



The Practicality of MOODLE Platform at Higher Education during COVID-19 Pandemic and Post-pandemic: Perceptions and Challenges

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Abstract

This research paper aims at investigating the effectiveness of MOODLE online learning platform's use at higher education in Algeria. Through an exploratory investigation, this study delves into examining the experience of two EFL teachers from the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Constantine, who taught five different English subjects at different levels during the academic years 2019-2021. MOODLE online learning use, practicality, and challenges were uncovered via a semi-structured interview. The thematic analysis of the interviewees' qualitative data showed that teachers can, in no way, rely on only one particular platform to teach different subjects. For an efficient manipulation of MOODLE Platform, the paper concludes with experts' recommendations and suggestions.

Article info

Received
10 April 2022
Accepted
28 August 2022

Keyword:

- ✓ Challenges:
- ✓ COVID 19 Pandemic and Post pandemic:
- ✓ MOODLE Online Learning Platform:
- ✓ Perceptions

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, in the Algerian higher education context, there is a rising need for a shift from the traditional learning (face to face) to the online learning, which has become an obligation during the world-wide pandemic crisis. Face to face teaching is not enough for a successful process of teaching/learning (Coman et al., 2020). Since we are in the era of globalization and technological development, the world bank of information is accessible online. To access and benefit from such materials and data, now referred to as E-Learning, one needs special techniques and new skills, digital skills.

Recently, the Algerian higher education institutions have been facing a change in the teaching ways. Due to the sudden lock down and for the sake of saving the academic year, the e-learning mode was imposed and MOODLE Platform was suggested by the ministry of higher education. This latter facilitates taking full advantage of modern technology creating by then an interface for e-learning (Berbar, 2020).

Like all the educational institutions in the world, “Algerian schools and universities have adopted various designs for distance education, like online lectures, distance drills and exercises,

virtual tutorials, video conferences, group works, and assessments (Benadla & Hadji, 2021).

Since the primary task of educational institutions is to make the process of creating, protecting, integrating, transmitting and applying knowledge an easy and accessible one, it is also their role to find appropriate and effective strategies to change their ways of teaching and to move towards the use of different educational platforms. That is to say, the Algerian higher education institutions need to adopt and integrate the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to benefit from the opportunities of having a variety of options in teaching/learning and to meet the challenges of 21st century modernity and innovation in teaching and learning.

Moodle platform is a course management system that can be used by teachers to develop teaching materials for online courses (Costa et al., 2012 ; Stasinakis, 2015). This language management system facilitates the creation of a web learning content where the learner utilizes the Internet features during his interaction with this content represents the second generation

online systems (Bouquebs, 2021). The activities on MOODLE platform represent a variety that is classified into six classes : Creation, Organization, Delivery, Communication, Collaboration and Assessment (Piotrowski, 2010). Despite the richness of such educational platforms, we are, however, still in a preliminary stage of using MOODLE Platform in a full and efficient manner. Moving towards the use of e-learning during COVID-19 resulted in the appearance of many challenges (Solodka, et al., 2021, p. 25). The introduction of the learning management system has been a challenge for many educational institutions in terms of providing proper training and up-skilling the teachers in the use of LMS effectively and incorporating it appropriately in their teaching.

For the sake of uncovering the reality and the challenges of MOODLE use when it was suggested as an e-learning mode to insure the completion of teaching tasks, this paper aims to explore university teachers' perception towards the use and the utility of MOODLE during COVID 19 lockdown. To gain insights from the terrain, the researchers explored the topic via a real context involving an interview with two EFL teachers from the ENSC. The study aimed to (a) investigate teachers' attitude

towards the utility of e-learning during the pandemic; (b) check how useful MOODLE platform was for the teaching of various subjects; (c) diagnose why the strengths of the MOODLE hide its weaknesses; (d) inspect teachers' evaluation of their own experience with MOODLE e-learning platform; (e) provide recommendations that would enhance the quality of e-learning via MOODLE. To reach these objectives, the researchers departed from the following research questions:

- How did Algerian teachers react towards MOODLE use during COVID 19?
- To what extent teachers' online lectures delivery via MOODLE was or wasn't successful when compared with the traditional delivery (face-to-face)?
- To what extent the nature and the characteristics of the subject should be considered when designing an online lecture via MOODLE?
- What difficulties did teachers face/have when using Moodle?
- What would augment from the quality of e-learning via MOODLE to facilitate the teaching of English as a foreign language to Algerian students ?

