

On Multimodality Integration in Online Instruction: A Case Study of Some Virtual Classes Delivered at the English Department/ Tripoli University during Covid (19) Quarantine

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ABSTRACT: Recent research has shown evidence of the positive influence of adopting the multimodal teaching approach, especially in the e-learning context. The assumptions are manifold. Employing multimodal digital techniques can be highly beneficial in terms of enhancing students' learning experiences, taking into account students' variety of learning styles. Using multimodal pedagogies can be a key in drawing students' attention to the target material and a way to boost their cognitive skills as well as their class engagement. The core concept of the multimodal approach is that the process of teaching nowadays should no longer depend solely on language, for there are other effective means of meaning-making. Instructors should push their boundaries to experiment as well as take advantage of the multiple, viable digital modes of content delivery when designing their on-line lessons and e-course activities in order to keep abreast with the rapid waves of change vis-à-vis the status quo and the future of digital learning.

Hence, the current study examines the multimodal digital practices of a number of Libyan higher education instructors who were involved in an experimental e-learning program proposed by the English Language Department at Tripoli University during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of their fully online classes, instructors displayed varying levels of digital literacy and some employed different modalities of teaching resources and communication venues when approaching their virtual lectures. Therefore, the paper mainly reports on the practices and the implications of multimodality in e-learning settings by highlighting students' takes on the e-learning experience as a whole and the impact of integrating diverse multimodal resources on their uptake.

A total of seven online classes were observed in terms of the amount of the various digital media and modalities of lesson design and communication activities applied. The Multimodal Design Elements framework proposed by the New London Group is used as a reference for data analysis. The study is based on a descriptive-qualitative approach. A brief questionnaire is tailored to illicit students' views on the e-learning program, including the challenges and the course materials used in the program. 41 students participated in the questionnaire.

The findings show that in unimodal classes, where instructors depended on one medium of delivery and interaction, students displayed scarce to no interaction and did not exhibit any kind of engagement nor commitment to the class. Conversely, in multimodal classes, where instructors used a minimum amount of creative and innovative communication and instructional media for interaction and delivery, students showcased a high level of engagement, commitment, and achieved remarkable learning outcomes.

The results show that students were highly excited about digital mediated learning, especially for audio-visual modes where teachers supported their lessons with videos. Additionally, students expressed that using diagrams and charts when demonstrating a lesson can help them memorize and retain information better, especially when it comes to content-based classes. Furthermore, the study reveals that when using the multimodal teaching approach, not only is content creation and lesson delivery facilitated, but also the level of student-teacher interaction is eased and highly activated. This study stresses that technology should no longer be used as a luxury or an auxiliary aid in the instructional process but rather an essential part and player in the teaching process, be it in a real or a virtual classroom setting.

Key words: multimodality, e-learning, technology, digital literacies, students' learning styles.

1. BACKGROUND :

In the late 2019, the whole world was witnessing unprecedented circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic; officials globally raced to find solutions to curb outbreak locations and the increasing morbidity rates by banning gatherings in all public places as well as imposing strict social distancing rules; by March 2020, most educational institutions worldwide had experienced unexpected closures and had urgently sought to come up with feasible alternatives to compensate for the sudden pause in education, especially during the periods of *complete* lockdown and quarantine, when COVID-related mortality rates reached alarming levels.

The sole applicable solution that was adopted by many schools and universities across the world was to deliver lectures and attend classes behind digital screens. The decision to create virtual campuses for both educators and students was not a novelty, as the culture of distance learning has always been globally prevalent and strongly present in most developed countries, even before the COVID-19 crisis. However, for a developing country like Libya, the issue was highly problematic and complicated as the culture of ICT (Information Communication Technology), especially in the higher education context, has always been absent.

In 2020, in response to the continually increasing dire situation of the pandemic, the English Language Department at Tripoli University, embarked on a distance learning program, via the Telegram platform; the goal was to ensure the continuity and regularity of the educational process. Moreover, the department's vision was to prevent having "*une année blanche*"¹ and to successfully run the academic year without any suspensions.

The e-learning program was extremely resilient. It offered opportunities for professors to deliver virtual lectures via the Telegram platform and to design online teaching materials in accordance with their own preferences. The materials had to be based on the department's assigned curricula; they had to satisfy the students' academic needs, meet their expectations, and most importantly, accomplish the learning objectives. The distance learning program was quite experimental and highly challenging for the department's faculty members as well as for the students alike since it was the first of its kind.

During the course of their online classes, some teachers displayed different codes and modes of resources and communication tools when approaching their lectures. It is worth mentioning that the e-learning experience is currently still

¹ [1] "**Une *année blanche***": a French expression that accounts for a year that is considered blank or lost due to strikes, pandemics, or any other reasons. The researcher could not find a better way to express the concept but to put it in French.

going on in some classes, however, in the form of a blended learning approach, as it has been readily approved by most of the students.

The reasons why not all classes are now held partially virtually are: first, some professors have very humble digital literacy backgrounds; therefore, their command of technology and ICT tools is very limited. This group of professors find it way easier for them to handle their classes in the traditional way, i.e., in an actual classroom setting; second, a good number of professors have blatantly expressed a clear rejection of the concept of online teaching, and hence they prefer to hold on to the old school face-to-face teaching fashion without any kind of IT reference or interference. In fact, it is important to note that a considerable number of teachers believe that online teaching doesn't have the same value as face-to-face instruction.

As for students, albeit being quite intimidated and confused prior to the actual online program, they consequently showed a great deal of acceptance and gradually developed a sense of commitment and connectedness to their fully remote classes. Most of them demonstrated a clear interest in the e-learning experience, especially in classes where teachers showed a considerable level of digital literacy knowledge and created innovative course materials enhanced with diverse *multimodal/multimedia* teaching and communication resources.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: MULTIMODALITY IN DIGITAL TEACHING-LEARNING CONTEXT

Recently, there has been a plethora of research in the area of online learning and teaching, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many virtual classroom-based studies have sought to explore and better understand how different digital instructional practices and methodologies can affect students' remote learning experiences. One of the key areas that has particularly gained attention is *multimodality* in the e-learning context.

Many scholars and researchers, Maiulo Jonathan (2022), Dressman (2019), Gibbon (2012), assert that course materials which make use of multimodal communication and instructional digital tools enhanced with grabby layouts, including *meaningful graphics, chromatics, images, podcasts, videos, and audio-visual* resources can, to a great extent, deepen students' learning experiences and stimulate their curiosity, especially when the digital modes are simultaneously combined in a coherent way.

