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ONLINE DISTANCE TEACHING AND LEARNING: OPPORTUNITIES, ATTITUDES AND CHALLENGES

ENSEIGNEMENT ET APPRENTISSAGE À DISTANCE EN LIGNE : OPPORTUNITÉS, ATTITUDES ET DÉFIS

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Abstract: *The role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play in modernizing all society facets has become undeniably crucial. The last world pandemic of COVID 19 has not only confirmed that role, but has urged all institutions all over the world to adjust their traditional work methods with new unconventional alternative, through one common context: virtual. The present paper seeks to recall attention to the unavoidable method of online learning, by reporting an overview of worldwide experiences of its use and its expansion in education, as well as directing a special concern toward that new trend in higher education in Algeria. The study's outcomes of the Algerian sample indicate that teachers' and learners' readiness, attitudes, material means in addition to other constraints still hinder that objective.*

Key words: *Online learning, distance learning and teaching, blended learning, ESP, ICTs*

Résumé: *Le rôle que jouent les technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC) dans la modernisation de toutes les facettes de la société est devenu indéniablement crucial. La dernière pandémie mondiale de la COVID-19 a non seulement confirmé ce rôle, mais elle a exhorté toutes les institutions du monde à adapter leurs méthodes de travail traditionnelles à une nouvelle alternative non conventionnelle, dans un seul contexte: le virtuel. Le présent document cherche à attirer l'attention sur « l'inévitable » méthode d'apprentissage en ligne, en rapportant un aperçu des expériences de son utilisation et de son expansion dans l'éducation dans le monde, ainsi qu'en orientant une préoccupation particulière de cette nouvelle tendance dans l'enseignement supérieur en Algérie. Les résultats de l'étude du cas algérien indiquent que la préparation, les attitudes et les moyens matériels des enseignants et des apprenants, ainsi que d'autres contraintes, continuent d'entraver cet objectif.*

Mots-clés : *apprentissage en ligne, apprentissage/enseignement à distance, apprentissage mixte, ESP, TIC*

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1. Introduction

On line learning has become a widespread means of education that substitutes a classroom environment and facilitates the ongoing process of teaching/learning by offering a number of possibilities, such as distance learning. The last world pandemic of Corona virus has demonstrated to all institutions in all sectors that the need of carrying on work and information exchange required an immediate alternative to the traditional way of meeting, by strongly considering the advantages of using new technologies like the open source platforms that maintain connection and face the constraint of the external environment.

In education, the principle of online learning as an alternative to or as a complement for classroom teaching/learning can be convenient to many occasions like national or international conferences and meetings, specific environmental and health circumstances or emergency cases. Indeed, 'distance learning affords educational opportunities to individuals unable to attend conventional classroom settings' (McNaughton, 2001: 1). By *unable* McNaughton refers to those individuals living in rural or remote areas, who often cannot commute to universities or college and individuals with other time restrictions.

The adoption and the use of new technologies are also the concern of many policymakers who consider their integration in education as integral to their progress and modernisation (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001; Na, 1993; OECD, 2001; Pelgrum, 2001; Sooknanan, 2002). In the Arab countries for instance, 'numerous international initiatives, such as the United Nations Development Program, have sought to help Arab countries embrace modernization by bringing about reforms in their educational systems' (Abu Samak, 2006: 13). In Algeria, the application of ICT policies became significant right from the year 2002 through the Ministry of education project that aimed at equipping all schools with computers and by introducing information and communication technology in educational programmes 'to facilitate the entry of Algeria into the information society' (World Telecommunications Development Report, 2006. ITU). However, and although the Algerian government has encouraged ICTs introduction in education, and despite the wide emergence of the internet and of multimedia devices in Algeria in the last decade, technology is seldom made accessible for teachers and students inside schools and universities (Makhoukh, 2012). Nevertheless, the lack of technology accessibility is not the only factor that leads to a gap between today's information and communication society and the educational system in our country. One other major factor to be considered is that of the teachers' attitudes toward ICT, and their readiness for its right integration in education. As Abu Samak (2006) argues:

