

Traditional Classrooms Versus Google Classrooms: Disparities and Difficulties

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Abstract :

Due the outbreak of Covid-19, universities had to switch to the e-learning mode through the use of platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Classroom. This paper has as focus the disparities that students find between in-person classes and online ones. For this, the investigation seeks to draw a comparison between the features of face-to-face instruction and those of online learning through conducting a short online survey with 50 EFL students. The findings demonstrate a combination of differences and difficulties that students meet as they learn face-to-face and on Google Classroom.

Keywords: Traditional classes; e-learning; Google classrooms; disparity; difficulty.

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1. Introduction

When the world went into lockdown back in March 2020, Algeria followed due to the spread of a new scary virus. Covid-19 and its transformations compelled the world to alter its habits in many sectors. In higher education, universities have had to move from face-to-face instruction to an online learning mode. Later, most universities opted for blending both modes of teaching.

To reduce numbers and gatherings, Algerian universities employed a system of waves where a wave of students attends classes at university while another section stays at home for online classes for a specific period of time like a few weeks or a month. Afterwards, the two (or more) sections, switch modes. By the end of the semester, all students would cover their courses through both learning modes: face-to-face and e-learning.

This way, all students can meet their teachers in class and try virtual instruction. Also this way, many students attempted learning both in traditional classes and on Google classes, which led to the appearance of new observations and problems.

One issue that arose is that students started comparing between the two options and preferring one over another for several reasons. The latter constitute the focal point in this research.

In a nutshell, the main problems that this study wishes to investigate are the disparities between online and face-to-face classes and the difficulties faced in each. They will be probed through students' representations on both.

2. Review of literature

These two past years have seen much change in many sectors. In teaching and learning, the dichotomy of in-person instruction versus online learning has been receiving tons of attention from practitioners and researchers¹.

As the shift from face-to-face towards e-classes seemed to be the sole option along the pandemic and quarantine², it has become primordial to study its effects, practices, and means. This move or reform was necessary; it has proven to be beneficial in many ways so far; yet, there are many difficulties, challenges and frustrations associated to it³.

It is different from what teachers and students are accustomed to. In the traditional classroom, teachers meet students and students meet classmates; colleagues meet in the staffroom or in the corridor, but on Google Classroom, Meet, or Zoom, the meeting is virtual or absent.

The fluctuation has also touched spaces, boundaries, and motives. For example, the digitalization of teaching/learning makes boundaries unclear between the space of classes and that of family meetings, between work or school life and the private one⁴.

To further elucidate, in the traditional classroom, space is dedicated to learning; however, on Google Classroom, both the teacher and the student are often home, probably in the same room where they sleep, eat, or have fun with family⁵.

On one side, this disconnection between the learning and private spaces is viewed as an advantage of e-learning as it makes learning flexible⁶. The authors consider this as an advantage of having classes virtually, but on the other side, they also see that this disconnection is disadvantageous as it may lead to imbalance⁷, decreased well-being⁸, and increased stress⁹.

Specialists in the educational realm have been studying the advantages and drawbacks of ICT integration and online learning from multiple angles like the disparities between e-learning and face-to-face instruction¹⁰, students' attitudes towards them¹¹, and the challenges met in each. Farcasiu and authors¹² point at another disparity between traditional learning and e-classes, that of evaluation and information sources. In the traditional classroom, the main source of information and evaluation is the teacher¹³.

Contrariwise, "in e-learning, students' evaluations can be carried out using tools, they can access information from various documents uploaded onto the platforms"¹⁴.

This is not necessarily advantageous because students, and even teachers, are not equally equipped with technological skills and devices¹⁵. The technological infrastructure needed for a successful e-learning experience is dissimilar to the arrangement of face-to-face instruction.

The former depends on technology, Internet, and devices that may not be available to most participants¹⁶, while teaching/learning in the traditional classroom can take place with no reference to tech-appliances.

From another perspective, “students who belong to rural areas have little or no access to internet”¹⁷. In a university context, students come from various regions, and this may account for huge material and technological disparities between them to the point of having some students totally unable to pursue their classes online because of the lack of equipment or the shortage of Internet¹⁸.

Therefore, the quality of the teaching-learning process “is not only related to the teachers’ skills and abilities to capture attention during the e-learning process”, but also to students’ readiness, devices, and e-skills¹⁹.

