The Online Teacher's Roles: Moroccan Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

In this article, I shed light on the challenging and the multidimensional roles of the online teacher in relation to students 'perceptions towards these roles. The aim behind this initiative is to know whether the importance of the teacher has decreased with the implementation of e. learning in Moroccan higher educational system or else it has increased with the growing development of Technology. The investigation is based on the description and analysis of data collected from Moroccan university students. The results reveal quantitative and qualitative differences in the informants' feedbacks, confirming the multidimensionality of the online teacher's roles on the one hand and presenting some challenging issues related to the online learning and teaching processes in Moroccan higher education on the other hand.

Keywords: E. learning; online teaching; multifaceted roles; perceptions; challenges.

1.Introduction

The sudden unexpected movement from face to face to full online teaching in the pandemic COVID 19 and the recent integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the academic world and particularly in higher education, lead to a change of roles attributed to the teacher. The latter is to reconsider and reconstruct the whole process of teaching to adjust it to the new online environments. The present study seeks to examine the multidimensional challenging roles of the online teacher on the one hand and Hassan II university students' perceptions regarding these roles on the other hand, based on the fact that online teaching and e. learning are two facets of the same coin and both the student and the teacher are involved in the learning- teaching process. The ultimate aim is to answer the following questions:

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- Does the importance of the teacher decrease with the advent and growth of the technology and with the implementation of e. learning in the educational system particularly in the pandemic?

- What are the main distance roles fulfilled by the online teacher and to what extent they are multifaceted and challenging?

- How far do students' perceptions shed light on the different roles attributed to the online teacher, based on what they experienced and how they experienced their online study during the pandemic?

To do this, this article is organized as follows: Section one deals with the roles' descriptions of the online teacher ranging from the pedagogical role, and its affiliated sub-roles, to the technological role and its sub-roles respectively. Section three presents the empirical study of Moroccan students' perceptions about the roles of the online teacher. It consists of data collection procedures, description, analysis and interpretation of the results related to the raised questions.

2. Roles' descriptions of the online teacher: The theoretical background

In distance teaching, the interaction between teachers and students takes place over a computer network of some kind in both asynchronous…and synchronous forms as well as interaction through texts, videos, audios in shared virtual worlds as cited in [1]. In other words, the online teaching is a process whereby the teacher shares information and instructions related to his/her course curriculum in two different forms: either synchronously, in real time or asynchronously at any time or any place. This is done based on the use of computer assisted programs, interactive multimedia, and internet discussions rather than from classroom methods of instruction [1]. As the online environment changes and new technologies become available, the nature of the online educator role will change [1, p. 19]. In the literature related to online education, a number of researchers referred to in [1] have discussed the changing roles of the online teacher from different perspectives. It was generally acknowledged that the assimilation of the roles and competencies of the online teacher is a difficult task [2] as he is attributed different online roles ranging from 'the managerial', 'social', pedagogical, and technical roles, to cognitive, affective and managerial, to other roles as process facilitator, advisor, assessor, designer, administrator and technologist.[1]

In the 2010 literature up to now, new roles have been associated with the online teacher namely the learning supporter, the content expert and the life skill promoter [1]. Though many researchers cited in [1,2] differ in the terminology used related to the multidimensional roles of the online teacher, the pedagogical role remains the one identified most frequently [2, p. 468]. This role is assumed to be the basic task attributed to the teacher in online and offline courses.

2.1. The pedagogical role

The pedagogical role is the basic role attributed to the teacher whether the process of teaching is online or face to face. The difference regarding that role is related to the online environment characterizing the distance teaching process. In this respect, the online teacher is to decide how to set the course online effectively to meet the students' expectations. To do this, he needs to convert the teaching materials used in face to face classroom

to the online environment, relying on appropriate technological tools. At this particular phase, the online teacher undertakes a technical role to integrate ICT in the teaching process.

Starting with the pedagogical role, the online teacher assumes different sub-roles before, during and after the delivery of the online course.