> … despite the presence of ICT in the classroom, the extent to which such technology resulted in actual improvements in teaching and learning cannot be assumed. One variable that has been linked to the effective use of ICT by American and European teachers is teacher attitudes… In school settings in developing countries, where teachers who are expected to integrate ICT into their instruction effectively function as primary "change agents" (Chin & Hortin, 1994: 83), individual attitudes may play a significant role in the extent to which teachers carry out their responsibility. (Abu Samak, 2006: 3)

Hence, teachers –regardless of whether they are adept at utilising new technology or not – need to acknowledge the new rules imposed by the world of communication and information because in the context of innovations designed for educational systems,

teachers are assumed to be major stakeholders in making such adoption decisions (Spiegel, 2001. qtd in Abu Samak, 2006: 3). Teachers also need to think about fostering new competencies that will allow them decide which technologies to use and how they could be best used.

Many university studies in Algeria have investigated the attitudes of university teachers and students in regard to the use of technology-based instruction (Nedjah 2010; Meharet 2011; Bentayeb 2012; Guerza 2015; Boulmerka 2016). Nevertheless, and even though those works have shown in their findings a general positive attitude amongst teachers and students, several concerns about integrating new technologies and successfully managing to implement them in their instruction were often raised. These are usually linked to external environmental barriers and internal barriers mainly related to teachers' personal mentality such as attitude, fear, belief, will, confidence and motivation (Nedjah, 2010). Rosenberg (2001) sets clues to assess readiness for integrating a technology-based form of training, because not any institution or corporation are ready for delivering knowledge by digital means. Hanson (2003) reviews Rosenberg's (2001) idea of readiness by adding that:

> Success depends on support in a variety of ways considering several factors: the readiness and openness of a culture to share information in a comprehensive manner, the readiness of management to invest resources in developing a robust infrastructure, and the readiness of trainers to design learner-centered curriculum along an ever-expanding continuum of employee needs. (Hanson, 2003: 80-81).

Thus, readiness is a key element to efficiency and then to successful achievements. And because the process of teaching/learning is the concern of a whole community, readiness of changing the teaching/learning environments in our Universities through the integration of new technologies is the concern of all that community starting from its decision makers who represent the top of the pyramid to its basis represented by the students.

2. Introducing New Teaching/Learning Environments

Regarding the advantages and the drawbacks of both traditional classroom face-to-face teaching and online teaching it is worth thinking about an *optimal* approach that gathers the practices that best succeed teaching/learning in both methods. In other words, a mixture of 'different environments' is to be used in the process of teaching/learning to obtain what we call blended learning.

2.1. Blended Learning

The concept of blended learning is not new. Teachers and learners of all disciplines have always used different approaches methods and strategies to achieve effective learning, as Marsh (2012) argues:

> Good teachers will always use more than one method or approach in their teaching, and good learners will always combine different strategies in their learning. Good programs of study combine lectures, seminars, group projects, placements, and so on to offer students a variety of different learning opportunities. *Traditional* distance learning courses have long provided blended learning through a combination of self-access content (print/video/TV/radio and face-to-face/telephone support). (Marsh, 2012: 3)

Marsh (2012) carries out by stating that what is new about mixing different approaches, methods and strategies in the process of teaching/learning is the range of different learning opportunities and environments made possible today through the use of technology to support learning and teaching. What is also new is the "expectation" of our learners to use technology in and out of the classroom as part of the learning process (Marsh, 2012: 3).

The term *blended learning* traces back to the year 2000 and was mostly linked to 'supplementing traditional classroom learning with self-study e-learning activities' (Marsh, 2012: 3). At that time, the introduction of new technologies offered new options to both teachers and learners to develop their skills, therefore, a combination of different environments became necessary: 'Blended learning gives learners and teachers a potential environment to learn and teach more effectively' (Marsh, 2012: 3).
Later on, the concept of blended learning has gained attention by becoming pedagogically valuable as it provided a 'much richer set of learning approaches and environments' (Marsh, 2012: 3). Nowadays, the term blended learning is not restricted to the use of new technologies inside classrooms or in self-help study, but it 'can refer to any combination of different methods of learning, different learning environments, different learning styles... [ ] it is essentially all about making the most of the learning opportunities and tools available to achieve the *optimal* learning environment' (Marsh, 2012: 3).

