

N°14, vol.2
2021

ReSciLac

Revue Pluridisciplinaire
ISSN : 1840-8001

2^{ème} semestre 2021
(Décembre 2021, vol.2)

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Indexation : Worldcat, Stanford Libraries, Penn Libraries, Zeitschriften DatenBank

Preuve de l'indexation

- <http://www.worldcat.org/title/rescilac-revue-des-sciences-du-langage-et-da-la-communication/oclc/957341200>

- <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/11844535>

Université d'Abomey-Calavi
Faculté des Lettres, Langues, Arts et Communication
LASODYLA-REYO / UAC – 2021

ReSciLaC N°14, vol.2
Revue pluridisciplinaire

2^{ème} semestre 2021 (décembre), vol.2

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De Korne, H. 2007. The pedagogical potential of multimedia dictionaries. Lessons from a community dictionary project. The 14th annual stabilizing indigenous language symposium in Michigan on 1-3 June 2007. Consulté le 1er février 2012 sur <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/ILR/ILR-11.pdf>.

Présentation

ReSciLaC (Revue des Sciences du Langage et de la Communication) est une revue du Laboratoire de Sociolinguistique, Dynamique des Langues et Recherche en Yoruba (LASODYLA-REYO) de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC). ReSciLaC est une revue pluridisciplinaire qui accueille des contributions abordant un grand nombre de champs d'études des sciences humaines et sociales.

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USING E-LEARNING TO ENHANCE EFL LEARNERS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS IN BENIN

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Abstract

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, many activities worldwide, including educational activities, were forced to close, and students were denied access to their classroom environment. Online courses have emerged as the best way to continue educational activities in the field to bridge this learning gap. This study aims to evaluate the usefulness of online classes in EFL classes, evaluate the learners' new experiences in distance learning, and appraise the challenges and barriers related to using electronic learning methods. The present research applied a descriptive-analytical method based on a mixed research approach. A questionnaire and an interview guide were designed and distributed. It is found that the main stumbling blocks that influence EFL e-learning during the COVID-19 crisis are related to technical, academic, and communication challenges. Moreover, the results show that most EFL learners complained about continuing distance learning, as they could not attain the awaited progress in language learning accomplishment.

Keywords: E-learning, academic achievements, COVID-19, EFL.

Résumé

Face à la pandémie de COVID-19, de nombreuses activités dans le monde entier, y compris les activités éducatives, ont été contraintes de fermer et les étudiants se sont vus refuser l'accès à leur environnement éducatif. Pour combler ce déficit en apprentissage, les cours en ligne ont été mis en place comme la meilleure solution pour la poursuite des activités dans le domaine éducatif. Cette étude a pour but d'évaluer l'utilité des cours en ligne dans les classes de l'anglais et d'évaluer les nouvelles expériences des apprenants dans l'apprentissage à distance et d'évaluer les défis et les obstacles liés aux méthodes électroniques d'apprentissage. Le présent travail de recherche a appliqué une méthode descriptive-analytique basée sur une approche de recherche mixte. Un questionnaire et un guide d'entretien ont été conçus et distribués. Il s'avère que les principales pierres d'achoppement qui influencent l'apprentissage en ligne de l'anglais, langue étrangère pendant la crise COVID-19 est liées aux défis techniques, académiques et de communication. En outre, les résultats montrent que la plupart des apprenants d'anglais se sont plaints de la poursuite de l'apprentissage à distance, car ils n'ont pas pu accomplir les progrès attendus dans l'accomplissement de l'apprentissage de la langue.

Mots clés: E-learning, résultats académiques, COVID-19, ALE.

