Distance Language Education: Reality and Prospects

Enseignement des Langues à Distance: Réalité et Perspectives

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Abstract

The present study aims at highlighting the importance of adopting the distance language education as an alternative to in-person presence education in the Algerian tertiary education. To investigate the potential and the utility of using the distance language education, a study was conducted at the University of El-Oued. For the data gathering tools, two online questionnaires were administered to both 10 English language teachers, to elicit information about the procedure of providing a distance learning, and to 25 students of English to elicit their attitudes and satisfaction about the online learning they were subject to. The findings reveal that ICT is crucial in maintaining this form of education. Teachers admit that the online education was a compulsory policy adopted by the ministry to save lives during the pandemic. According to them, distance language education used to be an accompanying strategy to face to face education utilized by some teachers as a result of the rapid social and technological changes. The distance language education used to adopt many forms such as delivering courses in CD- ROMs as well as mailing regular courses. However, they state that, now, they face many challenges to deliver their courses via online form only. As for the students, their anxiety about their study was reduced by adopting such a strategy especially those in final years looking forward for the BA or MA diplomas. They are satisfied because they see that this type of education reduced the burden of geographical distance. Results prove that depending totally on distance education is a challenging experience for both teachers and students. The study ends up with recommendations to enhance the quality of online education through the adoption

of varied tools for distance learning. Suggestions were made to extend this type of education to workers and special needs' students in future occasions.

Keywords: Distance Education- ICT- Online Education- Professional Development.

Résumé

La présente étude vise à souligner l'importance d'adopter l'enseignement des langues à distance comme alternative à l'éducation en présentiel dans l'enseignement supérieur algérien. Pour étudier le potentiel et l'utilité de l'utilisation de l'enseignement des langues à distance, une étude a été menée à l'Université d'El-Oued. Pour les outils de collecte de données, deux questionnaires en ligne ont été administrés à 10 professeurs d'anglais pour obtenir des informations sur la procédure de fourniture d'un enseignement à distance et à 25 étudiants d'anglais pour connaître leurs attitudes et leur satisfaction quant à l'apprentissage en ligne auquel ils étaient soumis. Les résultats révèlent que les TIC sont essentielles au maintien de cette forme d'éducation. Les enseignants admettent que l'éducation en ligne était une politique obligatoire adoptée par le ministère pour sauver des vies pendant la pandémie. Selon eux, l'enseignement des langues à distance avait l'habitude d'adopter de nombreuses formes telles que la prestation de cours sur CD-ROM ainsi que l'envoi de cours réguliers via e-mail. Cependant, ils affirment que, maintenant, ils sont confrontés à de nombreux défis pour dispenser leurs cours en ligne uniquement. Quant aux étudiants, leur anxiété vis-à-vis de leurs études a été réduite en adoptant une telle stratégie, en particulier ceux en dernière année en attente de diplômes. Ils sont satisfaits car ils voient que ce type d'enseignement réduit le fardeau de la distance géographique. Les résultats prouvent que dépendre totalement de l'enseignement à distance est une expérience difficile tant pour les enseignants que pour les étudiants. L'étude aboutit à des recommandations pour améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement en ligne grâce à l'adoption d'outils variés pour l'apprentissage à distance.

Mots clés : Développement professionnel- Éducation en ligne- L'enseignement à distance- TIC.

