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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Online and Face-to-Face English as a Foreign Language Proficiency in Morocco: The Case of the Moroccan Baccalaureate Students during the Covid

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**ABSTRACT**

Due to the outbreak and alarming spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a recognized need for alternative ICT-based methods like online or blended methods of teaching school topics, English as a Foreign Language in particular. It seems that the sudden transition to emergency remote teaching has presented a number of challenges and constraints for EFL practitioners, as well as opportunities throughout all the cycles of the Moroccan education system. In Morocco, EFL learning specifically has become of vital importance in the last decade. Research on the status of English, proficiency and input from an online or blended learning perspective, nonetheless, is scarce and focuses mainly on face-to-face learning and hardly on the impacts of online or blended learning on language proficiency in EFL settings. However, the effectiveness of learning EFL in the Moroccan context, mainly fully online English as a foreign language learning in the Moroccan secondary education system, has yet to be uncovered. The principal objective of this paper was to investigate whether learning EFL fully online can be as effective as learning it fully face-to-face. A quantitative methodological approach was adopted. Independent samples t-tests were carried out to compare online and face-to-face learners' performances at Moroccan secondary schools in a baccalaureate-level EFL course in the Regional Academies of *Casablanca-Settat* and *Beni-Mellal-Khenifra*, Morocco. The key variables 'age', 'gender', 'learning outcomes', 'the residential environment', 'access to Internet', 'Net connection availability' and 'digital device used' are controlled. The main findings, wherein the t-value of the seven subtests represented a mean difference of 31,380 in the fully face-to-face group and -17,582 in the fully online group, indicated that online EFL learning in baccalaureate education cannot be at least as effective as face-to-face EFL learning. This study should, therefore, be of value to language course providers who wish to implement flexible EFL learning and to, broadly speaking, course designers, practitioners, and computer-assisted language learning researchers.

**KEYWORDS**

Online & face-to-face groups; English language proficiency; language components; language skills.

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### 1. Introduction

The current research orientation is not an attempt to verify theories about the status of language teaching and learning from an online perspective. Instead, it is a pioneering attempt to explore how online and face-to-face modes of teaching and learning have operated within the educational system in Morocco during the Covid-19 pandemic, and their possible impacts on the students' English language learning performances at the end of secondary education level. It would have been crucially interesting to verify such effects for all the subjects and contents taught on the school curriculum but, given the focus of the study, only the online and face-to-face instructional modes' impacts on the EFL language proficiency of the baccalaureate Moroccan students are studied.

It should be signaled at this level that the present study reflects a research interest in the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic that has dramatically changed, among other landscapes, the educational setting in Morocco as well as in the rest of the world. In fact,

it is part of a large-scale ongoing research put forward with the aim of evaluating the innovative practices in the educational system in Morocco in general and in secondary education in particular. Undoubtedly, the new international crisis of Covid-19 that has very recently hit Morocco as well as the rest of the world has called for the urgent use of miscellaneous Information Communication Technology (ICT)-based pedagogical methods, notably the new modes of instruction, i.e. online and blended teaching and learning methods. In the foreseeable future, such a move would without any doubt have staggering implications for curriculum design based on competencies, implementation of active learning methodologies, models for formative evaluation, and new forms of tutoring adapted to the realities of the country.

### **1.1 Development of online language teaching in Morocco**

With respect to the teaching of foreign languages in Morocco, there has been some development of innovative ways of learning and teaching French as an L2 and English as an EFL, including the less commonly taught languages like the Tamazight. In the pre-pandemic period, face-to-face instruction mode was the rule. Modes like blended, online, and distance learning were gradually integrated into educational systems in general ways to enlarge the scope of EFL language exposure. In order to boost the effects of the educational system in the last decade, the Moroccan educational authorities have started to look for the implementation of active learning ICT-based methodologies, which could be crucial to the future development of the educational system of the country. Still, since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, Morocco has strived to apply innovative technological developments to online learning as a short-term alternative to face-to-face interactions.

