

Arabic Language Students' e-Learning Experience in an English Course at the University of Oran1 Algeria during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sarradj Siham*

Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, Oran1 University Ahmed Ben Bella, 31000, Algeria.

* Corresponding author. Tel: 00213675149407; email: sarradj.siham@univ-oran1.dz

Manuscript submitted September 12, 2021; accepted October 21, 2021.

doi: 10.17706/ijeeee.2022.12.2.62-71

Abstract: Distance learning is not the product of the modern world as some may think; its origins go back to the 1720s with the very first experience of correspondence learning. Nevertheless, the concept of online learning, on the other hand, is the product of the modern digitalized world since its principal key element is the Internet. In this paper, we are going to clarify the ambiguity underlying two interrelated but different concepts which are 'distance learning' and 'e-learning'. Then, we will trace the historical background of distance education in the world and in Algeria. In the end, we will present the results of a descriptive study that was conducted through an online questionnaire, and which targeted first-year students of the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, University of Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella. The purpose of this opinion poll was to reflect students' impressions and evaluate their first and unique experience of learning English electronically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key words: COVID19, distance education, e-learning, descriptive study, historical background.

1. Introduction

Distance learning and online learning are two different instructional modes. Yet, the characteristic that they share in common is that the teacher is not at the same place nor at the same time as the learner. Indeed, the first type of distance education was correspondence learning. About three centuries ago, teachers used available means at that time to deliver their courses, that is, newspapers and postal services. Then, with the invention of the radio and the television, distance education took a new dimension, and instructors started targeting masses of people. The discovery of the Internet; however, was a turning point in the development of distance education as a whole. This innovative invention gave birth to the concept of online education, a new and different mode of instruction that is usually delivered and executed electronically. In this work, we are going to see the evolution of remote learning across the generations to provide the reader with a panoramic view of this evolving mode of instruction. We will also describe the experience of distance teaching in the University of Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella during the COVID-19 pandemic, and assess the first experience of learning the English module electronically in the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Difference between 'e-Learning' and 'Distance Education'

E-learning, also known as online learning, means a system of learning which is transmitted through electronic devices like computers and smartphones. E-learning goes hand in hand with the ICTE i.e., Information and Communication Technologies in Education. That is, the use of modern technologies, notably the Internet, play a crucial role in the e-learning process. In other words, they facilitate and ameliorate the quality of distance education [1].

Mugridge (1991), defined the term 'distance learning' by stating that it is: "a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teachers and learners and thus one in which other means-the printed or written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, for example- are used to bridge the physical gap." [2].

A similar definition was offered by UNESCO which explained the term as: "... any educational process in which all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner, with the effect that all or most of the communication between teachers and learners is through an artificial medium, either electronic or print." [3].

Historically speaking, e-learning is perceived as the descendant of correspondence learning which inaugurated the notion of remote learning as a whole. The concept of distance learning, on the other hand, is viewed as an umbrella term that covers all types of learning where there is a physical separation between the learner and the teacher.

2.2. The Evolution of Distance Education in the World

It is quite important to highlight that the concept of remote education as a whole went through different stages, and traversed multiple generations to finally reach its present definition.

At first, the idea of distance learning was pioneered by the first printed correspondence courses that were published in newspapers and shipped through the mailing post. Then, with the invention of the radio and the television, distance learning gained in time delivery and reached masses of people. Nonetheless, the discovery of computers and the Internet revolutionized remote learning and gave birth to the concept of 'e-learning' which cleared away all the obstacles that were related to time and the geographical separation between the learner and the instructor.

Indeed, the concept of distance education, the ancestor of e-learning, goes back to the beginning of the 18th century when Caleb Philips published advertising in the Boston Gazette newspaper in Massachusetts, USA to propose his private correspondence courses in shorthand. He wrote: "Any persons in the Country Desirous to learn the Art may, by having several lessons sent weekly to them, be as perfectly instructed as those that live in Boston." [4].