Before delivering his online course, the distance teacher plays the role of a designer of the course content. It is an organizational role whereby he starts by setting the course objectives, and the curriculum design. It is very important that the online course meets the same objectives and curriculum requirements as its face to face counterpart. Yet, moving from the traditional classroom environment to online instruction requires more than merely converting course materials to an online platform. In fact, the resources, skills, and tools needed for successfully teaching students online vary considerably from those of the traditional classroom. In the online classroom, teaching techniques must be updated rather than reproduced [3, p. 3]. In other words, the online teacher is to plan the instructional online strategies and methods that are appropriate to the learning goals and to the abilities of students by repurposing lecture notes, new insights and views on the course content.

Moreover, and before the delivery of the course, the online teacher sets the time parameters of the course by fixing, for instance, the deadline of the learning tasks directed to students and providing them with specific schedules related to the syllabus. These fulfilled tasks aim to make the course manageable and understandable.

During delivery, the online teacher is virtually present, He/ She performs two other tasks namely cognitive and affective. The Cognitive role pertains to the presentation of knowledge, thinking, reasoning and analyzing different issues related to the course content as well as helping students to engage in rehearsing and retrieving information. The affective role, on the other hand, is performed by the online teacher namely in virtual classrooms in that he adopts a kind of behavior related to influencing student's relationships with him and with other students.

After the delivery of the course, the distance teacher evaluates the students' learning outcomes as well as the whole online course, fulfilling the role of the evaluator. He provides students with prompt feedback to their different mails and messages with the aim to reinforce their engagements and contributions in the learning-teaching process.

2.2. The technical role

Based on my humble experience in online teaching during the pandemic COVID 19, and according to many researchers [3, 4], among others, the online teacher is assumed to fulfill a technical role when rethinking how to present the teaching materials in accordance with the online model. In this respect, the authors in [5, p. 13, 14] explain that there is "a close correlation between the content of the lesson and the online materials" which means that technology is used to complement teaching. One of the principles advocated in [5] is to separate the role of the teacher and the role of technology as these roles are not interchangeable, though they are complementary. Related to the technical role of the online teacher emerge other peripheral roles namely: the e-learner and the e- supporter or the e. guide roles.

2.2.1. The e-learner role

At this phase, the online teacher is performing the task of an e. learner, searching and inquiring the different tools to use in the implementation of online materials as there are various online technologies to deliver online courses among which we may cite the different platforms and tools such as: presentation software, smart boards, chat software, Google meet, zoom, Microsoft teams…etc.). To reinforce their e-learning, many teachers join online communities to share knowledge and develop their competences.

2.2.2. The e-guide role

The online teacher makes students comfortable with the technological tools used to facilitate the online course by selecting, developing and suggesting appropriate resources for learning, providing students with guidelines, tutorials and tips as to the access and use of platforms. The online tutor is considered a guide on the side in that he plays the role of a moderator instead of an online instructor because… a learning activity or process should be LEARNER-centric instead of PRESENTER-or CONTENT-centric [6].

2.3. Advisor Role

While undertaking all the previous roles, the online teacher plays the role of an advisor and a monitor. At each step of the online teaching process, the teacher provides his students with some advices related to every aspects of the course content, helping them to get the most out of their course and suggesting measures to enhance performance. He provides them with tutorials and links to submit exercises, to log in the platform and have access to the course materials and downloading [7]. Other tasks interplay with the advisor role namely: social and affective in that the teacher builds a positive social environment in virtual classes and establishes a sense of community and a mode of interaction, by developing collaborative groups and enhancing the learner groups to assume responsibility for delivering their learning activities. In addition to that, the distance teacher is to ensure that the learners understand their commitment to the learning community [6].The feeling of connectedness to the group helps students reduce the feeling of isolation and loneliness caused by the online learning. The preceding description of the online teacher's roles is essentially founded on my work experience observations and on the literature related to online learning and teaching respectively. Most of the results that were achieved by many researchers mentioned above 1/7 confirm the multidimensional aspect of the online teacher's roles during the pandemic. In what follows, much more concern will be directed to the investigation of the multidimensionality of teachers' online performances and the way they are perceived by Moroccan university students. This is to shed light on the challenging online learning and teaching processes in Moroccan higher education during COVID 19 pandemic.