Introduction

The education policy adopted in Algeria in all stages (primary, middle and secondary schools) is completely dependent on face to face education. In tertiary education, distance education constitutes very limited experiences and is restricted to some majors of the 'Continuing Education University' that offer evening classes. Hence, the distance education in Algerian universities is mainly concerned with delivering additional support for the lessons already presented in the class or with providing extra practical exercises, additional references…etc. The COVID-19 pandemic affected all fields; in the educational and academic fields, a new approach and strategy

has to be adopted so as to both guarantee the health of citizens, and to ensure the proper functioning of education. Higher education institutions are resorting to e-learning as a quantum leap for both professors and students; it is for the first time that they experience an imposed distance education policy to be implemented for delivering main courses rather than providing students with exercises or clarifications to their already taken lessons. This posed great challenges and revealed the potential of material and psychological readiness of higher education individuals and institutions. Distance education imposed itself in modern education as an efficient approach especially at the pandemic period. In addition, distance education is also a strategy adopted by many high educational institutes to enroll a big portions of students who are unable to attend face to face courses; these courses are targeting mainly special needs' students, students working in full time jobs, students living in remote areas…etc. The current study then seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Can online learning replace face to face instruction?

- Can distance education ensure high quality of foreign language learning?

- Are teachers and students ready to revisit their old educational practices to cope with the requirements of the online environment?

I. Literature Review

This section provides the theoretical background of the study.

1.1. Distance Education

Also referred to as distance learning. Newby, Stepich, Lehman and Russell (2000) define distance learning as "*an organized instructional program in which teacher and learners are physically separated* (p. 210)." Cited in (king, F. et al (2001).

1.1.1. *Types of Distance Learning*

Distance education can be provided in different ways.

- Correspondence Courses: conducted through mailing regular courses. It is asynchronous type of communication. The interaction in this form is simple and delayed .

- CD-ROM Courses: courses based on 'Compact Disc-Read Only Memory'

- Telecourses: the content is delivered via radio or television broadcast.

- Online Learning: Internet-based courses offered synchronously and/or asynchronously.

- Mobile Learning: by means of devices such as cellular phones, PDAs and digital audioplayers (iPods, MP3 players).

1.2. Information communication technologies (ICT)

ICT refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunication. This includes the internet, wireless networks, cell phones and other communication mediums.

According to the   UNESCO, "*ICT is a scientific, technological and engineering discipline and management technique used in handling information, its application and association with social, economic and cultural matters*". ICT can ensure the following forms of conferencing that are used in distance education.

- Audio-Conferencing: It involves the live (real-time) exchange of voice messages over a telephone network.

- Audio-Graphic Conferencing: it is with an on-moving visuals added to voice messages.

- Video – Conferencing : it allows the exchange of moving images together with voice and graphics. Video-Conferencing technology does not use telephone lines instead it uses either a satellite link or television network (broadcast / cable).

- Web-Based Conferencing: it involves the transmission of text and graphic, audio and visual media via the internet; devices required to ensure this type are a computer with a browser. This type ensures both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

1.3. Online Education

The term generally refers to the online teaching and learning. The term e-learning is widely used to refer to the online learning. It is an Internet-based education. It is a type of distance learning that is characterized by the interactivity. The online leaning is an effective approach because it ensures the shift from top- down instruction that produces passive learning to an interactive and collaborative learning environment. The teacher will assume the role of a facilitator and a guide rather than being the only source of

knowledge. Students subject to online leaning will benefit from two types of interaction, teacher- learners interaction and learner- learner interaction.

Online education is compatible with our modern busy lifestyles because it is unbound by time or location. Teachers and students can log in anywhere and anytime. E-learning has started long time ago in a form of text-based via the Web or CD-ROM. A new form of training called Computer Based Training (CBT) evolved as a result of the rapid technological change. "*Windows 3.1, Macintosh, CD-ROMs, PowerPoint marked the technological advancement of the Multimedia Era*" (Kiffmeyer, 2004).

CD-ROM Computer-Based Training was a minor importance since it is mainly text-based. "*No one really cared about the effectiveness of this new medium – it was just really cool.*" (Cooke, 2004).

The innovation of the 'Learning Management System abbreviated LMS is an important step. Clark clarifies that the LMS which is "*The first Learning Management Systems (LMS) offered off-the-shelf platforms for front-end registration and course cataloging, and they tracked skills management and reporting on the back-end.*" (Clark, 2002). This offered the possibility to place courses online and to ensure interaction in a form of real- time discussion .

