The Impact of Covid-19 on Non-formal Education in Morocco: Digital Transformation of Language Centers in Fes

Salim DIB

Laboratory for Psychological, Sociological, and Cultural Studies
Faculty of Letters and Human sciences, Dhar El Mahraz,
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Fes, Morocco.
Salim.dib@usmba.ac.ma

Abstract:

The coronavirus pandemic has not only had a significant influence on worldwide trade and tourism, but also had a significant impact on education. Due to the spread of the virus, schools and language centers across the country were closed, students and teachers had no choice but to adopt themselves to the new situation. The resulting restrictions of social life accelerated a shift towards the application of digital media in language centers. Daily routines, everyday behaviors, and working environments, including education, are progressively being transformed by digital media. Notably, a lot of applications and social networking sites have supported and improved the learning process during the pandemic. By adopting a survey method through interviews with the managers of language centers and teachers, this paper attempts to answer questions about the current usage of digital media in language centers in Fes, especially in the context of extra hours and evening classes. In addition, this study will highlight the efforts of individual entrepreneurs to get along with the horrific impacts and the social changes the pandemic has occurred. This study revealed that many centers were obliged to make use of some applications like Zoom, Google meet, and even WhatsApp to keep the education going. The findings suggested that language centers were able to cope with the terrible impact of Covid-19 so as to keep on their fundamental role in students’ learning process.

Keywords: Coronavirus, non-formal education, digital media, language centers, start-ups
1. Introduction

The Covid-19 epidemic has impacted negatively human activities all across the planet. During the early stages of the outbreak, like many other countries around the world, Morocco adopted a number of rules to help people from catching this fatal infection. First, it issued evacuation orders for nationals living in China’s Wuhan region, where the virus was first detected. Upon their return to Morocco, additional restrictions were put in place for the evacuees, which included a mandatory 20-day quarantine in a Rabat military hospital (Chtatou, 2020). Despite initial efforts, the number of confirmed cases increased hugely, the authorities added more measures including a mandatory nationwide lockdown and curfew enforced by the police and the army, requiring that citizens limit their movement during the day to absolutely necessary activities. The government was strictly enforcing the measure by requiring individuals leaving home to acquire a special permit either from their workplace or local authorities.

The goal of these restrictions was to limit residents' activities outside the house. Residents were instructed not to leave the house unless compelled to. Do activities from home whenever feasible. Many industrial zones, offices, commercial centers, and tourist attractions were shuttered. Various organisations followed up on this government policy by introducing a work-from-home policy. This government policy was not limited to enterprises, industries, or offices. This policy covered all population activities, including educational activities. At school or on campus, learning was no longer permitted. This emergency led to the massive closure of face-to-face activities of educational institutions. (ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020: 1)

The need to maintain educational continuity presented challenges to which countries responded with different remote options and solutions. Both formal and non-formal sectors were at stick to continue the school year. They tried multiple options including adjusting the school calendar and how the curriculum was implemented, all adapted, prioritized and adjusted in various ways. In the formal sector, the government asked for the use of digital resources and platforms that can be accessed remotely, which have been bolstered with unprecedented speed by the ministries of education by online resources and the launch of free-to-air television or radio programming. The ministry of national education launched a digital platform to enable teachers to communicate directly with their students and provide remote learning classes, with a model that takes advantage of ICTs. The new platform enables students to get more involved in the learning process through lectures, digital texts and audio-video techniques1.

The launch of the digital learning platform comes after Morocco shut down all pedagogical centers on March 16, in a bid to slow the spread of Covid-19 in the country. To encourage students to continue their studies at home, a number of television stations also suspended their normal broadcasts to support remote education. On March 19, Morocco’s Ministry of Education announced that the Broadcasting and Television National Company (SNRT) dedicated some TV channels to broadcast on a daily basis in line with the remote program implemented to ensure continuity until the end of the academic year (Handaji, 2020).