Introduction

Over 5 billion people in the world face the COVID-19 health crisis today. This deadly virus has taken the lives of more than 200,000 people around the globe, and the death havoc continues to rise. It has crippled every sector of human activity. Schools from primary to higher education have been closed up in the educational sector to avoid its spreading

among students. Pellini, A., Jordan K., & Phillips T. (2020, p.2) stated that “Schools’ closure due to coronavirus (COVID-19) are affecting learners worldwide. By the end of March 2020, over 180 countries had closed down their schools, affecting 87.4% of learners”. Thus, measures have been taken to tackle this deadly virus. Its effect on the educational system worldwide, especially in Africa, requires urgent attention. With the lockdown, students’ academic performances are likely to be affected. Only those who are conscious of their studies and those with strict parents and guardians take appropriate measures and do well at school despite the health crisis. The overwhelming majority of other students work without being provided any help.

However, the good news is that teaching/learning has been facilitated with recent technology. One of these modern technologies is Electronic Learning, commonly referred to as e-learning. The Commission of the European Communities (2001, p.20) defines e-learning as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration”, Soliman, N. (2014, p.753). Although e-learning has been in use in more developed countries long before the advent of COVID-19, it is important, with the current health crisis widespread worldwide, that e-learning should be introduced in the educational system, especially in developing countries like Benin.

E-learning is no longer new in developed countries. Yet, it is still a dream to be achieved in most underdeveloped and developing countries. E-learning is not part of the educational system in Benin, except for a few private high schools and universities. Nevertheless, with the COVID-19 health crisis, schools have been closed, and students have been at home for months with no access to the classroom. As stated by Jordan, K., David, R., Phillips, T., & Pellini, A. (2021, p.7), with the coronavirus pandemic, if care is not taken, students, mostly EFL learners, might lose interest in learning, “especially when parents cannot motivate them.” Therefore, this study intends to find out if the integration of e-learning in instruction could positively impact EFL students’ learning performances. The inquiry also aims to evaluate the learners’ new experiences in distance learning and appraise the challenges and barriers related to the electronic methods of learning in Benin secondary schools. The present research applied a descriptive-analytical method based on a mixed research approach. A questionnaire and an interview guide were designed and distributed to collect reliable information.

To this end, this research paper is guided by the following questions:

- How effective is e-learning on learners’ academic performances during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What implications could result from the integration of e-learning in the Benin educational system?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: section 2 is about the Literature review, which gives some background, some conceptual clarifications, and displays some previous works about e-learning. The following section describes the methodology. Section 4 shows the results of the study. Finally, section 5, the discussion. The remainder provides some suggestions and recommendations followed by the conclusion of the work.

I. Literature Review

The subsequent section displays the previous works conducted on online learning and some challenges regarding its implementation during the COVID-19 crisis.

I.I What is E-Learning?

Babu, G. S., & Sridevi, K. (2018, p.85) stated that “in the current era, where technology is rapidly evolving, education has also taken the support of information and communication technologies and now offers convenient ways to help increase the knowledge, education and literacy status of people.” CT is an acronym that stands for Information and Communication Technologies and includes electronic learning. Following the Ministry of Education, as cited in Wright, N. (2010, p.7), Electronic learning (e-learning) is “learning and teaching that is facilitated by or supported through the smart use of information and communication technologies”. According to the Ministry of Education (2000), e-learning is “flexible learning using ICT resources, tools, and applications, focusing on interactions among teachers, learners, and the online environment. e-Learning usually refers to structured and managed learning experiences, and may involve the use of the internet, CD-ROMs, software, other media, and telecommunications” (Wright, N. 2010, p.7). Also, Wan, Z., Wang, Y., & Haggerty, N (2008, p.513) refer to e-learning as “a virtual learning environment in which a learner’s interactions with materials, peers and/or instructors are mediated through information and communication technologies. It is different from the traditional environment because ICT is used as a tool to support the learning process. Taking advantage of network infrastructures, learning can occur anywhere using many types of resources.” E-learning enables learning at any point in time through the internet and web-services. Moreover, e-learning “provides anywhere, anytime easy access for enhancement of knowledge and skills” (Babu, G.S., & Sridevi K. (2018, p.85).

