

## Implementing Distance Learning during COVID-19 in Morocco: Pedagogical Gains, Challenges, and Learners' Attitudes

**Hassane Benlaghrissi**

Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences  
Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Benni Mellal, Morocco  
Email: [benlaghrissi@gmail.com](mailto:benlaghrissi@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students in Morocco and elsewhere were forced to move from face-to-face instruction to distance learning. Consequently, a plethora of online platforms, including Google Classroom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and video communication applications, were used as instructional tools. In light of this, the current study investigates the pedagogical gains of implementing distance learning via Microsoft Teams during the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges participants encountered. It also probes English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' attitudes toward the effectiveness of this mode of instruction. The study population was 28 secondary school students who taught English courses distantly for eight weeks. A post-questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The findings revealed that most participants identified two pedagogical benefits: the ability to learn at home and flexible learning time. As for the challenges, most participants admitted having no or poor network signal, no connectivity in their devices, technical problems related to Microsoft Teams, reduced interaction with their teachers and peers, and poor learning. Besides, the analysis of the 5-point Likert scale survey indicated that while participants were somehow motivated to attend distance learning English courses, they expressed discomfort, they considered face-to-face learning to be more effective than distance learning, and thus they were unsatisfied with the experience and had no intentions of future use. As a result, the study participants displayed negative attitudes toward the implementation of distance learning.

**Keywords:** challenges, COVID-19, distance learning, effectiveness, learners' attitudes, Microsoft Teams, Moroccan secondary schools, pedagogical gains

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## Introduction

As technology has penetrated all parts of our lives, it has become necessary to incorporate information technology (IT) in learning and teaching. Undoubtedly, making use of IT would enhance the learning and teaching process quality in the future. However, one way to adopt IT in education is via distance learning. This being said, distance learning is not only a possibility for future education but also a reality that provides learners, even in significant numbers, with exceptional learning opportunities and choices in where, when, and how to learn (Mehrotra et al., 2001). As a result, this promotes students' engagement and maximizes opportunities for student success (Kupczynsk et al., 2012).

Distance education has a long history, dating back to the late eighteenth century. This long history has paved the way for a growing implementation in educational institutions. This, consequently, enhances the quality of learning and makes it accessible to a wide variety of learners, including those who are disadvantageous to face-to-face learning (Mehrotra et al., 2001). Moore et al. (2011) define distance learning as a mode of instruction that includes "an instructor who is physically located in a different place from the learner, as well as possibly providing the instruction at disparate times" (p. 129). This definition, therefore, stresses the instruction occurring in different locations between the educator and the learner. Accordingly, distance learning is characterized by the sponsorship of an educational institution and the physical separation of the educator and the learner (Ascough, 2002).

Researchers often use distance and online learning interchangeably (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005; Moore et al., 2011). According to Kearsley (1997), online learning is an instruction that requires a computer network such as the world wide web. In most cases, online education occurs in the distance education context, where the instructor and the learner interact via a network. Hence, like distance learning, online learning denotes physical separation, the support of an educational institution, the use of a computer network, and two-way communication via the computer network (Paulsen, 2002).

With the outbreak of COVID-19, teachers and students were forced to switch to distance learning, which has had a tremendous influence on the educational system globally (Li & Yu, 2022). This mode of instruction has had a significant beneficial effect on teaching and learning by encouraging educators to implement novel online teaching methods along with making a various online platform such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, and video communication applications available to students (Budsaba-Kanoksilapatham, 2021; Wildana et al., 2020). Further, online tools helped students accomplish their tasks quicker and improved the quality of assessment (Maier et al., 2020).

Despite the positive outlook of distance learning, instructors and practitioners have experienced various difficulties, mainly technical issues and lacking technological facilities (Akpinar, 2020; Muhammad & Kainat, 2020). Moreover, in a recent experimental study, Benlaghrissi (2023) found that students who were taught grammar courses conventionally performed significantly better than students who used online learning via Microsoft Teams. The author concluded that lacking high-quality devices, not preparing students for the experience, and poor training of teachers were the main reasons behind the negative effect of the implementation.

