



REVUE SCIENTIFIQUE

ANNALES

DE L'UNIVERSITE DE PARAKOU

(République du Bénin)

SERIE

LETTRES, ARTS ET SCIENCES HUMAINES

(LASH)

Numéro Spécial Colloque FLASH-UP 2020

Tome 1, juillet 2021



ISSN: 1840-9539 / eISSN: 1840-9547

ANNALES DE L'UNIVERSITE DE PARAKOU

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(LASH)

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ISSN : 1840-9539 eISSN : 1840-9547

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SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE EFL ONLINE CLASSES IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALISED HEALTH CRISIS OF COVID-19 IN BENIN

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Date de réception : 05/12/2020 Date d'acceptation : 29/05/2021

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to take stock of the advantages and drawbacks of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), as is the case at the English department of Abomey-Calavi University in the Republic of Benin since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given that the efficiency of distance learning of foreign languages has always been the subject of several debates, it is appropriate to take stock of this situation. To this end, quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 136 learners involved in different years of bachelor's degree programs, and 10 of their instructors were randomly recruited online through one of the e-learning platforms set up by the government and in the field. Through semi-structured questionnaires and phone conversations, these respondents provided their opinions on this issue. Data have been analysed through a statistical method of descriptive interpretation of SPSS 26 software. The different results obtained (easy management of large-size classrooms, development of stage fright and foreign language anxiety, lack of practice and commitment, inadaptability of the e-learning system) show that the learning of this language is quality worsens. Therefore, everything suggests that we are running towards the worst in the lack of a better alternative. That is why the present research study made several constructive suggestions and recommendations in the end.

Keywords: E-learning, EFL classes, Covid-19

Résumé

Cette étude a pour but de faire l'état des lieux sur les avantages et les inconvénients de l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère (ALE) constatés au Département d'Anglais de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC) en République du Bénin depuis l'avènement de la pandémie du Covid-19. Étant donné que la question de la fiabilité de l'enseignement des langues étrangères à distance a toujours fait l'objet de plusieurs débats, il est opportun de faire le point sur cette situation.

Pour ce, des données quantitatives et qualitatives ont été recueillies de 136 apprenants en différentes années de formation de licence et 10 de leurs enseignants recrutés au hasard en ligne, grâce à une des plateformes d'e-learning mises sur pied par le gouvernement, et sur site. À travers des questionnaires semi-structurés et des entretiens téléphoniques, chacun de ces répondants a donné son opinion par rapport à la question. Les données ont été analysées grâce à une méthode statistique d'interprétation descriptive de SPSS 26.

Des différents résultats obtenus (gestion plus facile des effectifs de classes pléthoriques, développement du trac et de l'anxiété de la langue étrangère, manque de pratique et d'engagement, inadaptabilité du système e-learning), il en ressort que l'enseignement de cette langue est désormais au rabais. Ainsi, à défaut d'une meilleure alternative, tout porterait à croire que nous courons vers le pire. Raison pour laquelle plusieurs suggestions et recommandations constructives ont été faites à l'issue.

Mots clés : E-learning, cours d'ALE, Covid-19

1. Introduction

The present mixed-methods research study aims to take stock of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning situation in the era of Covid-19 with the paradigm of online classes in the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi in the Republic of Benin. As a result, to achieve better the objective of this study, it is crucial first to explore the beliefs of the different educational actors on the advantages and drawbacks of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in this English Department. Moreover, to understand better the problem stated in this study, it is essential to present an overview of the history of the academic institution in which this Department is located.

University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) is an offshoot of the reorganisation of the University of Dahomey instituted after independence. This multidisciplinary university institution, created in

1970, has always had as its prerogative the training of quality executives and scientific research for a better expansion of the national economy. Rechristened for the first time in 1975 as “The National University of Benin,” this first public University in the Republic of Benin will be renamed the second time, University of Abomey-Calavi, in 2001. It bears this denomination until today. It also helped to establish in the same year the second public University in the country known as “University of Parakou.” With its motto, “Doctrina Lumen Humani Generis Est,” meaning, “science is the light of mankind,” the University of Parakou and the one of Abomey-Calavi share the same missions. The LMD system regulates both. They include various academic units, such as those dedicated to Literature, Languages, Arts, Communication, and Human sciences.

Indeed, the introduction in 2020 of the online course paradigm in the Beninese educational system coincided with the commemoration year of the University of Abomey’s 50th anniversary. Therefore, it is appropriate to take stock of the quality of training and research within each of its entities. The one that will be the focus of interest in this research work is the English Department of the Faculty of Literature, Languages, Arts and Communication (FLLAC), created on October 18, 2016, according to the ministerial decree No. 2016-731 / MESRS / DC / SGM / SA / SGG16. It is noteworthy to mention that this Faculty is nothing more than an emanation of the split of the Faculty of Literature, Arts and Human Sciences (FLASH) created on August 21, 1970, the date on which the University of Dahomey, known today as the University of Abomey-Calavi, was born.

Two thousand and twenty (2020) was a year of multiple challenges due to the advent of the generalised health crisis of Covid-19 that is struggling to be contained. This crisis has prompted the promotion of the e-learning system in the educational world. In Benin, the experience of implementing this approach does not appear to have been so conclusive. Everything suggests it has created more harm than good in the Beninese education system. In addition, it does not seem to be compatible with certain principles of the LMD system, such as those requiring face-to-face lessons, particularly in the context of practical work and the teaching of foreign languages. In other words, the paradigm of online courses seems to set in motion the quality of foreign language teaching in high educational institutions in developing countries. Therefore, it is crucial to shed light on the potential causes of these various challenges facing the implementation of the online course system. Thus, the present study addressed this issue by examining the impact of distance learning courses on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Benin. The following two questions are the key points that served as a compass to the study.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching EFL in the English Department of the University of Abomey Calavi in the Republic of Benin?
- How good is the impact of online courses on the teaching of EFL in this Department?