I.I.I Advantages of E-learning

Several studies have been carried out on the benefits of e-learning. E-learning as modern technology has many benefits. E-learning “promotes collaborative learning and therefore it results in more engaging and enriching experiences of learning” (Al-Maqtri, M. A. T. 2014, p.649). A 2004 study by Hjeltnes et al. stated several advantages of e-learning which include “cost-efficiency and cost-effectiveness, long life education and easiness of learning, teacher and student time saving, greater flexibility, less geographical barriers, and better administration” (as cited in Al-Maqtri M. A. T. (2014, p.649). Moreover, a study

carried out by Tunmibi, S., Aregbesola A., Adejobi P., & Ibrahim, O. C. (2015, p.53) revealed that “most of the students agreed that e-learning help students have access to an unlimited source of information; reveals a connection between subjects; promotes critical thinking and encourages students’ way of learning”. Furthermore, “E-learning can support learning by offering differentiated learning, particularly for those who need support in literacy, numeracy, and ICT. It offers a wide range of tools to enable teachers and learners to be innovative, creative, and resourceful in all learning activities”. Altogether, “Teachers and learners can easily customize digital learning resources to suit pace and level, appropriate to any learning style and ability” Babu, G.S., & Sridevi, K. (2018, p.86). Cruthers, M. (2008, p.160), on the other hand, believe that e-learning offers opportunities such as:

to “pursue learning in an individualized and self-paced way... receiving feedback without delay, which might not be the case in the physical classroom; and e-learning makes it easier for slow learners to participate, by allowing them more response time” as cited in Sharaim, K. Y., & Khali, Z. N (2010, p.161).

I.2. E-learning during COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in schools’ closure in every part of the world. UNESCO estimates that “out of the total population of students enrolled in education globally...over, 89% are currently out of school due to COVID-19 closures” (as cited in Giannini, S. 2020, para.I. If this trend continues over a long time, it is to be feared that the drop-out rate of abuse, loss of confidence, and self-esteem will increase grammatically, and the quality of teaching and learning will decline (Jordan, K., David, R., Phillips, T., & Pellini, A., 2021, p.2). Students need to be encouraged to keep learning or lose interest in education in this crucial period. To prevent this from happening, Gianninni, S. (2020, p.3) suggests that distance learning and the internet be made available to learners. That is to say that with e-learning, learners will have the opportunity to keep abreast of ongoing learning, thereby preventing a breakdown in education. Although teachers feel the need to have their learners take an online course as a quick response to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, several of them find it difficult to do so because they do not have the hang of online teaching expertise. Previous studies pointed out challenges associated with e-learning. For example, Shraim, K., & Khlaif, Z. (2010, p.165) commented: “Although the rapid development of ICT provides easier and more affordable connectivity to the Internet, thereby narrowing the digital divide, equitable access will continue to be a major concern to governments worldwide”.

I.3. Challenges to E-learning

From previous studies, the main challenges to the implementation of e-learning are financial resources, students’ motivation, and weak internet connection. Babu, G. S., & Sridevi, K. (2018, p.87) commented that the application of e-learning and its relevant

technology entails money and space that need to be explained to the administrators and all those in a leadership position. Furthermore, studies by Shraim, K., & Khlaif, Z. (2010, p.166) reported that the overwhelming majority of teachers and learners fear that they will encounter problems with online courses. Their report indicates many problems they might have, including the provision of appropriate equipment, availability of computers and easy access to them, trustworthy and cheap bandwidth, and unfaulty network.

Students could also easily be distracted if they use them for other purposes such as entertainment (Appana, as cited in Shraim K. Y., & Khalif, Z. N. (2010, p.170). Besides, e-learning requires computer literacy which most teachers and students have difficulty grasping. As stated in Shraim, K., & Khlaif, Z. (ibid.), it requires time. Their study reports that many teachers find insufficient time to plan lessons in appropriate digital form and monitor the learning process.