The detrimental consequences of COVID-19 and distance learning might impact students and instructors long-term. To mitigate such long-term effects, instructors must first identify the pedagogical gains of distance learning and the challenges learners might

experience. Moreover, understanding learners' perceptions would undoubtedly enable innovation and enhancement, leading to improved distance education (Gullifer & Tyson, 2010). Accordingly, the current study aims to investigate the pedagogical gains of implementing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in a Moroccan secondary school and the challenges participants faced. It also scrutinizes learners' attitudes toward the effectiveness of this mode of instruction.

### Literature Review

With the outbreak of COVID-19, extensive research has been done on distance learning resulting in diverse attitudes toward the effectiveness of its implementation. In 2020, Serhan examined how American university students perceived the transition from face-to-face to online learning using the Zoom platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher used a 5-point Likert scale survey that 31 participants completed to collect data. Almost half of the participants (48%) said they did not enjoy video-conferencing via Zoom, while only 23% agreed. Additionally, most participants (61%) did not notice an improvement in their learning, while 10% admitted a positive effect on their learning. Consequently, students preferred face-to-face instruction over online learning.

In a similar study, Mahfouz & Salam (2021) questioned whether or not Jordanian university students had positive or negative attitudes toward online learning during the COVID-19 crisis. The study sample was 194 students at Aqaba University who responded to a survey questionnaire. The findings suggested that students had a negative attitude towards online learning due to technical and financial problems.

Alarbi et al. (2022) explored students' and teachers' attitudes toward online learning in the UAE using a cross-sectional descriptive design. The participants were 418 secondary school students and 58 teachers who used online education during the 2020-2021 academic year. Overall, participants held positive attitudes toward the experience. Findings also showed no statistically significant difference between private and public teachers. The authors concluded that distance online learning could provide a more effective and comfortable learning environment.

In another recent investigation, Elashhab (2022) investigated the attitudes of Saudi female students toward online English language learning during the pandemic lockdown using Zoom, Cisco WebEx, and Blackboard platforms. The study's primary objectives were to identify the challenges of online learning to understand students' learning experiences and suggest practical solutions. After two semesters of distance education, the results revealed that 63.52% of students preferred distance education, and 59.6% perceived online education as an efficient teaching method to expand their knowledge, skills, and social competence. On the other hand, 69.5% of students admitted to encountering technical difficulties.

Notably, far too little attention has been paid to distance education in Morocco. Benhima (2021) inspected Moulay Ismail University students' attitudes toward using distance education during COVID-19. By adopting questionnaires and focus group discussions, the author identified the platforms students used, their attitudes towards distance learning, and students' recommendations to improve distance learning in Moroccan universities. Based on the results, the most used platforms by students were WhatsApp, dictionary apps, and Google. Students also preferred face-to-face learning to online classes, even though part-time students and those who live far away prioritized online learning. As

for the recommendations, students suggested providing high-quality free internet, varying teaching methods, and offering much time for exam preparations.

El Khayma (2021) researched Ibn Tofail University students' motivation for and attitudes toward online learning. The study sample was 89 students who responded to an online questionnaire. The results demonstrated that 48% of the respondents had poor online learning due to technical and financial problems, while 36% affirmed satisfaction with online courses. In addition, only 27% of the respondents were enthusiastic about attending online learning, while 37% were not. Therefore, most participants in the study had negative attitudes toward distance classes, and 49% did not see online learning as the future of education in Morocco.

Given all mentioned, research is scarce in the Moroccan context. In addition, research thus far provides evidence that fewer have been undertaken in secondary schools. Therefore, this study seeks to obtain data that will help address some of these research gaps by investigating Moroccan secondary school students' attitudes toward distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It first analyses the pedagogical gains of the implementation and its challenges. It also explores students' attitudes toward the eight-week experience. To achieve these objectives, the following questions were addressed:

1. What pedagogical gains are offered to students in distance learning and the challenges they encounter?
2. What are students' attitudes toward the implementation of distance learning in English courses?