2. Literature review

Moodle can be implemented to help students learn better and make them independent learners. The implementation of MOODLE is of paramount importance in the teaching of English to Algerian EFL students.

In the Algerian EFL classroom, it is noticed that teachers and students do not fully benefit from MOODLE because they face lot of challenges. Owing to the fact that since “the introduction of MOODLE, training university teachers to take benefits from Web learning systems was the target in almost all Algerian universities” (Bouguebs, 2021, p.143), the process followed is just that of an upload-download one. The teacher uploads lessons and courses, and the students download them, which makes it a purely repository process. This process is influenced by the perceptions of both teachers and students vis-a-vis the use of Moodle platform.

This perception of upload-download procedure limits teachers and students’ choices and chances to benefit from the various teaching and learning options provided on Moodle platform such as : communication using forums, writing blogs, contribution in content creation via wikis, taking tests, undertaking self-evaluation, having quizzes, and so on.

All this is due to some serious and ongoing challenges that both Algerian teachers and students have vis-a-vis Moodle platform use (Berbar, 2020). These challenges can be summarized in what follows :

- The Algerian teaching is traditionally face to face.
- The constant instability of internet services.
- Teachers’ lack of knowledge of Moodle platform to fully understand how it functions in order to benefit from the different services it provides.
- Teachers and students lack a culture in the use of digital platforms.
- Teachers and students lack confidence in the use of the platform due to lack of knowledge and skills in its use.
- Teachers suffer from lack of training and weak technological skills.
- Algerian educational institutions do not provide sufficient training programs.
- Teachers perceive Moodle as a repository of materials.

- The interactive tools of Moodle are not actively used by teachers and students (chats, forums, communication and so on).
- Moodle is used just as an access to materials by students.
- Teachers do not know how to use and communicate elements like forums, chats, blogs, wikis and so on.

All these challenges, inter alia, might complicate the teaching/learning process for both the teacher and the student. This is becoming a further problem in higher education institutions and it requires studying it, analyzing the situation and reflecting upon it to reach proper ways in the adoption and integration of technology in the Algerian EFL classroom.

3. Methodology

The purpose of the current investigation is to determine the utility of online learning platforms use during COVID-19 at the Algerian higher education. The study assesses the effectiveness of two EFL teachers' use and manipulation of MOODLE platform, and explores the challenges, possible solutions and recommendations for future online learning via digital management systems

3.1 Data Collection Method

The researchers used a descriptive analytical method to test the validation of the study. In this investigation, data include qualitative findings collected from verbal accounts in which interviewed teachers went back through their experiences with Online learning via MOODLE during COVID-19 pandemic lock down. Their intent from this exploratory qualitative investigation was to get an in-depth understanding of e-learning platforms and websites use during and post to the pandemic. Accordingly, a semi structured interview was administered to two EFL teachers (see appendix 1). Interviews are relied on to collect our qualitative data because “they are best used when he (the researcher) wants to learn detailed information from a few specific people”, argued Driscoll (2011, p.163)..

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted at the ENS “Assia Djebar” of Constantine. Two EFL teachers from the department of English shared their online teaching experience via MOODLE during COVID-19. These teachers were taking in charge five different English subjects that were taught for different levels. Material Design and Development (MDD) was presented to 4th year students, Writing was taught to 3rd year students, Reading Techniques was instructed to 2nd year

students, and Grammar and Phonetics subjects were taught to 1st year students.

