Questioning Intercultural Communication Skills Absence in Five Algerian Universities Digital Challenge

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Abstract:
COVID-19 pandemic has had a hard impact on all educational sectors where access to schools, educational institutions, and university campuses is forcibly halted. In this context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research urged teachers to move from face-to-face to online learning to mitigate the spread of the virus, keep up the regular schedule and save the academic year. This paper highlights the issues, perspectives, and pedagogical practices of the instructors' overnight change, switching pre-existing face-to-face learning to the online environment. It also refers to the challenge of those learners lacking intercultural communication skills needed to participate virtually. The researchers used the documentary research method to develop their leading research question and analyse existing research documents and other e-sources of information such as university and government reports, newspapers, PDF books, papers, and YouTube channels to collect relevant data for this study. As a result, we could illustrate the Algerian universities' response and analyse government and university sources such as newspaper articles and ministry decrees. Therefore, we believe that the emergency to digitalize teaching in our higher institutions is a significant opportunity to keep engaged in the online environment now and after the pandemic and take advantage of the universities' best pedagogical practices. Thus, prepare for the online shift to better address the digital divide by promoting equal opportunities for all students to access the Internet, possess and effectively use Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) to fully participate in the modern educational system.
Keywords: Algerian universities, Covid-19 pandemic, intercultural communication, online learning, pedagogical practices

Introduction

The silently devastating COVID-19 pandemic is the latest most severe health crisis of the 21st century. As COVID- 19 health emergency continues because of the increasing number of infected cases, the ministry of higher education announced cancelling all face-to-face classes by converting content to an online environment starting from April 5, after spring break. However, in this sudden shift, academics who have never taught online face a real challenge by transitioning in-person courses to the online environment. The second challenge is to help learners develop intercultural communication skills, mainly those with the least access to technology.

Educators across the country have gone above and beyond always to reach out and teach their students, which is a real test for them, especially for novices, who may not be adequately equipped with essential technological tools, skills, and knowledge. Furthermore, Internet access, training, and skills necessary for quality online teaching/learning are also a test for socially disadvantaged learners. Limited access to technology and the internet can impact their ability to engage in an online environment (Zhong, 2020).

This article explores the first wave of responses of five Algerian universities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It sheds light on the issues, perspectives, and teaching practices of overnight change of instructors towards online education without online pedagogy and the challenge of learners lacking the intercultural communication skills necessary to participate. As a leading research question, we have based on how **universities and learners move from face-to-face learning to the online environment.**

Literature Review

The COVID- 19 global pandemic has affected Algeria, among other nations. The recorded death tolls are among the highest, forcing the Government to impose since March, 23 2019 a total lockdown in Blida province, a major hotspot, and a 12-hour night curfew to Algiers (Hamadi, 2020), resulting in significant uncertainty as to when schools, educational institutions, and university campuses will reopen.

To mitigate the impact of the lockdown and social distancing, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research has urged institutions around the country to restore teaching and learning through technology, moving from face-to-face mode to the online environment. The latter is the only alternative to this challenge, as it offers the flexibility of learning; its sudden shift in the pedagogical medium undoubtedly forces academics and teachers to rethink how to deliver their course content. (Sarnou & Sarnou, 2021)

Teaching is mainly done by conventional, traditional, or slightly sophisticated teacher-centred methods rather than modern student-oriented applications and techniques at our universities. At the same time, knowledge and information are transmitted through lectures and discussions that require the physical presence of both student and the teacher.

Face-to-Face Education

Classroom-based learning, traditional/ conventional classroom or in-person classroom, has been the standard for centuries, where teaching and learning occur in the same place and at the same time. This learning is essentially a teacher-centred method with the teacher being the provider of knowledge, and passive learning with little input from the students (Harden & Cosby, 2000, pp.338-339) who are passive receivers of knowledge through learning resources that are

often limited to teaching materials, textbooks, relevant exercise books, test and exam papers, etc. Ultimately, the teacher causes learning to occur (Novak, 1998, p.132).

