Algerian EFL Students' Attitudes Toward Online vs. Traditional Classroom Learning Environments

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Abstract

The rapid evolution of technology has brought about profound changes in education globally. In Algeria, where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education is pivotal for fostering international communication and career prospects, the traditional classroom setting has traditionally been the primary mode of instruction. However, the emergence of online learning platforms, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic's necessitated shift to remote education, has spurred debates regarding the efficacy of online versus traditional classroom learning environments. This study investigates the perceptions of Algerian EFL students regarding online and traditional classroom learning. With a group of participants including 60 students from various Algerian universities, this research utilizes qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, to gain insights into students' views, preferences, and experiences in both learning settings. By comparing and contrasting these perspectives, this study aims to provide an accurate understanding of the advantages, challenges, and potential benefits of online and traditional classroom instruction in Algeria's EFL context. The findings have the potential to inform educational strategies and policies, aligning them more closely with students' needs and preferences in the evolving landscape of higher education.

Keywords: EFL Education, Online Learning, Student Attitudes, Traditional Classroom

Introduction

Education is a dynamic field shaped by technological advancements, societal needs, and pedagogical innovations. The 21st century has witnessed a profound transformation in the landscape of education, largely catalyzed by the relentless march of technology. This shift has indicated online learning as a prominent and influential component of contemporary education systems worldwide. In Algeria, a country where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education becomes a pivotal role in preparing students for global communication and career opportunities, the conventional classroom environment has long been the bedrock of language instruction. Nevertheless, the advent of online learning platforms and the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid transition to remote education, have ignited extensive debates regarding the effectiveness of online versus traditional classroom learning environments.

This study delves into the perceptions of Algerian EFL students regarding online versus traditional classroom learning environments. Comprising a diverse group of 60 students from various Algerian universities, including M'sila, Barika University Center, Annaba, Ouargla, Djelfa, Tlemcen, and Algiers, this research employs qualitative research methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, to unravel students' perspectives, preferences, and experiences in both modes of learning. Through this comparative analysis, the study seeks to uncover insights into the advantages, challenges, and potential benefits associated with online and traditional classroom instruction in the context of EFL education in Algeria. The findings hold the promise of informing educational strategies and policies, fostering an alignment that is more attuned to the evolving landscape of higher education and the diverse needs and preferences of students in the country.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the perceptions of Algerian EFL students regarding online and traditional classroom learning environments.

2. To investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning.

3. To provide recommendations and insights that can inform educational policies and practices in Algeria, particularly in the context of EFL instruction.

Research Questions

To achieve the above objectives, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Algerian EFL students perceive online learning as compared to traditional classroom learning?

2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the attitudes and experiences of Algerian EFL students regarding online learning?

   1. Review of Literature

1.1 Online Learning and E-learning:

Online learning has gained considerable prominence as an educational method in higher education institutions. Some researchers' interpretations can be viewed as indicative of the prevailing notions regarding online education. Aparicio et al (2016) argued that the term "e-learning" was not the initial terminology employed to describe the utilization of computerized systems to support or enhance the educational process. They identified a total of 23 concepts associated with the use of computers for educational purposes, including but not limited to

online learning, virtual learning, distance education, mobile learning (m-learning), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and learning management systems.

As for Dhull and Sakshi (2017), online learning is a specific type of distance learning that makes use of various technologies to facilitate education. These technologies include the internet (world wide web), email, chat platforms, newsgroups, textual materials, and audio and video conferencing. The purpose of employing these technologies is to deliver educational content and enable communication between instructors and learners (p32). Thus, one significant is its flexibility. Online learning allows students to engage with the educational materials and participate in coursework at their own preferred pace and according to their personal convenience. Unlike traditional in-person classes with fixed schedules, online learning provides the freedom for students to access learning resources and complete assignments when it aligns with their individual schedules and commitments.

According to Bertea (2009, p1), online learning can be described as a substitute for traditional distance education. It involves the integration of various technologies, primarily leveraging the internet, to facilitate the exchange of essential information, including testing and assessment, that learners require throughout their educational journey. In essence, online learning utilizes technology and the internet to deliver educational content, support assessments, and enable learning from a distance, making it a modern and effective approach to education.

