Assessing Moroccan EFL Students' Perceived Learning Experience during Covid-19 Pandemic

Said Oussou
Btissam Taybi

As part of its efforts to cope with the period of forced confinement caused by the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry of education has called for the shift to hybrid teaching and learning. Indeed, in an answer to the call of the ministry, the Moroccan universities rushed into suggesting several available platforms through which students and teachers can interact. As such, the present study aims at investigating the extent to which EFL Moroccan students use these platforms and how they perceive their online learning experience during the confinement with respect to the platforms used. A quantitative research design underpinned the study. Thus, based on their convenience, a sample of 145 EFL students completed questionnaires distributed to them using Google forms. SPSS was used to analyze the data. Drawing from the findings, online tools that received higher frequency of use by students were WhatsApp, Facebook and Zoom. Findings also showed that a significant number of the students were not satisfied with the interaction run through these tools. Finally, implications and recommendations were discussed.

COVID-19; distance learning; EFL students; ICTs; interaction; perceptions.

Introduction

Today's society is characterized by changing winds and shifting sands. Societies throughout history have gone through drastic changes that reshaped many practices. Indeed, the world has witnessed another unexpected change, bringing about lockdowns in most of the countries. One such change that forced people into new ways of life has been, at least for a period of time, Covid-19 pandemic, which has influenced many fields such as economy, tourism, and education is no exception. Education cannot be dispatched from what goes around the environment. In this respect, information and communication technology (ICT) has come to play, as it did before, a crucial role to bring classrooms home for teachers and students to resume their teaching and learning processes. According to Kear et al. (2004), ICT has three main uses, each of which supports distance

learning. The first use is related to its nature as a resource-based approach, which supports learners with a wide variety of materials. The second function lies in its potential to enhance an active approach to learning. The third one is to involve and, hence, promote learners' active participation in virtual environments.

As part of its efforts to cope with the period of forced confinement caused by the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, the ministry of education has called for the shift to distance learning. Indeed, in an answer to the call of the ministry, the Moroccan universities have rushed into suggesting several available platforms through which students and teachers can interact. For example, some universities used Moodle, others used Zoom, yet still others resorted to other various e-learning platforms. Worth noting also is that teachers provided live streaming of the modules, video conferencing, and others opted for recorded videos to be later sent to their students, either via WhatsApp, Facebook, or email. This has made it possible for the learner to continue his/her academic training and learning off the campus.

The purpose statement

For the present study, the focus was on the Moroccan EFL students' experiences with the use of the broad range of ICT tools such as zoom, adobe connect, Google teams, Google meet, among others that were mostly adopted by the Moroccan institution during Covid-19. It also seeks to investigate the satisfaction level of students with distance learning during that period.

The research questions

The present study purports to answer the following two research questions:

To what extent do Moroccan EFL students use online tools during the pandemic?

How was their satisfaction with the quality of interaction provided by these tools?

The Literature Review

1. Distance learning: brief history

Distance learning has taken a number of shapes as technology advances over the years. Before the internet, videotaped lectures have been the normal for some years (Moore & Lockee, 1998, as cited in Valentine, 2002). Also, audiotapes and ready-made lectures have been made use of (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999). The tools of delivery in distance learning in its early beginnings took forms of basic print-based courses (Banas & Emory, 1998). As the internet evolved and continues to evolve, distance learning has also taken new forms embraced through a variety of internet-based technological tools (Dickson-Deane, Moore & Galyen, 2010; Galushi, 1998).

