

Distance Learning in Algeria: A New Pedagogy for a New Professional Experience

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Abstract:

A new mode of teaching and evaluation emerged at the Algerian universities after the global health crisis caused by the Coronavirus, necessitating the teaching and learning process to take place remotely through digital platforms, especially Moodle (Modular et al.), which is officially accredited. This rapid and significant transition from traditional teaching to distance learning has profoundly affected the entire university system. This article examines how the two main stakeholders have addressed this new pedagogical approach: teachers and students. Two research tools were used to conduct this study: a questionnaire administered to twenty master's-level students and a semi-structured interview with five full-time teachers. The collected data demonstrated that most teachers and students reported that the initial experience was fraught with numerous technical challenges. Furthermore, both groups urgently needed to develop pedagogy compatible with this new teaching mode.

Keywords: Distance learning, health crisis, digital platforms, digital pedagogy, Moodle.

Introduction

The 2019-2020 academic year was profoundly impacted by the global coronavirus pandemic, which prompted policymakers and education leaders in Algeria and worldwide to close schools and universities on a large scale to contain and prevent the spread of the virus. In response to this unforeseen health crisis, face-to-face courses were replaced with online, remote, and blended learning methods, along with Zoom conferences, ensuring the continuity of education.

Consequently, the pandemic reshaped and transformed education into a digital learning hub. Educators worldwide were thrust into a rapid shift to online

teaching methods, necessitating digital infrastructures, software, practical methodologies, and adequately trained teachers and learners—resources that few countries had readily available at the start. The new teaching paradigms, vastly different from traditional models, undoubtedly demand specific prior knowledge, skills, and expertise. Adapting conventional educational content to meet online learning requirements presents another complex challenge, particularly when ill-prepared.

Enhancing digital literacy, which promotes a profound understanding of the digital environment, has become essential for navigating these changes. It allows individuals to adapt to new contexts and respond creatively and collaboratively intuitively. Contemporary teachers must prioritize professional learning, which is recognized as a crucial driver of flexibility, well-being, collaboration, and educational leadership. The rapid societal and technological changes of the 21st century have imposed a need for students to develop an increasingly broad and complex skill set, while teachers must continuously improve their competencies (Révai, 2020; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

Therefore, the following questions are raised:

a) To what extent are Algerian teachers and students prepared to navigate this new teaching environment?

b) What lessons can be drawn from the initial experience?

First, this research aims to analyze the educational situation during the COVID-19 pandemic and emphasize the constraints that impeded the effective implementation of distance learning, thereby affecting the fulfillment of predefined educational objectives. Secondly, it seeks to explore the necessary changes in teachers' professional identity required for 21st-century educators. The gaps determined during a year of experience present an opportunity to reevaluate teaching methodologies to ensure quality online and learning in exceptional circumstances, such as the current health crisis.

1. Literature Review

The following section will address the origins and definition of the concept of distance learning and its integration into the field of education for the first time. Moreover, digital literacy is explained in detail and justified as a significant necessity for contemporary teachers to meet the demands of the hegemony of technological inventions. The new professional identity is also described as

raising awareness among teachers of the imperative changes imposed by the new era.

I.1. Online Learning: Origins and Definition

As the prevalence of learning technology continues to advance, teachers and researchers must agree on consistent terminology and definitions (Lowenthal & Wilson, 2010; Volery & Lord, 2000). Thus, different terms are often used interchangeably. Online teaching and learning can be defined as a form of education that occurs via the Internet. It has been labeled with different names, such as online, distance, and e-learning. This approach combines both asynchronous and synchronous modes. However, regardless of the terminology and tools employed, this type of teaching and learning aims to make classes more accessible and flexible for students. It is recognized that this mode of education, which is gaining traction globally, enables the general public to benefit from educational opportunities without the need to relocate, thereby avoiding the hassles of transportation and associated costs.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) offers several online teaching/learning typologies that have become an urgent need in the current context. Therefore, the use of the Internet and laptops for teaching and learning purposes has significantly increased (Cole et al., 2017; Halverson & Smith, 2010; Kontos, 2015; Sela, 2005; Tynan et al., 2015).

1.2. Mandatory Improvement of Digital Literacy by Teachers in the Era of the Pandemic

Exponential technological developments have caused significant upheavals and changes in teaching and learning, approaches, and evaluation typologies. One of the most critical changes in education is the appearance of new forms of learning: distance learning, online learning, and e-learning, which have shifted from experimental novelties to nearly ubiquitous teaching tools. Entering the digital world and adapting to the latest information and communication technologies applications remains the critical solution to address the current pandemic. Thus, adopting these modern technologies and their applications by Algerian teachers is crucial today to act as resilient educators. However, these forms of typology and learning environments will undoubtedly cause some destabilization among online students and their teachers, who are, for the first time, forced to adapt to a learning environment that differs from the traditional classroom.