According to Rodrigues et al (2019), the concept of e-learning can be defined as an innovative web-based system that utilizes digital technologies and various educational materials. Its primary aim is to offer students a personalized, learner-centered, open, enjoyable, and interactive learning environment, thereby providing support for and enhancing the overall learning process.

Online learning and e-learning are frequently used interchangeably, as they both pertain to forms of distance education that rely on technology to facilitate the learning process. In the context described by Simens et al. (2015), e-learning specifically refers to a method of distance education in which teaching and educational content are entirely delivered via the internet. This means that all aspects of instruction, including course materials, communication with instructors, assessments, and interactions among learners, take place through online channels. The distinction here is that e-learning emphasizes a comprehensive reliance on internet-based technologies for the entirety of the educational experience, whereas online learning can encompass a broader range of technologies beyond just the internet.

1.2 Distance Learning:

According to Moore et al (2011), distance learning primarily pertains to the initiatives aimed at offering and facilitating access to education, especially for individuals who are geographically separated from traditional educational institutions. Moor (2011) elaborates that distance learning involves teaching and organized learning experiences that typically occur in different locations. Consequently, it necessitates the utilization of specialized tools, distinct modes of communication through dedicated institutional systems, and the integration of various technologies to bridge the geographical gap and facilitate effective education delivery.

1.3 Blended Learning

Blended learning represents a relatively recent concept in the field of education. As for Graham (2006), this concept involves the fusion of traditional face-to-face learning methods with computer-based learning. In other words, blended learning is the application of a teaching approach that seamlessly combines in-person classroom instruction with online learning components, as described by Park and Shea (2020, p. 256). This approach aims to harness the strengths of both traditional and online education, offering students a more versatile and well-rounded learning experience that can cater to various learning styles and needs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The study involves a sample of 60 Algerian EFL students drawn from multiple universities in Algeria. The selection of participants was purposeful, aiming for diversity in terms of age, gender, university location, and academic level (undergraduate and postgraduate). The universities represented in this research include Msila, Barika University Center, Annaba, Ouargla, Djelfa, Tlemcen, and Algiers, ensuring a broad cross-section of the Algerian student population.

2.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary method for data collection. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward online and traditional classroom learning. Interview questions will be designed to elicit rich, qualitative data, capturing a wide range of perspectives. Interviews will be conducted in Arabic or French, depending on the participants' language preference, and will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

2.3 Findings:

2.3.1 Perceptions of Online Learning:

1. **Positive Perceptions of Online Learning**

- **Convenience and Flexibility**: A significant proportion of participants expressed positive views about online learning, emphasizing the convenience and flexibility it offers. For example, some students mentioned that they appreciate the ability to access

course materials and lectures at their convenience, allowing them to better balance their studies with work or family commitments. One student noted, "Online classes give me the flexibility to study when I'm most productive, even if it's late at night."

- **Access to Diverse Resources:** Many students highlighted the wealth of online resources available. They cited examples of utilizing online libraries, open educational resources, and multimedia materials to complement their learning. One student shared, "I can explore various online sources to deepen my understanding of a topic, which can be quite enriching."

- **Personalized Learning Pace**: Some participants noted that online learning allowed them to proceed at their own pace. They could pause and replay recorded lectures or spend extra time on challenging concepts. This personalized approach was seen as advantageous by several students.

2. **Challenges and Concerns with Online Learning**

- **Technical Issues:** Several participants encountered technical challenges, such as unstable internet connections or difficulty navigating online platforms. These issues sometimes disrupted the learning experience. One student mentioned, "I've missed important parts of lectures due to poor internet, and it's frustrating."

- **Isolation**: A recurring theme was the sense of isolation that some students felt in online classes. They missed the face-to-face interactions with peers and teachers that the traditional classroom provided. A participant stated, "I feel disconnected from my classmates; it's not the same as being in a real classroom."

