INVESTIGATING THE BARRIERS OF TEACHER-LEARNER DISTANCE COMMUNICATION: ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF MOHAMMED 1ST UNIVERSITY AS A CASE STUDY

Fatima Zohra ALAOUI MAHREZ
Mohammed 1st University, Oujda, Morocco
falaouimahrez@gmail.com

Abstract:
The spread of the Covid 19 Pandemic all over the world has obliged educational institutes to shift towards online education. Therefore, the ways and strategies of teacher-learner communication have changed also, and technology-based communication tools have become the alternative way of classroom communication. This paper attempts to shed light on the barriers of teacher-learner distance communication strategies in the Moroccan university context. The research draws on a quantitative analysis of a questionnaire of 10 multifaceted questions addressed to English Department Students of Mohammed 1st University. The survey sheds light on: a) the communicative strategies used by teachers and students during and after the course, b) the difference between face-to-face and distance communication, and c) teachers' feedback of questions and inquiries after the course. The results of the study reveal the shortcomings of distance education communication in the Moroccan University. Some of the main barriers are: 1) the lack of real-time interaction between students and their instructors, 2) the absence of collaborative and group activities, and 3) students often do not receive teachers’ feedback of their inquiries. The research ends by stating some strategies to facilitate teacher-learner distance communication.

Keywords: Distance Education, Mohammed 1st University, Teacher-Student Communication, Technology based Communication Tools, Quantitative analysis.

Introduction:
The need for distance education or e-learning has immensely increased in the 20th and 21st centuries due to the increase of information technology (IT), and the spread of international studies and international organizations; the fact that has influenced the teaching-learning process around the world. The shift towards e-learning means that people are no longer obliged to be located in conventional classrooms to learn since they can learn only from their homes through the means of technology (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Burns, 2011; Mamattah, 2016). Accordingly, new trends of teaching-learning communication tools have emerged to accompany distance education.

Online education is being introduced as a fundamental part of the student learning experience in higher education. Hence, higher education institutes worldwide have included Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to facilitate the process of teaching-learning and to make their programmes accessible for all learners around the world without the need to leave their countries to study abroad (Pinto, et al., 2012; Mamattah, 2016; Jenkins & Hanson, 2003). These universities provide fully online courses and flipped courses in terms of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and web-based systems such as Learning Management Systems (LMSs), and Virtual Learning Systems (VLSs) (Phan, 2018, Pinto, et al., 2012). All these inventions have tried to facilitate learning and to widen information for a large
number of students. However, the spread of Covid 19 around the world has accelerated the need to shift towards online education (Allo, 2020).

The current education crisis, due to the unpredictable onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, updated, among other reasons, the need to review the Moroccan government’s strategies of education system management. Thus, Morocco has imposed several measures aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic including the closer of educational institutes and the use of online education. Some of the alternative solutions offered by the Moroccan government were the inclusion of university electronic platforms and feeding them with courses, which allowed teachers and professors to make courses available to students, and the dissemination of courses on the Arriyadia channel for undergraduate students with 3 hours of broadcasting per day (6 lessons in total), to reach, afterwards, 6 hours per day (12 lessons in total) (Elmendili & Saaidi, 2020).

Nevertheless, the majority of Moroccan university students are not familiar with distance education and not all of them have the tools, technology devices and technology competence to follow this new trend of education. Similarly, the majority of university professors focused only on traditional education (face-to-face), before the pandemic, and, sometimes, they used online printed materials to teach in conventional classrooms. Accordingly, the online communication aspects should be questioned to examine its effectiveness and its reflection on the teaching-learning process in the Moroccan Higher Education.

1. Literature Review
1.1 Distance Education: A General Perspective

Electronic learning (e-learning), online learning, distance education, learning-mediated courses, web-based learning are all overlapped terms that are used interchangeably to refer to the process of learning which is mediated through the use of internet, intranet, mediated platforms (DVD, CD etc.), ICTs and/or web-based learning through the direct access to internet connections (Smart & Cappel, 2006; Kramer, 2002; Mamatha, 2016; Burns, 2011). E-learning is also defined as “a system and a process that connects learners with learning resources in the same electronic space, without the constrictions of time” (Kramer, 2002, pp. 23-24). In the same vein, UNESCO defines e-learning as “an educational process and system in which all or a significant proportion of the teaching is carried out by someone or something removed in space and time from the learner.” (Burns, 2011, p.9). This entails that learners can overcome the constraints of time and space to learn easily and efficiently.