Philips was not the only person to inaugurate distance learning; several instances throughout diverse countries prove that distance education, especially correspondence education, existed long before the development of modern technologies.

Here are the most important historical events, listed chronologically, which helped in the development of distance education.

- In 1840, the English language teacher Isaac Pitman, the inventor of Pitman's shorthand, pioneered distance teaching in England where he started mailing postcards to teach Stenography [5].
- In 1850, Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt launched the first correspondence language courses in Berlin, Germany [6].
- In 1858, the University of London was the first to officially recognize correspondence education [7].
- In 1873, Anna Ticknor, the daughter of a Harvard teacher, founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home which targeted female students in Massachusetts, USA [8].
- In 1877, distance learning was inaugurated in France by Emile Pigier, the founder of the private institute "l'École Pigier" [9].

- In 1892, the University of Chicago became the first educational institution to offer correspondence courses [6].
- In 1921, the USA started granting instructional radio licenses to universities to deliver educational programs [10].
- In 1925, the University of Iowa underwent the first instructional broadcasting five-credit courses experience that included: “The Psychology of Learning”, “Modern English”, “Current Social and Economic Problems” “Appreciation of Literature”, “The American Constitutional System” [11].
- By 1936, diverse credit and non-credit educational programs in multiple disciplines were broadcasted via the radio; yet, their experience was reported to be globally short-lived [11].
- The 1930s witnessed also the first experimental educational television programs [12].
- In 1951, the Western Reserve University, Ohio, launched the first credit courses via television [12].
- In 1963, twenty television stations were created by the FCC (the Federal Communication Commission) to facilitate and reinforce visual-auditory educational broadcasting [10].
- In 1964, the University of Wisconsin created the AIM project to structure the educational content delivered through the television, which was applied by various educational institutions notably by the British Open University (1969) and the German Fern Universität (1974) [10].
- By the 1980s, thanks to the development of communication satellites, educational television emerged and covered the most distant zones [6].
- By the 1990s, the appearance of the concepts ‘online learning’ and ‘online university’ revolutionized distance education thanks to the invention of the Internet [6].
- By the late 1990s, the apparition of the first types of LMS (Learning Management Systems) like “WebCT” (1995) “Blackboard” (1997), and later “Moodle” (2002), which were the first and most popular online learning platforms [13], [14],
- In 2008, Dave Stephen Downes and George Siemens developed the first Massive Online Open Courses, famously known as “MOOCs” paving the way for the emergence of a new type of multiple online free courses [15].

As we can see, distance education did exist long before the invention of modern technologies. Yet, the discovery of the Internet gave birth to the concept of ‘e-learning’ making distance education easier and more accessible, flexible with diverse options, and much more sophisticated offering a variety of customized learning methods and materials.

In Algeria; however, the notion of ‘distance learning’ is considered as a new concept that has been significantly reinforced during the COVID-19 crisis.

2.3. The Evolution of Distance Education in Algeria

The origins of distance education in Algeria go back to 1969 with the foundation of the first National Center for Correspondence Education. This center provided pupils, who could not pursue their education in conventional secondary and high schools, with the possibility to do it at home.

In 1987, the center aimed at strengthening its independence; consequently, it established an audiovisual laboratory for the production of its audio-visual documents. Indeed, the teaching methods were diverse ranging from supplying students with handouts to delivering customized lessons through audiovisual means including radio, television, and even newspapers like “Elmasaa”, which used to publish regular exercises as well as their corrections [16].

Additionally, the center developed and opened numerous regional centers in Algiers (1983) and Djelfa (1999), changed its naming to the National Office for Distance Education and Training in 2001, and started providing students with multimedia materials.

A few years later, the office created a website to deliver necessary information, and has also developed a

platform to reinforce online education [16].

In higher education, the concept of distance learning was pioneered by the University of Continuing Education (UFC), which was founded in 1991 [17].