In language teaching/learning, blended learning has continuously developed (mainly by the introduction of computers) through time with the adoption of new language teaching approaches. Ruthven-Stuart (2003) in an online survey of 300 CALL-related language teachers from 36 countries, has found that 98 percent agreed that one of the roles of a computer was *a complement to classroom teaching*. He has then identified different strengths of blended language learning (in Marsh, 2012: 4):

- provides a more individualized learning experience
- provides more personalized learning support
- supports and encourages independent and collaborative learning
- increases student engagement in learning
- accommodates a variety of learning styles provides a place to practice the target language beyond the classroom
- provides a less stressful practice environment for the target language
- provides flexible study, anytime or anywhere, to meet learners' needs
- helps students develop valuable and necessary twenty-first century learning skills

In blended learning, online learning environment comes to 'supplement' or 'complement' traditional classroom learning environments. And because of the new digital world demands, all teaching increasingly relies on 'more or less digital- or net-based flexible solutions in the educational organization' (Marsh, 2012: 4). Therefore, the question today is not to work on convincing teachers and learners about the integration of technology in learning/ teaching, but it is about asking ourselves 'how should we blend?' Future researches would be worth oriented alongside this question.
In ESP courses, blended learning was seen to be particularly suitable for Business English learners because it gives them flexibility in where and when they learn (Arnó-Macià, 2012). Unlike face-to-face class, the concept of blended learning permits to ESP teachers to

design very specialized courses due to narrow groups of students, or individual courses. Examples to this situation are pre-study courses for students who want to prepare final projects or in pre-experience courses for learners who want to prepare real-time language that they are likely to meet in work place situations. Hence, in addition to classroom face-to-face courses, the ESP teacher can include an online synchronous learning (example, using Skype video or Zoom conversations) to practice such very specific activities with his/her learners. He/she can also propose access to online materials such as virtual libraries and electronic dictionaries related to their needs. Blended learning has the benefit of making a course more flexible which is one of the key elements in ESP teaching, in a way that it allows the students to be more autonomous as Trinder (2012) states 'blended courses can help learners in developing autonomy, out-of-class learning, self-assessment, individualization' (Trinder, 2006: 192), and collaborators as interaction is strengthened by the narrow human contact.

Nevertheless, blended learning also has drawbacks related to technological gap among the learning population, as well as financial and technical issues. In Business English for example, Kern (2013) says that English for advertising 'course shows how complex such a blend can sometimes be. It can be time-consuming to create such courses, and teachers need to have some technical knowledge and training, and have access to particular technologies' (Kern, 2013: 111). Hence, particular efforts need to be made by institutions and teachers to 'to consider these and other issues before setting up a technology-integrated blended course and to find ways to make it sustainable (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004; Littlejohn, 2004, in Kern, 2013: 111). The kind of challenges that a pedagogical team can face according to Kern (2013) are:

- Issues of accessibility, availability and reliability of the technology
- The need for one-off and ongoing teacher and learner training
- Varying levels of tech-savvy of teachers and learners
- Time and resources needed to create technology-integrated courses
- The need for new ways of managing classes in which technology is used, including how to deal with technical problems during lessons
- Having to adapt to the changing roles of teachers as well as learners, particularly in online courses, etc.

Kern (2013) concludes her article by asserting that the difficulties and issues previously mentioned

> …need to be thought through carefully to enable a smooth and successful integration of technology and ensure that teachers as well as students will accept the use of the technology as a valuable addition to their ESP course, rather than a distraction from the real purpose, which is learning the target language (Kern, 2013: 111).

2.2. Online Teaching for the Four Language Skills

Teaching foreign languages online has become fairly common, though speaking seems to take the lion's share among all language skills that could be learnt and taught online. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning some works found in the literature related to that domain either those where online learning has been considered as effective to the four language learning skills, or in those where online environment has been claimed to be ineffective.