More importantly, face-to-face instruction is essential for building a sense of community (Conole et al., 2008, p.10), it is quite dynamic, and it allows live interaction between the teacher who plays the role of the motivator (Upton, 2006, p.29) and his/her learner and between the fellow learners themselves. It also guarantees a better comprehension and memorization of lesson content and allows classmates more engagement and collaboration (Face-to-face-learning, 2020).

Online Education

Online education is self-paced learning, and learners can choose where, when, and how they can learn. They have access to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or a Learning Management System (LMS), collaborative and interactive learning platforms such as Moodle, Collaborate, or Blackboard. Those learning platforms are based on cloud technology that allows instructors and learners to share educational materials and communicate via the web through forums, chats, blogs, digital resources, and tools to create engaging learning content with the aims of "extending discussions" (Moodle, 2014) and keeping "students informed, involved, and collaborating" (BlackBoard, 2014).

The instruction may be asynchronous when teaching and learning do not happen at the same time (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) or synchronous when teaching and learning happen at the same time; or both of them to facilitate interaction, collaboration in group activities to boost learners' engagement and avoid high dropout rates. **Another aspect of remote learning is that it helps develop 21st-century soft skills by stimulating the students' curiosity, collaborative work, autonomous learning, critical thinking, and digital literacy** (Sun & Chen, 2016)**.**

Intercultural Communication Skills

There is no single definition of intercultural communication (IC) that all researchers accept. However, Sadokhin (2007) defines IC as a blending of knowledge, skills, and abilities with which an individual can successfully communicate with partners from others. The possession of those qualities such as respect, openess, curiosity, observing, listening, analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting are the key abilities that contribute to intercultural communication, and influence individuals' communication behaviors virtually and in real life.

Undoubtedly, university education is about teaching content, and the ability to adapt to changing conditions and constantly expand one's knowledge is increasingly being focused on, in addition to critical thinking, creativity, intercultural communication, and teamwork abilities (European Commission, 2020).

Research Methodology

The researchers used the documentary research or documentary sources method to develop their leading research question and analyse existing research documents and other e-sources of information to collect relevant data for this study. The researchers believed that this method is more effective than in-depth interviews or participant observation.

The use of documentary research methods refers to analysing documents containing information about the phenomenon we wish to study (Bailey 1994). This method was undertaken to access data from various sources such like review of available information from books, physical elements, statistics, university and government databases, and online platforms.

Data Analysis

This paper adopts a documentary analysis method that provides access to ministry reports, web searches, and online platforms with careful consideration to the quality of the information source, mainly in the context of COVID-19 and the scarcity of physical data.

Furthermore, in order to use reliable sources, importance was granted to the use of university and government sources to support decision-making about a potential rethink of e-learning curricula in the post-crisis era. The researchers used 43 sources, including news articles, Higher Education Ministry, Universities MOODLE Platforms, University Websites/ blogs, PDF books, reports and papers, YouTube Channels, and details of collected data used in this paper is provided in Table 1.

Most of the gathered information (65.11%) came from the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research portal, universities' e-learning platforms and websites. When complete information was not accessible, a review of available data, statistics, and other data from government, regional, and multilingual newspapers' articles were substituted.

Table 1.*Illustrates the full details of the collected data*

Sources Types	Examples	Numbers	%
News articles	Elmoudjahid.com	15	34.88%
Higher Education Ministry	MESRS press release	2	4.65%
Universities MOODLE Platforms	elearning.univ-km.dz	9	20.93%
University Websites/ blogs	Université Kasdi Merbah Ouargla	4	9.30%
Pdf Books, Reports &Papers	Conole et al	11	25.58%
You Tube Channels	Maamar, K	2	4.65%

Five universities from the four cardinal points in Algeria have been reviewed to represent higher education response to the pandemic. The focus was to explore a university of the capital city of each region, with a stronger focus on universities that have adopted different digital strategies from others. We also attempted to balance regions/ provinces with high cases and those whose cases are just emerging. We present these cases in Table 2.

Table 2. *Provinces reviewed from National Office of Statistics*

Province	Region	Number of inhabitants (NOS/2008)	Covid-19 cases (14-04-2020)
Algiers	North	2 947 461	368
Khemis-Miliana (Ain Defla)	North	771 890	63
Constantine	East	943 111	40
Oran	West	1 443 052	134
Ouargla	South	552 539	14

The province organizes the findings presented in this article in alphabetical order.