The particularity of this university is that it gave senior high school students, who failed to obtain their bachelor's degree or who could not pursue their higher education in a conventional university due to some compelling circumstances, the opportunity to do it from a distance [18].

The UFC relies principally on the hybrid type of learning, but it employed different means to deliver the distance-teaching part. At first, the University depended on printed correspondence courses that targeted three major domains: history, mathematics, and accountancy. Then, the University evolved and started delivering its courses via the radio and television. Starting from 2005, the university began adopting modern techniques of remote learning especially through the inauguration of online platforms like 'Ifada', which was an LMS developed by an Algerian science computer student [18].

In 2016, the UFC accompanied five Algerian universities in the project 'Master Online' under the ministerial decree n°553 that was issued on October 26 [19]. The University of Oran1, and more particularly the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, underwent this experience which was short-lived because of several technical problems and the absence of necessary equipment.

Apart from that, distance learning and online learning in higher education became officially recognized in all Algerian universities exceptionally during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, before this lockdown period, no university teacher used to teach his/her students electronically nor from a distance. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that many universities' platforms for distance education did exist long before this particular period, but their use was optional and purely devoted to extra activities. We can take for example, Ahmed Ben Bella's university platform that was created in May 2013 [20].

Indeed, the unique sanitary crisis that struck the whole world in 2019 made the Algerian university in front of a delicate balance and obliged it to choose between two possible scenarios. Close the universities completely for an unlimited period, or undergo a completely new experience of teaching?

The Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) decided to suspend face-to-face learning temporarily, and pursue studying through distance education or online learning on March 12, 2020.

The MESRS exceptionally issued two ministerial decrees, (n°633 on 26 August 2020 and n°055 on 21 January 2021), that officially recognized distance education as an accepted form of learning in all Algerian universities. It declared in article 2: "Distance learning or online learning is a pedagogical educational method approved by the system of higher education" [21].

Subsequently, in that respect, the University of Oran1 Ahmed Ben Bella suspended face-to-face learning and invited teachers to replace the traditional mode of teaching with the remote type of instruction to ensure the ongoing of the academic year.

3. The Study: Evaluating the Experience of Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.1. The Context

Face-to-face instruction mode has always been the widely-spread mode of lecture delivery at the University of Oran1. Technology-based courses; however, have generally been a daunting and unmanageable area for many teachers. Consequently, both students and teachers faced many difficulties while implementing the concept of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic that can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Neither side was fully ready to deliver or receive this kind of education through the university's

platform due to a lack of IT skills.

- 2) Teachers were obliged to look for substitute solutions; therefore, some of them started organizing videoconferences through applications like ZOOM®, but this method was not satisfying too because of the bad Internet connection and the limited time for the free version.
- 3) Other teachers created private groups on Facebook, but some of them qualified it as an inappropriate environment because of its social and entertainment nature.

Overall, the experience of distance education during the first phase; that is, the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020, can be depicted as a challenging period for teachers and students because it made remote learning compulsory during a particular and an unprecedented period.

However, during the academic year 2020/2021, the experience was more pleasant and less stressful for both instructors and learners thanks to the following improvements:

- 1) The University organized training for many teachers in order to privilege the use of the university's platform.
- 2) Face-to-face learning became devoted only to some modules (fundamental and methodological ones), and distance education became assigned to transversal and discovery modules like English and computer science.
- 3) Some teachers, mostly volunteers, organized workshops to explain how to learn electronically and how to use the platform to their students.
- 4) Other teachers abandoned social media as a means to deliver their lessons because of plagiarism, and the inappropriateness of similar environments; instead, they adopted an online mode of teaching as was the case for the English module.

Indeed, this latter was entirely delivered electronically via the university's platform during the whole academic year 2020-2021. By the beginning of the year, students received the adequate training that enabled them to learn via this educational platform. Besides, the lessons and activities were designed in a special way that took into consideration many parameters.