The literature assessment has disclosed many studies handling distance online learning styles and approaches. Various investigations were concentrated on the uses of technologies in instruction. Many of them served to plan mixed learning settings that focus on supplying learners with outstanding quality education and include computers and multimedia systems to upgrade active learning. Many researchers have identified new platforms' opportunities for online course learners, motivating instructors to promote active learning to lure students and compel them to engage in the learning process.

Studies on distance learning technologies have observed evolution over the years, where the first researches focused on describing digital technologies and their advantages in education, while others addressed the positives of adopting platforms and social networking sites as learning tools and check out their effects on the educational process, especially in EFL learning context. Limited critical studies investigated its role in developing the teaching and learning methods and stated the obstacles students face. Finally, current surveys addressed the need to integrate distance learning in education through the global environmental crisis and secure instruction continuity.

The work assumed that the e-learning mode is moving up in education, but substantial works should be improved regarding online learning applications. The Covid-19 Pandemic transformed the whole education process into online learning. But in the Beninese context, it is the first time for educational actors to be engaged in the experience of e-learning. Using technology in traditional teaching and learning has been investigated and covered by several surveys and projects.

2. Research Methodology

This study intends to find out if the integration of e-learning in instruction could positively impact EFL students' learning performances. Then, it evaluates the learners' new experiences in distance learning and appraises the challenges and barriers related to the electronic learning methods. To identify the threats related to the issue, some methods and approaches were designed to conduct the research.

2.1. Research Method

The present research applied a descriptive-analytical method based on a mixed research approach. According to Aramo-Immonen H. (2013, p.3), a mixed research method is “an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both quantitative and qualitative forms. Mixed method designs provide researchers across research disciplines with a rigorous approach to answering research questions”. In the same vein, FoodRisc Resource Centre (2016, para1) defines mixed research design as “a methodology for conducting research that involves collecting, analyzing and integrating quantitative (e.g., experiments, surveys) and qualitative (e.g., focus group, interviews) research”. This study has used this method to understand the research problem better.

2.2 Research Instruments

The study aimed to find out through the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data the participants’ appraisal and perspectives on the usefulness of online courses in EFL class and then evaluated their new experiences in distance learning and appraised the challenges and barriers related to the use of electronic methods of learning. To reach this purpose, two instruments were designed to collect relevant information.

a) A *questionnaire* organised into four sections has been issued: the first section contains items asking for general information. The second presents items prompting the informants to provide answers related to their perceptions of the usefulness of online courses on learners’ academic performances during the COVID-19 pandemic. The third section contains items eliciting their opinions about the implications of the integration of e-learning in the Benin educational system. The fourth deals with items requesting the constraints or barriers that act against a successful use of online courses in education and their suggestions for improvement.

The questionnaire was piloted on a group of EFL teachers who were asked to comment on the appropriateness and ease of the survey instruments, which led to simplifying the wording of some items. The copies of the questionnaire were distributed to them during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 (July to December).

b) A *follow-up semi-structured interview* was carried out with 18 participants randomly chosen from the larger group. A semi-structured interview format was selected because of its appropriateness for the research. It also enables the researcher to ask the same set of questions to all the 18 informants and ask further clarification questions where necessary. The interviews consist of six questions organised in two parts: (1) the informants’ experiences with distance learning, and (2) their perceptions of its effectiveness and suggestions. The informants’ opinions content analysed. The data collected through these instruments were analysed using percentages. This operation involves identifying, coding, categorising, and labelling patterns emerging from the qualitative data elicited from them through the interview (Patton, M. Q. 2002, p.463).