Garbuja and Surkhali²⁰ contend that: “there may be a feeling of isolation and less interaction [online] as compared to classroom environment which may potentially lead to minimal participation, distractions, withdrawal or complete disappearance of students”. They maintain that communication in e-classes is less effective than in traditional classes²¹.

In fact, the relationships that teachers and students build when they directly meet can promote this “didactic communication” better than held online²².

They can also foster the feeling of wellbeing as the beneficiaries of traditional instruction get to spend time in open spaces with each other rather than in front of a screen²³.

The screen in e-learning may even lead to sight troubles, back issues, and other health problems if faced for long extents of time²⁴.

All in all, research has demonstrated that face-to-face instruction has different effects from those of online learning²⁵. The distinction between the two lies in numerous aspects, some of which have been revealed through this review of literature, while we hope to reveal others in the coming section.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

The in-hand study addresses the following questions:

- 1- What do students feel about learning online?
- 2- According to students, is the online learning experience different from the face-to-face one?
- 3- What are the main differences between Google classrooms and traditional classrooms?

For these questions, the following hypotheses are set:

- 1- The majority of students feel unsatisfied with online learning.
- 2- For students, the online learning experience must be different from the face-to-face one.
- 3- The main differences between Google classrooms and traditional classrooms are numerous. They are mainly related to direct interaction, real presence of the teacher and students, and the quality of lesson delivery.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the disparities and the difficulties that students face as they learn both online and traditionally. To reach this aim, a comparative and qualitative research design is needed in order to put the two types of classes, Google and face-to-face, side by side and evaluate their qualities and differences.

3.2 Sampling and participants

The participants in this study are 50 university EFL students (46 female and 04 male). They are third year students at the Department of English at the Teacher Training School, Bouzareah, Algiers, whose age is between 20 and 25 years old. Thereby, the participants are also pre-service teachers who have tried both online and face-to-face instruction. Before the study was conducted, the researcher gave the sample a course of 12 sessions, half of which were held on Google Classroom, whereas the second half took place face-to-face. Earlier then parallel to this, the group of respondents had two semesters in online learning with other teachers, most of which were carried on Google Classroom, Meet, and/or Zoom, all while having, either simultaneously or separately, in-university classes. This makes the sample convenient for answering the research instrument. The sample can represent a larger population of Algerian EFL university students.

The participants' consent was obtained prior to the distribution of the research tool. Also, their privacy was respected all over the work.

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

To find answers to the questions stated earlier, this research adopted an exploratory comparative method. For this, a short online questionnaire was shared with the sample as a Google form in February 2021. We sought to conduct the survey online so as to respect the health measures of the pandemic; hence, the link

to the questionnaire's form was shared with the participants on Google Classroom. We were hoping for more answers as the instrument was electronically distributed to 150 students; however, we could obtain only 50 responses after waiting for a month.

The online questionnaire contained three main questions, besides two demographic questions about age and gender. The first one is a multiple-choice question (MCQ) with four options, the second one is a close-ended question with three specific options, while the third one is an open-ended question that students could answer through a short paragraph or a list of items.

After collecting the data, the latter were analyzed using the descriptive and content analysis methods. For the two first questions, the data were scanned quantitatively then described in demonstrative graphs, whereas the last question was examined using the content analysis technique. All the students' replies were read, their content was identified, after which the correlations and key disparities were extracted.

4. Findings

4.1 Presentation and analysis of data

The first question is: "How do you feel about learning online?" The options that were provided are as follows:

- a) Satisfied
- b) Confused
- c) Unsatisfied
- d) Other:

21 students (42%) expressed their dissatisfaction with online learning, whereas 12%, 6 participants, said that they are rather satisfied with it. A percentage of 38% (19 students) selected the second option "confused", and 8 respondents inserted their own words instead of choosing from the list. 4% (2 students) stated that they feel "lost", one student used the word "angry" to reveal how s/he feels about online learning, while one student used the adjective "unseen". These findings are demonstrated in the following chart.