First of all, the number and the content of the lessons had been reduced and lightened to make the experience easier and less stressful. Secondly, the lessons were automatically adjusted to open weekly and successively for a smooth and slow follow-up. Thirdly, each lesson included a mind-map, a recorded explanation, a written manuscript, and a self-assessment exercise for better assimilation.

Fourthly, students were encouraged to ask their questions on the platform publicly or privately and a daily follow-up was assured to answer their inquiries. And last but not least, students received a face-to-face revision session and were given the choice, notably during the first semester, to choose between an online or a face-to-face final evaluation method.

All these facilities had a unique and precise objective which was to guarantee a swift shift from the conventional way of teaching to the newly applied mode of learning.

3.2. Study Objectives and Research Questions

The implementation of this new type of teaching made us wondering about its real effects and outcomes. Was the experience beneficial, deficient, or disappointing?

In an attempt to evaluate this experience adequately, some questions have been raised:

- What were the difficulties that students faced while learning online?
- What was their preferred method of learning as well as their favorite way of evaluation?
- How did they perceive the whole experience of remote learning, and what were/are the main advantages of this newly implemented mode of instruction?

3.3. Participants

First-year students of the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature, University of Oran 1, were invited to answer the above-stated questions in order to reflect their impressions and evaluate their first experience of learning English electronically. They were asked to complete an online questionnaire that was published on the university's platform as well as on the department's Facebook page in June 2021. Eighty-three students, represented mostly by females (74.7%), participated in this opinion poll, and their answers helped us draw several interesting conclusions.

4. Results

Concerning the difficulties that students faced while studying online, three main issues were highlighted. Firstly, the bad Internet connection seemed to be their highest worry with 52.5%. Secondly, an assimilation problem appeared to bother some of them with 42,6%. And thirdly, difficulties in using the platform looked to cause some nuisance to 45% (see Fig. 1).

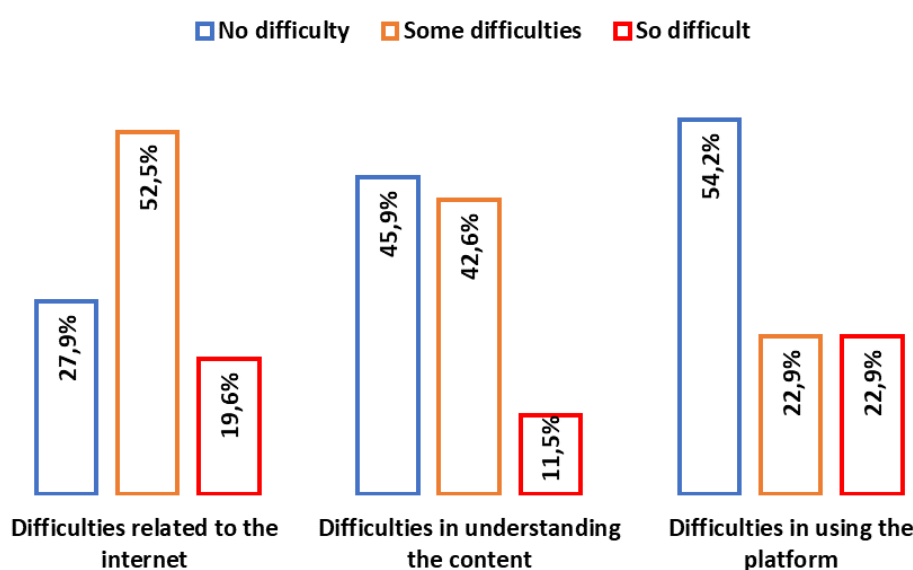


Fig. 1. Students' difficulties while learning English electronically.

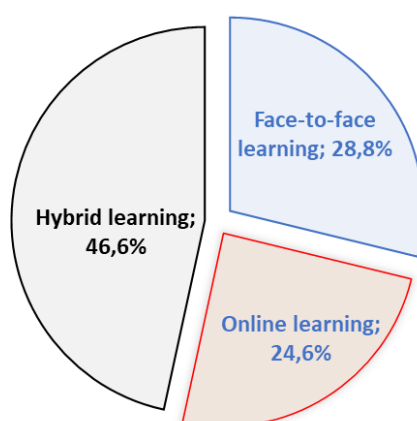


Fig. 2. Students' preferred type of learning.

