

Investigating Algerian EFL Students' Online Learning Readiness

Ammar Benabed¹, Amina Abdelhadi¹

¹Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret, Algeria

*Corresponding Author: Ammar Benabed

Email: abdelhadiprof@gmail.com



Article Info

Article history:

Received 13 July 2021

Received in revised form 18

August 2021

Accepted 28 August 2021

Keywords:

Online learning

EFL students

Attitudes

Readiness

Willingness

Abstract

Readiness is a critical factor to implement effective educational change. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine Algerian university EFL students' online learning readiness. To reach this aim, a survey is conducted with 150 first year EFL students from Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret using an online questionnaire. The findings of this study highlight the correlation between EFL students' readiness and willingness to online learning. It is found that due to technological constraints, the majority of EFL students demonstrate low level of online learning readiness which, in turn, affects their willingness to engage actively in this process. They rate themselves lower in terms of prior experience of online learning, time management, self-directed learning, self-efficacy, online communication and motivation. Hence, this study ends up with some suggestions and further practical implications.

Introduction

COVID-19, the most recently discovered infectious pandemic, has had the potential to radically reshape our world. It has created global disruption, resulting in the closing of many institutions, including the doors of our schools. According to the United Nations report, closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94 per cent of the world's student population (August, 2020). Perhaps, as urgent as the response to COVID-19 outbreak and its rapid spread, policy makers, experts and educators may have no option except to shift rapidly toward using online learning while they may not be well prepared for that (Crawford et al., 2020). More importantly, this pandemic has not only shown us how crucial is education for societies but also how critical is the ability of educational systems to respond quickly to unexpected risks. In this regard, the study at hand attempts to investigate Algerian university EFL students' readiness for online learning so that possible implications can be suggested to help universities and academic staff develop and apply appropriate modes of learning/teaching to meet students' needs. To this end, the present study is supposed to answer the following research questions: (1) To what extent are EFL students ready (well prepared) for online learning? (2) Does EFL learners' level of readiness affect their willingness to learn online?

Online Learning in Algerian Universities

The concept 'online learning', with its different forms (Küsel et al., 2020), is often referred to as e-learning, virtual learning, internet learning, digital learning, distance learning and distance education among other terms. Many authors describe online learning as access to learning experiences via the use of some technology (Benson, 2002; Paris, 2004). Others discuss not only the accessibility of online learning but also its connectivity, flexibility and ability to promote varied interactions (Ally, 2004; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). In this respect, it may be not hard to see the key claim that online learning is different from traditional learning as it is about the use of electronic technologies to access educational curriculum outside of a traditional classroom.

Online learning in Algerian higher education in particular is relatively new (Djoudi, 2009; Zermane & Aitouche, 2020). As online courses are gaining popularity and their success often depends on the teacher preparation and ongoing support, the University 'Frères Mentouri' of Constantine1', since 2012, has afforded newly recruited teachers the opportunity to have an effective online training in "ICT and educational practice". Thanks to this specific online training, which was launched officially by the state (decree N 932 of July 28, 2016), newly recruited teachers are supposed to be prepared to adapt to a new working environment, be familiar with online teaching and more importantly with online courses design. Put boldly, the training assured by 'the University Frères Mentouri of Constantine1' has made it clear that online teaching does not mean sending students home to read a textbook and do online assignments. The best online instruction allows students to interact with the content and engage in learning activities. It is worth noting that this training, as a unique

learning resource, links the theory to the practice for the acquisition of different smart skills. Among other learning management systems, Moodle and Open Edx (MOOC) are usually the reference LMS platforms to implement ICT teachers training in Algeria. Owing to its low application cost and ability to combine completely online learning with face to face classroom learning, Moodle network is being improved steadily in Algeria (www.distancelearningportal.com).

It is frequently assumed that there are some potential advantages of online learning (Anderson, 2004; Cigdem & Ozturk, 2016), but COVID-19 has brought many of its weaknesses and constraints especially in the developing countries. Recent research has revealed the gap between the promised vision of digital technologies and actual practices in universities (Henderson et al., 2017). Consequently, educational institutions in developing countries, and Algeria is not exception, are in urgent need to adapt to the digital challenge and they are expected to come out with alternative strategies, policies and processes that will set the direction for student engagement with different institutional digital resources.

