The impact of the virtual classroom on the development of oral communicative competence in qualifying secondary school learners: A case study of the provincial direction of national education in Agadir

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Abstract: The period, mandated by health decision-makers in Morocco, was characterised by a certain improvisation in terms of the approaches used to enssure some form of pedagogical continuity. WhatsApp groups emerged as one of the methods adopted in an imposed manner by most teachers who were content with the digital tools available. In this context, our article aims to analyze the technical, didactic and pedagogical functioning of distance sessions programmed in synchronous mode, in order to determine whether virtual classes simulated real ones. It also seeks to study their effect on the development of oral communicative competence in Moroccan high school students. For this, we employed a mixed methodology: online questionnaire and semi-directive online interview process. The results indicated that no oral production was carried out, and hence there is a barrier to achieve an effective level of communicative competence during virtual sessions.

Keywords: Communicative competence, Confinement, ICTE, Speaking, Virtual classroom.

1. Introduction

During the pandemic crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus, Morocco, like other countries around the world, opted for distance learning (DE) as an emergency alternative to maintain educational continuity. Distance courses, both synchronous and asynchronous, have been set up to share content and enable learners to benefit from pedagogical follow-up, thus reducing the risk of dropping out of school. The virtual classroom (VCL) is one of the methods used in DL. It offers the possibility of recreating the atmosphere of a real classroom and benefiting from the advantages of face-to-face teaching, even at a distance (Georges Ferone and Aurore Lavenka, 2015). This modality is of particular importance in the distance teaching/learning process. It relies on the use of digital tools in synchronous mode ensuring content sharing, interaction and management of didactic and pedagogical situations (Ferone, G &, Aurore, 2015).

From this perspective, we formulate the following question: What technological and digital tools were most widely used for distance learning during the health crisis in Morocco? Do these tools ensure that content is shared and that there is interaction between those involved in the learning process? How are distance learning courses delivered - synchronously, asynchronously or as a hybrid? Can we really describe these courses as virtual classrooms that meet all the theoretical requirements in terms of sharing and management? Are oral and written skills encouraged and developed through the digital tools used?

All these sub-questions converge towards the problematic of our study formulated in the following way: To what extent have distance learning courses, run as part of a VCL, contributed to the development of oral communicative skills?

In order to answer this central question, we put forward the following three hypotheses:

- Sessions programmed in synchronous mode, as part of DL, could simulate a real classroom by ensuring all the subjacent didactic and pedagogical dimensions;
- The digital tools used could guarantee virtual written and oral communication between teachers and their learners;
- The communication provided through the VCL would promote the development of oral communicative competence in learners.

In order to confirm or refute these three initial hypotheses, our research within the framework of FFL didactics will aim to analyze the technological tools and methods adopted to guarantee pedagogical continuity in this particular context. It also seeks to explore the impact of VCL as an DL modality on the optimisation of oral communicative competence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Distance Learning

Distance learning has its origins in the 20th century (François and Estelle Orivel, 2006). It is a teaching method that relies on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) without the need for learners to physically attend school (Claudine Beaupré et al., 2019). This model was initially based on the use of postal services, followed by educational radio in 1927 and television in 1939 (Nipper, 1989). The growing rise of interactive media and the Internet would further facilitate collaborative learning, notably through the use of discussion forums and web conferences (Peraya, Viens and Karsenti, 2002). We now speak of online teaching, online learning and the connected classroom. The introduction of this use began in universities during the 1990s, then its integration gradually spread to secondary and elementary school (Ferone, G & Lavenka, A, 2015). However, DL only reached its peak during the period of confinement imposed by the Covid-19 health crisis. Indeed, in March 2020, and as part of the prevention against the uncontrollable spread of the virus, all schools found themselves obliged to suspend face-to-face classes and switch to virtual mode (Bernadette Plumelle, 2021). Although this complete transformation may seem difficult, innovative initiatives have emerged in the education sector (Jean-Louis Durpaire, 2020), enabling teaching and training activities to continue. Teachers, in turn, have had to adapt to the situation despite lacking the necessary digital skills or resources (Gouëdard, P. et al., 2020), underlining the need for tailored training to respond to such situations or similar crises.