For future lessons, blended or hybrid learning was students' best choice with 46,6%, compared to a pure face-to-face type of learning (28,8%) or an exclusive sort of online learning (24,6%) (see Fig. 2). That is, students want the flexibility of time and place offered by e-learning, but also the vital interaction provided

by face-to-face learning.

Concerning students' favorite evaluation method, 53% voted for a face-to-face evaluation mode, and 47% chose an online evaluation means. That is, the majority of students prefer the conventional method of evaluation certainly because it provides them with an adequate learning environment and helps them concentrate more and obtain fair results. Yet for others, the online evaluation method is better perhaps because it is less stressful for some of them or an unsupervised environment that facilitates cheating for some others.

Students were also asked to enumerate some advantages of e-learning. Flexibility in study time and studying with more comfort appeared to be the two highest positive criteria offered by this mode of instruction (see Fig. 3).

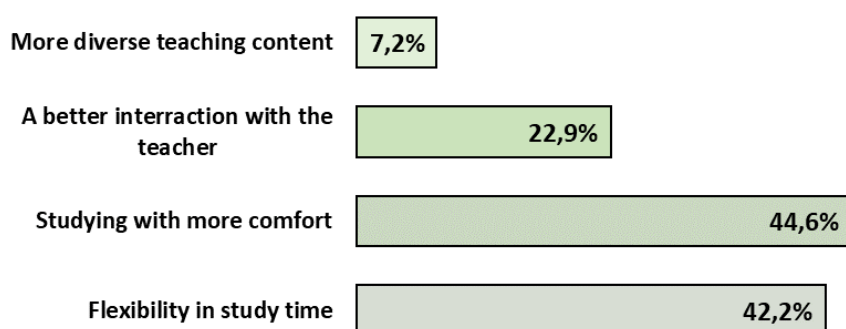


Fig. 3. Advantages of e-learning.

Globally, students' impression of the entire experience of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was depicted by 48% of the students as being moderately satisfying. For 39%, it was described as being a good experience, and for 13% it was qualified as a bad experience (see Fig. 4).

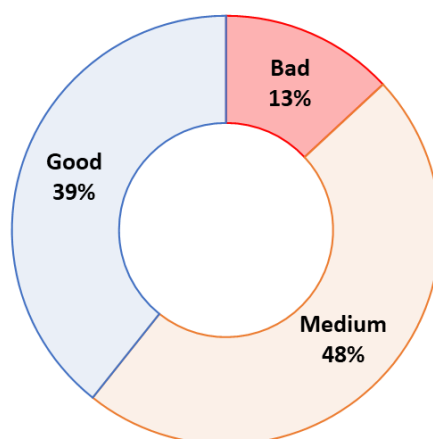


Fig. 4. Students' global evaluation about learning English remotely.

These numbers can be interpreted as being both comprehensible and quite promising. In the sense that, if we take into consideration the difficulties that were related principally to the lack of training and the slow Internet connection that students highlighted previously; then, we can say that the obtained results are logical and coherent. Besides, since the whole experience was a first try that occurred during a sensitive sanitary situation, for future well-prepared experiences, the results will definitely be largely satisfying.

5. Discussion

Based on the results obtained and presented above, the first concern that should be seriously dealt with is the bad Internet quality. Indeed, the Internet speed and quality are very low in Algeria, and this problem poses a real obstacle against an effective and easy e-learning process. According to a recent report published in February 2021, Algeria is among the five worst places for Internet quality in the world [22].

Additionally, students should be well-informed about the characteristics of this type of learning to avoid comprehension problems. Unlike the conventional method of learning which is teacher-centered, online learning is a learner-centered type of learning where the learner should double his efforts to manage his time, self-motivate himself, and assimilate the lessons independently [23].