3. Students' perceptions of the online teacher's challenging roles

As aforementioned in the previous sections, the purpose of conducting this study is to shed light on the online teacher's roles and further elucidate the manifold aspects of these challenging roles. This section presents an empirical inquiry on students' perceptions of the roles of the online teacher. The objective is to conduct a comprehensive and an objective analysis of students' opinions on these roles to answer the questions postulated

at the beginning related to the matter. The data has been elicited from students of the English department, Hassan II University, Faculty of letters Mohammedia. They are selected from different semesters and are devised online questionnaires to fill thoroughly in accordance with the purpose of our inquiry.

3.1. Data collection procedure

We methodologically adopt questionnaires because they allow an explicit form of data collection and an easy quantitative description of results, by means of which we can induce a pattern for responses, charts, percentages…etc.

The questionnaire devised for the current investigation, includes 15 questions, divided unequally into different sets of questions. The first set requires from participants to provide personal information. The second set comprises six questions related to the pedagogical role of the online teacher. The third set of questions is meant to inquire the perceptions of students regarding the teacher's technical role, based on the fact that these students have experienced the online study for more than one semester during the pandemic.

Moreover, the type of questions employed in this questionnaire pertained mainly to close ended questions with the option of open and free comments meant to vocalize the participants' views and opinions. Close ended questions are adopted because they are much easier to fill out, and less time consuming for participants to complete. Added to that, they provide more reliable results as they can be easily interpreted.

3.2. Data analysis and tabulations

In what follows, we shall present and analyze our data by means of different figures and graphs, with different percentages and proportions that represent the two essential roles, the pedagogical and the technical roles respectively. The first part of the questionnaire presents some information on the participants' gender and semester. Students from different semesters are chosen deliberately because they have been studying online during the pandemic. Out of 390 respondents, 41.8% identify themselves as S1 students, 25.9% as S3, 25.9% as S 5, and 6.4% as S6 students. What turned out to be interesting is that a staggering 100 of participants confirm that they have actually followed all their English courses online. Their perceptions about the online teacher's roles are, then, important namely that the teaching process is inevitably interrelated to the learning process. The main focus of the second part is to extrapolate information related to the participants' opinions on the role of the online teacher before, during, and after the delivery of the online course. Before delivery, and as mentioned earlier, the online teacher is assumed to be the responsible for the course content in that he is to plan and fix the time parameters. Related to that, Students have been asked three questions and their responses can be summarized in the following figure:
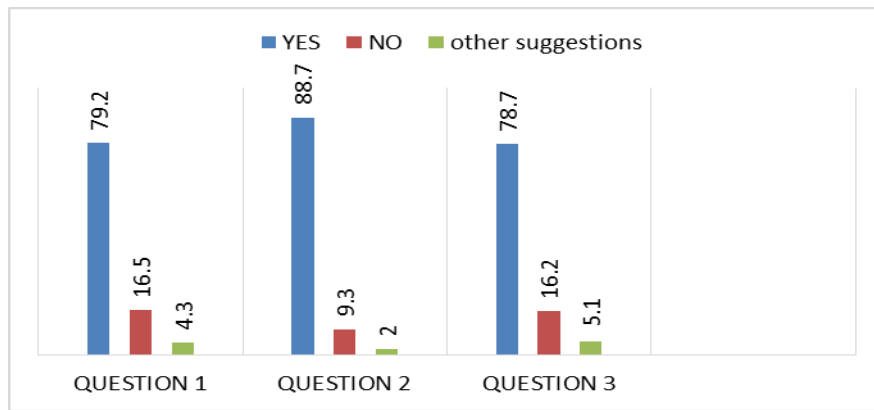
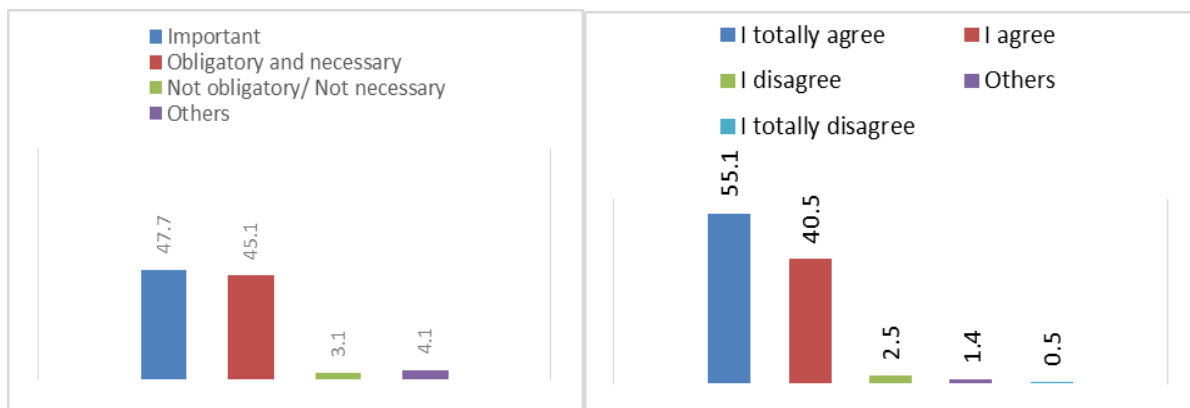**Figure 1:** Students' perceptions of the pedagogical role.

