

# Digital Classroom Mise en Scène during Covid-19 Era: The case of Tlemcen University, Algeria

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## **Abstract**

The current growth of E-learning as a viable technique signals a shift from the traditional teacher-centred classroom to a learner-centred one. The concepts of autonomous learning, independent decision-making, time and space flexibility, and teachers' evolving roles from instructors to facilitators are all well represented in the E-learning context. Our students belong to the digital generation, and no one can deny that we spend most of our time in front of our screens, exchanging via social networks or emails. Electronic devices speed up communication and leave behind face-to-face communication, which is a primary aspect to consider, mainly during lockdown (pandemic) in social communication in general and in an educational context in particular. As a result, it is interesting to investigate how distance learning increase/decrease students' self-learning abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the main issues students and teachers face through online education. The present research, an exploratory case study, was conducted at the University of Tlemcen, Department of English, through E-questionnaire to investigate how learning/teaching occurs as a hybrid process that starts in the classroom and continues online. Our findings highlight the importance of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) in autonomous learning circumstances, such as remote learning, even though the generalizability of our findings has some limitations due to the cross-sectional character of the study and the sampling technique. As a result, fostering SRL should be a top focus in the physical classroom and online education. Self-access language learning centres allow students to learn in a self-directed manner to meet various learning objectives.

**Keywords:** E-Learning, Technology, Hybrid Pedagogy, Covid-19, Autonomy, SRL

## **1. Introduction**

Traditional education has changed radically within the last couple of years. Being physically present in a classroom is not the only learning option anymore. Thanks to the rise of the Internet and technology, nowadays, people can access a quality education whenever and wherever they want, as long as they can get online. We are now entering a new era – the revolution of online education where different universities around the world propose different options for online courses such as MOOCs (Rodriguez, 2013).

In education, online learning is more beneficial for its frequent use. The use of technology defines online learning; it often encompasses a wide range of systems, including internet access and online courses. The programs are provided through the Internet, and it comes in a variety of formats. In distance learning, an individual will learn on his or her own unbounded by temporal or spatial restrictions. The learner benefits from the provided environment, tools, and materials with his or her self-control and free will. E-Learning has created a solid platform for the implementation of continuous learning (Khan & Setiawan, 2019).

As a result, it is crucial to define autonomous learning. Student autonomy occurs when the learner, rather than a teacher or instructor, establishes objectives, conducts learning experiences, and makes evaluation judgments about a learning program. When students take responsibility for their learning, they are taking steps towards becoming lifelong learners. That is why; one of the critical qualities required for distance learning is learning autonomy. This technique emphasises learner practice, independence, and accountability in all learning processes (Moore, 2017).

Furthermore, distance education's growth has increased the diversity or situation of the tools it employs and enhances its theory. These new learning environments have changed the views of learning and improved the means of learning. However, not all students are used to studying online, and since E-Learning involves ICT tools (Hooks, 2001), the area's lack of internet access makes distributing technology for students to study at home a daunting task. That puts students who do not have access to digital tools at a disadvantage in today's workplace. One and a half billion students worldwide were engaged in online learning during COVID-19 in March 2020 (UNESCO sources); But NOT ALL of them could access different electronic devices; Lack of internet access (Different time Zone, not being able to pay). Neither teachers nor students have previous experience teaching online or at distance learning.

Like many worldwide institutions and universities, Abou Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen University has been forced to close its doors due to Covid-19 Pandemic. These circumstances have ramifications for the effectiveness of the higher education learning process. The COVID-19 epidemic obliged institutions to present an alternative educational process for students. Many institutions worldwide, including the Department of English at the University of Tlemcen in Algeria, have enquired about integrating the best online or distance learning into their educational plans.

The objectives behind this research are an attempt to examine the perspectives and attitudes of foreign language students about integrating E-learning into university programs and providing light on various educational issues since it is critical to understand students' perspectives and attitudes to improve E-learning. As a result, it is interesting to investigate how distance learning increase/decrease students' self-learning abilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and the main issues students and teachers face through online education.

