Online Learning and Remote Assessment at University during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Suggestions

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Summary:

Covid-19 pandemic is much more than a health crisis; it is also a socio-economic crisis in many countries. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading to a sudden closure of schools, universities and colleges. Algeria is not an exception; Covid-19 Pandemic has imposed remote assessment in Algerian university. Universities are not prepared for online learning and remote assessment during the pandemic. Assessing students in an online environment without preparation leads to real challenges for higher education. The current research aims at exploring the challenges of remote assessment and the expectations for such new technique of assessment in higher education. A brief definition to assessment and its types are provided, the main challenges are discussed and some online assessment techniques are suggested for teachers to hopefully overcome barriers in the process of online assessment.

Keywords: challenges; Covid- 19; higher education; remote ; Assessment; suggestions

1. Introduction

The new Corona virus continues to expand throughout the world in developed and developing countries in the beginning of 2020, with more than one million deaths. It seems unfortunately that this pandemic will last long because though the huge efforts done by many countries and

the resources provided to laboratories and research centers, no total effective remedy has been discovered yet. There is a decline in the world economy, loss of jobs, and commerce. Education also has been severely affected by the pandemic, in addition to many other unexpected negative results. Education in general is changing and witnessing certain challenges

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during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers and students in most universities in the world live the experience of the lockdown. Therefore, they move unexpectedly towards online teaching. Many problems are faced by students and teachers when shifting from face-to-face to online learning. Covid-19 Pandemic has imposed remote assessment in Algerian university. Assessing EFL students in an online environment without preparation leads to real challenges for teachers and students alike. This research aims to shed light on the challenges of remote assessment as a new technique of assessment in higher education. And to provide recommendations and suggestions for facilitating the processes of online learning and remote assessment.

2. Covid-19 an Overview

Covid-19 is an abbreviation for Corona Virus Disease 2019 , Corona-viruses, as a family, are named by the resemblance of their shape to crown. It is according to the World Health organization 2020 the infectious disease is caused by the most recently discovered corona-virus identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. (Chelghoum, 2020). Covid-19 is now considered as a pandemic that affects many countries worldwide at different levels. The most common symptoms of Covid-19 are: cough, fever, tiredness, headaches, loss of taste and smell. 210 countries in the world are affected by the corona virus, there are more than 2,261,425 reported cases, 154,734 confirmed deaths, and 579,212 being recovered (Regencia, Siddiqui, & Allahoum, 2020). The results are nowadays more than those mentioned before. Countries such as USA, Italy, Spain, and India are severely hit by corona virus. Death and the rapid spread of the corona virus are frightening mainly because most of scientific laboratories of research are still working hard to find a definite and efficient cure to the virus. The Pandemic has caused humans death and economic disruption in almost all continents. Governments implemented social distancing policy, main places for gathering such as stadiums, restaurants, schools and universities were closed due to the implementation of isolation and confinement. Education is widely affected by the pandemic; the sudden closure of universities and schools throughout the world is a way to stop the rapid spread of corona-virus.

3. Remote Assessment Definition and Benefits

Due to the unexpected health crisis that hit the world, and the sudden closure of universities, many higher institutions adopted online learning and remote assessment. From their houses students can be accessed through different devices. Online teaching paves the way to online assessment; it is more flexible than the traditional assessment methods. There is a variety of remote assessments to evaluate students online. According to Latrobe university website (2014) Designing effective online assessment provides an opportunity to reflect on what you are trying to achieve in assessing your students. Designing effective online assessment is rarely a matter of transposing existing assessment items to some online system or tool. Effective online assessment is always informed

primarily by pedagogical considerations, with technical considerations secondary to this.

Remote assessment is a type of assessment conducted off site; it basically makes use of technology. Remote assessment frees the student from the necessity of traveling to a fixed place, at a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be assessed. Traditional assessment is replaced by an online assessment in which traditional tools such as papers and pens are no more used; assessment is conducted by new and advanced technological devices. New assessment methods and strategies have been created. The new techniques in remote assessment have different advantages in comparison to the traditional ones; some benefits of remote assessment are put forwards by Duan and Westhuizen (2016):

• Test items can be randomized when the assessment is taken, so no student will have test items appear in the same order as the student who is taking the same test on the next work station.

• In the case of multiple-choice questions, distracters can be randomized.

• Test items can be tagged by level of difficulty.

• "Pools" of test items can be used from which the tool can randomly assign different test items to different students.

• Some types of test items can be scored by the tool that is used, relieving the teacher or teacher educator from that burden.