Just from a first glimpse, the chart's representation of the data reveals significant compatibility between three responses related to the roles performed by the online teacher before delivery. The majority of participants agree that the distance teacher is, indeed, the planner and the designer of the course (Q1), the only responsible for the course content(Q2) and the organizer of the learning activities and time parameters of the course, with percentages of 79.2 % ; 88.7% ; 78,7 % respectively. Whereas few of the respondents deny these roles, with percentages of 16.5%; 9.3 %; and 16.2%, while others provide various responses to the three questions. The responses are ranging from those who are not sure of the right answer, to those who claim that the administration and the teacher are the planners and the designers of the course, to the others who stipulate that the teacher has a central role in designing the course but he/she should also create an interactive space, a flexible learning environment where students might provide their feedbacks. Some students provide irrelevant but pertinent answers to the question like they don't attend the live classes and they just rely on the files sent by their teachers or they do not have a Wi-Fi at all to follow the updates of their courses. Related to the time parameters, some informants suggest that the online teacher should choose a convenient time that is suitable to the majority of students and preferably that of the timetable scheduled by the administration. Moving to the roles performed during the delivery of the online course, students have been asked to confirm or disconfirm whether the online teacher has the role of transmitting knowledge and information during the online course or not (Q4). This question is meant to shed light on the cognitive role associated with the distance teacher. Their responses are illustrated in figure 2 as follows:
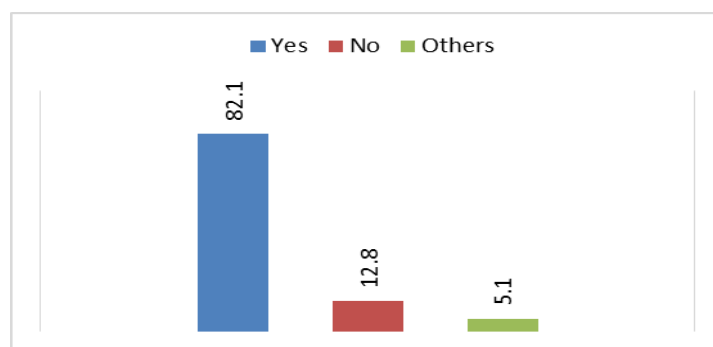
Figure 2: Students' perceptions of the teacher's cognitive role.

Considering the above figure, we notice that 82.1% of the whole participants confirm the cognitive role associated with the distance teacher while 12.8% do not. Other responses (5.1%) vary from one respondent to another. Some explain that it is his/her job while others state that the transmission of knowledge is not always done by the teacher; and that he is more to guide students and engage them in the process of learning. Such answers prove the fact that the online teaching is an interactive process that is expected to be learner's centered.

Question (5) is a scale marking question inquiring the participants' views of the virtual classroom whether it is important, obligatory and necessary or not obligatory. This question relates to a follow up question (Q6) that seeks the participants' perceptions of the interactional behavior adopted by the online teacher in virtual classrooms. In other words, these questions inquire the students' opinions regarding the social role of the distance teacher. The latter is assumed to perform that role while delivering the live classes, establishing and maintaining students' relationships and creating a pleasant atmosphere. Consider the following charts:


Figures 3a/3b: Students' perceptions of the social role during delivery.