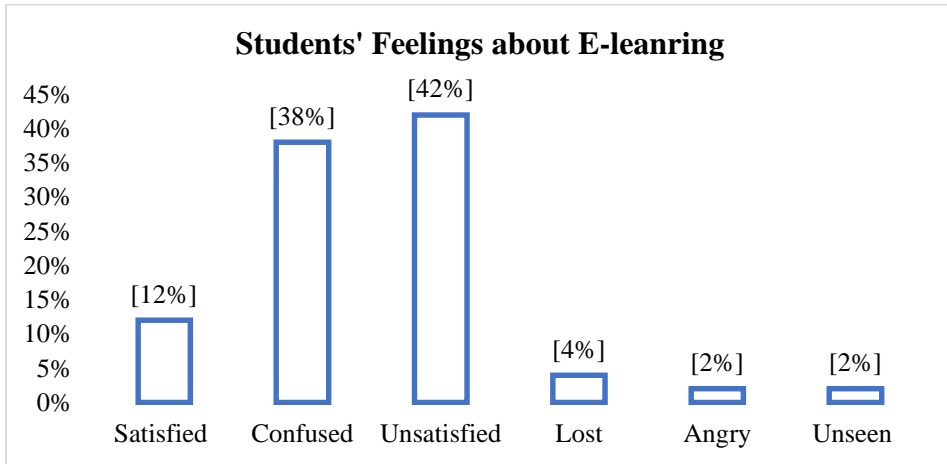


Fig.1.Students’ feelings about e-learning

The second question probed: “According to you, is online learning different from face-to-face instruction?”. Students were asked to choose from these three options:

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Maybe

As expected, the majority of students (94%) picked “yes”, online learning is different from traditional instruction. Meanwhile, only one student (2%) chose “no”, and 2 students (4%) opted for “maybe” as they probably were not sure about the differences between the two learning modes. These findings are displayed in the coming graph.

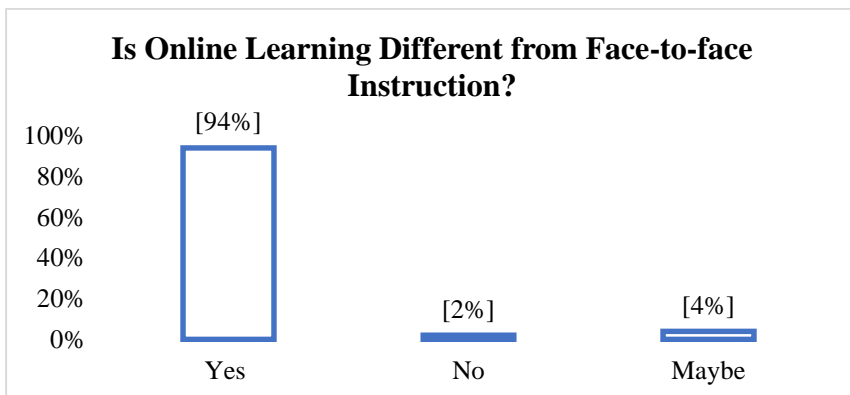


Fig. 2. Is online learning different from face-to-face instruction?

The third and last question reads: “What are the main differences between studying in a traditional classroom and studying on Google Classroom?”. The findings were abundant. Thus, the researcher opted for using the content analysis method to sort out all the differences stated by the sample. The gathered data, after analysis and classification, are grouped in Table 1.

Table 1: Main differences between traditional and Google classrooms

Main differences	Traditional Classroom / Face-to-face	Google Classroom / Online
Hardship of lessons	Less	More
Online technical issues	Absent	Present
The screen	Absent	Present
Availability and access to all	Available and accessible to most or all students	Unavailable and inaccessible to all students
Presence of the teacher, eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions	Better and present	Less or absent
Interaction, discussion, participation, feedback, debating, and questioning	More, better, and immediate	Less and distant
Explanation of lessons	Better	Less quality
Focus and concentration	More	Less
Distractions	Less	More
Assimilation and understanding	Better	Less
Attendance	Obligatory / easy to attend	Not obligatory / easy to skip
Seriousness	More	Less
Real contact	Present	Absent
Effectiveness	More	Less
Commitment	More	Less
Seriousness	More	Less
Motivation	More	Less
Involvement and engagement in the lessons	More	Less
Organization and clarity	More	Less
Ambiguity	Less	More

Freedom	Less	More
Pressure on students	More	Less
Expenses	More	Less
Enjoyment	More	Less
Time	More	less
Information and content	Limited	Abundant
Knowing students by the teacher, and knowing the teacher by students	Better	Less
Misunderstanding	Less	More
The learning environment	Available	Unavailable
Familiarity	Familiar	Unfamiliar
Harmful to the eyes	Unapplicable	Applicable
Obstacles	Less	More
Success	More	Less

4.2 Discussion and interpretation of findings

In his study, Mahyoob²⁶ asked a similar question to the first one in our online questionnaire. He inquired about EFL students' general satisfaction with online learning. His findings go against ours as they demonstrate that 42.90% of his sample are satisfied, 13.80% are unsatisfied, and 43.20% are somehow satisfied²⁷. This could be due to differences in context, setting, and equipment.

