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Comparative Observations on Face-to-Face Instruction Versus e-Learning: EFL Students' Representations

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Comparative Observations on Face-to-Face Instruction Versus e-Learning: EFL Students' Representations

Observations comparatives sur l'enseignement en présentiel et l'apprentissage en ligne : les représentations des étudiants' EFL

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Abstract

The abrupt instructional shift that took place in March-April 2020 due to the global Covid-19 Pandemic has engendered serious effects, some of which seem to be lasting ones. The sudden turn towards e-learning took neither teachers' nor learners' needs into consideration. Most of them were not ready, trained, nor well-equipped. It was an emergency case at many levels. Later though, some universities sought to provide training and equipment in order to succeed the online teaching-learning experience. While it is clear that teachers received more training than students, the latter are the focus of this action research because they are the learning agent. For this, we attempt in this exploratory research paper to understand students' views towards e-learning and their preferences regarding face-to-face instruction and online learning. To achieve this aim, an online questionnaire is used with 55 EFL students at the Department of English, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bouzareah (ENSB). The findings show that most learners prefer face-to-face over e-learning because they understand better in the physical presence of the teacher, that they were not ready for the shift, and that they have not received training on e-learning. These attitudes and representations entail that the e-learning experience had better be improved to students through providing training and equipment.

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Keywords: e-Learning, face-to-face instruction, students, representations, comparative study

Résumé

Le changement d'instruction qui a eu lieu en mars-avril 2020 en raison de la pandémie du Covid-19 a engendré des effets graves, dont certains semblent durables. Ce changement vers l'e-learning n'a pris en compte ni les besoins des enseignants ni ceux des étudiants. La plupart d'entre eux n'étaient ni prêts, ni entraînés, ni bien équipés. C'était un cas d'urgence à plusieurs niveaux. Plus tard, certaines universités ont cherché à fournir une formation et des équipements afin de réussir l'expérience d'enseignement-apprentissage en ligne. S'il est clair que les enseignants ont reçu plus de formations que les étudiants, ces derniers sont au centre de cette recherche-action car ils sont les agents d'apprentissage. Pour cela, nous tentons dans cet article de comprendre les points de vue et préférences des étudiants par rapport à l'e-learning et l'enseignement en présentiel. Pour atteindre cet objectif, un questionnaire en ligne est utilisé auprès de 55 étudiants d'EFL du Département d'Anglais, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bouzareah (ENSB). Les résultats montrent que la plupart des étudiants préfèrent le face-à-face à l'apprentissage en ligne parce qu'ils comprennent mieux en présence physique de l'enseignant, qu'ils n'étaient pas prêts pour le changement, et qu'ils n'ont pas reçu de formation sur l'apprentissage en ligne. Ces représentations impliquent qu'il vaut mieux améliorer l'expérience d'apprentissage en ligne pour les étudiants en leur fournissant une formation et du matériel.

Mots-clés : L'apprentissage en ligne, enseignement en présentiel, étudiants, représentations, étude comparative

ملخص

كان للتغيير المفاجئ في التعليم الذي حدث في مارس - أبريل 2020 بسبب جائحة كوفيد-19 آثار كثيرة. لم يأخذ التحول المفاجئ إلى التعلم الإلكتروني في الاعتبار احتياجات الأساتذة والطلبة حيث أن معظمهم لم يكونوا جاهزين ولا مدربين ولا مجهزين تجهيزاً جيداً. كانت حالة طوارئ على الكثير من الأصعدة. ومع ذلك، سعت بعض الجامعات لاحقاً إلى توفير التدريب والمعدات من أجل تحقيق النجاح في تجربة التدريس والتعلم عبر الإنترنت. في حين أنه من الواضح أن الأساتذة تلقوا

تدريبات أكثر من الطلاب، إلا أن الطلاب هم مركز اهتمام هذا البحث الإجرائي. لهذا، نحاول في هذا المقال فهم وجهات نظر الطلاب عن التعلم الإلكتروني. لتحقيق هذا الهدف، يتم استخدام استبيان عبر الإنترنت مع 55 طالباً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بالمدرسة العليا للأساتذة، بوزريعة. تظهر النتائج أن معظم الطلاب يفضلون التعلم وجهاً لوجه على التعلم عبر الإنترنت لأنهم يفهمون بشكل أفضل في حضور الأستاذ، كما أنهم لم يكونوا مستعدين لهذا التحول لأنهم لم يتلقوا تدريباً في التعلم الإلكتروني. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أنه من الأفضل تحسين تجربة التعلم عبر الإنترنت للطلاب من خلال تزويدهم بالتدريب والوسائل حيث يمكن أن يؤدي ذلك إلى تحسين إعداد الطلاب ومشاركتهم، ومساعدة الأساتذة في مهمتهم. الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم الإلكتروني، التعليم وجهاً لوجه، الطلاب، التمثيلات، دراسة مقارنة