In (3a) above, it is crystal clear that participants view the live class and the virtual classrooms as important, obligatory and necessary with the percentages of 47.7 % and 45.1 % , thus, corresponding to 92.8 % of the totality of the informants, while just few of them (3.1%) view that live classes are not obligatory , not necessary. The rest (4.1%) provide various responses in open comments: some state that they are not obligatory but necessary because they help understand the course content better, others clarify that they are important. Some informants further explain that they are suffering from internet problems that prevent them from attending the virtual classes at all. Moreover, the live classes, for some participants, are delivered only by few teachers, and students are studying the rest of modules on their own relying on the sent PDF or Word files. Others explain that it is the emergency of the sudden pandemic all over the world that imposes distance learning and that the latter is also useful even in non-urgent situations, in that it may be used as a reinforce to face to face sessions, allowing the exchange of feedbacks between students and teachers. Yet, distance learning still needs to be reconsidered in order to be more efficient. In the same vein, chart (3b) highlights a high percentage of informants (95.6 %) showing their agreement on the fact that the online teacher should play a social role while 3.1% disagree whether totally or not. 1.3 % of the informants show that the social role is not an obligatory and a primary responsibility of the distance teacher. The teacher, for them, should be professional and courteous but not at the expense of teaching or delivering information. These informants give more importance to the teacher's

role of transmitting information and knowledge rather than building relationships between students.

So far, we have covered the data related to the pedagogical role before the delivery (planning and design of the course content, during delivery (the cognitive and the social roles). Left to shed light on the role expected from the online teacher, after the delivery of the course, namely the evaluator role as shown in chart 4 below:
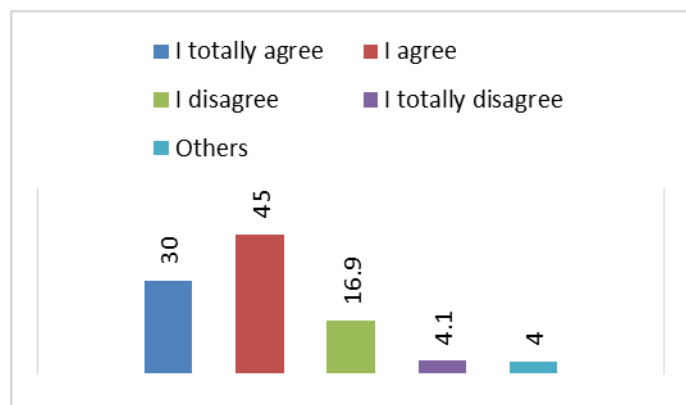
Figure 4: Students' feedbacks on the evaluator role of the distance teacher.

As can be noticed, the majority of informants (75%) agree that the online teacher is the only responsible of online students' evaluation, while 21% disagree or totally disagree; yet, other responses (4%) reveal a fair amount of disparity of free comments in which some state that the responsibility is shared by the administration and the teacher, others claim that students efforts are also important in contrast to others who attribute the responsibility to both the teacher and the student. To summarize this section, we can say that students' perceptions regarding the pedagogical role of the online teacher are compatible with the idea that the basic role of the teacher, whether online or face to face, is the pedagogical one. The latter subsumes two other sub- roles: the cognitive and the social roles respectively. To shed light on students' perceptions of the technical role and to test the hypothesis that the online teacher performs different e- roles while teaching online namely: the e- learner role and the e-supporter role, Answers retrieved from the respondents have shown varying choices as demonstrated in the figures 5, 6, and 7 below:
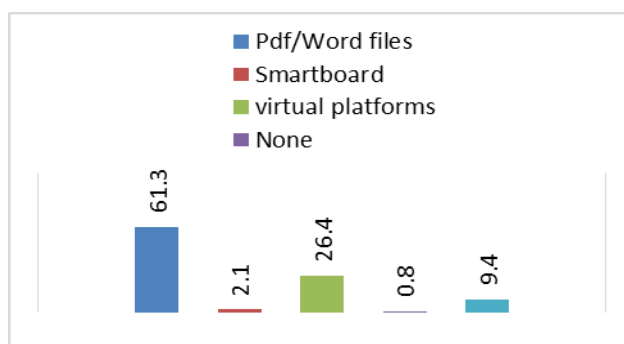

Figure 5: On the use of technological tools by the online teacher.