In many works (Beauvios, 1997, Chun and Plass, 2000, Pelletieri, 2000, Relan, and Gillani, 1997, Lee, et.al 2005, Sullivan and Pratt, 1996, Warschauer ,1996, Warschauer, 1999, in Jabeen and Thomas, 2015) it is asserted that web-based instruction (WBI) and computer-mediated communication (CMC), offer to learners 'an experience of increasing motivation, collaborative learning and social interaction which are meaningful to the learners in the language classroom' because of its varied and authentic language learning environment.

Furthermore, Sullivan and Pratt (1996) have found 'a greater impact of CMC on student's writing proficiency than a face-to-face communication during a semester', and have pointed out that writing abilities of some learners who have tried online learning have developed more than in traditional classes (Jabeen and Thomas, 2015). This online learning environment should however be based on principles that derive from situated learning theory: '(a) provision of authentic activities within contexts, (b) benchmarking experts' thinking and performance, (c) abundant information and multiple points of view, (d) opportunity for practical reflection, (e) cooperative construction of knowledge, (f) clarification of thinking, and (g) coaching' (ibid). Hence, online learning methodology relies on the same pedagogical supports and principles found in classroom environments but with more flexibility and with closer teacher-student relationship (as learning online usually happens with a limited number of learners or even individually).
Nevertheless, experimentations in teaching reading skills in an online environment have provided less effective results. So for example in Kim's (2002) study to test the efficiency of web-based English course reading she reported that 'the actual output-performance level achieved via CMC interaction was not quite commensurate with previous expectations, especially not in terms of collaborative learning' (Kim 2002, qtd in Jabeen and Thomas, 2015).

2.3. Teachers' Training

Teachers' role in integrating ICTs in learning is visibly crucial, and each educational reform in this field should take into account teachers' knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes (Cuban, 2000). Likewise, Fullan's (1992, 2001) perception of school reform also focuses on the modification of mindsets, such as pedagogical assumptions, values, and beliefs, is a key factor to any educational change effort. Hence, dealing successfully with ICTs depends not only on knowledge of the capability, limitations, applications, and implications of ICT, but also on individuals' attitudes and perceptions regarding ICT tools. A teacher who has positive attitudes toward ICT and recognizes it to be useful in promoting learning will evidently integrate ICT in his/her classroom more easily than others.

It is a fact that using latest ICTs inside the Algerian University is still a challenging matter because of all the previously mentioned factors. Yet, that same challenge seems to become a child's game outside universities for many students thanks to the wide expansion and the familiarity of the internet use plus the vulgarization of multimedia means. Hence, and since the new generation of students has the forbearance and readiness to use new technologies for personal or self study use, it is constructive and practical to invest this ICT literacy in asynchronous and synchronous learning.

Teachers' preparation to the use of new technologies in teaching should be a part of their pre-service training parallel with didactic and psycho-pedagogical learning, and because technology is in a constant evolution and change, this should stay an ongoing task during in-service training. This can then happen through regular workshops between teachers to exchange ICTs knowledge or through seminars where ICT professionals and experts can expose to the teachers the latest technologies they can use to facilitate the process of teaching/learning. Besides, hundreds of tutorial videos are available on the web that any teacher can consult to learn how to exploit any IC technology for his/her teaching purposes. One famous example of those web sites where tutorial videos are available is YouTube.

2.4. Online Teaching for Students' Tutoring and Supervision

One of the emerging technologies used in education in general and in FL in particular is online teaching through e-learning platforms or through simple applications like Skype and Zoom. If the use of that technology still seems challenging inside our universities classrooms, teachers can use the virtual world (VW) for students' regular tutoring. Thus, the use of online platforms can substitute the face to face conversations where the student and his teacher tutor usually find difficulties to fix their schedules for a tutoring meeting. Furthermore, and in addition to asynchronous instruction through e-mails or through social networks, teachers can also use online platforms to supervise students' who prepare their dissertations or are about to give oral presentations such as presenting a classroom project or a viva.

However, handling a technology needs preparation and acquiring the necessary competency as mentioned in the works of Compton, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Youngs, 2007:

> Teachers interested in teaching in virtual worlds should be aware of the similarities and differences between these 3D environments, the classroom, and other online environments. In-service teachers may need to keep their minds open, be willing to expand their views of pedagogy, and learn skills that are particular of the new teaching environment (Compton 2009; Hampel and Stickler 2005; Youngs 2007, as qtd in Da Silva, 2012: 161).

