Emergency remote teaching of French as a foreign language: Course adequacy to the INEE standards

Rana Hasan Kandeel

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore the adequacy of French as a foreign language (FFL), with specific context to teaching and learning of the beginners' course for the International Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) standards. Specifically, in terms of the impact of coronavirus pandemic on teaching foreign languages. The paper utilized qualitative methodology with the two mediums of direct observation and the open questionnaire. According to the study results, adaptive changes were seen in the curriculum, and these were in accordance with the INEE standards for education in emergencies. For example, revision in the contents, planning and methodologies. More specifically, while the Blackboard platform saw an increase in the new learning materials and written communicative activities in the forum; there was a clear reduction in the oral skills and language practice. Also, in comparison the use of traditional methodology was seen to be higher than the communicative method.

Key words: education in emergencies, beginners, remote teaching, French as a foreign language (FFL), INEE standards

Introduction

The measures against COVID-19, led to the transference of education completely to the online medium for the many academic establishments across the globe. This was also seen to be implemented on March 9, 2020 at College of Languages at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. Correspondingly, the teachers adopted the use of online mediums for instruction delivery. These included: Blackboard, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, amongst others. The primary objective was to avoid wasting a student year and also ensure seamless and continued education despite the new challenges.

During the initial stages of these unfamiliar times, the students learning French at the University were able to engage in continued learning with minimal disruption. Under the new normal, the University teachers invested efforts in teaching a beginners' FFL course using the online teaching platform as a mediating role. Guichon (2012:6) also corroborates that without the teacher's mediation, technology is of marginal importance to language learning (Guichon, 2012: 6). On the lines of Nader (2019: 84) the level of beginners was considered, especially those students from non-French native backgrounds that make learning FFL a challenge.

As the pandemic onset brought forward unprecedented conditions, the teaching faculty approached the online remote teaching of French language without any prior plan or design. Attributed to the fact that in remote settings the first tasks involve the instructor, the teaching faculty employed the concept of teaching and not learning (Hodges et al., 2020). In all cases, the concept of teaching is closely related to learning, as "*Teaching is the action performed by the person or technology that facilitates the presentation of content and the exchange of knowledge and skills. Teaching is an attempt to organize external events for the purpose of constructing knowledge and skills*" (Branch, Dousay, 2015: 18). While "*learning is done by an individual to construct knowledge and skills*" (Branch, Dousay, 2015: 18), and learners use a personal cognitive activity to achieve their learning.

Technological dimension of academic offers significant edge in remote settings, and additionally it is equally important to ensure the educational quality and continuity with a focus on a comprehensive analysis of teaching and learning. The study explores the sufficiency of teaching and learning methodology of FFL introductory course towards meeting the minimum INEE standards for teaching in emergencies. The paper is divided into four sections:

- Theoretical framework of the study pertaining to the concepts and foundations of education in emergencies.
- Description of the educational settings components in emergency that underpin the teaching and learning. This section also describes the research problem.
- The research methodology, tools, and data analysis approach used in the study.
- Study results, discussion, and recommendations.

1. Theoretical framework
This section of the paper presents the overarching theoretical concepts and foundations with reference to the remote settings' educational scenario, and with specific intersect with teaching FFL. Also, this section highlights the INEE standards used in the study.

1.1. Education in emergencies
According to INEE, 'education in emergencies' refers to the disruption of education during any disaster or conflict situation of large magnitude, that is, extending to tens of millions of children and youth. Here, the term "education" includes all types of formal, informal, technical, vocational higher, and adult education. It comprises education for all ages, primary, secondary and higher education, targeting children, youth or adults (INEE, 2010: 2).
Furthermore, societies experiencing conflict, forced displacement, natural disasters and public health emergencies emerge as focus areas of education disruption during emergencies (INEE, 2018: 4). Due to the unprecedented, rapid, and far-reaching effects of the coronavirus pandemic, this crisis can be proportional to warranting a classification within the framework of education in emergencies. According to Kirk, Cassity (2007: 51), the physical, psychosocial and cognitive protection of people is enhanced by this type of education during and after emergencies. This can be attributed to the fact that such education is underpinned by the principles governing the exceptional education conditions and caters to ensuring the provision of a minimum level of education. This implementation of education albeit is shadowed by the specific emergency conditions, it offers scope of improvement in academic curricula, teacher training, teaching, learning, and learning outcomes.
With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, researchers suggest a specific term for the instruction in these circumstances "*Emergency Remote teaching (ERT)*". It is a "*common alternative term used by online education researchers and professional practitioners to draw a clear contrast with what many of us know as high-quality online education*" (Hodges et al., 2020). In the specific scenarios that demarcate the emergency situations and are not ideal educative circumstances, the resultant online education cannot be deemed comparative to the planned and normal online education. In fact, education in emergency situations is not carried out in ideal circumstances, it is a temporary online education carried out in response to an emergency and it should be differentiated from online education, which is planned and occurs in normal situations (Hodges et al., 2020). A planned online education follows a course of careful preparation and design that influence the ultimate quality. However, this

meticulous attention to course design is not possible during emergencies, particularly in absence of a prior crisis response plan.

Such education may be conducted using distance learning modes like radio, mobile or a combination, based on the feasibility. Several studies have focused on the education systems in remote situations within the specific context of educational disruption due to conflicts and war, where radio and textbooks were used to support education continuity (Davies, Bentrovato, 2011; Qahir, Kirk, 2007).