2. Literature review

This second part of the present research work revolves around exploring work and reflections conducted previously and relating to the issue under investigation. With the help of a critical look, it made it possible to take stock of the prior results and information regarding the benefits and drawbacks of learning a foreign language by transposing all this to the Beninese context. Likewise, it helped focus the debate on the usage of the e-learning system on the learning of EFL in the English Department of the Faculty of Literature, Languages, Arts and Communication (FLLAC) from the University of Abomey-Calavi in the Republic of Benin.

Indeed, putting yourself in the shoes of a non-professional, one might be tempted to ask why it is helpful to learn a foreign language. Such questioning is legitimate because it helps to take

stock of the quality of foreign language training offered by our African universities in general and Beninese in particular. It also helps shed light on the different advantages of learning a foreign language in a Beninese context and its possible consequences on the learner and the country's economic development. Suppose it is a fact that the practice of a foreign language is a source of many benefits for its learner to whom it endows several assets. In that case, it is necessary to wonder whether this language acquisition depends on the quality of the education provided or the learner's training. From the era of democratic renewal to the present day, the University of Abomey-Calavi has always strived to provide quality training to its learners or prospective executives. Although this educational institution has experienced congestion of its student body for the last three decades, this has remained a consistent problem for the University. This situation tends to harm the quality of the various education offered to its learners. As B. Kouménougbo (2011, n.p.) reported, the phenomenon has intensified over the years, given the lack of adequate infrastructure containing the ever-increasing number of students. This independent investigative journalist also underlined that as a result, the living conditions of the learners had deteriorated significantly to such an extent that it is necessary to wonder if this situation would not affect the quality of the assimilation of the knowledge imparted by teachers to these learners. According to the latest data made available by the Statistics Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi as presented in Table 1 below, in 2017, this institution had 65,712 students enrolled compared to 30,959 in 2002; giving an increase of more than double of the latter in 5 years. According to the Statistics Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi, the average annual growth rate in student numbers over the past ten years is 5.1 % (K. S. Chogou, D. M. Zannou, and M. da Cruz, 2018, p. iii). Based on these data, the number of students can be estimated at nearly 120,000 today. With an initial capacity of about 6,000 students and a current capacity of fewer than 20,000 learners, one may reasonably be concerned about the effectiveness of the knowledge acquired by these students.

Table I: Statistics of students enrolled at UAC from 2002 to 2017

Year	TOTAL NUMBER STUDENTS	NUMBER FEMALE STUDENTS	PROPORTION FEMALE STUDENTS
2002-2003	26801	4158	15.5
2003-2004	27177	4097	15.1
2004-2005	28601	4177	14.6
2005-2006	34518	4999	14.5
2006-2007	40048	5852	14.6
2007-2008	38350	5712	14.9
2008-2009	48165	8597	17.8
2009-2010	59318	10120	17.1
2010-2011	65096	12122	18.6
2011-2012	69688	15041	21.6
2012-2013	83951	19576	23.3
2013-2014	92703	23000	24.8
2014-2015	78101	20089	25.7
2015-2016	61416	16979	27.6
2016-2017	65712	18407	28

UAC Statistics Department, 2018

Source: Chogou, K. S., Zannou, D. M. & da CRUZ, M. (2018, p.115). *Annuaire des statistiques de l'année académique 2016-2017 de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi*. 10.13140/RG.2.2.34684.59520. [Retrieved on 10/21/2020 from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329177902>]

Being one of the academic sub-entities with a high student population, the English Department enrolled 3,500 students (5.4 % of all students enrolled at UAC) during the 2016-2017 academic year (K. S. Chogou, D. M. Zannou, and M. da Cruz, 2018, p. ii). To date, this figure is approximative of nearly 5,000 registered students for a reception capacity of fewer than 1,000 students. Besides, since the number of state teachers available to teach these students is limited to 16, it is crucial to question the quality of the teaching provided in this Department. Moreover, when you consider the employment of about 20 unpaid part-time instructors, there are grounds to think that we are gradually approaching the abyss.

With the advent of the global health crisis caused by Covid-19 and the resulting new teaching methods, we may rejoice in the adoption of distance learning as a way to alleviate the University's overpopulation problem. However, the lack of suitable materials such as electronic media, computer-based tools, and the fluidity of an Internet connection that may enable these courses to be taken online pose significant challenges to the success of this new teaching method. In Benin, like most developing countries where the average citizen lives on less than a dollar a day, it is almost inconceivable to require a student to get a computer or a smartphone and a good internet connection within less than six months. However, for the more affluent who could afford to get them, there will be a matter of mastering the use of these tools, whether these wealthy learners or their teachers. Nonetheless, thanks to the dynamism of the present administration in Benin, many steps are being implemented to make Internet access more accessible to all students. Besides, several training modules are being created for these learners and their teachers to master operating online courses. However, it is questionable whether or not online classes could be suitable for all types of training offered by the University. The experience of the English Department could be instructive. Indeed, everything suggests that teaching a foreign language like English would be complicated through distance courses. How to understand that the learner of this foreign language, who struggled to keep up with his instructor's pace in a face-to-face learning situation, could succeed in achieving better academic results? The results of this study would undoubtedly help us to answer this question better. However, there is no longer any need to prove that learning a foreign language, be it distance or on-site, offers its learner many advantages. Even if the results of this research work tend to say the opposite, because of many factors presented later in this document, learning a foreign language such as English allows you to multiply tenfold your cognitive abilities.

Swedish scientists (J. Mårtensson *et al.*, 2012, p. 241) have found through brain imaging research using “[...] brain scans to track what occurs when someone learns a second language [...]” (A. Mackey, 2014, n. p.) that the size of the brain grows when you learn a foreign language. Indeed, the experiment took place “at the Swedish Armed Forces Interpreter Academy, [where] young recruits learn a new language at a swift pace” (Lund-University, 2012, October 8, n.p.). During an experiment where they measured the brains of these recruits before (through a control group) and after (with the experimental group) the language training, they made a spectacular discovery. As J. Mårtensson *et al.* (2012, p. 243) quoted in Lund-University (2012, October 8, n.p.) uttered, they “[...]were surprised that different parts of the brain developed to different degrees depending on how well the students performed and how much effort they had had to put in to keep up with the course”. They also mentioned that “[...] learning a foreign language in adulthood changes the structure of language-related brain regions” (J. Mårtensson *et al.*, 2012, p. 243). According to J. Mårtensson *et al.* (2012, p. 240), it is a fact that “[...] we cannot compare three months of intensive language study with a lifetime of being bilingual [...]”. However, “[...] there is a lot to suggest that learning languages is a good way to keep the brain in shape” (J. Mårtensson *et al.*, 2012, p. 243 as observed in Lund University, 2012, October 8, n.p.).