2.2. Virtual Classroom

As mentioned above, the "virtual classroom", also known as a "webinar", refers to a synchronous distance-learning modality favoring oral or written communication with the possibility of recording sessions for later viewing in asynchronous mode (Thierry Cuirot & Jean-François Detout, 2021) (Ferone, G & Lavenka, A (2015). In this method, teachers and their learners participate in pre-programmed meetings using digital tools. Each participant can observe, listen and interact with the others without being physically present in the same space. These elements enable the simulation of real classrooms by creating a "remote presence" (Anni Jezegou, 2010). What's more, G. Ferone and A. Lavenka (2015) add that fostering motivation and autonomy among learners is important for preventing virtual session dropout and school dropout.

2.3. Distance Learning in Morocco

Morocco was relatively well prepared to adopt this virtual learning format. As Abdennasser Naji (2020) points out, the country already had web platforms such as "TelmidTice" and "E-learning", and an educational channel called "TV Athaqafia". At the same time, teachers, each according to their own means, sought alternatives to ensure pedagogical continuity and maintain contact with learners. These solutions include collaborative platforms such as "Teams" and "Google-Meet". Distance learning tools have not been beneficial for all due to technical, economic and geographical constraints. Faced with

these difficulties, and with the aim of delivering courses while fostering interactions with learners, many teachers, particularly in public schools, have opted for other solutions to set up VCLs, among them applications such as "WhatsApp", "Telegram" and "Facebook", which are proving to be more accessible and user-friendly tools, suitable for a wide range of social categories.

3. Methodology of Research

3.1. Context

Our study aims, through a mixed approach, to analyse oral communicative competence in the context of VCL. It, therefore, consists of describing the teaching sessions planned at a distance and comparing them with the theoretical foundations of VCL, in order to analyse the effect of these distance practices on oral competence. To do this, we used two complementary investigative tools as part of a mixed-methods approach.

The distribution and collection of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview were carried out online via "Google Forms" shared on "WhatsApp" groups bringing together teachers in the Agadir-Idaoutanan region over a period that ran from July 3 to July 30, 2021. The forms are intended for teachers of French in the qualifying secondary cycle who have already had the experience of teaching at a distance during the period of confinement.

3.2. Survey by Questionnaire

As the table below illustrates, our corpus is made up of seventy-nine teachers of French at qualifying secondary level who were kind enough to answer our 23-question questionnaire.

It is also imperative to note, as the following table shows, that our respondents belong to two different sectors: 76.1% work in the public sector and 23.8% in the private sector, including 57.1% female teachers and 42.8% male teachers:

Table 1.
Presentation of the questionnaire sample.

| Demographic information		Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	42.8%
	Female	57.1%
Old age	Between [25-30[	23.8%
	Between [30-40]	38%
	More than 40	38%
Experience	Less than 5 years	23.8%
	Between 5 and 10 years	14.2%
	Between 10 and 15 years	38%
	Between 15 and 20 years	19%
	Between 20 and 30 years	4.7%
	More than 30 years	0%
Sector	Public	76.1%
	Private	23.8%

3.3. Survey by Interview

We conducted a semi-structured interview with thirteen teachers (five female and eight male) of French in the qualifying secondary cycle, asking them to share with us their own experiences, challenges and strategies. The data were collected anonymously. We then proceeded to identify emerging themes related to our problem. It should be noted that our study focused only on the qualifying cycle, which limited the size of our sample.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Analysis of Questionnaires