The underlying assumption of the multimodal teaching approach is that modern teachers should always devise and update their digital teaching tools since they are dealing with a generation of learners who were born in a digital era where smart phones, video-games, social networks, and advanced computer-

based technologies have immensely affected almost all their avenues of life. The learning process should be a simulation of real-life interaction where people interact and make sense of the world around them by means of their various senses all at once. The senses that we use for everyday perception and interaction are: *sight (visual), hearing (auditory), smell, touch (tactile), movement (kinaesthetic)*. **The theory of multimodality can be rightly described as follows:**

“.. in its most fundamental sense, is the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context. More generally multimodality is an everyday reality. It is the experience of living; we experience everyday life in multimodal terms through sight, sound, movement. Even the simplest conversation entails language, intonation, gesture and so forth”

Therefore, the multimodal approach to teaching places value on the significance of applying digital-based resources into the teaching process as it has become vital and inescapable. Integrating technology-based tools into today’s everyday instruction is no longer a luxury or an option, but rather a necessity and a must. Recent empirical studies have come up with findings that vehemently support the core concepts of this approach. These studies have shown the tremendous positive effects of using digital multiliteracies on learners’ motivation, level of participation, and overall performance in class. In fact, designing online course materials with different engaging digital resources and media can be

precisely tailored to the expectations of today's learners. In this respect, Dressman (2019) asserts :

“In the digital age, multimodality has become even more central to communication, and this is especially true for language learners, who depend on the multiplicity of channels available on a screen to help them “pick up” meaning in a target language.”

It is worth mentioning that the term "multimodality" has always been associated with multimedia. In fact, both multimodality and multimedia are used interchangeably in linguistics-related literature. However, recently, some scholars have attempted to clarify the nuances between them. In this regard, Arola Sheppard and Ball (2014) make a fine distinction between the two terms "mode" and "medium":

“A mode is a means of communicating. A medium is the channel or system through which communications are conveyed. The plural form of medium is media. So, for example, if we want to communicate in the linguistic mode, we might choose the medium of print. If we want to communicate in the aural mode, we might choose the medium of a podcast. Both print and podcasts are forms of media.”

Central to the concept of multimodality in teaching is that learners are different types. Teachers should acknowledge the diversity of students' learning abilities and styles. Further, modern teachers should make genuine efforts to design online course materials that appeal to a diverse spectrum of learners. Kress (2003) argues that:

“We need to develop a theory that can take into account the multimodal nature of all human knowledge, one that encourages multimodal design and creation. Preferring one mode over another disserves some members of society and denies them agency”

The term "multimodality" first appeared in academia in the 1990s, specifically in the discipline of social semiotics by the New London Group (known as the NLG), who were a group of scholars, led by Gunther Kress. It consisted of ten academics and theoreticians of different nationalities and of different areas in the social sciences. These scholars were dedicated to researching and developing new (multi) literacy pedagogies that reflect today's social environment and technology .At the heart of this theory is the assumption that human communication is changing with the advancement of technology.

Modern man uses different modes for making meaning, i.e., language and speech are not the only media of communication and meaning production. Teaching and communication are becoming no longer print-based but mostly screen-based. Therefore, "linear and mostly text" ²materials should be avoided in modern day pedagogies.

The theory was later brought to the forefront in the field of ELT by Gunther Kress's seminal work Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (1996). Kress developed discerning views about applying the Multimodal social theory in the field of language teaching. His theories stress the significance of creating ELT

teachers who understand the importance of going beyond language when it comes to teaching. Teachers should "*digitize*" their courses by applying modes such as images, videos, and blogs, as well as animations and interactive games to maximize students' comprehension level and guarantee knowledge retention. He further illustrates with some examples from kids' storybooks and study materials where pictures and illustrations are excessively exploited for the sake of activating the different senses, conveying meaning, and maximizing comprehension. The argument is that even adults should be exposed to various modes and representations of meaning to better their understanding of the target material and hence achieve deep learning.

In a rapidly growing digital age, we have to acknowledge that many aspects of teaching and learning have completely changed. Relying on traditional media of instruction nowadays, such as materials in print or speech, no longer suffices nor stimulates students' learning curiosity and cognitive skills. Kress (2003) stresses that "Multimodality looks beyond language and examines these multiple modes of communication and meaning making." The Gordon Kelley Academic Success Center further maintains that using various modes can enrich the content of the lesson and help students activate their senses, increase concentration, and easily internalize new information.

“...the advantages gained through multiple learning strategies include the ability to learn more quickly and at a deeper level so that recall at a later date will be more successful. Using various modes of learning also improves attention span. Familiarizing yourself with various learning styles will only enhance your ability to study more effectively. For example, when comprehension of reading material has not been successful, a visual representation can often assist the student in comprehending the material. Or, if listening to a lecture has not allowed the student to gain complete understanding of a concept, viewing a presentation on the same topic or attending a group study session could result in a more positive learning experience [...] Multimodal Learning Strategies are a step in the right direction for most learners allowing the student to be more aware of learning preferences which may result in a stronger desire to learn new material. Combining learning modes can also result in a more balanced approach to studying and learning which leads to greater understanding, comprehension, and retention.”³

The principles of multimodal theory in teaching precisely align with those of the VARK’s model of learning styles. According to the VARK model (1970) advanced by Neil Fleming, learners are classified into four categories depending on their learning styles and preferences. Students can be *visual*, *aural*, *read/write*, or *kinesthetic*. Visual learners learn best by viewing images, illustrations, color-coded notes, videos, graphs, and charts, while aural learners depend on listening when learning and understanding the target content. Aural learners prefer listening to podcasts, teachers’ voice notes, audiobooks, and class recordings. On the other hand, read/write students learn best when reading and writing down information for memorization or creating presentations. Kinesthetic learners are practical in

³<https://uafs.edu/sites/academics.uafs.edu/files/Departments/Academic%20Success/THREE%20LEARNING%20STYLES%20EXPLAINED.pdf>

nature; they prefer applying and doing new concepts to achieve better understanding. Therefore, educators and teachers are required to satisfy a diversified body of students to meet their needs and expectations by designing versatile course materials to ensure the best learning outcomes. **Sankey, Birch, and Gardiner argue that (2010)** "students may feel more comfortable and perform better when learning in environments that cater for their predominant learning style".

In 2021, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States released the findings of a comprehensive research entitled "*Teacher Professional Development in the Arab States during the COVID-19 Pandemic*" to evaluate the distance learning experiences in the MENA region. The report focused on the collective challenges, techniques, obstacles, and e-learning environments used in these programs. Unfortunately, the research did not include Libya and a number of other Arab countries. In fact, it specifically surveyed Lebanon, Jordan, KSA, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco.