It is crucial to emphasize that. Unfortunately, the new forms of teaching have not been accompanied by adequate training for teachers and students on how to teach and learn online, including its specific pedagogical approaches, the enhancement of learning outcomes, and the overall quality of the learning experience (Duffy & Kirkley, 2001; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Until now, research in this field has mainly focused on students and pedagogical strategies. However, teachers and students remain uncertain due to a lack of understanding of how online teaching can be effectively delivered. For Algerian teachers who have never experienced online teaching, the new typology of education lacks face-to-face interactivity and is a primary source of discord. In the interest of successfully adjusting to the online classroom as the sole alternative, teachers are prompted to reconsider their core professional beliefs and values about the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching. Adopting this new model for delivering online courses necessitates deconstructing well-entrenched practices, which must be replaced by a teaching and learning framework heavily based on new technologies.

1.3. New Professional Identity of the Online Teacher

While providing valuable learning opportunities, digitization imposes new requirements on teachers and learners. Teachers are expected to be skilled operators of ICT and must be actively involved in designing the digital environment. The pace of digitization seems to be a constant challenge that impacts people's lifestyles, work, and learning. Following this digitized transformation of education, there has been a focus on developing teachers' digital skills (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Redecker, 2017; Starkey, 2020). It is commonly accepted that such digitization can promote the quality of education by reinforcing professionalism, increasing learner engagement, enhancing students' digital competencies, and the quality of their teaching and, thus, their lives in general.

Crucially, the future success of teaching and learning for teachers and students could be severely compromised by a lack of digital skills. To prevent this unfortunate outcome, teachers must ensure effective distance teaching. The professional identity of the teacher (PIT) is no longer limited to subject matter expertise and didactic and pedagogical knowledge; instead, new parameters emerge that change teachers' perceptions of their professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2000). Teachers are prompted to develop their PIT based on their own teaching experiences and drawing from everyday experiences, even if they are not closely related to teaching. Nowadays, teachers should pursue a PIT that allows them to cope with rapid professional changes, thereby helping to reduce

student dropout rates and teacher burnout (Alsup, 2006). The reconfiguration of PIT is crucial for teachers worldwide to navigate rapid and disruptive situations similar to those currently caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the dialogical self-theory (DST) proposed by Hermans (2001) provides a handy definition of identity for educational contexts: a flexible configuration of relatively autonomous, dynamic, and ever-changing identity positions in a perpetual dialogue among them.

1.4. The First Online Experience of Teachers and Students

The use of the Internet and information technologies for teaching and learning has significantly expanded (Cole et al., 2017; Halverson & Smith, 2010; Kontos, 2015; Sela, 2005; Tynan et al., 2015). This transition has effectively contributed to the design of online courses and offered a broad audience the opportunity to continue their studies. However, teachers' attitudes toward this new type of teaching and learning are affected by various factors, such as gender, professional experience, exposure to, and proficiency with computers. Regardless of how advanced and efficient the technology employed is, its practical application depends on the positive attitudes of its users. (Liaw, Huang & Chen, 2007). Thus, this necessitates adequate preparation for such learning (Warner et al., 1998). This preparation is based on three aspects: students' preference for the new delivery method compared to traditional methods, their confidence in utilizing electronic communication for learning, and their ability to engage in autonomous learning. Other researchers later refined this concept, including McVay (2000, 2001), who developed a 13-item tool to measure students' behaviors and attitudes as predictors. This tool can help identify and validate students for online preparation.

1.5. Flexibility and Adaptability of Teachers: Essential Abilities for Success

These two concepts are defined as prominent abilities that allow individuals, in general, to readjust to all changing circumstances inherent to life successfully. Martin et al. (2012) examined adaptability among students. They demonstrated that it was positively related to teaching performance, enjoyment of learning, life satisfaction, meaning and purpose in life, and dynamism in reception. Being flexible and adaptable is also a critically relevant ability for teachers, given that teaching involves responding to and managing constant change (Collie & Martin, 2015). Therefore, preparing teachers to manage unpredictable changes

effectively is crucial for Algerian teachers in the COVID-19 era. Thus, they must adapt to new roles, accept changes, and have an alternative plan.

II. Empirical Stage

To our knowledge, this study is the first associated with such a type of teaching/learning during the pandemic. The current section offers an overview of the target research sample and the applied procedures. It also addresses the techniques adopted to collect and analyze the gathered data.

2.1. Design and Sampling

This study used a cross-sectional mixed methods design, where quantitative and qualitative methods complemented each other. The participants in this study were Master's students enrolled in the academic year 2021-22. They all experienced the first online teaching/learning process. Their perspectives are of paramount significance for researchers to make informed adjustments. The respondents are full-time teachers who have experienced the new online teaching and learning type.

