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The unexpected transition to distance learning amid COVID-19: A qualitative study on faculty experience

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine how faculty view the experience of the unexpected transition to distance learning as the only option to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomenological research design was adopted to account for faculty experience when delivering online language courses. Data were collected through email interviewing with Moroccan university teachers. 20 male faculty members, drawn from a purposeful sample, participated in this study after the completion of a seven-week period of delivering English classes at a distance. Thematic coding analysis was used to approach the participants’ answers. Results illustrated how the teachers’ experience of delivering language classes involved lack of ICT infrastructure and lack of student engagement, while creating opportunities for flexibility in the time and pace of teaching and learning and increased learner-content interaction. Based on these results, implications for implementation and research were provided.

1. Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has urged the closure of schools, institutes, colleges, and universities worldwide and showed that the complete return of students to physical classes is still elusive during the academic year 2021–2022. In response to the global pandemic, many countries have resorted to distance education to ensure continued learning for all age groups. In Morocco, for instance, the Ministry of Education has decided to launch a distance learning program since March 16, 2020 to deliver instruction to students from primary to higher education through national TV channels, national education portals, social media, and interactive and online platforms. Since the start of the fall semester in 2020, some Moroccan institutions of higher education have continued to deliver courses at a distance solely; other institutions have opted for a blended format in course delivery; and others have resumed face-to-face classes.

The abrupt shift to distance education—also called distance/online learning in this study (see Twigg, 2001)—for the first time to maximize the study opportunities disrupted by the global pandemic since March 16, 2020, has opened new research directions in educational technology in Morocco, where the researcher’s curiosity to delve in this field of study was the main source of motivation to examine faculty experience of the unexpected transition to distance language learning. Being one of the first scholarly publications to report the experience of a national sample of teachers of English who involved in online learning as the only option to respond to the pandemic justifies the contribution of this study to research on distance language education in the time of emergency. Two research questions guided this investigation:

1. What hindrances do faculty report when delivering language courses at a distance?
2. What benefits do faculty report when delivering language courses at a distance?

The significance of this study on faculty experience of the unexpected transition to online language courses is threefold. First, results from this investigation would develop an understanding of whether the teachers swear by or swear at the distance education experience considering the available means. Second, the results would provide guidelines to policymakers to improve the field of educational technology with emphasis on preparing the ground for distance language education at tertiary level in Morocco. Third, this manuscript would encourage educational technology researchers to explore new lines of research on distance language education in Moroccan higher education.

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1 For instance, course content for primary and secondary students is broadcast through the Arrahia TV channel and the TelmidTICE portal, whereas course content for university students is delivered through Arryadia TV channel and the Resources Universitaires Numérique (run) portal.

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2. Literature review

Empirical research evaluating teachers/instructors’ experience of distance language learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to reach the scholarly literature. Thus, this research article presented a brief history of distance learning in Morocco and reviewed previous studies involving university teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the experience of conducting online language classes.

2.1. A brief history of distance learning in Morocco

Willfulness to embrace distance education to enhance learning in face-to-face classes in Morocco was part of a reform whose primary aim was to introduce Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the curriculum as stated in the National Charter of Education and Training as of 1999 (see Hassim, 2002). The follow-up measures taken by the Ministry of Education to implement the reform aimed at equipping public schools and universities with technologies (e.g., computers, video projectors, the Internet, etc.), training teachers in how to integrate ICT in the classroom, and establishing digital resources through big projects and initiatives, particularly GENIE (for detailed information, see Ismaïl, 2020) and MARWAN (THOT THOR CURSUS, 2001).