2. Definition and characteristics

Distance learning, also known as online learning or e-learning, refers to a form of education where students can learn remotely without physically attending a traditional classroom setting. Moore (1990) defines it as "all deliberate and planned learning that is directed or facilitated in a structured manner by an instructor … separated in space and/or in time from the learners" (as cited in James & Gardner, 1995, p.23). It can also be defined as "improved capabilities in knowledge and/or behaviors as a result of mediated experiences that are constrained by time and/or distance such that the learner does not share the same situation with what is being learned" (King, Young, Richmond & Schrader, 2004, p.9). Distance learning has become increasingly popular in recent years, especially with the widespread availability of the internet and advancements in technology. It can take various forms, such as live virtual classes, pre-recorded lectures, interactive quizzes and assessments, discussion forums, and online group projects. It allows students to access educational materials and communicate with their teachers and peers from any location and at any time, as long as they have an internet connection.

Berg and Simonson (n.d.) outlined four characteristics distinguishing distance learning. These three characteristics can be fused into three. First, distance learning is institutional. That is, it is more than just a self-study or out of class learning. Second, this mode of education inherently geographically separates students and teachers. If designed well, this mode may lessen the gap among the different social classes that students belong to, an important advantage of distance learning. Third, the telecommunications used in distance learning connect different individuals within groups of learning. These learning groups form communities composed of students, teachers and instructional resources.

3. Benefits and challenges

One of the significant benefits of distance learning is its flexibility. Students can learn at their own pace and on their schedule, which is especially useful for those who have other responsibilities, such as work or family obligations. Distance learning can also be more cost-effective than traditional classroom learning, as students do not need to pay for transportation, accommodation, or other expenses associated with attending a physical school. However, distance learning also has its challenges. One of the biggest concerns is the lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers, which can make it more difficult for students to receive immediate feedback and clarification on complex topics. It may also require more self-discipline, autonomy and motivation, as students need to take responsibility for their own learning and time management.

According to Galusha (1998), distance learning is deemed effective especially for adult learners. With respect to the rationale of distance learning, Moore (1973) argues that effective teaching and learning is that which does not restrict itself to the in-class-teaching, but that which brings the teacher and the learner to the teaching and learning process without involving their physical presence (as cited in Galusha, 1998). This being

said, distance learning involves a more collaborative effort from the part of both the student and the teacher with no time or space-bound.

In the same line of thought, the proliferation of modern technology has provided a rich source of knowledge for both learners and teachers alike. Indeed, modern technology has made a wide range of resources accessible for students, which thus help distance learning grow more than ever (Akinsanmi, 2005; Cornu, 2010; Cuban, 2001; Davis, 2005; Galusha, 1998; Kumar & Pasricha, 2014). Given these affordances of technology, distance learning has provided opportunities for learners to learn whenever and wherever they desire as the process of learning does not only take place in class, but it also exists outside the walls of the classroom. Equally important, according to Beatty (2010), technology helps learners develop their autonomy; a principle that is considered the goal of education (Benson 2011; Nunan, 2003; Ouakrime, 1998; Pawlak, 2017).

4. Distance learning during Covid-19 pandemic

Distance learning became a popular alternative to traditional in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. With schools and universities closed or operating with limited capacity to prevent the spread of the virus, many institutions quickly transitioned to distance learning to continue providing education to their students. Distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic presented several challenges for both teachers and students. One of the biggest challenges was the lack of face-to-face interaction, and lack of learner autonomy exacerbated the challenge. This is because distance learning presupposes that students are autonomous so that they can navigate through their learning more independently. In fact, in a study by Oussou (2020), there is a significant correlation between the use of ICTs and learner autonomy. Additionally, not all students had access to the necessary technology or reliable internet connection to participate in online learning, which created disparities in access to education.

Despite these challenges, distance learning also had some benefits. For example, it allowed for greater flexibility in scheduling and the ability to access course materials from anywhere with an internet connection. It also provided an opportunity for educators to experiment with new teaching methods and technologies that they may not have used in a traditional classroom setting. As technology continues to advance, it is likely that distance learning will become even more prevalent and accessible, providing even more opportunities for people to learn and grow from anywhere in the world. Overall, distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of adaptable education systems that can respond quickly to changing circumstances. While in-person learning will likely remain the preferred method of education for many, distance learning has become a valuable alternative that can help ensure access to education even in challenging times.