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1 Remote Learning: Digital Platform Launched to Enable Teachers to Communicate Directly with Students | Maroc.ma
On the other hand, non-formal sector in terms of language centers has also been influenced by the shutdown. By Non-formal education, I mean an instruction that is not obligatory and structured and is learned outside the context of a formal school, be it extra hours, evening classes, learning languages outside the structures system provided by the government. However, many devalue the role of non-formal education sector because it is out of the formality, as the prefix ‘non’ implies. Rogers Alan, for example, looks at the concept not just as everything that is left over; rather “it is the freedom from everything that is not within a very restricted set of walls” (Roger, 2005: 4). Following the establishment of the learning from home policy, language centers were banned from face-to-face learning. Therefore, all the centers in Fes, as in the whole country, were asked to close. As a result, a variety of online learning methods have developed. In this respect, learning inequalities grew in the context of in opportunities to learn during the pandemic. (Jæger and Blaabæk, 2020).

In this study, I aim to shed light on the impact of covid 19 on language centers in the region of Fes. To what extent, they were able to adopt to the new shift of digital use and online teaching. What kind of strategies they followed to continue the school year? One of the contributing issues is tutors’ awareness and expertise with online learning. Consequently, my purpose is also to scrutinise the efforts of resilient start-ups to get along with the horrific impacts; to what extent were they able to excel in online teaching.

2. Background and Methodology

Over the last few decades, digital technologies have been introduced into schooling and have changed the context of teaching and learning process with increasing access to devices, the internet, and online learning environments. (Selwyn et al., 2017). This shift has resulted in degrees of integration or infusion of digital technology within schooling system. (Yates et al., 2021). When the pandemic swept the universe, the Moroccan government came up with a policy to adopt online learning. Teachers in public and private sectors were asked to prepare for online, remote teaching and learning until the end of the school year. While online and distance learning are not new, but in Morocco this was a novel and sudden experience for students who normally gain knowledge through face-to-face learning. To distinguish it from high-quality online education, the scenario generated by Covid-19 has been proposed as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges et al., 2020).

Moving education online allows teachers and students to teach and learn from anywhere at any time, but the rate at which this transition is required is unprecedented and astonishing. UNESCO and Morocco’s Supreme Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research have produced a joint report, entitled 'Teaching in Morocco during the Covid era' detailing the challenges that the Kingdom may face in imposing a more digital education. The document details that 75% of students in primary education in the country do not have technological means in schools, 53% of secondary school and university students, and an estimated 65% of educational centres do not have a good internet connection within their own premises, with 49% respectively in high schools. The report expresses concern about the resources that are available and teachers and professors have already stressed several times the lack of digital tools that are not available, and that they have asked on numerous occasions to obtain these means (Ortiz, 2021).
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There is already a growing body of literature related to education and Covid-19 impact in Morocco. Mohsine Jebbour's study (2022) looked into faculty reactions to the sudden shift to remote language instruction as the only choice for dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. His study aims at reporting the challenges and benefits of conducting online language classes when the country was under lockdown. The findings showed that online language programs had issues with ICT infrastructure and student participation, while also providing flexibility and increasing learner-content interaction. Belamghari (2022) shed lights on the experiences of university students from the department of English with distance learning. His case study indicates the challenges these students have faced during the lockdown, including inequality, technical and logistical hurdles, and lack of intimacy. Ennam (2021) also analyses the distance e-learning experience from the perspective of students. His investigation aims at questioning the achievability of distance learning, he deduces that this type of learning during the lockdown has led to insufficient online teaching/learning among students mainly because of low web accessibility and low distance engagement.

While adopting a qualitative case study method, this article highlights the experience of managers and start-ups of language Centers in Fes with the impact of Covid-19 during the lockdown. The main objectives of this study is to address the following questions:

i. How language centers managed the closure of their centers.
ii. How technology shift influenced the teaching/learning process.
iii. To what extent was the digitalisation of evening classes effective?

Because it tries to comprehend the complicated world of lived experience from the perspective of individuals who live it, this research uses unstructured interviews. Multiple realities and experiences may occur, and we intend to get insights into how teachers experienced this phenomenon using a qualitative methodology. The interviews were conducted either via WhatsApp messages or Face-to-Face. Twenty managers and start-ups of the language centers responded among thirty one participants.