The report concluded that although many Arab countries succeeded in launching e-learning programs within the first weeks of the pandemic, the quality and efficacy of these programs remain questionable. The research reported that among the many reasons behind the failure of many e-learning programs in the

Middle Eastern region is that most e-learning materials produced during the times of Corona lacked creativity, i.e., eclectic and innovative digital practices regarding course design and structure. Furthermore, most programs were exclusively teacher-centered; in other words, students were mere information recipients and did not take part in the instructional process.

“The next very significant challenge was digital illiteracy [...] teachers were not comfortable designing digital content with ease. Especially at the beginning of the crisis, teachers did not master even the ability to create links and or using the new platforms. Teachers needed much training on student-centered pedagogies and on how (new) technologies can facilitate taking into account the different learner contexts and needs [...] Many teachers complained that they had not been made aware of the existing resources and facilities”.

Malak Zaalouk (2021)

In fact, the survey disclosed deeply entrenched problems concerning teachers’ development programs in the Arab world, especially when it comes to their digital literacy knowledge. It concluded that Arab teachers and educators were generally not well prepared to fill in the gap during the pandemic, regardless of the affluent funding offered by some of their governments.

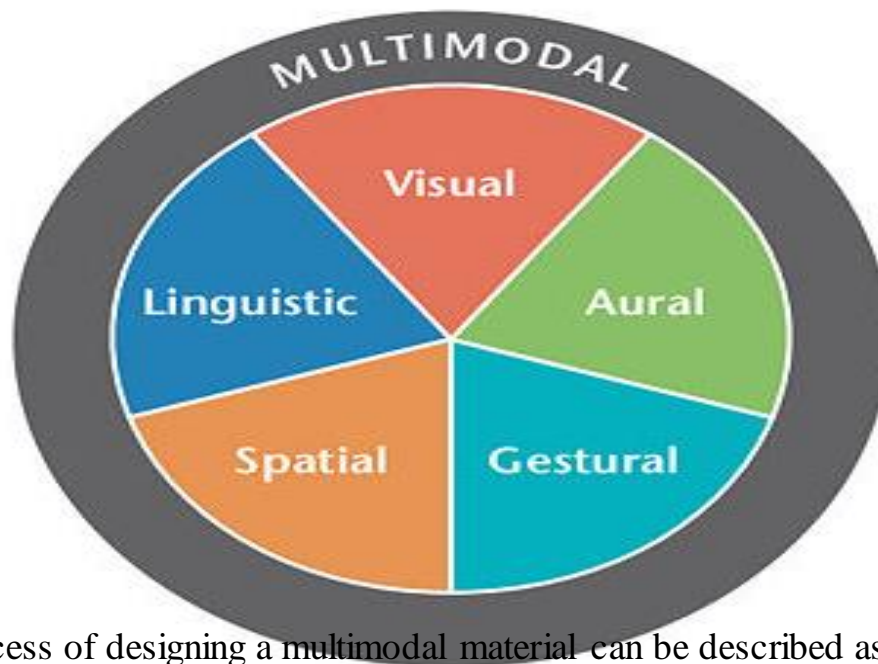
(Zaalouk, 2021:14)

2.1. MULTIMODAL RESOURCES:

Multimodal resources are various and are technically described as modes. *"Each mode does a specific thing: images show what takes too long to read, and writing names what would be difficult to show. Color is used to highlight specific aspects of the overall message.* Kress (2012) therefore, "modes are connected to any of the five senses." Alison Gibbon (2012)

The below chart (Figure 1) outlines the main multimodal resources that should be adopted when designing effective digital teaching materials; they consist of four main areas of design: **linguistic design, visual design, audio design, spatial design, and gestural design.** A typical multimodal course design should consist of at least two or more of these design areas that help students activate their senses and impact their cognitive skills for better knowledge retention. All these modes interlace together to produce deep, meaningful content that is embodied in different representations that ultimately match and suit different learners. (Shanahan, 2020).

Figure 1 the five elements of multimodal design



The process of designing a multimodal material can be described as follows:

“using multiplicities of media and modes [...] it involves teachers making design choices in the ways in which the curriculum content is expressed, arranged, and sequenced multimodally[...]To engage aptly with multimodal texts involves understanding the affordances of the different meaning-making resources and how they work together to produce a coherent and cohesive multimodal text”(Toh, Lim, Nguyen. 2022)

The chart was advanced by the New London Group and is used in this present study as a reference to explore and detect teachers’ applications of the multimodal resources that “permit the design of meanings”. Valencia (2016)

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the multimodal digital practices of a number of Libyan instructors who were involved in an e-learning program at the English Language Department, University of

Tripoli, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study stresses the importance of applying the multimodal teaching approach especially in online-oriented classes. Applying multimodal pedagogic strategies benefits a wide range of students whose learning styles and preferences are diverse. It highlights the significance of promoting the culture of digital literacy within the avenues of higher education. It further corroborates the necessity of establishing a sustainable teachers' digital literacy development program across the nation to harness and update Libyan teachers' digital skills. The concerned authorities should make urgent reforms and take serious steps towards integrating digital learning into the higher education sphere as it has become mandatory and inescapable in this rapidly growing digital age.

Revisiting the e-learning experience and contemplating the weaknesses and challenges that were encountered by both the educators and the students involved in this study can help find solutions for similar digital learning endeavors in the future. The study suggests the need for substantial, intensive IT courses for all Libyan teachers, especially for instructors in the higher education sector. These courses should be periodical and mandatory under the supervision of the ministry of higher education and research. Providing the necessary class digital equipment

is also a must as education, even in real classroom settings, has become highly digitized.

Introducing and applying technology-assisted applications as well as methodologies in online instruction will dramatically contribute to the quality of education. In addition, deploying diverse multimodal techniques in fully or blended online teaching will help teachers ameliorate their teaching practices and address all students regardless of their learning preferences. Thus, it will eventually have a positive impact on students' performance and learning outcomes.

3.1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This paper addresses the following questions:

1. What were the most predominantly multimodal resources used by some Libyan instructors at the English language department during the COVID-19 pandemic in their fully online instruction?
2. What were the most assistive multimodal communicative activities that stimulated students' interaction and class discussion?
3. What were students' views on the online learning experience in terms of course materials, teacher's availability, and class interaction?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research is based on the Multimodal Design Elements framework proposed by the New London Group to analyze teachers' multimodal practices.

This model clearly shows the main compartments of a multimodal design that covers the areas of meaning-making design, including linguistic design, aural design, spatial design, and visual design. The following chart, adapted from The London Group (1996), illustrates these design areas in detail.

