

Students' (Dis)satisfaction with Synchronous Online Learning in Times of COVID-19: Essaouira Higher School of Technology as Case Study

Adil El Filali*

*Cadi Ayyad University, Marrakech
adilelfilali38@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper measures the effects of COVID-19 on university students' learning performance. Students' degree of (dis)satisfaction with real-time virtual instruction is a determining factor in their achievement. This variable (students' degree of (dis)satisfaction) may better be understood with reference to the barriers that face students regarding their synchronous virtual learning. Specifically, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on such mode of learning helps identify and explore such barriers. To this end, two crucial aspects are worthy of mention. While the first concerns the students' degree of (dis)satisfaction with the learning mode in focus, the second focuses on the difficulties who students encounter in such mode of learning. Methodologically, data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed to 101 students at the Higher School of Technology –Essaouira. The data analysis phase consists of both the students' responses and their comments. The former is analysed quantitatively, while the latter are analysed on the basis of the themes emerging from them. The study demonstrates that most participants hold fewer positive attitudes towards real-time online courses particularly during this period of crisis. It also shows that most students encounter many difficulties while learning English synchronously, which makes them favour in-class settings over the synchronous ones. The importance of this study lies in that it helps get an insight into the students' views of and experience with real-time online learning during COVID -19. The study, however, may call for further research associated with other issues different from the one under investigation.

Keywords: real-time virtual learning, higher education, (dis)satisfaction, barriers, students' learning performance

Introduction

Scholars' interest in investigating COVID-19- related issues mainly in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in higher education has been and is still growing. Real-time learning, as a supplement to in-class teaching, is one of these issues to which careful attention should be given. The current study aims at: (a) understanding students' attitudes towards their (dis)satisfaction vis-à-vis online learning and course delivery and (b) testing their needs and preferences for such praxis, in light of the problems they encounter during such learning experience. The importance of student satisfaction with online virtual classes lies in understanding how this aspect attributes to better learning experience at Essaouira School of Technology, as an 'institution with limited access.'

Certainly, university students are currently living a critical learning experience characterized by fear and uncertainty. Investigating such experience has therefore become a necessity as to what factors need to be considered to better it. During the pandemic, especially when they learn physically, students are in great danger of being infected by the virus. Consequently, this unsafe learning landscape does not encourage them to learn effectively. Seemingly, learning remotely has the potential to increase chances for learners to feel safe and thus learn better. In the synchronous online learning format, students' ability to learn effectively is reinforced by their feeling of safety –not danger.

Literature review

Students' (dis)satisfaction with online learning has been explored by many scholars. Charles Dziuban et al. (2015 :1) claim that a precise configuration of student satisfaction with online learning is proving to be elusive because it might be context dependent. However, the issue at hand still requires much investigation mainly with reference to the current context of COVID-19 outbreak.

The notion of satisfaction is difficult to define. Long (cited in Ioana Topala & Simona Tomozii 2014 :381) suggests that learning satisfaction has been seen in terms of affect, as a superior emotional complex, defined by the level of joy one feels when learning. Thurmand V. A. et al. (cited in Viet A. N. 2016 :3155) state that satisfaction is a concept that reflects outcomes and reciprocity that occur between students and instructors. In light of these definitions, it is possible to say that the degree of satisfaction differs from one student to another, depending on various multiple factors and/or contexts. Arguably, learning in a dissatisfactory environment discourages students to learn actively and productively. From a psychological perspective, the learner's mind in such learning atmosphere does not function in its normal way nor does it work in its usual setting (the in-class setting) to which the learner is accustomed. Hence, learning from home implies that learners while learning at the same time, are likely to encounter unprecedented or sudden difficulties, which, as a result, create a major barrier to their effective learning. Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy-Ellison and Shea (cited in Charles Dziuban et al. 2015:2) found six key elements that contribute to students' satisfaction in learning: an enriched learning environment, well-defined rules of engagements, instructor commitment, reduced ambiguity, an engaging environment, and reduced ambivalence about the value of the course. Palloff, R. M. & Pratt, K. (2003 :4) think that it would seem obvious that when students are satisfied with online courses and programs, they are more likely to be successful. According to Peter Serdukov (cited in Sistek Chandler & Cynthia Mary 2020 :8):

learning in the online environment is the learning mode in which interaction among participants occurs at the same time, simultaneously. While there can be various formats of synchronous communication, e.g., telephone conversations or instant messaging, here we mean live, videoconferencing sessions where the

whole learning group communicate with each other in real time seeing and hearing what is going on and engaging in the process contemporaneously.