The analysis of the citation above infers that the teacher's use of the VW in teaching relies on two major criteria: (i) technical competencies, as the FL teacher is not ICT specialist or may not be ICT savvy. (ii) Psychological preparation, as a teaching environment based on new technologies is not devoid of constraints and difficulties. Therefore, the integration and the adoption of that kind of technology in teaching/learning methods needs are to be preceded by a targeted preparation, i.e. to acquire the needed technological literacy as well as having a sufficient amount of enthusiasm.

3. New Perspectives for Distance Learning in the Algerian Universities

Information and communication technologies integration as part of the standards that direct our universities is an initiative which will serve to a large extent their development and lead to prosper. Aside from facilitating administrative tasks, ICTs use in the processes of learning and teaching, if well incorporated, will enable a rapid diffusion of knowledge, widening the scientific research and promote our universities at the international level.

One example of a technology that has shown its efficiency in delivering knowledge in the field of distance learning either in local or international settings is the videoconference or teleconference.

The British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) whose main objective is to support 'schools and colleges in the use and development of ICT in education to raise standards, widen access, improve skills and encourage effective management, has published a series of papers where research evidence about video conferencing and its benefits in education was exposed.

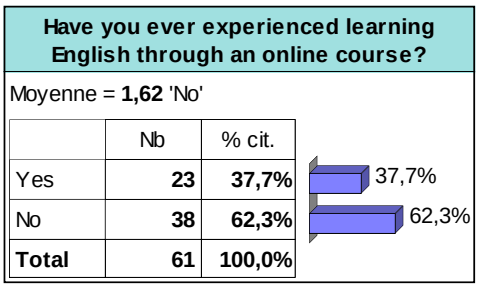
In BECTA's (2003) papers, video conferencing is defined as being a method that 'allows people in different locations to see and talk to each other. It may also support the electronic exchange of files, sharing of computer applications and co-working.' In addition, the papers bring evidence to video conferencing benefits by gathering summaries of main researches where these have been tackled and classified them into categories (see appendix I).

As far as the Algerian universities are concern, in 2018 I have conducted a research study aiming at measuring the attitudes of students and teachers of ESP toward the use of online distance learning/teaching. Printed and electronic copies of questionnaires were administered to 20 teachers and 63 students of ESP (specialized in subject matters like, International trade – Marketing - Management – Finance - Law – English studies - Optics – medicine– architecture - law - psychology - pharmacy) from different universities in Algeria (Sidi Bel Abbés, Oran, Saida, Tlemcen, Laghouat and Setif).

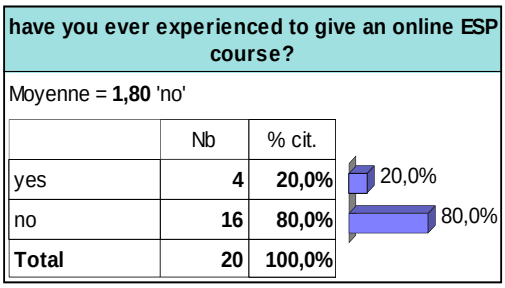
The results below represent the section where the participants were asked a number of questions around their perception of online distance learning/teaching:

Answers to Questions 1 This question includes both synchronous and asynchronous courses put online because the purpose was to identify the students' interest for the use of VW in learning English as an alternative to classroom context.

Graph 1: students' results



Graph 2: Teachers' results



23 of the students who have answered 'yes' as having experienced online learning, only 14 have given examples to the site or platforms they used. According to the second table on the left, and after a verification of the existence of the mentioned sites (except the famous ones), it seems that these students have generally chosen sites that propose tutorials for learning English with real teachers (mostly natives) from all over the world. Analysis of

the teachers' responses to this question revealed that online teaching is not a widely used method and is still unexplored by the great majority (80%) of teachers.

All things considered, comparison between both categories revealed that though online learning is still an unfamiliar method either in learning or in teaching (as low percentages were given to 'yes' by both sides), it appears that students show much more enthusiasm about online learning than teachers.