The above chart illustrates the online technological instruments used by the distance teacher. Respondents, in

here, prove that PDF and word files are the most frequently adopted e-materials in online studies, with a percentage of 61.3 % of the whole responses; followed by the use of virtual platforms as indicated by 26.4% of the whole participants. Only 2.1% opt for smart boards as technological tools used by teachers. Whereas the other responses (9.4%) specify that both PDF and Word files as well as virtual platforms are used and that the technical materials used in online teaching depend on the distance teachers as each one adopts what seems convenient to the teaching process. Added to that, according to some participants, only few teachers have integrated more than one tool in his/her teaching online, while the majority relies on PDF and Word files. Though different in percentages, the above various feedbacks confirm, indeed, the technical role attributed to the online teacher whose first step is to adjust his/her teaching materials to the online model using virtual platforms to facilitate the teaching learning process. In what follows lay the students' opinions on the e-learner's role as illustrated by:
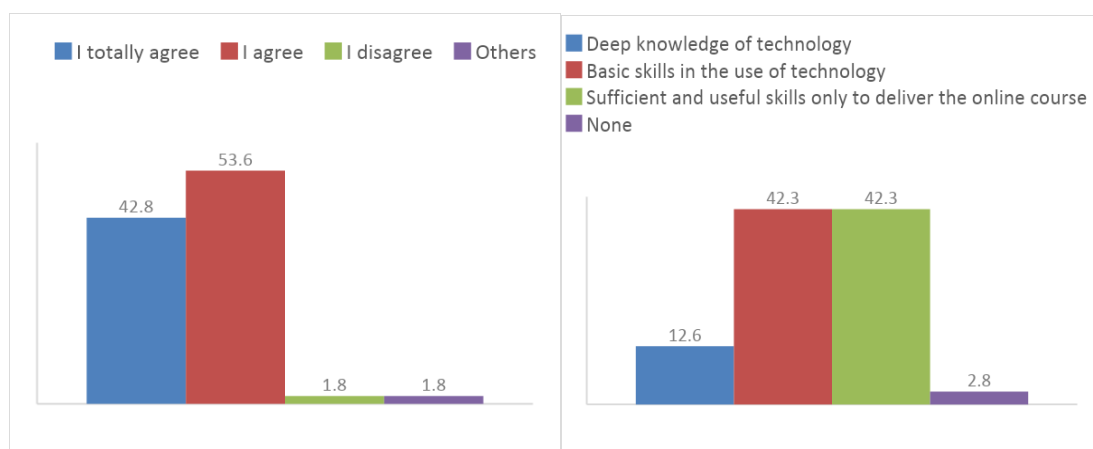

Figures 6 and 7: Students' perceptions of the e-learner role of the online teacher.

Most of the respondents, in the above charts, approve the fact that the online teacher needs to have basic, sufficient and useful skills in technology to deliver the online course, with 84.6% of the totality of participants. 12.6% of them opt for the necessity of deep knowledge of technology from the part of the online teacher while 2.8 % of participants opt for the non-necessity of technological skills. Based on the data above, it is clear that the online teacher is expected to learn more about the various technological devices that are required in the process of online teaching. Here emerges the e-learner role performed by the distance teacher who is faced by a sudden transition from face to face to full online teaching and, thus, try to learn and discover the endless world of technology. This new role attributed to the online teacher is further confirmed by chart (7) above. 96.4% of participants (totally) agree that the online teacher needs to search and inquire the different technological tools to facilitate the virtual communication with his/ her students. 1.8% disagrees with the attribution of any technical role to the teacher; while the rest (1.8%) provide different opinions specifying that the online teacher should not be forced to perform a technical role because he should be provided with appropriate technological tools to work with. His role is to teach, using a standardized platform or software efficiently and making the best of it in order not to confuse students. Besides the e-learner role, the online teacher is assumed to have another role namely 'the guide' role. Informants are asked whether the teacher has to guide them and show them the technological devices to be used in their online studies. Their answers are presented in figures (8a) and (8b) respectively:

Q11: Do you think that your online teacher has to guide you and show you how to use the technological devices in order to study online?