Physical distance provides learners with valuable opportunities to learn in an effective way, stressing an anxiety-free context of learning. According to Bello et al. (cited in Bacheva, V. 2018: 5), the physical distance, which is often seen by many as a disadvantage, can have positive effects by making learners and instructors more objective, less fearful of comments or criticism, and less prone to cultural barriers. Psychological safety, Bacheva writes, leads to better learning outcomes and fosters creativity, confidence, and a willingness to experiment on the part of the learners. A study conducted by Woodcock et al. (cited in Bacheva, V. 2018: 6) demonstrated that students were able to learn from home and feel more confident asking questions for understanding, and thus were more comfortable sharing their ideas in a judgement-free environment. Woodcock et al. added that most participants reported that they were more competent online compared to their participation in the classroom. Spangle, M. et al. (cited in Johnson, J. et al. (2005:2) argue that online learning supports critical thinking skills, leadership, communication and problem solving. Following the same line of thought, Burnett, K. (cited in Johnson, J. et al. (2005 :1) believes that the online format puts students and teachers on 'equal footing' and many of the barriers found in the traditional classroom, such as shyness, gender, ethnicity, and age are reduced.

Relatedly, the process of naturalizing such learning atmosphere -- or making it real-like -- is thus inescapable. Hence, in order to render a synchronous online class successful, the learner is required to go through at least two crucial sequential phases: a pre-synchronous online class and a while-synchronous online one. In the first phase, the learner is supposed to be ready for such class ahead of time. He should thus prepare or 'guarantee' a comfortable space where she/he can attend her/his virtual online class, avoiding disturbance resulting from contact with roommates, family members, friends or others particularly during the time of learning. As to the second phase, the while-synchronous learning class, learners have to be present socially during the time allotted to each class. However, being connected during this class (from beginning to end) does not necessarily mean that the student attends it. There is more to her/his actual participation and interaction than to her/his attendance.

According to Michael Marmon (cited in Wright, R. D. 2015 :128), social presence allows for online education to re-create or model an online course in the same vein as one taking place in a traditional face-to-face environment. Marmon suggests that the importance of social presence in courses taking place online lies in that it facilitates the creation of positive student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Social presence occupies not only a sphere in online environments that seeks to limit the transactional distance theorized by Moore (1993) but is essential to the processes of keeping students satisfied and driven intellectually to fulfil defined learning objectives. In addressing Moore's theory, Otto Peters (2004 :28) believes that transactional distance depends on whether students are left alone with their distance education materials or whether they can communicate with their teachers. The transactional function is determined by the extent to which teachers and students can interact ('*dialogue*'). At the same time, it is influenced by the extent to which the learning path is determined by pre-planned teaching programmes ('*structure*'). Moore and Otto's views suggest that synchronous online learning is jointly content and context-dependent, both elements are necessary for effective reciprocal communication.

Bandura's (cited in Keengwe, J & Kungu, K. 2019:177) theory of self-efficacy, is context-dependent and is linked to social anxiety and attention. Su et al. (cited in Keengwe, J & Kungu, K. 2019:177) believe that self-efficacy may also be related to learning contexts. In a similar vein, Hara et al. (cited in Keengwe, J & Kungu, K. 2019 :177) assert that once learners become familiar with the distance learning technology, they tend to become less anxious and

less frustrated. Students who have social anxiety, also known as social phobia, may consider virtual online learning as a valuable opportunity for effective learning, something that this category of learners may not experience particularly in traditional classes.

According to Schute (cited in Bolliger D. U. & Wasilik O. 2009: 104), student performance is higher in an online course than in a traditional course. Yair Levey (cited in Lawrence, T. 2008 :267) suggests a study dealing with the issue under discussion in terms of its findings. Such study, conducted by Fredericksen, Pickett, Shea, Pelz, and Swan (2000), demonstrates that students who reported the highest levels of satisfaction also reported significantly higher levels of learning than students who rated satisfaction level as lower. Kuo, Walker, Belland & Schroder (cited in Charles Dziuban et al 2015 :2) state that the interaction construct plays an important role in both face-to-face and online learning modalities. Comeaux Patricia (2004) claims that in both traditional and online classrooms, students need more than grades from their instructors they also need meaningful feedback to help bridge their academic knowledge and skills with their daily lives. As such, this feedback can be useful regarding the integration of various and multiple communicative activities into synchronous online instruction.

The students' oral performance in synchronous online learning requires a video conference platform (zoom –google meet) where they may be engaged in various communicative activities such as describing a situation, comparing and sharing ideas about a particular topic, and so forth. This communicative component can be considered as a powerful incentive for students to strengthen their motivation for learning. Motivation here, according to Benhima and Benabderrazik (2020 :26), is responsible for many educational phenomena, like attendance and absenteeism, low and high achievement amongst others. Consequently, the implementation of such activity will influence the current learning modality in a positive way, especially if students receive synchronous constructive feedback from their teachers. Irrespective of the learning modality, the teacher lectures and explains, and it is possible to gain immediate feedback from the students about the content of the course. Students, in turn, get the immediate reaction of the teacher. In times of crisis, when students and teachers should not meet in classes, different methods of teaching should be implemented. As Bolliger & Wasilik (2009:104) put it, quality is important in the delivery of courses regardless of the environment in which they are delivered.