4.1.1. Digital Teaching/Learning Tools

The choice of digital tools plays a very important role in the success of VCL. They must ensure sharing, management and interaction between the players involved in the pedagogical action (Marot & Darnige, 1996). With all this in mind, it was essential first to identify the tools used by our respondents were using and to check to what extent they meet the characteristics of a virtual classroom:
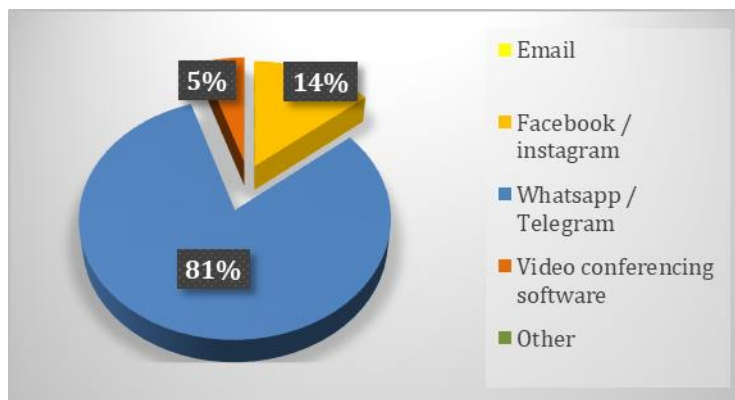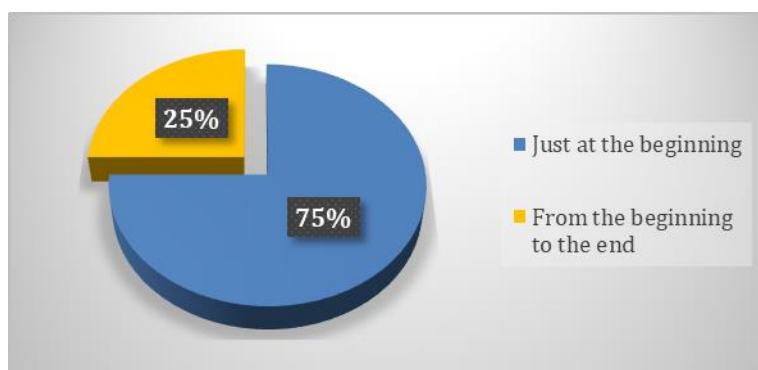

Figure 1.
Digital tools used.

Figure 1 shows that 95% of teachers chose to use the applications most accessible by the majority of learners. "WhatsApp / Telegram" (81%) and "Facebook / Instagram" (14%) dominated. By contrast, videoconferencing software programmed specifically for virtual sessions was used by only 5% of teachers.

4.1.2. Interactions

As mentioned above, the use of social networks can only be considered to promote a VCL if they fulfill certain characteristics, notably synchronous interaction.
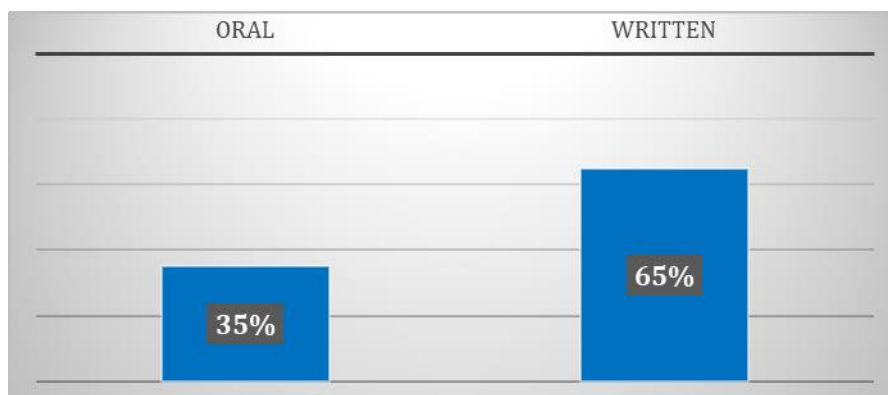

Figure 2.
Use of synchronous mode.

4.1.2.1. Synchronous Interaction

According to Figure 2, only 25% of teachers continued to work in synchronous mode, favouring the "remote presence" that characterizes VCL, while 75% chose to return to asynchronous mode.