Learner Readiness for Online Learning

Today's young people are thought to be internet obsessed. Tools of the digital age are integral parts of their lives, having a profound impact on their learning. This Net Generation seems to be no longer the generation educational system was designed to teach, and claims of educational reform are justified by reference to them then (Prensky, 2001). Here is Marilee Sprenger (2010) making a compelling argument that today's students are bright and talented; and their mission in school and life is different from that of previous generations. Consistent with this, online education has been considered beneficial since it provides interactive digital environment and supports undertaking autonomous learning (Torun, 2020). To paraphrase Moore (2013), online instruction can offer numerous advantages including flexibility, accessibility, independency, interactivity, multimodality, cost-effectiveness, ubiquitous learning, convenience, and learner-centeredness. Considering this, in interactive and collaborative online learning, the shift is from teaching to learning centredness, that is to say, teaching is seen primarily as a means of support. Such shift makes the relationships between knowledge, authority and power visible and explicit, it enables student to develop a sense of autonomy as they take ownership and control of their learning.

Let us not dismiss the idea that to create an effective online learning environment, it is necessary to know students' attitudes, perceptions and level of readiness (Armstrong, 2011). Learner readiness for online learning has been defined by Borotis & Poulymenakou (2004) as being mentally and physically ready for certain online learning experiences and actions. It has been examined through a variety of dimensions which indicate its multi-dimensional construct,

and shows a lack of consensus about its components (Farid, 2014). Giving little detail, Hung et al. (2010) identify five different sub-dimensions that should be taken into account while measuring online learning readiness: self-directed learning, learner control, motivation, computer/internet self-efficacy towards learning and online communication.

To focus too much on self-directed learning and self efficacy, Zhoc and Chen (2016) make it clear that self directed learning is a process which includes the states of understanding the learning needs of individuals, creating learning objectives, defining material resources for learning, selecting and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and using the choices in evaluation of learning output. Zhoc and Chen (2016) expand on; self directed learning focuses on the skills and abilities of a learner to engage in the learning process. Self-efficacy however is about individuals' beliefs and expectations in their capability to perform a task using computers or internet (Kırmızı, 2015). Hung (2010) continues saying that Internet self-efficacy could be different from computer self-efficacy in setting up, maintaining, and using the Internet behaviour series. Regarding factors influencing learner achievement in online learning environments, Cigdem & Ozturk (2016) point out that students' self-direction towards online learning is the strongest predictor of their achievements within the course whereas computer/Internet self-efficacy and motivation for learning did not predict the learner achievement significantly

Methods

Given that the topic under study requires a large group of people to answer, and due to the current situation with Coronavirus, the study at hand employs a self-compiled questionnaire created online using Google Forms. According to Regmi et al. (2016), online questionnaires done on the Internet and using smartphones are gaining popularity, the information is directly collected digitally and the raw data is very quickly available for processing. The respondents can also answer the questions at any location and at any time of day.

Sampling in this study is a purposive one, following the typical strategy where participants share the same experience (Dornyei 2007). A diverse sample of participants is recruited to facilitate the possibility of eliciting manifold versions of this subject. Participants recruited varied in terms of gender, ethnicity, class and social background. The questionnaire is administered online to a sample of 300 EFL students from different Algerian Universities, but only 150 responses are received from students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. From the total sample, 71 % students of which are females while 29% are male students.

The questionnaire is divided into five sections concerned with the abovementioned research questions, it includes: (1) learning environment preferences, (2) attitudes towards online learning effectiveness, (3) access to technology, (4) familiarity with technology and (5) readiness for online learning. Mixed method approach is used in the analysis of the questionnaire (quantitatively with closed questions and qualitatively with the open ended questions)

Results and Discussion

The current study depends on an online questionnaire as the main instrument for obtaining the required data. The obtained data is represented in graphs, each graph followed by a descriptive analysis.