2.3. Participants

To obtain authoritative information and reach my goal, I have chosen a sample population of English teachers and lecturers from some selected high schools and universities of Benin. This population includes a total of 200 EFL teachers and lecturers (100 males and 100 females) chosen haphazardly. This means that the sample population is from state-owned and private high schools and some universities in Benin republic. The respondent teachers and lecturers involved in this study have teaching experience ranging from 5 to 15 years, with ages between 25 and 55. All of them were involved in the distance learning/teaching experience. Thirty-seven (37) of them went through a formal TEFL training course. They held a teaching certificate and Ph.D. as well, while the remaining 163 only hold an academic degree in English language and literature.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures and Method of Data Analysis

Due to the COVID-19 health crisis, permission was taken from the authorities to conduct this study with the participants. Following the government's preventive measures, the participants wore their masks and were seated 1 metre apart from one another. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants before the meeting. The study took place in the second term of the academic year 2019-2020 (from July to December) in Benin. Questionnaires were distributed to a sample of 200 high schools and universities lecturers. 50 questionnaires were administered to female teachers, and another fifty to male teachers. Another 100 questionnaires were equally handed to teachers of different age cohorts; the first 50 questionnaires were given to young teachers between the ages of 25 to 35 and the last 50 questionnaires to senior teachers between the ages of 45 to 55.

All prepared questionnaires were distributed and then collected for analysis. Thus, the collected data were organised, interpreted, and analysed using percentage, mean, standard deviation, and then followed by analyses from which summary and conclusions were drawn on the basic questions. Numerical values were multiplied by corresponding values assigned to the degree of agreement. To obtain the rating mean, the sum of the products of the value and frequency was divided by the total number of the informants.

3. The Presentation of the Results

As summarized in Figure I, this section provides the main results of the analysis of the data from EFL teachers on the usefulness of and obstacles to e-learning in education in Benin.

3.1 Results from the questionnaire

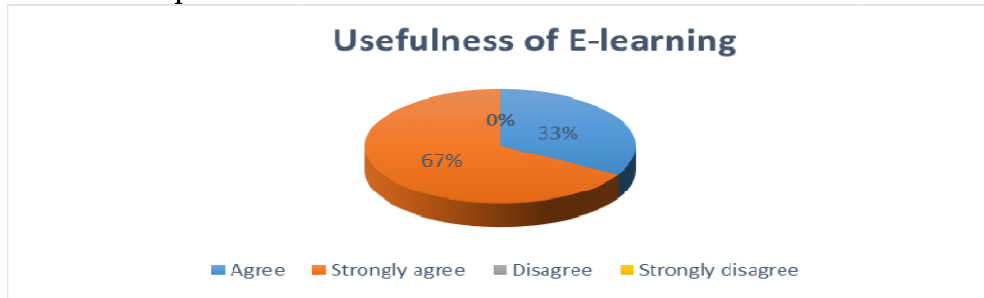


Figure 2: Usefulness of E-Learning in the EFL Classroom
Source : Field Investigation, September 2020

Figure I shows teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of e-learning during the COVID-19 health crisis. The figure shows that 67% of the EFL teachers strongly agreed with the usefulness of e-learning on students' academic performances, while 33 % agreed with the statement. None of the participants reported to the contrary.

The following section is about the results of the data analysis from EFL teachers regarding the low internet connection, the time factor, students' demotivation, and lack of facilities as primary obstacles to e-learning. Figure II displays information related to teachers' perceptions about the main challenges of implementing e-learning at school. Most of the teachers (34%) reported that lack of facilities such as computers and smartphones had been a significant challenge to e-learning. In addition, 33% of the participants revealed that a weak internet connection hinders the effectiveness of e-learning. In comparison, 22 and 11% of the respondent teachers reported that time and students' demotivation are the main challenges to meet while implementing technology in instruction.