In addition to all this, A. Mackey (2014, n.p.) specified, “[...] people who speak [several] languages fluently have [a more precise memory] and are [often more creative and more flexible mentally] than monolinguals”. She further mentioned that “[...] knowing another language is [always] advantageous, regardless of when you learn it” (A. Mackey, 2014, n.p.).

The following are additional advantages of foreign language acquisition, as A. Chatel (2014, n.p.), E. Peal, and W. Lambert (1962, p. 1 as cited in B. Czekala, 2019, n.p.), and G. Kruschewsky (2017, n.p.) mentioned them.

- Satisfy your curiosity and develop competencies in communication and flexibility

- Open doors and boost your memories; increase your Intelligence Quotient (IQ)
- Have a broader view of things and many options in everything, develop dynamism
- Understand, make, and survive in the political world; Wake the politician inside you up
- Have greater intelligence, both verbal and non-verbal; develop time management skill
- Better understand the world, meet or make friends, and increase the chance to find a spouse
- Develop creativity, decision-making abilities, self-confidence, desire to achieve, and sense of priority; Develop a lot of business ideas and those of entrepreneurship
- Study at your own pace and a lower cost through the Internet and new information and communication technologies; Acquire highly complicated skills, develop patience
- Create wealth, change your financial habits, multiply tenfold skills leading to happiness and avoiding being left behind; Develop interests in musical instruments playing
- Increase job or career opportunities and fight against underemployment
- Identify and appreciate the limits of a translation, the ideas that are sometimes lost due to the lack of some given information related to a specific culture.

As a downside, one can consider the negative impact that a poorly trained teacher could have on the quality of a learner’s productivity and performance. As pointed out by R. Richards (2011, p.1), some disadvantages of foreign language learning have to do with its cost, challenge, and time. The other major drawbacks of foreign language learning are those experienced when learning them through the e-learning system. V. Gupta (2020, n.p) considered ten of them presented in Table 2 below.

Table II: Downside of the foreign language through e-learning system

1	No Face-To-Face Interaction	6	Lack of Self-Discipline
2	Limited Acceptance, Accreditation, and Recognition	7	Online Courses are more Time Consuming
3	Online classes often lead to boredom	8	Speaking and Listening Practice
4	Language immersion is missing in E-learning	9	It is difficult to become fluent
5	There is a scarcity of Online degree courses	10	Low Motivation, and Distractions

3. Methodology

This part of the research deals with the methodological approaches and instruments used to collect the presented, analysed, and interpreted data in the following sections.

3.1 Research design

Descriptive research or research design is a procedure for performing a study with complete command over variables that may interact with the validity of the outcomes (N. Burns and S. Grove, 2003, p. 195). According to W. Fox and M. S. Bayat (2008, p. 8), descriptive research studies “aimed at casting light on current issues or problems through a process of data collection that enables them to describe the situation more completely than [would be] possible without employing this method.” As benefits, they help to combine qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches and consider the situation under investigation in a completely standard and unaltered natural setting (J. Dudovskiy, 2018). Regarding some of their disadvantages, they do not control variables, as in empirical research. Moreover, they favour bias in the different responses because they may provide decent or incorrect answers. When observed, they may fail in giving accurate reactions due to the importance of their privacy. Given that descriptive research studies usually adopt three types of data collection methods (observation, case study, and survey), the present research work is typical of a survey. Therefore, respondents involved in the study through the semi-structured questionnaires distributed to them and phone conversations provided different answers to the various questions addressed to them.

Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously and independently from the many participants to address the two study objectives. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected from EFL students, whereas the qualitative data were collected from EFL instructors. After the phase of crossing checking of the different data, the interpretation phase followed.

3.2 Selection of the Research Sites

The survey took place exclusively in the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi in the Republic of Benin. This Department is located in the North-Western part of the said University in the Atlantique region bordering Cotonou, the country’s economic capital. The classrooms (amphitheatres) served as places for recruiting participants and collecting data for this study.

3.3 Population

The total population for this study comprises 136 intermediate learners and 10 EFL teachers randomly recruited. Because of the new teaching measures required by the government due to the generalised health crisis, only students of academic programs authorised to start classes were addressed because of their low-class size. They are students of the second and third year of bachelor’s degree programs and professional training programs (Licence and Master’s degree in translation and business English). They were supposed to be involved in both e-learning and face-to-face classes. The distribution of the samples of the different participants involved in the survey is presented in Table III below.

Table III: Frequency distribution of participants by gender and age

EFL Learners								
		Age					Gender ND	TOTAL
		16-20	21-25	25-29	30-34	35 -> +		
Gender	Male	23	32	3	0	0		61
	Female	25	15	2	0	0		42
Age Non Disclosed (ND)		5	5	2	0	0	33	33
Total								136
EFL Instructors								
Gender	Male	0	0	0	0	8	0	8
	Female	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Age Non Disclosed (ND)		0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total								10

3.4 Research Instruments and Data Collection Procedures.

The nature of the two research questions due to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has suggested using questionnaires and phone interview instruments. A research questionnaire is appropriate for the present study because of its time efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and unbiased evaluation features. Indeed, because of the generalised health crisis, it was necessary to take urgent measures that could make it possible to counter or promote the adoption of e-learning as a new education system in the Republic of Benin. For this reason, the different opinions of the various actors in the education sector on this issue were primary. Similarly, failing to meet with the language instructors because of their heavy schedules, the phone interview proved to be very practical and suitable for the strict respect of the social distancing in this time of Covid-19’s health crisis that we are going through. Moreover, phone interviews help save time and create interaction, strong ties, and flexibility between the interviewer and the interviewee.