4.1.2.2. Type of Communication

Oral competence is developed through oral communication. Figure 3 shows the presence of this communication.
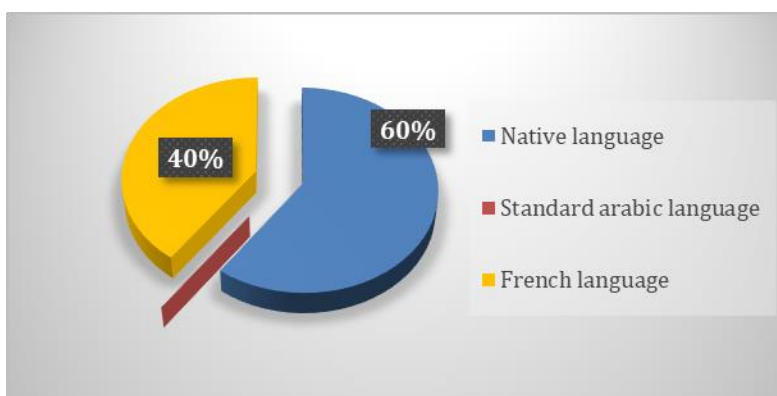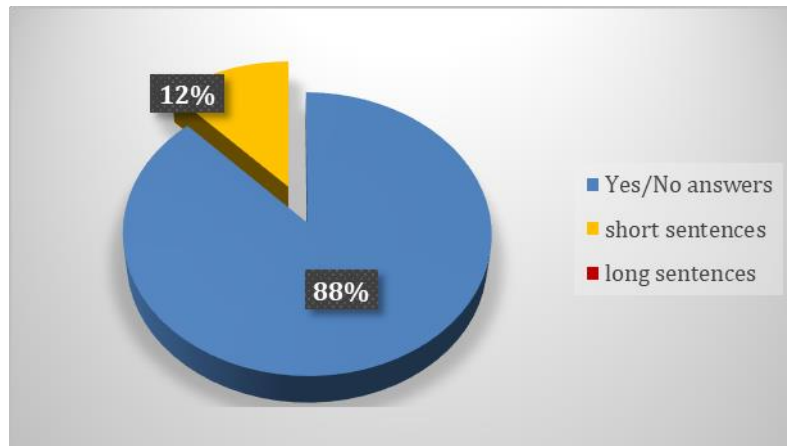

Figure 3.
Written/oral communication.

Figure 3 shows that 65% of communicative interactions are written, compared with only 35% of oral interactions in the form of audio recordings.

4.1.2.3. Language of Communication

Despite the limited use of the oral communication language, the study of the language used remains to be verified before judging the development of this skill. In the same vein, two other interdependent questions need to be analyzed: the first Figure 4 concerns the language of communication used, and the second Figure 5 relates to the analysis of oral communicative competence based on the types of sentences used.

Figure 4.
Language used in oral interactions.

Figure 5.
Types of sentences in French language.

As a result, we find that 60% of learners Figure 4 used the native language (Moroccan Arabic) as the language of oral interaction, while the others chose to communicate in French. On the other hand, Figure 5 shows that 88% of all oral exchanges carried out in French were in the form of short, closed answers, while the construction of complete sentences represented only 12% and took the form of short, simple sentences.