The government encouraged teachers and lecturers to create their own multimedia instructional resources in order to bring the courses offered by schools and universities into the digital era. With the sudden outbreak and rapid spread of the pandemic, there has been a strong need for online classes through the intensive use of online and blended modes of instruction instead of fully face-to-face teaching and learning. Assessing online and face-to-face EFL language learners' learning during the pandemic is motivated mainly by a keen interest in investigating Moroccan student gains in language proficiency as a means of assessing particular English language knowledge and skills and providing feedback to the Moroccan bacculaureate learners on their progress in particular. The current study focuses on the first motivation, i.e. the impacts of blended learning on English language proficiency (ELP), to find out whether online English language learning can provide an effective alternative to face-to-face language learning for those students who are in need of a different learning format owing to the pandemic.

### **1.2 Online learning in Covid times**

At an international level and as the Covid-19 pandemic swiftly spread out, educational institutions (i.e., universities, schools, institutes...etc) in Europe and the United States have suddenly decided to close their buildings and campuses with the aim of containing the spread of the virus. Many of these educational institutions adopted emergency remote teaching through learning management systems like Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas or video-conferencing software like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Collaborate Ultra. The unexpected and forced shift to emergency remote teaching has generally been challenging for school demography all over the world, especially for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), English as a second language (ESL), Business English (BE), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Morocco is obviously no exception to the pandemic spread. Despite the increased interest in blended learning and teaching and the growing number of initiatives to set up blended language courses, there is still a dearth of knowledge on fully online language courses, especially studies comparing the proficiency levels of fully online and fully face-to-face EFL courses.

### **1.3 Transition from secondary to higher education**

In Morocco, learners of English rely on EFL or EAP courses to transition from secondary education to higher education and generally succeed in their academic studies. With respect to higher education institutions, especially English-medium universities (i.e., *Al-Akawayn, Ben Guerir*) or Departments of English Studies that use English as the main medium of instruction (EMI) in Moroccan state universities as well, students often follow classes in English to develop their language proficiency in EFL or EAP. In lower education cycles, Moroccan bacculaureate students are most often involved in advancing their language development in ways that expand their knowledge of such basic skills as grammar and their academic lexical range and build their proficiency in academic writing conventions. Through these classes, bacculaureate students can be prepared to successfully enter higher education institutions and even in EMI environments.

### **1.4 English online instruction in secondary schools**

In Moroccan secondary schools, educational authorities have opted through regional academies for education and training for both online and blended modes of teaching EFL and other school topics. Still, the current situation is unique. The courses of EFL delivered remotely online during the pandemic were not purposefully designed to be delivered entirely online and, thus, did not focus on quality course design, teaching, and learning. Instead, the EFL courses were solely intended to maintain the academic calendar amid the crisis in a country wherein face-to-face teaching has always been the rule. In a similar vein, the educational

authorities claim that the newly established teaching modes play an instrumental role in the implementation of EFL teaching by delivering the necessary English provision as baccalaureate EFL learners switch from secondary to higher education and by providing non-systematically digitized foreign language instruction. English language development is the primary role of English courses in secondary schools, especially for baccalaureate students. Proficiency in English remains an expected outcome as well as a necessary end for academic success. In secondary schools, the baccalaureate level classes of EFL in particular target specific needs of learners in a way that other classes and streams do not, cultivating grammar of English, critical thinking, extensive reading, public speaking, and communicative competence.

### **1.5 English online instruction in higher education**

English language practitioners' efforts to shift to emergency remote teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Moroccan higher education context have been noticed while preparing their students for further graduate studies. The post-pandemic move to online facilitation has only hastened the digital transformation of the Moroccan higher education system. The integration of online and blended teaching and learning modes has become the new normality. Like in a considerable segment of countries worldwide, Morocco has established online and blended learning platforms to facilitate language learning, provide an authentic and engaging learning experience, and support pedagogical innovation. Moreover, technology-mediated instruction can help ESP, EAP, and BE practitioners to deliver interactive, flexible and individualized online educational experiences while fostering student autonomy.

### **1.6 Paucity of research on online-based EFL instruction impacts**

To evaluate the efficiency of ICT-based modes of instruction during the pandemic, several studies have been conducted as shown by the relevant burgeoning literature piloted in face-to-face, online, or blended teaching and learning environments concerning several school topics, EFL in particular. While some comparative studies have been carried out in Europe and the United States to determine learning results in face-to-face, online, or blended learning ESL and EFL language learning settings, there is still a notable paucity of well-controlled studies in the field of EFL learning, specifically comparing proficiency levels in fully online and fully face-to-face taught courses. Studies of this kind have not also been carried out yet in the Moroccan context. The effects of such modes of EFL teaching and learning on students' proficiency are not yet known. In Morocco, only very few and often fragmented and non-experimental studies have been conducted involving the case of online EFL teaching during the pandemic in secondary schools. Against this vantage point, it must be signaled at this level that EFL proficiency in Morocco under the pandemic circumstances has been - and is still, a terra incognita and an uncharted area of research.