The EFL learners who participated in the survey were randomly and partly recruited in the research field because of their low classroom size (less than 50 students) that complied with the new government requirements regarding health crisis management. Some were recruited online through the social network known as “Telegram,” initially created to provide online courses. Among the ten (10) language instructors who participated in the survey, four (04) were recruited online by chance through the social network known as “WhatsApp.” The six (06) others were accidentally recruited from the English Department laboratory. The EFL learners were administered semi-structured interview questions through a 5-Point Likert Scale questionnaire mainly designed for the survey. As for the EFL instructors, they have been exclusively distributed phone conversations.

Out of 187 questionnaires administered to the EFL learners, 136 (72.72 %) were completed and returned on time through e-mail boxes and physically. The questions for the phone conversations consisted of five open-ended questions, and the EFL instructors were interviewed according to their availability. They were audiotaped, and the relevant parts of the verbatim transcription of their oral production were identified and coded to check out similarities and differences in their beliefs. In other words, an inductive analysis strategy adapted from D. Freeman (1998, pp. 82-119) was used to analyse the data collected from the phone conversations. It deals with the following procedure – “(a) first-cut analysis, (b) coding, (c) grouping, (d) determination of the correlations, and (e) presentation of the traits” (D. Freeman, 1998, pp. 82-119). Only the significant trends consistent with their beliefs were picked out and presented as outcomes for this study. The data collected from the questionnaires were cross-checked and analysed through a descriptive statistical interpretation of SPSS 26 software. The field investigation lasted for three (03) months.

4. RESULTS

The data collected through the 5-Point Likert Scale interview questionnaires and the individual phone conversations are reported below. They were gathered from two different kinds of participants. Regarding the first one, it deals with a sample of 136 EFL learners made of 61 (44.85 %) males, 42 (30.88 %) females, and 33 (24.27 %) students who did not disclose their gender. The second kind of participants refers to 10 EFL instructors, of whom 08 (80 %) were males, and 02 (20 %) were females. Most EFL learners’ participants mentioned they would like to improve their listening (35.29 %) and speaking (58.82 %) skills. The age of EFL learners ranged from 16 to 29 years old with a mean age of 22 years old, while considering that 12 did not disclose their age. Regarding the EFL instructors, they were all aged over 35 years old.

4.1 Findings Related to the First Research Question

The presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the data collected from the different participants about the advantages and disadvantages of EFL teaching at the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) are as follows.

4.1.1 From the EFL Learners

The significant outcomes from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the EFL Learners are presented below.

4.1.1.1 Outcomes from the Descriptive Statistics Analysis

The descriptive statistics of items 8 and 9 with the gender revealed that the means scores of the answers provided by the distinct respondents to these items’ questions turn respectively around the values of 3.00 and 1.00 (Cf. Table IV). The coefficient of variation (Standard Deviation) is $SD > 1$ for item 8 and $SD < 1$ for item 9. This result indicates that many motives explain the reason why EFL learners are studying the English language. It can be suggested that they are

interested in their target language learning to travel to English-speaking countries and for reasons such as academic and professional requirements and understanding the culture of native speakers. However, the coefficient of variation for item 9 is $SD < 1$, the information provided by those respondents is all close to the one denoted by the mean score. This result suggests that most informants studied English online for less than three (3) months.

Table IV: Descriptive statistics of items 8 and 9 with gender

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Which of the following best describes your main reason for studying English?	134	15	1	16	3.55	3.057	9.347
Gender	103	1	1	2	1.41	.494	.244
How long have you been studying English online?	132	3	1	4	1.49	.682	.466
Valid N (listwise)	97						

On the other hand, the descriptive statistics of items 10 and 12 with those of some statements from item 13 showed a different coefficient of variation to the responses provided by the informants to the questions expressed by these items or words (Cf. Table V).

Table V: Descriptive statistics of items 10 and 12 with some statements of item 13

Items/statements		N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Item 10	What do you think of the quality of the English courses you take online?	130	4	1	5	2.02	1.171	1.372
Item 12	With the advent of COVID-19. what do you think of the way classes are taught in the English department these days?	129	4	1	5	2.23	.796	.633
Statement 1 of Item 13	Learning English language is very important because it is a universal language.	132	4	1	5	4.20	1.151	1.324
Statement 2 of Item 13	English studies help to develop many skills for the professional world.	131	4	1	5	4.15	1.001	1.002
Statement 3 of Item 13	Opportunities offered by English studies are multifaceted but not always easy to access	130	4	1	5	3.81	.941	.885
Statement 4 of Item 13	Students having studied English are not always well equipped for the professional world	131	4	1	5	3.10	1.282	1.644
Statement 5 of Item 13	There is still a lot of lightness in the training of English learners.	128	4	1	5	3.59	1.133	1.284
Statement 6 of Item 13	Very few EFL Learners have a good command of their target language.	125	4	1	5	3.49	1.126	1.268
Statement 7 of Item 13	Many learners are still not able to make meaningful sentences even after graduation.	131	4	1	5	3.73	1.156	1.336
Statement 15 of Item 13	Young graduates of the English department lack strategies to sell themselves.	126	4	1	5	3.44	1.223	1.496
Statement 16 of Item 13	Anyone who has studied English should never be unemployed. It's all about skill.	133	4	1	5	3.51	1.352	1.828
	Valid N (listwise)	103						

By applying the rule of the **Standard Deviation** as mentioned above, the following inferences can be noted. Most of the learners (Cf. Table VI) believed that taking English classes online may facilitate, to some extent, the learning of this target language though this is sometimes boring (37.4 %). On the other hand, some of them (35.3 %) at the same time believed that this does not always allow the learner to stay focused (Item 10: $SD > 1$). This outcome suggests that these EFL learners are considerably against using the e-learning system in their foreign language learning process. The demonstration of such an observation can be seen through the fact (Cf. Table VII) they (66.9 %) believed, studying a foreign language through a distance learning system does not help them practise their new language (Item 12: $SD < 1$). Most of them (84.9 %) agreed that learning the English language is essential because it helps to develop several skills for the professional career (Item 13 – Statements 1 and 2: $SD > 1$). Many of them (71.3 %) contended that English studies are likely to offer lots of opportunities or outlets to learners (Item 13 – statement 3: $SD < 1$). However, they (64.7 %) have also highlighted some

weaknesses related to the kind of academic education they are involved in and mentioned (61.9 %), namely the quality and limit of the training given to them in the English Department (Item 13 – statements 4, 5, 6, 7 : $SD > 1$). They (54.7) believed that new teaching approaches should be developed to help them (56.8 %) become successful in their studies and able to sell themselves (Item 13 – statements 15 and 16). This result suggests that English studies offer lots of advantages to EFL learners when they are well trained. They give them the chance to prepare for their professional life, get accessible job opportunities, and develop many abilities such as foreign language anxiety management, oral communication, leadership, self-help, and self-confidence. Their primary disadvantages are time consumption and foreign language anxiety development.