4.1.2.4. Interaction Management

The digital tools used in the VCL context must support classroom management and control of interactions. To ensure that this is the case, we asked teachers whether the applications they were using enabled them to do this Figure 6.
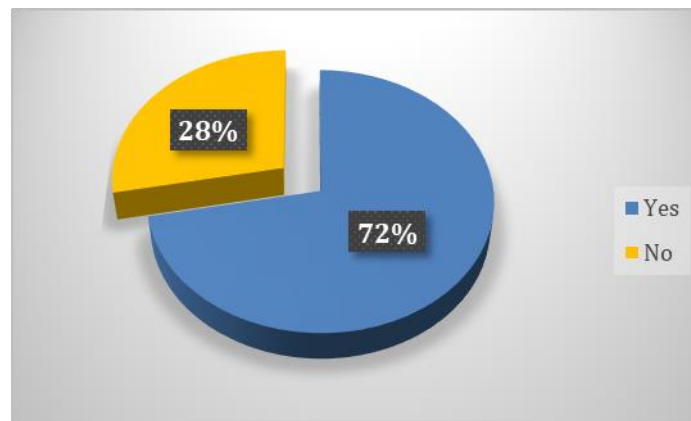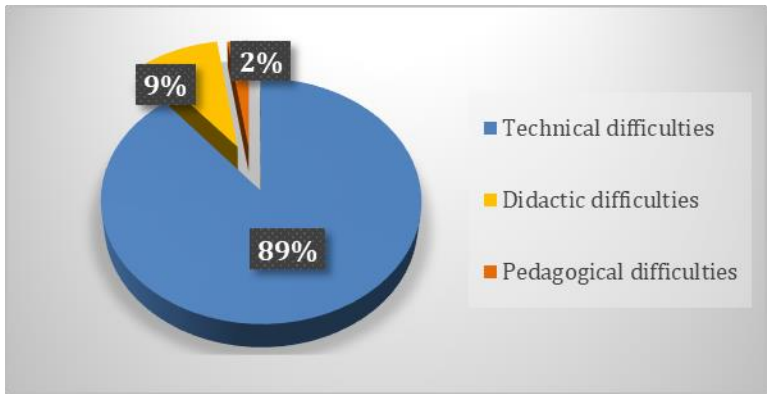

Figure 6.
Virtual classroom management.

The data collected show that only 15% of those surveyed who had used the "WhatsApp" application were able to manage their virtual classroom. On the other hand, 85% confirmed the difficulty of the task.

4.1.3. Difficulties

This new mode of teaching/learning is not without its problems, especially when it is adopted unannounced, without a trial period that enables the acquisition of certain knowledge and skills that

facilitate its implementation, while neutralizing or at least reducing the obstacles encountered. In investigating the challenges of the remote classroom, we have identified the following difficulties:
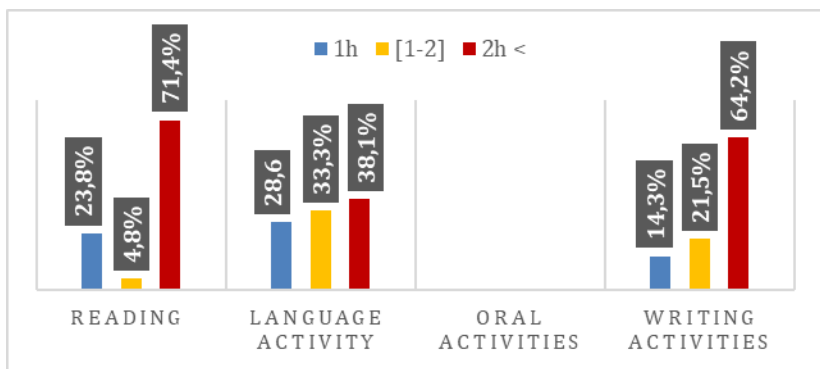

Figure 7.
Types of difficulties encountered during DL.

According to the interviewees, the difficulties encountered can be divided, as shown in Figure 7, into three main categories: Technical (52%), didactic (43%) and pedagogical (5%) problems.

Among the pedagogical difficulties, we would mention the question of the time allocated to each activity. Indeed, a comparison between the time devoted to each pedagogical activity in a real classroom and that in a virtual classroom has enabled us to identify the issues linked to interaction management.
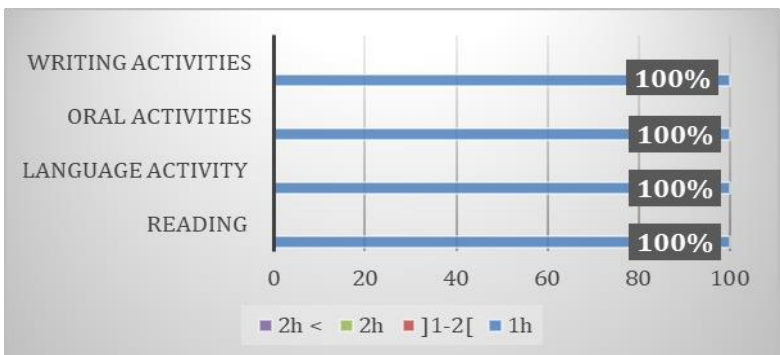
Figure 8.
Time allowed for activities in a real classroom.