The aim of the current research study can be said to be twofold. First, it aims to monitor if there are any differences in impacts on the language proficiency of Moroccan baccalaureate EFL students with respect to the face-to-face taught group and remotely taught group. Second, it seeks to demarcate the differences in language learning between the two groups in terms of aspects of the English language taught at the end of secondary school level. While relegating the issue of the blended mode of instruction to a later stage of research, online and face-to-face teaching of EFL in the Moroccan educational setting is dealt with from a comparative perspective to profile a preliminary view of the impacts of both teaching modes on the EFL language proficiency of baccalaureate students.

## **2. Literature Review**

Early formats of distance education date back to 1840, when Isaac Pitman used mail and a shorthand technique in order to teach and collaborate with students; and it is taught that the term e-learning began to be used in the educational field in the mid-1990s (Lee et al., 2009). Aparicio et al. (2016) specified 23 various concepts that belong to the use of computers in learning activities from 1960 to 2014, used especially for learning purposes. A more complex and inclusive definition states that distance learning can be considered a particular form of teaching and learning that integrates e-learning resources and mediums whose role is to make education and training more qualitative (Sangrà et al., 2011). E-Learning systems are an embryonic conception, entrenched in the concept of Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI). The concept of CAI first appeared in 1955 as a means of teaching problem-solving (Zinn, 2000).

The temptation to compare online learning to face-to-face in-person instruction under the pandemic circumstances will yield valuable data (Zimmerman, 2020). As a matter of fact, numerous comparative studies, among others, have been formerly carried out to explore whether traditional face-to-face teaching methods are more productive or whether online or hybrid learning is better (Dhawan, 2020; Lockman & Schirmer, 2020). Results of the studies show that students perform much better in online learning than in traditional learning. In the same vein, several research studies have been carried out on online learning to explore student satisfaction, acceptance of e-learning, distance learning success factors, and learning efficiency (Yen et al., 2018) or to highlight factors affecting students' satisfaction and performance in online classes during the pandemic (Rajabalee & Santally, 2021). However, a scant amount of literature is available on the impacts that in-person, online, or hybrid teaching models have on the learners' English language proficiency.

Covid-19 has provided practitioners, teachers, and students both locally and globally the opportunity to use digitalized tools extensively in teaching and learning. Due to the pandemic, all the schools, institutions, colleges, and universities were shifted to online instructional mode by their respective governments. Covid-19 and the medical emergency state adopted in Morocco from the middle of March to the middle of July 2020 have obliged students and teachers to remotely study and work from home, using numerous ICT-based tools. The Moroccan Ministry of Education has set up e-learning platforms to ensure continuity in teaching and learning. Public television and radio have also programmed pedagogical contents for students in collaboration with the concerned ministry. Hence, research in this field is strongly needed to address some throbbing questions related to the total efficacy of ICT integration in learning school subjects, in general, and English as a foreign language course, in particular. Indeed, there is still a dearth of knowledge about the total impacts of the adopted means and instructional formats on the EFL secondary schooled learners' utmost proficiency.

Previous studies in the Moroccan context have mostly examined the teachers and students' beliefs and practices concerning ICT use and distance learning. A recent study by Benhima and Benabderrazik (2020) investigated the role of using ICT in motivating Moroccan English Department students to learn during Covid-19 quarantine. It stressed that the most highly motivating factor behind using ICT to learn is linked to extrinsic factors, whereas the demotivating factors are related to lack, weakness, or absence of Net connection and lack of proper orientation. El Ghouati (2017) examined the relationship between e-learning styles and achievement in English among English Department students. Learning styles, according to the author, are subdivided into visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and read/write learning styles. Another study conducted on Moroccan teachers concluded that most teachers often use the computer to word-process their lessons or to download materials from the Internet (Biaz et al., 2009). Others reported the situation of the Moroccan higher educational system in terms of equipment, e-learning platforms, digital learning content, ICT practices of Moroccan university students, and achievement of collaborative work (Riyami et al., 2016). The authors proposed a cartography that represents the allocation of ICT tools for collaborative tasks. Laabidi and Laabidi (2016) also surveyed barriers affecting the successful use of ICT tools. Forty-seven teachers at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes and Moulay Ismail University in Meknes participated in the survey. The results revealed that teachers encountered many obstacles like internet connectivity, technical skills, lack of institutional support, and big class sizes.