The eClassroom evolved after that is very effective; it is a *"...web-based synchronous events with integrated CBT and simulations.*" (Clark, 2002) . eClassrooms are often called Live InstructorLead Training (ILT). "*Live instructor-led training(ILT) via the Web can be combined with real-time mentoring, improved learner services, and up-to-date, engaging "born on the Web" content to create a highly-effective, multi- dimensional learning environment.*" (Kiffmeyer, 2004).

1.4. Professional Development

Professional development is also called 'In-service training' or 'ongoing learning continuing education'. Teachers have to master the new technologies related to their duties and that could facilitate their courses' delivery. Professional development is interesting for both instructors and learners to develop certain skills and to enhance the performance and the mastery of certain techniques. This will affect positively the students' achievement.

One of the skills that should be developed even by the experienced teachers is coping with the technological devices because advances in

technology have provided multiple highly sophisticated teaching methods. Teachers then should develop their knowledge of the following:

- Web browsers and an email program.

- Web-based interactions such as email, discussion boards, listservs, and chat rooms.

- Internet searches using a variety of search engines.

1.4.1. Types of Professional development

Professional development can take place in both formal or informal environments:

1.4.1.1.   *Formal Professional Development*

It is ensured in a formal environment via conferences, seminars, workshops, courses or study days at the university. Collaborative learning among members of a work team is also a form of formal professional development.

1.4.1.2.   *Informal Professional Development*

It is ensured by different informal methods of learning such as learning from peers through observation or discussions. Independent reading is also an interesting self- training method. Moreover, the online professional development mode can be very effective as it enables teachers to be involved in an interactive real-time discussion with more experienced others.

2. Methodology

This section is devoted to the practical part of the research. It provides a clear description of the approaches and the methods used in the current research. This section is designed to analyze the data obtained from the two questionnaires administered to both the English language teachers and the students of English language at Hamma Lakhdar University of El- Oued. Results are analyzed qualitatively.

2.1. Sampling

A purposive sampling also called 'judgment sampling' was selected for both populations. It fits the current study because it is a time-effective sampling method. Purposive sampling method was adopted because of its appropriateness to a limited number of primary data sources that can contribute to the study. It is used in educational researches despite of its

low level of reliability and high levels of bias and inability to generalize research findings.

2.2 Participants

Ten (10) English language teachers as well as twenty five 25 English language students from the department of English at the Faculty of Arts and Languages at Hamma Lakhdar university of El-Oued were selected purposively to contribute to the study. The study was conducted in the academic year 2020/2021. The table 1 below illustrates the samples of the study.

Targeted Participants	Position	Gender	Total Number
Tranche one	Permanent Teachers	4 males &6 females	10
Tranche two	Bachelor students and Master students	10 males and 15 females	25

***Table1**. Population of the Study*

2.3 Data Gathering Tools

So as to achieve the study's aims the present researcher designed two online questionnaires to generate data. The online mode was selected because it is time effective, easy to prepare, quick to distribute and to collect answers. Moreover, it ensures the social distancing imposed by the safety measures adopted by the university policy. Participants will be easily reached virtually because their presence at the university is governed by scheduled different remote time intervals. The questionnaires were composed mostly with open-ended questions. This will enable to have in-depth analysis and will ensure the effectiveness of the qualitative analysis.

2.3.1 The Teachers' Questionnaire

This online questionnaire targeted 10 English language teachers working in the department of English at the faculty of Arts and Languages of El-Oued university to elicit information about the procedure of providing a distance learning. The teachers' questionnaire consists of eight (08) items: four open-ended questions and four close- ended questions. Teachers were asked about their attitudes towards imposing the online education policy, the importance of using ICT in online learning, old and new types of distance education techniques, difficulties encountered to implement the e-learning,

importance of professional development to enhance the teachers' performance in mastering technology and the teachers' vision about the online teaching in Algeria.