5. Types of distance learning: asynchronous and synchronous modes

A debate has taken place on asynchronous and synchronous forms of e-learning. Asynchronous e-learning, according to Hrastinski (2008), is a type of e-learning which does not allow for people to be online on an instant basis. It is arranged through a type of media such as email as the most commonly used facilitating tool. This tool helps teachers and learners stay in contact even beyond the classroom walls. Indeed, asynchronous e-learning allows learners to check their materials at any time after they have been uploaded by their teachers (Dada, Alkali, & Oyewola, 2019). This way makes it possible for learners to go back and download the documents they need. Also, they are given more time to think about the assignments or read their readings unlike the case with synchronous e-learning.

Synchronous e-learning is this media which allows learners and teachers to be online at the same time (Misbah, Ghulam, Abid & Sarwar, 2017). It is manifested in media such as chat and videoconferencing, which was widely used at the time of the confinement. Amiti (2020) argues that this type of e-learning makes learners as participants in a community rather than isolated learners remaining silent before the computer. In other words, synchronous e-learning supports learners to ask questions to their teachers online, which makes it more or less like the case in in-class courses. Among some commonly used tools as types of synchronous e-learning in distance learning are instant messaging tools. These include Yahoo Messenger, Skype, and Windows Live Messenger (Safei, Amin, Rose & Abdul Rahman, 2011).

While some differences have been drawn between asynchronous and synchronous e-learning, it should not mean that one type is more favourable than the other or that one of them should be used at the expense of the other. Rather, a combination of both serves different purposes at different occasions. Therefore, instead of praising one over the other, the use of one form over another at a time should explain the purpose behind using it at that particular occasion. After all, there is no clear-cut distinction between both types. It is rather a matter of degrees.

Methodology

The present study followed the procedures of a quantitative approach to research design. Employing this approach means dealing with numeric data rather than theme-based analysis. One of the benefits of adopting the quantitative approach in a given study is that it allows for large samples from the population (Bryman, 2012), which indeed applies to this study.

1. Context and participants

This study targeted all the universities across the country. That is, students from different universities had the opportunity to take part in this study since it deployed an online survey. The resulting sample consisted of 145 university EFL students. In terms of

the gender of the participants, they were 71 males (49%) and 74 females (51%). Concerning their age, they formed three groups between 17 and 21 years old, between 22 and 26, and 27 or above. The first age group represented 43.4% of the sample, the second group was 45.5%, and the last one was 11%. Clearly, the dominant group was one that varies between 22-26 years old, followed by the 17-21 group, and finally the 27 or above group. With regard to their BA semester, three semesters were included, with semester six being the most frequent one (84 students, 57.9%), followed by semester four (35 students, 24.1%), and the lowest frequent being semester two (26 students, 17.9%).

2. Data collection instrument

To collect the data, the questionnaire as an instrument was employed. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, in which Disagree = 1, Strongly disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly agree = 5. Also, some of the items in the survey included Yes/No questions. The choice of these two types of scales was highly based on the type of questions. Since the validity of the results depends on the data collected and the instrument used, the items in the questionnaire were all devised meticulously consulting the related specialized literature. Another important aspect that contributes to the trustworthiness of the results is the reliability criterion. For this, the internal consistency of the instrument, following Bryman (2012) and Leowen and Plonsky (2016), was measured using Cronbach's Alpha and was found to reach .85, which is, according to Bryman (2012) and Dornyei and Taguchi (2010), a highly acceptable level.

3. Data analysis procedures

Having been collected, the data was then analyzed using SPSS version 23'. Mainly, scale item analysis procedure for students' perceptions of their experience of distance learning was followed. The analysis was primarily descriptive in accordance with the research questions raised in this study. The description of the results followed item by item process so that a thorough analysis could be reached. Below are therefore the results of the present study.