• Online tools can give immediate feedback to students.

• Online tools can perform item analyses on the test items, which will help the assessor identify poor questions. (Duan and Westhuizen, 2016 p.8)

Many countries around the world have already established remote assessment mechanisms years before the pandemic. Remote assessment benefits and its success make it a necessity nowadays in higher education around the world.

4. E- Learning in Algerian Universities

Algeria has been subjected to Corona virus pandemic like many other countries in the world. The first positive tested case was declared by the Algerian health ministry on February, 20th, 2020. Gradually many positive cases have been revealed. The number of positive cases kept increasing in slow pace in the beginning, however numbers are increasing fast to reach frightening scale. In March, 2020 and in order to prevent the spread of the virus, the President of Algeria made a decision of closing schools, kindergartens, universities, and all educational institutions. The quarantine period started, however, this sudden stop severely affected the process of learning. As a solution the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Algeria opted for online learning as a genuine solution to help students having lectures during the lockdown. According to Teaster and Blieszner (1999), the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods; however, its primary distinction is that the teacher and the

learner are separate in space and possibly time. Negash and Wilcox (2008) classify e- learning into six types:

-E- learning with presence and without e-communication (face to face) -E - learning without presence and e-communication -E- learning without presence and with e-communication (asynchronous) -E-learning with virtual presence and with e-communication (synchronous) -E learning with occasional presence and with e-communication (blended/hybrid/ asynchronous) -E- learning with presence and with e-communication (blended/hybrid/ synchronous)

The real starting point of e-learning in Algeria with the use of internet networks starts in 2006 with a partnership with two companies "Microsoft" and "Thompson", this service provides 4.000 courses and lectures for teaching ICTs and communication skills (Guemide and Benachaiba, 2012). The Pandemic of covid-19 has flipped the balance and imposed on the Algerian universities to include e-learning models not only ICTs.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research decided to start the new initiative of online learning in Algerian universities starting from 15th March, 2020. However, neither human sources nor infrastructure are ready for such step. According to Chelghoum (2020), using a variety of educational platforms such as Google classroom or Zoom application for videoconferencing is not a novel way of teaching in many developed countries; however it is not the case in Algeria. Yet, integrating these technologies in the classroom has made the educational reforms very challenging, especially in an alarming way like the present pandemic. The shifting to purely online teaching and learning needs much effort from both instructors and learners.

4.1 Challenges of Online Teaching and Learning during the Pandemic in Algerian Universities

The difficulties in the application of online learning at the university vary from a faculty to another and from a teacher to another. The main challenges facing remote learning in Algerian university can be summarized as follows:

1-In Algeria the traditional approach of teaching and learning is dominating; official authorities before the pandemic showed no interest in using this type of education, as a result, teachers and students do not have an idea about online learning types and strategies. This was not the case for many countries that have already established online teaching mechanisms at university many years before the pandemic.

2-Teachers and students attitudes towards online learning are not highly positive; there is certain fear from such new dimensions in learning. Teachers are not trained and students are not ready.

3- Low internet connection quality is one of the real challenges; several types of online learning require high speed of connection, however unfortunately the online learning witnesses cuts frequently. Internet connection in Algeria is somehow slow in comparison to other countries in the world.

4-Students may think readymade lectures more reliable and valid than online lectures, they tend to be receivers of knowledge, and they do not have a previous experience in this new type of learning.

5- Moodle platform suggested by the ministry does not function regularly, it is blocked for days, and many teachers face problems within their Moodle accounts, some of them could not be opened, pass words are changed frequently. There is a lack in maintenance and a terrible lack of specialists at universities.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, online education will start through the use of Moodle as an electronic system. Students and teachers will carry on their learning and teaching tasks virtually. However there are several challenges faced by both teachers and students when using Moodle, some of these challenges are put forwards by Boutkhil and Maouche (2020) as follows:

• Lack of organization in posting lectures, which made students confused.

• Lack of feedback from the part of teachers in the Moodle platform.

• Students and teachers do not use the Moodle platform effectively because of technical problems and the mastery educational technological tools.

• The Moodle platform is badly implemented; in other words, students face difficulties to access the platform.

• Not available to all students; in some cases students do not possess computers and net connection.

• Lack of motivation and sensibilization from the part of the administration.

• Lack of organization of the study materials in the Moodle platform; nearly all Algerian universities suffer from that problem, and the lack of periodic programming and organization, the lack of specialists that makes it difficult to reach.

• Lack of guidance from teachers and administrators.

Not only online learning is witnessing challenges in Algerian universities, assessment also is a serious challenge for teachers and students alike.