2.3.2 *The Students' Questionnaire*

This online questionnaire was administered to 25 students of English at the department of English language at the faculty of arts and languages in El-Oued university to elicit information about their attitudes and satisfaction about the online learning they were subject to. The questionnaire consists of eight (08) items: five open- ended question and three close-ended questions. Students were asked about the effects of the pandemic on the their study, their anxiety, the appropriate learning types they find compatible with their study, effectiveness of the alternation between in- presence and distance education, their satisfaction about the e-learning they were subject to and about the advantages resulted from the online learning.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study show that teachers consider the resort of the education policy makers to the distance education in a form of online learning is an effective approach and an inevitable choice as the pandemic of Covid -19 imposed the implementation of many emergency measures in all fields including the tertiary education level. According to them, this policy aims at reducing personal contact as a preventive approach. Teachers also stated that this was their first real experience to be fully immersed in an online compulsory mode of teaching since previously it was a matter of personal choice. They stated that e-leaning was an accompanying mode to the face- to- face education; it was provided occasionally in case time was insufficient to deliver the targeted program or in case teachers want to equip learners with extra practical activities, clarifications and references for further reading. According to teachers, they used to use only old models of distance learning such as CD-ROMS and mainly by sending regular e-mails. These two techniques according to them were easy to handle and less time and effort consuming. However, they added that they were asked to utilize other novel modes of distance learning that better ensure the distance education; these were techniques introduced for the first time to the majority of them. These new modes according to them are more sophisticated and are similar to the ones used in different parts of the world to ensure effective online learning. They stated that they were asked to

upload lessons via a platform specifically designed to deliver online courses. They were also encouraged to use more interactive methods of online learning in a form e-classes through the use of different learning platforms such as Google Classroom and Moodle. Teachers were also involved in different other modes such as ZOOM and Google Meet to attend job-related meetings or to engage in professional development activities such as scientific conferences, study days or workshops. Teachers added that the mastery of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is of great importance to maintain the e-learning approach in a modern world which is depending totally on technology.

Teachers added that at the very beginning of the imposed distance education policy they encountered different difficulties to deal with sophisticated platforms and experiencing new technological methods in ensuring the distance education; but, this disorder was soon reduced or even totally eliminated with the in- service training that ensured mainly an indirect self- professional development through discussions with colleagues who already dealt with such methods or even consulting other colleagues from the department of technology and computing seeking assistance and guidance. Teachers expressed their wishes to have academic official trainings and workshops to cope with new technologies used in the domain of e-learning. They also were optimistic towards the online leaning in Algeria. They anticipate that distance education will have a prestigious position in the future. It will not be a mere assistance to the in-presence education but rather a central mode of teaching and learning that will be adopted by academic institutes and universities.

Concerning the students, results of the data analysis show that the pandemic of Covid-19 has affected their studies severely. They stated that it was for the first time that they experience the social distancing safety measure imposed by the university. They added that their detachment from the university settings was a hard experiment. This involves them in a status of anxiety about their studies as this presented a situation of a vague and unclear image. They declared that they were mainly worried about the delay of exams, the ineffectiveness of online learning, the unfamiliarity with the online mode of education, the delay of obtaining the diplomas…etc. They stated that after their engagement in the online learning, the anxiety was reduced and through time they recognized that new distance education models can be helpful and effective. Their old habit to be only dependents

on in-presence education and that it cannot be replaced by distance education has been changed. They admit that distance and in-presence learning are similar to great extent and that the alternation of both modes adopted by the university policy makers was effective and resulted in creating a blended learning.