What seems to stand out from the conducted studies is that the pandemic had more negative than positive impacts on students while receiving online instruction, as the students were not prepared for an online learning experience at the onset of the pandemic. Students were immersed in both negative and positive learning experiences, receiving online or blended instruction during the pandemic. They thus unveiled several disadvantages of distance education such as lack of engagement, communication problems with teachers, time mismanagement, traditional educational habits, and mostly the inability to frequently interact with teachers and peers (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Conversely, students revealed numerous advantages of distance education such as flexibility in time and place, synchronous and asynchronous learning, more responsibilities in learning, and comfort in the learning environment (Dhawan, 2020; Gopal et al., 2021). The findings of the aforementioned studies have highlighted valuable data on the importance of ICT integration and factors affecting students and teachers' distance education practices. Nevertheless, the studies have not examined the impacts of online and face-to-face instructional patterns on students' aggregate language proficiency from an analytic perspective of their learning outcomes. The present study tries to fill this research gap. The designated instructional course that has been taught remotely online and physically face-to-face is aimed at reviewing, expanding, practicing, and exploring new linguistic and life skills. The pre-pilot proficiency test - along with an annexed questionnaire including the key variables at play - the baccalaureate students sat for after being taught the same EFL course via the two modes covers all components and skills in distinct units of baccalaureate-accredited syllabi.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Fieldwork Activities Plan**

The fieldwork and the research activities were carried out during the period 2020-2021 throughout the whole academic year with four differentiated phases. Table 1 provides an unblemished outlook of the whole process. The preliminary pre-pilot exploratory study was conducted in the period spanning from March to June 2021. The involved informants are Moroccan second-year baccalaureate EFL high school learners. The data were attained by analyzing a-forty learners' seven-section English language proficiency test products in two distinct Moroccan Regional Academies for Education and Training, *Casablanca-Settat* and *Beni-Mellal-Khenifra*. Table 1 outlines the fieldwork activities undergone since March 2021.

Table 1. Fieldwork activities plan

March 2021	March 2021	April 2021	May 2021	September 2021
Beginning of the research; search for the two groups (FFG & OG) in the two regional academies for education and training.	Meeting with the involved teachers in Beni-Mellal & Casablanca to agree on the teaching course, the test format & mode, and the students who will be involved.	The forty 2 <sup>nd</sup> year BAC students in the 2 groups are taught a whole course, respectively FF and online. The students' background data are collected via an annexed questionnaire.	The students in the two groups sit for a seven-section proficiency test in-person under the supervision of the involved teachers. The students' outcomes are assessed.	Data analysis and reporting of the research results. Reshuffling & refining.

### 3.2 Data Collection Technique

During 2020-2021, the data on the English language proficiency of Moroccan baccalaureate students were collected via a testing instrument, using quantitative techniques only. The aim was to get a global view of the impacts of the newly introduced online mode of teaching on the language proficiency of the students involved in the designated EFL course in the times of Covid-19. The English language proficiency test was administered to 40 students enrolled in the Moroccan baccalaureate classes in the local secondary schools of the *Beni-Mellal-Khenifra* and *Casablanca-Settat* regions, Morocco. All test participants, who were evenly divided into two groups, were then enrolled in the second-year baccalaureate levels and following EFL classes as part of the school curriculum. The face-to-face group (FFG) was taught the EFL course via face-to-face instruction mode and the online group (OG) was taught the same course but via an ICT-based distant pattern (Microsoft Teams). The study was conducted in English language teaching (ELT) classrooms at two main regional academies for education and training in Morocco. The forty Moroccan participants in their final level of public upper secondary education sat for and answered a seven-section English language proficiency test, including three language components (i.e. grammar, vocabulary, and functions) and four skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

### 3.3 Research Questions

The main aim of this study is to investigate the differences in learning outcomes between fully online and FFG EFL learners and thus to find out if fully online EFL learning can be as effective as face-to-face learning. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following major research questions (RQ):