Table VI: Frequencies entry for item 10 - What do you think of the quality of the English courses you take online?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid They are boring. I prefer taking them off line	52	37.4	40.0	40.0
They are not bad but do not always allow the learner to stay focused. The learner cannot keep up with the teacher	49	35.3	37.7	77.7
I think they must be quite interesting because I do not have too much experience of these courses	12	8.6	9.2	86.9
They are interesting. They help practice English differently	8	5.8	6.2	93.1
They are very practical and help the student to learn English very easily	9	6.5	6.9	100.0
Total	130	93.5	100.0	
Missing System	9	6.5		
Total	139	100.0		

Table VII: Frequencies of entry for item 12 – With the advent of Covid-19, what do you think of how classes are taught in the English Department these days?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid It is worrying. We do not want to study anymore	11	7.9	8.5	8.5
Studying a foreign language through a distance learning system does not really help us practice our new language	93	66.9	72.1	80.6
It goes without saying that this depends on technological conditions.	11	7.9	8.5	89.1
I think that our educational system is emerging. Anyway, I like it.	12	8.6	9.3	98.4
We could not dream of better. This solves the problems due to the overcrowded classrooms	2	1.4	1.6	100.0
Total	129	92.8	100.0	
Missing System	10	7.2		
Total	139	100.0		

4.1.1.2 Outcomes from the Inductive Analysis

Respondents were also allowed to provide any additional information they felt was necessary to support their opinions on the topics under study to get reliable and trustworthy statistics. First, many of them addressed their gratitude towards the researchers for giving them the chance to express their minds. They have then implored the latter to make their opinions known to everyone to enable appropriate measures to solve their different learning concerns. Second, many of them qualified as weak and limited the education given to learners at the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) because they believe that this education does not allow them to have a good command target language. Some stated **that we do not have enough assistance from our language instructors; we are on our own in our quest for English learning; moreover, large-size classes do not provide learners with an accurate follow-up.**

Overall, they admit that English learning as a foreign language is necessary for everyone nowadays. Therefore, language educators from the English Department should assist students and help them take language immersion programs.

4.1.2 From the EFL Instructors

Five open-ended phone conversation questions were asked to the EFL instructors. Two were designed to answer the first research question. The different answers to these two interview questions can be summarised into the following significant trends as consistent with the beliefs of these respondents.

✚ *How is the teaching of EFL doing in your English Department?* Most of the informants argued that teaching English as a foreign language is challenging. Some stated, [...] **the first challenge we have to deal with is large-sized classes**. In addition, they believed that the teaching of English in an LMD system requires many resources. Some contended that **in underdeveloped countries like the Benin Republic, the foreign language educator must be granted the necessary resources such as language laboratories and language immersion programs. In addition, they should be given opportunities for cooperation between national and international universities and transdisciplinary research fundings**.

✚ *Are there any advantages or disadvantages to studying English in a specific and focused way at the UAC?* Most of the participants mentioned that the English Department is full of qualified and experienced executives who have already proven their competencies in many ways. They argued that **the education given in this high place of knowledge could be considered remarkable considering the multiple efforts, challenges, and sacrifices that this necessitates daily**. Two of them mentioned that EFL teachers in this Department often outdo themselves to provide quality training to their learners, given the glaring lack of adequate resources. Some of them pointed out, **at the end of their various academic and vocational training programs, learners are provided with linguistic, technical, and practical skills**. However, they add, **except for a few of them who succeed in making their teachers proud through the excellent command of their target language, many of them remain with lots of gaps**. This observation poses the issue of revitalising the academic system and that of the teaching and supervising strategies. Most of them informed that the teaching of EFL has undoubtedly many advantages. Among others of these benefits, they have enumerated, [...] the development of the brain or intelligence quotient [...]; [...] **self-confidence, and oral communication abilities [...]; [...] the discovery of the histories, cultures, and customs of others nations**. As pointed out by some, the most common disadvantages of EFL learning include time consumption, stage fright, and foreign language anxiety. Furthermore, they asserted that EFL learning is a long journey; it is a long-winded race requiring **endurance, sacrifice, commitment, and determination**.

4.2 Findings Related to the Second Research Question

The presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the data collected from the different participants about the impact of online courses on EFL teaching in the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) are as follows.

4.2.1 From the EFL Learners

The significant outcomes from the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the EFL Learners are presented below.

4.2.1.1 Outcomes from the Descriptive Statistics Analysis

The descriptive statistics of item 11 with the gender revealed that the means scores of the answers provided by the respondents to this item's questions turn around the value of 2.00 (Cf. Table VIII). Therefore, the Standard Deviation is $SD \geq 1$ for item 11. This result indicates that most of the respondents (37.4 %) are sceptical about e-learning in language education in the future (Cf. Table IX). Some (31.7 %) believed that this educational system might probably be the school of tomorrow if the methods of access to the online courses are improved and made available to all. However, a considerable number of them (15.8 %) contended that whatever the type of teaching system that could be adopted for reasons related to the Covid-19's health crisis, we will never be able to do without face-to-face courses. This outcome suggests that the EFL learners from the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi (UAC) admit that the online class system can be effective in their foreign language learning process. However, it could never replace for real the one used traditionally.