Learning Environment Preferences

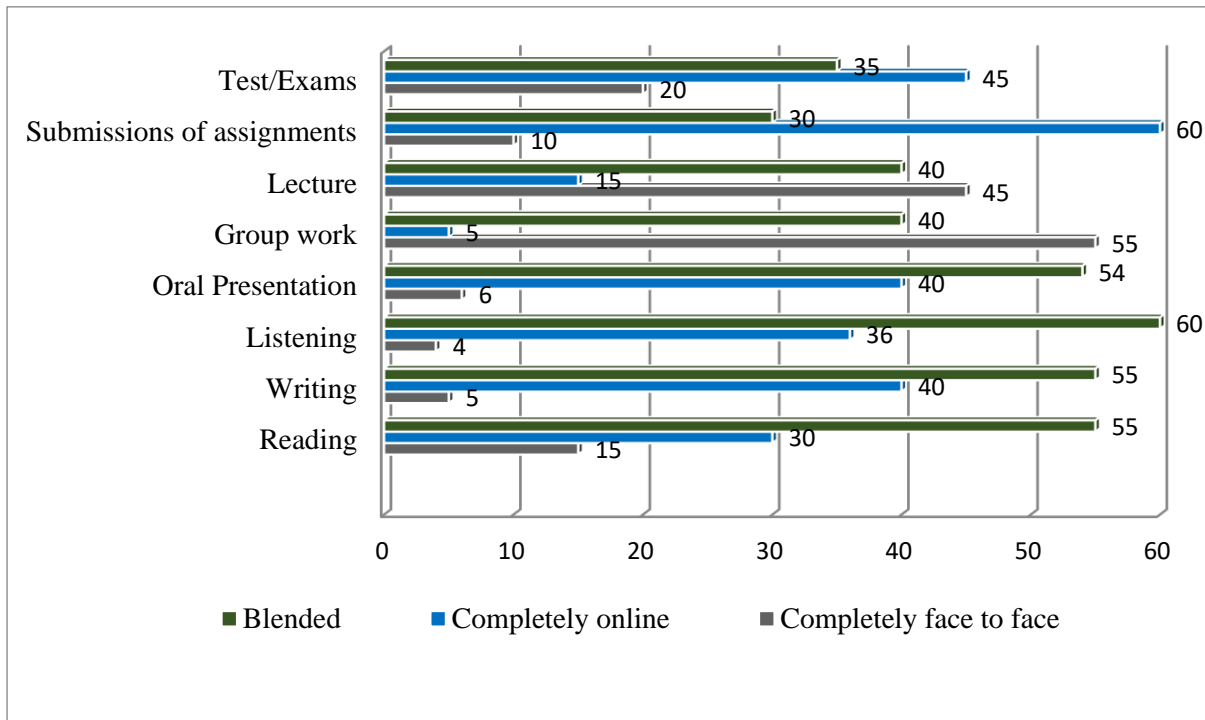


Figure 1. Learning environment Preferences

The data presented in figure (1) show that there is no single preferred learning environment. For the completely online mode of learning, the respondents prefer taking exams (45%) and submitting assignments (60%). For the completely face to face environment, they prefer these activities: lecture (45%) and group work (55%). As for the other remaining activities (skills), they show preference to do them in blended (hybrid) environment: oral presentation (54%), listening (60%), writing (55%) and reading (55%).

