Exploring EFL Teachers' Perspective on the Challenges of Distance Language Education

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Abstract

   Although the challenges related to distance language education were significant during the pandemic, fostering it is the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education's priority. This article investigates the issues that university teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) face in remote education. The paper seeks to reflect on Algerian EFL teachers' experiences with distance education. It aims to find reliable answers to the following questions: Do EFL teachers have a positive take on distance education? What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in virtual instruction? What is the effect of remote education on EFL learning? Therefore, employing a qualitative research method, a semi-structured interview was conducted with nine teachers at the department of the English language and letters at Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. Results reveal that EFL teachers report poor internet quality, lack of motivation on the part of students, and lack of knowledge about remote teaching and assessment, among the issues that hinder effective distance education. In this respect, in its concluding part, this paper provides some recommendations for overcoming the challenges related to distance education of EFL.
Keywords : Challenges; EFL teachers; perspective; qualitative research; virtual instruction

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I- Introduction :

One of the basics of modern societies is distance education, a mode of teaching and learning where teachers, students, and peers meet in virtual classrooms through different online platforms such as Moodle, e-learning, Sanako, Google Meet, and Zoom. In fact, before the coronavirus outbreak in 2019, distance education was rarely referred to in higher education in Algeria. However, interest in online education reached its peak during the pandemic era. In teaching and learning foreign languages such as English, remote education brought various opportunities, challenges, and new techniques for teachers and learners.

A recent integrative literature review study by Erarslan (2021), which analyzed research studies conducted in the first year of the pandemic, stated that online education in the English language is challenging. The author reported that poor internet quality, lack of online educational tools, and lack of information and technology tools literacy are among the challenges teachers and students face in online education. This is due to the nature of this new pedagogical mode, which involves using different technological and digital tools and online platforms. In the context of Algerian universities, many studies were conducted to measure the effectiveness of remote education and the issues that students encounter. However, more needs to be done to investigate the challenges that language teachers, in general, and EFL teachers, in specific, face in distance education. Therefore, the question to be asked is, what are the obstacles that EFL university teachers face in virtual language classes? Hence, this study is exploratory research that aims to record EFL teachers' take on and experience with remote education. Only then can effective measures be taken to enhance remote education, which is meant to foster the future experiences of distance education of EFL in Algerian universities.

II- Literature Review :
II.1. Distance Education :

Distance education, also referred to as e-learning (Stauffer, 2022), virtual education, and online education (Simonson et al., 2019), is associated with online content on the web or the internet (Tsai & Machado, 2002). Online education is often mistakenly considered similar to distance education. Nair (2022) clarifies that online education is different from distance one in location, interaction, and intention. The author clarifies that while online education is where the students and the teacher use online platforms and can take place in in-person classes, distance education is exclusively remote and lacks face-to-face communication. Nair (2022) adds that the teacher can use online classes to back-up in-person sessions. In contrast, distance classes intend to replace the teacher with instructions posted beforehand in an e-learning platform. Simonson et al. (2019) characterize virtual education as institution-based, geographically separating the teacher and students, involving interactive telecommunications, and sharing data, voice, and videos (learning experiences).

II.2. Means of Virtual Education :

Different digital and technological tools can be used for distance education. Luo and Lei (2012) classified the types of Information Communication Tools (ICTs) in virtual learning into educational networking, web-based learning, and mobile learning. Educational networking represents online platforms that are functionally based on communication and link users together to share, connect, and discuss (Dakon, 2011). They include Edmodo, Ning, and Sanako. Web-based learning tools are the means used in learning that utilize the internet as an instructional delivery tool to carry out various activities. They foster the individualization of learning, facilitating instructional methods, overcoming physical distance, and saving time (Gómez, 2008). They include social bookmarking and blogs. Mobile learning uses mobile and computing devices, such as smartphones, computers, and laptops (Traxler, 2005).