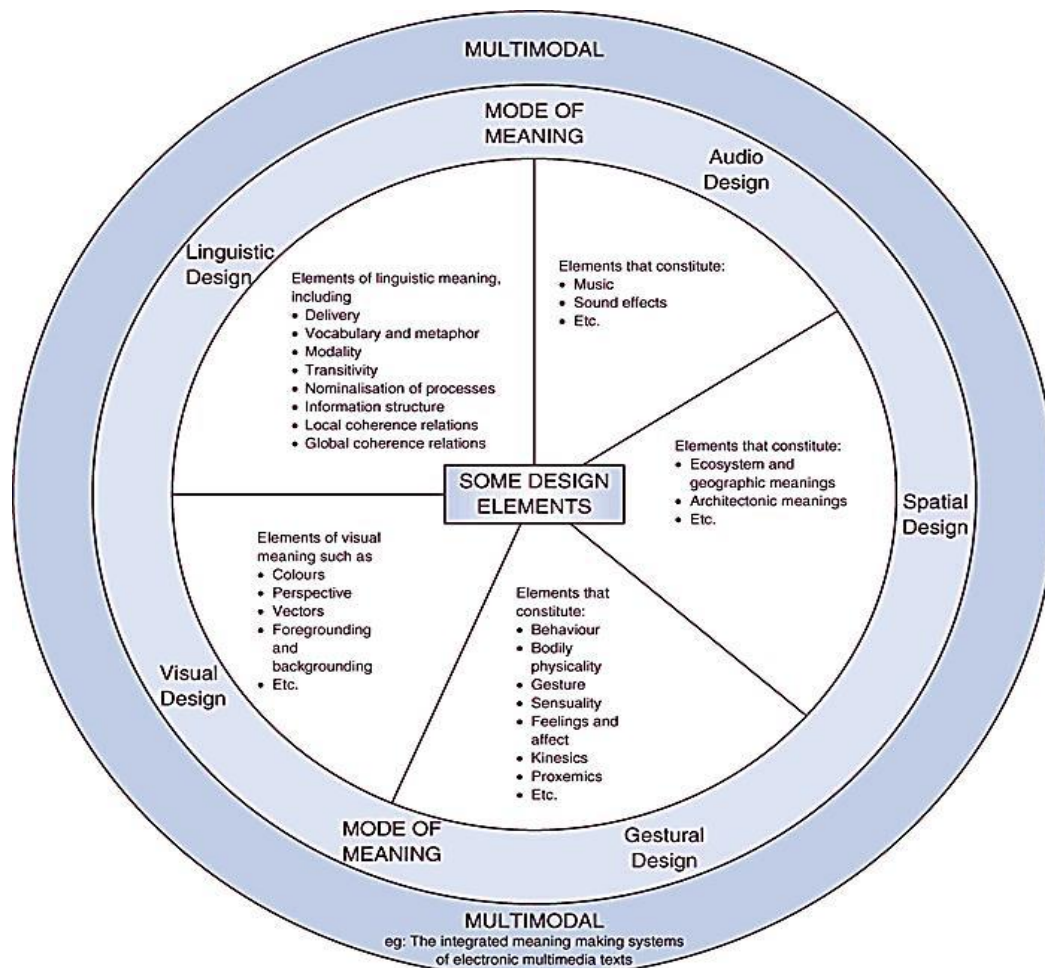


Figure 2 The New London Group Model for meaning making Design Elements

The study uses descriptive-qualitative approach to data analysis. A brief questionnaire, consisting of five questions, was sent out to students to review their

perspectives on their e-learning experience at the English language department, Tripoli University. The concise questionnaire was also intended to illicit students' views on some of the obstacles they encountered during their remote classes. A total of 41 students participated in this study. They were of 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th semesters. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old. An interesting note is that most of there were part-time employees in both the education and business sectors.

Seven virtual classes were closely observed across two semesters. Two classes were structure-based in nature, while the rest were pure content-based. Seven instructors were involved in this study; they were all female MA holders. Their ages ranged from 30 to 45 years old. They all had a high-profile teaching history and had been working in this domain for years. The researcher joined their classes via a hyperlink posted for students on the department's page on Facebook. The purpose was to investigate the various online teaching methodologies used by these instructors in terms of course design, including the multimodalities integrated for instruction and interaction. The researcher did not inform the instructors about the purpose of joining their academic channels to ensure they run their virtual lessons in the usual way of teaching. They were all cooperative, and some expressed their utter consent to join their course channels.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The following part reports briefly on the multimodal elements of design used in the observed online classes as well as the types of assessments and interactive activities deployed. *Therefore, upon the systematic observation of the eight virtual classes delivered by some Libyan professors at the English language department/Tripoli University, via the Telegram social platform, during the COVID-19 quarantine, the following results have been found:*

4.1. TEACHING MODALITIES AND MULTIMODALITIES:

A good number of teachers adapted diverse multimodal elements of design when delivering their virtual classes across the two semesters; however, not all these elements were incorporated all at once into a single "text". Still, these classes, which used at least two or three multimodal elements, could rightly be described as multimodal as Hasbrock contends that “*Multimodal instruction involves having the learner engage simultaneously or in close sequence with the material using two or more of their sensory “modalities”.*”⁴

Clearly, there have been evident efforts on the part of most teachers to use and merge different modes of meaning-making and to make the learning process

⁴ <https://medium.com/inspired-ideas-prek-12/understanding-multimodal-instruction>

possible and realizable for students. Generally, the most predominantly adapted modes ranged from **linguistic design**, **audio-visual design** to **aural design**.

Some professors were committed to sending in-print materials in Word or PDF forms; they would follow up these text materials with audio recordings that provided in-depth explanations of the lessons being covered. Some of these classes did not really depend on any visuals, i.e., images, illustrations, or diagrams. Even the sent documents were in the form of simple blocks of text that resembled the pages of ordinary books. There were no highlighted notes or side annotations of any kind. This method of instruction resembled the typical traditional classroom in which students place their sheets in front of them and instructors lecture in a one-way manner. The instructors relied solely on the linguistic design in this approach.

In structure-based classes, the instructors relied largely on sending text materials related to the course in PDF files. In addition, they further enhanced the lesson with similar audio-visual content from **YouTube**. The teacher would embed one or two videos from YouTube; they recommended the students to watch them to achieve full comprehension. Many students found this method very helpful and informative in terms of helping them grasp the lesson well. However, a handful of students complained that some of the YouTube videos were not exactly the same

as the proposed lesson in the curriculum in terms of the content. For example, some videos lacked depth and precision, or some had off-lesson parts.

Another effective method that was adapted in content-based classes when several teachers used the **Vrecorder** app. With this method, it was possible for teachers to create a multimodal course material that combined **linguistic, audio-visual, and spatial designs**. The teacher would video record the reading material on their screen and at the same time explain the lesson. This application offers teachers assistive tools for demonstrating their classes, such as making annotations, zooming in on key concepts, or highlighting important lines and paragraphs. Students found this method completely helpful and practical. They were able to save the video and watch it at their convenience.