Algiers: Houari Boumedienne of Science and Technology University **(HBUST):**

As a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak, the requirement for social distancing, and the suspension of in-person lessons, Houari Boumediene University of Science and Technology has announced on March 31 the "effective" resumption of courses on April 5 (Ismain, 2020).

HBUST University has succeeded in launching the CISCO WebEx meeting platform that allows up to 5,000 students to virtually meet and collaborate online with their teachers in person, thanks to its partner CISCO Algeria. Lessons and videos can be viewed live online or recorded on streaming via the university Moodle digital platform. Access to both CISCO WebEx and Moodle platforms can be done through P.C. or mobile Smartphones, and the novelty is that it can even be made via landlines by dialling a free number. More importantly, instructional videos have been made available on YouTube, besides PDF guides for both teachers and students to initiate and support them, using WebEx and Moodle digital platforms (Ismain & Ahras, 2020).

In addition, training sessions have been scheduled to train teachers to learn to use the various online learning platforms; even some students have also been initiated to distance learning. As a result, teachers are now progressing to the newly introduced alternative forms of learning and started uploading their lessons in PDF and PowerPoint Files in Moodle (Ahras, 2020).

Nevertheless, the only remaining issue that students may need is a good Internet connection. In doing so, HBUST responsible is doing its best to reach an agreement with telephone operators to guarantee a free connection to disseminate the courses. Two operators agreed, and they are still waiting for the third operator's response (Ahras, 2020).

In case of shutdown continues, online tests and exams could be thought about as the digital platforms offer several functionalities that could be exploited (Ahras, 2020).

Khemis-Miliana (Ain Defla): Djilali Bounaama Khemis-Miliana University (DBKMU)

Khemis-Miliana, in Ain Defla, is a neighboring province of Blida about 72 km, has recorded its first COVID-19 case on March 24. Yet, the number has raised fourfold in less than two weeks ("Les Cas de Coronavirus Confirmés", 2020 &Amrouni, 2020)

So, as a measure to fight the spread of the disease, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research announced on April 4th to postpone the start of the second semester after the spring break (MESRS, 2020a).

The temporary closure coupled with the Ministry instruction to move to online learning have urged academics to take steps to transition to online delivery to stay in contact with their students (Daoud, 2020) even though not being prepared for the transition as no institution or faculty has offered online delivery prior to COVID-19 (S.E., 2020).

To face the emergency, teachers recruited between 2016 and 2019 and who had benefited from formal training in ICT and distance learning were requested together with the university technical staff to train those who may not possess the necessary digital skills to use the Moodle platform in order to create their online courses (MESRS, 2020b).

The University technical staff has created on March 30 a YouTube Channel where instructional videos have been uploaded to equip both teachers and students who may face problems as course designers or online learners with the digital skills necessary to use the University online Moodle platform. Examples demonstrate how to log in to the University e-

learning platform or the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) web portal (Maamar, n.d.).

Teachers are, as well, shown step-by-step on how to create a course on Moodle, download and install the publishing chain Opale3.7 and Scenari software to produce academic training documents, and how to use LaTeX and Free Office software for technical type settings; besides, creating videos for Opale on Moodle with Camtasia studio to make educational videos; and so, encouraging teachers to use a mixed mode of teaching online (Maamar, n.d.).

However, not all university teachers and students have an account or an updated account on the University platform; so to solve the problem, teachers were asked to get in touch with the Head of departments' of their faculties and students with their teachers via their professional emails or login the Moodle platform as anonymous users or guests to allow non-logged-in students access their courses (Maamar, n.d.). More importantly, free of charge access was granted to MOODLE platform to unable students connected to fixed or mobile networks to open the platform course content (Rédaction AE, 2020b).

To carry out teaching from face-to-face to online, one of the authors, a teacher at Djilali Bounaama University, who has benefited from formal trainings with Erasmus on how to design a practical online course, feels adequately trained in online pedagogy and the technologies. She interacts with her students, supports them with constant feedback, and helps them collaborate and work together; she even feels ready to test them online (Araibi, 2020).

