Exploring the Attitudes of Students to Distance Learning during Covid-19 in Morocco: The Case of Students of English Studies at Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal

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Abstract

Accompanying the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an unprecedented practice in education worldwide. This was resorting to distance learning (DL) at large. Morocco is no exception. Having continued our teaching practice through this new orientation in the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, we thought that this experience is worth reflecting about. This study which aims at exploring the attitudes of the students to distance learning. The methods of this research is quantitative study where questionnaire administered to a target population of 160 students belonging to the department of English studies at Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal, Morocco. The findings we obtained from a questionnaire addressed to 160 students at the Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal revealed that the attitudes of students towards distance learning are generally speaking positive. Still, it must be admitted that these findings also showed that there are some challenges facing a sound implementation of this new orientation in teaching, which necessitates some requirements both in terms of digital resources and digital pedagogy to reach efficiency in the future.

Keywords: *Attitudes; Distance Learning; Covid-19; Digital Pedagogy; Efficiency*

INTRODUCTION

Amid the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the education sector encountered an unparalleled upheaval. Schools and universities were closed as a protective measure to avoid the risk of having the disease spread among the huge number of students worldwide. In response to address this crisis, the adoption of distance learning (DL) was implemented. The present scholarly investigation, titled "Exploring the Attitudes of students to distance learning during Covid-19 in Morocco: The case of students of English studies at Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal", endeavors to delve into an issue concerning the practice of distance learning. There is a gap in research related to this mode of education, at least in Morocco. To limit the scope of this study, we will be concerned mainly with the attitudes of students to distance learning. The paper includes the following parts: a review of literature is presented first starting with a section on Covid-19 and its impact on education. Then a historical view on distance education and its development is presented showing its advantages and its disadvantages. This first part also sheds light on the requirements of efficient distance learning, both in terms of digital resources and digital pedagogy. After this, we proceed to the presentation of the second part of the current study (the research methodology) starting with the statement of the research problem, the research questions and the research tools. The third part of this article is devoted to the discussion of the findings and providing answers to the research questions of the

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study. The paper concludes by stressing the fact that distance learning is emerging as a new orientation in the educational scene though it is facing some challenges. What is needed is to create a favourable climate for its implementation taking into account its pedagogical and technical requirements. From the preliminary research, many article explored the impact of Covid-19 through education e.g. Marinoni et al. (2020); Dwivedi et al. (2020); Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) stated that the disruption in the current situation is undeniable and increase inequality of learning opportunities. The efforts put in place to prevent a void academic year, to ensure future planning despite the high degree of uncertainty, with the risk of decreasing private and potentially also public funding, demonstrate the incredible amount of pressure on higher education institutions to cope during the current crisis and at the same time their resilience and creativity. This research tries to explore similar situation that happened all over the word but in precisely only elucidate in Marocco case.

The aim of the current study is to explore the attitudes of one agent most concerned with education (the students) to distance learning to see whether these attitudes are positive or negative and whether there is a climate for the implementation of distance learning in the Moroccan context. To give orientation to this study, three related research questions were put forward and they were formulated as the following:
1. What are the attitudes of students towards distance learning?
2. Does the implementation of DL in Morocco face any challenges?
3. To what extent is DL efficient, as a new orientation, to manage the crisis in education in Morocco that started with the outbreak of Covid-19?

LITERATURE REVIEW
A view on Covid-19 and its impact on education

Corona virus influenced not only health, but also all aspects of society worldwide, especially the education. Concerning the impact of Coruna Virus on the educational sector, it was clear that with the outbreak of this pandemic, the world started undergoing one of the greatest threats ever. The threat to global education declared a big educational crisis starting from March 2020. The Covid 19 pandemic pushed governments to close down schools and universities as a proactive measure, which was followed with partial lockdowns and health emergency state. Students started experiencing a global learning crisis because they were forced to stay at home. Consequently, learning the fundamental skills needed for life and the process of socializing which normally take place at schools and through interaction with peers was blocked.

Managing the crisis was a big problem for the countries which were attacked by this pandemic. It was a multi-fold crisis because the governments had to manage the health of people and cure those who suffered from the effects of Coruna virus. They also had to manage the pace of the economy, at least, to make sure the basic needs are available. In addition to this, it was also a priority to manage the educational sector to ensure the pedagogical continuity and to save the academic year. There was no choice from resorting to distance teaching and learning. This new mode of teaching was familiar in some educational systems, but it was a new experience in some countries including Morocco.

