



Online Teachers: Stepping out of the Comfort Zone Is a Must

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ABSTRACT

The urgent shift to the online instructional environment has produced unprecedented challenges for teachers and placed new obligations on them. In this context, the study at hand investigated higher education teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching, their readiness to teach online and their willingness to teach outside their comfort zone. To this end, an online survey was conducted with 24 EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers from various Algerian universities using a questionnaire created in Google Forms. The obtained results reveal that the majority of the EFL teachers perceive online teaching as less effective than face-to-face teaching due to three key factors: technological constraints, learners' unpreparedness, teachers' technophobia and health issues. Though it was mandatory for them to teach online at the beginning of the lockdown in March, the teachers' responses imply a low level of personal and contextual readiness, which, in turn, affected their willingness to teach online. This study highlights the correlation between teachers' readiness and willingness to teach online. It indicates that a high level of readiness can help the teacher adapt to the change, reduce resistance and ensure the constant extension of their comfort zone. This study ends with some practical suggestions and a number of opportunities for future research.

KEYWORDS

higher education, online course, perception, readiness, resistance, willingness

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Karami, 2014; Snyder, 2017).

1. Introduction

Significant challenges face the higher education community in the post-COVID-19 era. Higher education teachers worldwide are being required to rapidly adapt to the online teaching mode, thereby increasing their workloads and responsibilities (Bao *et al.*, 2020). This transition may prove rewarding and bring with it opportunities to rethink education (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020); however, it may be perceived as daunting (Lederman, 2020). Such a shift also emphasizes the importance of teachers' acceptance of different modes of teaching as well as their readiness for the environments within which they are asked to teach. As no education programme can fully prepare the teaching staff for unanticipated demands and challenges (Jensen *et al.*, 2010), teachers may be in need of motivating flexible programmes to help them leave their comfort zones and better prepare their students for 21st century skills and competencies (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020).

Despite extensive research on the effectiveness of teaching in the traditional classroom (Seidel and Shavelson, 2007), limited literature exists on what makes teaching effective outside it (Rasmussen, 2016). For various reasons, many educational experts and school reformers are convinced of the urgent necessity of online teaching; however, it is essential to address such issues as teachers' attitudes, preparedness and willingness to teach online prior to launching any educational reform. Against this backdrop, the present study explores Algerian higher education English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching and their readiness and willingness to adapt to the online teaching environment. It is important to mention that the key incentive behind conducting this study stems from the claim that educational reforms can be successfully accomplished only when teachers believe in their need of their accomplishment. No doubt, educational reforms can be doomed to failure if teachers are resistant to them (Kliebard, 1988; Terhart, 2013;

2. Digital Natives vs. Digital Immigrants

Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach. (Prensky, 2001:1)

In his essay 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', Marc Prensky (2001) refers to the existence of a new generation that has been brought up surrounded by and interacting with digital technology. Today's young people who find the constant updates in the field of technology unproblematic are dubbed 'Digital Natives'. Digital natives have grown up exposed to the continuous flow of digital information (Dingli and Seychell, 2015), and they therefore think and process information differently from their predecessors. In terms of education, Prensky (2001) points out that since today's students are native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet, their brains have physically changed along with their thinking patterns. Similarly, Marilee Sprenger (2010) makes a compelling argument that today's students are brighter and more talented; and their mission in school and life is different from that of previous generations. In view of the reflections on the knowledge and skills digital natives have and must acquire in education in order to achieve future success, it may be assumed that current educational systems are irrelevant and failing to meet their needs. In other words, digital natives are believed to no longer be the generation the current educational system was designed to teach.

With reference to the 21st century skills needed for the digital natives in academic settings, Prensky (2001) notes that there is a digital gap (divide) between those who have grown up in the digital world (digital natives) and those who have acquired familiarity with digital technology at some later point in their lives (digital immigrants). This gap has resulted in digital natives, who do not need to familiarise themselves with

technology, being taught by digital immigrants, who are using the outdated language of the pre-digital age. Jukes and Dosaj (2006) explore this issue a little further. They share the view that digital immigrant teachers prefer a slow and controlled release of information, text over pictures, sound and video, linear and sequential presentation, standardised testing and delayed rewards. In contrast, digital native students prefer multimedia, parallel processing and multitasking, pictures and video before text, immediate relevance and instant gratification. It is difficult for digital natives to excel academically using these outdated teaching methods; thus, online education can be considered beneficial, since it provides an interactive digital environment and supports autonomous learning (Coman *et al.*, 2020).

It is increasingly realised that the exposure of today's students to technology can strongly affect their learning; nonetheless, it is not necessarily true that students who grow up in a digital era are, by implication, digital native learners.