Results

This section presents the results of the data collected in the present study. It uses tables displaying the frequency percentages corresponding to each item in the questionnaire. For consistency purposes, the section starts with the analysis of the questions concerning demographic characteristics pertaining to the participants, namely their gender, age and their BA semester. The section will then present the results pertaining to the research questions of the study to describe the students' levels of use, satisfaction, and perceived usefulness of distance learning during the Covid-19 period.

The following tables are presented to illicit EFL students' perceptions of their experience with distance learning during the response to the COVID-19 emergency.

Table 1

Students' perceptions of their experience.

	Items	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %
1	Engaging in online learning is beneficial	6.2	17.9	25.5	42.1	8.3
2	Online tools offer me an opportunity to interact with my teachers and ask them questions	4.1	19.3	27.6	40.7	8.3
3	Learning English online is convenient for me	5.2	20.3	31.7	31.7	11
4	I am satisfied with online learning	9	22.1	26.2	35.9	6.9
5	learning English online suits my learning styles	11.3	25.5	24.6	27.6	11
6	I get more learning materials through e-learning	7	27.5	29.7	30.3	5.5
7	I feel more independent learning online	23.4	24.8	18.6	22.8	10.3
Note: (SD) = strongly disagree, (D) = disagree, (N) = neutral, (A) = agree, and (SA) = strongly agree.						

The results presented in table 4 indicate that EFL students are not that engaged in distance learning. Half of the participants agree (44.1%) or strongly agree (6.3%) that engaging in online learning is beneficial, with an insignificant number of respondents disagreeing (17.9%) or strongly disagreeing (6.2%) with the item, yet almost a third of the participants (25.5%) remained neutral. For the second item, almost half of the participants agree (40.7%) or strongly agree (8.3%) that online tools offer them an opportunity to interact with their teachers. Only an insignificant number disagree (19.3%) or strongly disagree (4.2) with the item. Concerning item number three, a quite significant number of students agree (31.7%) or strongly agree (11%) that learning English online is convenient for them, whereas 20.3% and 5.2% agree or strongly disagree, respectively, with the item.

Additionally, results of item 4 presents that less than half of the participants agree (35.9%) or strongly agree (6.9%) that they are satisfied with online learning. Only one third of the respondents agree (27.6%) or strongly agree (11%) that learning English online suits their learning styles, yet others disagree (25.5%) or strongly disagree (11.3%) with the item. Concerning the provision of learning materials through e-learning, a third of the respondents agree (30.3%) or strongly agree (5.5%) with the statement, which is almost equal to the number of students who disagree (27.5%) or strongly disagree (7%). Similarly, less than a third of the participants agree (22.8%) or strongly agree (10.3%) that they feel more independent learning online, whereas almost half of the participants

disagree (24.8%) or strongly disagree (23.4%) with the item. The following includes figures presenting results on the online tools used and preferred by the students.