1. Introduction

Hybrid teaching is not a completely new form of instruction, nor is e-learning. The latter goes up to the late 1990s where discussions around it started becoming an interesting spot for educators and researchers (Farcasiu et al., 2021). E-learning has become mostly famous and applied due to the outbreak of Covid-19. It is about learning getting mediated electronically, that is, on Internet. On the other hand, an in-person teaching-learning process delivers learning in a direct face-to-face meeting with students (Fersaoui, 2016).

Fully online classes have some virtues that face-to-face instruction might lack, like flexibility in terms of time and space, lower expenses as they require only Internet connection, besides the no-need to travel all the way to university (Muhammad et al., 2017). However, virtual learning has also drawbacks like the inaccessibility to Internet or devices for some students (Sadeghi, 2019), disparities in technological skills and materials between students, besides the unguaranteed availability of a learning space for e-learning classes (Beunoyer et al., 2020). For this, it has been proven by some studies that face-to-face instruction and e-learning have different impacts on learners and learning (Downey et al., 2011), like losing focus while learning online (Farcasiu et

al., 2021) as well as losing motivation or engagement as students skip online deadlines and meetings. Nazarlou (2013) cites other negative effects of e-learning such as sight issues due to spending long hours looking at the screen, back ache, and lack of outdoor activities which are important to health and well-being.

Remote or distance learning almost completely deletes the social facet of the teaching-learning process. This could be one rationale why *“the majority of students prefer to be taught face to face by a teacher rather than going online”* (Sarnou&Sarnou, 2021, p.361). In this study, we will try to discover whether this is valid for our sample and population, and what the grounds for these students’ preferences are.

2- Methodology

2-1 Research questions

The main research inquiries that this paper investigates are:

- 1- How do students regard online learning during the pandemic?
- 2- Do they prefer e-learning or face-to-face instruction? Why?

This study is a comparative exploratory one that aims to find some answers to the aforementioned questions through an action research design and through collecting data from a sample that is to be described in the coming section.

2-2 Context and sample

The current study is conducted as part of an action research led by the researcher to evaluate her hybrid course at the Department of English at the Teacher Training School, Bouzareah, Algiers, Algeria (ENSB). The 55 participants are third year students whose age ranges between 19 and 26 years old. They are from both genders, but most of them are women (48). The investigation took place in February/March 2021, which marked the end of the first semester of third year. After having experienced both online and face-to-face classes for one semester in third year, and a full

semester in online learning in second year, the participants, who may represent different populations (EFL students particularly and university students in general), were approached to collect their views of both learning modes and their preferences in relation to the theme of the study. Furthermore, the collected data could also serve to get insights of the students' evaluation of the researcher's course.

2-3 Research instrument

The research instrument that is used in this study is an online questionnaire. The latter was held online because of the requirements of the pandemic era. Due to that, no institutional agreement was required, but the researcher tried to respect research ethics. Before using the instrument, and before employing the collected data, the researcher made sure to obtain the participants' consent. The participants' privacy is guaranteed all over the work.

The link to the Google form of the questionnaire was shared with the respondents on Google Classroom, and while the total number of the sample is above 150, only 55 of them filled in the questionnaire.

The online survey, as mentioned earlier, was intended to be a course evaluation. It contained, initially, six questions, three of which serve mainly the evaluation of the researcher's course. Meanwhile, the last three ones could be used for the purposes of this action research, and can be read in the subsequent part.