What is notable in our findings is that most participants feel confused, unsatisfied, lost, angry, or unseen when it comes to e-learning which validates the hypothesis set earlier in this paper.

It is also notable that this can be due to the fact that they find the e-learning experience unfamiliar and different from the face-to-face one. There is no doubt that a large difference exists between traditional classrooms and Google classrooms.

The distinctions, thought one participant, depend on the teachers, while another one commented that: "online learning is not for all the students". This cannot be denied given that students do not have access to the same technological gadgets and opportunities. Interestingly though, one student wrote: "I can't find any difference between them".

Another student expressed an analogous opinion: “I don't feel there is any difference. We are just having more pressure during face-to-face classes because of lack of transport, traffic problems and so many financial and other problems, but when it comes to teaching methods there is no change. Therefore, I prefer online classes, at least we get time to revise, study more and we have better circumstances”.

While a few students prefer having classes on Google for the comfort, reduced expenses, and avoidance of transport, traffic, and the campus, the majority of them find the traditional classroom space more suitable and comfortable to learn as this participant who reflected: “school is the most appropriate place that offer the environment to the learner to study”.

Indeed, while online learning seems to be cheaper than in-university classes, many students appear to be willing to pay the transportation and campus life expenses instead of handling technical issues and their cost.

Garbuja and Surkhali²⁸ confirm that: “low internet bandwidth and technical difficulties are the barriers to use online courses for both students and teachers”.

These obstacles are more present when learning online and may engender less motivation, engagement, and commitment, and more ambiguity, pressure, and absence²⁹.

Adding to that, some participants thought that: “at home, we are not free all the time since we have house chores to do”. They also reported more disturbance by siblings and online distractions as they learn online from home.

More than one student said that they find that traditional classes are more effective than e-classes. This can be drawn to a mixture of factors like the seriousness of traditional classes; whereas on Google, “the students will somehow be careless and may skip the lessons”, as written by one respondent.

A second vital difference is in relation to understanding lessons, focus, concentration, interaction, and knowing students. “I personally understand better when studying in class”, said one participant, “it is better for me to express myself in speaking. I didn't like commenting in the online courses”.

Direct interaction with students in the traditional manner does not only allow students to better focus, concentrate, engage, and understand the lessons, it also permits teachers to understand more how students think and learn. To illustrate, one of the respondents subscribed: “I think the main difference is the assimilation. In class you can assimilate better than at home, because you know that you have to focus with your teacher”.

That said, other students have opposing views. For instance, they see that: “the online classes give the chance to all students to participate and ask questions any time while in face-to-face classes, we can ask and talk but not all the students can do that besides the time limitation”. Google classes are not all bad nor unsatisfactory.

They offer options that face-to-face classes lack or do not use often. To state a few, “with online learning, students work with videos, podcasts, graphs, etc. While in the classroom, they deal with their teacher’s lectures,” says one respondent. Many teachers try to add visual aids to their lessons, but no matter how much of them are used in-person, the online world has more of them. It is their best source.

There is also the abundance of information and content online and their limited amount in face-to-face meetings. This is debatable as many students prefer the latter because, in the words of a participant student, the teacher explains “only the main points of the lesson shortly and simply” without the need, sometimes, for “further information about the content of the lesson thanks to comprehensive documents and attachments”.

If we can generalize, our study, like that of Mahyoob, found that: “most EFL learners are not satisfied with continuing online learning”³⁰. This is due to all the disparities and challenges that exist online. Notwithstanding, e-learning has both advantages and disadvantages as can be noticed in Table 2.