Q12: The online teacher should provide you with guidelines, tutorials and tips to help you use virtual platforms (Google classroom/ ENT Hassan II university platform…)?
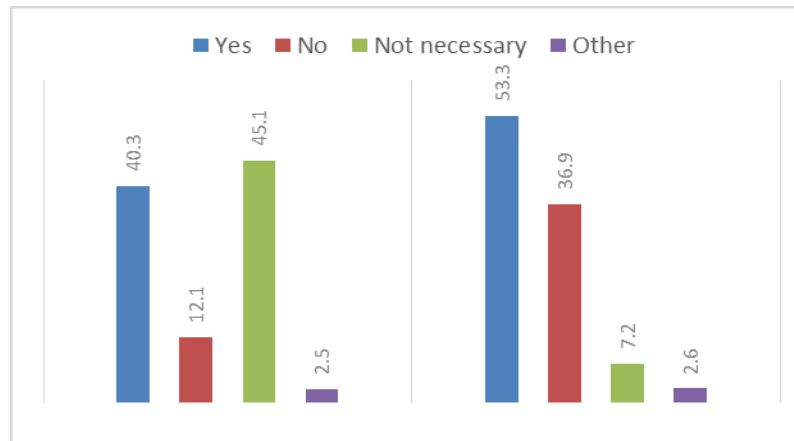

Figures 8a and 8b: Perceptions of the 'guide' role.

We notice, in (8a), that the participants' responses differ significantly in that 40.3 % opt for a 'yes' choice, while 45.1% claim that it is not necessary and 12.1 % show a 'no' option, meaning that the teacher doesn't have to guide students and assist them in the use of technological devices. Other students, representing 2.5% of the whole participants, provide their opinions in free open comments stating that the teacher's technical guidance might be useful for some students who do not know how to use technology while others clarify that it would be preferable to guide students in case new technological tools have been integrated in the teaching process.

The two above charts are meaningfully related in that they both show student's feedbacks on the technical 'guide' role assumed by the online teacher. However, they differ in the wordings of the posited questions: The question in chart (8b) is a checking question that is meant to verify the consistency of the responses provided in chart (8a). Contrary to (8a), the responses in chart (8b) are different although the questions in both charts are nearly similar, tackling the same issue. This is clearly shown by the percentages indicated in chart (8b). Out of 390 responses,53.3% agree on the fact that the online teacher should provide students with guidelines, tutorials and tips to use in virtual classrooms, while 36.9% opt for 'not always' option. This can be interpreted as an implicit agreement on the technical guidance of the online teacher and that it should not be too frequent. So, we can notice that in chart (8b), the percentages of students preferring explicitly or implicitly the guidance of the teacher are higher than those in chart (8a), with a percentage of 53.3 % in the former as opposed to 40.3% in the latter. As mentioned before, while performing his/her role, be it pedagogical or technical, the online teacher is also assumed to play a peripheral role of counseling. The last item dealt with in the questionnaire is the advisor role. Participants are asked about the frequency of advice provided by their online teachers. Contrary to expectations, the informants provide different answers as shown in chart (9) below:

Q13: While studying online, how often does your online teacher advise you and share with your difficulties?
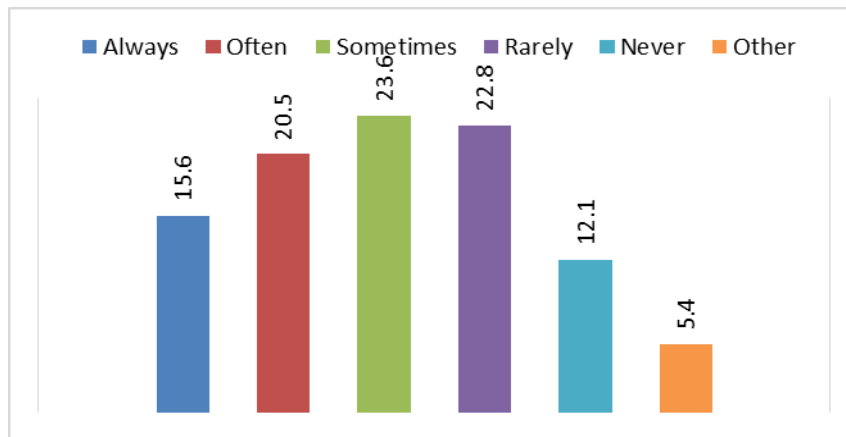
Figure 9: Students' perceptions of the 'advisor' role of the online teacher.