1.2. Online remote learning for FFL beginners

Quality of education cannot be solely associated with the use of technology. Correspondingly, this powerful tool should be carefully exploited considering the plausible positive, as well as negative impact (Warschauer, 2009: xx).

For an effective implementation of online learning environments, it is necessary that the students also are equipped with the requisite language skills and sufficient proficiency in communication and interaction. The study of previous literature shows that though research is available around teaching of intermediate and advanced levels, studies focusing on the beginners' use of Web2.0 for learning and teaching (Chakowa, 2018). According to Kandeel (2013:103), the beginners lack autonomy and demonstrate a dependence on the teacher with particular reference to the use of technologies. In addition, the use of online aids for teaching beginners may also be affected due to challenges around individual follow-up. Beginners require continual motivation, encouragement and a specific focus on their individual needs and interests for an engaged and successful learning. Also, a regular feedback can help adjust and improve the online learning experience for students.

Foreign languages and FFL teaching oriented research has been found to explore several significant topics including Web2.0 for sustained student focus and motivation (Martínez, 2012; Ducate, Lomicka, 2008; Pinkman, 2005), learning autonomy (Lenkaitis, 2020; Cruaud, 2018; Cappellini et al., 2017), and self-confidence (Bournel-Bosson, Kostov, 2018). Several studies are increasingly exploring the use of social media in informal learning of foreign languages. Reinhardt (2019) reviewed the existing literature on social media use (formal and informal) in second and foreign language teaching and learning; for a period between 2009 to mid-2018. According to him, the social media use in learning contributes towards the development of cross-cultural and social pragmatics awareness, learners and users' identities, and particular literacies. The use of technology in education saw an organic growth resulting from the educational institutions' and stakeholders' intent to move towards more effective teaching, and this was evident despite the extensive research.

However, there is an apparent lack of focus on the 'how' of ensuring education to all types of learner in remote learning situations in the existing research on foreign languages, wherein, as remote conditions offer a unique distinction of relatively quicker responses under less than ideal conditions. With specific reference to the FFL set-up, it has been evidenced that online modes in FFL is responsive towards educating immigrants or refugees, thus affirming the FFL didactics in terms of catering to individuals in specific learning needs. Though, this affirmation resulted from several years of development of novel learning spaces for education management underpinned by theoretical references and specific methodologies aligned with unique needs of learning French as a Second Language (FLS) (Lepez et al., 2008). In addition, FFL didactics' efficient response to language teaching and learning needs as seen in language of integration (FLI) for immigrants evidence the methodological developments and the emergence of specific didactic field. According to Adami (2012:11), in France this specialization has witnessed a gradual growth with respect to the most important potential theoretical sources-most relevant to its intervention field corresponding to research trends. However, these resources and

capacity cannot be utilized in a generic manner owing to the exceptional conditions and specific learners.

Thus, it can be safely inferred that in remote situations, a relevant and applicable theoretical framework can be leveraged to further improve teaching and learning FFL, and as such, the current paper uses the theoretical framework specializing in education in emergencies.

1. 3. Education in Emergencies Framework and INEE Standards
The INEE handbook developed in 2004, with 2010 updates contains 19 standards for education pertaining to three stages in an emergency, namely preparedness, response, and recovery (INEE, 2010: 4). The standards are organized into five domains (Figure 1): Foundational standards, access to learning environment, teaching, and learning, teachers and other education personnel, and education policy (INEE, 2010: 8). This paper takes into consideration the teaching and learning domain due to its relevance to the exceptional learning conditions of the French language and translation program in FFL course's quality improvement.
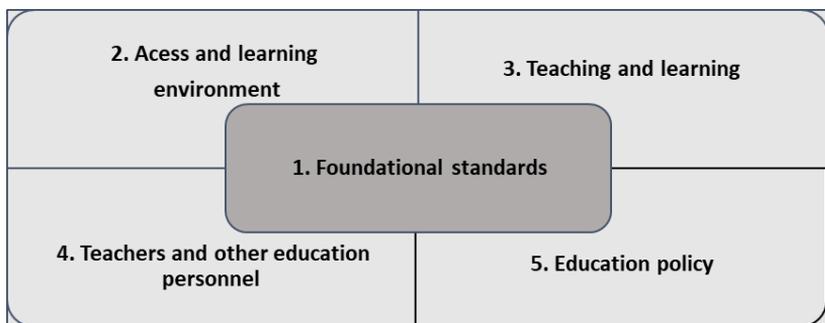

Figure 1: **Domains of the INEE Minimum Standards**

The quality of teaching can be significantly improved via analyzing FFL course teaching and learning within the particular context of didactic practices and introduction of more activities and new contents. Often times, crisis and emergencies result in infrastructure, resource, and capacity gaps that can be addressed also in local contexts through standards. The 'standards' refer to global, recommend actions that ensure the provision of a good teaching in emergencies.