However, not until the Moroccan government confirmed the spread of COVID-19 in the country did the Ministry of Education adopt for the first-time distance education per se by the time teachers and students were staying in their homes as a preventive measure to contain the pandemic. Back in 1999, the National Charter of Education and Training posited readiness to incorporate distance learning in the curriculum. Included in the 10th section in the reform was article 119 on the integration of ICT in education and the adoption of distance learning in secondary education to deliver instruction to students living in remote areas (Hassim, 2002). After two decades, this aim may be achieved to some extent during the current emergency—COVID-19, which has also and somewhat accelerated the implementation of the Framework Law 51.17 regulating the education system, particularly article 33 and article 48 which call for the necessity of promoting, developing, and funding distance education to support classroom teaching.

2.1.1. Previous studies

Warschauer (2000) presented the results of a two-year ethnographic study of students’ and teachers’ perceived experiences of online learning in four college language and writing classes, where many students were second language learners. Three results were reported. First, students did not experience web-based technologies principally as an aid to second language learning, but that they viewed themselves as developing critically important new literacy skills in a new medium. Second, literacy activities were most effective when students understand the purpose of the activities, consider the activities culturally and socially relevant, and can use the electronic medium in an appropriate, purposeful way. Third, teacher beliefs were found to be an important determiner for implementing new technologies.

Hampel and Hauck (2004) reported the results of a distance German course delivered solely online for the first time by the Open University, U.K. The study assessed both student and teacher experiences, focusing on activities conducted through Lyceum and student support. The findings showed that students valued the increased degree of interaction with fellow students and felt comfortable working with Lyceum thanks to the informative introduction. Teachers evaluated the tasks very positively, as they were well planned, suitable, and learner centered.

Murday et al. (2008) examined student and instructor perspectives on online courses in French and Spanish with WebCT at Carnegie Mellon University. Results showed that students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the online courses and reported different issues relating to the reduced schedule of classes and technology used in course delivery. Teachers tended to evaluate the online language courses negatively, as they called for the need for training, control of course materials, and connections with students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The purpose of this study was to examine how faculty view the experience of the unexpected transition to distance language learning as the only option to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research design adopted was phenomenological theory because the purpose is to grasp the lived experiences of a group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given such a type of study requires a systematic and immersive penetration of university teachers’ thoughts and insights to understand their experience of the unexpected transition to distance language learning, in-depth email interviewing was adopted to collect first-hand information from 20 faculty members in efforts to answer the research questions formulated at the onset of this manuscript.

3.2. Participants

This study adopted a purposeful sampling method because the aim was to recruit participants who experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). That is, this manuscript involved 20 male faculty members who delivered online courses when the government shut universities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The inclusion of male participants only was unintentional, as several female teachers of English were kindly requested and reminded to participate in the study, but none of them did. The 20 participants are affiliated to the following higher education institutions: Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fez, Moulay Ismail University in Meknès, Ibn Zohr University in Agadir, Mohammed V University in Rabat, and AbdelMalek Essaâdi University in Tétouan. They were all Moroccans with ages ranging from 29 to 50 years, and the length of their teaching experience varied from 4 to 28 years. Anonymity of the participants was guaranteed by designating teachers as participant (1), participant (2), participant (3), etc. Table 1 presents the teachers’ background information.

None of the participants had training in how to deliver online courses; however, three of them received training in how to use technology in teaching English; and only four teachers have already had hands-on experience in using asynchronous distance learning to support classroom learning.

3.3. Data collection

Given this study on faculty experience of teaching English at a distance took place during quarantine, the researcher adopted email interviewing, which has emerged as a feasible technique in qualitative research in the last two decades (see Meho, 2006). The main advantages of using email interviewing in this study involved 1) reaching as many participants as possible irrespective of their geographical locations, 2) providing participants with enough time to process the questions and responding at their convenience, and 3) minimizing the cost of transcribing data (Karchmer, 2001; Meho, 2006). Prior to collecting actual data, two teachers of English majoring in educational technology provided feedback on the interview questions, which resulted in rephrasing some items before emailing the final version of the semi-structured interview to the target participants. The interview questions collected data on the teachers’ background information and current experience of teaching English at a distance (see Appendix).
This study explored how faculty view the experience of the unexpected transition to teaching English classes at a distance. Initially, the researcher contacted personal acquaintances majoring in education at university. Teachers who confirmed that they majoring in education at university. Teachers who confirmed that they could deliver course content to students. One way to locate these teachers involved looking for their e-mails on the websites of universities where they work. Then the researcher sent prospective participants individual emails including a Google Form with the interview questions and a consent form as an attachment to request their voluntary participation in the study. Follow-up emails were sent to some participants to seek further clarification on certain responses, which helped in collecting in-depth data. Overall, the process of data collection lasted for three weeks; however, data analysis started immediately after receiving answers from the first six participants.