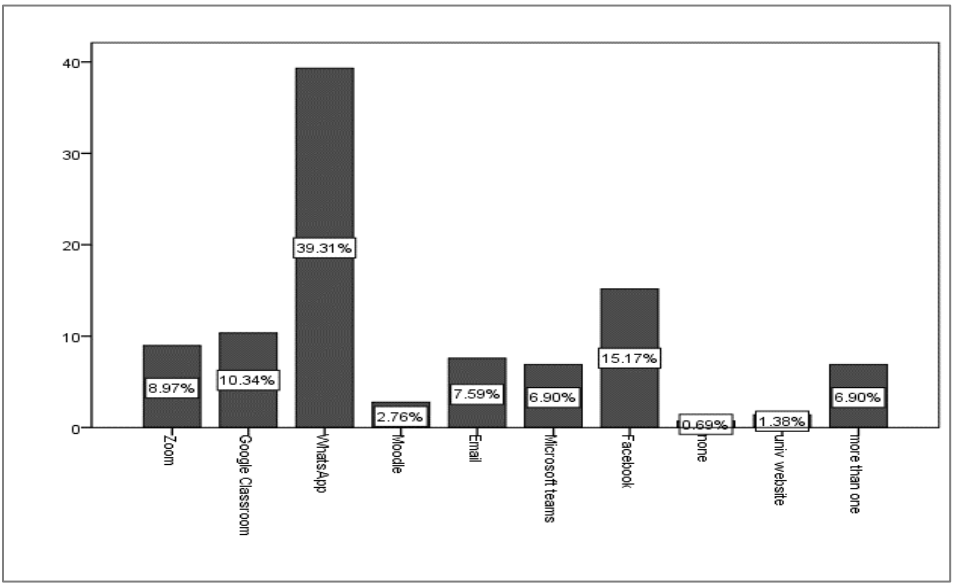

Figure 1. Online tools used by the students.

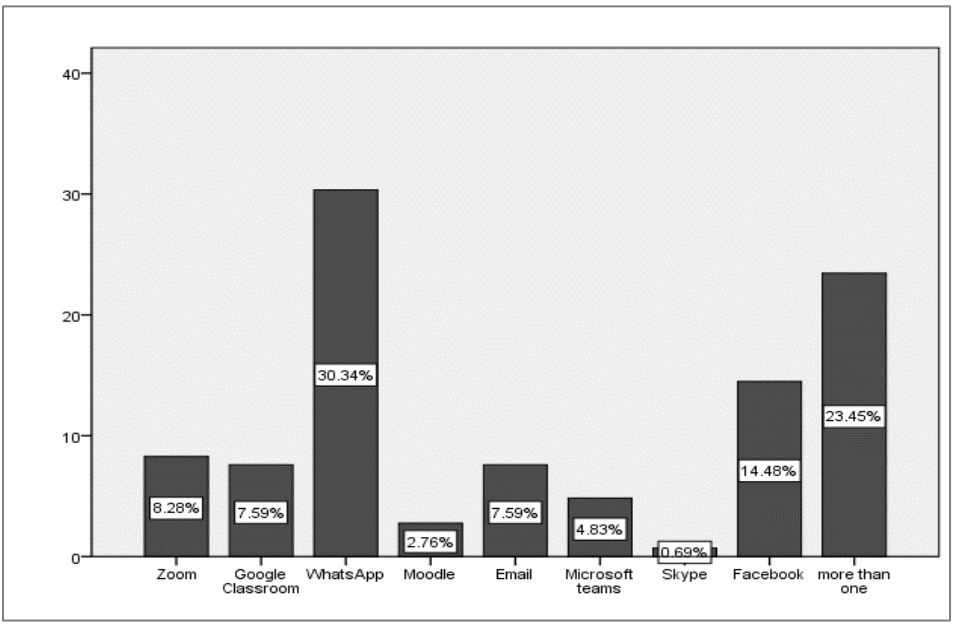

Figure 2. Online tools preferred by the students.

In terms of their use of online tools, they mostly used whatsApp (39.3%), followed with Facebook which receives the second high frequency of use (15.2%), and others being of only significantly infrequent use such as Google classroom, email, zoom, etc.

In terms of preference of use, they prefer, once again, to use WhatsAp (30.3%) and Facebook (14.5%), which is expected since they use them much more than the other tools. Some respondents (23.4%) prefer more than one tool. The least preferred tool among the other ones is Skype.