The domain of teaching and learning is divided into more sub-standards, namely: Curricula, training, professional development and support, instruction and learning processes and assessment of learning outcomes (Figure 2).
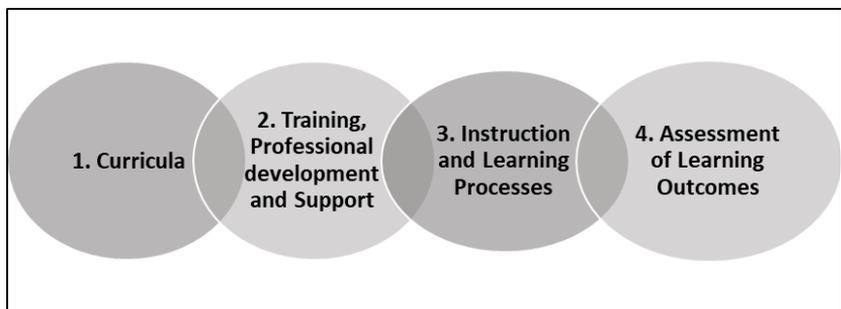

Figure 2: **Sub-standards of the domain of teaching and learning**

This paper considers the education related standards, that is, Standard 1 or the Curricula and Standard 3 or the Instruction and Learning Processes. In teaching foreign languages, Curricula (Standard 1) or educational programs refer to the design, implementation, and evaluation of language programs, which implies the complete educational process (Richards, 2001). In education of emergencies, curriculum is "*a plan of action to help learners to improve their knowledge and skills. It applies to both formal and non-formal education programs and needs to be relevant and adaptable to all learners. It includes learning objectives, learning content, assessments, teaching methods and materials*" (INEE, 2010: 77).

The premise of selecting the sub-standards in this paper was not only the fact that these are applicable to a language program, but also as these constitute essential course elements. The development or changes in a course's teaching program can be identified through learning objectives, learning content, assessments, teaching methods and materials. More so as changes resulting in education program due to any emergency may be evident in any of these sub-standards. The Standard 3 or instruction and learning process is defined as a learner-centered process characterized by participation and inclusion, according to the INEE (2010: 87). The INEE has furnished a general definition of each of the sub standards, describing their specific criteria. Underpinned by these criteria and mapping these with the study objectives the resultant metric describing the study criteria is presented as Table1. Herein, the criteria were formulated based on parameters like, specific emergency situation, public health scenario, absence of war or forced migration, targeted learners and their types, university students, educational interest area and teaching faculty.

Table 1: **criteria for the two INNE sub-standards "Curricula" and "Instruction and learning processes".**

Standard	Criteria
Curricula	Appropriate to context and level of learners.
	Curriculum review and development should be carried out by accepted and appropriate education authorities.
	Using formal and non-formal education programs/ activities during or after emergencies.
	Life skills learning content and key concepts should be context-specific and may include: Health and hygiene promotion; Culture, recreation, sports, and arts, including music, drama and visual arts.
	The psychosocial needs, rights of learners should be addressed at all stages of emergency through to recovery.
	Education personnel need training to recognize signs of distress in learners to provide additional support.
	Language of instruction is language(s) understood by learners.
	Locally available learning materials for learners should be assessed, adapted, or developed if necessary, at the beginning of an emergency.
Instruction and learning processes	Teaching methods are appropriate to context.
	Teaching methods should address the rights and needs of learners.
	Implementation of new methodologies, particularly during the initial stages of an emergency, may be stressful even for experienced teachers
	Teaching should be interactive and participatory, ensuring that all learners are involved in the lesson and encouraging active engagement of learners.

For all study purposes, the paper has used the definition provided by the INEE for all the terms used in the study, and these definitions are similar to the FFL. Learning

"objectives" identify the knowledge, attitudes and skills that will be developed through education activities. The concept of "learning content" refers to subject areas, while the "assessment" refers to the measurement of what has been learned as knowledge, attitudes or skills for the learning content covered. This research uses also "teaching methods" a concept which refer to the approach used in the presentation of learning content and it refers to the term of methodology. And finally, the "instruction material" refers to books, supplementary study materials and other teaching and learning materials (INEE, 2010: 78).

2. Contextual framework

The Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University (PNU) is established in the north of the Saudi capital, Riyadh. The Translation Department of the Faculty of Languages offers a course in the French language as a part of the French-Arabic translation studies. The course caters to non-native French students, who do not have any prior knowledge of the French language and Arabic is the mother tongue of these students. French is the second foreign language after English and the students obtain a bachelor's degree in translation after four years of learning French language.

In education domain, this was an unprecedented emergency condition and as such demonstrated lack of any contingency plan for continuing education in emergency/crisis situation. As such, in order to meet the novel emerging challenges of online remote education, the education establishment largely relied on the capabilities and experiences of the faculty staff in the field of language teaching and translation.

The technological advancement has assured a concurrent and fortified technological infrastructure overall with students having access to a good internet connection and electronic devices. The use of technology has been largely focused on teaching translation with the students being encouraged to FFL learning through directed use of websites (example, for grammar exercises). The university also has employed the use of Blackboard platform for course launch and provides the fundamental information about each French language course (duration, course topics, learning objectives, contact details for teachers, teaching strategies and teaching methods, assessment and announcements).

According to Aljaber (2018), multiple factors including the distrust of online education and ineffective use in higher education resulted in limited use of the Blackboard platform in online teaching and assessment. The university encourages the use of digital platforms in teaching FFL with a mandatory minimum activation level for the Blackboard platform that constitutes one of the academic and professional evaluation criteria of professors.

Mowad (2020:101) adds that the use of this medium in teaching and assessment fails to qualify as a majority proportional use due to the restricted use. Despite the fact that Blackboard platform features tools that create interactive electronic lectures as well as help manage assignments, tests and grades, and send and receive emails and announcements to students. Thus, the tool serves as a robust channel for interaction, communication, and collaborative work. The faculty members are enabled to manage live discussions with the facility to divide students into groups and allow direct conversation between them with the Blackboard platform. Furthermore, the teachers are able to track the student interest and study activities as the platform provides analytics on how often students access and use the system (Al Meajel, Sharadgah, 2018, Pusuluri et al. 2017, D'silva, Reeder 2005). As such, in an evolving hybrid educational system in Saudi, these capabilities of the platform have led to its use in teaching English as a foreign language (Alsaied, 2016). To the best of author's knowledge, there are no studies that have explored the use of Blackboard platform in teaching FFL in the same context.