Figure 9.
Time allowed for virtual classroom activities.

According to Figure 8, the teachers (100%) confirmed that face-to-face activities did not often exceed the scheduled time, unlike activities carried out in virtual mode Figure 9. In fact, over 70% of those questioned confirmed the time-consuming nature of reading and writing activities, which in virtual mode exceeded the scheduled time, breaking the two-hour barrier.

Analysis of Figure 9 also reveals the absence of the oral activity in all the distance learning courses. As a result, oral communication is only present through the few audio recordings used in the oral responses identified in the other activities.

4.2. Analysis of Semi-Directive Interviews

To supplement the information collected in the questionnaire, we conducted semi-directive interviews sent online to thirteen teachers. The results are as follows:

4.2.1. Training for the Use of Digital Tools

The use of technological tools requires certain digital skills. All those interviewed (93%) confirmed that, prior to the period of confinement, training in this area was rare. While those offered at a distance during the period of confinement were attended by only 47% of our interviewees. The latter attested that remote training was neither sufficient nor successful due to technical problems. Moreover, added one of the interviewees, the theoretical nature of the training courses and the impossibility of making applications on the same digital tool rendered them unproductive.

4.2.2. Using Communication Applications

23% of teachers reported that videoconferencing tools for synchronous mode contact, such as "Google Meet" and "Zoom", were only used during the first few days of the lock-in period, as they require a high-speed connection. They explained that most learners had abandoned the virtual sessions because of their parents' economic situation. The latter were unable to provide a high-speed connection for the entire period of distance learning. One of these teachers pointed out that the majority of these learners used the "Pass *6", which allows them to stay connected only on social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp...). In response to these constraints, the interviewees found themselves obliged to return to "WhatsApp" for the rest of the period.

4.2.3. Management of Synchronous Courses

All the responses received (100%) highlighted the difficulty of managing interactions in the context of animated VCL via "WhatsApp". For our respondents, this type of tool made it impossible to control the presence of learners or the flow of messages received, especially in response to questions posed by the teacher. The teacher was therefore called upon to listen to all recordings that might contain the same idea and the same answer, thus contributing to the extension of the planned duration of the virtual sessions.

4.2.4. Oral Communicative Competence

90% of interviewees explained that the learners' level of French was disappointing, which made it impossible to plan oral activity sessions or oral discussion sessions, especially in distance mode. The few responses received in French did not go beyond words or short sentences, while all interactive statements, according to 85% of interviewees, were produced in the native language or emoticons, as the overriding objective in distance learning courses in such circumstances was to understand the course content to the detriment of the language taught or of instruction.

Motivation is another issue raised by the interview. Five out of thirteen interviewees pointed to the demotivation of learners caused by health circumstances and the unusual use of distance learning courses.

In response to the open question on "difficulties encountered when teaching at a distance", we identified a single response dealing with didactics. The teacher explained that the approaches used in face-to-face teaching cannot be adapted to distance learning. The rest of the responses focused on technical problems, such as the lack of adequate equipment, and pedagogical problems, such as time and group management.

5. Discussions

Analysis of the results of the two investigative tools, one qualitative and the other quantitative, highlighted the reality of virtual classrooms used during the period of confinement as a synchronous modality of distance learning.