## **2. The Use of E-learning in Education**

E- Learning, or the use of technology in learning, has become a hot topic in the education sector, and it now meets the demands of today's students. Incorporating technology into classroom learning has increased stimulation and improved student interaction. In nearly every discipline, e-learning has a significant presence (MacTeer, 2011; Zheleva & Tramonti, 2015).

Language education is one of the fields where technology has supplanted and enhanced learning methods. Take the English language, for example. Today's teachers employ various methods, including movie clips, ads, comments, and dramatics. It not only makes the session more entertaining than traditional book-based instruction, but it also keeps the student focused during the lesson. Distance learning has also altered because of e-learning. Modernisation allows students to be as involved as if they were physically present (Joshi, 2012).

E-Learning allows instructors to move away from a « one-size-fits-all » learning paradigm and toward a more targeted approach. Teachers can create individualised learning experiences for students using a systematic learning process and various material forms, which are impossible to provide in most traditional classrooms.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of E-learning**

Even if e-learning is growing more popular, there may be opponents; according to Růžičková (2009: 7), as mentioned in Kučirková (2014: 43), thus it is necessary to outline the method's pros and disadvantages – at least in general. (Vančová, 2007; Dudeney and Hockly, 2007; Galavis, 1998). E-learning is an excellent approach to motivating students to practice the language and allows them to tailor their learning to their particular needs and time constraints. Adults and older students, such as distant and lifetime learners, tend to benefit from it. They are conscious of their objectives and appreciate the opportunity to work at their speed and autonomously. Adults find it simpler to learn languages without being seen and scrutinised by their peers during sessions, even from a psychological standpoint, because they are scared of making errors in front of their peers. As a result, they appreciate the option for self-study. Regardless, we would want to offer these students an ESP E-learning course in addition to full-time courses. Garrison and Anderson (2003) consider e-learning at the heart of educational institutions and refer to it as a 'Strategic advantage.'

Many schools and colleges want to use e-learning to alter their courses, whether for distance studies or full-time study. Because the interactive method allows students to be fully involved in the teaching process and is often more appealing than textbooks, supporting emerging technology innovations through strategic incorporation of e-learning and lifelong learning allows educational institutions to maintain their leading role in the education sector.

It is stimulating for pupils, according to many researchers and professionals. The potential of keeping the material up to date is also mentioned by Dudeney and Hockly (2007) and Růžičková (2009). Students will likely benefit from asynchronous interaction since they will have more time to prepare replies, resulting in more accurate responses. Videos, pictures, and music excite the eyes and ears in ways that traditional materials cannot.

The importance of feedback in activities 29 and the form of assessments is critical for the learning process (Růžičková2009). Květoň (n.d.) emphasises the ability to study at any time and location as long as a computer is linked to the network. Depending on the timetable and requirements of the professors, students can often study at their speed. It also highlights cheaper fees as a benefit of e-learning; nevertheless, the initial expenditures of hardware and software purchases may be prohibitively expensive. At least three elements have a beneficial influence on educational usage of the Internet, according to Onno & Purbo (1998).

- Learners may take courses from anywhere, regardless of obstacles or institutional borders, and it is handy for them to sit with specialists in their field.
- Lectures/studies can be conducted at a variety of locations across the world without regard to the university/school with which students are familiar.
- Furthermore, the new library has a faster internet connection and can be utilised anywhere in the cosmos.

Rahardjo agrees with this viewpoint (2002). According to him, the Internet's advantages for education include access to information sources, network access, and media collaboration. Online courses, literature databases, research findings, and lecture content are all examples of information sources. Individual touch with the resource can be established without physical interaction.

While the Internet may be used to collaborate on collaborative research or to write a joint report, E-learning, on the other hand, has certain drawbacks. In terms of the most evident drawbacks, the following viewpoints should be noted: While they are autonomous students, some students are unruly. Many abilities, including speaking, are more challenging to master online (Galavis, 1998, p. 28).