Table 2: Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning³¹

Variables	Years of studies 1-3 n = 428 (53.23%)	Years of studies 4-6 n = 376 (46.76%)	P	Total n = 804 (100%)
Advantages of online learning				
Access to online materials	292 (68%)	260 (69%)	.77	552 (69%)
Learning on your own pace	273 (64%)	239 (64%)	.95	512 (64%)
Ability to stay at home	287 (67%)	271 (72%)	.12	558 (69%)
Classes interactivity	13 (3%)	22 (6%)	.05	33 (4%)
Ability to record a meeting	98 (23%)	67 (18%)	.07	165 (21%)
Comfortable surrounding	219 (51%)	215 (57%)	.08	434 (54%)
Disadvantages of online learning				
Reduced interaction with the teacher	200 (47%)	163 (43%)	.33	363 (45%)
Technical problems	252 (59%)	183 (49%)	.003	435 (54%)
Lack of interactions with patients	230 (54%)	336 (90%)	<.001	566 (70%)
Poor learning conditions at home	75 (18%)	49 (13%)	.07	124 (15%)
Lack of self-discipline	208 (49%)	120 (32%)	<.001	328 (41%)
Social isolation	189 (44%)	132 (35%)	.008	321 (40%)

To conclude, interaction between the teacher and students then amongst students can be deemed the game changer for traditional classes, while it is what many students regard as a main difference between learning online and learning in-person. Also, the learning conditions at home are not appropriate for all students as this one who confessed: “the main difference is the issue of focusing with the teacher since during the online sessions there is no learning environment despite of being home and relaxed on our beds, but still classes have their value”. Actually, traditional classrooms are still as valuable as they were before Covid-19, if not more.

5. Implications for pedagogy

Even if “e-learning was the panacea at the time of the pandemic”³², and it is still, its applicability and access to it remain unequal to many students around the globe. We can discern that even if most students prefer face-to-face classrooms, the screen is starting to earn its position and value in the educational world.

Google Classroom, and the other learning platforms, can be effective if the major technical, environmental, and academic issues facing e-learning are solved.

We can read this student's report, in which she asserts that her Google Classroom experience was better than the face-to-face one: "I think online classes enable us to cover everything linked to our studies. I personally found myself in the right track then. Plus, what I adored mostly when we were pursuing our lessons via Google Classroom is the fact that I was able to develop myself and my skills from various angles.

I could join online courses and learn much and earn certificates in return, read a bunch of books and dedicate more time to creative writing. Face-to-face classes are not so bad, but there is no doubt that they need to be enhanced mainly if teachers would re-consider their teaching strategies, I think it is unsuitable to be sent many documents at once, whereas in fact we are already studying at university, it is either online or face-to-face, not both!"

This can imply that it is probably better to use traditional instruction and Google classes to complete each other and not to overload students. Furthermore, e-learning works better when students are ready, trained, and equipped for it.

Thereby, it is advisable to offer both students and teachers training on the use and exploitation of e-learning platforms. Sarnou and Sarnou consolidate that: "Students must be well trained in using the online platforms before they are required to attend courses [...] as our students are not accustomed to these platforms"³³.

As a matter of fact, this single factor of familiarity can make students either take or leave the learning mode. Novelty is welcome, but it is recommended to be preceded by preparation along with gradation.

This could be a key element why many students are still confused and not satisfied with e-learning. It can also be contemplated that: "teachers should be free to use the online learning platforms they find more useful and operative"³⁴ in order to raise students' engagement, motivation, and focus in e-classes.

As observed, the screen that students were already facing for long hours before the pandemic can be used with success for instructional aims, but first and foremost, students and teachers need to be provided with equal technical equipment.

6. CONCLUSION

This research study investigated students' feelings towards online learning as well as the disparities between traditional classrooms and Google Classrooms. The collected data and their discussion validate the hypotheses set by the researcher as they revealed that the majority of students are either confused or unsatisfied about learning online. This is due to the numerous disparities that exist between learning face-to-face and learning online, through Google Classroom. These disparities, such as the concrete presence of the teacher, real contact and direct interaction, technical inequalities, commitment to learning, familiarity, clarity, and availability of a suitable learning atmosphere, constitute some challenges and difficulties for students. In some cases, it even becomes impossible for them to attend an online class which hinders their learning. This is why the majority of students seem to still prefer the traditional classroom. To conclude, it is neither relevant nor realistic to say that learning in a real classroom is similar to learning on Google and, in general, online. Therefore, it becomes unworkable to expect the same teaching-learning outcomes from the two learning modes.

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