Another definition claims that e-learning is the instruction delivered via a computer that is intended to promote the learning process (Clark & Mayer, 2008). And it is viewed by the European Commission (2001) as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchange and collaboration” (Pinto, et al., 2012, p.852 ; Mamatha, 2016, p.4). Consequently, it can be concluded that distance education is a broad term that describes all means of education that are achieved through the use of electronic technology and which aims to enhance teaching and learning.

1.2 Types and Forms of E-Learning

There are three types of e-learning, namely, fully online, mixed mode, and web-assisted (Mamatha, 2006; Gillespie, et al., 2007). The first type stands for a distance learning which has no physical contact between the intructor and learners, and it is done through the use of information technology tools. Moreover, learners in this type are self-directed and learning style is flexible. The form of fully online education is asynchorous in nature in which learners are
provided by asynchronous tools. Unlike fully online learning, the mixed mode of learning, also
defined as hybrid or blended learning, refers to the use of both face-to-face and online learning. In
this mode, teaching and assessments are done face-to-face while assignments, presentations and
learning materials are provided online. This mode is used to make teaching-learning process
more flexible and efficient through reducing the hours of face-to-face interactions. The web-
assisted mode of e-learning provides learning materials mediated through the use of web-sites and
virtual classrooms. This mode is similar to fully-online mode in the fact that it is done fully
online, but unlike the fully-online mode, it uses synchronous forms and tools of education in
which the instructor and learners interact and communicate. Hence, web-assisted learning uses
live interactions through the mediation of internet and technology communication based tools.

There are diverse ways to implement e-learning either through the use of synchronous
form or asynchronous form (Smart & Cappel, 2006). The synchronous form of learning is used
in real time interactions as mediated through the use of internet. In other words, this form of
learning is capable of engaging people in different places or locations at the same time through
the mediation of internet. Hence, the instructor and learners interact and communicate in the
same time using diverse tools such as chat boxes, audio conferencing, video conferencing,
instant messages, white board, web conferencing, application sharing etc. Accordingly, this
form is similar to face-to-face learning in the fact that they both use in-time interactions, but it
is different from it since it is used online rather than face-to-face, which requires physical
presence.

On the other hand, asynchronous form of learning stands for the self-paced or self-directed
learning in which the learners learn without the constrictions of time. It is a flexible form of
education and learners are not required to engage in the same live interactions. Rather, they use
the same materials but individually (Kocur & Kosc, 2009). The main tools that are used in
asynchronous form are document libraries, databases, e-books, forums, streaming audios and
videos, blogs and website links (Mamatha, 2006, p. 8).

Although e-learning continues to grow rapidly, it still remains at an early stage of
development in Morocco. Consequently, researchers and deliverers of online learning need
more understanding of the communicative aspects of this new trend of education, especially the
teacher-learner communication perspectives.

1.3 Computer-Mediated Communication and Interactivity in Higher Education

Computer-mediated communication is a broad term that encompasses various forms of
communication through the use of technology (and internet), and which can be synchronous
and asynchronous in order to widen and facilitate the process of learning (Lamy & Hampel,
2007). CMC has emerged in the late 1980s and it referred to the process in which learners can
engage with the communicative aspect of their study by exchanging language online rather than

The Computer-mediated communication theory in language learning and teaching has
flourished in the mid-1990s with the works of Warschauer (1995; 1997; 1998; 1999) in which
he tackled the issue of online interactions mediated through the use of computer and other
technology devices in order to examine the processes and outcomes of social interaction and
group processes in education. In this context Warschauer claimed that CMCL helps learners to:
“1) communicate with native speakers; 2) communicate either one-to-one or, more
innovatively, one-to-many and many-to-many; 3) plan their communication; 4) revisit their
work, owing to the permanent traces made available to them through the technologies”
(Warschauer, 1995; Lamy & Hampel, 2007).
In this regard, interactivity in higher education as mediated through technology is defined by Barretto, Piazzalunga, Ribeiro, Dalla and Filho (2003, p. 272) as “an activity and/or action between individuals and/or machines” (as cited in Ellis, et al., 2009, p. 305). Hence, it is any communicative situation that occurs between student-student and/or student-teacher through the use of technology connections including the internet. Moreover, interactivity is also related to educational software that is perceived as interactive, and interactivity here refers to the interaction between computer devices and its users (Ellis, et al., 2009). Accordingly, to broadly understand the definition mentioned above, interactivity refers to the interaction between student-student; student-instructor; student-content; student-computer.

The main technology-based communication tools that are used in higher distance education are synchronous in nature, which include chat rooms, discussion forums, emails, social networks, phones etc. In this paper, the main focus is on the student-instructor interaction (communication) as mediated through the use of technology-based communication tools.