Students may feel alone, there is a lack of interaction, and computers may not create a feeling of teamwork (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007, p. 182). On the contrary, it refers to e-learning as a benefit that promotes student collaboration and the formation of research teams. On the other hand, it asserts, "the efficacy of collaboration depends on the co-learners ability and desire to share resources and recognise the importance of their peers' input."

Many challenges that might arise with e-learning include technology flaws that can cause accessibility issues. In addition, appropriate equipment is required, and students must have access to the appropriate gear and software. Some students are hesitant to utilise ICT, while others cannot study independently due to their reliance on the instructor for teaching, assistance, and feedback.

E-learning is ineffective for some sorts of courses, such as those that need experiments and simulations. There are also certain downsides to consider when assessing the introduction of e-learning, such as the absence of human communication (but the ability to utilise chats, discussion boards, and other forms of communication) and difficulties with older students' capacity to use current ICT. Furthermore, some students may believe that the classes are voluntary and not required to attend. Online learning may be viewed as a complement to an extension of traditional learning methods within a community. Online learning should not be used to replace

### **Autonomous Learning**

What does it mean to be a self-directed learner? Richards (2016) responds on his official website: "Learner autonomy refers to the notion that learners should assume growing responsibility for what they learn and how they acquire it. Because autonomous learning is based on learners' needs and preferences, it is considered to make learning more personal and targeted, resulting in higher learning results. It differs from the usual teacher-led model, in which the instructor makes most of the decisions."

According to him, there are five principles to follow in order to achieve self-directed learning:

- Active participation in student learning.
- Providing resources and options.
- Providing options and possibilities for decision-making.
- Assisting students.
- It Encourages introspection.

Learner autonomy is a crucial component of many teachers' teaching, which they strive to achieve in a variety of ways – for example, by carefully analysing their students' needs, introducing and modelling strategies for independent learning, providing learners with techniques to monitor their learning, and consulting with students regularly to help them.

The concept of "autonomy," which includes situations, skills, and the ability to guide one's learning (Benson & Voller, 1997), has been used in language education in various ways to fit diverse contexts. The degree of attention placed on various elements influencing the learning setting frequently determines how autonomy is understood. These variables might include the learners' knowledge, aptitude, attitude, and motivation, as well as the different learning limitations imposed by the learning environment, such as curricular requirements, teaching and learning techniques, and institutional control.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic year 2020-2021 at the University of Tlemcen. Descriptive and analytic research methodology and tools were used to assist us in performing this study. It is based on information gathered from thirty-nine (39) Master 2 EFL students who completed an E-questionnaire. An interview with teachers would have been a great addition, but unfortunately, due to the terrible situation, we were in with COVID-19, particularly Delta Variant. We had at least five (5) teachers, but none of them responded to our emails, so we had to cancel it, which resulted in some limitations in our research.

The University of Tlemcen also opted for Microsoft Application 'Teams' to be used as an online application for distance learning. Higher hierarchy imposed different online apps without caring about the cost and the impact on teachers and students. Several research questions were raised:

1. What online teaching reality means for them?
2. Does COVID-19 lockdown affect the learning process?

3. How does distance learning enhance students' autonomous learning aptitudes during Covid-19?

#### 4. Data Analysis

The data collecting and processing procedure is critical in determining and analysing the present situation. In the current study, data comes in various ways, including measurements and survey responses. Thus, students' E-questionnaire was used to illustrate autonomous learning during The COVID-19 Pandemic, to understand better what is happening in the E-learning situation under study, and to identify the factors affecting the situation positively or negatively.

*How would you describe distant learning during Covid context?*

*Table 1- Students' Description of their Attitudes towards Teams Application*

| Responses                              | Percentage | Number of participants |
|--|------------|------------------------|
| Easy access to learning documents      | 38,46      | 15                     |
| Difficult access to learning documents | 15,38      | 6                      |
| Ability to study at home               | 23,07      | 9                      |
| Ability to contact the teacher         | 12,82      | 5                      |
| Others                                 | 5,12       | 2                      |

Less than half of the participants (38, 46%) find it easy to access learning documents, while 15, 38% seem difficult to them. 23, 07% find the Team's valuable platform since they can study at home, and only 12, 82% declare they can contact the teacher via the application directly. The rest of the respondents mention other positive reasons for using Team's platform, such as retrieving grades and organising review sessions whenever necessary.