4.2 Remote Assessment Challenges

Challenges of remote assessment vary from a country to another; these challenges are tightly related to the educational context, technology, teachers training and preparation, and students' engagement and motivation. Some of the main challenges of remote assessment at Algerian universities are:

• One of the challenges is the unexpected movement from classroom learning in presence to multi-online sources for learning for instance: Google Classroom, Google meet, and others.

• Validity and trustworthiness are two fundamental challenges in remote assessment; in fact, the type of assessment should be valid in the sense of meeting learning objectives and reliable in evaluating students appropriately. Several techniques for remote assessment exist but their trustworthiness is under

question. Some teachers while sending tasks to students they receive the same answers just names are different.

• The prevention of cheating and plagiarism is one of the basic challenges of remote assessment.

• There may be also a problem in the clarity of the type of assessment mainly because of the lack of face to face interaction.

• It is really unfair that active and successful students find themselves taking the same grades as students who do not do the least of efforts in learning, they instead copy and paste answers.

• High quality of internet connection cannot be assured by Algerian authorities. This hinders the process of remote assessment which necessitates the use of different digital types of assessment that demand high connection quality.

• Students' engagement in online learning and assessment and their motivation are considered as one of the basic challenges. Students are not familiar with online learning and assessment, this new type of learning makes students feel uncomfortable especially because of being far from teachers. Students may find it hard to cope with online assessment because of their unfamiliarity with this type of assessment, since they feel less secured than doing it in the classroom within teachers' presence.

• Covid-19 imposed lockdown on students, their way of life changed, fear and anxiety dominated, students are anxious about their lives, fear from the virus to affect them, this affect also their studies, these psychological effects play a role in the process of learning in general and assessment in particular.

• Both teachers and students in Algerian universities seem not ready to such sudden change in teaching and learning. Teachers are neither trained nor prepared for online teaching. Students too are not trained for using online techniques such as Google classroom, sending tasks and tests via Moodle, and sending requests. Receiving ready-made lectures via emails seems to be the easiest way for students to learn online. Even in assessment all new techniques of remote assessment are considered as less secured than answering on a double sheet of papers and handing them to teachers.

5. Recommendations and Suggestions for Successful Remote Assessment in Algerian Universities

Online assessment in Algerian universities is still in its first steps, the above mentioned challenges should be surmounted for the sake of putting remote assessment in its right path. Certain suggestions and recommendations are to be taken into consideration to promote online learning and remote assessment in Algerian universities, among these:

-Improving internet broadband connection, it is a fundamental step without which remote learning and assessment cannot be succeeded in Algerian universities; authorities should give importance to this recommendation.

-University teachers in Algeria need training courses to help them establish online learning and to deal with remote assessment successfully. During the pandemic it becomes a necessity to use electronic platforms and ICTs for teaching online.

-University students also need to be trained to improve their performance in the use of media and electronic platforms in general; they need special courses for how to interact, to do tasks, to request, and how to manage their learning effectively. Training teachers and students is very essential in Algerian universities since it facilitates online learning and reduces challenges facing remote assessment.

-Successful experiences of online learning in other universities throughout the world may serve as models to follow by Algerian universities through exchanging experiences.

-Teachers publish lectures and several materials via electronic platforms, these personal materials should be protected. Intellectual protection is necessary to avoid theft.

-Severe punishment should be attributed to students accused by plagiarism in doing tasks and tests in remote assessment, cheaters have to be given low grades or given chance to repeat the test in the worse cases those cheaters have to be dismissed.

-In addition to Moodle, multiple media should be used to facilitate the process of learning and assessment.

-Assessment methods should be improved, web cams for instance can be used for controlling exams and avoid cheating.

6. Suggested Techniques for Successful Online Assessment

Shriner (2015) provides seven characteristics of effective online teachers which are: (a) being passionate about the subject, (b) being passionate about teaching, (c) sees value in online education, (d) being a good time manager, (e) being flexible and open to feedback, (f) facilitates classroom community with engaging tone and creativity, and (g) trained in online teaching. In the online assessment world, multiple content formats can be used; online tests can incorporate digital features such as audio, video, animation and innovative item types. The next techniques are suggested by Marcel and Sandy (2002):

A) Multiple-Choice Tests

Multiple-choice tests are a common form of online assessment. It is important to create multiple-choice tests properly, because in online assessment, the flaws of poorly written items are potentially not visible when they are placed online. Students may also have to cope with technical challenges, which exacerbate the impact of poorly written questions. A great advantage of online multiple-choice tests is that they are easy to administer and can assess different types of content and measure achievement at multiple levels of learning objectives. Questions can range from simple recall and comprehension to more

complex levels. As the questions do not measure writing ability, students are not disadvantaged if they have poor writing skills in another language.