As can be noticed, counseling from the part of the teacher is rare to non-existent according to some participants (22.8% and 12.1%) respectively. 20.5% and 15.6 % of the whole participants point out that the online teacher's advice is frequent (often /always choices) while 23.6 % approve that their online teachers sometimes offer advice and share with them the difficulties encountered in online learning. The other respondents (5.4%) provide their own feedback, which can be summarized in the idea that the 'advisor' role attributed to the online teacher cannot be generalized to all teachers.

3.3. Discussion of Results

After describing and analyzing the gathered data, and with all considerations put into place, we can hitherto claim that our findings related to the multifaceted roles of the online teacher strengthen the importance of the pedagogical role performed by the online teacher more than the technological role. The participants' feedbacks vary from one respondent to another. The majority approve that the core role associated with the distance teacher is the pedagogical one, namely that of planning, designing the course, transmitting knowledge and evaluating students; yet some participants have raised the point that an interactive learning environment is to be created by the online teacher to communicate with his students and to know their feedbacks. This supports the fact that the online teaching is basically an interactive process involving both the teacher and the student. It is a learner centered process whose core is the learner's needs and the role of the online teacher is a guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage as stated before.

Other striking feedbacks provided by some respondents relate to their inability to pursue their courses due to some technical problems related to either the platforms used or internet connection. This fact can be attributed to the various challenges encountered in distance learning and teaching in general. With respect to the technical role performed by the online teacher, and based on the collected data, the main challenge encountered in the online teaching and learning processes is related to the inadequate equipment, slow internet and connections, lack of technical expertise supporting instructors and students as well as the insufficient basic skills in e-learning and e-teaching. The shift of role to adapt to the online mode is a challenging process. The main pedagogical challenge stems from the inability of instructors to seamlessly transfer their face to face course materials to the

online environment on the one hand; and from the difficulty of taking into consideration the students' strategies and engagement in the learning process on the other hand. Moreover, the online delivery is demanding and intensive. More time is required for the design of the course, the preparation of the learning activities and the assessment of students' learning outcomes as many teachers began with little to no training or preparation specific to this online delivery mode. This is what explains the issue raised by some participants related to the differences of the teaching methods adopted by their online teachers and the difficulty of generalizing these processes to all of them.

The results mentioned above have, undeniably, been influenced by the difficulties encountered in this inquiry. The first constraint relates to the data collection process as some participants were unable to access the shared online questionnaire due to unavailability of internet connection, or to the lack of appropriate technological tools. Other informants displayed a sort of reluctance to the change towards the online study mode; thus, were unwilling to share their own perceptions of their online teachers' roles.

4. Conclusion

After presenting the multidimensional roles of the online teacher and investigating the students' perceptions toward these roles, we arrive at the conclusion that the importance of the teacher and his roles increase with the integration of ICT in higher education. The more the technological tools are changing, the more the role of the online teacher will change. Yet, the pedagogical role remains the principal responsibility of the online teacher as confirmed by the results of the collected data. The online teacher needs just basic skills in e-learning to change and transform the pedagogical approaches to the distance teaching model to meet the instructional needs of students. ICT integration in higher education becomes a necessity. The online teacher should make use of it as a mediating tool but not as an end in itself. The real challenge is to develop fluency with teaching and learning with technology not just with technology itself.

This leads us to wonder; could language instruction templates and platforms entirely replace the notion of language classes for future generations? Or should both the online and the offline modes be maintained by adopting blended (hybrid) learning, which is a combination of face to face classroom instruction with online activities? With the advent and growth of technology and its implementation in education, there is an urgent need for new language learning theories and approaches to be developed to handle both the online and the offline modes of learning and teaching.

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