Besides, learning online necessitates special skills; that is, students' tendency for information and computer technologies alone is not enough. That is why, many students who can perfectly use applications like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, found several impediments while using educational platforms.

Similar technological problems have also been pinpointed in an Algerian study that was conducted at the University of Bejaia in 2020. In this survey, three obstacles were highlighted as being the main challenges facing remote learning in Algeria which are: "The non-mastery of IT tools, the low Internet speed" and the non-affordability to get a private laptop by many students [24].

As a matter of fact, the percentage of ICT skills in Algeria is so low. Only 17% of the Algerian population knows basic ICT skills like how to send an email [25]. Consequently, Algerian universities and computer science teachers should reinforce ICT skills by integrating regular ICT workshops as an essential part of university students' curriculum.

Finally, the hybrid type of learning, which seemed to be students' preferred type of learning, has been qualified by many researchers as a balanced and complete method of instruction [26].

In a recent Algerian study that was conducted at the École Normale Supérieure "Assia Djebar" in Constantine, this mode of instruction has been depicted as a flexible teaching method that "enhances the quality of instruction" [27].

Similarly, in this study, 87% of students voted for a blended type of learning for future lessons because it provides them with "ease, flexibility and convenience" [27].

Thereby, the adoption of a hybrid instructional model seems to satisfy the majority of students' needs and meet their expectations. Students have no pressure and more time to do their homework each according to his/her capacity, and they are encouraged to be self-responsible and self-reliant. Thus, teachers could use the platforms to deliver their lessons and activities using modern and more attractive teaching methods, yet they should also organize face-to-face revision sessions to answer students' inquiries and enhance interpersonal relationships which also play a significant role in the learning process.

6. Conclusion

Distance learning and online learning are two distinct concepts; however, virtual learning is considered as the descendent of distance learning, and it goes hand in hand with modern technologies.

Officially in Algeria, distance education as a whole in the sector of higher education became widely spread during the COVID-19 period. Overall, the experience of e-learning had many pitfalls for teachers as well as for students; nonetheless, this unprecedented experience made it clear for us that the incorporation of modern communication and information technologies in higher education has become an inescapable fact to better match the modern digitalized world.

ICT skills, regular training, availability of suitable equipment, and a better Internet connection; however, were found to be the pillars for an effective and prosperous e-learning process.

Finally, online learning should not replace conventional learning; instead, they should be complementary through the adoption of a hybrid type of learning which appeared to be the most balanced and the

preferred type of learning by the majority of students.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

The author likes to thank all first-year students of the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature for their participation in this work. Special thanks go to Dr. GHERMI Mohamed for his unconditional help, presence, and encouragement.