Attitudes Towards Online Learning Effectiveness

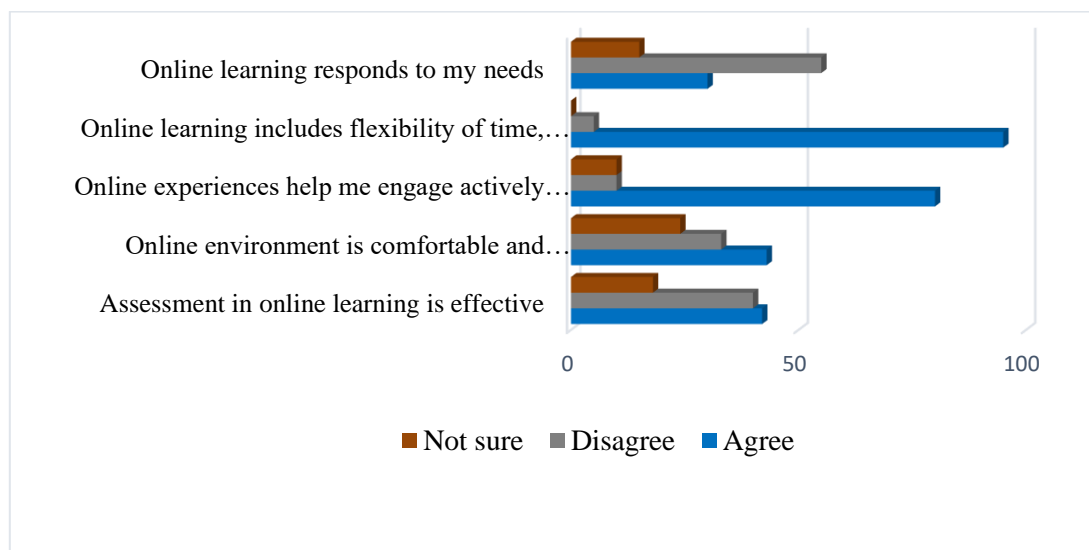


Figure 2. Attitudes towards Online Learning Effectiveness

This question is intentionally limited to these five mentioned aspects as they are believed to be the basics of online learning process. A look at the entire results displayed in figure (2) indicate

that the respondents tick all the options in the Likert scale (agree, disagree and not sure). Such balance between the answers may imply that questions about the structure, design, assessment, experiences and effectiveness of online learning courses are still not clearly understood and therefore need further research.

Access to Technology

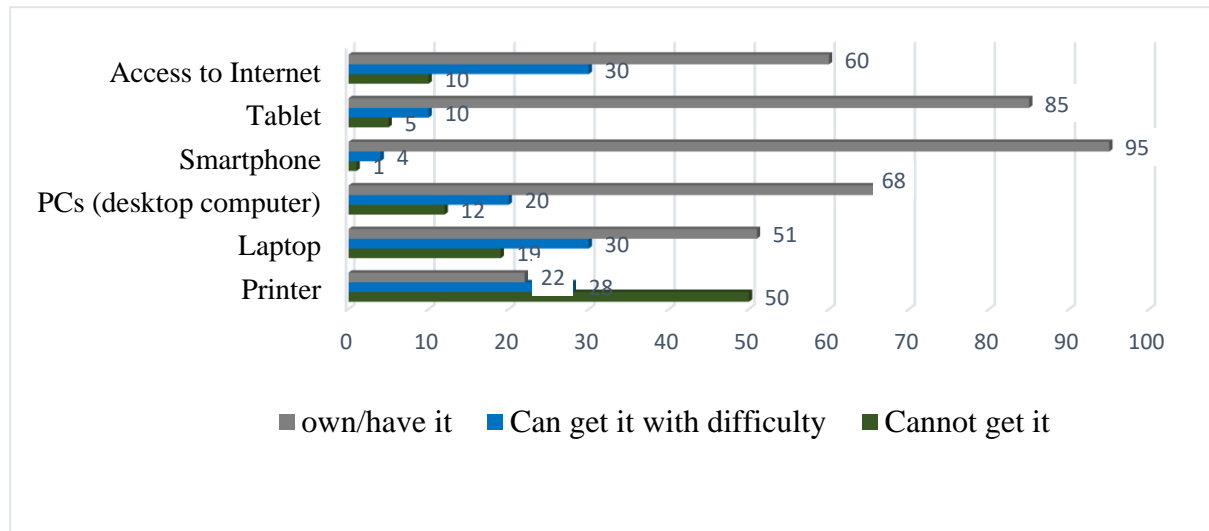


Figure 3. Access to Technology

It can be noticed in figure (3) that a significant difference exists between the respondents' perceptions of technological devices ownership and access to Internet. Compared to the availability of PCs and laptops, with (68%) and (51%) respectively, nearly all the participants report their easy access to Smartphones (95%) and tablets (85%). Among the highlighted findings also is that (50%) of them cannot get a printer while only (60%) of them have access to Internet.