### 1.4 Barriers to Communication in Distance Education

Even though distance education has tried to reduce space and time for students and teachers to meet and communicate in virtual spaces, there are some barriers that hamper the interactive situations of student-student and student-instructor. Some of the main barriers are stated in Berge’s study *Barriers to Communication in Distance Education* (2013): 1) *Technical barriers* in which students may face problems concerning technology competence and lack to access to online education. 2) *Temporal barriers* which refer to the lack of the commitment of students to attend live sessions, which affects the teacher-student distance communication. 3) *Psychological barriers* which refer to the students’ anxious feelings concerning the communicative situation with their instructors, especially when they communicate using asynchronous forms. Scholars found that students prefer to communicate in face-to-face situations since body language and voice are of paramount importance in the transmission of the messages (Berge, 2013, p.378). 4) *Social, interactive, and collaborative barriers* which entail the lack of emotional and social connections, lack of real-time feedback, lack of group and collaborative activities and the increase of misunderstandings. 5) *Cultural barriers* which refer to the cultural misunderstandings that occur between students representing different cultures in intercultural online education communication. However, other related barriers of online education include lack of instant teachers’ feedback and the lack of real-time interaction.

Consequently, problems that result in low levels of interaction led to a lack of motivation and the lack of enthusiasm for learning, the fact that causes students to stop learning online. Therefore, this article aims to shed light on the main online communication barriers that occur in the English Department of Mohammed 1st University from the perspective of students.

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1 A Background about Distance Education at Mohammed 1st University

After the spread of Covid 19 pandemic, Morocco, as the rest of world countries, has announced the lockdown in all sectors including public education institutes, which obliged all universities to shift towards online education. However, Mohammed 1st University had already stated the background of e-learning through the implementation of Moodle platform, which was one of the main interests of scholars and researchers in the last few decades, and researchers and professors in the French department had already included e-learning in their educational courses (Kaddouri & Bouamri, 2010). However, during March and April 2020 (immediately after the lockdown), Mohammed 1st University started using online courses which included 15971 written resources (including PPT, PDF, Word), 782 video resources, 60 audio resources,
and 276 other resources (Elmendili & Saaidi, 2020). Moreover, instructors as well as students of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences were the most active during this period with a percentage of 33% in comparison to 21% in the Faculty of Sciences and 15% in the Faculty of Juridical Sciences, Economy and Sociology.  

2.2 Data Description and Collection

The study uses a questionnaire of 13 multifaceted questions delivered to English department students of Mohammed 1st University. 3 questions were used only to know background information about the participants, while the other 10 questions were designed to examine the main barriers of teacher-student online communication. The questions focus first on the communicative strategies used by teachers and students during and after the course, second, teachers feedback of questions, inquiries and assignments after the course, third, the students’ perception of the difference between face to face and distance communication. The questionnaire was delivered through the mediation of internet, primarily via the use of social networks–Facebook and WhatsApp–and also through the use of e-learning web-site of Mohammed 1st University via messages and e-mails.

2.2.1 Participants in the Survey

After the delivery of the questionnaire, a sample of 128 participants responded to the survey about their perception of online communication that occurs between instructors and students. The table below shows the personal information of the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Male 43%</td>
<td>Female 57%</td>
<td>18-20 35,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Personal Information of Participants

According to the table, the majority of participants were females, with 57% representing 73 female participants, compared to 55 males (43%). This result goes back to the fact that the majority of enrolled students in the English department are females. The majority of participants are between 18 and 23 with a frequency of 71,9% (35,2% between 18-20 and 36,7% between 20-23), and this entails the fact that the majority of participants are enrolled in the second semester with 51,6% as compared to 38,3% for sixth semester and 19,5% for the fourth semester.

2.3 Data Analysis and Interpretation

2.3.1 The Communicative Strategies Used By Teachers and Students during and after the Course

To know the main tools and strategies used by professors and students of the English department of Mohammed 1st University to communicate during and after the online course, four questions are designed. The first question focuses on the main tools the instructors use to deliver their courses. The second question examines the number of instructors who communicate with their students in online real-time, basically through the use of synchronous form of communication. The third question explores the main tools used by students to contact

their instructors after the course, and the fourth inquiry investigates the use of collaborative and group work online.