References

- [1] Hubackova, S. (2015). History and perspectives of elearning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 1187-1190.
- [2] Keles, M. K. (2016). A review of distance learning and learning management systems. *Virtual Learning*.
- [3] UNESCO. (2002). Open and distance learning: trends, policy and strategy considerations. Paris: UNESCO.
- [4] Telegram, T. C. (1974). Caleb started it. *The Columbus Telegram*.
- [5] Britannica, T. E. O. E. (2021). Sir Isaac Pitman. Retrieved from the website: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Isaac-Pitman>
- [6] Bozkurt, A. (2019). From distance education to open and distance learning: A holistic evaluation of history, definitions, and theories. *Handbook of Research on Learning in the Age of Transhumanism*, pp.252-273. IGI Global.
- [7] History of the University of London. Retrieved from the website: <https://london.ac.uk/about-us/history-university-london>
- [8] Caruth, G., & Caruth, D (2013). Distance education in the United States: From correspondence courses to the Internet. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 14(2), 141-149.
- [9] CESAD. Cours par correspondance, des origines à nos jours. Retrieved from the website: <https://www.cesad.fr/ecole/enseignement/cours-correspondance/>
- [10] Casey, D. M. (2008). A journey to legitimacy: The historical development of distance education through technology. *TECHTRENDS TECH TRENDS*, 52(2), 45-51.
- [11] Pittman, V. V. (1986). Pioneering instructional radio in the U.S.: Five years of frustration at the University of Iowa. *International Conference on the History of Adult Education 1925-1930*.
- [12] Simonson, M. R., Smaldino, S. E., & Zvacek, S. (2015). *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.
- [13] Turnbull, D. C., Ritesh, & Luck, J. (2019). Learning management systems: An overview. *Encyclopedia of Education and Information Technologies*.
- [14] Bradford, P., Porciello, M., Balkon, N., & Backus, D. (2007). The blackboard learning system: The be all and end all in educational instruction? *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 35(3), 301-314.
- [15] Barman, L. McGrath, C., & Stöhr, C. (2019). Higher Education; For Free, For Everyone, For Real? Massive Open Online Courses and the Responsible University: History and Enacting Rationalities for MOOC Initiatives at Three Swedish Universities in The Responsible University (pp.117-143). Stockholms universitet, Institutionen för pedagogik och didaktik.
- [16] ONEFD. Retrieved from the website: <http://www.onefd.edu.dz/vue-historique.html>
- [17] Journal-officiel. (1990). Décret exécutif n°90_149 du 26 mai 1990 portant création, organisation et fonctionnement de l'université de la formation continue. Retrieved from the website:

https://www.mfdgi.gov.dz/images/pdf/textes_reglementaires/F1990022.pdf

- [18] Bouachour, K. (2018). *Revue Etudes en Economie et Commerce et Finance*, 7(1), 345.
- [19] Hansali, S. A. M. (2020). المجلة الجزائرية للعلوم القانونية، التعليم العالي عن بعد: تجربة جامعة الجزائر 1 في الماستر عبر الخط السياسي والاقتصادية، 57(3).
- [20] univ-oran1. Accueil. Retrieved from the website: <https://elearn.univ-oran1.dz/>
- [21] MESRS. (2020). Arrêté n°633. Retrieved from the website: <https://www.mesrs.dz/documents/21525/79975/898-7-10.pdf/2450d041-ff57-4df5-a14a-0704d4e444ba>
- [22] Buchholz, K. (2021). The Best & Worst Places for Internet Quality.
- [23] Valentina, A. N. A. (2015). The role of e-learning, advantages and disadvantages of its adoption in higher education. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 12(1), 34.
- [24] Benkhider, N., & Kherbach, S. (2020). The influence of remote learning on students' learning habits during COVID-19. *Les Cahiers du Cread*, 36(03).
- [25] ITU. (2021). Digital trends in the Arab States region in 2021: Information and communication technology trends and developments in the Arab States region, 2017-2020.
- [26] Sawaftah, W. A., & Aljeraiwi, A. (2016). The effectiveness of blended learning based on blackboard in immediate and delayed achievement and retention in a physics course among health colleges students at King Saud University (KSU). *J. educ. psychol. stud. Journal of Educational and Psychological Studies [JEPS]*, 10(3), 476.
- [27] Bouguebs, R. (2020). Action research on integrating a blended learning reading course in higher education. *Journal of Studies in Language, Culture and Society [JSLCS]*, 3(1), 1-14.

Copyright © 2022 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).



Siham Sarradj was born in Oran, Algeria in 1988. She studied the English language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Oran and obtained her teaching diploma in 2010. She was the top of the year, and a winner of the national competition for a postgraduate scholarship; hence, she obtained a state scholarship to pursue her studies in Tunisia. In 2012, she graduated from the University of Tunis and was hired by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research as a permanent English teacher in the Department of the Arabic Language and Literature. In 2019, she earned her Ph.D. in the field of American civilization from the University of Oran2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed with a very honorable mention. Sarradj's research domains are school violence and modern teaching methods. Her main objective is to contribute in improving the educational system by looking for effective applicable solutions.