Some instructors are conducting their lessons by uploading lessons in PDF formats, Word, and PowerPoint Files in the University e-learning platform to support their students in this period of physical, social isolation (Université Djilali Bounaama, 2020); others are doing live online lecture videos for those who could attend and recording them using a webcam for those facing health, isolation or poor internet access during this crisis (Université Djilali Bounaama, 2020).

Additional free web-conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet are being used for synchronous meetings, in addition to other tools like Facebook and email to benefit those facing Internet connection issues (Université Djilali Bounaama, 2020).

Finally, the evolving situation of COVID-19 has led to suspending all laboratories, workshops, practicums, and internships (Schahrazed, 2020).

Oran: Oran 1 Ahmed Ben Bella University (O1ABBU)
Being the second most important city after Algiers, the capital city, Oran is the third most hit province after Blida and Algiers ("Coronavirus : 185 Nouveaux Cas", 2020).

When the extension of the lockdown after April 5 seemed imminent, the Vice-Rector of external relation, cooperation, and scientific events of Ahmed Ben Bella University, Prof. Smain Belaska, addressed teachers and researchers in a letter that was published on the university e-learning platform encouraging remote learning instead of face-to-face teaching for April in order

to provide access to digital content to their students and keep ties with them during the period of covid-19 lockdown (Université Oran1, 2020b).

To do so, Oran 1 University has provided an e-learning platform to allow instructors to post their lessons with either free or limited access to their students. It has also provided a guide for teachers explaining the steps to post their courses. Students were also given the necessary information to access the uploaded courses via the University e-learning platform. Further, a PDF manual of the University Zimbra collaborative software and webmail was uploaded; besides, two other step-by-step guides on setting up a professional account for teachers and a student account. To do it, the student could fill in an online form, and within 12 hours, s/he could log on to the online learning platform (Université Oran1, 2020a).

Moreover, in order to lighten the e-learning platform in these times of Internet overuse and low-speed access, teachers of first-year students in the different specialties were asked to enable access to their courses to allow the University technical staff to put them on the faculties and institutes' web pages to reach those who may have Internet connection problems (Université Oran1, 2020a). The uploaded files could either be in videos, PPT, word texts, or scanned manuscripts converted to PDF formats. An application has also been made available for download on the teachers' smartphones, accessible from Moodle App link (Université Oran1, 2020a).

On April,19, 82% of the educational content was uploaded to the e-learning platform, 900 accounts were created for teachers, 5,400 others for students, and nearly 2,612 have also signed up for the smartphones' MoodleApp ("Mise en Ligne d'un Portail," 2020).

Also, to support distance learning and ensure equity in access to the learning resources, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is making additional efforts by putting an online portal (MESRS, 2020b) that gathers the links to all Algerian universities and also by patterning with telephone operators which have guaranteed that browsing the universities web portals and digital platforms will be free of charge to ensure wide dissemination of data ("Mise en Ligne d'un Portail," 2020).

Constantine: Abdelhamid Mehri-Constantine 2 University (AMC2U)
As a big city in Algeria, Constantine is the third most important city in the East of Algeria, and the fifth-most hit province where the number recorded has almost raised three times ("Les Cas de Coronavirus Confirmés," 2020&Amrouni, 2020) urging Higher Education decision-makers to move in-person classes to online delivery in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (MESRS, 2020a).

It was the pioneer in online education since it offers e-learning training for newly recruited teachers since 2016 (ENSC, 2016 &Université Constantine2, 2020a). Constantine 2 University switching digitally is going smoothly as it is not a new strategy; a week after the spring holidays had been extended, the percentage of courses converted to the e-learning platform according to the Vice-Rector, Taki-Eddine Dib Ahmed, in an interview with Cirta FM on 12 April, has reached 75% of the total of 647 modules (Université Constantine2, 2020c).

In fact, a helpdesk was launched on March 26 where PDF guides in Arabic and French were uploaded to help teachers post their courses on the platform, and in case of a request for additional support, four members are reachable via an email (Université Constantine2, 2020b). Other step-by-step guides in PDF format and videos in Arabic and French are also available on the University e-learning platform for teachers (Université Constantine2, 2018).