II.3. Benefits of Remote Education :

According to (Al-Hadidi, 2013), distance education enables flexible input modification, enhances communication on the part of students, supplies them with feedback on their learning, and provides various learning resources and assessment methods. In the same context, Drokina (2020) states that distance education in universities allows students to combine work and studies, provides flexibility in learning/ teaching anywhere and anytime, fosters autonomous learning and self-discipline among students, and enhances technological literacy. Simonson et al. (2019) support this idea and add that virtual education is an effective teaching and learning mode because it helps students assign more time to their studies.

In foreign language learning, ICTs play a decisive role in fostering language (FL) learning in virtual classes. Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) noted that using ICTs like blogs and video conferencing facilitates the FL learners' interaction and communication, enabling them to use the target language for real purposes and in authentic contexts. Besides, involving digital educational tools in remote classrooms will make the learner more interested, active, and responsible, as they will boost their creativity by experiencing new ways of learning. In the same vein, educational networking enhances curiosity and motivation, educators' involvement in their education, collaboration, and creativity, facilitates information sharing and checking, and saves time (Hargadon, n.d.). In the same vein of thought, Djoudi and Boukhedmi (2022) stress the importance of creating a pleasant learning atmosphere. The authors go further to add that ''Teaching languages and teaching grammar, in particular, can be enhanced through the use of ICTs for developing teaching techniques and overcoming many of the obstacles that both a learner and a teacher can face'' (Djoudi & Boukhedmi, 2022, p.43). Therefore, ICTs effectively enhance EFL teaching and learning experiences in online classes.

II. 3. Challenges of Remote Education :

Like traditional (in-person) education, the distance mode of education has some things that could be improved. Drokina (2020) mentions that poor communication with the teacher, lack of motivation and self-organization on the part of students, interrupted internet access, and lack of teachers' feedback through body language are the major issues brought about by virtual classes. Drokina (2020, p. 47) adds, "Insufficient

implementation of the skills of building relationships in a team and speaking in front of an audience" is another challenge of remote education. Furthermore, lack of technological literacy and adapting, dealing with, and being updated with new technologies are barriers that students and teachers encounter in remote classes (Habibu, Al-Mamun & Clement, 2012).

Regarding the challenges of virtual education in the EFL context, student-teacher interaction raises a severe obstacle (Mahyoob, 2020). Besides, a lack of experience with technological devices and online platforms, understanding lectures, assignment design and completion, and instruction methods hinder the success of virtual classes in the field of EFL education (Yusniaty Lodo & Ajito, 2022). Furthermore, reliability and credibility are other issues in distance education. Some digital educational resources need more reliable communication networks, and learners are likely to depend totally on online resources, which may lead to plagiarism. Moreover, the study conducted by Rababah (2020) that aimed to examine the online education challenges in EFL during the COVID-19 era revealed that lack of adequate training on using online educational tools or platforms, inconsistent teaching styles of instructors, and bad internet connection to be the main issues faced in distance education.

III-Research Methodology and Design :
III.1. Aims of the Study :
The present study investigates the challenges of distance language education faced by EFL university teachers. Therefore, in a broad sense, this study aims to record EFL teachers' take on and experience with virtual classes in terms of the effect of this educational mode on EFL students' language ability and the means they use in distance education. In a narrow sense, the present study seeks to deal with the issues brought about by distance education regarding instruction, management, and assessment.

III.2. Research Questions :
The present research aims to answer the following questions:
- Do EFL teachers have a positive take on distance education?
- What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in virtual instruction?
- What is the effect of remote education on EFL learning?

III.3. Research Means and Population :
This article seeks to reflect on university teachers' experience with distance education. Therefore, employing a qualitative research method, a semi-structured interview was conducted with nine teachers at the department of the English language and letters at Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. The interview aims to gather data concerning teachers' perceptions of and experiences with distance education. It also seeks to unveil the challenges of distance education regarding instruction and assessment. The interview contained nine questions (see appendix) and was conducted with teachers of different modules (oral expression, written expression, grammar, linguistics, literature, English for specific purposes, and research methodology).