**RQ1.** *Are there any differences in terms of impacts on the English language proficiency with respect to the English language proficiency performances of the face-to-face taught group and online taught group of Moroccan baccalaureate students?*

**RQ2.** *If there are any, what differences are there in language learning between the FFG and OG groups in terms of some aspects of the English language taught during the end of the Moroccan secondary school level?*

With this emphasis on language proficiency, the current study does not deal with proficiency as a uniform entity. Rather, it is conceived of as a multifaceted concept involving crucial underlying components, notably (grammar structures, vocabulary building, communicative functions, reading comprehension, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking). Thus, the following sub-research questions (SRQ) are put forth to address this line of inquiry:

**SRQ1.** *Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the grammar structure of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?*

**SRQ2.** *Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the vocabulary building of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?*

**SRQ3.** *Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the communicative functions of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?*

**SRQ4.** *Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the reading comprehension of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?*

**SRQ5.** Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the writing of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?

**SRQ6.** Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the listening comprehension of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?

**SRQ7.** Are there any differences observed in terms of students' mastery of the speaking of English as displayed by both OG and FFG groups? If there are any, what are these differences?

### 3.4 Participants

The current study provides a quantitative analysis of baccaureate students' performances in both fully online and fully face-to-face EFL courses. It accommodates some of the challenges mentioned above, controlling key variables, i.e. gender, Net connectivity, digital tools, course level, homeschooling, and learning outcomes. By the time the research was carried out, an increasing interest in blended learning via various tools by major players was observed. The educational authorities called for the use of blended modes of instruction. So many schools and higher education institutions as well in the country have set to organize blended learning EFL courses in addition to the mainstream face-to-face format. The proportion of online learning use varied greatly across numerous courses. The precise degree of online learning used in the teaching of EFL in Morocco has largely been unknown.

The study is set in formal secondary educational institutions in *Casablanca-Settat* and *Beni-Mellal-Khenifra*, Morocco. In general, the two groups (n=40) display socio-pedagogical similarities at the level of the teaching-learning experiences. Table 2 provides background information on the participants taking part in this experiment, notably their numbers, mean age, and gender in each of the two groups involved, the face-to-face group and the online group.

**Table 2.** Participants and their numbers, mean age, and gender in the FFG and OG

Groups	N. Ss	Gender	Mean age	SD
<b>Face-to-Face Group (FFG)</b>	20	<b>FFG</b> Male 07 Female 13	18.07	1.08
<b>Online Group (OG)</b>	20	<b>OG</b> Male 08 Female 12	19.00	1.12

N. Ss= Number of students  
SD= Standard deviation

The first twenty students were taught using the in-person face-to-face pattern at *Beni-Mellal-Khenifra* Regional Academy for Education while the second twenty learners were remotely taught via the online tool at *Casablanca-Settat* Regional Academy for Education. Table 3 shows the various residential locations of the participants in the two groups.

**Table 3.** Residential environment of both the FFG and the OG participants

Mode group	Regional Academy	Rural	Suburban	Urban
<b>FFG</b>	<i>Beni-Mellal-Khenifra</i>	2	6	12
<b>OG</b>	<i>Casablanca-Settat</i>	2	5	13

All two groups were taught the same components of the designated course (i.e., vocabulary, grammar, functions, receptive & productive skills) in seven continuous and successive sessions using two different instructional patterns. Only after the 7-session instruction, did both the FFG and OG groups take the EFL language proficiency test during the final two weeks of the course in order to give a more accurate representativeness of their proficiency at that particular level. The performances of the two groups, FFG and OG, were then compared. It was predicted that course format (face-to-face or online) would not affect outcomes at the lower-division level regarding the English proficiency seven subtasks.

### 4. Research Findings

The tasks are developed with the aim of exploring the English language proficiency of the Moroccan baccaureate students, FFG and OG in this case, with respect to their ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences and their ability to use a wide range of communicative functions and skills. The ELP test of the baccaureate students completed comprises seven subtasks, adapted from an official accredited Moroccan textbook. Each task aims to review, expand, practice, and explore new linguistic and life skills numbered here 1 through 7, notably Grammar Structure, Written Vocabulary, Communicative Functions, Reading Comprehension, Writing, Listening Comprehension, and Speaking. Data were calculated and presented based on the responses of the participants

to the English language proficiency seven subtests. Then, they were statistically analyzed through SPSS as reported in the Tables below (Tables 4–10), showing the mean scores, SD, and t-value of each subtest.