Distance learning as an emerging mode of education

A view on distance learning

Distance education or distance learning is that type of education in which the delivery of instruction is not done in the classical way which involves face to face interaction between the two main agents of education: the teacher and the students. According to Keegan (2002) distance education can be summarized as "teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching". The principal feature of this mode of education is that students are not physically present in a traditional setting such as the classroom. The source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance or both.[1] Distance education is not a new practice.

Today distance education has developed so much, especially with the emergence of Distance e-Learning (DeL), which is the combination of distance education and e-Learning. The latter type of education is characterized by an extensive use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the delivery of education and instruction and the use of synchronous and asynchronous online communication in an interactive learning environment or virtual communities, instead of a physical classroom, to bridge the gap in temporal or spatial constraints (Felicia, 2015). It, thus, combines the strengths and advantages of distance education and e-Learning.

Briefly, as a result of the tremendous development of third generation distance learning systems that include interactive videos, emails, and World Wide Web technologies, distance learning has been redefined to include teacher-student interaction (Katz, 1998, 2000; Trentin, 1997) taking different forms such as:

1. Web conferencing which refers to a service that allows conferencing events to be shared with remote locations. These events are sometimes referred to as webinars or interactive conferences and online workshops. This service allows real-time point-to-point communication as well as multicast communication from one sender to many receivers. It has the possibility of text-based messages, voice and video chat to be shared simultaneously in different geographical locations. This mode has been used a lot during Covid-19 to share teaching materials in different domains.

2. Educational television: This consists of the use of television programs in the field of distance education. It may be in the form of individual television programs or official special channels. This was also used a lot during Covid-19 to share lessons with the students.

3. Live streaming which refers to content delivered live over the Internet. It requires a camera for the media, an encoder to digitize the content, a media publisher, and a content delivery network to distribute and deliver the content.

A further point needs to be included when dealing with DL and this concerns its approaches. In this respect, two approaches can be mentioned: the synchronous approach and the asynchronous one. The synchronous model is used to describe forms of education and learning that occur at the same time, but not in the same place. It has a live nature which makes it different from the asynchronous distance learning (Hrastinski, 2008). Synchronous learning has a number of key benefits when compared to other distance learning delivery models[1]. Some of these benefits are

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[1]https://www.slideshare.net/chelseafied1994/distance-learning-education-39414272

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structured learning. The group involved in learning is required to participate simultaneously. Clear guidance on how the work needs to be done is provided and the pace of learning is controlled. Every member of the group is kept on task. Another benefit is related to interaction. In this respect, synchronous learning allows the entire learning group to interact in real-time, which offers solutions to the sense of isolation that can come from distance learning models that do not offer this kind of interaction, and this can be beneficial for improving student engagement and maintaining interest.

The asynchronous model, on the other hand, is a type of learning in which the student and the teacher are not directly communicating in real-time. The instructor delivers the lessons in a time which is different from the time in which the learner receives them. It relies on pre-recorded e-learning platforms and downloadable materials. Among its strong points, there is accessibility and practicality. Still, it has some weak points related to limited contact with the instructor and lack of instant feedback. Consequently, for a better delivery of the courses, DL systems have to use both the synchronous and the asynchronous modes (Kamal & Sultana, 2000).

Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning
Distance learning, as a new model used in education, has some advantages and some disadvantages. The advantages of distance learning consist of flexibility which offers numerous choices and materials that students can have access to whenever and wherever they are and at their own convenience. For students, it means easier access to learning, greater convenience in choosing where to study, a wider variety of credentials to aim for and more autonomy in scheduling their lives" (Daniel, 2016). Traditional styles of classroom education can never offer such flexibility. Another advantages mentioned about using one's pace of study which students can set their own pace of study. The use of online education enables students to work at their own pace in many circumstances because the regulations are not very rigid. The next advantages are ease in accessing resources and motivation which especially the asynchronous mode, there is an ease in having access to the assigned materials without restrictions. Besides, these resources are motivating and appeal to the type of today learners; the so-called digital learners. Responsibility also includes as the advantages of distance learning as well as students take some responsibility for their learning because distance learning boosts self-study which is centered on studying without direct supervision or attendance in a classroom. Related to responsibility, distance learning requires some competences on the part of the learner (Birch, 2001) such as operational competence and competences related to the efficient use of ICT tools for learning, communicating, collaborating and self-direction. The last advantages is autonomy which is considered an ultimate goal of education. Students find themselves in a situation where they need to rely on themselves in reading, thinking about and analyzing the materials they continuously receive from their teachers to make the most of them.