3. Teaching Inside and Outside the Comfort Zone

A comfort zone can be defined as a psychological state in which things feel familiar to individuals, groups or communities. They feel at ease with their regular habits and routines, perceiving that everything is under control and consequently experiencing low levels of anxiety, stress and risk. According to Bardwick (1991), the author of 'Danger in the Comfort Zone', the term 'comfort zone' refers to a behavioural state in which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral position. In other words, when inside the comfortable zone, what to do and what to expect are clear. However, does spending a lot of time in the comfort zone cause a problem?

Perhaps there is nothing wrong with being comfortable in the comfort zone, but a problem may arise when someone gets too comfortable, such as feeling complacent and showing no eagerness to achieve new goals, take new risks or seize opportunities. That is to say, if you are too comfortable, you are not productive (Tugend, 2011). Bardwick (1991) cites a famous experiment conducted by the psychologists Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson in 1908. Using mice, Yerkes and Dodson found that anxiety improved performance up to a certain level – what is now known as optimal anxiety. However, when that level is passed, and one is under too much stress, performance deteriorates. White (2009) refers to the zone in which performance can be improved by some amount of stress as the optimal performance zone. According to Yerkes (1908), anxiety increases performance until a specific degree of arousal is attained. However, performance deteriorates as higher levels of anxiety are attained. Beyond the optimal performance zone, lies the 'danger zone', in which performance declines rapidly under the influence of greater anxiety.

Given that everyone's reaction to stress is different, stepping outside the comfort zone is a way to get comfortable with discomfort. To illustrate, when the optimal performance zone has been reached, one's skills increase and one becomes comfortable with that new level of anxiety. Once the comfort zone has been expanded, one can get more used to those feelings of productive discomfort and not be so scared to try new things in the future (Tugend, 2011). Teaching can be viewed in the same way. Studies have shown that teachers often resist change because they are used to doing things in a particular way (Zimmerman, 2006). As has already been hinted,

complacency can be a sign that teachers are not trying something new or different; a teacher's continuous and never-ending comfort may not lead them to a higher level of excellence. As a result, among the discouraging factors that make teachers reluctant to teach online are personal and contextual readiness, which are represented by three indicators: (a) technological and pedagogical content knowledge, (b) online teaching presence, and (c) institutional support (Putnam, 2020; Scherer *et al.*, 2021). Put differently, teaching is a complex and challenging career that needs the constant extension of one's comfort zone. In this respect, today's teachers need to accept the integration of digital technology to facilitate and improve student learning (Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Benzehaf, 2016; Sriharan, 2020).

4. Methodology (Sampling and Instruments)

The present study aims to provide insights into teachers' perceptions, readiness and willingness to teaching outside their comfort zone (traditional classrooms). To this end, it is of consequence to answer the following four research questions:

- How do EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of online teaching?
- To what extent are they ready (well-prepared) for online teaching?
- Does their level of readiness affect their willingness to teach in online spaces?
- What motivates resistant EFL teachers to teach outside their comfort zone?

Being convinced by the view that an online survey approach is convenient in several ways (Regmi *et al.*, 2016), the author opted for an anonymised structured questionnaire created online using Google Forms. Sampling in this study is purposive; it represents 24 Algerian higher education EFL teachers, including 66.6% female participants. The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 62 years old, and their teaching experience varied substantially (from 5 years to more than 20 years) across a broad range of academic disciplines. To achieve a sufficient heterogeneity of online teaching practices, the respondents were intentionally recruited from a specific faculty but not a specific university. All the respondents reported that the rapid shift to online teaching had been mandatory. Only about 33.3% of the total sample had had some prior experience with online teaching and learning management systems. Of the selected instructors, 83% had taught at least one online course during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questionnaire was piloted to check that its design worked in practice. The participants were provided with the aims of the study, and were asked to acknowledge that they had been informed and understood that completion of the online questionnaire was tacit consent for their data to be used and shared.

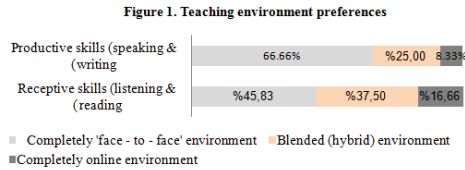
5. Data Analysis

The results of the study at hand are gathered by means of an online questionnaire that is divided into three main entitled sections. A mixed method, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches, was used in the analysis of the questionnaire (quantitatively with closed questions and qualitatively with open-ended questions).

5.1. Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Online Teaching

This section contained three questions by which we aimed to probe into the EFL teachers' perceptions of online teaching effectiveness and the major factors affecting their perceptions. The questions are stated as follows:

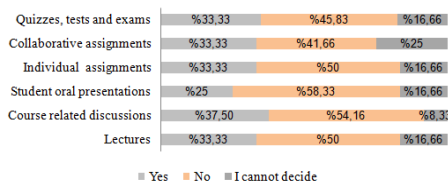
5.1.1. What is your preferred environment for teaching English language skills?