Methodology

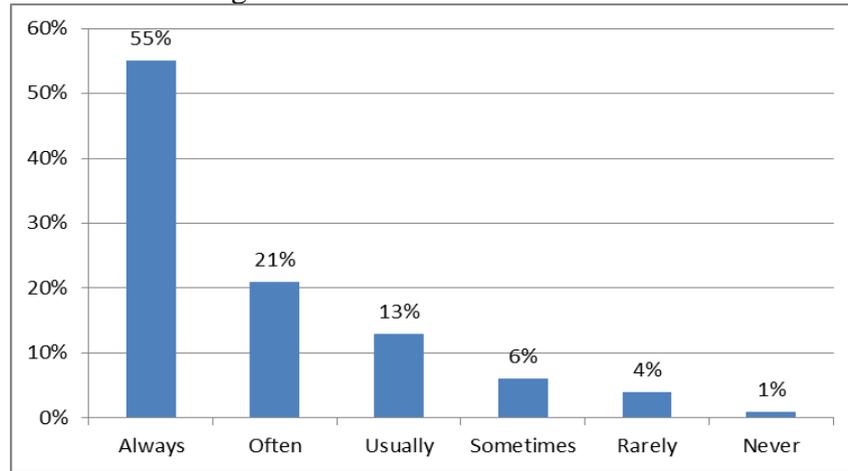
Data which were collected from semi- structured questionnaires, were quantitatively analysed and then used as a basis for the findings and conclusions of this study. The questionnaire is addressed to 101 university Tourism Management (Semester 5; 14 males and 28 females) and Business Intelligence and Data Science (Semester 3, 25 males; 34 females) students at the Higher School of Technology-Essaouira. The questionnaire, composed of 12 closed-ended questions and one open-ended question, relates to synchronous virtual learning of English during the period of COVID-19. Questions linked to the purpose of this study are explored. With the objective of making them seem reliable, some of the participants' comments were coded and edited before being explored. As such, students' comments were studied relying on the common themes that emerge from them.

Data analysis and findings

Real-time synchronous class attendance

Students' attendance at synchronous online English for communication courses can be illustrated on the basis of Fig. 1 below.

Figure 1: Real-time online class attendance

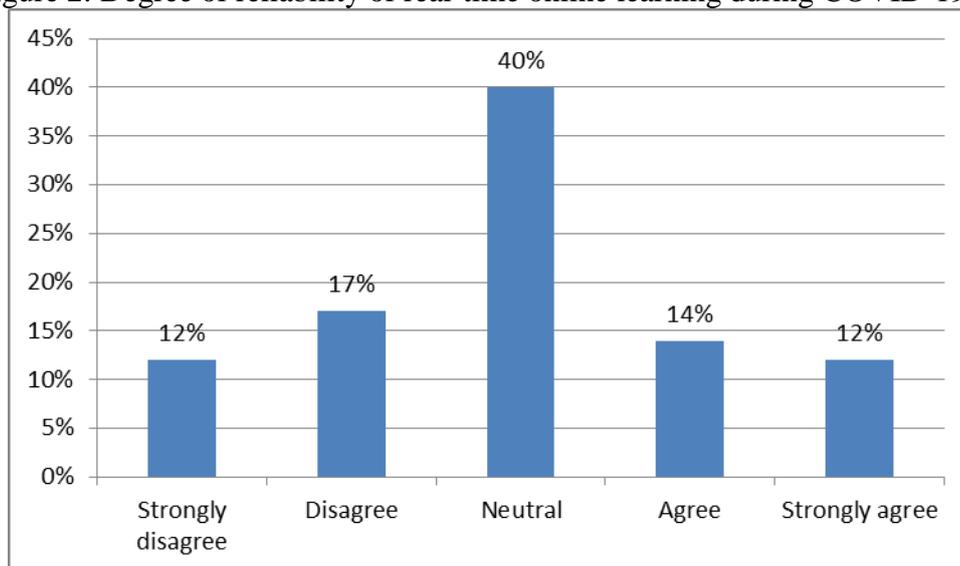


Results about synchronous virtual class attendance clearly indicate that approximately 60% of the respondents attend virtual classes at the same time, 21% of them often do, 13% usually do, 6% of them sometimes do, and 4% rarely attend such classes. However, 1 % of the students’ non-attendance can be observed. It can be noted that the students’ attendance rate for real-time virtual classes is unsatisfactory. This might be due to the students’ unfamiliarity with the new learning modality, particularly during this period of health calamity.

Degree of students’ reliability on real-time online learning during COVID-19

Students’ level of (dis)agreement with the extent to which they rely on real-time virtual classes is measured on a five-point Likert scale. Of all our participants, only 12% strongly agree that online learning is reliable, 14% agree, 40% are neutral, 17% disagree, and 12% strongly disagree. Although less than half of the respondents are neutral, the results reveal that physical courses may not be replaced by real-time virtual ones. With this in mind, students’ reliability on physical classes may be motivated by their preference for the in-person learning landscape. However, students who consider real-time online classes as unreliable may face problems in their learning performance. In contrast, those who think that such courses are helpful for learning will undoubtedly benefit from such experience.