3. FFL course for beginners

This paper focuses on the analysis of teaching and learning the French language in a course entitled "*Introduction to the French Language*" during the COVID-19 pandemic. The course is intended for first-year students in the second semester of their academic year, which in this case is 2019-2020. In this specific instance, it was taught for a period of four months, and the last two months were learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic. The course was taught once a week, for three hours. The total number of enrolled students is forty-three and as stipulated in the CECRL Framework (2001), these students are in the process of obtaining the A1 level.

The primary reason that underpins the selection of this course for the research is that the specifics of this course allow for

(i) understanding the main challenges of

(a) teaching beginners in a;

(b) fully online environment, and

(ii) in using this experience to think about the adaptation of other courses targeting beginners.

The curriculum analysis was conducted used the four components listed in the Curricula standard developed by INEE and include, learning objectives, content, teaching materials, teaching methods and assessments. The in-depth analysis based on these components is particularly relevant to help identify the changes in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The course is designed to provide an introduction of the French language to the students through the development of oral comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension and written production. The course construct follows a linear progression, as outlined in textbook *Texto 1* (Lopes, Le Bougnec, 2016). Moreover, for a higher customization, the contents or the lessons have been modified to include only the relevant topics from each lesson to cover the necessary elements for this level, thus deviating slightly from the curriculum organization in *Texto1*. Classroom learning is conducted through student book and exercise book which is made available in physical copies at the university's library for purchase. As an example of the lesson adopted for online teaching, the current paper focuses on the tenth lesson. It allows for a better insight into the online learning methodologies as methodologies vary between traditional methodology for teaching grammar and vocabulary and communicative approach for teaching communication to improve learners' language skills (oral and written comprehension and expression).

Interactive learning constitutes a necessary element of teaching, highlighting the significance of instructor-learners and learner-learner interactions in basic communication situations. With a participative approach the students answer simple questions asked by the teacher in French, and also the learners engage in oral role-play, working in peer teams to write dialogues in French and present in class, and more such activities. Basic dialogues in French are used by the students to communicate in the class. The teacher uses the sing-along method to encourage students for an expedited learning of the language, for example, name of the days, months and such, thus giving the students a good idea of the pronunciation, as well we language vocabulary. Thus, a more interactive way of learning helped even the struggling students to stay motivated through the online mode. Furthermore, these participative activities fostered and strengthened the peer-teacher bond. Cumulatively, these developments evidenced the achievement of the acquisition of basic knowledge and targeted skills and demonstrated progress in FFL teaching and learning. The assessment methodology used was face-to-face interaction without using online tests or exams and these are valid for learning outcomes in the areas of knowledge and skills.

4. Research problem and questions

The research problem pertains to conducting an explorative and qualitative study on the changes affected in the teaching and learning scope due to COVID-19 pandemic with specific reference to changes in FFL beginner's curriculum and if teaching and learning meets the needs of students and the INEE minimum standards for education in emergencies.

The teaching faculty initiated the virtual classes with the use of online platforms like MS Teams and Blackboard with the objective to ensure instruction continuity using available and accessible technology for students and faculty alike. In addition, for a seamless transition to online teaching the university conducted technical training in supporting the initiative and facilitating the teachers to familiarize themselves with essential Blackboard features and virtual classes. However, considering the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and resultant emergency situation the teachers were not prepared to address the change. The faculty thus evolved and developed their capacities as teachers and researchers in context if FFL didactics to diligently find appropriate teaching methods and methodology for the remote learning situation in the course "*Introduction to the French Language*" for beginners. Similarly, for students the situation demanded quick adaptations to new learning methods. More specifically, the students were well-versed in learning this course from a textbook *Texto 1* and the use of an online platform like the Blackboard was new to them. Irrespective of the exposure to integrating technology into language classes the proportion of the adoption of online medium posed a challenge for the teaching faculty as it has specific nuances for a remote situation like course management, lesson design, online resources, and student interactions.

This led to the following research questions:

1. What are the changes that have occurred in the course curriculum and in teaching and learning the French language?

2.What is the students 'opinions about learning the French language post implementation of these changes?

3. How compatible are these changes with the INEE minimum standards?

5. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology, combining the researcher's observation with an open questionnaire survey. The first is a technique that allows for questioning and materialization on an empirical level the components of the beginner's course. It is "*an essential method of providing access to what is hidden, restoring the chain of actions and interactions, or even assimilating what is not said or "what is not to be said* " (Chauvin, Jounin, 2010: 145). The participant observer can first define the case under review in this study and then proceed to draw a comparative analysis with other states and environments and build more general models (Chauvin, Jounin, 2010: 152). During the observation period, March 2020 to May 2020, the author collected data through notes on processes and activities involved in implementation of the online teaching mode. For example, the class events and activities, digital tools, teaching methods and more. These data sourced the analysis to define the resulting change from COVID-19 pandemic in teaching towards understanding the adaptation mechanisms and elements of change. Emphasis was placed on analyzing content, learning plans, preparing learning materials and adapting them to circumstances, and using teaching methodologies.