Despite all these advantages, the disadvantages of distance learning cannot be ignored as well will mentioned in the article. The most primary disadvantages about problems related to maintaining motivation. For many students, not having scheduled lessons related to a particular setting such as the classrooms makes it difficult to be motivated all the time or to maintain one's motivation, especially the one that comes from within. Another point of view is about

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communication problems which one facet of communication problems that emerges with distance learning is related to the difficulty of staying in direct contact with the instructors and getting immediate feedback. In face-to-face teaching, if the learners have problems with understanding the courses, they can always interact with their teachers who respond immediately. In distance learning, there is also the possibility of contacting the teachers through emails and other means, but such contact is not as effective as the direct one. The absence of immediate feedback may have some negative effects on the process of learning. According to Nkingwa (2013) stated that students often feel a bit disconnected and isolated when they do not get feedback in time. The next disadvantages are difficulty interacting with peers because there is no possibility to have that real contact with peers. Group discussions done through the internet are less interactive. There is no possibility to work in groups and converse in the same way as in real classrooms. Above all, in distance learning students tend to feel isolated from peers and it is difficult to build genuine relationships. Technical problems is the next barrier of distance learning because requires some technological equipments ranging from a reliable source of electricity, owning some devices such as a computer, a tablet or a mobile and a reliable internet connection.

Requirements of distance learning

The main requirements of efficient distance learning can be illustrated in the following pyramid proposed by Hampel and Stickler (2005). This pyramid consists of seven categories of skills for teaching languages online beginning with more general skills of working with technology, its constraints and possibilities, moving on to the social skills of community building, with the highest-level comprising skills in teaching languages creatively and developing a personal teaching style online. According to Hampel and Stickler (2005), teaching language online requires some additional skills that are different from those used to teach language in face-to-face situations.

Based on their years of teaching languages synchronously in an online environment and experience in the training of online tutors, Hampel and Stickler (2005) identified the key competences needed to teach online as illustrated in Figure 1. Compton (2009) added that these competences range from lower-level skills (e.g. basic ICT competence, specific technical and software competence and awareness of constraints and possibilities) to higher level skills (e.g. online socialization, facilitation of communicative competence as well as creativity, choice and developing one's own style). From this, we infer that distance learning, especially in its developed form, distance e-learning (DeL) requires some basics in using educational technology. But this is never sufficient in the educational field because issues related to pedagogy, being able to communicate effectively and to contribute to the socialization process of students are always of great importance. After all, social relationships, peer-to-peer interactions and developing social skills are crucial to develop at any educational level.
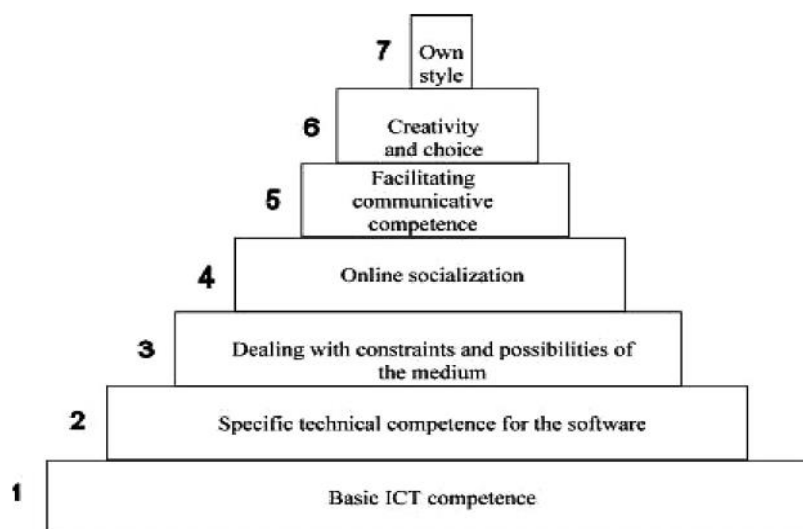
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Figure 1. Skills Pyramid (Hampel & Stickler, 2005)

RESEARCH METHOD

Having participated in distance learning during Covid-19, we got the idea that this experience needed some reflection and research. So, we decided to conduct this study to explore the attitudes of students in Morocco to distance learning taking into account the claims of different literature about this type of teaching and its requirements. The coming sections shed light on this study.

