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Challenges of Using Learning Management Systems in General English Courses during Covid-19 Emergency Remote Teaching: Exploring the Professors' Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, many public places, involving schools, educational institutions, and universities around the world, were closed to prevent the spread of this deadly virus (Blandenier et al., 2020; Dodangeh et al., 2020; IAU Working Group of COVID-19, 2020). In response to this crisis, the majority of educational centers across the globe, including Iran, shifted their instructional activities from customary, face-to-face education to online education (Onyema et al., 2020; Rezaei et al., 2020). Digital platforms like Learning Management Systems (LMS) became readily accessible and its capabilities were recognized by those who had used it before (Alizadeh, 2019; Hemmati & Mojarrad, 2016; Moradimokhles & Hwang, 2020), so it was allowing instructors with almost no prior training or experience to offer Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to students. Assessing the hurdles or challenges of online education in various educational sectors could be beneficial if emergency situation persists for a while and in preparing for similar educational circumstances in the future (Hodges et al., 2020). In this regard, the researcher attempted to explore the challenges of online general English language courses held through LMS in a selected number of state-run universities in Tehran from the professors' perspectives. General English is a course the majority of Bachelor students in Iranian universities are obligated to pass whose objectives are to strengthen students' abilities to read and interpret English texts and to help them understand the content of English texts in their semi-specialized courses.

METHOD

To collect data for this qualitative study, the researcher managed to conduct in-depth semi-structured electronic or face-to-face interviews, each lasting around 30 to 60 minutes, with nine professors from seven state universities in Tehran who kindly agreed to participate in the study. The interview questions addressed the challenges the professors faced in teaching general English courses via LMS regarding designing lesson materials, class activities, assignments, and exams as well as their practices and challenges of teaching English in synchronous online classes. Furthermore, in order to have a profounder understanding of the challenges faced by the professors in general English courses offered through LMS, the researcher managed to observe 32 sessions of online general English classes, each lasting around 90 minutes, at six state universities during two academic semesters from October 2021 to February 2022. The data analysis procedure involved transcribing the interview and observation data, reading the transcripts several times, coding and recoding the segments of data, writing marginal memos, cross checking the data, categorizing recurring codes, and eventually extracting several themes related to the professors' challenges of using LMS in general English classes.

RESULTS

The findings of the study revealed that **technical** challenges like problems related to network servers, the low speed of the Internet, internet connection disruptions during class time, the lack of access to digital tools, unfamiliarity with or inadequate utilization of LMS affordances and options in synchronous and asynchronous teaching; **communication** challenges like poor possibilities of turning on webcams during the class, low participation of students in speaking activities, and few opportunities for pair or group works; **pedagogic** challenges like students' diverse English proficiency levels, difficulties in preparing quality English teaching materials particularly multimedia, and the time-consuming process of providing personal feedback on assignments submitted by students via LMS; **ethical** challenges like cheating opportunities in online exams and concerns about equity issues; **managerial** challenges like large population of students in each English class, as well as **psychological** and **physical** challenges were among the problems discussed by the professors or observed by the researcher.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, the availability of a learning management system is not the only essential requirement for a high-quality online English course, and a variety of other pedagogic and non-pedagogic factors should also be taken into consideration. This finding is in line with the studies conducted by Tayş and Başaran (2018), Toland et al. (2014), and Wu (2008), who assessed using LMS in courses of English as a foreign language. Wu (2008) emphasized that without assistance from a group of IT experts, using Moodle (a kind of learning management system) in teaching English would be very hard. Tayş and Başaran (2018) stated that despite MyELT's (a kind of LMS) potential benefits for language learning, teachers have mixed feelings about using this platform due to issues like students' lack of ICT skills, apathy toward the LMS, and the system's inherent flaws and restrictions.

Toland et al. (2014) found that Manaba (a kind of LMS) could be a useful tool in English language learning classrooms. However, a lack of appropriate training was contributing to problems related to ease of use. This reiterates that it is crucial for institutions adopting e-learning to investigate additional elements that may impact students' opinions of LMS, such as instructor effectiveness, instructional materials, and technological preparedness.

In line with the mentioned findings, the researchers of the current study found that despite various capabilities of LMS in teaching, such as the ability to play video and audio files in class, designing assignments, and administering tests that can improve the quality and efficiency of an online course, it is not possible to expect an online course to be successful unless all the necessary distance education infrastructures are in place, including providing high-speed internet and appropriate digital devices for professors and students, training the professors and students to use different sections of LMS, and a strong and available technical support team in the university to support faculty and students about their challenges in using LMS. These findings are in line with other findings that show schools, teachers, and students must embrace technology and develop their digital literacy to adapt to the new global trends and realities in education. Additionally, universities should consider a smaller student population for online courses, so that all professors and students have the option to turn on the webcam in the classroom, resulting in a more formal learning environment for the students and a more effective way for the professors to monitor the students, besides making a more personal connection with their students.

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