## **Research Method**

### ***Participants***

The study participants were 10<sup>th</sup>-grade EFL secondary school students studying at Tazizaoute High School, El Kbab, Directorate of Khenifra, Morocco. The sample of the study included 28 students.

### ***Data collection instruments***

A post-questionnaire was employed to collect data. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information, two multiple choice questions dealing with pedagogical gains and challenges of distance learning, and a 5-point Likert scale survey of 18 items exploring the participants' attitudes toward the effectiveness of implementing distance learning in their English learning. The researcher developed the questionnaire based on the literature review.

### ***Validity of the instruments***

To determine the questionnaire's validity, four professors in applied linguistics and researchers in distance education evaluated it. Three items were reworded based on the reviewers' feedback, and part two, dealing with pedagogical gains and challenges of distance learning, was included.

### ***Reliability of the instrument***

For the questionnaire's reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was computed. As shown in table 1, the value was 0.884, indicating that the questionnaire was reliable for data collection.

Table 1. *Reliability of the Post-questionnaire*

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items	N of Items
,884	,820	37

### Procedure

The study lasted eight weeks, from April 5th to May 28th, 2021. While the control group was taught English courses traditionally, the experimental group used distance learning via Microsoft Teams. Before the treatment, the researcher invited the participants in the experimental group to a two-hour round table discussion about the differences between distance and face-to-face learning. In addition, the participants were given an overview of how to access Microsoft Teams, join a meeting, and respond to the teacher's instructions and questions. The participants took part in the study for eight weeks. After the treatment, they were given the post-questionnaire to analyze the implementation's benefits and challenges and assess their attitudes toward this teaching mode.

### Findings

As already stated, the questionnaire consisted of three parts: demographic information that included gender, age, participants' IT skills, their previous experience in distance learning, and their preparation for the experience. The second part had two multiple-choice questions regarding the pedagogical gains and the challenges of distance learning. The last part was a 5-point Likert scale of 18 items to investigate students' attitudes toward implementing distance learning. These 18 items were grouped into four dimensions: students' motivation for distance learning, students' comfort in distance learning, students' perceived effectiveness of distance learning, and students' intentions of future use.

### Demographic Profiles of the Participants

As displayed in table 2, the total number of participants was 28, 6 were males, with a percentage of 21.4%, and 22 were females, with a percentage of 78.6%. As for the participants' age, most participants (57.1%) were 15 years, 39.3% were 16 years or more, and finally, only 1 participant (3.6%) was below 14 years.

Table 2. *Gender and Age Distributions among the Participants*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	6	21,4	21,4	21,4
	Female	22	78,6	78,6	100,0
	Total	28	100,0	100,0	
Age	Below 14 years	1	3.6	3.6	3,6
	15 years	16	57.1	57.1	60,7
	16 years and more	11	39.3	39.3	100,0
	Total	28	100,0	100,0	

For the third question dealing with students' IT (Information Technology) skills, from figure 1, most participants' (67.9%) IT skills were medium, 17.9% were low, and only 14.2% reported high IT skills.

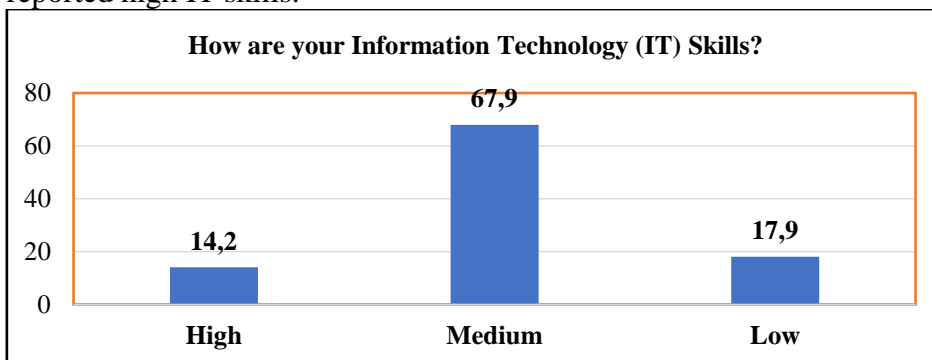


Figure 1. Respondents' IT Skills

For participants' previous experience in distance learning, figure 2 illustrates that most participants (64%) had no experience in distance learning. In comparison, 36% admitted to having previous experience.