#### 4.1 Grammar Structure Task

The aim of the Grammar Structure task is to control for grammar mistakes produced by the involved students and their ability to use correct tense inflection, modal auxiliary verbs, infinitives/gerunds and to form correct sentence structures (i.e. affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms). Table 4 provides the results of both groups with respect to their performance on the Grammar Structure task.

**Table 4.** Overview of the Grammar Structure task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
<b>Grammar Structure (15 Items)</b>	FFG	10,10	1,21	4,067
<b>Grammar Structure (15 Items)</b>	OG	6,75	1,84	-4,873

For the Grammar Structure task, the maximum score is fifteen. As is clear from the results described in Table 4, the scores for the Grammar Structure task between FFG (M=10,10; SD=1,21) and OG learners (M=6,75; SD=1,84) are actually surprising. The scores are higher of the Moroccan baccalaureate EFL learners for the Grammar Structure task in the face-to-face instruction mode. The mean scores of the remotely taught students are somewhat lower concerning the same proficiency task.

#### 4.2 Written Vocabulary Task

As regards the Written Vocabulary task, the aim is to measure the student's ability to form correct collocations, right word associations, and accurate word definitions. For the Written Vocabulary task, the maximum score is sixteen. Table 5 provides the mean scores of both the face-to-face group and the online group on the Written Vocabulary task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 5.** Overview of the Written Vocabulary task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
<b>Written Vocabulary (16 Items)</b>	FFG	11,45	1,57	6,970
<b>Written Vocabulary (16 Items)</b>	OG	7,52	1,99	-2,698

The results described in Table 5 noticeably demonstrate that the scores are higher of Moroccan EFL learners for the Written Vocabulary task in the face-to-face instruction mode (11,45; SD=1,57). The mean scores of the remotely taught students are to a certain extent lower (7,52; SD=1,99) regarding the same proficiency task.

#### 4.3 Communicative Functions Task

For the Communicative Functions task, the purpose is to gauge the correct use of expressions of opinion, agreement, and complaint. The maximum score for the Communicative Functions task is 15. Table 6 provides the mean scores of both the face-to-face group and the online group on the Communicative Functions task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 6.** Overview of the Communicative Functions task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
<b>Communicative Functions (9 Items)</b>	FFG	11,15	1,73	5,573
<b>Communicative Functions (9 Items)</b>	OG	7,57	1,90	-2,708

Relating to the Communicative Functions proficiency task, the scores, as described in Table 6, are striking. The results obtained confirm once again the superiority of the face-to-face group concerning the Communicative Functions task (11,15; SD=1,73). The mean scores of the online group of students are somewhat lower (7,57; SD=1,90) on the same task.

**4.4 Reading Comprehension Task**

As far as the Reading Comprehension task is concerned, the aim is to measure the student’s ability to read a text, correctly work out *wh*-questions and true/false statements, and correctly infer word meaning. The maximum score for the Reading Comprehension task is fifteen. Table 7 provides the mean scores of both the face-to-face group and the online group on the Reading Comprehension task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 7.** Overview of the Reading Comprehension task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
Reading Comprehension (15 Items)	FFG	10,45	1,64	3,960
Reading Comprehension (15 Items)	OG	7,52	1,82	-2,942

The scores, as is clear from the results highlighted in Table 7, are higher of the Moroccan face-to-face group of learners for the Reading Comprehension task (10,45; SD=1,64)). The mean scores of the online group of students are fairly lower (7,52; SD=1,82) regarding the same receptive proficiency task (Reading Comprehension task).

**4.5 Writing Task**

In connection with the Writing task, the aim is to control the students’ ability to write a well-crafted descriptive paragraph using given cues and their ability to underline mistakes in a poorly written paragraph (viz. capitalization, punctuation, and spelling mistakes). The maximum score for the Writing task is 15. Table 8 provides the mean scores of both the face-to-face group and the online group on the Writing task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 8.** Overview of the Writing task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
Writing (2 Items: Open & Close Questions)	FFG	8,40	1,82	5,904
Writing (2 Items: Open & Close Questions)	OG	6,04	1,92	-1,751

The results described in Table 8 conspicuously show that the scores are somewhat higher of the Moroccan EFL learners for the Writing task in the face-to-face instructional mode (8,40; SD:1,82). The mean scores of the remotely taught students are rather lower (6,04; SD=1,92) regarding the same productive proficiency task.