![Figure 3: The Diversity of Types and Forms of Online Courses Delivered by Instructors](image)

Since the instructors use diverse ways and forms to deliver their courses, a multiple-choice question was the best to be used. According to students’ responses, the majority (124 participants) claimed that their professors deliver their e-courses by uploading PDF and PPT references. Moreover, 51 participants responded that their instructors use short-recorded audio, and 29 students said that they use recorded videos; however, only 21 students claimed that their professors use real-time live sessions. The students that chose the option “other” added that their instructors use Microsoft Word, Links for exercises and YouTube videos and books; hence, these answers could be added to options one and three. Consequently, we can claim that 16.4% of professors use synchronous interactive e-learning while 83.6% of them use asynchronous forms.

![Figure 4: Professors who interact with Students during the Online Course.](image)

The present diagram shows that 40% of participants alleged that only a minority of their teachers interact with them during the course, 22% claimed that the majority of their teachers interact with them, 20% of them said that none of their teachers interact with them, while only 13% claim that all of their teachers interact with them during the e-course. However, even students who chose the option “other” (5%) claim that only one or none of their teachers interact with them. In this vein, we can claim that the majority of students, with a percentage of 65% (including responses of ‘the minority’, ‘none of them’ and ‘other’), claim that there is less or no teacher-students interaction during the online courses, while 35% argued that their teachers interact with them during online learning.
Pertaining to the diversity of technology-based communication tools that students use to communicate with their instructors outside the courses, a number of 91 participants use emails, 72 participants use e-learning web site, while 11 participants use WhatsApp and 8 students use Facebook applications. Since the question was introduced in terms of multiple choice, students could choose more than one answer. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the majority of students use formal and institutional means to communicate with their professors.

Concerning the use of collaborative work and group activities online, 63% indicated that they are not integrated in similar activities, while 34% indicated that they use collaborative and group activities online in their studies. On the other hand, 4 participants (3%) claimed that they use initiative virtual groups to interact with each other (student-student interaction). This entails that the majority of professors do not promote group activities online; therefore, there is an absence of students’ community in virtual classes, unlike the conventional mode of learning.

2.3.2 Teachers Feedback of Questions, Inquiries and Assignments after the Course

The second part of the survey deals with teachers’ feedback concerning students’ questions, inquiries and assignments. Therefore, this section consists of two questions. The first one addresses the students’ opinion concerning the time their professors spend to answer their questions and inquiries, while the second question deals with students’ opinion about their teachers’ feedback concerning online assignments.
Concerning the students’ opinion about the time spent by their instructors to answer their questions and inquiries, 47% of participants reported that they receive answers after few days, 16% stated that they have never received feedback, 13% claimed that they receive feedback after week or weeks, and the same percentage (13%) reported that they receive immediate answers, while 11% added other answers. Answers of the students who chose the option “other” were diverse. Some claimed that their professors answer after some hours (which is similar to the option immediately), others said that they do not receive any answers (which is similar to the option never), one student is still waiting for his teacher’s answer, and others claimed that they did not try to ask online questions. Hence, according to the statistics, we can conclude that the majority, with 60% (including both options ‘immediately’ and ‘after few days’), receive regular feedback for their questions, while the rest face problems to reach the answers they wait for.

The response on the teachers’ feedback concerning online assignments shows that 34% of the respondents assumed that sometimes, they receive feedback on their assignments, 31% stated that they have never received any feedback from their instructors, 25% reported that they usually receive feedback on their assignments, while a small category of 10% stated that they always receive feedback.

2.3.3 The Students’ Perception of the Difference between Face to Face and Distance Communication

The last part of the survey deals with the students’ perception of teacher-student e-communication as compared to face-to-face classroom interaction. This part encompasses four
questions. The first question examines the students’ opinion about their preference to ask questions and comment online as compared to conventional classes. The second question focuses on the students' perception of how online communication helped them to enhance online learning process. The third question investigates the students' perception of online communication as compared to face-to-face interactions, and the fourth question provides four related sub-questions in order to examine a general perception of students concerning the effectiveness of teacher-student online communication.

Figure 9: Students Opinion about their Preference to ask Questions and Comment Online as Compared to Conventional Classes

With regards to how respondents feel about asking questions and commenting online, it can be reported that 26% of students do not feel comfortable while asking questions and commenting online. So, they prefer face-to-face interactions. On the other hand, similar percentage with 25% argued that they feel more comfortable to ask questions and comment online than in face-to-face situations. In addition, 16% strongly claimed that they do not feel comfortable to ask questions and comment online. On the contrary, 13% strongly agree that online interaction is more comfortable, while 20% feel neutral about this question. However, combining similar answers, we can conclude that 42% of participants prefer face-to-face interactions while asking questions and commenting, 38% of respondents feel more comfortable with e-interactions with their professors, while 20% stay neutral.