As a reminder, the Standard Deviation (σ) is a statistical measure that helps to know how far or close the individual responses to a question (or the unique data values in a set) are from the mean value. Its formula is as follows.

$$\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum(X_i - \mu)^2}{N}} \begin{cases} \sigma = \text{population standard deviation} \\ N = \text{the size of the population} \\ X_i = \text{each value from the population} \\ \mu = \text{the population mean} \end{cases}$$

Table VIII: Descriptive statistics of item 11 with gender

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Do you think that e-learning is the school of tomorrow?	131	4	1	5	2.00	1.060	1.123
Gender	103	1	1	2	1.41	.494	.244
Valid N (listwise)	99						

Table IX: Frequencies of entry for item 11 – Do you think e-learning is the school of tomorrow?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	
Valid	I do not know. Tomorrow will tell us	52	37.4	39.7	39.7
	Probably yes if the systems of access to these courses are improved and made available to all	44	31.7	33.6	73.3
	There is a good chance that it will become so. but still we will never be able to do without face-to-face classes.	22	15.8	16.8	90.1
	I think that soon this will be inevitable. We will not be able to do without them.	9	6.5	6.9	96.9
	The future of tomorrow's education simply rests in the hands of the designers of online courses	4	2.9	3.1	100.0
	Total	131	94.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	5.8		
Total	139	100.0			

According to the Standard Deviation rule (σ), commonly abbreviated as **SD**, when $SD \geq 1$, this indicates that the individual responses to a given question (or the unique data values in a set) tend to be spread out over an extensive range of values. However, when the contrary situation

occurs, that is to say, $SD \leq 1$, this shows that those individual data values tend to be close to the mean score. $SD=0$ only when all the unique data values are very similar and equal to the mean score. In other words,

The lower the standard deviation, the closer the value of X_i will be to the mean and, therefore, to the distribution centre. Conversely, the greater the standard deviation, the further X_i will be from the distribution centre. Thus, the sum of all the variations between the X_i and the mean is logically equal to zero (0). (Adapted from B. Bahouayila, 2016, p.11).

Applying the Standard Deviation rule as defined above allows the following inferences to be observed when interpreting the data presented in Table X.

A considerable number of informants (72.6 %) believed that Covid-19's issues seem to make the English language studies more complicated than ever (Cf. Table XI). Similarly, most (59 %) strongly disagreed that the new teaching conditions due to Covid-19 could greatly promote English learning (Cf. Table XII). Moreover, they (61.9 %) agreed that Benin's significant limit of e-learning might be the internet connection. Still, they showed (57.5 %) their disapproval towards the idea supporting that the e-learning policy in Benin is very favourable for the teaching of English. Most of them (58.2 %) believed that with the e-learning system, many learners fail in adopting a good learning position and assumed (65.5 %) that they will drop out of school in the long run. Therefore, they (43.2 %) somewhat disagreed with the idea of pretending that e-learning might be the best alternative ever for teaching English Covid-19. However, they (47.5 %) agreed, to some extent, with the fact that e-learning might seem to make language immersion easy when implemented with the necessary resources. Overall, they (77.7 %) believed that the system of teaching English in Benin must be redefined for better perspectives (Item 13 – statements 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18: $SD > 1$).

Table X: Descriptive statistics of some statements from item 13

Statements from Items 13		N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Statement 8 of Item 13	COVID-19 Problems Seem To Make Studying English More Complicated Than Ever.	129	4	1	5	3.95	1.138	1.295
Statement 9 of Item 13	New teaching conditions due to COVID-19 greatly promote English learning.	131	4	1	5	2.32	1.320	1.743
Statement 10 of Item 13	The major limit of e-learning in Benin is the internet connection.	129	4	1	5	3.64	1.334	1.780
Statement 11 of Item 13	The e-learning policy in Benin is very favorable for the teaching of English.	129	4	1	5	2.53	1.238	1.532
Statement 12 of Item 13	With e-learning, many learners fail to adopt a good learning position.	126	4	1	5	3.67	1.166	1.360
Statement 13 of Item 13	Many learners will drop out of school with e-learning for lack of means.	130	4	1	5	3.85	1.191	1.418
Statement 14 of Item 13	E-learning is the best alternative ever for teaching English COVID-19 or not.	128	4	1	5	2.66	1.250	1.563
Statement 17 of Item 13	E-learning seems to make language immersion easy. It's all about financial resources.	131	4	1	5	3.24	1.290	1.663
Statement 18 of Item 13	The system of teaching English in Benin must be redefined for better perspectives.	131	4	1	5	4.23	1.231	1.516
Valid N (listwise)		113						

Table XI: Frequencies of entry for the statement 8 from item 13 – Covid-19 Problems seem to make studying English more complicated than ever

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	8	5.8	6.2	6.2
	Disagree	9	6.5	7.0	13.2
	Neither agree nor disagree	11	7.9	8.5	21.7
	Agree	54	38.8	41.9	63.6
	Strongly agree	47	33.8	36.4	100.0
	Total	129	92.8	100.0	
Missing	System	10	7.2		
	Total	139	100.0		

Table XII: Frequencies of entry for statement 9 from item 13 – New teaching conditions due to Covid-19 greatly promote English learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	49	35.3	37.4	37.4
	Disagree	33	23.7	25.2	62.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	15	10.8	11.5	74.0
	Agree	26	18.7	19.8	93.9
	Strongly agree	8	5.8	6.1	100.0
	Total	131	94.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	5.8		
Total		139	100.0		

4.2.1.2 Outcomes from the Inductive Analysis

Considering the stakes of this research study, respondents also had the opportunity to argue or support their opinions on the various issues under investigation. Thus, the following outcomes based on an inductive analysis of some qualitative data have been obtained.

The majority of respondents expressed their disapproval towards adopting the e-learning system in the Republic of Benin. They notably raised the following issues as problems that undermine the effectiveness of this education system.

- The inability to understanding the courses sent on the e-learning platform without any explanation;
- The lack of adequate resources that can help to take the courses online;
- The inability to know the effectiveness of the online courses;
- The probability that many EFL learners quickly drop out of school just because of e-learning.