Moreover, to allow instructors to directly interact with their students in real-time, the University made available tutorials on how to stream live on YouTube with OBS studio Open Broadcaster Software that is a free open source software used for capturing and recording the screen while also capturing audio (Université Constantine2, 2018).

Abdelhamid Mehri Constantine 2 students could access their courses through the university e-learning platform, website, and Facebook. In addition, an email address, phone, and fax were put at the students' disposal to answer their queries (Université Constantine2, 2020d). There are two ways to log in to the Moodle platform, students can either do it autonomously or by using login-IDs created for students upon their registration by their students' card ID number as their username and their birth date as password (Université Constantine2, 2020d).

 Ouargla: Kasdi Merbah University (KMU)
Ouargla, the northeast province of the Algerian desert, is where the first confirmed coronavirus case was reported on 25 February. It is also the first region where death among children, a girl of 9 years old, was reported (Rédaction AE, 2020a).

As a result of this world pandemic and the increasing number of infected cases and deaths, Ouargla University, as the rest of Algerian universities, has also moved its teaching online as a safety measure to curb the spread of the highly contagious disease.

Kasdi Merbah Ouargla University online learning preparations have started in early March, a few days after receiving Prof. Chitour, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, instruction of February29 sent to the heads of higher education establishments and presidents of scientific research councils that suggested teachers and students adhere and adopt the online approach to ensure the continuity of courses in case of possible pandemic (MESRS, 2020a).

On March 2, 2020,Kasdi Merbah Ouargla University announced that a training course about the Moodle platform was provided for teachers of the ten faculties and two institutes on 4 and March 5. On the 11th of the same month, another training course was scheduled for the faculties and institutes' heads of departments and their deputies (Université Ouargla, 2020a & 2020b).

As the pandemic continued to gain ground, the spring holiday was extended for two weeks, and it was announced that in-person teaching was suspended for higher education, and online learning would be adopted. Academics have to post their courses onto the universities' platforms which are expected to continue until the extension of the lockdown at least 29 April (Bensouiah, 2020).

Also, as the implementation of online teaching at higher education is new, Kasdi Merhab Ouargla University's information and technology team has developed a practical manual in PDF format to ensure teachers are equipped to post their lessons on the university MOODLE platform. An email address is also available on the e-learning platform home page at their disposal for additional assistance (Université Ouargla, 2020a).

On March 19, 2020, in a letter to the different faculties' deans and institutes' directors, Vice-rector Abdelfateh Abi Daoud insisted that teachers must register and open an account via their professional Zimbra platform to post their lessons on the University Moodle platform. In contrast, students can self-enroll on Moodle platform using any email account.(Université Ouargla, 2020a).

Additionally, many video tutorials have been made available on YouTube hosted by Kasdi Merbah Ouargla University experts to benefit teachers and students by seeing and hearing to access knowledge and skills needed to use the Moodle platform for effective teaching and learning (NTCSA Laboratoire, 2020). Audio-visual videos provide step-by-step support for users to enroll in Moodle, build/ open a new course, quiz, create participants' sections and groups, and convert a PowerPoint to a video (NTCSA Laboratoire, 2020).

Results and Discussion

The synthesis of the five Algerian universities' responses to the challenge imposed by the COVID-19 situation shows that the digital strategies taken in higher education vary from a university to another. Nevertheless, there are more similarities than differences.
The meta-analysis from the above information highlights organizational, pedagogical, and technological challenges.

1- While nearly all the provinces of the big cities with developed economies are reporting a high number of cases, Ouargla, despite being the wealthiest province in Algeria, has recorded a lower number of confirmed cases compared to Khemis-Miliana (in Ain Defla province), which is a small town with a developing economy, but has a far high number of COVID-19 cases.
2- Except for Ouargla in the South, the analysis also shows that, in general, the Northern provinces and mainly those closer to Blida (the epicentre of Covid-19) have a more significant number of COVID-19 cases.
3- All universities have suspended face-to-face teaching and extended their spring holiday even though Ouargla has a few infected cases; there is a national consensus on closing campuses and moving to distance instruction to support students continue their studies and save the academic year.
4- Almost all universities are facing the challenge of the sudden shift to online delivery that needs special pedagogical, digital and intercultural skills, besides possessing a P.C. or Smartphone and good Internet.
5- Almost all academics and students struggle with the low-speed Internet in these times of over-use.
6- All universities use free digital platforms such as Moodle, Zimbra, Opale 3.7 and Scenari, LaTeX and Free Office, Camtasia studio, OBS (Open Broadcasting Software), Zoom (free version), Google Meet, Facebook, and universities' websites.