**4.6 Listening Comprehension Task**

The Listening Comprehension task aims to measure the student’s ability to correctly answer questions while listening for specific details in the spoken input. The maximum score for the Listening Comprehension task is 12. Table 9 provides the mean scores of both the FFG and the OG groups on the Listening Comprehension task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 9.** Overview of the Listening Comprehension task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
Listening Comprehension (6 Items)	FFG	5,70	1,95	1,584
Listening Comprehension (6 Items)	OG	4,84	1,65	-1,352



With respect to the Listening Comprehension proficiency task, the scores, as described in Table 9 above, strikingly validate being somewhat similar with noticeable primacy of the Moroccan EFL learners in the face-to-face learning mode ( $M=5,70$ ;  $SD=1,95$ ). The mean scores of the remotely taught students are somewhat inferior ( $M=4,84$ ;  $SD=1,65$ ), compared to the scores achieved by the FFG students in the same receptive proficiency task.

#### 4.7 Speaking Task

With regard to the Speaking task, the goal is to control the student's ability to correctly answer all the questions with very few major errors and adequate vocabulary use, choosing from the provided prompts. The maximum score for the Speaking task is 12. Table 10 provides the mean scores of both the face-to-face group and the online group on the Speaking task along with the number of items in each task.

**Table 10.** Overview of the Speaking task and the number of items in each task along with the mean scores for both groups, the FFG and the OG

Proficiency Task	Group	Mean	SD	T-value
Speaking (6 Items)	FFG	6,30	1,75	3,322
Speaking (6 Items)	OG	4,85	1,78	-1,258

The scores, as is clear from the results described in Table 10, are relatively higher for the Moroccan EFL learners for the Speaking task in the face-to-face instructional mode ( $M=6,30$ ;  $SD=1,75$ ). The mean scores of the remotely taught students are fairly lower ( $M=4,85$ ;  $SD=1,78$ ) with respect to the same productive proficiency task (Speaking task).

### 5. General Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, the authors evaluated the aggregate efficacy and productivity of the Moroccan EFL students' utmost ELP test performances pertaining to online and face-to-face classes during the pandemic era. The current research orientation is not an attempt to verify theories about the status of language teaching and learning from an online or face-to-face perspective. Rather, it is a groundbreaking attempt to explore how the online mode of teaching and learning has operated within the Moroccan educational system during the times of Covid-19 and to unveil its possible impacts on the learning performances of the EFL students at the end of secondary school level, compared to face-to-face in-person instruction.

The t-test results as noticed in the Tables above (i.e. Tables 4–10) indicate noteworthy differences being relevant to the performances in the two groups of the study. This variance is validated by the t-value mean scores which are negative in all the fully OG subtests and affirmative in the fully FFG subtests. The main findings of this research showed then that online EFL learning in Moroccan baccalaureate education could not be at least as effective as face-to-face EFL learning. The key factors at play here validating the low proficiency level of the online taught group as opposed to the face-to-face taught group mainly include 'gender', 'the residential environment', 'access to Internet', 'homeschooling', and 'digital device.' Five respondents' total proficiency from the online-taught group has been perceived to be somewhat high. All of them are females belonging to urban areas and have the necessary digital tools, Internet coverage, and Net connectivity. Thus, the low efficacy and productivity of the online-taught group compared to the face-to-face-taught group is due to the lack and weakness of digitized learning tools and the locality of the learner's institution.

The results of this study have numerous significant practical implications for educators, students, and researchers. This study should hence be of value to language course providers wishing to implement flexible EFL ICT-based learning. It should also serve alphanumeric lesson designers, practitioners, and computer-assisted language learning researchers. A significant limitation concerns the study's small sample size and the focus solely on the students' proficiency perspective. It is recommended that further research should be undertaken to understand the other major players' attitudes (viz. teachers, parents, and administrators' views) and experiences towards the newly adopted learning modes, especially the online, blended, and HyFlex patterns in EFL classes during the pandemic.

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