Basing on their different outlooks, the revitalisation of the educational system is necessary. Some have even stated, **We should avoid dealing with the e-learning system because we are not ready for it in our country.** Nevertheless, few of them have given some credit to this educational system. They stated that **E-learning is very efficient because it promotes flexibility in a teaching situation and allows the learner to access the course materials from everywhere.** Some others mentioned, **E-learning is a good initiative because it enables students to learn at their own pace and at the same time open up to other studies or activities.** However, many of them asserted that the way this is implemented in the Benin Republic, especially at the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi, is not good. To support this idea, they stated, **Most EFL teachers only send their course materials in PDF format to learners for reading and understanding on their own.** Some suggested that it would have been better if their language teachers also left their course material in audio or video format. These courses will be explained in those video or audio materials that the learner could always have at hand.

Many respondents have lingered on statement 16 of item 13. They believed that we could graduate from a prestigious university and not be recruited by the government. This result poses the problem of the lack of orientation in studies. During their training, learners must be informed of the various outlets of their professional or academic activity. A long time before the end of their studies, learners must be encouraged to enhance their skills by creating wealth thanks to their intrinsic capacities.

In other words, most respondents were fiercely against online courses because, as they stated, **we do not have the resources to deal with them.** They have also suggested that the

government that forces them to participate in it should set up the policy of **one student, one computer, or one smartphone** and provide them with free internet access. Moreover, they stated that **we barely eat our fill; therefore, we should not be pretending to mirror the realities of developed countries in our countries**. Some believed that the Covid-19 crisis had been entirely simply marking the end of education in developing countries. Some others also thought that e-learning is a terrible idea for EFL students because it makes them lazy.

Moreover, they asserted, [...] **it does not help us understand the courses properly because of the inability to ask all kinds of questions. It also affects our speaking skills because we no longer have someone beside us to help us with our mistakes or practice our target language**. They specified that in the traditional class situation, [...] **it was challenging for us to practice the language; what would this be like in the context of online classes?** They then suggested that before adopting such a teaching system, it should be taken some considerable time to train everyone, namely, the different education actors in this regard.

4.2.2 From the EFL Instructors

Of the five open-ended phone conversation questions asked to the EFL instructors, three were designed to answer the second research question. The major trends of the different answers to these three interview questions are summarised as follows:

✚ *What do you think about the e-learning system currently being implemented in our educational system?* Most respondents believed that e-learning could be considered an excellent approach to teaching foreign languages when implemented with the necessary resources. However, the following issues are just a few of those they mentioned as the ones they can face with learners when dealing with online classes. These are **the concerns of internet connection, the lack of computer and educational tools, interference, and undesirable noise due to bad handling or ignorance of the use of microphones**, to name but a few.

✚ *What is the situational analysis you can make of implementing this learning system in the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi?* All of the participants argued that the results of this analysis give cause for concern. Three of them stated that it had been almost three months since the courses that are supposed to take **online have been struggling to start** [...]. Most of them deemed it essential to mention that after lifting the lockdown, the Beninese government, like other countries worldwide, has instituted the e-learning system to alleviate the problems related to the management of the widespread Covid-19 health crisis. Some asserted **we all know how the second part of the last quarter of the past academic year was handled. Our education system has received a hard blow with the adoption of the online course system. Moreover, since then, it struggles to recover**.

They specified that the significant problem that continues to arise is teachers' and students' training in the techniques of access to this new education system. All of them stated that despite the various theoretical and practical training organised by the government, most higher education teachers still struggle to master the functioning of this system. Therefore, to save the current academic year, most of them suggested that the government should set up a strategy that can allow face-to-face classes to take place with the strict observation of the concept of social distancing and health security measures.

✚ *Can foreign languages such as English be taught effectively online?* Most of them believed that this is a great question to which any educator involved in language teaching should tackle an answer. They all admitted that distance education has a particular advantage. Most of them explained that it allows any learner to take on several courses simultaneously without leaving home. **They stated that many of these online training courses are free and only require costs related to the consumption of the internet connection. However, they specified, they do not always promote oral communication skills because online classroom learners listen more to the teacher than to themselves in most cases**. In other words, they explained that in an actual online classroom situation, the interaction between learners and the relationship or exchange between teacher and

learner is almost non-existent. Some argued that this situation-specific to distance learning does not promote teaching languages in general and foreign languages in particular.

On the other hand, some have uttered, [...] **Of course, this can contribute to the development of socio-cultural knowledge. It can allow the learner of a target language to learn more about the culture, civilisation, and customs of the native speakers of that language. However, the often limited time learners spend online hardly allows them to practice their new language.** Besides, a few of them highlighted that we should not forget the harmful impact of electronic devices on human health. The lucky ones, did they state, [...] **may end up with visual acuity problems over time if they are not diagnosed with a type of cancer.** They have all suggested that the government review its new distance education policy and allow both types of education, whether online and face-to-face, to occur.

5. Discussion of the results

Based on each of the research questions, the present part of the study brought out, on the one hand, the gist of the results obtained through the cross-analysis of the different data collected from the EFL learners and the language instructors. However, on the other hand, it has addressed each of these outcomes simultaneously while focusing on its distinct objectives.

5.1 Advantages and disadvantages of teaching EFL in the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi in the Republic of Benin

The main trends that can be suggested, from the results of the cross-analysis of the different data collected, as those that correspond to the participant's views on the first research question, are as follows.

The cross-analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the EFL learners revealed that most have been consistent in their responses. When cross-checking their different opinions with those of their language instructors, it was found that various reasons lead EFL learners to undertake English studies. Some of these motives have to do with their interest in travelling to English-speaking countries, meeting some academic and professional requirements, and being knowledgeable of the culture of native speakers. However, foreign language learning is challenging. To be successful in having a good command of them, learners have to set for themselves a long-term goal and do whatever possible to achieve it.

Moreover, by attending English language classes, learners expect to be well-trained and develop some competencies to help them survive in the professional world. Even though some of them may qualify as weak or limited, the education offered to them at the English Department of the University of Abomey-Calavi, it is essential to emphasise that the teacher can never give everything to learners. He can only give them the primary education they should learn to meet other knowledge by their care. These learners are then responsible for questioning themselves and understanding that not everything will be taught to them in a classroom situation. Nevertheless, it is now apparent that learning a foreign language gives its learner more advantages than disadvantages. Among others of these benefits, as reported in the literature review, are intelligence development (J. Morales, 2013 *et al.*, p. 194 and pp. 197-198), self-control, oral communication, leadership skills, anxiety management, and the easiness of securing job opportunities (G. Kruschewsky, 2017, n.p.).