Figure 2: Degree of reliability of real-time online learning during COVID-19

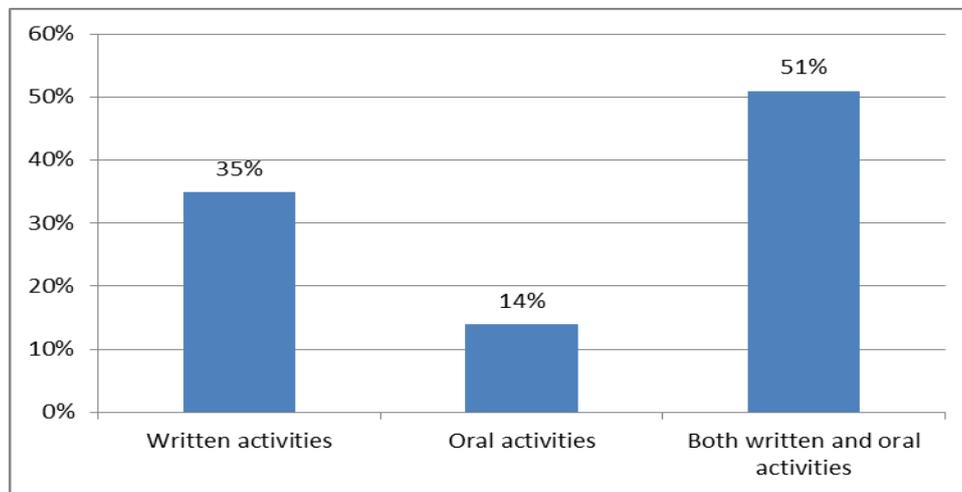


Given that they constitute an essential component of English Language Teaching (ELT) in higher education, virtual online courses should thus be considered on the part of all the participants.

Nature (written or oral) of tasks assigned synchronously

When asked about what sorts of activities to do online, a little more than half of the total number of participants 51% opt for both written and oral activities, 35% of them prefer to be engaged in written activities, while only 14% of students opt for oral activities. The results reveal that the diversification of the tasks assigned to students is highly recommended, especially in English for communication classes that are run synchronously. Such diversification may also be applicable to physical classes. Examples of this aspect of diversification include: assigning a comprehension reading task, eliciting information from students, inviting them to discuss issues and comment on their classmates’ views, to name but a few. Such activities can help students engage in active learning and improve great written and oral performance.

Figure 3: Students’ preference for the nature (written and/or oral) of tasks assigned synchronously



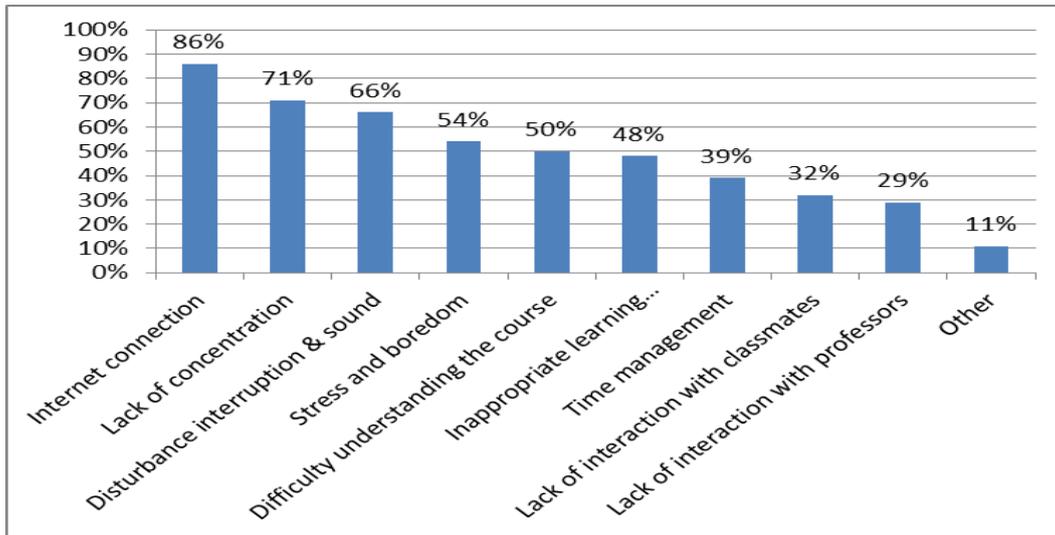
Using google meet, as a real-time virtual platform, can benefit both female and male students a great deal. In this, access to such platform provides students with plenty of opportunities to participate using voice or text-chat responses. Therefore, the synchronous nature of this mode of learning facilitates students’ learning and boosts their engagement. This dual activity (both spoken and written) may be seen in a legal term as ‘democratic,’ especially with students who find it difficult to express their views orally. For example, stuttering as a physical disability, may affect learner’s performance in a negative way. A female student says: *‘Real-time virtual classes are not that bad because we get a chance to share ideas etc. Personally, I would like to participate in both. But I have a problem of tottering. Because of this, I prefer to remain silent, (respondent 46, female BIDS).* Once they are given enough time in this learning platform, these students would successfully perform the skills they already possess.