### 3.5. Data analysis

The data collected from the participants were recorded in Google Forms, and an Excel spreadsheet was used to organize the answers corresponding to the email interview questions. The participants’ answers were approached using thematic coding analysis, which can be adopted as a general framework within different qualitative research designs (see Robson & McCartan, 2016). One main advantage of thematic coding analysis is to “provide a means of summarizing key features of large amounts of qualitative data, using a principled approach” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 470). The implementation of thematic coding analysis requires the following five stages: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) identifying themes, 4) conducting thematic networks and making comparisons, 5) and integrating and interpreting the themes (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In this study, reading and re-reading the data preceded the phase of high-lighting key words and sentences tapping the participants’ distance education experience. Then the teachers’ responses were colour coded and placed in a visual chart to aid identifying tentative themes. The emergent themes were compared to categorize similar codes in thematic categories before offering explanations and interpretations to answer the two research questions.

### 4. Results

This study explored how faculty view the experience of the unexpected transition to distance learning as the only option to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. An attempt to approach this research problem required finding out: 1) the distance learning technologies used by the teachers, 2) the hindrances reported by the teachers when delivering online classes and 3) the benefits reported by the teachers when delivering online classes.

The 20 teachers delivered online courses through synchronous technologies (Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet) and/or asynchronous technologies (Google Classroom, Edmodo, Moodle, e-mail, and social media). 13 participants were exclusively involved in asynchronous distance learning, three participants were exclusively involved in synchronous distance learning, and four participants used both types of distance learning. The participants mentioned four hindrances and two benefits when reflecting on their sudden experience of teaching a distance. The hindrances were grouped in two thematic categories: 1) lack of ICT infrastructure and 2) lack of student engagement. And the benefits were categorized in two themes: 1) flexibility and 2) learner-content interaction.

#### 4.1. Hindrances to delivering online classes

The participants’ answers suggested that the experience of the unexpected transition to teaching English classes at a distance involved lack of ICT infrastructure and student engagement. While lack of ICT infrastructure was concerned with access to technology and training, lack of student engagement pertained to interaction and motivation.

##### 4.1.1. Lack of ICT infrastructure

Access to technology ($n = 15$). Access to technology involves students’ inability to have the necessary electronic equipment and afford the Internet to attend online courses delivered by teachers through synchronous and asynchronous technologies. On the one hand, students’ lack of the necessary electronic equipment, such as “computers”, “tablets”; or “smartphones” was a key factor hindering the instructors’ teaching experience at a distance. Upon the closure of universities to combat the spread of COVID-19, the teachers and students had to stay in their homes and use technological devices to engage in the educational process remotely. However, several students were not able to attend these online language classes because they did not possess a personal computer or mobile phone. One teacher commented on this issue: “students do not attend because they have no computers or smartphones.” The inability to afford these technologies by students...
would minimise learning opportunities in any distance language environment.

On the other hand, students’ inability to pay for the Internet or offer high-speed Internet access in a regular manner was the other challenge that frequently affected the teachers’ experience of delivering online courses. The teachers reported that their students had problems accessing the Internet because they could not always afford its cost to attend online classes from their homes. Statements made by the faculty members showed that “students complain about the difficulty to have access to [the] Internet on a regular basis”, and others could not benefit from live online English courses due to the low quality of the Internet connections, which some teachers described as “unreliable Internet connection”, “bad Internet connection”, and “slow network connection.” This helps explain why “student absence”, as one teacher mentioned, was frequent and prominent in the online classes where the teachers found “difficulty to reach all students” during the lockdown.

