due to the traditional methods used by teachers. As a consequence, only 16.7% of the respondents said they feel motivated which is a weak percentage. The teachers may introduce various resources to up-date their lessons and make them more attractive.

E-learning can prove to be beneficial and help the students enhance their listening and speaking skills, taking into account that the learning styles aren't alike within the traditional setting and online setting as well. Hence, we need to develop approaches that facilitate this type of education and highlight all the factors affecting its integration.

E-learning has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages can be identified in its flexibility, convenience and easy access to its activities; interesting and up-dated material; easy communication with the teachers; motivation and skill development; autonomy and digital interaction. On the other hand, the disadvantages of e-learning are also perceived by the students as major drawbacks that hinder the process of online teaching such as the dependence on technology and internet access which not affordable for all the students. In addition to the lack of digital literacy and technical readiness for both teachers and students because the courses are delivered in a digital setting which is completely different from the traditional setting where we only need a board and a pen.

2. Implications

Today's classroom research puts more focus on the learner being the central element in the learning process. That is why, it is essential to shed light on the learners' attitudes and motivation towards English language learning in general and e-learning in particular. This study set out to open the scope of research into this area because there is a relationship between students' attitudes towards the implementation of e-learning and their academic performance in English learning. Moreover, identifying students' attitudes may influence their achievement and raise their awareness of the different modes of education.

The findings of the study indicated that the students have both positive and negative attitudes towards using online mode of instruction and are not really experienced in dealing with all its facets. Consequently, this field could be very fruitful for

future research and investigation as e-learning proved to be the only solution in times of emergency and crises.

In this endeavor, higher education institutions should offer technical training for teachers to help them deal with electronic resources and apps that are used in this domain. Teachers are also supposed to facilitate this learning by finding efficient innovative ways and choosing materials that suit learner's needs and desires and involve them in online activities.

Conclusion

E-learning has proved that learning cannot be based only in the classroom since the use of computers and new technologies has facilitated communication and instantaneous interaction between people. This digital revolution has offered many opportunities to teachers and learners to access, exchange, consume, share and discuss course content out of the boundaries of traditional classrooms. However, while many countries are using these technologies effectively and astonishingly, we still face several challenges and problems to safely introduce them in our educational activities.

Our Algerian universities need to keep up with technological advances in educational programs and prioritize innovation and creativity imposed by the rapid advance of globalization. Needless to say here that technology also facilitates learning a foreign language and EFL learners tend to prefer integrating technological means into many language activities such as listening and speaking.

The study has revealed that e-learning can be advantageous, but it has not yet been fully established in our

universities due to the difficulties and challenges that are faced. Thus, higher education stakeholders have to find effective ways to encourage this education and build an effective platform to develop and facilitate the implementation of this mode.

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