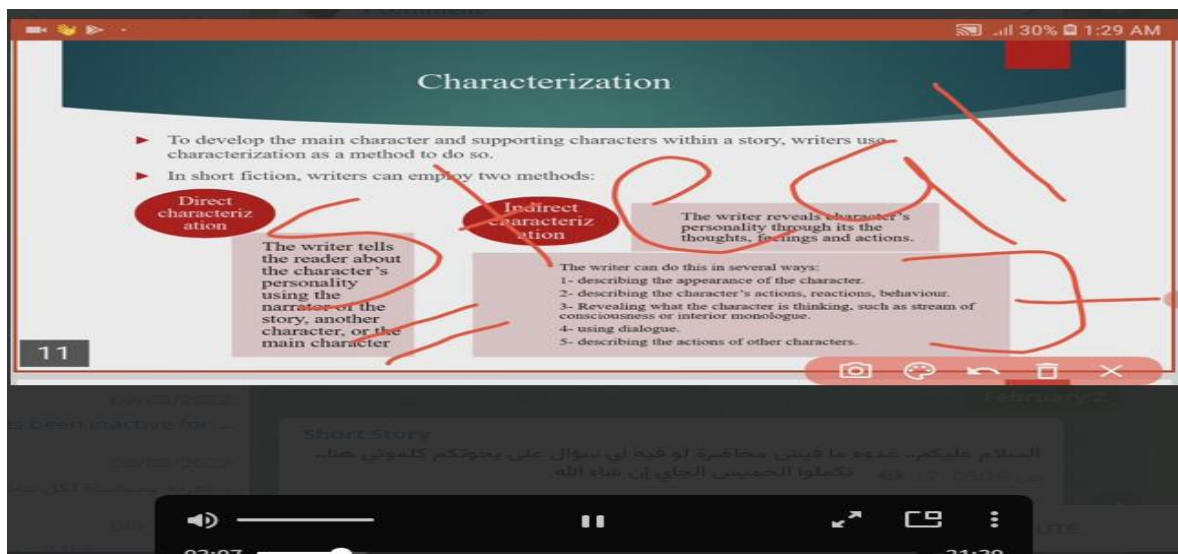


Figure 3Vrecorder app affords a range of tools for multimodal instruction

In some cases, there were some instructors who simply uploaded documents to read. Students, on their behalf, had to download these text materials for study. In this method, students had to develop self-study skills and promote their learning autonomy. Every time the teacher sent a document, she would ask the students to review the material, and, in case of any difficulties, the students were welcome to go back to the instructor for any necessary clarification. Many of the students who were involved in this course expressed their frustration with the serious difficulties they had to encounter, especially that some of the lessons required demonstration and profuse explanation. A good number of students have reported that they felt completely discouraged from communicating with the teacher. They claimed that they were too shy to ask their teachers for more clarification. To mitigate this dilemma, some of them created channels for peer-study to ease the process of understanding. In this regard Maiullo (2022) stresses that: *“paying attention to modes of communication in online classes also helps approximate face-to-face activities that engage students with comprehensible input and result in authentic communication.”*

As for the few multimodal classes, it was noted that one of the teachers who adapted this approach depended mostly on both **linguistic** and **audio-visual design**. The teacher created PowerPoint video presentations, which were all

uploaded on a **YouTube** channel so that students could find them as a reference. These PowerPoint video lectures were recorded and enhanced with clear layouts and a meaningful use of chromatics. The lessons' key concepts were underlined or highlighted in red for foregrounding purposes; there was also an ample use of charts and diagrams with labels and captions. Charts and tables were used to simplify the lesson and sum up long articles.

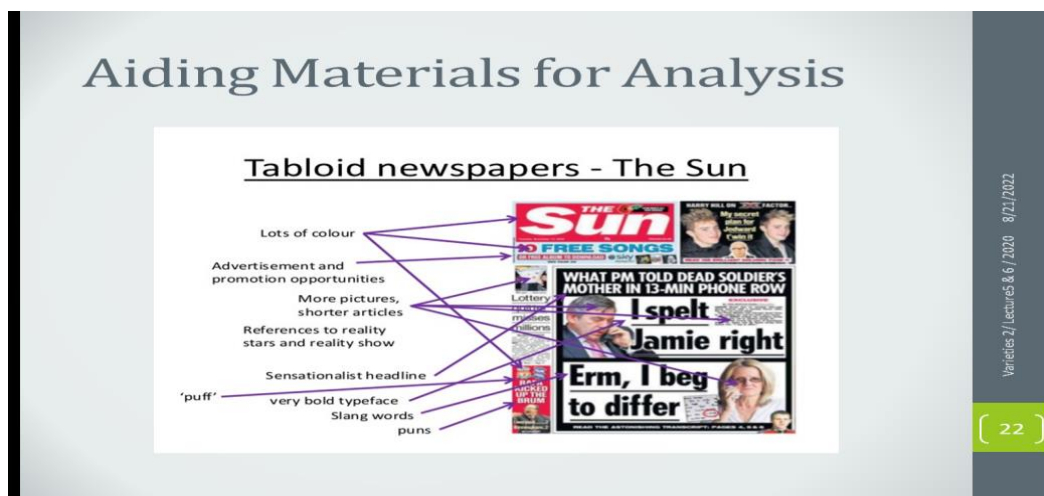


Figure 4 Using illustrations and labels in Multimodal digital classes

Infographs with labels were also used for demonstration. Important concepts were summed up and enlisted in numerated points. This facilitates the process for the students to memorize and internalize the new information easily, especially since the teacher usually read these summary points in a high tone with a slow pace. Moreover, the lessons ended with a weekly assignment. In these assignments,

students apply the new concepts and theories in practice. The assignments were graded as part of the class assessment policy.

Some professors depended solely on **aural design** by sending students lecture recordings followed up by a cluster of questions about the lesson as homework. Based on some side conversations between the researcher and the students, many complained about finding lengthy audio clips extremely tedious, especially when the teacher spoke feebly and seemed to be just reading out from the text.

There was also another case when the teacher relied on a unimodal approach based on **linguistic design**. The teacher sent multiple readings to the students. The lessons were annotated with highlighting and underlining. However, they were all explained "textually" by means of typing lengthy paragraphs, mostly in Arabic. There was no single "voice" recording by the teacher, so the students did not hear the instructor's voice whatsoever. As observed, there was not much interaction in the discussion channels. Still, students were committed to submitting their assignments on time because they were marked; the teacher, on the other hand, was committed to sending feedback to all students. Students involved in this class expressed that online courses without visuals or audio were completely empty and boring. On many occasions, students needed to develop an affective relationship

with their distant classes and teachers. However, not sending audio recordings or responding in type drove many learners to lose interest and zest fast.