Familiarity with Technology

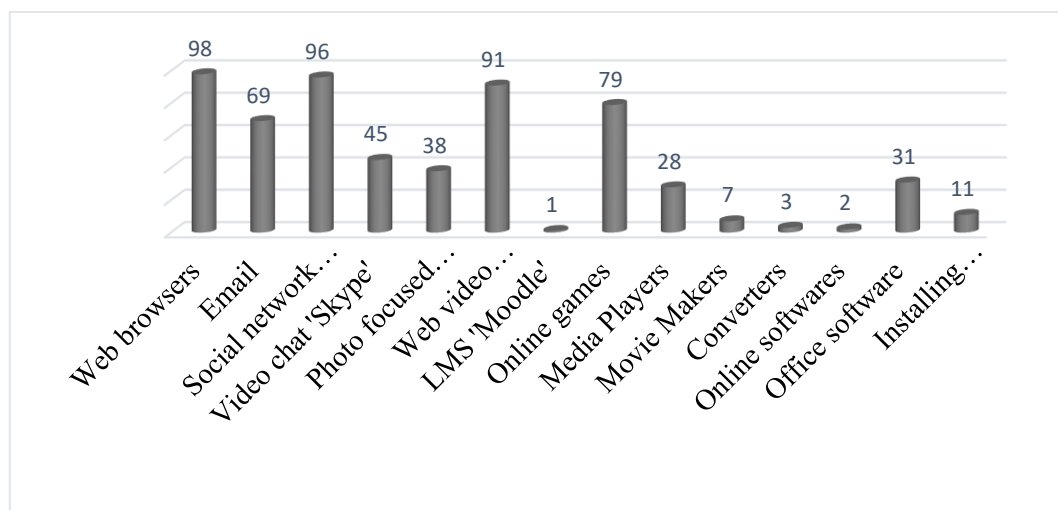


Figure 4. Familiarity with Technology

Figure (4) denotes that the respondents mark these items as very familiar to them including: web browsers (98%), social media, mainly facebook platform (96%), Youtube site (listening and downloading videos) (91%), and online games (79%). More specific statistics regarding their other activities through websites are as follows: sending emails (69%), using video chat

‘skype’ (45%), and photos focused sites (38%). Interestingly enough, only (1%) of the respondents are more comfortable with the learning management system ‘Moodle’.

Concerning software, their reported familiarity is not very high. As it is evident, reports are quite similar (movie makers 7%, converters 3%, online software 2% and installing software 11%). Though many students are required to use Office software (Word, Excel and PowerPoint), (31%) of the total sample reported themselves as being capable of using them. In fact, this gap merits further investigation and further thought.

Readiness to Online Learning

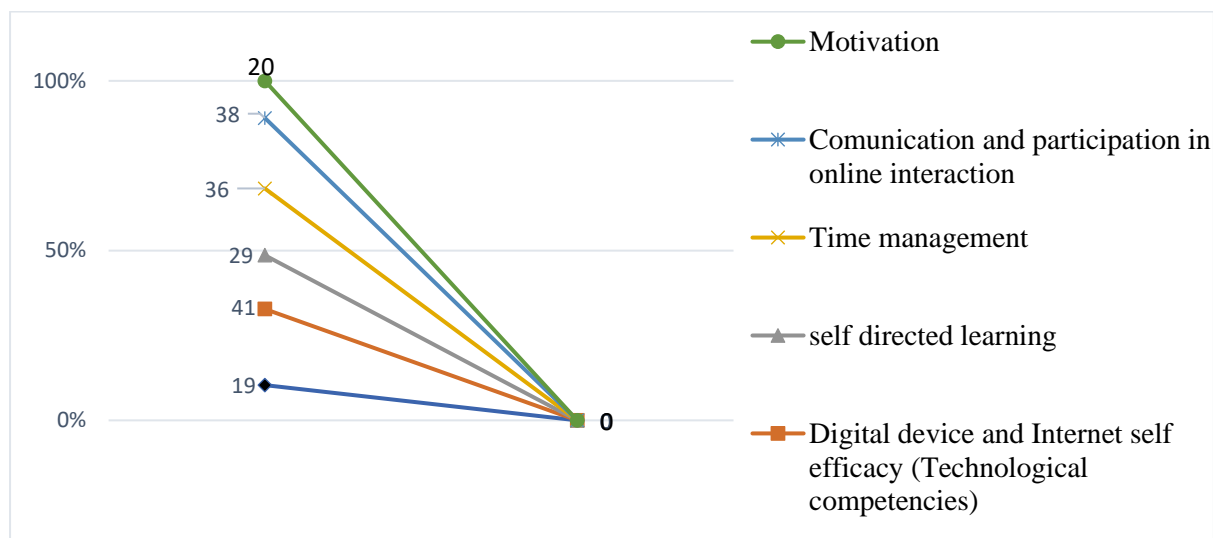


Figure 5. Dimensions of readiness to online learning

Comparison of the online readiness dimensions listed in figure 6 reveal some slight differences. Overall, not all the participants are found to have prior experience of online learning (19%), and only less than half of them report themselves as having the necessary skills to operate digital tools and Internet (41%). The respondents also rate themselves as low in engaging in self directed learning process (29%). In addition, most of the noticeable results are that (36%) of the informants feel themselves able to manage time and (38%) of them are able to communicate and participate in online interactions. It is also shown that only 20% of the total sample feels motivated to engage in this mode of learning

Conclusion

The findings of this study are based on the claim that the assessment of learner readiness is highly essential prior to launching online learning (Torun, 2020).