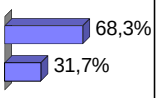
Answers to Questions 2

Graph 3: Students' results

Do you think online learning could be an efficient tool to learn ESP?

Moyenne = **1,32** 'Yes'

	Nb	% cit.
Yes	**43**	**68,3%**
No	**20**	**31,7%**
Total	**63**	**100,0%**

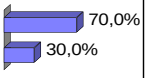


Graph 4: Teachers' results

Do you think online learning could be an efficient tool for teaching ESP "busy" learners who cannot attend an English classroom course?

Moyenne = **1,30** 'Yes'

	Nb	% cit.
Yes	**14**	**70,0%**
No	**6**	**30,0%**
Total	**20**	**100,0%**



On this question, both categories showed a positive attitude toward the efficiency of online learning in ESP, though a higher percentage was given by teachers 70% against 68,3% by students. This result may be due to teachers' mastery of didactics; they could therefore forecast and expect new perspectives for ESP teaching.

For that reason, an additional question was included in teachers' questionnaire question them about the advantages that online learning can bring to ESP. 10 of the overall teachers who answered YES, gave the following answers:

Graph 5: teachers' answers for yes

If yes, what benefits could online learning bring to ESP teaching?

	Nb	% cit.
Choice of time and place of learning	**1**	**9,1%**
Does not need high speed internet connection - can connect with native speakers easily	**1**	**9,1%**
easy contact with the teacher from any part in the world	**1**	**9,1%**
good interaction - motivation - covering various learning/teaching strategies - iteresting - posituve attitude	**1**	**9,1%**
It can help ESP students improve their English level better than old methods	**1**	**9,1%**
It's interesting -less efforts	**1**	**9,1%**
learn from anywhere - saves time - be exposed to real situations	**1**	**9,1%**
learner is more motivated, performs pronunciation better	**1**	**9,1%**
save time - satisfy instant and remote learners' needs	**1**	**9,1%**
saves time and money - study at any time wherever you are	**1**	**9,1%**
useful for extra learning (students)- keep in touch with lge context	**1**	**9,1%**
Total	**11**	**100,0%**

Responses show a common agreement around opinions like online learning is: motivating, interesting, and comfortable (anytime anywhere) and improves students' pronunciation and interaction. However, there were also negative attitudes and doubtful opinions from some teachers (five) about using the virtual world to deliver knowledge:

Graph 6: teachers' answers for no

If no, what drawbacks may online learning arise if integrated in ESP teaching/learning?		
	Nb	% cit.
bad internet connection	**1**	**16,7%**
It is useful with distant learners only	**1**	**16,7%**
lack of students' interest - technical issues	**1**	**16,7%**
provides lazy learners	**1**	**16,7%**
sending documents takes lots of time	**1**	**16,7%**
the availability of internet is implicated as a handicap to the use of online learning	**1**	**16,7%**
Total	**6**	**100,0%**

Yet, one can notice that four of the five teachers opposed to the use of online learning mainly because of 'bad' or 'low' or 'failure' of internet connection. No one has referred his/her opposition to online learning to unawareness of the field or lack of experience or training.

To sum up, the analysis of the participants' attitudes toward integrating online learning has shown a general positive attitude from both teachers and students. Results have also confirmed that the students' readiness for new technology-based methods will lead them to rapidly adopt the use of new ICTs and online learning if integrated in their universities in the near future. However, and though those positive attitudes, it seems that some teachers' competency gap as well as their reluctance to use such a method will lead to a delay in adopting and integrating it in our universities.

4. Zoom for all distant speakers and lecturers

All the previously mentioned distance learning/conferencing benefits have been massively recognised by the world community during the last COVID 19 pandemic, and the recourse to internet applications that offer such distance conferencing services has become a global must.

Zoom is a platform that has probably been the most worldwide utilized during the COVID 19 pandemic. It has allowed all kinds of organization teams, employees, teachers and students, businessmen, executers and policy makers to continue work together in a virtual environment when the lockdown has make it impossible for gathering in normal settings.