A further notable observation was that students generally did not seem encouraged to join in live sessions. Among the many professors who participated in this distant learning program, only one attempted to run live classes via **Zoom**. However, every time the instructor scheduled a live session, no student showed up. Students claimed that it was challenging to secure good connection coverage to attend the sessions smoothly without any disruptions or internet breakdowns; while others thought that having recorded lessons was more beneficial and practical, especially during lockdowns when most students were home and it was challenging to find a quiet zone when all family members were around. Conversely, there were very few cases where teachers ran audio live streams on Telegram. It is true that many students did not join in, but at least there were a few others who did enjoy having interactive synchronous classes with their teachers.

A further common feature that was found in all the observed virtual classes was that they did not entail **gestural nor spatial designs**. Students did not experience watching their professors give classes as they were all not webcammed.

4.2. MULTIMODAL TYPES OF CLASS ACTIVITIES AND PARTICIPATION LEVEL:

As far as assessment strategies are concerned, some teachers used various modes for assessing students. Besides written assignments, there were some teachers who did weekly oral quizzes. The weekly oral quizzes were mandatory and required students to record their answers in voice notes. This created a more dynamic, socially-driven class as students were able to listen to each other's answers, and sometimes this led to further discussions. It was noted that in multimodal communicative classes, students in the beginning reacted/replied textually to their teachers; however, they eventually grew more encouraged to, voluntarily, react verbally to the posts, announcements, and feedback. This was an obvious sign that they had started to feel at ease and that their virtual environment

was beginning to be familiar and comfortable.

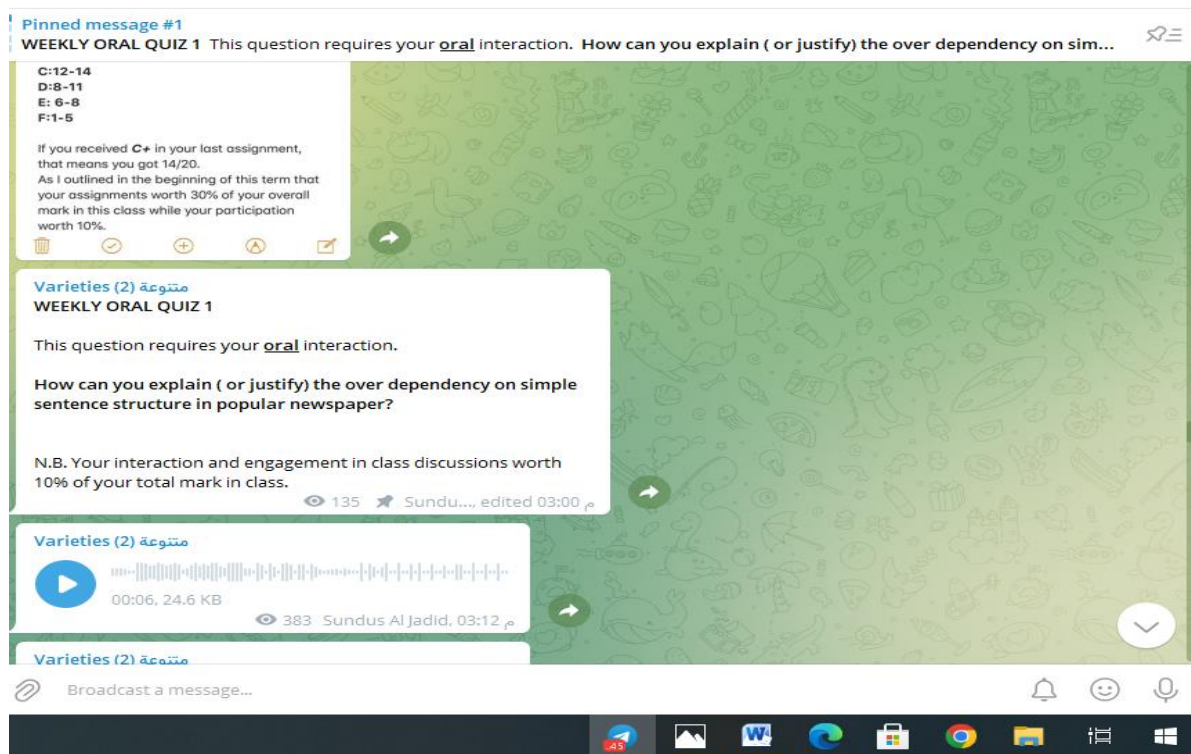


Figure 5 Interactive oral quiz activities in DL classes

A shared feature among all unimodal classes was that students' participation was remarkably low. Participation was also below the average in some multimodal classes where teachers did not create any interactive communication activities or where the teachers scarcely communicated orally, i.e., in voice recordings with the students. Many of these discussion channels remained blank because students were always hesitant to initiate or lead discussions. In fact, all teaching approaches concur on the principle that a classroom cannot be successful if it only imparts knowledge without requiring students' participation and involvement. It is

important worth mentioning that the prime purpose of founding Telegram discussion channels was to create communication threads and an inclusive, interactive two-way sphere for teachers and students to discuss course-related questions and untangle possible obscurities. In many classes, it was clear that the teacher made an effort to create a quality course with lively discussions and activities; unfortunately, only a few came up with innovative interactive activities to entice students' class engagement. It was found that most teachers, who complained about their students being passive and inactive, did not apply enough interactive class activities and scarcely communicated orally with their students.

Another useful activity that was largely deployed in multimodal classes was the multiple choice questions (MCQ) in the discussion channel to check students' levels and maintain their progress. In classes that adapted this activity, students participated actively in these polls because they were devised as games. Therefore, students were exceedingly motivated to take part in these activities, which catalyzed their class participation. These activities enabled the teacher to gauge the students' level and locate the areas that required extra reinforcement. In his article "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy" (2003), Gee argues that "*Motivation for humans lies in challenges that feel challenging but doable and in gaining continual feedback that lets them know what progress they are making.*"

In many online classes that required assignments, students were discouraged when a few instructors did not send their feedback. Feedback provision is of paramount importance for students, especially in an e-learning context, to track their progress and, most importantly, to foster their self-confidence. Students were also disrupted as there was overlapping in submission deadlines across the various classes. A few instructors were tolerant in terms of extending submission dates, while others showed a strict attitude toward deadlines.