In addition to this approach to analyze the change in teaching, it was equally significant to accumulate student's feedback for changes in learning. The open questionnaire survey was thus implemented to question students about their experience in learning the French language during the Covid-19 pandemic and to know the effectiveness of the changes and its role in providing a quality online

teaching for students. In May 2020, the questionnaire was distributed to course student population (n=43), wherein, total responses received were (N=27). The primary open-ended question in the survey was: Elaborate your experience of learning French during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The mode of sharing the questionnaire to the study participants was WhatsApp platform, as it serves as the most popularly used and fasted mode of communication. In particular, the teaching faculty has seen higher responses to academic information and queries circulated through this medium. The questionnaire was circulated to individual WhatsApp account of each participating students and was formulated in Arabic language. The students' responses to the questions were translated to English for study purposes and to retain participant anonymity, the response records were coded into letter (Student 1 = E1). The qualitative approach was used to analyze the responses. The objective analysis was underpinned by two main premises: (i) students' impressions of FFL learning, and (ii) students' perspective on French language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, once the changes affected in the academic program are analyzed, followed by collating the students' opinions on learning, the study aims to assess the compliance of these changes with the minimum INEE standards.

6. Results

6.1. Changes in the course curriculum and in teaching and learning FFL beginners during the COVID-19 pandemic

In this section, the paper puts forth the procedures implemented to adapt instruction concurrent to the alterations in content and learning plans, formulation of learning materials, applicability of these, circumstances regulating the change and the modified teaching methodologies and assessment. The primary idea was to adapt the curriculum in alignment with the in-use methodology of teaching FFL, with respect to the context, institutional instructions, student characteristics, with little attention to the INEE standards—all in prime interest of continuing education for the students and prevent any academic loss. Notably, the curriculum objectives remained the same, as these are stipulated by the department of translation. However, the curriculum components were modified to some extent in order to accommodate the online learning environment.

6.1.1. Modifying the content and introducing new plans

In order to adapt to the new situation of online learning it was imperative to rely on the original curriculum for this course. As such, the adaptation pertained to content modification towards objectives mentioned in the previous section. The underpinning idea was to align to the university instructions for the educational process suggested by the administration in the college. The primary process change was reducing the lecture time to an hour instead of the standard three hours.

6.1.1.1. Modifications in the content

In terms of course content, the lecture topics identified included those topics that could be covered quickly with the students and did not require classroom settings for discussions or dialogues. Emphasis was placed on imparting grammar and vocabulary lessons with reduced time for verbal communicative language skills. This is because, of insufficient time to include dialogue or conversation in the lessons and higher time allocation to this scope would have hampered teaching the entire planned content due to change in process. Correspondingly, the following table shows the addition conjugation of the verb do (faire) to another lesson as an example for changes.

Explanation of this verb was given in Lecture 9 and the instructor prepared a written activity on the Blackboard about it.

The following table shows changes in the content of Lecture 10.

Table 2: **Breakdown of a single face-to-face course into two online courses**

Contents of course before COVID-19 pandemic	Contents of course after COVID-19 pandemic

Cours 10
 Savoir-faire :
 - Dire le temps qu'il fait : parler de la Météo
 Livre : Encadré bleu, p.44+ exerc.6, p.50.
 - Dire l'heure
 Livre : encadré blanc, p.46 + exerc.12, p.51
 Lexique :
 -La météo
 - Les mots de la journée : *matin, midi, soir…*
 Livre : encadré bleu, p.47.
 Cahier d'activités : exerc.3, p.47
 -Les nombres : 0-60
 -Les noms de pays
   La France / La Belgique / La Chine / La Pologne / La Corée
   L'Arabie Saoudite / L'Espagne
   Le Brésil / Le Japon / Le Mexique / Le Canada
   Les Etats Unis / Les Philippines.
 -Grammaire :
 -Les prépositions (en – au –aux + noms de pays)
 Livre : encadré jaune, p.31 + exerc.6, p.37
 -Les prépositions de lieu :
 Devant – derrière- sur- sous- à côté– dans. P. 47
	Cours 9
	 Lexique:
	 -Les noms de pays
	   La France / La Belgique / La Chine / La Pologne / La Corée
	   L'Arabie Saoudite / L'Espagne
	   Le Brésil / Le Japon / Le Mexique / Le Canada
	   Les Etats Unis / Les Philippines.
	 Grammaire
	 -conjugaison des verbes Faire+ Aller
	 -Les prépositions (en – au –aux + noms de pays)
	 -les prépositions de lieu utilisées avec les noms des villes et des pays (masculin, féminin et pluriel)
	
	 Cours 10
	 Savoir-faire :
	 Parler de ses activités dans le temps libre sur le Blackboard.
	 Savoir-faire :
	 Sur le Forum du Blackboard
	 - Dire le temps qu'il fait : parler de la Météo
	 Lexique :
	 - La météo

Notably, the amendment made led to segregation and use of content from one lecture in normal class (Lecture 10) into content for two lectures in online learning (Lecture 9, 10). This is primarily attributed to the reduction in the lecture time thus limiting the accommodation of entire existing content. The selection of content to be included was also (in addition to above-mentioned criteria) was based on its relevancy and interconnectedness with the other topics included in the lessons. As such, other topics, such as numbers and hours, that were not related to other topics in the lesson or that needed to be learned for another whole lecture were excluded. Also, the lesson plan now included two short written assignments: Writing activities for the students to do during their free time (like, describing the weather conditions in the city on the discussion forum of the Blackboard).