4.1.1.2. Training (n = 12 participants). The teachers’ and students’ lack of training in distance education was a related key factor mentioned by the interviewees, who employed synchronous and asynchronous technologies. The sudden transition to distance education required the teachers to be self-reliant regarding the delivery of online language classes, as they had to first become familiar with how to use technology for education, look for free e-learning platforms, and ensure that their students are familiar with and have access to these new virtual learning platforms. Once accessing the online language courses, the teachers were also required to “facilitate interaction, to provide feedback, to answer questions and to make adjustments that fit the needs of learners” (White, 2003, p. 21). Hence, training in how to run online language classes was a must. One participant eloquently commented on this concern: “professors need to receive training in distance teaching/learning. Some even need to be trained in the use/manipulation of technological devices and tools.” Although one teacher had training in technology use in teaching English thanks to participating in a “three-day training program”, he reported that “the online environment feels uncomfortable due to inexperience.” Thus, being very comfortable with the technologies to be used for distance learning and having first-hand experience as online learners are preconditions for shifting to online teaching (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004). In this regard, the interviewees considered “training in e-learning” a prerequisite to become able to use “different and practical technological resources and materials.” The demand for training in online learning suggests that these faculty members recognised how their online teaching experience was way different from their experience of traditional teaching.

On their parts, students of English were unfamiliar with how to manipulate distance learning technologies. Although some students had the opportunity to involve in synchronous courses, lack of training made them feel afraid of using technology for learning purposes, as one teacher complained that “some students refuse to use the camera.” Therefore “students … are also required to show more commitment … [and] change their traditional mode of learning”, another teacher reported. This last comment indicates that these professors called for a change in traditional students’ attitudes toward distance education. The key to this problem, one teacher argued, requires offering students “training” in how to use technology and most importantly online platforms for learning. Even though “students today are known as digital natives … or the net generation” (Hsi, 2013, p. 197), preparing them for a new mode of learning is a prerequisite to ensure successful accessibility to distance language courses and increase their confidence to participate actively in the online learning environment (see Hetser et al., 2013).

4.1.2. Lack of student engagement

4.1.2.1. Interaction (n = 8). Interaction refers to oral and immediate communication between the teachers and students and teacher feedback on student learning. On the one hand, the professors, who used asynchronous technologies, experienced the absence of immediate communication with their students as a facility offered in web-based distance courses (White, 2003). One faculty member reported that his online language courses involved “the absence of prompt interaction”. This suggests that these professors were at the stage of sharing information with their students in the online language courses, where communication between the teachers and students was one-way. These teachers also experienced the absence of oral communication because of using asynchronous technologies. Yet, one teacher seems to be unhappy with this situation, as he stated: “oral participation is undesirable and usually replaced by written interaction or sending pictures, which is not the essence of language classrooms.” On the other hand, the faculty members, who used synchronous technologies, mentioned lack of interaction in the form of feedback. That is, students who attended live online classes did not benefit from teacher feedback, as one teacher reported to find “difficulty to correct homework and students’ mistakes.”

4.1.2.2. Motivation (n = 5). The last challenge observed by the professors when teaching English at a distance through synchronous and asynchronous technologies pertained to low student motivation. According to the participants, “a lot of students lack interest in learning” and “most students do not do the exercises.” The teachers’ statements suggest that when students moved to online classes, they experienced “feelings of lack of preparedness and lack of confidence and a sense of inadequacy (White, 1995, p. 209). In language teaching settings, distance teachers consider the use of technology a means to increase student motivation (Broady-Ortmann, 2002; Kim, 2008). However, the teachers’ use of web-supported platforms to deliver online courses did not achieve this purpose.