13 subscribers

Pinned message
My Dear Students, I won't be able to show up tomorrow Saturday 16th/ July in college. However, I certainly, if God wills, will I

القراءات و تحليل النصوص
A text can only be qualified for analysis when it is both coherent and cohesive.
Anonymous Quiz

70% True

30% False

10 answers

👍 1

👁️ 45 12:05 م

Leave a comment

القراءات و تحليل النصوص
In DA (Discourse Analysis) we aim at coming up with deep and complex interpretations of texts and conversations by considering their contextual background.
Anonymous Quiz

90% True

10% False

10 answers

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Figure 6 Interactive MCQ activities in DL classes

To even further make a communicative socially oriented class, there was an interesting class activity where the instructor asked her students to work in groups for a class assignment; not all the assignments required group work but the instructor did this group activity for once or twice. However, students were immensely excited to work collaboratively with their classmates. The teachers split students into groups and were instructed to create a discussion channel for each of these groups. The teacher joined these groups to monitor their' progress and to check on the efforts of every students.

Another important point to acknowledge is the significance of choosing the **Telegram** platform as a virtual learning management system (LMS) for this online program. In fact, Telegram has been proven to be effective and applicable for carrying online classes with boundless ease and flexibility. Moreover, unlike other learning environments that students might find a bit complicated and quite unfamiliar, the Telegram application is a social platform in the first place and is mostly used by a wide range of youths for communication purposes.

4.3. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE E-LEARNING EXPERIENCE:

A brief questionnaire was designed to measure students' satisfaction with regard to the distant learning (DL) program run by the English language department at Tripoli University. This questionnaire was designed by one of the participating instructors who sought to find out students' opinions vis-à-vis their virtual classes, which were based on the multimodal approach. The teacher taught five classes for two semesters. They used a multimodal approach that entailed elements including linguistic, aural, and audio-visual designs. The questionnaire comprised twelve questions. For the purpose of this study, only five questions were selected and sent out to the participating students in Arabic to give them a room to express themselves at ease. The questionnaire focused on specific criteria related to the course design, top challenges, and teachers' availability.

The questionnaire Given to English Language Department Students to assess their DL experience

1. How do you describe your distant learning experience?

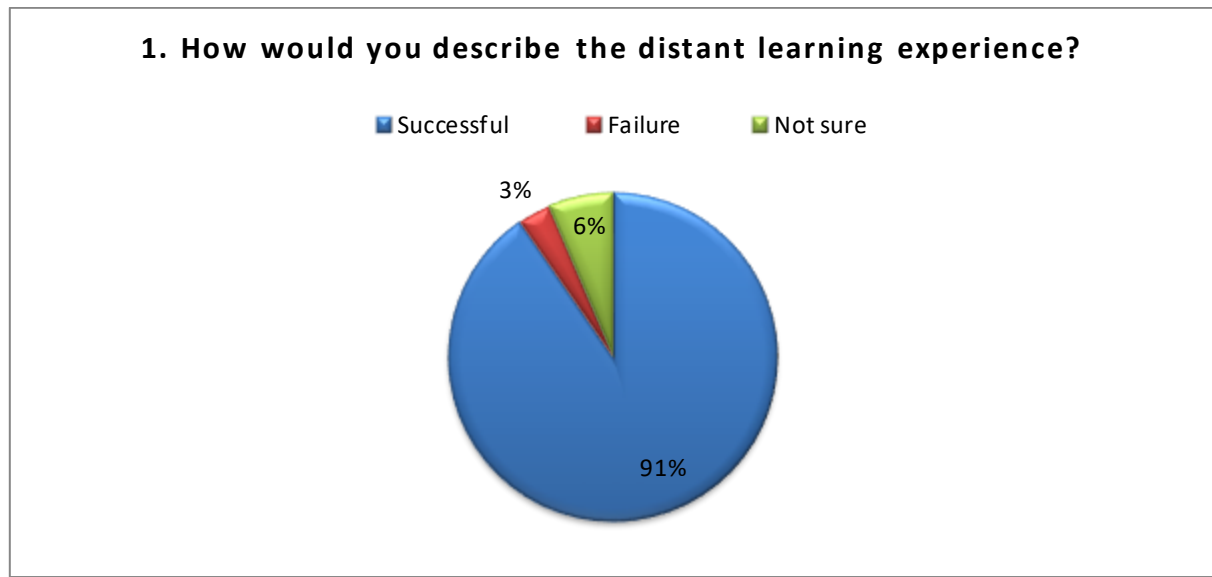
2. Given to the online course materials you had, was it to challenging to understand the lessons?

3. Would you like to carry the online experience even after the end of the pandemic?

4. Have you encountered any difficulties communicating with your teacher?

5. Write about a specific challenge you had while studying on line?

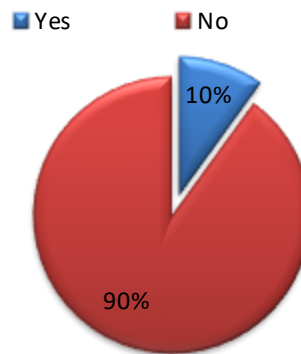
As for the first question, most of students agreed that the e-learning experience was successful and perfectly went beyond their expectations; however, a couple of students believed that the e-learning program fell prey to many pitfalls, including weak internet coverage, high cost of internet credits, and also the excessive number of assignments and research papers that they had to submit. Prior to their distant learning experience, students were not accustomed to writing lengthy research papers on a weekly basis; only a few classes required them to work on term papers. The disheartening feeling that overwhelmed most students was also another downside as reported by one of the students “being far from campus and friends was an unbearable challenge in itself”. On the other hand, it is important to note that many students have expressed that the online experience harnessed and honed their research and writing skills. This is especially true since many assignments required group work, so students found a valuable opportunity to work closely with each other and exchange knowledge.



The second question sought to find out students' level of comprehension of the content delivered virtually during the pandemic. As shown in the pie chart, most of them thought most of the lessons were clear thanks to the clarity and the organization of the layout. Students confirmed that PowerPoint video recorded presentations were the best teaching modality, especially when the content was empowered with diagrams and visuals. In fact, “combining images with text or recording is a great way to make materials accessible for students of varied proficiency levels” as Maiullo (2022) puts it. Students were appreciative of teachers who spoke clearly when recording their aural or audio-visual materials. Several students maintained that YouTube educational videos were extremely helpful especially when they are discussed with the instructors. Moreover, many students emphasized that diagrams and mind mapping should be incorporated in all

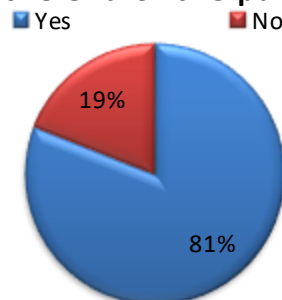
online lessons because these tools deepen their understanding and accelerated their memorization of key concepts. They all agreed that lessons that were devoid of any visuals, audios or videos were tedious, empty and monotonous.