The distinctiveness of Zoom comparing to other applications mainly like Skype, is that it is an easy, reliable cloud platform that enables a great number of participants to meet (up to 500 participants under "large meeting" add-on option, or the free plan, allows to host video conferences of up to 40 minutes and up to 100 participants). Zoom company claim that the software-based is the original conference room solution used around the world in board, conference, huddle, and training rooms, as well as executive offices and classrooms. According to Reuters (April 02/2020 7:43am), Zoom's daily active users jumped from 10 million to over 200 million in the three months following the COVID 19

lockdown. And when applications like Microsoft's business-focused Teams app and Slack were used by 1.56 million mobile users and less than 500,000 mobile users respectively, research firm Apptopia estimated that Zoom's daily U.S. mobile user volumes rose to a record 4.84 million for the same day (Reuter April 02/2020 7:43am).

Luckily the Algerian universities were not excluded from Zoom's virtual experience, as many university teachers and researchers have taken part in videoconferences and meetings to share their research works, ideas and opinions about different topics. Besides, many Algerian universities (Blida, Setif, Tlemcen, Oran...etc) have created free access e-learning platforms (in addition to Moodle) for their students, and a YouTube channel was devoted for pupils of middle and secondary schools to prepare their final exams. Unfortunately, the minimum and major required conditions for the success of those online activities, i.e. the availability of a good internet flow and an appropriate ICT device are still hard to be fulfilled by a considerable number of students, namely those living in remote areas and/or for those in difficult financial situations.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, today's issues are to be resolved by today's means, and today's *digital learners* cannot be taught with the same centuries-old teaching methods any more. In other words, to reach international standards, the Algerian University needs to give itself the means that match with the current era exigencies and anticipate future constraints. Being for or against the use and integration of new technologies into the educational system cannot change the fact that hereafter the strategies and methods of learning of the new generations of students will always call for, in one way or another, the use of the latest and the best technology that serves and facilitates their learning. Hence, for the present and future generations of teachers, their perceptions about the teaching methods should evolve and develop according to the options and the alternatives offered in this era, where information and communication technologies increasingly represent the standards of our lifestyles.

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Appendices

Appendix I

a. General benefits

● It supports distance learning by linking up tutors and students, and also offers a means of reassurance and social contact for students (Hearnshaw, 1997).

● Subject teaching can be enriched by input from experts or practitioners, as in mathematics and the Motivate project (Gage et al. 2002).

● Students can develop communication and social skills by collaborating with their peers in other institutions.

● Students who normally stay in the background participate more; they are motivated to take part in video conferencing.

b. Benefits for students

● Collaboration with schools where the pupils come from different cultures leads to the development of multicultural relationships and understanding, while enriching traditional activities (Cifuentes & Murphy 2000).

● It provides enhanced opportunities for language students to interact with native speakers (Kinginger 1998; Wright & Whitehead 1998).

● It offers an alternative outlet for expression by those normally hampered by poor literacy skills (Eales et al. 1999).

c. Benefits for teachers

● Academic aspirations are raised amongst those students communicating with more assured students, who become positive role models (Cifuentes & Murphy 2000).

● Strong relationships are fostered with peers when working with other schools on collaborative projects (Cifuentes & Murphy 2000).

● The audience for courses can be increased by teaching face to face with one group and simultaneously transmitting to a second centre elsewhere (Gilbert 1999; Carville & Mitchell 2000).

● Clips from sessions may be used as material for evaluating and modifying anti-social behaviour by students (Coverdale-Jones 1999).

d. Benefits in initial teacher training

● Students can observe teaching practice without being present in the classroom (Kinnear et al. 2002)

● Students may use video clips of their classroom experiences to share ideas and teaching resources (Sharpe 2000)

● Students on teaching practice feel 'a safety in distance' when using video conferencing to communicate with their supervisors, resulting in a more frank interaction (Sharpe 2000).

e. Benefits for students with special educational needs

● Support can be provided to children with complex physical and communication difficulties without professionals or families spending lots of time travelling (Donegan 2002).

● Students may overcome feelings of isolation and develop social skills by associating with peers who have similar needs (Thorpe 1998).

● The video conferencing context acts as a focus for some students, helping them to organise the way they think and act (Thorpe 1998).

● Students discover that if they shout out or talk over one another they cannot be understood, and alter their behaviour to take turns to talk (Thorpe 1998)