3. Findings and Analyses

The findings come up with different themes that will be elaborated and discussed in this section. The study brings out the experiences of language centers and teachers during the confinement. The results showed that there were more negative than positive experiences.

3.1 The consequences of centres closure during the confinement

Basing on the results of the survey, the impact of the closure of centres was incredibly negative. Managers were obliged to shut down their businesses. For some, language centers were the only source of living and income. All the participants use terms like “negatively”, “hugely impacted”, “terrible”, “the worst period”, “very challenging” in their teaching and managing experiences. Their negative views are illustrated by the manager of Highway Academy “many language centers have closed down due to Covid-19, very few survived the crisis. We couldn’t pay the rent, teachers and administrators remained jobless, and we almost went belly up”. The study indicates that 6 owners of Language centers shut down immediately after one month of renting. Prof. Driss sadly states “I launched this project in September 2019, the second semester was my hope to pay the
rent; it is the period where students become interested in evening classes. Unfortunately, we closed because of the pandemic, but in fact I lost all my money in preparation for the school year. I got depressed and I changed my path to private schools aiming to save some money” Nassim Al Fajr’s manager. Therefore, most start-ups stopped their business because they couldn’t stand the rent and administration fees. It is worth mentioning that the majority managers of language centers are young entrepreneurs. They got a diploma in languages and couldn’t make it for further level of studies. They start up their own business in tutoring and offering private lessons to students of the three levels: primary, secondary, and high schools’ students.

The survey also indicates that the closure due to the pandemic has led some to the court. Many renters couldn’t wait for the end of the pandemic to figure out the monthly payments of language centers’ managers. Therefore, they were accused by the house’s owners. Jamal, for example, is the owner of al Maarifa center told me in a face-to-face talk “After two years of renting, paying my bill on time, the owner did not reduce the amount of money even during the lockdown, so I refused to pay simply because I didn’t work, the center was closed and one day her lawyer called to inform that the judge who is going to decide either to pay or to leave the house in peace”. Jamal’s case was only an example out of many in Fes that I heard during a meeting with Language Centers Managers.

Apart of the financial outcome, some owners brought up the psychological impact of the shift to online teaching. Many teachers of language centers had to shift automatically from face-to-face to distance teaching. This new method has caused many to disfavor e-learning. One teacher confirmed: “it was a great experience, but very challenging though”. The factors that made this experience exhausted was the fact it “needs a lot of effort and material adaptation; some teachers lost their confidence”. Because of that and the long hours of online teaching, teachers felt extremely tired at the end of the school year.

3.2 The shift to online teaching

Language Centres did not seem to move an inch to utilise the technology in the classroom until Covid-19 swept. The covid-19 outbreak has brutally forced the owners and teachers to conduct class remotely as the classes were shut down. The teachers were crawling and expected to think quickly of how to keep the class going through the online platforms. Starting from very low-tech platforms like WhatsApp to contact students and give assignments, and as the period of closure expended, the owners and teachers shift to use interactive platforms as Zoom and Google meet (Figure 1).
As figure 1 indicates, the closure left teachers and language owners hesitated and confused, not knowing what to do as Prof. Hatim says, OneSigma Manager, “At the beginning I took a holiday waiting for the reopening of schools because I couldn’t think of myself away from the white board and students in front of me. I just kept my contact with them through messages and audios”. The survey shows that a great number of Language Centers used Social Networking sites like WhatsApp and Facebook just to inform and keep in touch with their students. However, when the ministry launched the Massar platform as teachers and students will finish the school year from home, many Language centers started a huge campaign to convince students to continue their school year online as well. The director of Highway Academy, Prof Driss told us in a meeting later “once I comprehended that the school year will end online, I called all teachers encouraging them to work online, I also helped some by teaching them how to use Zoom so that we can keep the students benefiting from evening classes”.

During the early pandemic, students and teachers were challenged to use technology and appropriate apps in online learning, according to the following remarks from language center teachers and owners. They were nervous about switching to online learning because they were used to a range of face-to-face methodologies. This was a problem that both students and teachers had to deal with.