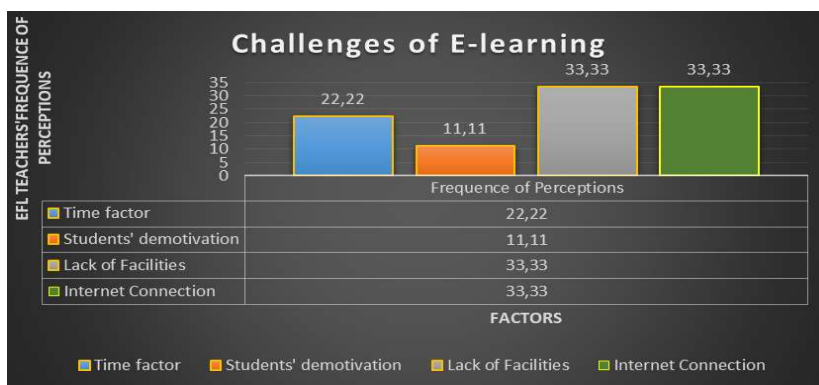


Figure 2: Challenges of E-learning
Source: Field Investigation, October 2020

3.2. Results from the interview

The semi-structured interviews organized with selected participants have revealed the following:

- Three out of the four interviewees were confused about what is meant by Web-based and e-learning and its place and role in the teaching/learning of English in the context of COVID-19 health crisis;
- They all agreed that web-based learning promotes active and independent learning. It is a very convenient and flexible learning option for students. Owing to e-learning, students can train themselves on a daily basis and whenever they have the time to do. Thus, the chance of engaging the students in active learning by stimulating their learning motivation and preparing them for a good command of English is obvious. Moreover, they reported that, due to the video instructions provided for audio, video learning can be renowned and seen and heard many times if students do not understand the topic at the outset.
- They believe that the assessments that are computer marked tend to be only knowledge-based and not necessarily practicality-based. Therefore, it is important to review test questions to suit the reality of the learning situation, but they found these challenges really daunting;
- For them, the most prominent challenges related to e-learning are lack of training and information, low internet connectivity rate, difficult teaching/learning conditions, lack of instructional materials that provide e-learning resources,
- Appropriate training among English teachers is compulsory.
- The authenticity of a particular student's work is also a problem as just about anyone can do a project online rather than the student themselves. EFL learners' behaviour modelling is mandatory before any application of distance learning.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the online education issues faced by EFL instructors and their learners during the current pandemic crisis. Some of these issues are related to the challenges, learners' interaction with technologies tools concerning the e-learning approach, and the trainers' perceptions of online learning methods in language classes.

The data and information collected from the participants have revealed that e-learning is needed to enhance students' academic performances during the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, all the teachers strongly agree that e-learning will be highly beneficial, especially during the COVID-19 health crisis in Benin. E-learning is not a common practice in Benin educational system but its use, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is essential to both teachers and students. The participants reported that the preventive measures enforced by the government include total isolation from public places, students need to keep the learning going to prevent a breakdown or interruption in their studies, with the health crisis, the only way of providing both teachers and students with this opportunity is of course through e-learning. That is the reason why Babu, G. S., & Sridevi, K. (ibid.) commented that e-learning is potentially valuable for helping to gain access to knowledge and education every time and everywhere.

The findings of this work validate the results of forgoing research on the issues about distance learning during COVID-19. The findings revealed that students are unhappy with distance education and the related barriers. Integrating e-learning in education has its implications and challenges. Although it has not been stated in the questionnaire addressed to the teachers, the interview results have revealed that most students, especially those in high schools, are not computer-literate and do not have smartphones. Some other learners find it difficult to upload online exams files on their mobile phones because of the particular requirement regarding the file's format or extension, which is not supported by their devices. Altogether, 33% of the participants reported that the weak internet connection, especially in rural areas, could affect the effectiveness of e-learning. Teachers could also have a problem preparing lessons and putting them in digital form. That is why there needs to be special training for teachers before introducing e-learning into schools.

Nevertheless, suppose the academic future of learners, especially EFL students, is guaranteed during the COVID-19 health crisis. In that case, there needs to be an urgent need to implement e-learning in higher education, and appropriate measures need to be taken to ensure its full effectiveness on EFL learners' academic performances. The results indicated that many learners missed numerous tasks, duties, and face-to-face communications with their instructors, which are essential aspects in the process of the educational activities. After some time, learners could overcome most of the technical issues related to online learning platforms. The necessary steps are needed to facilitate the online education process and overcome the problems reported.