7- Houari Boumedienne of Science and Technology University is the only university that has integrated Webex meeting platform into its Moodle Learning Management System (LMS), offering, thereby, real-time lectures.

8- It is also noticeable that no university had remote education prior to COVID-19, and all were not ready for this unprecedented emergency despite possessing the digital platform Moodle.

9- Even though ICT and distance learning training for newly recruited teachers have started since 2016, remote teaching is still not promoted.

10- Except Ouargla, which had in-person training courses about the Moodle platform for teachers and staff after receiving Prof. Chitour's Chitour's letter, all the other universities did it in PDF formats and YouTube tutorials after the pandemic had been declared and campuses closed.

11- Interestingly, all universities' technical teams have helped in online delivery by developing practical manuals in PDF format besides YouTube instructional videos to ensure teachers and students are equipped to navigate the universities' digital platforms and use the technological tools.

12- Surprisingly, no institution has offered online and face-to-face training for instructors to learn how to effectively design an online course, motivate and engage their students, and test them online.

13- Many academics and students do not have a university email account, making the Moodle login, intercultural interaction, and collaboration more difficult for all, whether teachers, students, or university technical staff.

14- Each university uses a different login way to its online services. Ahmed Ben Bella University in Oran login process allows students to fill in an online form, and within 12 hours, logging on to the online learning platform can be possible. Nevertheless, the login method at Kasdi Merhab University in Ouargla via login-IDs created for students upon their registration is more straightforward and accessible for the users and would solve the universities' forgotten password resetting issues.

15- It is noticeable that the rapid move to online delivery is a real challenge for both academics and students who are used to conventional instruction to teach/ learn online; resulting in a temporary decline in teaching/ learning quality and equity regardless of teachers and technical staff's efforts made in a relatively short time in a context of emergency.

16- It is important to note that there are no shared sources among the five Algerian universities. Apparently, teachers and technical staff endeavored to support only the learners' online instruction. They did nothing to help them develop their intercultural communication skills to function effectively and appropriately in the online setting, except, a teacher at Djilali Bounaama Khemis-Miliana University who benefited from trainings with Erasmus and possesses the crucial skills needed to be an effective online teacher and the required strategies for developing engagement and rapport with students.

17- Despite the digital move, university decision-makers have to make additional efforts to empower learners to develop their intercultural communication skills in education to foster a culture of positivity, which will benefit all parties for sustainable development.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the responses of five Algerian universities to the COVID-19 pandemic and sheds light on the issues, perspectives, and pedagogical practices of the instructors' overnight change to switching pre-existing face-to-face learning to the online environment.

Overall data shows that no university was prepared for the digital move, and thus a lot had to be done. However, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research pre-pandemic instruction urging academics to adhere to e-learning strategy in case of potential pandemic helped a minority pave the way to online shift.

Yet, shifting from a conventional face-to-face to an entirely virtual delivery strategy will not happen overnight and is tied with many constraints and challenges such as access to ICT or home office infrastructure and sufficient internet bandwidth for both academics and students, mainly for those living in remote locations and lacking digital skills needed to take part in the online environment.

Additional support and training need to be given to teachers who have rapidly migrated whole study programs online, more support at registering, security, designing their materials, assessing, and keeping records of their students' learning outcomes to acquire the required competencies. Also, to enable learners to have life-long changing experiences, develop their intercultural communication skills, and enhance access and use equity, equality, and the quality of virtual HE, a rethink of e-learning curricula is called for in the post-crisis era. Further, universities must make efforts to address the digital divide by particularly enabling underprivileged students to access technical devices, such as personal computers and modern learning mobile gadgetry, through financial aid (discounts and /or funding).

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