The results displayed in Figure 1 indicate that 66.66% of the participants preferred a 'completely face-to-face environment' to teach the productive English language skills, 25% preferred a blended environment, and only 8.33% of the total sample selected 'completely online environment'. For the receptive skills, 45.83% participants preferred a 'completely face-to-face teaching environment', whereas 37.50% and 16.66% preferred blended and 'completely online environments', respectively. The results gathered prove that there is no one preferred teaching environment; a significant difference exists between the preferred environments for teaching the productive and receptive skills of English language. In addition, the reported frequencies of teaching environment preferences demonstrate that the participants of this study hold more positive attitudes towards blended teaching than online teaching.

5.1.2. Can online teaching be more effective to test the effectiveness of these teaching methods than face-to-face teaching?

Figure 2. The effectiveness of online teaching as compared to 'face-to-face' teaching



This question aimed to capture the teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching by focusing on particular teaching methods. The data presented in Figure 2 show that approximately a third of the recruited sample, with a minor deviation in their responses (25%, 33.33%, and 37.5%), acknowledged the effectiveness of online teaching with regard to the listed course-related activities. Worthy of notice is that the frequency obtained for the option 'I cannot decide' (ranging from 8.33% to 25%) may confirm the participants' lack of sufficient prior online teaching experience.

5.1.3. What are the major factors affecting the effectiveness of online teaching?

Nearly all the respondents highlighted the unavailability of digital devices and limited access to the Internet as hindrances to online teaching. In addition, their answers implied that learners' lack of interest, confidence, prior experience of online learning, motivation and digital skills may indicate their unpreparedness to be taught online.

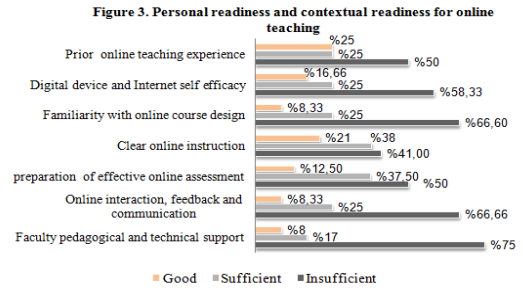
The highlighted findings also uncover other factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of online teaching. More than half of the

respondents concur that due to students' and teachers' health problems; migraine and eyestrain, online teaching can be ineffective. It is noteworthy that only a small number of respondents regarded the 'fear of technology' as a potential reason for teachers to resist teaching online.

5.2. Teachers' Readiness for Online Teaching

This section intended to assess the teachers' personal and contextual readiness to teach online, and the extent to which their level of readiness affected their willingness to adapt to the virtual teaching space.

5.2.1. How do you assess your personal and contextual readiness for online teaching?

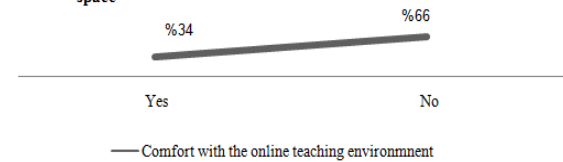


The results presented in Figure 3 show that the respondents' perceptions of their readiness for online teaching, focusing on personal and contextual dimensions, are not largely at variance. The majority of respondents reported all indicators as insufficient, which serves as a lens through which their low online teaching readiness can be described:

- 50% of the teachers reported that they had insufficient prior online teaching experience
- More than half of the teachers (58.33%) reported low digital device and Internet self-efficacy
- 66.6% indicated insufficient familiarity with online course design
- Approximately half of the respondents reported little satisfaction with clear online instruction (41%) and preparation of effective online assessment (50%)
- More than half of the respondents reported little confidence in their time management (54%) and online interaction and communication (66.6%) abilities
- In terms of the contextual dimension of teachers' readiness, 75% of respondents reported inadequate pedagogical and technical support from their faculty

5.2.2. Are you making efforts to adapt to the online teaching zone in the post-COVID-19 era?

Figure 4. Teachers' willingness to adapt to the virtual teaching space



Here again in Figure 4, the gap between the respondents' answers is wide. Unlike 34% of the total sample, 66% reported their unwillingness to enhance their competencies to adapt to this new mode of teaching. These results appear to be in accordance with the teachers' perceptions of online teaching, the factors leading them to resist online teaching and their level of personal and contextual readiness to teach online.

5.3. Practical Suggestions

This section of the questionnaire is devoted to some practical recommendations for teachers who are still uncomfortable with online teaching and thereby hesitant to experience online teaching.