With such a lesson plan and assignments, the beginner batch of students, were encouraged to write in FFL and use the new online forum activities optimally towards engaging in online education activities and constructive peer work as well as feedback from the faculty. The teaching faculty consciously adhered to the online medium in allocating a writing assignment and did not engage in the conventional classroom practice of conducting all writing activities on paper or in the student book of *Texto 1* as in pre-COVID-19 times.

6.1.1.2. New lectures plan

During the new regime of online teaching medium, the teaching faculty made the following observations in designing the new lecture plans:

- Weekly lesson plan were better-suited to help students develop an improved understanding of lesson to be covered in each lecture, as well as the new tasks in online learning.
- The lesson plans were organized to include basic information for the students in the new online learning environment.
- The modified lesson plans were aligned to the use of online medium, in terms of instructor explanation, teaching content, and performing existing exercises in the textbook *Texto 1,* as well as online.
- The lessons plans were modified to follow a one-directional linear flow with inclusion of online platform pertaining to entailed student activities during the FFL course.
- The lesson plan contained a detailed description of the activities and was drafted separately for each lecture containing the lesson page numbers in the textbook, all the exercises that the students will undertake in the textbook, files, discussions, assignments, quizzes.
- The modified lesson plan, in addition included the targeted knowledge and skills, guidance notes, and other learning materials like videos and new activities utilizing the Blackboard platform. More specifically, the written assignments were aimed to encourage students to write simple sentences
- The lesson plan presented a meticulously and well-ordered understanding of the class content and schedule. The plans were written in MS Word doc, in the native language of the students, that is, Arabic towards also encouraging independent learning amongst the students.
- The new lesson plans also included supportive materials to facilitate and support learning in the new environment towards access and summarizing the relevant course contents. For example, an educational video was shared online with the students on weather, with instructions to watch for 20 seconds and two writing assignments after the online lecture.

During the FFL class, the communication language was not only restricted to French but the teaching faculty also used Arabic, that is, the students' native language as in remote teaching conditions. This is because, the faculty observed that as a beginner level batch, not only students could understand all lesson/course content in French language.

6.1.2 Videos as learning materials

The supporting learning material was also modified to suit the online platform. The teaching faculty decides to include simplified aids to boost better comprehension and student engagement.

- Inclusions like explanatory videos to complement the lesson plan for content that necessitated better or enhanced learning
- Use of online visual aids was restricted from using printed materials. For instance, videos were used in the online classroom sessions for Time lesson. Thus, giving the students the choice to watch a video or refer their textbooks.
- The challenge in video selection was identifying video content to best match or align with the textbook content, leading to high time investment by the faculty in searching and retrieving the apt video.
- Another evident challenge was the video quality to be ideal for online sharing and transmission. Also, it was important to identify videos that were

presented in a clear dialect as regards the pronunciation from non-native person, which is not preferable in learning beginners.

- The students were asked to watch the videos and prepare the lesson, practice pronunciation, develop vocabulary. Also, the students were shown pictures to help remember and sharpen their vocabulary and language comprehension by answering questions related to those pictures. This was intended to replace the classroom activities.

6.1. 3. Instruction and teaching methodologies

A two-hour online training program was organized by the university in order to create virtual classrooms to enable remote learning in all disciplines. This ensured that the entire teaching faculty body has access to distance learning platforms, including MS Teams and Zoom. This transition from the conventional face-to-face classroom teaching to virtual remote education marked a necessary transition in the unprecedented coronavirus times.

This online training program however was not extended to cover any specific needs of the FFL teaching. As such, the following practices characterized the delivery of lessons:

- The lessons were explained on a synchrony virtual classroom created for the lesson on the Blackboard.
- The virtual sessions are only constructed to allow the use of microphone and the sessions refrained from using videos cameras (instructors and students) owing to the personal and social cultural reasons. In this respect, it is necessary to note that lack of a visual encounter/interaction leads to absence of non-verbal communication.
- In order to explain the lessons, a shared screen was used, wherein, the lessons were presented in a MS Word file by the instructor and the important elements of the lesson were highlighted using colors and shading.
- The reduced lecture time, affected the traditional method of elaborate verbal explanation and discussion, which, in turn, impacted the interaction possibility between learners-learners, and learners-instructor group. Even though, the chat option was used by some students as discussion medium to give a written answer, the use of verbal response was highly limited.
- The solution to expedite teaching in a reduced span was to bank upon the grammatical translation methodology of lesson delivery. With the use of native language, this reassuring methodology reduces misunderstandings that may percolate in in organizing learning and transferring information.
- There was minimal emphasis on verbal skills as significant amount of time is expensed in an oral dialogue involving interaction between learners-learners, and learners-instructor group. Thus, rendering the online session time allotted insufficient to cover all the intended topics in the lesson plan.
- In the conventional classroom scenario, dedicated time is allocated for learners to practice verbal language skills. This is essentially achieved through organizing class into groups and teams. However, this is not feasible through the online medium where is the students are attending through a remote location.
- It was also observed that students requested the instructor to deliver instructions in their native language, i.e., Arabic—this was despite sharing the instructions prior to the actual online session.
- Additionally, the students used the synchrony tools in the Blackboard during the online lecture to communicate with the instructor. Alternatively,

students also sent emails asking for information on the assignments or to convey any other related messages.