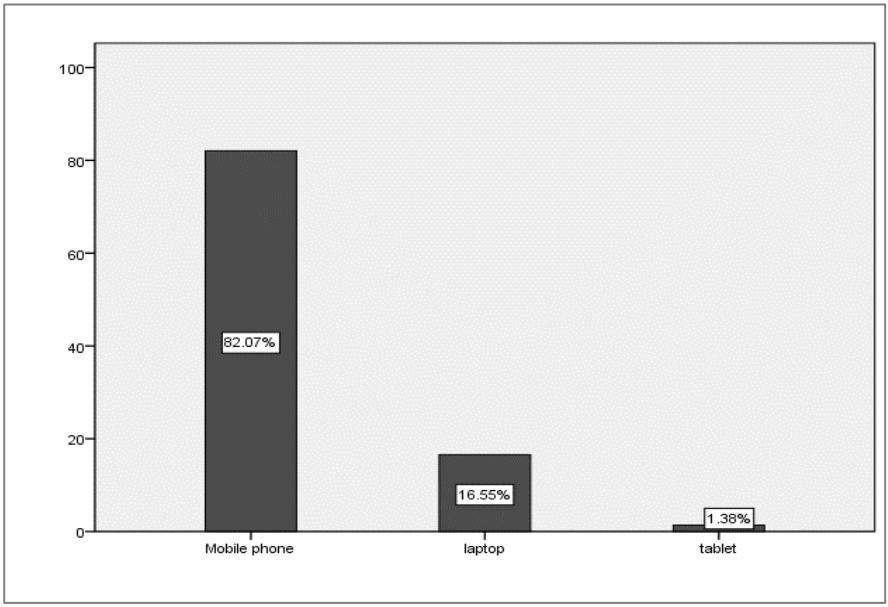

Figure 3. Devices used by the students.

Concerning the devices they use, the majority of the respondents (82.1%) opted for the mobile phone. The second category is laptop which is used by 16.6% of the participants, whereas the tablet is used by a very insignificant number of students (1.38%).

Table 2

Students' perceived usefulness and familiarity with the tools.

Statements	**Yes %**	**No %**
Are you already familiar with those tools?	79.3	20.7
Do these tools help you interact with your teachers?	73.8	26.2
Do you think that e-learning allows you to interact more than in the classroom?	20.0	71.7
Do you find it easy to understand the courses online?	28.3	71.7
Are you assigned exercises through online learning tools?	66.9	33.1

As indicated in the table, 79.3% opted for yes and only 20.7% said they were familiar with these tools. Similarly, more than two thirds of the students answered with yes (73.8%) for whether those tools allow them to Interact with their teachers, whereas only 26.2% would state the opposite. Concerning whether there was more interaction in e-learning than in face to face, the majority (80%) said no and only 20% of the respondents opted for a yes option. Another question to which students responded was whether they found it easy to understand the courses online to which 71.7% responded by no and 28.3% answered with yes. Also, two thirds of the respondents (66.9%) said they were assigned exercises through online learning tools.

Discussion

Reflecting on the findings, it is clear that students' experience with online learning is quite contradictory; it is perceived at times as helpful but at other times as not effective, which is understood through their preference of face-to-face instruction as an irreplaceable mode of teaching and learning. Their tendency is more directed towards Whatssap and Facebook as the most used and, hence, preferred social media for their pursuits of learning. Regarding their perceived usefulness of online tools in helping them interact with their teachers, more than 73% of the students reported that these online tools helped them engage in interaction with their teachers. However, when asked to compare between face to face and online learning in terms of interaction, 80% stated that face to face interaction allows them to interact more than does the online mode. Similarly, with respect to understanding the courses online, more than 71% said that they found it difficult to cope with their studies online. These findings suggest that students prefer face-to-face instruction and are comfortable with it.

While most of the students indicated their familiarity with the tools, they were generally less in line with these tools' usefulness especially in terms of the potentiality of offering the students the chance to interact as much as they would in the case of face-to-face instruction. This points to a general lack of readiness for distance learning in Morocco. In relation to their use of the online tools, the present study reveals that they used them to a great extent, a finding which corroborates that of Zidoun, El Arroum, Talea and Dehbi (2020), who found out that the majority of their student respondents made use of the tools. In terms which tools students used, in the present study, Facebook and WhatsApp were the most used. Similarly, in a study conducted by Outoukarte et al. (2023), the same tools were reported to be the most widely used. Also, this study found out that, jointly, only 38.6% of the students agreed that learning online suits their learning styles. This is a striking finding that distance learning during the pandemic did not adress students' ways of learning. This lack of satisfaction may be a result of poor instructional design. This is because "distance learning programs require careful and deliberate instructional design steps" (James & Gardner, 1995, p.27). It means that the technological innovations should be effectively and efficiently tailored to students' needs.