2.2. Study Field

The data for the study were collected from several students and teachers in the Translation Department at the University of Tlemcen. All students (20) have been at this university for five years, and all teachers (5) have been part of the university faculty for a period ranging from two to eight years. Since March 2020, the university has been closed, and classes have transitioned to online processes. In this shift, teachers and learners had to adapt to the new form of teaching and learning.

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Student Questionnaire and Teacher Interviews

The questionnaire for students and the interviews conducted with teachers includes eight questions for the former, covering demographic variables, attitudes toward issues, and suggestions regarding online teaching and learning, and five questions for the latter.

- **Table 1: Familiarization of Respondents with Online Teaching and Learning**

-Have you ever used online teaching and learning before the onset of the pandemic?

Respondents	Yes	No
Teachers	20%	80%
Students	5%	95%
Total	8%	92%

The above statistical data indicate that the vast majority of respondents (95% of students and 80% of teachers) report that they have never utilized ICT for online teaching and learning before the onset of the pandemic. It is significant to highlight that they have never taken the initiative to engage with new ICT tools dedicated to distance learning. Even though they have familiarized themselves with ICT through a module in the curriculum over three years, students have limited their achievements to theoretical knowledge without attempting to develop practical skills. In This context, teachers have restricted their teaching goals to pedagogical and didactic issues, avoiding any changes in their practice. Although Algerian universities chose the Moodle platform for courses, only 20% of students are connected to this platform.

- **Table 2: Obstacles Preventing Access to the Moodle Platform**

-What prevented you from accessing the Moodle platform?

Obstacles	Teachers	Students
Material Problems	Lack of adequate material	Lack of personal computers
Connection Problems	Defective and imperfect platform Lack of internet connection at the university	Lack of internet connection at home. Inaccessibility of the platform.
Software problems	Lack of proficiency Lack of training	Lack of training

- **Analysis**

When asked about the obstacles preventing their access to the Moodle platform, they listed a range of deficiencies regarding equipment, software, and the unavailability of the Internet for most of them. They also demonstrated that online teaching is too demanding in time and effort. The imperfections and

inaccessibility of the Moodle platform contributed to these failures. The "digital divide" could significantly affect both teachers and students. Thus, distance teaching and learning have challenged teachers and exacerbated digital inequalities among students.

• **Table 3: Suggestions from Respondents and Students to Overcome These Obstacles**

-What do you suggest to overcome these obstacles?

Suggestions Teachers	Suggestions Students
Regular training / updates	Availability of materials
Improvement of internet speed and regular availability	Training
Review of internet prices	Availability of documents and feedback from in-person teaching
Availability of materials	Review of internet prices

• **Analysis**

To overcome these difficulties, most teachers and students highlighted the need for regular training, equipment availability, and the enhancement and consistent flow of Internet access. Some students called for Internet pricing to be made affordable for all. Others suggested offering documents and returning to in-person teaching and learning. For them, this mode of teaching and learning is safer and more beneficial in various ways: interactivity, immediate feedback, time-saving, etc.

Thus, this first experience with online teaching was imperfect for several reasons, but this option should still be abandoned. Public authorities must equip universities with modern communication means (equipment, budget, training, etc.), as it is necessary for teachers and students to embrace this new type of education. Accordingly, the digital divide's primary issues are mainly associated with a lack of interest in utilizing technology and access to it. Reducing the digital gap requires increasing affordability, empowering users, and promoting the relevance of online content. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of the digital divide in education. Therefore, teachers and students remain out of the loop due to insufficient technological and digital skills. Conversely, this exacerbates the knowledge gap by limiting access to it. Notably, none of the examined samples suggested adaptability or flexibility as a

relevant solution, encouraging teachers and students to adjust and alter their thoughts and behaviors.

Conclusion

The typology of teaching and learning requires a proactive mastery of new technologies and the deconstruction by teachers and learners of previous conceptions of teaching and learning to adopt new ones. Teacher training should include new pedagogical practices that are authentic and meaningful, shifting from digital literacy to digital competence and ultimately fulfilling a digital professional identity and a digital pedagogy. It is crucial to foster students' understanding of the skills required to function productively, safely, and ethically in diverse and increasingly digital environments. Information and communication technologies (ICT) should be practically integrated throughout higher education programs. Online teaching must become an integral part of the educational material in our national universities, not just a measure taken during exceptional crises.

With the rapid growth of technology and its integration into EFL contexts, primarily through several online platforms and language programs, the unexpected requirements brought on by CoViD-19, and the transition in perspective from viewing language as a tool for learning technology to an effective tool for language acquisition, it is evident that teachers around the world face fierce competition imposed by digitalization. Thus, to keep pace with the demands of the 21st century, it is high time for them to develop a digitized profile—a new professional identity; otherwise, all attempts will be in vain.

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