4.2. Benefits of delivering online classes

Of the 20 participants, only two faculty members reported that their experience of the unexpected transition to delivering online courses had no benefits but rather created “many obstacles … on the part of students.” Four other teachers reported no comments on the advantages of their experience. However, the other 14 participants pointed out that their experience of teaching remotely was characterized by flexibility and increased learner-content interaction.

4.2.1. Flexibility (n = 8)

The faculty members mentioned that teaching English at a distance through asynchronous technologies offered flexibility, as one teacher stated: “there are no timetable constraints; I post the lesson anytime I see suitable”, another one maintained that “students can study and have access to documents anytime … they wish.” This suggests that the teachers and students were no longer controlled by timetables and deadlines fixed at the onset of the academic year by the administration. Now, teachers and students, from the comfort of their homes, could control the time of language teaching and learning.

Another teacher mentioned that the adoption of synchronous distance learning saved his “time and energy.” That is, the professors were able to teach at their own pace because posting recorded videos or documents in online platforms assisted in minimizing repeated explanations of course content. Now, learners at their convenience could go back to the course material when there is a need for clarifying doubts about certain concepts and ideas. Accordingly, students had an opportunity to study at their own pace by processing and going through the course content anytime they wish, thereby allowing “turn [in] individual exploration of the material” (Murday et al., 2008, p. 132). Another teacher also shared this idea: “the students can read or watch or listen to lectures and repeat doing that, which help them master the ideas and information given by the professor.” Further, students had a chance to
control interaction with teachers in a timely fashion, as one instructor confirmed: “[students’] feedback is … not restricted to any schedule. I mean they can email me about pretty much anything.” All in all, the use of asynchronous distance learning allowed the teachers and their students to benefit from increased control over the timing and pace of teaching, learning and interaction.

4.2.2. Learner-content interaction (n = 6)

The teachers agreed that delivering English language online courses through asynchronous technologies created opportunities for increased learner-content interaction. One professor pointed out that “there is more concentration on the content when learning at a distance than when learning in the traditional classroom” because the delivery of English language online courses brought a new and intriguing mode of learning for students whose teachers shared “audio-visual materials, e-books, [and] pictures with colours”, “YouTube videos”, and “other materials borrowed from other teachers”. The opportunity to access the course material in a variety of formats is not only appealing to and preferable mode of learning for students (see Martin & Bolliger, 2018), but it also allows active interaction with content (i.e., the language). In other words, by sharing different types of media that explain the course material is “an effort to increase the effectiveness of the learner-content interaction” (Yoon, 2003, p. 23). This is well attested by another teacher who was surprised by his students’ engagement in writing activities in the online classroom. He maintained that the transition to distance learning “encourages students to write and do research …, [as] I observed a substantial increase in the numbers of students who … started sending me their written work. [And] … many students were able to finish writing their end-of-term papers.” The teacher’s statement suggests that distance language teaching created opportunities for independent learning. One teacher expressed this idea succinctly: “when I give students readings, they are always followed by questions for which they have to do some additional online research. This makes them responsible for anything they include or exclude while answering. This enhances their readiness to independent work”. Thus, the chance provided to learners to involve actively in further interaction with content helps develop their autonomous learning skills by exploring alternative resources of their choice to understand and contribute to the course material.

5. Discussion

The study investigated faculty experience of the unexpected transition to distance language learning as the only option to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two research questions guiding this research sought to report the hindrances and benefits of delivering online language courses during the lockdown. Results illustrated how the online language classes involved lack of ICT infrastructure and student engagement, while offering flexibility and increased learner-content interaction.