5.3.1. What motivates resistant teachers to adapt to the online teaching environment?

The respondents believe that teaching is a dynamic process and therefore teachers' needs are of a dynamic nature. Their responses imply that due to the imposed lockdown, their shift to online teaching had been mandatory and that their institutions had developed their own Learning Management Systems onto which they were required to log in and upload the study materials required by their students. The respondents had been asked to accept the change and were given little time to prepare their online courses. They further explained that they were not motivated to teach outside their comfort zone and, thus, motivational issues needed to be addressed. Additionally, the respondents were aware that their attitude and level of preparedness were critical for teachers' acceptance and effectiveness of online teaching. In their opinions, universities, now more than ever should invest in teachers' readiness for online teaching to minimise their resistance.

6. Findings and Implications for Further Research

The addressed survey was conducted to gauge EFL teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching and their readiness and willingness to teach outside their comfort zone. The questionnaire consisted of three sections, each of which was intended to reveal data pertinent to the study at hand.

The first question was designed to determine the preferred environment for teaching English language skills. The reported frequencies displayed in Figure 1 show that there was no one preferred EFL teaching environment. Of the teachers who taught at least one online course during the lockdown, the majority preferred teaching both receptive and productive skills in a completely face-to-face teaching environment. Overall, the recruited sample held a more positive attitude towards the effectiveness of blended teaching than of fully online teaching. These results are in line with other studies (Tagoe, 2012) suggesting that the online teaching mode has less value than the traditional one. It seems clear that previous teaching experiences with traditional teaching methods have been the most accepted and comfortable form of course delivery and still continue to influence teachers' preferences regarding the teaching environment. Put another way, the more online courses EFL teachers design, the more comfortable they will feel when teaching online and the greater their preference will be for blended and fully online environments.

To further probe into the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of online teaching, the second question was administered. The findings reveal a minor discrepancy in the participants' responses which, in line with previous research (Coman *et al.*, 2020; Torun, 2020), denote the possibility of the effectiveness of online teaching for particular teaching activities. Another implication of this finding, supported by Ann Ewing's findings (2021), is that the effectiveness of online teaching is still largely based on face-to-face teaching techniques. Effective online teaching is not only intended to serve as an optional or alternative environment for traditional face-to-face activities; rather it aims to offer radical flexibility

(Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020).

The analysis of the third question reveals four key factors contributing to the ineffectiveness of online teaching: (a) technological constraints, (b) learners' unpreparedness, (c) teachers' technophobia and (d) health issues. Similarly, Muthuprasad *et al.* (2021) also reported these factors as affecting the success of online learning. On reflection, for online teaching to be effective, attention to both teachers and learners' individual experiences and differences is required (Yengin *et al.*, 2010; Azarfam and Jabbari, 2012; Mishra *et al.*, 2020). In essence, learning is the goal of teaching (National Research Council, 1997), and future research may therefore investigate the role of online tutors in improving the effectiveness of online teaching.

The findings of this study bring to light the low level of teachers' personal and contextual readiness to teach online. In terms of personal readiness, the participants were found to have insufficient (a) prior online teaching experience, (b) the necessary digital device and Internet self-efficacy, (c) familiarity with online course design, (d) clear online instruction, (e) preparation of effective online assessment, (f) confidence in the ability to time management (g) online interaction and communication training. In terms of contextual readiness, inadequate pedagogical and technical support from the faculty was reported. Institutional support plays an integral role in developing effective online teaching; thus, the impact technical support and pedagogical guidance provided by faculties has on teachers' satisfaction with online instructional design and organisation merits further investigation.

It is conceivable that the participants' hesitance to adapt to the online instructional environment is due to their low level of personal and contextual readiness. Put simply, when readiness exists, resistance to change is reduced. This interpretation is supported by Scherer *et al.* (2021), who recommend the extension of the representation and measurement of this concept in future studies. The respondents suggested some practical suggestions; they claim that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are requisites for the development of teachers' readiness. Intrinsic motivation is governed by the teacher's desire to update their knowledge and refine their digital teaching skills, whereas extrinsic motivation originates from external factors such as faculty support. Based on this, we encourage further research that systematically examines the relationship between the extension of the teacher's comfort zone and motivational factors.

7. Conclusion

While online teaching has been present during the pandemic in many universities worldwide, there is now a greater need to test its effectiveness. This provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which teachers feel ready to embrace the change and step out of their comfort zone. Overall, the results of this study, though they represent a small purposive sample, put great emphasis on the intersection between teachers' perceptions and their readiness and willingness to teach online. They also indicate that a high level of teacher readiness can reduce resistance to change and ensure the constant extension of their comfort zone. In light of this, measures should be undertaken to increase teachers' level of readiness for any effective educational reform to be effective.

Biography

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Dr. Abdelhadi, an Algerian researcher, received a PhD in Gender, Language and Sociolinguistic Diversity from Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem, Algeria. She has published four articles in national journals and participated in four international conferences. Her research interests to date have focused on critical discourse analysis and gender studies. Now her focus is on various aspects of gender and education in the (post)COVID-19 era. ORCID: 0000-0001-9706-688X.

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