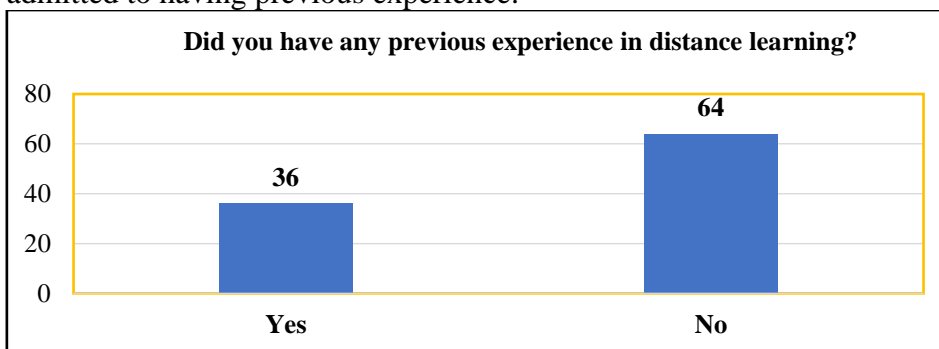


Figure 2. Respondents' Previous Experience in Distance Learning

Regarding the last question, from figure 3, most participants (68%) were somehow prepared, 25% needed to prepare, and only 7% were very prepared for the experience.

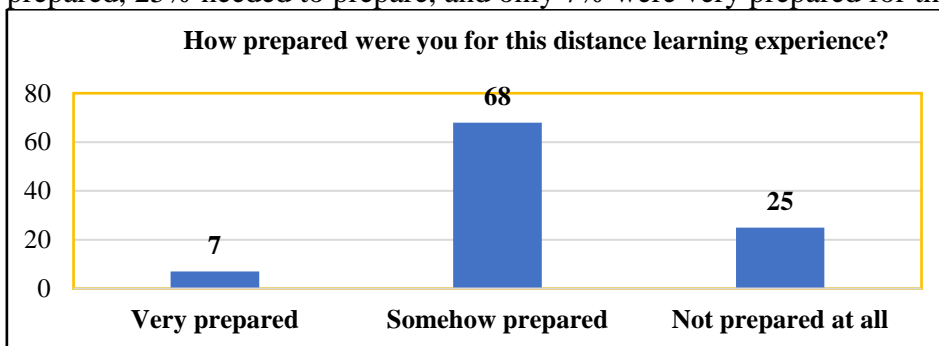


Figure 3. Respondents' Preparation for Distance Learning

### *Pedagogical Gains and Challenges of Distance Learning*

The questionnaire's second part dealt with the pedagogical gains and the challenges of implementing distance learning. For the benefits, as illustrated in table 3, most participants



(82.1%) claimed that distance learning allowed them to learn at home, and 60.7% declared it offered a flexible use of learning time. In addition, half participants reported that the experience improved their technical skills and allowed more accessible access to the teacher. However, only 6 participants (21.4%) admitted that distance learning helped them learn at their own pace and provided an easy and quick share of educational materials.