- **Motivation and Discipline**: Maintaining motivation and discipline in an online learning environment was a common concern. Without the structure of regular in-person classes, some students found it challenging to stay on track with their studies. One

student admitted, "I often procrastinate when studying online; there are too many distractions at home."

- **Limited Teacher Interaction:** Some students expressed frustration with the limited interaction with teachers in online classes. They missed the immediacy of asking questions and receiving instant feedback. "Online, it takes longer to get answers to my questions, and it's not as personal," remarked one student.

3. **Hybrid Preferences**

- Many participants indicated a preference for a hybrid approach that combines online and in-person learning. They believed this would provide the best of both worlds, allowing for flexibility while maintaining valuable face-to-face interactions. For instance, a student stated, "I think a mix of online and in-person classes would be ideal. We get the benefits of technology and personal connection."

These findings illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of Algerian EFL students' perceptions of online learning. While convenience, access to resources, and personalized learning are seen as strengths, challenges related to technical issues, isolation, and motivation need to be addressed. Additionally, students' preferences indicate that a blended or hybrid learning model may be a suitable solution to cater to their diverse needs and preferences.

2.3.2 Perceptions of Traditional Classroom Learning

1. **Positive Perceptions of Traditional Classroom Learning**

- **Direct Interaction with Teachers**: A prevailing theme among participants was the value they placed on the direct interaction with teachers in traditional classrooms. They appreciated the ability to ask questions, seek clarification, and engage in real-time discussions. One student noted, "In a physical classroom, I can immediately ask my teacher if I don't understand something. It's much easier to communicate."

- **Immediate Feedback**: Traditional classrooms offer students the advantage of immediate feedback on their performance. Participants mentioned that receiving instant comments on their assignments and having face-to-face discussions with instructors helped them grasp concepts better.

- **Sense of Community:** The physical classroom fosters a sense of community and camaraderie among students. Many participants spoke of the importance of social interaction with peers, collaborative learning, and the formation of study groups. A student remarked, "Being with classmates motivates me, and we support each other in our studies."

- **Structured Learning Environment**: Traditional classrooms provide a structured and disciplined environment for learning. Some students appreciated the routine and the absence of distractions that can be prevalent when studying at home.

2. Challenges and Concerns with Traditional Classroom Learning

- **Rigidity and Scheduling:** While traditional classrooms offer structure, some students found the rigid scheduling to be a drawback. For instance, students with work or family commitments sometimes struggled to attend classes at fixed times. "I wish there was more flexibility in the schedule," commented one participant.

- **Physical Constraints:** A few students mentioned the physical constraints of traditional classrooms, such as limited space and the need to commute to campus. These factors could sometimes be inconvenient.

3. Preference for Blended Learning

- Many participants expressed a preference for a blended learning model that combines the strengths of traditional classrooms with online components. They saw this as an ideal solution that could provide flexibility while preserving the benefits of in-person

interaction. One student stated, "A mix of traditional and online classes would be perfect. We get the best of both worlds."

These findings illustrate that traditional classroom learning is highly regarded by Algerian EFL students, particularly for its direct interaction with teachers, immediate feedback, and sense of community. However, concerns related to scheduling and physical constraints indicate that flexibility is also a valuable consideration. A blended learning approach appears to align with the preferences of many students, allowing them to balance the advantages of both traditional and online learning environments.

2.3.3 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This section delves into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Algerian EFL students' perceptions and experiences with online and traditional classroom learning.

1. **Acceleration of Online Learning**
   - The COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid transition to online learning, which significantly affected students' educational experiences. Many participants acknowledged that the pandemic accelerated the adoption of online learning platforms and tools. One student mentioned, "The pandemic forced us into online classes, and it was a sudden shift that we had to adapt to quickly."
   - Online learning became the primary mode of instruction during lockdowns and periods of restricted physical access to campuses. As a result, students had to become more familiar with digital tools and platforms, which, in some cases, led to increased confidence in using technology for learning.
2. **Challenges and Adjustments**
   - The sudden shift to online learning was not without challenges. Several participants highlighted the initial difficulties they faced, including technical

issues, lack of familiarity with online platforms, and adjustments to new modes of engagement. A student shared, "At first, it was tough. I had trouble with online tools, and it felt strange not being in a classroom."