Students evaluated their experience with online lessons as successful. They expressed their satisfaction with alternating it with in-presence learning. They also appreciate the support of teachers so as to enable them to engage in this leaning that was in the past optional rather than compulsory. They stated that in addition to ensuring social distancing which was a preventive measure aiming at reducing the danger of infection with Covid-19, the distance education was advantageous for them for different reasons; it was time and cost saving, it enabled them experiencing new technologies in education and it reduced the geographical burden. They added that their experience with distance learning led them to be thoughtful about its future. According to them, distance education should be reinforced even after the end of the pandemic; it is a policy that should be encouraged by universities.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study is to highlight the importance of adopting the distance language education as an alternative to in-person presence education in the Algerian tertiary education. The findings reveal that ICT is crucial in maintaining this form of education. Teachers admit that the online education was a compulsory policy adopted by the ministry as it was a matter of saving lives during the pandemic. According to them, distance language education used to be an accompanying strategy to face to face education utilized by some teachers as a result of the rapid social and technological changes. The distance language education used to adopt many forms such as delivering courses in CD- ROMs as well as mailing regular courses. However, they state that, now, they face many challenges to deliver their courses via online form only. Most teachers regret the fact that they were not equipped beforehand with the required knowledge to use this new form of education adequately. They wish that future professional development projects will focus on mastering the techniques of online teaching. As for the students, their anxiety about their study was reduced by adopting such a strategy especially those in final years waiting for the BA or

MA diplomas. They are satisfied because they see that this type of education reduced the burden of geographical distance since many of them are living in distant places. Results prove that depending totally on distance education is a challenging experience for both teachers and students. Despite the difficulties that can hamper this form of education such as the lack of mastery of technology, it is an occasion to evaluate the potential of both teachers and learners to experience similar situations. Thus future experiences will be less time and energy consuming. The study ends up with recommendations to enhance the quality of online education through the adoption of varied tools for distance learning. Suggestions were made to extend this type of education to workers and special needs students in future occasions. The present researcher also suggests that the Algerian academic institutions should have long term strategy for distance education as many people will be busier and unable to attend in-presence courses. Teachers were also recommended to invest more time for the professional development so as to cope with new online teaching technical skills.

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Appendix I

The Teachers' Questionnaire

An online questionnaire administered to 10 English language teachers to elicit information about the procedure of providing a distance learning. We appreciate your valuable contribution to answer the questions.

1. - How was your reaction towards imposing the online education policy by education policy makers?

> [ ]

2. - Is online education a novel approach to you?

○ Yes

○ No

3. - What types of distance education were you engaged in previously?

> [ ]

4. - What novel modes of distance education were you asked to utilize now?

> [ ]

5. Are ICTs important to maintain this mode of education?

○ A great deal

○ A lot

○ A moderate amount

○ A little

○ None at all

6. - Did you encounter difficulties to use technology in e-learning?

○ Yes

○ No

7. - Do you agree that Algerian teachers require intensive training to cope with the new technologies utilized in the domain of e-learning?

○ Strongly agree

○ Agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Disagree

○ Strongly disagree

8. - How do you anticipate the future of online leaning in Algeria?

> [   ]

Appendix II

The Students' Questionnaire

An online questionnaire administered to 25 students of English to elicit their attitudes and satisfaction about the online learning they were subject to. We appreciate your valuable contribution to answer the questions.

1. Have the COVID- 19 pandemic perturbed your studies ?

○ Yes

○ No

2. What sorts of anxiety have you experienced?

> [   ]

3. After experiencing different types of distance education - during the last year and the current year- that accompanied in-presence short periods learning; which type did you find more appropriate for your context?

[   ]

4. Is the alternation between in- presence learning and the online learning appropriate for you?

○   Yes

○   No

5. Are you satisfied with the online learning you were subject to?

○   Very satisfied

○   Satisfied

○   Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

○   Dissatisfied

○   Very dissatisfied

6. What is your opinion regarding the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the online education in such exceptional health conditions that strike our country?

[   ]

7. What advantages can be resulted from the distance education?

[   ]

8. How do you evaluate the process of online learning adopted by your university?

○   Extremely useful

○   Very useful

○   Somewhat useful

○   Not so useful

○   Not at all useful