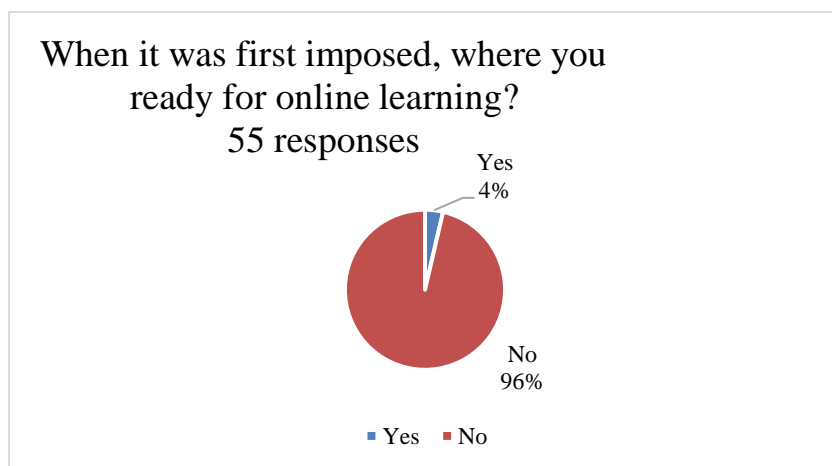
The first two questions are close-ended questions with two main options each. The third question is an open-ended one that invites participants to insert their short or long paragraph answers.

3- Presentation of findings

For the purposes of visibility and readability, the results are displayed in diagrams and tables (when applicable) as it is believed that this can facilitate the presentation and discussion of the results. Results of the open-ended question, particularly, are

described through a table then through textual analysis and illustrations from the participants' answers.

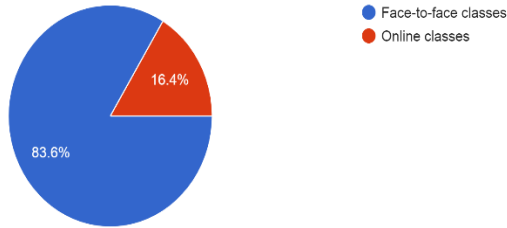
The first question is concerned with whether students were ready for online learning. "When it was first imposed, were you ready for online learning?". Only 2 students (3.64%) said that they were ready for it, whereas 53 (96.36%) chose no as an answer. The findings can be better seen in the following pie chart.



Graph 1: *Students' readiness for online learning*

The second question is: "Do you prefer face-to-face or online classes?". As clear as it seems, the purpose of this close-ended question is to find out students' preferences concerning the two learning modes that this study highlights. As can be seen in Graph 2, the majority of students (83.6%) prefer face-to-face classes while only 9 of them (16.4%) opted for online learning as a preference.

Do you prefer face-to-face or online classes?
55 responses



Graph 2: *Students’ preferences concerning face-to-face and online learning*

The third and last question is related to the previous one as it requests from the participants to justify their answers to the previous question. It says: “Why? Please, justify your choice”. The responses are ordered in Table 1 based on the students’ choices in the previous question. The first column includes the detailed students’ reasons of preferring face-to-face instruction, whereas the second column, on the right, contains the participants’ motives for preferring e-learning over face-to-face classes. The table classifies and simultaneously compares the findings as inserted by the respondents, without analysis. They will be analyzed and discussed later in this work.

Face-to-face Instruction	E-learning
We are able to discuss and ask questions.	The student won't waste his time on buses or waiting for transportation, you can gain time and study at home; in addition, students will rely more on themselves to study and get information.
I liked the online lessons; however, when we met in person many things were added. Nothing can replace face to face classes because we are to be in a direct debate with	When studying online, one has the adequate time to do a plethora of things, we have time to read books, revise our lessons to do exercise, assignments and even further

<p>not only the teacher but the classmates as well. In addition, during online sessions, many Internet issues may occur. Moreover, when you are in face-to-face sessions, all your senses are there, you are committed to be a real student (what I want to say is that during an online session, you cannot really know what is happening behind the screen; is the student sleeping? Is he focused? Finally, I want to say that personally I feel more comfortable and stable during face-to-face sessions.</p>	<p>readings which cover many areas of our courses. Unluckily, this is not the case for face-to-face classes. We can barely find time to manage every module. What is most disturbing is that some teachers are sending us many lessons both on Google classroom and in face-to-face classes. Therefore, we find piles of handouts, lessons, and tasks accumulating namely with this great number of modules we have this year.</p>
<p>Face-to-face classes are more interesting than online classes for many reasons. The most valuable is discussing with the teacher in addition to being focused. Moreover, because of Internet flow, we couldn't attend properly. Studying online remains boring since it keeps our minds focussed on the Internet, the phone batteries and on the sim-card data rather than concentration on the lessons.</p>	<p>Since schedule is full-timed and we waste most of our time in school buses to the campus because of traffic issues, we hardly get time to study and revise our lessons; however, at home we are always home and we follow our teachers online. We get time to deal with all the lessons.</p>
<p>Nothing can beat interaction with the teacher. We can learn a lot just by looking at the way the teacher teaches us. No Google classroom post can be enough to cover all the details and examples required to understand. In the classroom, we can learn from the teachers' body language, eye contact and experiences. In addition, we discuss different opinions which help us keep the right ones and eliminate all the misunderstandings and mistakes.</p>	<p>I prefer online classes because we had more time to take a look at what we were studying and organize them and also understand them better since we were in good conditions unlike in face-to-face ones where teachers tend to give us lectures at class plus at Google classroom where they send us plenty of handouts and assignments although they know that we do not have a good network at campus.</p>