Considering learning environment preferences, the gathered data indicate that there is no one preferred learning environment for all the listed activities. The respondents are not well balanced between completely face to face, completely online and blended learning environments. In fact, it is an interesting finding to know that learners do not learn in the same way and, in this regard, identifying learning environment is a critical step in understanding how to improve learning process (Dalmolin et al., 2018). We suggest ergo that research may go further to shed an important light on the integration and improvement of blended (hybrid) environment as the best alternative mode of teaching in the current situation.

Students’ attitudes towards online learning effectiveness are at variance and, as a consequence, it is pointed out that such views affect students’ willingness to online learning in many ways such as limiting their academic performance and decreasing their motivation and interest to

engage actively in online learning. It becomes evident that shaping positive attitudes is an essential part of students' willingness to take online courses and should be reconsidered therefore. Burns' study (1997) supports this with the statement that attitudes are evaluated beliefs which predispose the individual to respond in a preferential way. Put simply, the integration of online learning in Algerian universities may only succeed if students' personal beliefs, their knowledge and attitudes are taken seriously into account. Perhaps identifying the factors behind negative attitudes may also help increase their willingness to online learning.

It is also found that the majority of the respondents do not have sufficient personal digital device ownership, adequate familiarity to applications as well as access to Internet. This finding is reinforced by the view that student ownership of new technological devices, access to Internet and familiarity with useful applications are crucial in curriculum designs and delivery, their role is significant in the teaching and learning process of students (Sharples et al., 2014; Cronje & Kafui Aheto, 2018; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Educational technology integration goes hand-in-hand with discussions about online learning (Mayes et al., 2015), and technological constraints can be a key factor determining its failure. Consequently, universities in Algeria are subject to an evolving process of adapting to the digital challenge. To probe into this matter, an analysis of digital divide between the respondents regarding technological constraints is required.

In conjunction, the obtained results from this study show that nearly all the respondents (95%) report owning a smartphone. It is the device that is primarily used for mobile learning and academic purposes. These results are in line with previous research (Cronje & Kafui Aheto, 2018). The extensive use of mobile devices in academic settings indicate that the content of online courses should be suitable for small screens, and the learning activities for which Smartphones are important often do not include those which require writing and other forms of content creation (Vissers et al. , 2018). It is suggested then that when designing online courses, online instructors have to take into account that most of their students access different aspects of the course using Smartphones.

While examining students' readiness for online learning, the respondents demonstrate a low rate concerning experience of online learning, self directed learning and (computer and Internet) self efficacy, time management, online communication/participation in interaction and motivation. These variables emerge as relevant and significant dimensions of readiness (Küsel et al., 2020), they represent soft outcomes of education (Zhu, 2019) and their interconnection is an important issue for the learning processes associated with online learning. By implication, the respondents with a lower level of these sub-dimensions are less likely to master an online course or engage in an online learning activity. The descriptive results of the study also indicate that students' motivation for online learning is lower than both self-efficacy and self-directed learning. Hence, it is deduced that the more learners are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, the more ready/prepared they can be to engage actively in online learning.

With respect to the respondents' opinions, it is assumed that there is a strong relation between students' attitudes, readiness and willingness to online learning. Students with positive attitudes towards online learning show a high level of online readiness, and students with higher levels of readiness tend to be more willing to learn online.

Online learning has become a possible pathway to ensure the continuity of academic activities. Among the issues related to this rapid transition are perceptions of readiness. Online platforms are equipped with different facilities to enable students make the best use of the learning

environment, but unfortunately, due to many factors such as technological constraints, not everybody has a positive attitude towards it and not everybody is ready to use it.