Table 3. *Pedagogical Gains of Distance Learning*

	Responses' Number	Percentage
<b>Ability to learn at home</b>	23	82.1%
<b>Flexible use of learning time</b>	17	60.7%
<b>Learning at my own pace</b>	6	21.4%
<b>Improving my technical skills</b>	14	50.0%
<b>Easier access to my teacher</b>	14	50.0%
<b>Ease and quick sharing of educational materials</b>	6	21.4%

Conversely, the respondents encountered some challenges while experiencing distance learning. The vast majority of the participants (89.3%) complained about having no or poor network signal, and 75% admitted having no or poor connectivity in devices and thus had poor learning. Moreover, 57.1% had technical problems related to Microsoft Teams, 53.6% had reduced interaction, and 42.9% needed more knowledge and training in ICT. Table 4 presents the findings:

Table 4. *Challenges of Distance Learning*

	Responses' Number	Percentage
<b>No/poor network signal</b>	25	89.3%
<b>No/poor connectivity in devices</b>	21	75.0%
<b>Technical problems related to Microsoft Teams</b>	16	57.1%
<b>Lack of knowledge and training in ICT</b>	12	42.9%
<b>Reduced interaction with my teacher and peers</b>	15	53.6%
<b>Poor learning</b>	21	75.0%

### *Students Attitudes Towards the Implementation of Distance Learning*

For students' attitudes towards distance learning, the responses were collected from the participants using 5-Likert scale survey items. For interpreting the questionnaire mean scores, the criteria presented in table 3 were used:

Table 3. *The Interpretation of the Mean Score*

Mean score	Interpretation	Significance
<b>1.00-1.80</b>	Strongly disagree	Very low
<b>1.81-2.59</b>	Disagree	Low
<b>2.60-3.40</b>	Neutral	Moderate
<b>3.41-4.20</b>	Agree	High
<b>4.21-5.00</b>	Strongly agree	Very high

Consistent with the above interpretation, the analysis, as presented in table 4, revealed that the overall mean score of the questionnaire was 2.5054 with a standard deviation of .15230. The score is low as it is included in the low rank (1.81-2.59). Therefore, the participants of this study had negative attitudes toward implementing distance learning.

Table 4. Overall mean, Std. D, and Significance of the Questionnaire

The Questionnaire's Overall Mean	Standard Deviation	Significance
<b>2.5054</b>	<b>.15230</b>	<b>Low</b>

With regard to the questionnaire's four dimensions, as shown in table 5, the motivation dimension was the highest, with a mean of 3.2054 and a standard deviation of .19546. This dimension was moderate since the four statements had either high or moderate significance. Statement four, "I was always motivated to submit all my homework on time," came first with a mean of 3.5357 and a standard deviation of 1.31887, corresponding to high significance. The first statement, "I was enthusiastic to begin my distance learning experience in English learning," came last with a mean of 2.8571 and a standard deviation of 1.38013, which was included in the moderate significance. This illustrates that students were somehow motivated to attend distance learning in English courses.

Table 5. Participants' Motivation to Attend Distance Learning Courses

N	Item	Mean	SD	Significance
1.	I was enthusiastic to begin my distance learning experience in English learning	2,8571	1,38013	Moderate
2.	I was always motivated to attend all of my teacher's distance learning	3,2143	1,37051	Moderate
3.	I always tried to stay focused when my teacher explained	3,2143	1,34322	Moderate
4.	I was always motivated to submit all my homework on time	3,5357	1,31887	High
<b>Weighted mean/ Std. Deviation/Significance</b>		<b>3,2054</b>	<b>,19546</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Students' intentions for future use dimension obtained a mean of 2.4911 and a standard deviation of .24039 (See table 6). This made it a low dimension. The statement "I would like distance learning to be integrated into other skills and language components than face-to-face learning" came in the first place with a mean of 2.8571 and a standard deviation of 1.38013, constituting a moderate significance. However, "I would like distance learning to replace face-to-face learning in my school" came last, resulting in a low significance with a mean of 2.2500 and a standard deviation of 1.57821. This demonstrates that most participants were unsatisfied with the experience and had no intention of future use.