Clearly, the majority of content and teaching methodology used is conventional, albeit via a virtual medium, and the writing activities entailed a communicative approach. Another pattern that emerged was the psychological response the use of a new technology/medium to learning by the students. Definitely the faculty has prior exposure to the use of ICT in teaching FFL, however the application of this technology in remote scenario was a novel aspect. This, resulted in new challenges around managing stress in the early stages of crisis, and engaging all students in the interaction to ensure fairness in learning.

6.1.4. Assessment

Similar to the course design, and content, the assessment methods were also modified for improved adaptability from the student population. These modifications involved (i) Designing new assessment plans in line with the available technology and remote access mediums; and (ii) Changing the assessment methods based on the curricula/content changes.

The resultant modifications and observations are discussed in the following points:

- In the new curricula design, homework and quizzes were allocated more scores, thus raising the formative assessment score to 80% instead of 60%. This was initiated by the university administration to reduce the negative effects of the academic and psychological burden of online exams for students and to conduct all exams at the university level on the official platform.
- As such, the online exam duration was restricted to one hour with the purpose of accommodating all the other courses in the university. As the Blackboard platform would have run into technical glitches and issues, in case it was burdened with high number of tests, corresponding students logging and entering answers simultaneously.
- The assessment methods were changed to include self-correcting test papers. This mode was supported by the Blackboard platform's features that allowed to design these types of assessments, automatically correct tests, and send scores to the Grade Center, to be calculated and shown to students.
- Furthermore, in order to ensure the transparency of the procedure, the assessment results were discussed with the students. Moreover, the students who could not attend the online test had the option to sit for the assessment again, in case, they faced any technical issues and shared evidence of the same, for example, a screenshot of a system crash message.
- The majority of online assessments were oriented towards linguistic knowledge, that is, learning outcomes for language skills and knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary. This was conducted using written or verbal activities.
- The assessments were formulated as closed questionnaire containing MCQ and true or false questions. This was specifically because of the limitation of using a regular, open-ended questionnaire as this requires students to write short form or long form texts. Rather, assessment using open-ended questionnaire is highly time-consuming in an online context. As this requires multiple steps like, first downloading of test paper by the students, then filling-in the answers, uploading the answer sheets, then downloading of the answer sheets by the invigilator, correcting, scoring, and sending of these sheets to the students.

- Initially designing the online tests posed its challenges to the instructor, attributed to the fact that the instructors were not trained for these remote tasks, requiring research for conducting instruction and assessment for online medium. Indeed, the support extended by the university helped propel the entire effort to a significant extent.
- Another challenge was conducting the actual assessment of the (n=43) students, as the correction would leave limited time for preparation of lessons for the teaching sessions.
- Also, it was necessary to keep the virtual sessions, engaging and interactive by continually enriching them with new learning materials requiring extensive, time-consuming research on the part of the instructor.

6.2. Opinions of the students about online remote learning FFL

Upon the completion of the online remote learning, the students were asked to participate in the questionnaire survey, as mentioned earlier, in order to assess their experience on learning the FFL course through the online medium. In the following section, the paper puts forth the emerging patterns and results relevant to language learning.

6.2. 1. General impressions about the French language
- A beautiful and enjoyable language for majority of students:
  a. (E5) "*it felt like a beautiful and enjoyable language*"
  b. (E6) "*French language has a great culture*"
- The difficulty of French language compounds its beauty:
  a. (E16) "*French is an enjoyable language for me, but it is a bit difficult to learn and needs focus*"
  b. (E2) "*Grammar is difficult*"
  c. (E18) "*Difficult to practice*"; "*Large vocabulary*"
- A large majority of students opined that French is a complex, rich, powerful, communicative language.
  a. (E19, E21) "*…communicative nature… for future use*"

6.2. 2. The students 'point of view on remote learning the French language

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in changes in the learning environment, across the linguistic and didactic levels. The students shared the following feedback:
- Learning difficulty during the remote situations
  a. (E1, E2, E18) "*Grammar is the most difficult*"
  b. (E13, E16, E17) "*Grammar rules require memorization and… attention*"
  c. (E5, E7) "Difficult to *differentiate between masculine and feminine*"
  d. (E1, E10, E17) "*Learning requires more effort*"
  e. (E8, E10) "*Due to other online courses, less time to study*"
- Lack of language practice is the second difficulty with online remote learning, attributed to minimal opportunities of verbal interaction (learners-learners & learners-instructor). This was mentioned by (E1, E7, E13, E18, E21). A foreign language can be easily forgotten in absence of oral practice.
  a. (E1) "*The conversation was fun and at first I felt I mastered it well. But, I mean, when we got into the rules, it became more difficult for me to speak*"
  b. (E7) "*It is a difficult language without practice and it is easy for me or for beginners but if I leave it for a long time or if I do not study or practice it, I forget it*"

- Lack of comprehension of vocabulary during the virtual sessions emerged as the third difficulty from the responses.
    a. E11 "*With online remote education, we faced many difficulties in tests and new vocabulary, For example, if I want to translate a word to understand it, I will get the rest of the sentence that I did not understand because I did not learn it in the textbook*"
- Lack of time-management capabilities during the online exams. This could be attributed to couple of reasons: new medium for the students; shorter time than the conventional written exams and students wanting to share the same long-form answers as discussed in regular classroom sessions; difficulty in writing online answers as machines (mobiles, PCs) do not contain French characters. Only one student cited 'no negative' effect on learning with the online medium
    a. (E12) "*New words are being introduced into my life, so I enjoy French lessons whether they were face to face learning or online*"

6. 3. The extent to which changes comply with the INEE minimum standards

Clearly, the course design and content were modified to align with the teaching and learning challenges presented in contrast to the traditional classroom methodologies. Some of these changes could be considered to be in line with the INEE standards as mentioned in Table1.