Lack of ICT infrastructure was concerned with the students’ inability to have access to technology (possessing a personal computer/smartphone and affording the Internet) to engage in synchronous and asynchronous online courses. This result supports the same theme discussed in studies conducted before COVID-19 (Bormman, 2016; Lembani et al., 2020; Owusu-Ansah, 2018) and during the pandemic (Bachiri & Sahli, 2020; Hibbi et al., 2021). In the past, parents were possibly sharing their personal computers and smartphones with their children. Now, everyone is at home; while parents need to attend work meetings remotely, their children need to attend online classes conducted by their instructors. This perception suggests that the shift to distance learning demanded additional costs on the part of learners, who would need to buy personal computers and “purchase additional equipment such as a sound card or video camera” (White, 2003, p. 75) to access live online classes, do assignments, respond to e-mails, etc. The expensive cost of high-speed Internet connections may also explain why university students, especially those coming from poor backgrounds and living in villages and towns were not able to frequently continue learning remotely. Thus, the challenge of gaining permanent access to the Internet led to the exclusion of many language learners “from significant parts of their education due to limited access to online tutorials” (Rye & Zubaidah, 2008, p. 99).

Lack of ICT infrastructure was also concerned with how lack of training in online learning affected the teachers and students to use technology for educational purposes. Results from this study showed that the teachers lack the necessary skills to operate distance language platforms. This is in line with studies reporting that teachers are unable to employ computer technology without a working knowledge of information technology (Bellhassan & Azegagh, 2021; El Firdoussi, 2020; Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Owusu-Ansah, 2018). Hence, the faculty members need to have first “basic computer literacy instruction before any applications in the [online] classroom can be expected” (Broad-y-Ortmann, p. 113). The change occurring in the structure of instruction when transitioning to online education explains why “teaching at a distance requires methods of instructional delivery that are different from the strategies and approaches commonly used in traditional classroom setting” (De Simone, 2006, p. 183).

Another study also supports the current findings as distance learners were found to be unable to communicate out of the class, take quizzes remotely, and find course content easily without the requisite knowledge. Despite exerting personal effort to gain literacy in technology use, online learners reported to have insufficient knowledge in ICT for distance learning (Owusu-Ansah, 2018). Hence, both the teachers and students needed training in how online language learning operates. As Hampel and Stickler (2012) suggested, for online learning environments to enhance language learning, “users have to acquire appropriate literacy skills, and explicit training in these strategies and coping mechanisms has to be provided to enable students as well as teachers to successfully use multimodal synchronous online tools” (p. 135). Based on current findings, the digital divide—lack of computers and Internet access at home alongside the required skill and knowledge to meaningfully use technology for online learning (Onye & Du, 2016)—was prominent among students from language classes in Moroccan higher education during the pandemic.

Lack of student engagement was another challenge that affected the faculty experience during the unexpected transition to teaching at a distance. Even though some students had access to the online courses, they did not have the chance to engage in oral and immediate interaction with their teachers and receive feedback on their work. Lack of oral communication was also found to be prominent in online learning in other higher education institutions in Morocco during the lockdown (Hibbi et al., 2021). The absence of interaction, which plays a role in improving online learners’ communicative skills in English (see Wang, 2004), minimised teachers-student contact as a fundamental characteristic of foreign language online courses (Don, 2005) and maximised the amount of transactional distance between the teachers and their students. Although technologies, particularly the computer and the Internet have the potential for creating an interactive online environment (Warschauer et al., 2000; Yoon, 2003), the online language courses were characterized by lack of interaction, which is “important for various types of learning, is important to learning satisfaction, and assists in maintaining the persistence of distance students” (Berge, 1999, p. 5). Regarding lack of feedback on students’ work, research has emphasized the role of feedback in the success of teaching and learning processes in virtual courses (Zilka et al., 2018). For instance, online learners view immediate teacher feedback on their work as one of the most desirable forms of interaction (Northrup, 2009). Young (2006) reported that the absence of corrective feedback on student learning is a teaching practice employed by ineffective teachers (Young, 2006).