Problems students face in synchronous online learning

The results show that almost all the students meet a range of challenges while learning virtually at the same time during the pandemic. Examples of such problems include: internet connection (86%), lack of concentration (71%); disturbance, interruption and sound (66%), stress and sometimes boredom (54%), difficulty in understanding courses (50%), inappropriate learning (home-based) environment (48%); time management (39%), lack of interaction with classmates

(32%), and with professors (29%). Moreover, 11% of the respondents state that there are other problems. A female student mentions that *‘I cannot be comfortable attending my online class at home. My home atmosphere is not suitable for studying online. I barely concentrate with the professor and try so hard to do my online homework or tasks. Also, bad signal at home and not having the possibility to be in somewhere else, (respondent 10, female TM).’* Fig. 4 below shows the results about such variable:

Figure 4: Students’ problems in synchronous online learning

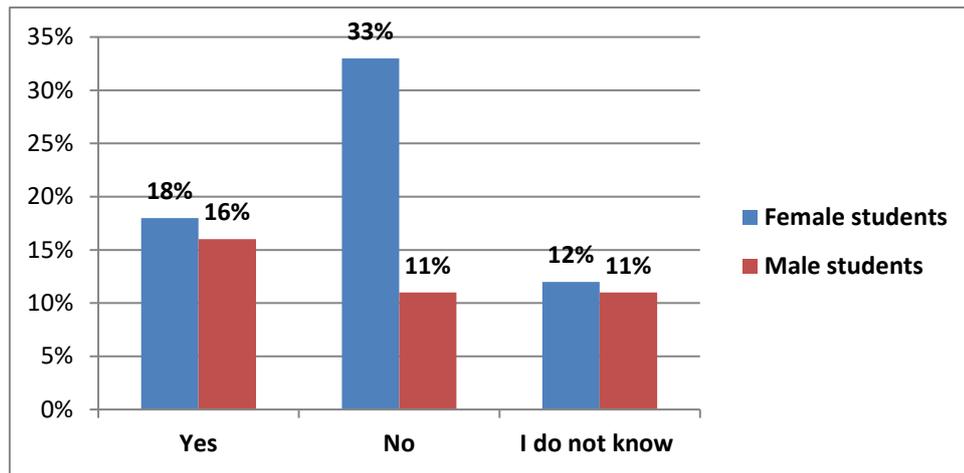


When it comes to the home-based synchronous online learning atmosphere, the principle of equal opportunities between male and female students poses a serious problem in such practice. However, ensuring equality between the two sexes regarding home-based real-time online learning should not be considered in terms of (in)adequacy of the learning location (home). Rather, this variable under investigation should be understood in terms of who is more participative and more productive in such learning modality.

Students’ (dis)satisfaction with their performance in real-time online courses

Students’ satisfaction with their performance in real-time virtual classes can be understood in light of the following results. Of all the participants (101), a wide majority of female participants 33% hold a negative attitude towards their performance during synchronous virtual classes, 18% are pleased with their learning performance, while only 12% of them are neutral. These results are understandable. They show that female students are faced with several problems in their performance particularly while learning remotely, which impedes their natural learning of English. As for male students, it seems that half of the them 16% are satisfied with their learning performance in such class, while a very small number of them 11% express their dissatisfaction with it or lack knowledge about the aspect in focus.

Figure 5: Students’ (dis)satisfaction with their performance in real-time online courses



On the basis of the aforementioned statistics (Fig. 5), it can be noted that students' dissatisfaction with real-time online classes may be attributed to their unpreparedness and/or unreadiness for such classes. Therefore, during the current period of health crisis, this variable (dissatisfaction) is not stable particularly with respect to the learning conditions in which this practice takes place.

Discussions and interpretations

According to McCoy and Heafner (cited in Manuel Cuadrado Garcia et al. 2010 :368), there is evidence supporting that men and women express varying degrees of anxiety, acceptance, and interest in new technologies across time. McCoy and Heafner's view also applies to our argument in this study. Students' views of and experience with real-time virtual classes of English can be explored in light of the findings of the current study along with the students' comments. On this basis, two major aspects can be discussed: 1) negatively-oriented views (dealing with the problems that students often encounter in real-time virtual learning) and 2) positively-oriented views (dealing with benefits of synchronous online learning). It is worth mentioning that some of the students' comments contain a set of elements that overlap between one another, but they are treated as such.

Less positive attitudes towards synchronous online learning

Students' views of and experience with synchronous virtual learning demonstrate that they encounter a range of difficulties while they are involved in such experience. With reference to the students' responses six problems are the most frequently encountered: internet connection, lack of understanding, stress, inappropriacy of the learning environment (home), time management, and lack of interaction or physical contact. Such problems are explored as follows.