*Do you find online courses fruitful?*

*Table 2- Students' point of view about online courses.*

| Responses | Percentage | Number of participants |
|-----------|------------|------------------------|
| Yes       | 53,84      | 21                     |
| No        | 46,15      | 18                     |

The results shown in the above table indicates that half of them (53, 84%) consider Online session beneficial, while half the other (46, 15%) disagree entirely.

*Do you think that E-learning was appropriately applied during Covid-19?*

*Table 3 - Students' views about E-learning application during Covid 19.*

| Responses | Percentage | Number of participants |
|-----------|------------|------------------------|
| Yes       | 23,07      | 9                      |
| No        | 76,92      | 30                     |

76, 92% is the percentage of participants that think E-learning was not appropriately applied during covid-19, in contrast to 23, 07%.

*Which learning situation do you prefer?*

*Table 4-Students' opinions on their preferred learning situation.*

| Responses                     | Percentage | Number of participants |
|-------------------------------|------------|------------------------|
| Entirely face-to-face courses | 66,66      | 26                     |
| Entirely online courses       | 2,58       | 2                      |
| Hybrid                        | 30,76      | 12                     |

Most of them declared preferring onsite courses, with a proportion of 66, 66%. On the other hand, 30, 76% are more interested in having hybrid classes. Whereas only 2 (2, 58%) like entirely online courses.

*What are the challenges that you face in E-learning?*

*Table 5-Students' description of the challenges faced throughout the e-learning experience.*

| Responses                                       | Percentage | Number of participants |
|---|------------|------------------------|
| Difficulty in adaptation to the learning system | 12,82      | 5                      |
| Lack of digital skills                          | 15,38      | 6                      |
| Technical problems                              | 38,46      | 15                     |
| Lack of self-discipline and motivation          | 41,02      | 16                     |
| Uncomfortable environment (at home)             | 10,25      | 4                      |
| Lack of social interaction                      | 15,38      | 6                      |

Because participants are confronted with many challenges simultaneously, with a percentage of 41, 02%, lack of self-discipline and motivation take the lead as most challenges faced by participants. Then 38, 46% face technical issues. However, 15, 38%

lack digital skills, and the same percentage of participants lack social interaction. With 12, 82%, the respondents cannot adapt to the online learning system – the rest (10, 25%) mention being in an uncomfortable environment (at home).

*What are the opportunities that distance learning offers you?*

**Table 6: Students' opinions on the opportunities provided by distance learning.**

| <b>Responses</b>                        | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>Number of participants</b> |
|---|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| Accessibility to online materials       | 15,38             | 6                             |
| The flexibility of time and space       | 15,38             | 6                             |
| Comfortable environment                 | 17,94             | 7                             |
| Freedom and autonomy                    | 17,94             | 7                             |
| Learning in your style                  | 33,33             | 13                            |
| Ability to record lectures and meetings | 33,33             | 13                            |

As seen in the above table, students have different opinions and choose multiple options. Therefore, we can see that the majority of students, with a percentage of 33, 33% choose the ability to record lectures and meetings and learn using their styles as the primary response. Freedom, autonomy, and a comfortable environment are the most selected option with 17.94%, while access to online materials and time flexibility and space are selected by 15.38%.

To sum up, the main points are identified:

- There is a lack of internet access in different time zones or even the inability to pay.
- The lack of training; neither teachers nor students have previous experience teaching online or at distance learning.
- They both discover new approaches to teaching and learning all of a sudden without being prepared.
- Teachers must cope with different learning styles (visual, auditory and verbal, physical, logical, social and solitary) to prepare for online lectures.
- Challenging factors affecting the learning process (Cognitive, motivational, affective, and social factors, as well as anxiety and self-esteem.
- Most of the students are UNRULY during online sessions.
- Lack of interaction.
- The home learning environment is less supportive than the classroom.
- Relying on teachers' assistance and feedback.
- The majority of students think that such courses are voluntary (NOT required to attend).