Despite the introduction of appropriate digital tools, recourse to traditional methods was a necessity to maintain contact with a large number of learners (Jean-Louis Durpaire, 2020). According to our results, the virtual classroom manifested itself through user-friendly and ordinary applications such as "WhatsApp". This was a choice imposed by several constraints. Firstly, the use of platforms and software dedicated to DL requires, as Pierre Gouëdard and his colleagues (2020) point out, digital skills. However, the training courses planned in this respect are deemed insufficient and sterile. Trainers were content to present the platforms and explain their functionality. As our interviewees pointed out, this lecture-based approach to training did little to develop these highly procedural and operational skills. In addition to this technical aspect, teachers also need to be trained in the didactic approaches appropriate to DL, and which enable virtual sessions to run optimally.

The second problem was technical. The majority of learners had cell phones with low storage capacity, which made it impossible to install software suitable for the virtual classroom. This problem was further exacerbated by the economic situation of the families who, in addition to their inability to afford a quality phone, found themselves unable to ensure a broadband connection throughout the distance learning period.

According to Vygotsky (1997), interactions contribute to the successful construction of learning outcomes and foster learner motivation (Cendrine Mercier, 2021). Looking at oral communication, our results showed that most of the oral interactions identified in the synchronous distance sessions were in the mother tongue (Moroccan Arabic), while those in French did not go beyond closed or simple constructions. This is certainly due to the lack of this skill among learners. The result was a feeling of anxiety, a fear of making mistakes and an inability to converse in French. We can even go beyond this finding to say that the inability to produce correct sentences leads the learner to choose between passivity and participation in the mother language.

Moreover, Georges Ferone and Aurore Lavenka (2015) recognize that the lack of visual interaction can disrupt virtual sessions and increase workload. Indeed, the "WhatsApp" application does not allow this visual contact. Our respondents also pointed out that this lack of visual interaction leads to management difficulties and time-consuming virtual sessions that recurrently exceed the scheduled time. Such difficulties can lead to loss of concentration, demotivation and, consequently, abandonment of synchronous virtual sessions.

Given the above, we feel it is legitimate to question the true nature of the teaching adopted in Morocco during the period of confinement. Was it really distance learning, or was it simply the diffusion of content without any meaningful interaction?

Although setting up educational platforms and channels may seem appropriate, it's crucial to recognize that the pedagogical action involves two main players: the teacher and the learners, who must be provided with the right resources and appropriate conditions for successful distance action.

Indeed, distance learning requires a solid infrastructure, in terms of both digital tools and Internet connectivity, as well as suitable digitalized didactic devices for both teachers and learners. However, these fundamental elements often seem to be lacking, calling into question the effectiveness of distance courses and the adoption of distance learning in Morocco.

Today, online teaching has become essential, requiring all players to be connected to digital platforms where they can interact effectively. The virtual classroom remains an essential environment for delivering live courses. It recreates the experience of a traditional classroom, where teachers and learners can interact and communicate in real time for a more interactive and engaging e-learning experience.

6. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the advantage of simulating a real classroom resides in freeing learners and teachers from the constraints associated with mobility. However, in the context of Covid-19, this modality was adopted as a matter of urgency to curb the spread of the Virus, without any prior knowledge of the theoretical conditions for its implementation. In this sense, data analysis enabled us to evaluate these sessions programmed in remote mode during the confinement in Morocco. In particular, this highlighted the teachers' representations of a VCL, which turned out to be limited to the characteristic of synchronization. Although virtual sessions scheduled via social networks and communication applications such as "WhatsApp" contributed relatively to pedagogical continuity by enabling sharing and interactions between the teacher and his learners, we cannot consider them as complete VCL. Indeed, they lack other management features needed to simulate a real classroom, notably in terms of time management and interaction, and the development of oral communicative competence, the focus of our research.

In short, synchronous courses during this period are far from being VCL, but rather synchronous encounters that enable content to be shared and explained, depriving the session of its pedagogical dimension, which is strongly present during face-to-face classroom sessions.

Although educational strategies are moving towards hybridization and online teaching, VCL is becoming a necessary, even compulsory, strategy for raising the quality of teaching and learning in the face of all the constraints that can hinder this pedagogical action.

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