Internet connection

Students' dissatisfaction with their synchronous learning performance relates to weak or no internet connection. Such problem does not provide them with the possibility to concentrate on their courses and interact actively with their peers and teachers. One of the students says: *'I am not really used to technology. I am learning how to use it, especially because I need to do my homework somehow. I did like how we can be at home, though, to bond with my family,'* (respondent 22, TM). In this case, this student, and perhaps others, would find themselves obliged to attend face-to-face classes only. One of the female students expresses her view by saying: *'I am not satisfied at all with my performance in virtual classes because we have strong issues with network here in Ghazwa [Essaouira el Jadida] and it does not give us the*

opportunity to interact easily with classmates or teachers. This is not related to English class only but to every course we have,' (respondent 101, female, TM). Another student, using French, shares the same opinion and states: 'Je trouve beaucoup de problèmes concernant les cours en ligne à cause de mauvaise connexion et aussi je n'arrive pas à comprendre tout le cours et au même à prendre des notes grâce à tous ces problèmes. Je ne suis pas satisfaite de cette stratégie d'étude,' (respondent 35, female TM). 'I face many problems concerned with distance learning classes due to the poor quality of internet connection. Moreover, I cannot understand all the classes and I cannot even take notes. Because of such problems, I am dissatisfied with this learning strategy,' (respondent 35, female TM) [My translation].

Lack of understanding

Real-time virtual learning may not be considered as the right learning modality, especially in terms of the subjects taught. One of the students asserts that: *'I think that the virtual way is not so helpful when it comes to the theory-based subjects,' (respondent 17, TM). This view reveals that some students may not feel comfortable with studying theory-based courses online. Rather, they prefer to study them in-person.*

Stress

Stress, according to Lazarus and Folkma (cited in Landow, M. 2006 :4), is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being. It is a difficulty that students encounter when learning synchronously. A student says: *'My online learning experience as a student is stressful,' (respondent 22, TM). Stress, as psychological state, may impede learner's achievement or may not, depending on his or her willingness to and motivation for learning, of course, during the current period of crisis.*

Inappropriacy of the learning environment (home)

It seems that one major problem with which students are faced concerns the learning environment. This view is expressed as follows: *'I am learning how to use it [synchronous online learning], because I need to do my homework somehow. I did like how we can be at home, though, to bond with my family,' (respondent 22, TM).*

Time management

It is essential to note that students with better time management skills may perform better online than those who lack such skills. Three comments help illustrate the idea: *'Real-time virtual learning takes time to be a success,' (respondent 16, BIDS); 'To organize your time, you should not miss classes. You have to respect your colleagues and your teacher in class,' (respondent 1, Specialization NA); 'We study some courses online and on the same day we have to go to school. So, this is really a tiring thing as it creates problems for us in organizing time, (respondent 45, BIDS).*

Lack of interaction or physical contact

When asked about the problems they often face in virtual synchronous classes, multiple female and male students report that: a) *'It is the first experience with the virtual in Morocco so we can say that it is so difficult to manage in regard to two perspectives. First, there is no physical contact with students. Second, the bad quality of connection,' (respondent 12, TM); b) 'Personally, virtual learning does not give an opportunity to learn, as the understanding of the lesson is distracted, and communication between the student and the professor is difficult because of the focus on a computer or phone screen or any other device,' (respondents 40, 82, BIDS); c) 'The real-time virtual class can be a strong barrier to interaction between students*

and their professor, the professor cannot have the attention or time to push all the shy students to participate, because of lack of signal or internet,' (respondent 10, TM) ; d) 'We miss the body language,' (respondent, 24 male BIDS) ; e) 'Real-time virtual classes can create some communication barriers to us by making it hard to know when to talk or how to read a person's body language and facial expressions,' (respondent 24, BIDS). Such comments demonstrate that real-time virtual classes are not very much appreciated because of distractions, lack of interaction between peers and teachers, absence of body language and/or facial expressions, and weak internet connection.

Positive attitudes towards synchronous online learning

The second aspect dealing with positively-oriented views can be explored in relation to students' comments and the similarities found in such comments. In this, three major perspectives can be discussed: learner's autonomy, development of students' communication skills, virtual classes vs face-to-face classes.

Learners' autonomy

It seems that taking synchronous online English classes, as a new learning experience, can be perceived of as a valuable opportunity for students to acquaint themselves with, acquire and develop new study skills to boost their learning of English. In this regard, some students explain their views and say : a) *'For the English language, we benefit greatly from the way the teacher teaches us, by performing tasks before the virtual class,' (respondent, 36, female BIDS) ; b) 'Virtual classes are the best way to learn during this deadly pandemic,' (respondent 52, Male, TM) ; c) 'It is an experience that will help us develop our learning experience even if it is difficult,' (respondent 79, female, BIDS) ; d) 'Virtual classes are a new experience for me in which I discover teachers play an important role in our life,' (respondent 80, female, BIDS) ; e) 'Virtual learning made us get used to listening to English,' (respondent 81, female BIDS) ; f) 'The most important thing for me is to learn, virtual or not, I have no problem, I can understand,' (respondent 3, Specialization NA) ; g) 'I feel that real-time virtual learning of English is good for us as it helps improve our communication skills. For me, I feel so happy when we discuss a lot of topics in a virtual class, because in my opinion this is the right way of teaching in this case,' (respondent 5, Specialization NA) ; h) 'Seeing the pandemic, our online courses, thanks to our teacher, give me the opportunity to add other skills of study to learn better and better and develop my level in English,' (respondent 92, male TM). As such, these views reveal that students can prove to be autonomous or independent remotely, which allows them, despite the current pandemic, to make progress in such process.*