The interview was conducted via messenger calls and audio records in November 2022. The population of the present paper was randomly selected. However, it is worth clarifying that the participants have an experience with distance education during the Covid-19 era (academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021) and hybrid education (the academic year 2021- 2022).

IV- Results:

The data gathered using the interview reveal that EFL teachers can be divided into two groups; those who are keen on distance education and those who refrain from it. With more precision, seven teachers claim that they like virtual education and explain that it permits teaching anywhere and anytime and enables them to be creative in EFL instruction. As for the three participants who disfavor remote education, they justified by claiming that they are used to the in-person mode. A participant argues, "when I was a student, I knew only the regular classroom with the whiteboard, the teacher, and the students following the teacher's explanation using paper and pen. As a teacher also, I can lecture my students in the context of a real classroom. I do not belong to this digital generation." Furthermore, participants with a negative take on distance education explained that they do not master online platforms.

Likewise, participants had divergent opinions on the effect of remote education on students' language learning. While some teachers perceive distance education as positively impacting EFL students learning, others think it negatively influences language learning ability. This is because five teachers view distance education as assisting students in overcoming psychological obstacles (anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and confidence) and did not hesitate to participate orally in the online sessions. Participants also believe that the distance mode of education made students more comfortable, motivated, and creative in doing the required tasks. However, four other teachers think virtual education has a double-faced impact on students' language learning. They shared the same ideas as the previous teachers regarding the positive influence of distance education on EFL students' language learning. They added that students became more autonomous, independent, and responsible for their learning and showed progress in creativity and productivity. In contrast, for the negative impact, they stated that some students were unmotivated and unwilling to participate and attend virtual classes, which affected their language learning ability.

Besides, EFL teachers say that they referred to different online platforms for teaching EFL virtually. Findings reflect that most of the participants (i.e., four teachers) use the e-learning platform, Sanako, google meet, and Zoom. Two other participants run distance classes via messenger (calls, chats, and audio records), share PowerPoint slides with an audio record in which they explained the lesson, send YouTube links of the lessons they prepared beforehand, and create Facebook groups for the sessions. Three other teachers opt for emailing written forms of lectures without providing any additional support for students.

Data also revealed that two significant views could be noticed concerning the success of virtual education. First, the great majority of teachers (i.e., eight teachers) consider the experience successful only to a certain extent for many reasons. This is

mainly because only some students benefited from virtual classes, as they took advantage of distance learning and overcame their fear of participation. In contrast, others refrained from engaging in participation and discussion.

Concerning the issues encountered by EFL teachers in distance education, Participants mention that motivating students, managing online classes as well as participation, evaluating students' works, tracing their progress, poor internet quality, and lack of technological literacy as well as devices (not all students had smartphones and computers) were the main challenges of distance education. Furthermore, while a teacher complains that students do not check the shared lessons frequently, another teacher says that virtual classes make students lazy and unproductive. The participant explains that distance classes allowed some students to cheat as most of their written assignments were plagiarized. Furthermore, three other teachers claim that some students developed a sense of irresponsibility and indiscipline. They clarified that some students did not join live virtual classes and interrupted each other and the others when participating. Teachers also added that some students are not used to technological tools and virtual platforms. Teachers also complained that there were instances of misbehavior on the part of students, such as: joking in colloquial Arabic, sending informal emails, sharing ironic pictures in Facebook and messenger groups, and not respecting teachers' instructions and deadlines.

Regarding the effect of distance education on teachers' roles, participants mentioned that the change is significant as the teachers lost their controlling role over their students' behavior. Teachers added that distance education is time and energy-consuming as teachers have been making more effort in lesson preparation, checking and evaluation, and contacting the students through digital tools. Participants think the teachers' role in virtual classes is merely a guide.