In addition, another finding of the present study was that face-to-face instruction promotes more interaction between students and teachers than distance learning does. This is reiterated in a study by Elfirdaoussi et al. (2020) in which face to face instruction was preferred by both professors and students. In fact, Zouiri and Kinani (2020) found out that 50.42% preferred face to face teaching, 42.05% wanted mixed teaching, and only an insignificant number of students (7.53%) opted for distance learning. Along the same line, other researchers (Ouahabi et al., 2021) found that synchronous learning e.g., videoconferences was found to be used by only 16.7% of the students, whereas the asynchronous type reached 32.7% and the hyprid one was the dominant with a percentage of 50.6%. Concerning the students' satisfaction with these online tools in the present study, less than half of the respondents (42.8%) said that they were satisfied. This is in congruence with the students in the study by Ouahabi et al. (2021) in which almost the same finding was the case (48.8% were satisfied).

Thus, one answer to the first research question is that students used WhatsApp and Facebook more than the other tools. They did so possibly because these were less demanding in terms of the bandwidth of Internet connection as well as its costs. To answer the second research question, the overall level of satisfaction of students with distance learning is moderate. They especially emphasized the fact that face to face instruction is not replaceable, testifying their strong bound to this mode of learning.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, students had different attitudes towards different aspects of their online learning experience. Their negative perceptions are expected as the outbreak was unexpected, and everyone moved online without a clear plan to follow. Some students were not even familiar with the tools before they had to move online. Some of the others who were familiar with the tools found it difficult to understand the courses provided online. While the majority considered some online tools as helpful, they were not satisfied with the interaction aspect of learning. Considering, for example, the comparison made between the classroom and online learning in terms of interaction, the vast majority of the students stated that in the former, interaction was promoted more.

Accordingly, the present study recommends that more training with regard to the use of ICTs is needed. Practical ways on how to use technology in and for teaching and learning would contribute to the effective and successful teaching-learning process. Also, teachers are encouraged to promote learner autonomy. By enhancing their autonomous learning, students would be in a better position to self-direct their own learning both inside the classroom and, more importantly, in the virtual environment. The instructional design in distance learning must also be efficient and respondent to students' different learning styles and needs.

Limitations

Certainly, the present study dealt with a topic of interest in the Moroccan context especially with the rise of both global and local tide of investment to enhancing the use of e-learning in education. However, two main limitations can be mentioned. At the theoretical level, there is scarcity of prior studies not only those which investigated the students' experiences of distance learning during Covid-19 but also those beyond that. This scarcity did not allow for more discussion on this topic both in the literature review section as well as in the discussion section. Also, the sample of the present study was based on students, more interesting results would have been yielded if the study included teachers. Methodologically, some form of a qualitative approach such as interviews together with the quantitative tools would also provide richer findings.

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Said Oussou is a Ph.D. student at the Department of English studies and the doctoral center of Applied Linguistics within the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Morocco. He also works as a part-time teacher in the same Department. He has participated, moderated sessions and helped organize a number of national and international conferences and is an author of some publications related to his field of interest. In 2017 he studied one semester abroad on an Erasmus scholarship in an exchange between the home University of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Fes, Morocco and the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. His main areas of interest are: Amazigh language and culture, morphology, ICT in education, language learner autonomy, and second language writing. (sa.oussou@edu.umi.ac.ma)

Btissam Taybi is a Ph.D. student. She belongs to the laboratory of Culture, Représentation, Education, Didactique et Ingeneurie de Formation (CREDIF) within the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar El Mahrez of Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco. Her main areas of interest include English language teaching, teacher education, teacher leadership and research in higher education. (btissam.taybi@usmba.ac.ma)