5. Recommendations and Suggestions

E-learning has become an urgent need for both EFL teachers and students during the COVID-19 health crisis to maintain and improve students' learning outcomes. However, it has implications and challenges to be met for a practical teaching/learning experience. The following measures could be taken by the government, teachers, and parents to meet the challenges that could stand as barriers to the implementation of e-learning:

Government:

Findings from the interview revealed that students might not have the financial means needed for e-learning. The government should help students by enabling free access to online courses. In addition, national television and radio channels, together with teachers and school administration, should organize programs where lessons should be broadcast on radio and television, especially those students living in rural areas with weak internet connections. Besides, the government could also organize training workshops for teachers to familiarize themselves with e-learning and acquire knowledge about how to offer efficient lesson contents online.

Teachers:

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students have no physical or face-to-face meetings in the traditional classroom. With e-learning, through the help of a forum or platform, teachers should present their lectures in the form of recorded videos or have a live presentation with the students. In the same perspective, teachers should upload their lessons online in the form of Portable Document Format (PDF) for students to download and study. Still, they should ensure that these lectures are not compact and are well detailed for easy comprehension. There should be room for feedback from students to ensure efficient teaching/learning. Besides, the findings revealed that students' lack of motivation could impede e-learning. Since there is no physical classroom where the teacher can supervise and ensure students' involvement in classroom activities, students might not feel pressured to undertake online courses or even go through assignments given to them. Teachers should introduce rewards and tokens to boost students' motivation and encourage their active participation.

Parents:

Parents have a significant role in the students' education, especially during the COVID-19 health challenges. Some participants in the study reported that some students, especially those who are still in secondary schools, have been deprived of smartphones and laptops by their parents. However, in such a difficult time, parents need to help teachers, school administration, and the government promote e-learning by providing smartphones and laptops to their children. Without it, students cannot access the internet, websites, and platforms, thus creating a breakdown in students' academic performances. They should also ensure that students use these facilities for their learning rather than for entertainment.

Conclusion

During the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions have succeeded in finding means to ensure students can carry on with their studies despite the contingency and social distancing. This has generated an exceptional push to online learning. This study aims to identify the importance of the online course in EFL learning class and the challenges regarding its utilisation in the field of instruction. The research sample included 200 high school teachers and lecturers. The descriptive-analytical approach has been used with a statistical assessment of the survey results. Two types of tools were used to collect reliable information. Four dimensions have been determined to reach the expected results, i.e., the extent to which e-learning is used and the advantages, disadvantages, and impediments to the integration of e-learning. Learning and teaching in an electronic setting still provide many benefits, including reducing costs and affords. It was also a successful alternative for many students to return to study in educational institutions during the spread of the Covid-19 virus, despite facing many issues and challenges. The literature review highlighted the various facets of e-learning

and its integration into the educational systems around the globe. It was deduced that the distance learning experience brought significant changes in education. However, its success depends on the appropriate measures taken before it can be introduced into the educational system in Benin.

By analyzing the results, some encouraging results have been achieved to highlight some of the issues, challenges, and benefits related to the integration of the e-learning system in the language learning sector. The technical issues are one of the major challenges learners and lecturers/teachers face regarding integrating online learning in instruction. Some learners faced internet connectivity problems, accessing classes, and downloading course materials. Online evaluations could not be opened on learners' mobile phones. Issues such as technical and financial support, training, improved working conditions, technological background, skills, copyright protections, and professional development are always crucial in implementing e-learning in Beninese high schools and universities.

Nevertheless, necessary steps need to be taken to ensure that there is no breakdown in learning during the coronavirus pandemic. The government has been advised to ensure free access to the internet for students and to help in broadcasting lectures or courses on television and radio channels. Teachers have also been advised to provide simple and well-detailed lectures with low megabyte consumption. Besides, parents have been encouraged to help fight the negative effects of the COVID-19 on students' learning by providing their children with smartphones and laptops to have easy access to e-learning.

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