In order to get data related to the present study with a special focus on DL, the tool that was used was a questionnaire which was administered to a target population of 160 students belonging to the department of English studies at Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal. This target population included 86 male and 74 female students from Semester 2, Semester 4 and Semester 6. All of them underwent the experience of DL for the first time during Covid-19. The data we got from this questionnaire was classified and transformed into graphs and statistics using Excel Program. The analysis of data was conducted according to some variables related to the use of DL such as flexibility, ease of use, convenience, motivation, autonomy, satisfaction and parameters related to the technical side. We were interested in a mixed approach methodology which combines both the quantitative and the qualitative approaches. The quantitative side was justified by our intention to have some statistics related to the study. The qualitative aspect, on the other hand, was justified because deep understanding and interpretation of the results was also important in this study. This was reached through including items in the questionnaire asking the participants to give reasons for their answers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
The development of Distance Learning during Covid-19 in Morocco

Following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions across nearly all nations enacted closures. However, education was not stopped completely. There was an urgent need for measures to manage the crisis. Governments resorted to distance education to ensure that

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students are not disconnected from the educational process. Different technological tools, such as television, online platforms, the Internet and mobile applications were used. A lot of countries, including Morocco, decided to launch distance education immediately after the closure of the schools. In this respect, teachers were expected to support students academically and to be engaged in distance education to ensure the pedagogical continuity and to save the academic year. It must be stressed again that there was no alternative from resorting to distance learning as a new orientation in Morocco. Different platforms were accessible such as: Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Moodle, Digital resources prepared by teachers and uploaded in some websites.

All these facilities prove that distance learning has developed rapidly in a short period of time. Some statistics from the Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Beni-Mellal show this. Up to May 3rd, 2020 -for a period less than two months-a lot of materials were available for the students through distance learning. These are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Media Used for Distance Learning

No	Media	Quantity
1.	Moodle and in the Website of Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Beni-Mellal.	760 pedagogical support
2	Youtube	90 lectures
3	Microsoft Teams	60 live lectures
4	Recorded by the Department of History at Faculty of Letters and Humanities in Beni-Mellal and were broadcast on TV channels	49 lectures

These statistics show that 35700 visits from the students to the website and the digital resources of this Faculty and show that a lot of work was done by teachers and the administrative staff. However, the attitudes of students need to be investigated to see the extent to which distance learning is gaining or losing acceptance among Moroccan students. This was the rationale behind conducting the current study.

The attitudes of the participants to DL

A close analysis of the data we got from the questionnaire we administered to the students, as shown in Table 2, reveals that most of the participants, regardless of their gender, reacted positively to some items related to the benefits of distance learning.

Table 2. Attitudes of the participants to DL

Items	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
DL involves flexibility in time	135	84.38	25	15.62
With DL, there is easy access to resources	130	81.25	30	18.75
With DL, consulting resources is done at one's own convenience	135	84.38	25	15.62
DL motivates the students and appeals to digital learners	151	94.38	9	5.62

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Items	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
With DL, students take some responsibility for their learning	152	95	8	5
DL boosts self-study	152	95	8	5
DL encourages autonomy	157	98.12	3	1.88
Getting knowledge through DL is satisfactory	150	93.75	10	6.25

According to the statistics shown in Table 2, the majority of the participants have positive attitudes to some aspects related to distance learning. 135 of the participants representing 84.38% admit that distance learning is flexible in terms of time and consulting resources at one's convenience unlike face-to-face teaching which has a fixed scheduled time. Related to this, 130 participants representing 81.25% of the respondents add that DL involves ease in consulting resources. Besides, 94.38% of the respondents believe that DL is motivating and appeals to the digital learners of today. Moreover, 95% of the participants think that with DL, students take some responsibility for their learning. Also, it is worth noting that 95% and 98.12% of the respondents put forward that DL boosts self-study and encourages autonomy, respectively. What is even interesting is that 150 of the participants representing 93.75% declare that getting knowledge through DL is satisfactory.

The challenges facing distance learning and further attitudes

Another facet related to the attitudes of students to DL concerns the challenges that hinder a sound implementation of DL. Figure 2 shows this clearly. According to the respondents, the most striking challenge facing distance learning is related to the technical side. 150 respondents representing 93.75 % of the participants stress that problems related to Internet connection and to the fact that distance learning is a new experience for the students act as obstacles towards the implementation of DL. Besides, 146 of the participants representing 91.25 % claim that with DL, there are no equal opportunities. According to them not all the students have a stable Internet connection. This has another consequence directly linked to absence of equal opportunities in getting knowledge. One more finding is that 140 of the respondents representing 87.5 % put forward that with distance learning, there is less interaction and less feedback compared to face to face teaching. What is even striking is that more than half of the participants 68.75 % revealed that they do not own the basics even for asynchronous distance learning such as a computer or a tablet. It should be mentioned again that asynchronous distance learning is that type of DL which does not necessitate a continuous Internet connection and where materials once downloaded can be accessed offline. Briefly, it should be noted down that although the majority of the participants in this study have positive attitudes to DL, they admit that there are some challenges facing this new orientation in teaching and learning.