Table 6. Participants' Intentions for Future Use of Distance Learning

N	Item	Mean	SD	Significance
.15	I would like to continue using distance learning to learn English than face-to-face learning	2,2857	1,32936	Low
.16	I would like distance learning to be integrated into other skills and language components than face-to-face learning	2,8571	1,38013	Moderate
.17	I would like distance learning to be integrated into all the other school subjects instead of face-to-face learning	2,5714	1,47645	Low
.18	I would like distance learning to replace face-to-face learning in my school	2,2500	1,57821	Low
<b>Weighted mean/ Std. Deviation/Significance</b>		<b>2,4911</b>	<b>,24039</b>	<b>Low</b>



Table 7 displays participants' discomfort in implementing distance learning with a mean of 2.3214 and a standard deviation of .15423, which also corresponded to the low significance. In this dimension, all the statements were included in the low significance. The highest mean (M= 2,5714) was for statement six, "Distance learning made it easier to ask questions when I did not understand than face-to-face learning." In contrast, the lowest mean (M=2.1429) was for the fifth statement, "Distance learning made it easier to understand and respond to my teacher's instructions than face-to-face learning."

Table 7. *Participants' Comfort in Online Distance Learning*

N	Statements	Mean	SD	Significance
.5	Distance learning made it easier to understand and respond to my teacher's instructions than face-to-face learning	2,1429	1,11270	Low
.6	Distance learning made it easier to ask questions when I did not understand than face-to-face learning	2,5714	1,06904	Low
.7	Distance learning helped me communicate more effectively with my teacher and peers than face-to-face learning	2,2500	1,10972	Low
.8	Distance learning helped me participate more effectively in discussions than face-to-face learning	2,3214	1,18801	Low
	<b>Weighted mean/ Std. Deviation/Significance</b>	<b>2,3214</b>	<b>,15423</b>	<b>Low</b>

As can be seen in table 8, the lowest mean value was students' perceived effectiveness of distance learning (M= 2.2545; SD=.18739), which also corresponded to the low significance. In this dimension, all the statements were included in the low significance. Thus, the respondents admitted that distance learning was ineffective as face-to-face learning. According to the respondents, these distance classes did not help them become more active, motivated, and autonomous like face-to-face learning. They had little understanding, which did not improve their English learning, and thus they were not enjoyable during this experience.

Table 8. *Participants' Perceived Effectiveness of Distance Learning*

N	Statements	Mean	SD	Significance
.9	I was more enjoyable in distance learning than in face-to-face learning	1,9286	1,27450	Low
.10	I enjoyed my teacher's teaching methods in distance learning than in face-to-face learning	2,1429	1,32537	Low
.11	I had more understanding of English in distance learning than in face-to-face learning	1,9286	1,05158	Low
.12	Distance learning helped me become a more active learner than face-to-face learning	1,9286	1,08623	Low
.13	Distance learning helped me become a more motivated learner than face-to-face learning	2,3571	1,28277	Low
.14	Distance learning helped me become a more autonomous learner than face-to-face learning	2,5000	1,34715	Low
	<b>Weighted mean/ Std. Deviation/Significance</b>	<b>2,2545</b>	<b>,18739</b>	<b>Low</b>

## Discussion

Regarding the first research question, most participants claimed that distance learning allowed them to learn at home and offered a more flexible use of learning time. This finding, however, is congruent with previous studies that emphasized flexibility as a significant

benefit of distance learning (El Aouri, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021). Serhan (2021) stated that students found distance learning more flexible than face-to-face learning as it worked best with their schedule during the pandemic. The author added that the implementation allowed learners to interact more freely because students felt it was easier to ask questions. In addition to flexibility, half of the participants reported that implementing distance learning improved their technical skills and enabled accessible access to the teacher. However, a few participants (21.4%) admitted that the experience helped them learn at their own pace and provided an easy and quick share of educational materials.

Oppositely, the respondents faced some challenges while experiencing distance learning. The vast majority of participants (89.3%) said they had no or poor network signal, and 75% admitted having no or poor connectivity in devices and thus had poor learning. However, the literature review in this regard manifested that technical difficulties, mainly poor network signals, and connectivity problems remain significant challenges in distance learning implementation (Elashhab, 2022; Mahfouz & Salam, 2021).