It is worth mentioning that the study had some limitations. The following case study is an attempt to investigate autonomous student aptitudes in e-learning using qualitative and quantitative methods, indicating that using an E-questionnaire for

various data sources may not be sufficient for such studies, as teacher interviews are still required to investigate teacher attitudes. However, due to the lockdown and health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, the second research tool has not been implemented, and the data gathered through the E-questionnaire may have some influence. As a result, it is critical to recognise that the interview will be a critical instrument for furthering the present research. The data provided on teachers are purely descriptive of the situation I experienced as a teacher in this department and through google meetings with colleagues while preparing the online lectures.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Due to the lockdown, most education systems have been forced to create alternatives to face-to-face teaching and learning. Many educational systems shifted activities online to ensure that instruction could continue even if schools were closed. Compared to the alternative of not going to school, online learning has been a valuable tool for continuing to build skills during school closures. However, there are still concerns that online learning may have been a sub-optimal substitute for face-to-face instruction, particularly in the absence of universal access to infrastructure (hardware and software) and inadequate teacher and student preparation for the unique demands of online teaching on them. Students can overcome some of the possible obstacles provided by online learning by developing strong attitudes toward autonomous learning, such as keeping focused throughout online sessions or retaining appropriate motivation. They are also critical in assisting students in efficiently using information and communication technology (ICT) and getting used to the most emerging learning tools.

Our findings are particularly relevant in light of potential school closures in the event of future crises. However, they may also help student design viable concepts for future blended or online learning. Our research highlighted the importance of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) in autonomous learning circumstances, such as remote learning. As a result, fostering SRL should be a top focus in the physical classroom and online education. SRL can be helpful in various ways, including assisting students in setting goals and scheduling their time and assisting them in monitoring their progress by asking probing questions.

Assisting students in setting and achieving attainable objectives helps them to gain valuable experience. Introducing accountability partners may help students form stronger social bonds while motivating them to stick to their objectives. In our study, students in both the high and low perceived competence groups indicated a need for clear and thorough task and assignment instructions. Teachers should give clear directions, provide explanations when required, and, if feasible, be accessible to answer inquiries.

Furthermore, many students were overwhelmed and perplexed by the variety of communication channels utilised for e-learning tasks and the various delivery modes employed by professors. As a result, there will be improved collaboration among instructors in terms of platforms and decentralisation.

Furthermore, timely and courteous feedback can help students' self-efficacy and motivation, as well as the teacher-student connection. Some students indicated a need for social interaction, hampered by the COVID-19 confinement. As a result, boosting social contact by offering possibilities for synchronous (e.g., video conferences, virtual reality) communication is a good idea. On the other hand, online communication has disadvantages and must be mediated by teachers to attain its full potential. Finally, even though digital learning has been supplementing conventional learning for years, most instructors were unprepared for the COVID-19 rules' rapid transition to distant learning. It is not only about sharing knowledge via the Internet. Online teaching involves more than just moving traditional courses to a digital environment; it necessitates the development of specific abilities by both teachers and students. Teachers should be better prepared and supported for distance and online education immediately.

Although distance learning, especially emergency learning in a crisis like COVID-19, poses obstacles for students, instructors, and parents, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) skills and intrinsic solid drive may operate as protective factors, promoting not just learning achievement but also student well-being. Moore (2012, 1993, and 1989) emphasises the importance of learner autonomy in promoting self-directed learning and accountability for learning objectives. We realized that allowing students to exercise liberty also allowed them to express creativity in ways that a more regulated or directed environment did not.

For students, the autonomy that fosters creativity is not always straightforward. Self-directed learning might be complex for some students because they are accustomed to receiving all directions and instructions from the "teacher." Students must be self-motivated, engaged, and driven to learn without the direct presence of their peers or professors. We discovered that we needed to give additional scaffolding for students uncomfortable with self-directed learning.

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