“we were obliged to use Zoom as it helps students in online interaction though it was really hard for me and my students to get familiar with this new shift” Al Ouafi center for Training

“During the lockdown we faced many problems in online teaching; for example, students were unlikely to spent more time and money on online classes” El Nassim Center

“like many Language centers, some teachers with me couldn’t accept the shift to online tech due to their lack of knowledge about the use of online platforms” OneSigma School

“I asked teachers to make use of white boards at home or papers while interacting and teaching students simply many didn’t use PowerPoint slides before the pandemic” Avicenne Center Fes

Figure 1: the reasons of applications used at the beginning of the lockdown
“I did everything to get students continue evening classes, you know Scientific subjects needs images while explaining, I found it hard at the beginning to use slides while explaining, but the majority of students could understand the lessons though it was really tiring for me and them” Zoubayr School.

These findings showed that language centers and teachers were not ready in terms of the use of tech. they were all immersed in the unknown world when it came to online learning. Yet, the owners of some language centers and teachers adapt to the new situation. The challenges faced by teachers are categorised into three parts:

- Technical challenges
- Individual challenges
- Pedagogical challenges

Three main themes were arisen from the managers’ story of the sudden shift through the narrative frame, including students’ economic condition, technology problems, and mental struggles of teachers. These themes concern the implementation of online teaching. First of all, according to many managers students found difficulties in keeping up with long-term evening classes; many drop out online-evening classes due to the economic conditions of their parents. Abdsamad, Elite School, illustrates that point saying that “the number of students went down massively in the second month of lockdown, many of them called the center apologising for not attending evening classes due to financial troubles of their parents”. The second them concerns both teachers and students, personally in my center, Avicenne Center, I went through hard time trying to convince teachers to continue evening classes through Zoom and Google meet, but in vain. Out of fourteen teachers only three who could deal with these applications professionally. As a result, many students couldn’t continue due to teacher’s lack of technological professionalism at the beginning.

In addition to tech problems, teachers after two months of working online, started to fade away in following students’ assignments and preparing online courses through PowerPoint slides. Prof, Oussama of Razki School commented on this issue: “I felt really exhausted after two months of spending hours online. Because of that I couldn’t sleep well and when the ministry called off the exams, I really calmed down and based on extra activities with my students”. The findings, which are confirmed by the study of Jebbour (2022), show that both teachers and students struggle mentally due to a lack of internet data and the necessary technology. At the start of teaching and learning from home, they struggled with how to provide material, provide feedback, complete activities, and study in a home environment. As a result, neither the teachers nor the students were able to concentrate on delivering the information. The increasing burden has overwhelmed the professors, who have yearned for a class atmosphere.

3.3 The influence of digitalisation on Language centers

The last question was a chance for teachers and Managers to reflect on the lessons they learnt from the pandemic. Though some teachers and language centers did not have the privilege to enjoy and adopt the shift to digital teaching and learning, many others have tried their best to adapt the situation and keep on the learning process. Crisis particularly for education is nothing new; a crisis is always an opportunity to reconsider current operations and push through reforms and
improvements that were proven hard to adopt (Benavot and Smith 2020). Over the past two years, a number of language centers have been quick to grab this opportunity and continue offering online lessons or at least provide students with online materials like recordings and assignments.

In this study, six teachers, who are the managers of language centers, are found to have learnt to shift their learning strategies to fit the online learning needs. Many have continued giving online lessons to students who can’t attend classes due to sudden events. Surprisingly, all the teachers are English language teachers. This might be understood thanks to the competence of teachers and the flexibility of the subject. The following comments are English Language Teachers:

“I could easily adapt myself to remote education, possibly because English is flexible”

“Honestly, I have never taught Grammar lessons using PowerPoint Slides until the lockdown, I think I have become professional in using digital devices”

“The best thing I did during the lockdown was that I made all my lessons available for online usage, sometimes they are useful to make the students revise”.

According to Jordo (2009), English has the ability to be a global language, and it should be taught with a multidimensional approach. People who know English also have an advantage in schooling when it comes to establishing new globalization pathways. As a result, using technology in English language teaching is a requirement in terms of its worldwide element (Tümen-Akyıldız et al., 2021).