Furthermore, more than half of the participants (57.1%) had technical problems related to Microsoft Teams, and 53.6% had reduced interaction. In this context, while some studies confirmed a low interaction in distance learning classes (El Khayma, 2021; Serhan, 2020), others concluded that distance learning improved learners' interaction. Hussain et al. (2020) found that students in their study preferred online interaction and feedback to distance learning. Most respondents considered distance learning interaction more effective and modern than face-to-face instruction during COVID-19.

Additionally, 42.9% of the respondents complained about lacking knowledge and training in ICT. A similar problem was reported by Mahfouz & Salam (2021) when they indicated in their study that some students and even professors lacked the proper training on how to use e-learning platforms, including Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Moodle, Facebook Messenger, Skype, and Microsoft Forms used for administering examinations. The authors emphasized that lacking training led students to prefer traditional education over online learning.

With respect to the second research question, the 5-point Likert scale survey analysis showed an overall mean score of 2.5054, with a standard deviation of .15230. Accordingly, the participants of this study had low attitudes toward implementing distance learning in English courses. Thus, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of (Benhima, 2021; El Khayma, 2021; Mahfouz & Salam, 2021). These studies came to the same conclusion that students had negative attitudes toward the implementation of distance learning.

Referring to the survey's four dimensions, the motivation dimension, as the highest ( $M=3.2054$ ,  $SD=.19546$ ), was included in the moderate significance. Students' intentions of future use came after with a mean of 2.4911 and a standard deviation of .24039. This made it a low dimension. Students' comfort in distance learning came in third place ( $M=2.3214$ ,  $SD=.15423$ ), corresponding to the low significance. The lowest mean value was students' perceived effectiveness of distance learning ( $M= 2.2545$ ,  $SD=.18739$ ), which was also included in the low significance. This illustrates that while participants were somehow motivated to attend distance learning English courses during the COVID-19, they expressed discomfort, they considered face-to-face learning to be more effective than distance learning, and thus they were unsatisfied with the experience and had no intentions of future use.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study investigates the pedagogical gains of implementing distance learning in English courses and the challenges the respondents faced. Moreover, it explores the participants' attitudes toward implementing this teaching mode. Most participants identified two pedagogical benefits: the ability to learn at home and flexible learning time. As for the challenges, most participants complained about having no or poor network signal, no connectivity in their devices, technical problems related to Microsoft Teams, reduced interaction with their teachers and peers, and poor learning. Further, the 5-point Likert scale survey analysis showed that the study participants displayed negative attitudes toward implementing distance learning.

Considering the results of the current study, the researcher suggests several recommendations. As a priority, most students admitted having technical problems related to the device's network signal and connectivity (89.3% and 75%), respectively. In this respect, it is unfair to raise the effectiveness of distance learning without reflecting on effective tools in different contexts. Therefore, students should be provided with high-quality devices and high-quality internet.

Additionally, since 64% of the students declared this was their first experience in distance learning and that most of them were somehow prepared for the experience, preparing students for such experiences beforehand is recommended. Furthermore, considering that most participants' (67.9%) Information Technology (IT) skills were medium, training them to use Microsoft Teams and other educational platforms is necessary to avoid different technical problems. Alomyan (2021) demonstrated that lower IT skills affect the learner's psychology, negatively impacting learning. Therefore, incorporating ICT in teaching materials would significantly increase students' familiarity with ICT tools in education. Finally, it is also strongly recommended to train teachers professionally on how to use educational platforms to vary their methods of instruction. Admittedly, as Mizher et al. (2022) confirm, adopting this instruction mode would positively impact students' autonomous and life-long learning. Thus, successfully implementing distance learning could be considered an employability skill for learners.

### About the Author:

**Hassane Benlaghrissi** is a Ph.D. student at Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Benni Mellal, Morocco. He is also a high school teacher at Tazizaoute High School, El Kbab, Khenifra. He earned his MA in Women's and Gender Studies from Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fez. He earned his BA in linguistics from Moulay Ismail University in Meknes. His research interests include ICT and Education, Curriculum Development and Evaluation, and Language Teaching and Gender Studies.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4884-1816>

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