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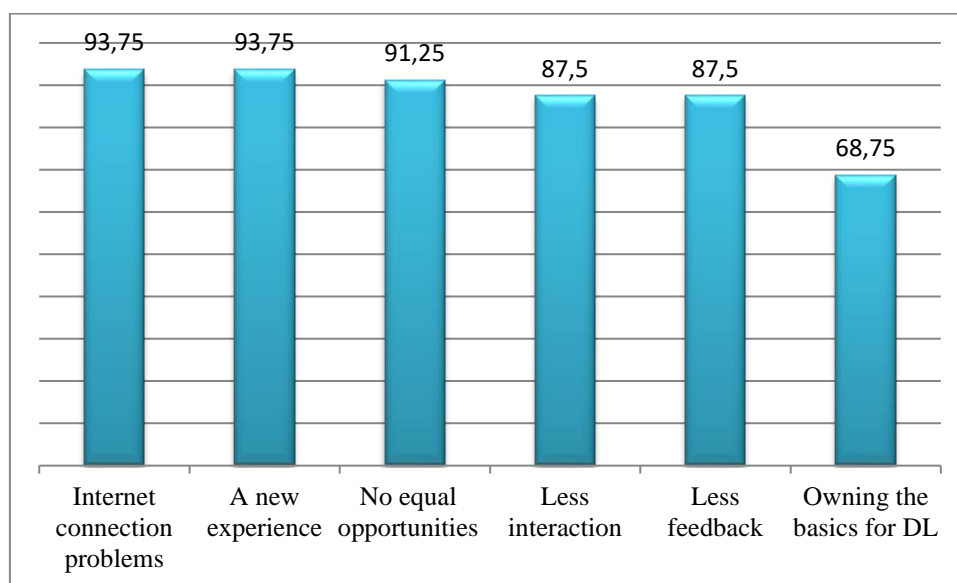*Said Emouhtarim*

Figure 2. Challenges related to DL: The perspective of the students

Now to answer the research questions of the current study, we stress again that the majority of the participants hold positive attitudes to embrace DL as a new strategy to manage the crisis in education that accompanied Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. Once again, the majority of the respondents agree that DL has a lot of benefits including flexibility, ease and convenience in accessing resources, motivation, responsibility and autonomy. These findings provide answers for the first question. However, the challenges that face DL, especially the ones associated with the technical side, such as Internet connection problems, owning the basics of DL, no equal opportunities in accessing knowledge, less feedback cannot be ignored. These challenges provide answers for the second research question of this study. Concerning the third related question which is about the extent to which distance learning is efficient, as a new orientation, to manage the crisis in education that started with the outbreak of Covid-19, the answers to this question are closely linked to those of the first question. DL is to some extent efficient taking into consideration its benefits. The ministry of education and the universities in Morocco have succeeded in managing the crisis and saving the academic year through DL. Besides, some statistics from the current study have revealed that DL is efficient, especially the statistics related to motivation and satisfaction of the students with the knowledge they got through DL. 94.38% and 93.75% of the participants showed such motivation and satisfaction, respectively. This is an important finding that can be invested on in the future as far as DL, as an emerging orientation in education in Morocco, is concerned.

CONCLUSION

Distance Learning (DL) is a promising orientation in education, especially at the university level. It is an innovative pedagogy involving new ways of teaching and learning. However, some requirements should be met to make it efficient, especially those requirements related to the

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technical side, such as Internet connection and the availability of the logistics for the students. The implication here is that DL has become a reality that cannot be overlooked when dealing with the new generation of students; the so-called digital learners. We should also bear in mind the emerging digital pedagogy accompanying DL which is about using digital tools thoughtfully, interactively and meaningfully with an added value to reach quality education. Additionally, we should allow some time for the process of learning in DL that involves reception, reflection, retention, reaction and giving feedback. The last thing to admit is that we have gained a lot from adopting DL to manage the educational crisis that accompanied Covid-19 pandemic. Now the policy makers, the teachers, the students and the parents are aware of DL.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

The attitudes of the students are what concerned us most in this study whose findings have shown that these attitudes are to a great extent positive. This is a variable that should be invested on to improve the quality of DL in the future.

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