4. Data Analysis Procedure: Thematic Analysis

The data analysis procedures began once the interviews were converted from audiotapes to transcribed texts. The procedure adopted in the analysis of the interview transcripts is “the thematic analysis”. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), it is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your (the researcher) data set in (rich) detail.”

After reading and re-reading the transcripts, data reduction began. The themes started to emerge with the initial reading of each transcript. “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). To identify the emergent themes in our data, we utilized an open coding procedure where segments from the text that fit the research questions were depicted.

5. Results and Discussion

This report is structured in terms of the main themes that emerged from the interviews. The six emergent themes developed as follows: (1) Uncertainty,

(2) Dissatisfaction, (3) Challenging oneself, (4) Lack of digital skills, (5) Students’ unawareness, and (6) Empowerment and Self-determinism.

5.1 Uncertainty

This theme becomes apparent in the teachers’ responses when they demonstrate both a positive and negative attitudes towards MOODLE online platform. Despite the fact that MOODLE was the only alternative that facilitate for them keeping in touch with their students during the pandemic lockdown; yet the two teachers expressed a negative attitude towards this latter. Holding two contradictory attitudes was supported by their testimonies.

For both teachers their attitude towards MOODLE was negative prior to the COVID 19 and it changes to a positive one post to the pandemic because of some reasons. For teacher one, holding a negative attitude at the beginning was due to the sudden imposed the online learning, lack of some skills. Then changing her attitude to a positive one was related some other reasons including developing new skills ...etc. One can deduce this mixture of feeling in the following testimony:

“In the first year of the pandemic, things were not really clear and there was a kind of lack of organization and good follow up, especially on the part of students who faced many issues that the teacher could not help them to cope with. In the second year, things started to be more clear and lecture delivery

was better since students started to be involved more because they started to understand how things function on the platform.”

For the second teacher, holding a negative attitude towards MOODLE during the lockdown and a positive one post to the pandemic was due to the following reasons that she highlighted in her account:

“Actually, I did not face difficulties when posting my online lectures via MOODLE. The most common obstacle that arises during the implementation of online learning is the limited internet access that hindered from advancing the learning process. Besides, the inappropriate manipulation of MOODLE interface reduced from the quality of my courses. However most of these problems were solved post to the pandemic except the low internet quality which is regarded as a permanent, persistent and unsolved problem”.

5.2 Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction as a theme comes out in the interview transcripts segments that show the participants’ feeling of deception due to the fact that some challenges they faced when posting their courses on MOODLE. Their lack of the required training on how to manipulate the platform interface prevented them from achieving their course objectives on time.

In her account, one teacher declared the following:

“At the beginning, when we were

confronted with the crisis of the pandemic, knowledge about MOODLE was not really sufficient. This was due to the fact that, as teachers, we were not previously introduced to such teaching platforms with all the necessary skills they require to use them effectively and efficiently”.

Within the same context, the other teacher asserted that:

“As my experience with MOODLE started before the pandemic, my knowledge about MOODLE is quite acceptable and among my colleagues I didn’t find difficulties to manipulate MOODLE platform when posting my courses during COVID 19 lock down. However, I can’t hide the fact that my knowledge about the manipulation of MOODLE interface was not that deep. At many occasions I remained stuck unable to complete my course design due to the lack of the digital skills”.

Adding to lack of training on how to manipulate the platform during the COVID 19, the two teachers were somehow unsatisfied when designing their online MOODLE based lectures because of a witnessed failure that they attribute to other factors. One of them asserted that: “The failure of some of my course objectives was mainly related to the nature and the characteristics of some subjects that necessitate F2F interaction that thing that was not possible via MOODLE.” For the second teacher, the feeling of dissatisfaction was due to some issues that she attributed

to other factors related to the students' lack of ICT tools, lack training on how to manipulate MOODLE ...etc. She expressed her opinions as follows:

“other issues that contributed to this failure including internet quality, availability of technological materials and tools for students like computers or tablets, lack of seriousness on the part of students to attend online courses or even connect regularly to receive lessons and be involved in any practice related to lessons.”.