The benefits of the use of digital devices vary basing on centers competency and teachers. Among the participants, a large number of Centers reflected positively on the digitalisation of language centers and called upon. Some called for this so as not to shut down their centers in periods of crises, others believe that it is high time to adapt new skills so that teachers can deliver online forms of teaching professionally. Many sets of studies support the importance of online learning including mobile learning. Matthew Kearney et al (2012), for example, investigate how learning is affected and modified by the tools used for learning, and that reciprocally the learning tools are modified by the ways that they are used for learning. However, the results of some students who took online lessons during the pandemic was neither a motivation for some centers to provide online evening classes, nor for students to repeat the same experience. Prof. Anass of El Ouafi Center comments on that “after going back to school we wanted to know if students would like to take online classes. To my surprise, none of the students preferred to take some sessions online”.

On the other hand, few centers did not accept the idea of digital learning either due to lack of interest of the staff, or their lack of motivation because of the first experience. Things such as technical issues, lack of structure, disturbance in the flow of classes, problems in clarifying doubts, lack of interest and motivations to attend the classes were some prominent factors reducing the effectiveness of online classes. Therefore, plenty of centers stopped offering online classes to students.

4. Discussion

The result of this study indicates that Language centers in Fes went through the most difficult period during the lockdown. Many managers and start-ups were forced to close because of their
inability to pay for rents and administration staff. Generally, the experience of the lockdown has deduced many lessons not only for formal education, but to non-formal sectors as well. Innovative start-ups should have learnt how to cope with and prepare for crises like Covid-19. Language centers managers are modals of innovation and self-entrepreneurship. Therefore, being innovative is a precondition of being resilient, as innovative businesses tend to constantly and continuously anticipate and adjust to a broad range of crises (Kuckertz et al., 2020). The findings have shown the majority of language centers were able to survive the heavy financial impact of the lockdown regardless of the government lack of support.

This survey has also explored the experience of language centers managers as teachers with digital platform and social networking sites. As they converted their evening classes to distance learning, many centers could not guarantee students interest because of many factors. As mentioned earlier, some parents’ financial situation pushed many students to dropout evening classes, others were not successful in using digital platforms for long hours either due to connection problems, or lack of technological tools. Hence, another fundamental topic has come up which concerns education inequality during the pandemic. Another factor that some centers had to deal with was teachers’ awareness of platforms use, and their lack of experience in online teaching. This has resulted in many dropouts and, thus, centers lost students and parents’ trust in evening classes. Many questioned the productive side of teachers online and their methods of interaction and explaining especially scientific subjects. This challenge was confirmed by the majority of managers and start-ups.

Although online classes were said to be more convenient in terms of saving time, both professors and language centers managers thought they were less productive and structured than traditional classroom learning. It is true that the majority were satisfied with the work they did during the lockdown, especially they helped students continue the schools year. Nevertheless, several teachers doubt the effectiveness of online classes for students with no prior experience and also the absence of technological facilities. In addition, pedagogical teaching strategies can also be considered a hindrance to the success of online classes for language centers.

5. Conclusion

It is not surprising that the sudden shift to online classes due to the pandemic was a precious opportunity for both teachers and students to get lessons. Language centers in the sector of non-formal education, on the other hand, have understood that crisis management skills should be employed to foster resilience so as to minimise the crisis. Covid-19 has shown that the resilient entrepreneurs were those who created change and opportunities with the resources available at the time, thus clearly following one important effectual principle (Martinelli et al., 2018). Certainly, making use of the resources that were available at that time, many teachers and language centers made use only of mobile phone so that students could prepare for the final exams. Hence, the digitalisation of language centers is another lesson that should be learnt during the pandemic since they experienced considerably higher workload and stress on average as the result of converting their classes to distance learning. This remarkable event has also called upon teachers’ readiness and awareness of the role of ICT in teaching.
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References


Appendix

Interview questions
1. How would you describe the impact of Covid-19 on language centers?
2. How did you manage the closure of the center?
3. What kind of challenges did the center come across during the lockdown?
4. What type of applications did you use at the beginning?
5. Did you and your center staff shift to online platforms later?
6. How technology shift influenced the teaching/learning process?
7. To what extent was the digitalisation of evening classes effective?