B) True-or-false items

Traditional true-or-false question items require students to indicate which of potential responses is true. A student therefore has a 50 per cent chance of being correct by guessing. With an online true-or-false question, guessing can be reduced by requiring an explanation. This does impact the ease of marking, but it is an efficient way to digitally collect additional information.

C) Essays

Essays are flexible and can assess higher-order learning skills. However, they are time-consuming for educators to score. If essays are submitted online, it may become easier to mark them using online rubrics, or by having an online marking scheme with prepared comments or other anticipated responses. These comments can be dragged onto the electronic essay, or new comments can be made on the essay. However, subjectivity may be an issue during marking.

D) Short-answer tests

These test items require the student to fill in a word or phrase in response to a direct question, or to enter a word or phrase that was left out of a statement. The advantage of having students take this type of examination online is that the answers can be scored immediately by comparing the student response to a pre-populated answer. The disadvantage is that often students will not type the exact answer and will be marked wrong. Spelling mistakes, for example, can cause an incorrect grade, whereas the teacher would have accepted the answer.

E) Online games

Online games offer exciting assessment opportunities. They can provide a safe, creative environment in which students can learn to experiment, collaborate and solve problems. They can be used in almost all educational disciplines for a variety of assessment types. Gamification is the use of gaming principles in the field of education in order to get students involved, engaged, and excited about learning. Gamification introduces concepts like badges, levels, achievements, and game points to the classroom. Students are rewarded with these concepts when they succeed, but are not penalized when they do not.

F) Student journaling, blogging and wiki building

Journaling, blogging or wiki building are also tools freely available on the Internet, journaling is a particular useful tool for encouraging student reflection, and teacher educators may elect to assess the journal entries by using a rubric. Students can create free-form journals. Building a blog or wiki is an important strategy for encouraging individual or collaborative student writing. Blog as a website organized by posts according to the date the posts were made. A wiki is a website that is organized by content. Blogging is similar to journaling, except that there are more features for providing access to the information. One or more students can build private, semi-private or public blogs. Blogs can be assessed in

the same manner as journals. Blogs are a particularly useful tool for teacher educators and teacher students when they are developing a professional online identity (POI). Many teacher education programmers are now including the development of POI for each student teacher as an outcome of the program. Wikis are particularly useful for collaborative group projects and are conducive to student collaboration and co-production.

G) Online, digital e Portfolios

Typically, a portfolio is a collection of student work that is organized, reflected upon and presented to show content comprehension and learning growth over a period of time. Reflections on the individual artifacts as well as the overall portfolio are critical components of this assessment tool. Portfolios enable deeper learning for students, and educators gain a better understanding of their students' knowledge and skills. Online portfolios can be constructed using a variety of ICT tools — for example, Evernote, or the open-source tool Mahara (https://mahara.org/), the latter of which integrates with Moodle. These tools allow students to write documents and upload photos, audio and video. All content can be tagged and, if necessary, shared to other media tools. The most significant advantage of creating a digital portfolio is the ability to include a variety of content. E Portfolios, for example, can contain movies, audio, presentations, text, hyperlinks and animations.

According to Thomas and Rogers (2020) despite its impact on the whole world, there is a bright side of the pandemic as concerns upgrading online education. Hence, to cope with the pandemic and be ready for the after crisis phase, big changes are unavoidable.

Conclusion

Algerian universities seem not ready yet to this rapid movement towards online teaching and remote assessment. The rapid change led to several obstacles. Bad internet connection, luck of teacher competence in online teaching, students' attitudes, motivation, and engagement are the main challenges witnessed in most Algerian universities. Despite the efforts of the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education to implement e-learning as a measurement during the pandemic. Blended learning in Algerian universities is still in its first steps. Training teachers and students is very essential in Algerian universities since it facilitates online learning and reduces challenges facing remote assessment. Assessment methods should be improved; some successful techniques are suggested for Algerian university teachers to better deal with online assessment that always represents a real challenge for them. Besides, having positive or negative attitudes towards e learning and assessment and even the existing challenges do not change the fact that the Algerian university should cope with the current era exigencies that call for new methods of learning for the new generation, mainly because information and communication technologies are becoming increasingly part of both teachers and students lifestyles. Today's digital

learners are not supposed to be taught with ancient methods used for years ago because today's issues are to be solved by today's means.

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