5.3 Lack of Digital Skills

Among the factors that hindered rather advanced the achievement of the course objectives was mainly related to their lack of the digital skills. As previously stated, teachers were facing many problems when they started posting their courses on MOODLE.

According to teacher one, her failure in manipulating MOODLE for the first time was due to her lack of knowledge on how to manipulate the platform. She asserted that: *“one cannot deny the fact that any failure in the teaching/learning process is due to insufficient knowledge about MOODLE”.*

To make this issue clear, the second teacher attributes her problems with MOODLE to the lack of the digital skills. She certified that: *“However, to some extent, the novelty of the online approach and the lack of the digital skills stand as major obstacles in the failure of objective achievements in some*

subjects”.

5.4 Challenging one-self

Even though teachers were not satisfied when using MOODLE prior to the pandemic lockdown due to the previously listed obstacles; however to reach their target (saving the academic year), the interviewees manifested a strong will and self-reliance.

To succeed in the design of her online courses, one teacher developed the new required digital skills by herself. *“No, I have never received a training in the use of MOODLE. I relied on myself to discover the platform, how it is used and its various options.”* declared the interviewed teacher.

When asking the respondents if their online lectures share the same design as that of F2F courses, the two teachers followed the same line of thought. Despite teachers agreement that both online and face-to-face course follow the same design; yet, some modifications need to be taken into account with the online design including the use of ICT tools and virtual meetings. The latter would help them overcome some of the problems related on how to succeed in the in online lectures design. One of the teachers declared the following:

“Sure, the online design follows the same design as F2F one: warm up, lesson presentation, practice and evaluation. However, the absence of the in-person presence is backed by some ICT tools such as PPT, videos, e-books...etc. Checking students' performance was verified via the

uploaded home-works or via virtual meetings relying some other alternatives such as ZOOM or Google meet.”

Within the same line of thought, the other teacher affirmed that

“The only difference between online and Face-to-Face design is that the lessons were always backed up with more learning support (lot of practice, audios, videos, texts) to help students get the maximum of the lesson as a way to make up for the change in the nature of teaching from face to face to online or distant teaching/learning. All this was done with constant follow up and regular contact with students to control or manage the process.”

Another challenging factor that teachers face when designing their online lectures was related to the nature of their subjects. Some subjects require more Face-to-Face interaction. To go beyond the lack of the in-person interaction, the two teachers relied on ICT tools and seek some net applications when presenting their online lectures. One of the interviewed teachers confirmed that:

“The nature of the course is what determines how or if the course can be taught online 100 per cent or we just need online teaching as a support to something that should be done in-class first and with more details of practice. This involves subjects like writing, phonetics and phonology. They all require in-

class teaching in the first place and online teaching can be used as a support only.

In order to overcome the lack of Face-to-Face interaction problem, one of the teachers baked her lecture with more “audios, videos, texts and more practice as a form of support to teaching/learning with constant follow up”. The other teacher relied on organizing regularly virtual meetings. We can deduce that from her accounts when asserting that:

“As Material Design & Development course requires more F2F interaction, in addition to the use of MOODLE interface where I state the course objectives, provide instruction, upload PPT presentation and e-papers; I back my courses with regular virtual meeting via Zoom, google meet to remove students’ learning obstacles”..

5.5 Students’ unawareness

This theme is quite apparent in the statements exhibiting students’ disengagement and the demotivation of students to interact via MOODLE. One of the interviewee’s considered that if she did not succeed in her online learning via MOODLE, it was because of the absence of students from the online process. She confirmed that:

“In Face to Face session, I used to control all my students. Yet when it comes to teaching them online, I lost my control. I could not interact with them online via MOODLE. My students were not considering the

platform as a learning environment. For them, it was like a website that helps them to download the needed documents.”