Moving to types of assessment teachers refer to in distance education; participants report that they use online live conversations (via Zoom, Messenger, and Google Meet) and video/audio records of students to assess their speaking skills through which they examine features like grammar, performance, fluency, accuracy, body language and confidence in orally using the English language. To assess their students' writing skills, teachers avowed that they gave students writing assignments to be accomplished and submitted by email or Messenger. As for teachers of other modules requiring reflection on information discussed in the lesson, they admit that they assess students' comprehension of the lessons by asking them questions or by asking them to summarize the lesson.

When asked about their take on assessing EFL students' progress in virtual classes, the vast majority of teachers (i.e., eight participants) complained by saying that they are not used to virtual evaluation. They explained that correcting assignments was challenging as they had to download students' works and correct them using computers (commenting on word/ PDF documents) and then send their evaluations back to students. A teacher describes the process by saying, "it is a nightmare, a neck pain; I dislike it." Another teacher added that because some students did not have computers or were unknowledgeable about using them, they did the assignments on paper and sent pictures of their assignments, which was even hard to comment on and evaluate.

However, a teacher describes assessing students' oral production as pleasant because students recorded original videos of their oral presentations. The teacher adds that students were creative in recording their daily routine, adventures, and hobbies in videos in the form of vlogs in which they expressed themselves in the English language and shared their works with their peers in Facebook groups, which created a competition between them.

Finally, teachers were asked what could be done to foster distance education at university. Most participants (i.e., five teachers) agreed on the necessity of training teachers on using ICTs and digital educational tools. Participants also suggest that more online educational platforms should be designed according to the needs of each module, especially oral expression and written expression. EFL teachers also suggest that students should be formally trained in using digital tools and educational platforms. They stress the importance of including a module that introduces students to the ethics of virtual classes.

V- Discussion of the Findings :

Multiple results have been collected from teachers' interviews. Although teachers had a positive take on remote education and described it as successful and significantly impacting students' language development, two contradictory views were recorded. On the one hand, teachers believe that virtual education positively influences EFL students' learning ability regarding overcoming psychological fears and difficulties, as students become more comfortable and creative when participating. These findings are in line with those stated by Drokina (2020). Virtual education fosters students' communication, participation, and independent learning.

On the other hand, EFL teachers argue that distance education negatively influenced EFL students' language learning as they noticed de-motivation, lack of participation, irresponsibility, and misbehavior on the part of some students. Accordingly, this finding aligns with Drokina's (2020) research on the disadvantages of distance education. Students' irresponsibility and misbehavior can be interpreted in relation to the drawbacks of remote education. Technological illiteracy can be essential in making students careless about their virtual studies. Teachers' mastery of education platforms is also critical in making distance learning pleasant. This is supported by Habibu, Al-Mamun, and Clement's (2012) claim related to the negative impact of technological illiteracy on distance education experiences.

Nevertheless, it is worth saying that in any educational mode (traditional, distance, hybrid), students can benefit from a particular instructional mode while others cannot. Therefore, EFL teachers must vary teaching methods and techniques to attract students' attention. Teachers can also refer to various educational platforms, involve different ICTs, and be creative in explaining the lesson to keep EFL students motivated to learn the language.

Nonetheless, findings of the interview report that EFL teachers use different platforms for distance education and refer to video/audio recordings, conferencing, composition writing, and summarizing as a means of evaluation. This means that the participants use different distance education means related to ICTs: educational

networking, web-based learning, and mobile learning, as classified by Luo and Lei (2012). However, the interview findings reflect that some teachers used e-mails as a means of distance education. Here, there is no harm in sending lectures via e-mail. However, this cannot be enough for EFL students to grasp the lessons' content because teacher-student discussion and communication are central. EFL teachers must provide students with the necessary support for the success of virtual classes. This can be related to teachers' unfamiliarity with distance education and technological illiteracy.

In addition, most EFL teachers have noted that their role in distance education shifted to be less controlling, as they had to make more efforts to teach EFL students and organize the sessions. Here, teachers care about what to teach (knowledge transmission) more than how to teach. Students live in an era where information is a click away from them. Surfing on the internet will put considerable knowledge at their disposal. Hence, distance education requires creativity in explaining lessons and concepts, which is attainable through involving different ICTs.