- The pandemic-induced shift also posed challenges related to maintaining motivation and engagement. Students missed the social interactions, group study sessions, and the immediate presence of teachers that traditional classrooms provided.

3. **Infrastructure Gaps and Digital Inclusion**

- The pandemic underscored existing infrastructure gaps in Algeria, particularly regarding internet access and the availability of necessary technology. Some students in remote or underserved areas faced significant challenges due to limited access to stable internet connections and suitable devices for online learning.

- The need for digital inclusion and equitable access to online education became more apparent during the pandemic. Participants expressed a desire for measures to bridge the digital divide, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities for online learning.

4. **Reevaluation of Online Learning**

- The pandemic prompted students to reevaluate their perceptions of online learning. While some participants continued to have reservations, others recognized the potential benefits of online education, particularly in terms of flexibility and access to resources.

- A participant reflected, "The pandemic made us see that online learning has its advantages, especially when physical attendance is not possible. It's not perfect, but it can work if the right support and resources are provided."

These findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant transformation in how Algerian EFL students perceive and engage with online and traditional classroom learning. While challenges were evident, the experience prompted a reevaluation of online learning, with students recognizing its potential when supported by suitable infrastructure and resources. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of digital inclusion and the need to address disparities in access to technology and connectivity. Overall, the impact of the pandemic has led to a reconsideration of the role of online learning in the Algerian higher education landscape.

2.4 Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the perceptions and experiences of Algerian EFL students regarding online and traditional classroom learning environments, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their educational experiences.

✓ **Blended Learning as a Preferred Approach**

One notable finding is the preference among students for a blended learning model that combines elements of both online and traditional classroom instruction. This preference aligns with the idea that blended learning can offer the flexibility and accessibility of online education while preserving the valuable aspects of face-to-face interaction and immediate feedback. Algerian universities may consider integrating more blended learning opportunities into their curricula to cater to these preferences.

✓ **Teacher Training and Support for Online Instruction**

Students highlighted challenges related to online learning, including technical issues and difficulties in maintaining motivation. To address these challenges, institutions should invest in teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills needed to

facilitate effective online instruction. Additionally, providing ongoing support for both teachers and students in navigating online platforms and tools can enhance the online learning experience.

✓ **Reevaluation of Assessment Methods**

The transition to online learning during the pandemic also prompted a reevaluation of assessment methods. Educators may consider diversifying assessment strategies to align with the online learning environment. This may include more project-based assessments, open-book exams, or online discussions, ensuring that assessment methods are suitable for the mode of instruction.

✓ **Digital Inclusion and Equity**

The pandemic emphasized the need for digital inclusion and equity in education. Policymakers should prioritize initiatives that ensure all students have access to the necessary technology and internet connectivity to engage effectively in online learning. This includes exploring partnerships with telecommunications providers and offering subsidies or incentives to bridge the digital divide.

✓ **Student Support Services**

As students adapt to the evolving landscape of education, institutions should bolster student support services. Providing academic and emotional support, counseling services, and mentorship programs can help students navigate the challenges associated with online learning and maintain their motivation and well-being.

✓ **Continuous Feedback and Improvement**

To effectively address the needs and preferences of students, continuous feedback mechanisms should be established. Regular surveys and focus group discussions can help institutions gauge the evolving perceptions and experiences of students in online

and traditional classroom settings, enabling them to adapt and improve their offerings accordingly.

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer profound insights into the perceptions and experiences of Algerian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the evolving landscape of education. The preferences and challenges voiced by these students provide valuable guidance for shaping the future of education in Algeria. The findings of this study illuminate a path forward for Algeria's educational system. By embracing a blended learning model and implementing the recommended strategies, Algerian institutions can create a more adaptive, inclusive, and student-centric educational environment, ultimately enhancing the quality of EFL education and promoting equitable access for all learners across the country.

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