<p>They are more useful concerning better understanding, clear lessons writing, the ability to ask questions, debate, and participate, while through online courses, teachers keep sending handouts that are endless and confusing.</p>	<p>Because we are not respecting the social distancing measures!! The rooms are small comparing with the number of the students!</p>
<p>Online classes were actually pretty satisfying but nothing beats the face-to-face interactions, just the fact that I am in a classroom already helps in concentration.</p>	<p>I like the online classes because I can focus more while I'm studying alone without any distraction.</p>
<p>By face-to-face classes, there is interaction between students and teachers; moreover, they're available for all students, everyone can attend the class unlike online classes, there are problems of connection and some of students couldn't afford to have connection all the time.</p>	<p>Simply because I hate staying in the campus. And online learning is better at restricting time.</p>
<p>I understand better when I see the body language and expressions the teacher is using while explaining. Besides, we can have feedback from our colleagues and teacher.</p>	<p>Sometimes I lose my concentration during the face-to-face classes.</p>
<p>My physical existence, at home, is a problem. My family doesn't understand that I have online classes; thus, for them, I am available almost all the time. So, I get interrupted very often.</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>I prefer face-to-face classes because I feel more involved in the lesson and its content.</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>The face-to-face sessions are better since they allow us to meet the teacher and interact with big concentration.</p>	<p>/</p>
<p>Through face-to-face lessons, I can understand easily not like online ones. Also, I can memorize things</p>	<p>/</p>

through the actions of teachers and the way they explain them.	
All my classmates will benefit because during the online courses, the majority didn't attend, but in the face-to-face courses, we all attend so we all will take benefits.	/
There is interaction between students and the teacher, the eye contact and more concentration since the environment of university enables students to study more than home.	/
It is much useful since both teachers and students interact together. Also, the visual explanation of the teacher helps.	/
There is interaction between the students and their teacher. The inaccessible connection may cause the absence.	/
Lectures are well explained at class, the eye contact is more comfortable and we feel like humans not containers of accumulated pieces of information.	/
Face-to-face courses give me a push forward, seeing my classmates and my teacher gives me motivation to study unlike online courses which lack the motive.	/
In face-to-face, we understand what we are doing. There is no obstacle, and we feel free to ask and avoid the ambiguity.	/
I would say it has to do with motivation mostly since we're interacting and working more when surrounded by the teacher and our peers.	/

Sometimes, we cannot attend online (Internet problems). Also, in face-to-face, we can understand better with the teacher.	/
Interaction with teachers is better in face-to-face learning. It doesn't take so much time. I could learn a lot in brief time	/
There is a dynamic interaction between students and the teacher. We understand better and easily the lessons.	/
It's a matter of interaction and enjoyment of learning.	/
It is a vivid way providing gestures, eye contact, sharing different ideas not just telling information.	/
Weak Internet connection.	/
I feel more comfortable; I can express myself better and understand way clearer than online classes.	/
I believe eye contact has got a lot to do when it comes to teaching.	/
Face-to-face is more practical and you can feel the vibe of the teacher and students.	/
The nature of some modules dictates that they had better be taught face-to-face.	/
Face-to-face classes are highly effective and interesting.	/
Face-to-face meetings allow both teachers and students to interact well.	/
The classroom involves face-to-face interaction among students.	/
I prefer class debates and eye contact between students and teachers.	/

It allows us to focus more and it is easy to be remembered.	/
I get more information and I retain a lot of things.	/
It is better when you hear and see your teacher.	/
Nothing can replace the teacher.	/
We don't face any technical problem in face-to-face.	/
I was not serious in online classes.	/
We can get the information well.	/
We interact more during class.	/
More comprehension.	/
Internet problems.	/