2. Given to the online classes you had , was it hard to understand the lessons?

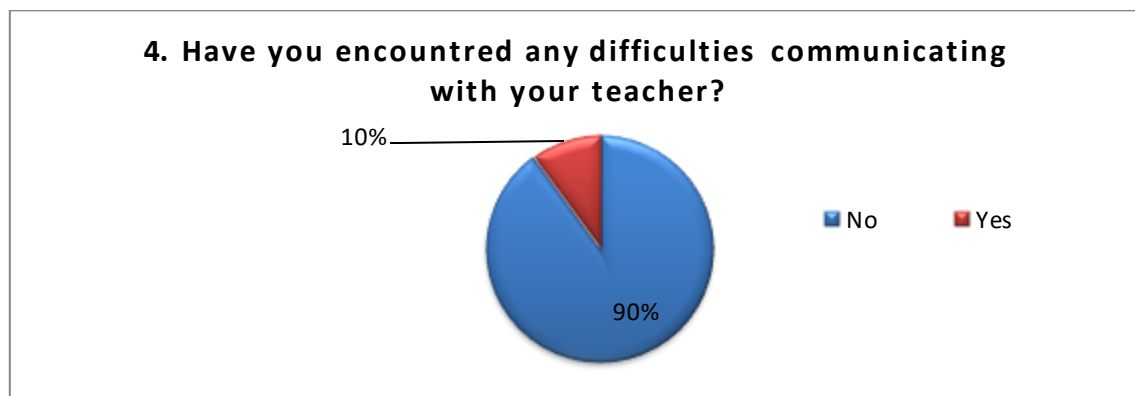


PowerPoint software affords teachers with ample tools that make their lessons attractive and engaging. They can select appropriate templates based on the nature of the course; additionally, videos and websites can be embedded in these presentations for additional reinforcement.

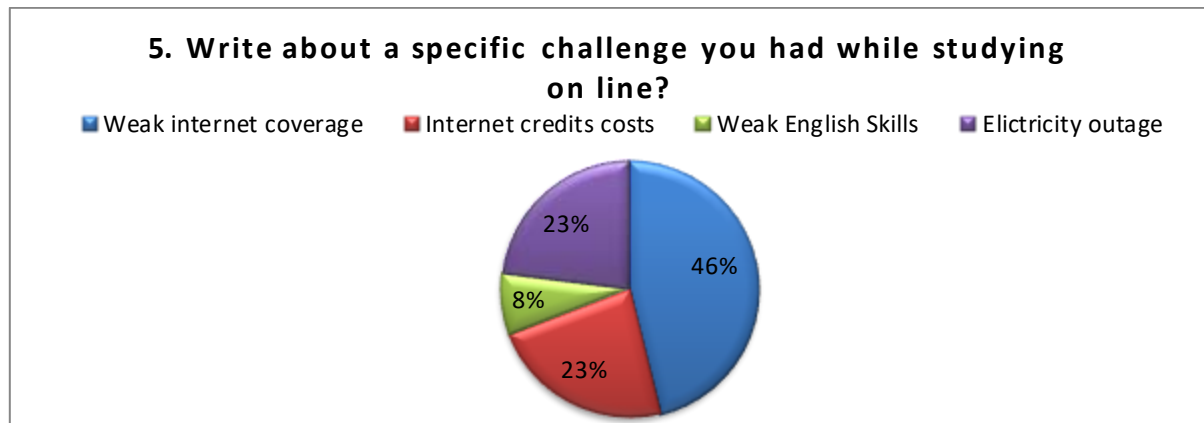
3. Would you like to carry on the online experience even after the end of the pandemic?



A large number of students stated that they would like to continue taking classes online in a form of blended learning even after the pandemic has ended. Many expressed that teachers' digital materials helped them understand the lesson and achieve a full grasp of key concepts. Moreover, using interactive communication venues assisted students in approaching their teachers and spelling out their concerns without any insecurities or hesitation. Students are now, more than ever before, think more positively about distance learning than before the COVID-19 crisis.



As for teachers' availability, not all teachers involved in this program were cooperative in this regard, but as it has been observed, most teachers in this study were indeed available and approachable 24/7. Students were comfortable sending queries directly to their teachers, although there were some complaints about teachers' not responding sooner.



The last question revealed the most typical challenges students had during online instruction. Most of these challenges were external however a small number of students voiced worries about having self-confidence concerns as well as difficulties to respond in English during oral quizzes. These students reported about+ their inability to understand the content especially when it was utterly explained in English without any L1 reference.

5. CONCLSION:

This research was an attempt to shed light on the English language department's virtual teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. It specifically aimed at examining teachers' multimodal pedagogic practices in the online instruction. Although the acute pandemic crisis hit all educational

institutions by surprise, a good number of instructors showed a great sense of alertness and unwavering seriousness. The research also aimed at disclosing students' perceptions regarding online learning and the most common challenges that they encountered in their virtual classes.

The results of this study further confirm, along with a host of previous studies, that the multimodal approach can be considered the optimum model to adapt, especially in the online instruction context. The multimodal approach appeals to students of various learning styles, and most students in this study agreed that courses with multimodal design were characterized by clarity, organization, and effectiveness in delivering the target content. To encourage student participation, some teachers in this research used multimodal communication practices. Based on the findings, students were immensely encouraged to participate when the instructor gave ample opportunities that required them to respond vocally and in different forms, such as collaborative group projects, polls and games.

The distance learning program yielded promising results for further future development; obviously, students' learning outcomes were considerably satisfactory and most educational objectives were successfully met, especially in the multimodal classes.

The distance learning program revealed Libyan teachers' aptitude to acquire and apply digital teaching-related skills and methodologies in their day-to-day instruction. Their high potential was revealed by their serious attitude and creative digital teaching responses during the COVID-19 crisis.

The COVID-19 experience was a lesson, and a blessing in disguise, especially as far as the Libyan educational context is concerned. It surfaced the *problematique* related to ICT integration and digital literacy knowledge in higher education. The study highlights the significance of providing ongoing teacher training programs in ICT across the nation as the whole world is transitioning to a fully digital phase, in all avenues of life. These programs will help Libyan educators and academics to be in step with their peers and international counterparts around the globe. Even today, many teachers continue to use the digital course materials they used during the crisis in their actual classrooms. Without a doubt, the online learning programs that were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic opened up new avenues for creativity, allowing Libyan teachers and all teachers worldwide to push their boundaries and experiment with a variety of digital teaching methods in order to provide a high-quality education for all.

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