Development of students' communication skills

To develop their communication skills, many students at Essaouira School of Technology mention that synchronous online classes can be beneficial regarding this objective. The latter, according to them, may be achieved by means of several elements such as fostering students' critical thinking skills, being engaged in discussions, and exercising analysis and note taking, amongst others. Such views are expressed as follows: *'I appreciate participating in online classes because this allows me to improve my communication skills and develop my critical thinking skills as we study theory and practice language, (respondent 84, male TM). Other students share the same view and report that: 'English is a language of communication that will not be affected much by studying online. I mean we can discuss as we are in classroom,' (respondents 41 and 19 BIDS); 'Virtual real time classes are beneficial for us, especially if they occur in good learning circumstances (serious students, good internet connection). Sometimes, I express myself better in this course,' (respondent 33, BIDS); 'I am so satisfied with real-time*

virtual learning of English, it helped me so much to be more encouraged in speaking. It also helped me develop my skills in analysis and not-taking and to have a special summary in the end,' (respondent 86, female BIDS).

Virtual classes vs face-to-face classes

Seemingly, students are not allowed to choose the learning format with which they feel comfortable, be it physical or virtual. Therefore, they are required to attend both of them in regard to the safety measures implemented by the Moroccan government. Supposedly, choice here is a paradox in itself seeing that it poses a serious problem for students as to which mode of learning works better for each individual student. This choice may be governed by the student's idiosyncratic visualisations and objectives of learning. However, during these times of health crisis, students cannot escape their attendance at synchronous online classes, an environment in which learning from screens may seem beneficial for some, but may not be so for others. When they feel comfortable with a specific mode of learning (face-to-face or online), students will undoubtedly make much progress in such learning condition. In contrast, online learning is thought of as a tiring experience because students are required to study both physically and virtually. To illustrate the idea of the paradox of choice, the following comments may be considered:

a) 'If we want to talk about online learning as a solution in light of this pandemic, I see that it is a logical solution. However, it is necessary to consider the students' financial condition, that is, with regard to internet expenses. Consequently, online learning has few advantages but a lot of disadvantages,' (respondent 45, BIDS) ; b) 'I think that distance learning is good but Face-to-face learning is better,' (respondent 7, female TM) ; c) 'For me, real-time online study does not significantly help the students benefit from lessons more than studying in class,' (respondent 13, female TM) ; d) 'In-class courses can never be replaced by online courses, because there is no interaction between students and the professor,' (respondent 82, female BIDS) ; e) 'Real time virtual learning of English is interesting yet not reliable as much as learning in classes,' (respondent 98, female TM).

Addressing the students' needs (recommendations)

In order to 'guarantee' an effective online learning experience, students need to have access to a computer and high-speed internet connection. Besides, organization on the part of teachers is appreciated as to set rules for successful synchronous virtual classes devoid of any problems like interruption or annoyance. Moreover, teachers need to make real-time online classes a little more interesting and enjoyable to engage students actively and help them be more interactive with teachers and classmates. Some of the students views help clarify the idea:

a) 'I suggest that higher schools make agreements with a telephone company to offer students internet subscriptions at reasonable prices,' (respondent 51, male BIDS) ; b) 'Virtual learning is a great way to learn while being home during this pandemic and might be a greater way to overcome school routine to get the maximum education possible, but it always depends on the circumstances of the student, does he have Internet access? or can he pursue virtual learning at home, or more likely a room with colleagues? Learning anything requires a lot of concentration,' (respondent 57, male BIDS); c) 'I think real-time online courses should be more organized by the professor and also the student. They have to set some rules that must be respected to understand well the course and avoid all the issues that face us,' (respondent 67, female BIDS) ; and d) 'I think in virtual learning the teachers should try to make the classes a little more interesting and enjoyable to keep the students from feeling bored because they already lack the real life interaction with the teachers that usually keeps them attentive in classes,' (respondent 90, female TM).

Despite its challenging nature, real-time virtual learning, as a new instruction modality ‘partially’ implemented in Moroccan university during the pandemic, has the potential to: a) offer students new chances to experience new learning skills, b) motivate them to study from home, and c) boost their interaction with their peers and teachers out of the brick-and-mortar setting. Further, virtual synchronous learning may be beneficial for some students but may not be so for others, depending on the context (home and/or budgetary issues)

Overall, the results of this study reveal that a set of recommendations should be considered. As such, these recommendations include: a) diversification of activities (oral and/written) assigned to students in synchronous online courses, b) students should be provided with cheap high-speed internet access as to learn effectively especially during the pandemic, and c) real-time synchronous classes should be interesting, well organized and enjoyable as to avoid feelings of boredom, stress, and/or inattentiveness.