The teachers involved in this study also reported that their students had a low degree of motivation to participate in the learning process. There are three reasons to explain this finding. First, given the learners
did not benefit from timely feedback on their language performance (White, 2003) and did not engage in prompt oral and immediate interaction with their teachers remotely could be a reason why learners were demotivated to engage in the learning process (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Another explanation for a breakdown in student motivation may involve the additional study time and learning demands required on the part of learners to figure out how to use technology for online learning (White, 2006). That is, lack of basic skills and knowledge needed to manipulate technologies for online learning led to lack of motivation among distance learners, who consider learning the technology language a time-consuming process (White, 1995). The other reason could be the psychological situation that everyone was going through during the pandemic, as several students reported to be worried about the pandemic, which led to negative consequences on their level of concentration on and satisfaction with distance learning (Belhassan & Azegagh, 2021).

Finally, the teachers’ experience of teaching English at a distance was characterized by flexibility in the time and pace of teaching and learning. Earlier studies posited that the ‘anytime and any pace’ function of online learning is the most important factor to entice both instructors and students to shift to distance education (Fidalgo et al., 2020; Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Northrup, 2009). In addition, the participants believed that the asynchronous online courses, which they attended, created opportunities for increased learner-content interaction. Research provides support to this finding because, unlike synchronous distance courses, asynchronous classes offer “learners more time to reflect on their own ideas and encourages them to do more critical thinking, since they control the pacing of interaction” (Huang, 2000, pp. 42–43). That is, with asynchronous communication, students have sufficient time to retain the information provided digitally and read, hear, and watch that information repeatedly until they understand the key concepts and ideas, thereby leading to increased learner-content interaction. By doing so, the online language classes tend to provide “more opportunities for exposure to L2 input and interaction, with the possibility of many hours of independent work” (Bañados, 2006, p. 535). And when self-directed learners interact with course content, they develop high self-efficacy for learning and course satisfaction (Cho & Cho, 2017).

5.1. Implications, limitations, and future research

Current findings suggest three implications for implementation. First, distance language learning can only be possible if educational institutions provide the language teachers and students with free in-house computers and unlimited high-speed Internet connections so that online learning becomes inclusive for all individuals. Second, the integration of ICT needs to be an integral part of the study programs implemented in classes to increase the teachers’ and students’ experience in and familiarity with technology use for education. A follow-up measure to guarantee positive outcomes of ICT integration in the curriculum requires developing intensive training courses for the teachers and students to learn how to manipulate a variety of computer- and web-based technologies for education. Third, the teachers need receive pedagogic training in how to deliver interactive live and non-live online courses. Part of the training needs cover which learning activities require synchronous and asynchronous online meetings between the teachers and students and among students themselves.

One of the limitations of this study was the absence of female faculty members among the participants, whose participation could have yielded new themes. Another limitation pertained to the unbalanced differences in the participants’ years of teaching, which could have affected their experience of teaching English at a distance. Research on how university students perceive the online learning experience is necessary to have a complete picture of the first experience of the unexpected transition to distance language learning in Morocco.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mohsine Jebbour: Conceptualization, Conducting email interviews, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing, reviewing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

Title of Paper: The Unexpected Transition to Distance Learning at Moroccan Universities amid COVID-19: A Qualitative Study on Faculty Experience.

- We have no financial interests to declare.
- All authors have participated in (a) conception and design, or analysis and interpretation of the data; (b) drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and (c) approval of the final version.
- This manuscript has not been submitted to, nor is under review at, another journal or other publishing venue.
- The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.

Appendix

Email Interview Questions

Background information

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. How many years have you been teaching at university?
4. Have you ever had training in teaching English at a distance?
5. Have you received training in technology use in English language teaching?
6. Did you ever teach at a distance before the government shut schools due to COVID-19?

Current experience of delivering online courses

7. Given the current situation (i.e., quarantine), what types of technology are you using to deliver online courses?
8. Given the unexpected transition to distance learning, what kind of challenges have you experienced while delivering online language courses?
9. What recommendations would you have for improving distance language learning?
10. Based on your personal experience during this unexpected transition to distance learning, what are the benefits of conducting online language courses?

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