Figure 10: Students' Perception of Online Communication and Learning Process

According to the perception of students about online communication and how it helped in enhancing their learning process online, a notable number of respondents with 44% agree that student-teacher e-communication is of paramount importance to enhance students’ learning
process, 23% viewed e-communication as less important to enhance their learning process, 12% strongly argued that it is important, 15% were neutral, while 6% strongly argued that e-communication is not important in the process of online learning. Thus, the statistics reveal that the majority of participants, with 56% (including both options ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’), perceive online communication as an important component of online education, 29% view it as unimportant, while 15% are neutral.

![Figure 11: Students' Perception of Online Communication as Compared to Face-to-Face Interactions](image)

With regards to how students feel while communicating with their instructors online, responses were as follows: 32% feel more comfortable while communicating with their teachers online than in face to face, 27% feel uncomfortable with online communication, 16% strongly feel uncomfortable, 12% strongly feel comfortable, while 14% are neutral. Surprisingly, participants who feel comfortable to communicate online and those that feel uncomfortable with online communication represent similar percentage with 43% for each, while the rest 14% feel neutral about this question.

![Figure 12: General Perception of Students Concerning the Effectiveness of Teacher-Student Online Communication](image)

The last question introduces four interrelated sub-questions to determine the students’ general perception of the effectiveness of teacher-student online communication as compared to conventional interactions. Hence, from the statistics above, the majority of students agree that student-teacher e-communication is challenging and less effective than face-to-face.
2.4 Findings

The survey was set out to analyse the perceptions students have about online teacher-student communication, as they are the main beneficiaries of this technology-enabled learning. The above results show that the majority of English department instructors rely on the asynchronous form of teaching, which stands for the self-paced or self-directed learning in which students learn without real-time interaction with their instructors. This form of learning could be preferred to some students who prefer to learn freely without the constrictions of time, but others, who believe that the direction and supervision of instructors are important, could feel frustrated and lose motivation to continue the learning process. Accordingly, the use of asynchronous forms of learning explains the absence of teacher-student interaction during the course as reported by participants in the second question, and it also entails the students’ use of emails, e-learning web sites and other technology-based communication tools to contact their professors after the course. Additionally, the results demonstrate that there is an absence of collaborative work and group activities in the online mode of education, unlike the traditional way of learning. This absence could weaken the effectiveness of learning process among students, since one of the main fundamentals of the communicative approach to learning is the use of group and collaborative activities.

However, relying on the results stated, we can claim that even though there is a lack of real-time interaction between students and their instructors, the majority of teachers answer their students’ inquiries and questions in short time since only 29% of the participants claimed that they face problems to receive answers for their questions from their instructors. Nevertheless, students feel unsatisfied with their instructors’ responses on their online assignments.

Concerning the students’ perception of the effectiveness of online communication as compared to face-to-face interactions, the results show that the majority of participants prefer face-to-face interactions more than online communication and believe that it is more effective. However, some feel comfortable while asking questions and commenting online, and this can entail the fact that through the use of technology-based communication tools, students can contact their professors in anytime. Results also prove that effective online communication has an important role in the improvement of online education.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the main barriers that hamper the smooth implementation of e-learning teacher-student communication are: 1) technical barriers, since the majority of instructors are not familiar with e-learning and the majority of students do not attend online courses; 2) temporal barriers, since the majority of instructors do not provide their students with feedback of their assignments; 3) psychological barriers, since many students do not feel comfortable to ask questions and comment online; 4) social barriers, since students are not integrated in collaborative and group activities.

Conclusion:

This article has attempted to draw some implications on the situation of online communication in the English Department of Mohammed 1st University by shedding light on the main barriers of teacher-learner distance communication. Mohammed 1st University is a pioneer in the field of e-learning since it has started this initiative years ago. Nevertheless, there are still some shortcomings that should be fixed. Some of the main problems are the lack of students as well as teachers’ technology competence, the availability of technology devices for students, and the lack of well-designed online interactive programmes to be followed by students.
The focus on teacher-student online communication should be taken into consideration since the future of education in our country necessitates the shift towards online education in all Moroccan institutes. Hence, our educational institutes must afford e-learning training for both students and teachers and develop new methods and techniques in order to enhance online communication.

Like any other research work, this article has its share of limitations; the researcher focused only on the perception of students towards teacher-student online education, with a short survey of their opinions. Indeed, conducting a comparative study by asking teachers of the English Department could be more fruitful and could give other insights that can either support our claims or refute them.

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