Limitations

Although this paper has reached its objectives, two main limitations are worthy of mention. The first is that a quantitative study limits the ability to make broader generalizations from the results obtained. The second limitation concerns exploring other issues that are related to another case study --mainly for comparative research.

Conclusion

Whether it is effective or not, real-time learning activity at the university, as an academic educational setting, depends largely on the learner--the main participant in the teaching learning process. Effective learning, in a sense, varies from one learner to another and from one group to another. During COVID-19, a safe learning atmosphere, among other factors or circumstances, is highly required as to get the maximum benefit of this learning modality.

Students who do not engage in interaction at the time of course delivery may therefore feel isolated, if not, frustrated, a feeling which does not work in their favour as it often impacts their learning negatively. In contrast, students who interact with their teachers and peers successfully are unlikely to experience such feelings. To understand students’ learning satisfaction with real-time virtual instruction, one example about this aspect may illustrate the idea and may serve, in a medical term, as a ‘remedy’ for students’ isolation or frustration. As such, this example concerns assessing students’ performance through feedback with the objective of reinforcing meaningful interaction with them. Hence, this kind of assessment should not only be given physically (in-person) and/or virtually (google meet or zoom platforms), but it should also be done asynchronously (emails). Further, implementing this ‘assessment trilogy approach’ in course delivery or afterwards, irrespective of the instruction mode implemented in teaching, benefits students a great deal. This benefit may be manifested in strengthening students’ meaningful interaction with instructors and peers. The ultimate objective of such interactive praxis is to consolidate students’ learning satisfaction. In this, students who receive constructive feedback from their teachers –or even from their peers- have multiple chances to develop their interest in learning of English. E-feedback (electronic feedback), according to Lamis Fanous, can be provided to students either in class at the same time they attend their writing task, that is synchronously or online via peers or teacher’s feedback, that is asynchronously.

Understanding students’ strategies for synchronous virtual learning during the pandemic is central to the teaching learning process as a whole. Irrespective of their levels of learning performance, almost all students are dissatisfied with their virtual online learning. Generally,

there are gender differences in attitude about attendance at real-time virtual classes. The current study demonstrates that female students hold a less positive attitude towards such classes than male students and use this learning mode less frequently.

References

- Bacheva, V. (2018). Social aspects of synchronous virtual learning environments. *AIP Conference Proceedings*, 2048.
- Benhima, M. & Benabderrazik, M (2020). The role of using information technology in the motivation of Moroccan English Department students during COVID-19 Quarantine. *The Journal of Quality in Education*, 10 (16), 22-47.
- Bolliger, D. U. & Wasilik, O. (2009). Factors influencing faculty satisfaction with online teaching and Learning. *Distance Education*, 30 (1), 103-116.
- Comeaux, P. (2004). *Assessing Online Learning*. Jossey-Bass. Eric.
- Cuadrado-Garcia Manuel et al. (2010). Are there gender differences in e-learning use and assessment? Evidence from an interuniversity online project in Europe. *Procedia. Social and Behavioural Sciences*, (2), 367-371.
- Dziuban, C. et al. (2015). Student Satisfaction with online learning: is it a psychological contract? *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Network*, (19) 2, 1-15.
- Fanou, L. (2020). The impact of Asynchronous and synchronous e-feedback on EFL learners' writing skills. Retrieved from: <https://www.awraqthaqafya.com/825/> 13 March 2021.
- Francescucci, A. & Rohani, L. (2019). Exclusively synchronous online (VIRI) learning: the impact on student performance and engagement outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 41 (1), 60-69.
- Johnson, J. et al. (2005). Faculty and Student perceptions of web-based learning: Bring online education programs to understand communities. *American Journal for Nurse Practitioners*, 9 (4), 9-18.
- Keengwe, J. & Kungu, K. (2019). *Handbook of Research on Cross-cultural Online Learning in Higher Education*. IGI Global
- Landow, M. V. (2006) (Ed.). *Stress and Mental Health of College Students*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Lawrence, T. (2008). *Online and Distance Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, and Applications*. Herhey: Information Science Reference.
- Palloff, R. M. & Pratt, K. (2003). *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Work with Online Learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Peters, O. (2004). *Learning and Teaching in Distance Education. Pedagogical Analyses and Interpretations in an international Perspective*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Simonson, M. & Schlosser, C. (Eds.). (2017). *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 18 (3). Information Age Publishing.
- Sistek C. & Cynthia, M. (2020). *Exploring Online Learning through Synchronous and Asynchronous Instructional Methods*. IGI Global.
- Topala, I. & Tomozii, S. (2014). Learning satisfaction: validity and reliability testing for students learning satisfaction questionnaire, *Procedia - Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 128, 380-386.
- Viet, A. N. (2016). Examining students' satisfaction while online learning activities in blended learning course: a case study. *Proceedings of ICERI 2016 Conference*, 14th – 16th 2016, Seville, Spain.
- Wright, R. D. (2015). *Student- Teacher Interaction in Online Learning Environments*. Information Science Reference.