Within the same scope the other teacher speculated that:

“The lack of seriousness on the part of students to attend online courses or even connect regularly to receive lessons and be involved in any practice related to lessons show that they were not conscious that MOODLE facilitate for them online learning.”.

5.6 Empowerment and Self-determinism

Empowerment and self-determinism as a theme comes out in the interview transcripts segments that display the numerous recommendation and suggestions the two teachers advance for overcoming and getting rid of the various problems related to e-learning via MOODLE. Both teachers consider that MOODLE interface needs some modifications. One of the teachers recommends the: “Changing the interface of the platform to make it more efficient in terms of use!”. The other teacher goes further in expanding the former recommendation by saying that “students and novice users struggle to find their way around MOODLE complex settings. This complexity could be removed if modifications are brought on its interface”.

To back this raised issue, a specialist in field of technology advancement said that:

“Moodle is a great LMS but since it’s

open-source, you have got to figure out many things... I like the immense possibilities in terms of delivering content and providing interactive materials but it’s not user-friendly and require long navigation. A great tool but could be improved.” Confirms Janice Harrison¹ .

To overcome their major challenges and for an appropriate manipulation of MOODLE platform, the two teachers displayed a strong will to develop their skills. One of the interviewees speculated that : “I have attended some in person and online workshops that aimed to develop our digital skills on how to manipulate MOODLE”. For the other interviewee, things changed post to the pandemic in that she started to develop the needed knowledge by herself. She said that: “After the first year of COVID-19, things changed because one gained enough knowledge to use the platform more efficiently for teaching and learning process success”. Within the same line of thought the other teacher confirmed that: “I recognized during the pandemic that my digital skills need to in a continuous progress. That is why, since the pandemic I did not stop attending professional development programs that target the development of digital skills.”

The thematic analysis answered the research questions and confirmed that the use of MOODLE during the pandemic was of a great utility; however, the different

¹ Associate Director of Instructional Technology, Jan oversees the development and provision of educational technology services and manages a team that supports faculty as they explore using new ideas, tools and media to their greatest benefit for student learning. <https://www.jaharrison@stonehill.edu>

challenges that teachers face during e-learning create a feeling of uncertainty and dissatisfaction among teachers. The latter was due to that fact that teaching subjects of different nature create a problem in the online design because MOODLE could not satisfy all the needs. Teachers can in no way rely on only one particular platform, like that of MOODLE which was provided by the Algerian Higher Education Ministry, to teach different subjects. Learning management systems should be selected according to some features like the nature of the subject and students' ability to learn better.

All in all, for an appropriate use of MOODLE in the future teachers provide the following recommendations:

- Changing the interface of the platform to make it more efficient in terms of use!
- Solve the problem of internet connectivity to raise the quality of internet accessibility.
- Send instant notification to students via their emails (phones or computers) to remind them about the start of a given course or the reception of a given teaching material!
- Provide teachers and students with training and guidance on how to use this platform to help them achieve the teaching/learning objectives.:

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Recently, there was a rising in the enthusiasm of higher education institutions towards the use of ICT, including Algeria. ICT is believed to be a source for improving the teaching/learning process and this is why it is usually considered as challenging, especially in the African context (Keats & Schmidt, 2007). Despite its high importance, e-learning is considered to be in its infancy in most developing countries (Unwin, 2008 ; Hollow, 2009). Actually, data about the state of e-learning in the Algerian context is insufficient. As a form of....., Moodle is a major platform used in teaching nowadays (Issacs & Hollow, 2012). Countries around the world differ in the degree of using LMS like MOODLE and other platforms. In the Algerian context, MOODLE platform is exclusively the only teaching platform that was suggested by the Ministry of Higher Education and is adopted by all higher education institutions.

Actually, there is a recognition for the necessity of MOODLE platform, and other educational platforms, to teach and communicate with students remotely. But to benefit from such platforms, certain critical points need to be highlighted and considered in order to help both teachers and students experience a successful teaching and learning. These points can be summarized in the following.