Besides, the multiple obstacles faced in remote education are technical problems like poor internet quality and accessibility, lack of devices, the low rate of students' willingness to participate and their misbehavior, plagiarism, the teachers' technological literacy, and the nature of the platforms used. In addition, most teachers consider evaluating students' progress challenging in remote classes. This finding supports studies of Mahyoob (2020), Rababah (2020), and Yusniaty Lodo and Ajito (2022), which indicated that more needs to be done to overcome the challenges of virtual education.

Furthermore, teachers have suggested several solutions to enhance distance education. The majority proposed getting more training on different ICTs and educational platforms for teachers and learners. EFL Teachers insisted on the correct and well-planned use of such technologies and creating specific platforms that match the nature of each module.

VI- Pedagogical Recommendations :

The initial stage of fostering distance education in Algerian universities starts with authorities and decision-makers. Collaborative work should happen between the ministry of higher education and scientific research and Algeria Telecommunications Corporation to enhance internet connection quality. The major obstacle faced by teachers in online education was poor internet quality. The other central point at this level is the ICTs and digital educational tools. We suggest that authorities launch training for teachers to foster their ability to master educational platforms and ICTs. This significant suggestion should be considered for any online platform requiring teachers' particular knowledge to engage effectively in distance education.

Furthermore, authorities are urged to motivate educational platform designers to design a virtual platform that matches the nature and needs of teaching foreign languages. This will give language teachers in general and EFL teachers in specific flexibility in varying distance teaching methods which will, in turn, positively influence students' motivation and willingness to attend virtual classes. Besides, organizing study days and workshops on the benefits of distance education will help raise students' and

teachers' awareness about the essentiality of this mode. This will allow teachers to discuss their challenges in remote education and exchange their experiences.

The second stage of enhancing the experience of EFL virtual education involves EFL teachers. For better distance education, EFL teachers are recommended to be more open to this teaching mode and boost their technological literacy to better control the different online educational platforms. EFL teachers must also attend the e-learning training programs organized by their universities. Most importantly, EFL teachers can benefit from ICTs and online educational platforms to be creative in virtual instruction. To overcome the challenges of assessing students' progress, EFL teachers can design different online tests and quizzes in the form of scales to assess their understanding of lectures. To assess writing ability, EFL teachers can refer to google docs to foster their collaborative writing.

Finally, researchers need to raise awareness about the importance of distance education and hybrid one. Therefore, more research needs to be done to cover the challenges of remote education. Regarding the issues of distance education that this study unveiled, future studies need to address EFL lesson planning and progress assessment in virtual education. In addition, more attention should be given to integrating EFL students into virtual classes.

VII- Conclusion :

Distance education is the future mode of instruction in Algerian universities. Although teachers have a positive take on remote education, they think it is a double-edged sword. Distance education positively affects EFL students' language learning, yet teaching and assessing students' progress in virtual classrooms is challenging. Nevertheless, to foster it, new measures should be taken into consideration. These measures should be tailored to address the challenges faced in remote education. Internet, digital tools, information communication technologies, and online educational platforms are an essential part of remote education and should be ameliorated to enhance the quality of the distance mode of education. Finally, teachers should be trained to use digital educational tools and platforms, manage virtual classrooms, and online design assessments to match the pedagogical requirements of the twenty-first century.

-Appendix :

Teachers' Interview Questions
1. As an EFL teacher, do you like virtual instruction? Why?
2. What is the effect of distance education on EFL students' language learning?
3. To what extent do you consider remote education a successful educational mode?
4. Which platform/s do you use in virtual classes?
5. What are the challenges of distance education?
6. What is the effect of distance education on teachers' role? How?
7. What kind of assessment do you employ in remote education?
8. Which assessment issues do you encounter in virtual classes?
9. How can EFL distance education be ameliorated?

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