This study has a few limitations that should be noted. First, the number of participants is relatively small. Second, some questions such as: ‘self-efficacy, self-directed learning and motivation for online learning’ are answered based on self-compiled questionnaire, and no other measurements are employed. Despite these limitations, the present study provides an understanding of learners’ attitudes, readiness and their relation with willingness to online learning. However, the results of this study do not say anything about the factors affecting negative attitudes towards online learning, technological divide and the assessment of students’ academic achievement on online platforms. To gain knowledge about these issues, further research is required.

Acknowledgment

The authors greatly value the participation of EFL students from Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret (Algeria) in this scientific paper and their willingness to share their experiences

References

- Anderson, T. (2011). *The Theory and Practice of online learning* (2nd ed.). AU Press : Athabasca University
- Armstrong, D. (2011). Students’ perceptions of online learning and instructional tools: a qualitative study of undergraduate students’ use of online tools. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 10(3), 221-226.
- Cigdem, H., & Ozturk, M. (2016). Critical components of online learning readiness and their relationships with learner achievement. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 17(2), 98-109. DOI : [10.17718/tojde.09105](https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.09105)
- Cronje, J., & Kafui Aheto, P. (2018). Digital device ownership and learning environment preferences of students in South Africa and Ghana. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 19(3), 93-11. DOI: [10.17718/tojde.445093](https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.445093)
- Dalmolin, Cláudia , A, Otto Mackeivicz, G.A., Thaís Pochapski, M.,& André Santos, F.(2018). Learning styles preferences and e-learning experience of undergraduate dental students. *Revista de odontologia da UNESP*, 47(3), 175-182. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1807-2577.05118>
- Djoudi, M. (2009, Mai 3-4). *Expériences de E-learning dans les universités algérienne*. Conférence Internationale sur l’Informatique et ses Applications. CIIA’09, Saida
- Farid, A. (2014). Student Online Readiness Assessment Tools: A Systematic Review Approach. *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*. 12(4), 375–382.
- Henderson, M., Selwyn, N., & Aston, R. (2017). What works and why? Student perceptions of useful digital technology in university teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(8), 1567-1579. DOI: [10.1080/03075079.2015.1007946](https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1007946)
- Kırmızı, Ö. (2015). The influence of learner readiness on student satisfaction and academic achievement in an online program at higher education. *TOJET*, 14(1), 133-142.
- Küsel, J., Martin, F., & Markic, S. (2020). University students’ readiness for using digital media and online learning—comparison between Germany and the USA. *Education sciences*, 10(313), 1-15. DOI:[10.3390/educsci10110313](https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110313)

- Mayes, R., Natividad, G., & Michael Spector, J. (2015). Challenges for educational technologists in the 21st century. *Education Sciences*, 5(3),221–237.DOI: 10.3390/educsci5030221
- Muthuprasad, T., Aiswarya, S., Aditya, K. S., & Jha Girish, K. (2021). Students’ perception and preference for online education in India during COVID -19 pandemic. *Elsevier: Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 3(1), 1-11. DOI: 10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100101
- Paris Paul G. (2004). E-Learning: A study on secondary students’ attitudes towards online web assisted learning. *International Education Journal*, 5(1), 98-112. Available at : <http://iej.cjb.net>
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants part 1. *On the Horizon*, 9 (5), 1-6. DOI: 10.1108/10748120110424816
- Regmi, P. R., Waithaka, E., Paudyal, A., Simkhada, P., and Van Teijlingen, E. (2016). Guide to the design and application of online questionnaire surveys. *Nepal journal of epidemiology*, 6(4), 640–644. DOI: 10.3126/nje.v6i4.17258
- Torun Dikbas, E. (2020). online distance learning in higher education: e-learning readiness as a predictor of academic achievement .*Open Praxis*, 12(2), 191–208. DOI: [10.5944/openpraxis.12.2.1092](https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.12.2.1092)
- Vissers, D., Row, M., Shofiqul Islam, M., & Taeymans, J. (2018). ‘ownership and attitudes towards technology use in physiotherapy students from seven countries. *Health Professions Education*, 4(3), 198–206. DOI: 10.1016/j.hpe.2017.12.003
- Zermane, H., & Aitouche, S. (2020). Digital learning with Covid-19 in Algeria. *International Journal of 3d Printing Technologies and Digital Industry*, 4(2) , 161-170. Doi:10.46519/Ij3dptdi.776978
- Zhu, CH. (2019). Self-efficacy and self-esteem in online learning environments of adult learners. *Int. J. Learning Technology*, 14(1), 1-17