Table 1: *Reasons why students prefer face-to-face or online learning*

4- Data analysis and discussion

Students' arguments show that, despite this era of e-learning boom, face-to-face instruction is still preferable by the majority of the sample (83.6%). It is believed that, in the research context, this is representative of a larger population, that of university students. This can be due to many reasons, one of which is that launching e-learning in the Algerian university was not preceded nor accompanied by training for students. 96.36% of the sample confessed that they were not ready for it, the thing which insinuates that they did not receive training for the e-learning process. It is also possible that this preference is due to other reasons such as the technical issues that come with online learning including the limited flow of Internet or its absence, besides the lack of materials and devices. Similar technicalities not only cause students to avoid learning online, but they can directly lead to their absence from it due to unavailable network, and thus, to reduced motivation, involvement, and engagement in their learning process. Conversely, face-to-face instruction is said to be more motivating, engaging, and interesting as can be read in the words of one participant who wrote: *"Face-to-face courses give me a push forward, seeing my classmates and my teacher gives*

me motivation to study unlike online courses which lack the motive". We may argue that the classroom environment is more suitable to learning than the online environment which is laden with distractions. Furthermore, the home environment is unlike the university one; while some students prefer the former because it is more comfortable and less distractive, because they do not need to use transportation means which are tiring and waste time, and because they avoid the campus where the living conditions are not decent. Many other students think that the classroom and the university are more comfortable, stable, and suitable for learning. They contend that they can focus better and concentrate more at class than at home probably because all their senses and body get involved when in class, unlike online when they only see or hear. Other students admit that they get distracted or even disturbed at home by family and house chores. One participant wrote: *"My physical existence, at home, is a problem. My family doesn't understand that I have online classes; thus, for them, I am available almost all the time. So, I get interrupted very often"*.

This is not all. Students seem to have a handful of other strong reasons in favour of direct instruction. For instance, there is the observation that face-to-face instruction reduces misunderstandings as it allows for direct contact, dynamic interaction, discussion, participation, debate, feedback, and instant questioning/answering with the teacher and classmates. One participant inscribed: *"we can learn a lot just by looking at the way the teacher teaches us"*; another one added: *"It is better when you hear and see your teacher"*. Indeed, eye-contact, body-language, physical presence, and gesturing account for much in the teaching-learning process. *"Nothing can substitute the presence of the teacher in front of his students"*, summed up one student.

According to students' views, classroom learning seems to be more practical than e-learning simply because, in the words of one respondent, "*Lectures are well explained at class, the eye contact is more comfortable and we feel like humans not containers of accumulated pieces of information*". Matter of fact, Abrahams et al. (2016) agree that the majority of students assimilate information better at face-to-face instruction than in the e-learning form. With that said, it should not be forgotten that virtual learning encourages autonomous learning, self-reliance, and responsibility. It is also more appropriate for health measures and social distancing requirements mainly that the physical classrooms are small and not very well-aired.

5- Pedagogical implications

Traditional classrooms are most students' choice; however, e-learning has become a necessity. To meet both needs, it is advisable to:

- Provide equal equipment for both teachers and students.
- Provide better-quality Internet.
- Provide suitable, motivating, and engaging e-learning platforms.
- Provide e-learning training for students, teachers, and even parents.
- Raise awareness of society about the material and mental requirements of e-learning.
- Adapt university spaces and classrooms for face-to-face instruction all in respecting social-distancing health measures.

6- Conclusion and recommendations

In the abundance of online teaching and learning options today, it is still not possible to dispose of face-to-face instruction. In the latter, both students and teachers find aspects that e-learning does

not provide, cover, nor guarantee, aspects like real interaction, direct eye contact, immediate presence, human contact, better focus, and authentic experiences. For these reasons, it is worth noting that students have a general tendency to prefer face-to-face classes, and occasionally prefer e-classes for the comfort associated to them as they help gain time, avoid traffic and transportation, and in cases, even save money.

Thereby, it is recommended to deeply investigate the improvement of e-learning as it is becoming part and parcel of higher education. It is also reasonable to further investigate the difficulties and challenges that students face such as technical issues, lack of focus, and the decreased motivation while learning online. It is urgent to find practical solutions and provide support in order to improve learners' attitudes towards e-learning which in turn will improve their virtual learning experiences and outcomes. Meanwhile, it is equally vital not to forget about the amelioration of face-to-face learning conditions mainly during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

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