- MOODLE is a free source platform that is designed to help teachers in the creation of courses. It should be exploited to have the

opportunity to have dynamic interaction between teachers and students.

- Teachers should be motivated to use Moodle and should be guided in the use of the different services provided by MOODLE for a depot of courses and teaching materials.
- Interactive learning tools are not effectively invested and this issue should be addressed.
- Efforts to satisfy teachers' desire in taking training courses to be more familiar with using MOODLE Platform should be made. Moreover, Teachers should up-grade their digital and technical skills in the use of Moodle.
- Modifying MOODLE interface so that creating a Flexibility of the platform .
- Providing training for both teachers and students. Teachers should receive training to fully use and benefit from Moodle advantages : holding seminars, workshops, making quizzes, and investing in other services and activities. Training students in the use of MOODLE should be addressed.
- Developing the digital literacy is crucial both for teachers and students. Teachers and students should be greatly immersed in the use of technology and platforms. Teachers and students should develop a culture in the use of different digital platforms. Besides, higher

education should be appropriately digitalized.

- Attempts to improve the internet services because this is one main reason why teachers refrain from using platform and its facilities.

It should be noted though, that the training of teachers is not the only influential factor in the success of teaching/learning via Moodle platform. Attention should also be directed towards the student since teaching is a learning centered process, where focus is neither on the teacher nor on the learner, but on both parts as the main components in teaching/learning. Students should be fully engaged in an active manner (Hall, 2006).

There are many challenges that face higher education institutions and teachers in the process of implementing MOODLE . Unwin (2008) and Andersson (2010) highlight the paramount challenges that need be addressed for a succeeding in the implementation of MOODLE based learning. For them, (a) preparing teaching courses require time investment, (b) lack of familiarity of teachers and students with this kind of platforms, (c) the need for the availability of teachers on constant basis and this adds to workload, (d) newness of e-learning, (e) ICT literacy is low, (f) students confusion and lack of guidance to use the platform are to the main issues that one should reflect on.

Additionally, training is of a paramount importance for a successful MOODLE based e-learning. According to According

to Unwin (2008) and Andersson (2010), training workshop on how to use MOODLE should focus on the following points :

- Use Moodle as an adjunct to face to face teaching to make teaching/learning a rich process.
- Understand the process of planning, designing and implementing online courses
- Learn to collaborate with others to do different tasks
- Create a better and active communication and collaboration with students.
- Design and manage learning and assessment.

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6. Appendices

Teachers' Interview Items

Dear teachers,

Last year and because of the COVID-19 pandemic most of your courses were taught online via MOODLE. This interview is intended to collect data about your experience with MOODLE online learning. The aim is to determine the utility of online learning platforms use during COVID-19 at the Algerian higher education. So, it would be kind of you to answer the following questions and make sure that your answers will be kept anonymous throughout the research study.

- Q 1. Have you ever designed an online lecture before the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, please explain
- Q 2. Have you ever used MOODLE platform before the COVID-19 pandemic? Please explain
- Q 3. Have you received any training on how to use MOODLE? If yes, please explain
- Q 4. How many subjects do taught online via MOODLE during and post to the pandemic? Please explain
- Q 5. To what extent your online lectures delivery via MOODLE was or wasn't successful when compared with face-to-face one? Please explain
- Q 6. Do you think your knowledge about MOODLE is sufficient? If you answer is no, do you think your insufficient knowledge about MOODLE contributed in the failure described above? Please explain
- Q 7. Did you face some obstacles on MOODLE when designing your online lectures? Please explain
- Q 8. When designing online courses, have you followed the same design as that of F2F courses? Please explain
- Q 9. Do you think that nature of the subject needs to be considered when designing an online lecture? Please explain
- Q 10. What are the major changes that you have made at the level of each subject? Please explain
- Q 11. How did you manage to adapt your lecture presentations to MOODLE parameters? Please explain
- Q 12. According to your experience with e-learning via MOODLE, what do you recommend to facilitate the achievement of learning objectives? Please explain