The different respondents of this study believed, as A. Mackey (2014, n.p.), A. Chatel (2014, n.p.), E. Peal, and W. Lambert (1962, p. 1), that English language learning is likely to develop creativity, decision-making abilities and increase Intelligence Quotient (IQ). The good news is that they are all aware of the many advantages of studying this foreign language. The critical point now is to provide the latter with the resources required to learn this language in conditions comparable to those the native speaker acquired it.

On the other hand, the different participants considered the detrimental effect that an inexperienced instructor may have on the quality of a learner's academic performance, motivation, and efficiency as drawbacks of English language learning. Similarly, like R. Richards (2011, p. 1), they believed EFL learning might be costly, challenging, and time-consuming. Additionally, as disadvantages of learning this foreign language, they listed the notions of sacrifice, commitment, and determination required and the likelihood for foreign language anxiety development.

Given that nothing good in this world can be achieved without sacrifice and perseverance, a range of motivators should surround EFL students to help them achieve their various language objectives. When these multiple constraints related to learning this target language should be combined with those imposed by the present situation of distant education adoption due to the Covid-19 crisis, there are grounds to be concerned and take stock of the current teaching challenges.

5.2 Impact quality of online courses on the teaching of EFL in the English Department of the University of Abomey Calavi in the Republic of Benin

Regarding the prominent trends that can be suggested as those that correspond to the participant's views on the second research question, it is a fact that most of them are against the implementation of the e-learning system in the English language learning process. They believed that this system is unfavourable for underdeveloped countries because its execution required many financial resources.

According to EFL instructors, this teaching system's evaluation method is restricted to purely objective questions. Additionally, they stated that this method encourages cheating among learners because the latter can use their dictionaries, course materials or be assisted by someone else unbeknownst to the assessor. As I. Clover (2017, n.p.) noted, they mentioned that computer-marked online examinations tended to be primarily knowledge-based and not necessarily practical. Moreover, they highlighted as V. Gupta (2020, n.p.) that e-learning programs do not enable language immersion, face-to-face interaction, the practice of listening and speaking skills and instead develop distraction among learners.

Some of the EFL learners who participated in the survey mentioned that distance-learning programs cause students to get bored and do not provide EFL learners with the chance to become proficient in their foreign language. While most of them agreed with their language teachers that e-learning courses are more time-consuming, these different respondents admitted that this teaching system also has some advantages. As I. Clover (2017, n.p.) mentioned, they believed that e-learning systems might help manage large-size classrooms and enable any student (part-time learners or full-time workers) to attend web-based classes anywhere. According to I. Clover (2017, n.p.), e-learning systems facilitate sharing different course materials in various forms and promote active and independent learning. They provide flexibility, self-learning, or daily training. They enable the recording or audiotaping of instructions, give the learner the chance to re-watch or listen to all that the teacher has said. Additionally, they facilitate interactions between learners and teachers.

The stocktaking of the online classes' situation helps to notice that there is reason to be concerned about the future of our education. In the aftermath of the lockdown, the attempt to implement online courses in our educational system ended in dismal failure. However, it is to believe that it would take more than that to bring education actors in developing countries to let go in the face of these facts reflecting the ineffectiveness of this education system. This situation undoubtedly explains that the Republic of Benin government has made its utmost to bring it up again with this time more energy and investment. Yet, the results remain the same and poor. So far, the online classes are still struggling to get started.

The best formula for successfully making this education system operational is to provide the various education stakeholders with adequate resources and the time necessary to acclimatise to this new system.

However, it would be a fundamental mistake to end the traditional system of face-to-face classes definitively because it contributes considerably to the success of foreign language learning. Moreover, its use is likely to reduce health risks that a chronic user of electronic devices and the Internet could run.

Conclusion

The present mixed-methods research study that focuses on descriptive statistics and inductive analysis methodology has attempted to take stock of the advantages and disadvantages of EFL teaching at the English Department of the University of Abomey Calavi in the Benin Republic since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Besides, the issue of the effectiveness of online courses in this Language Department was also addressed.

The different results obtained have shown that the EFL teaching at this Department provides multiple benefits to learners. Some of these advantages are the development of oral communication, critical analysis, self-confidence, creativity, time management, foreign language anxiety management, and decision-making abilities. Furthermore, this study's most common disadvantages of EFL teaching are time consumption and stage fright, and foreign language anxiety development. The following are some job outlets or opportunities offered by English studies. The EFL learner can easily find himself in the world of journalism, cinema, diplomacy, translation, interpretation. In addition, s/he can invest in the business, politics, import-export, maritime transit, port handling, aviation, maritime consignment, real estate, education, music, communication, projects management, tourism, events, and meeting industry, sport, and many others. Simply put, English language education enables students to communicate effectively in English, strengthens their listening abilities, helps in problem-solving, facilitates social interaction, and develops managerial skills. However, beginner students may have difficulty acquiring basic linguistic concepts that may make them feel anxious. Additionally, learning English as a foreign language may impede the educational process and demotivate learners. As for the effectiveness of online classes at this Department, the only immediate benefit that this could provide to the various education actors of this University is the management of problems related to large size classes. Besides, it turned out that this new education system is not adapted to the realities of underdeveloped countries like ours.

Suggestions and recommendations

Based on all the above, the following suggestions and recommendations have been projected.

- The educational system in the Benin Republic should be revitalised
- The government should decree the policy of “one student, one computer, or one smartphone” and be ready to provide each learner with free internet access.
- Before adopting the online teaching system, it should be taken some considerable time to train everyone, namely, the different education actors.
- Learners should be motivated to have endurance, sacrifice, commitment, and determination.

Future researchers on the e-learning approach should attempt to explore the effectiveness of this system among learners from different educational environments. In addition, to help generalise the present study's findings, further research with a more significant number of participants could also be considered.

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