The existing curriculum was specifically designed to cater to learning needs of the beginner level students and as such linguistically appropriate. The changes affected in the course made it more suitable for delivery using the online medium and entailed (i) organizing content with new additions; (ii) support other educational resources such as videos; (iii) provide access to new learning materials and perform activities through the Blackboard platform.

The responsibility of reviewing and developing the course curriculum was with the specific course instructor and was not lined up for official review by the program committee. This decision was taken in consideration of the fact that official review is a time-taking process, and moreover the changes were made during the pandemic, and to avoid disruption in continuity of course. Some of the content modifications were made in cognizance of the emergency situation and entailed including course content not previously included in the course, specific to online remote situation.

The framework of the traditional and formal learning capacities was retained in the classroom activities, and hence limited to textbook activities. In order to introduce new extra-curricular activities, it was decided to not refer or use the abundant digital resources available during the pandemic. Though, this is a natural course, according to Hodges et al., (2020), the transition to online education is difficult and poses challenges in terms of fully taking advantage of the possibilities of online resources.

The modified course did not contain content related to learning life skills and basic principles. Irrespective of the significance of these skills in enabling students to lead an independent and productive life. The focus was on solely building up the linguistic quality of the content, considering the limitations of teaching language in remote situations and no content was introduced to enhance students 'understanding of preventive measures in either the mother tongue or the foreign language. Likewise, no content related to entertainment, arts, or songs, for example, was taught.

It was also observed that the psychological needs of the students may go unattended. This can be attributed to a couple of reasons – (i) lack of prior training to the instructor on assessing the signs of distress in students; (ii) absence of physical and visual contact with students. This can be addressed by providing the instructors with necessary training in reading the signs in remote teaching conditions, and identifying indications that the student needs psychological support in continuing the course and

successfully completing the course duration. The drawback of this lacunae is that the students encountering difficult circumstances in remote situations may quit the program without access to necessary help.

The course instructions were not solely in French language but the students' native language, i.e., Arabic was also used to give instructions and clarify organizational procedures. This was done in response to the observation that students were seeking help from the instructor in Arabic language on emails to request clarification and information about instructions placed on the list of announcements in French language. Towards the set-up of online remote learning the students unanimously agreed on their desire to use the mother tongue in communication. As regards the decisions regarding the language of instruction this choice corresponds to the INEE standards stating that it is necessary to use a language that is understood by the learners to facilitate seamless communication.

Correspondingly, the focus on grammar and vocabulary gave a traditional methodological framework to the online remote learning Indeed, INEE reports that "*Implementation of new methodologies, particularly during the initial stages of an emergency, may be stressful even for experienced teachers*" (2010:88). There was a transition away from interactive method and the communicative approach towards the traditional content-rich learning. Definitely, this approach was in line with the context of education in emergencies with attention to facilitate students' understanding. However, it contrasted the students' perspective on developing the vocal and oral skills for the language. As no oral activities were suggested, there was no interactive integration or participation of students in oral activities.

The students' participation, their motivation, engagement and commitment were ensured through the Blackboard assignments and questions raised on the discussion forum. In accordance with the INEE standards no drastic change in the teaching methodologies was introduced to avoid any confusion amongst the students and the instructors alike.

7. Discussion

In the unknown times of corona crisis, as a first response to education, it was necessary to mechanisms and methodologies for online remote teaching. Correspondingly, the course instructor invested the profession exposure and acumen to expedite and formulate adaptable changes using the available capabilities to ensure continued student learning without enrolling in any training related to education in emergencies. These changes were affected mid-way during the course and as such, all the lessons in this course did not undergo a complete change. The change was limited to lessons scheduled to be covered in the last four lessons. Owing to these as well as the time constraints, it was not feasible to submit the changes for an official review and approval. It is recommended that the rest of the lessons should also be modified to cater to the altered scenario and these can be submitted for necessary review by the committees determined by the academic administration. In fact, these modifications should be made on periodic intervals, in order to scan and focus on novel emerging realities for use of appropriate content in language skills.

As regards the intersect between INEE criteria and the students 'opinions about learning, it was observed that for FFL, grammar constitutes one of the core qualities representing the learning of the course. This was taken into account while modifying the content to scale it to current online sessions. Also, as accommodating conversations or speaking-oriented content would have been higher time-consuming in comparison to video content for explaining the course modules. Moreover, grammar rules videos were available online, that could be accessed by students for learning.

As also mentioned earlier, the focus was on linguistic and ideally the course should be able to extend wider benefits. More specifically, an imbalance between knowledge and skills, was evident resulting from the adaptation of the curriculum. This was because a large amount of knowledge was adjusted to fit into shorter timelines. As such it is suggested that for the next semester, it is a priority to rethink the balance. This will particularly address the concern raised by the students regarding the difficulty and the intensity of studying grammar.

In addition, the students also cited challenges around comprehending sentences/sections/words that were not covered in class. This was seen specifically in case of sentences used in the tests or in the assignments. However, this can be considered as a trigger to motivate students towards self-learning to expand their language vocabulary and relate with their textbook learning.

In this case, it is necessary to develop an insight on the diverse strategies that can be leveraged to help students understand this vocabulary. For example, using the online bilingual dictionary to find out the meanings of words. This practice will also encourage students to engage in self-learning. As is corroborated by El-Hmoudova (2015), students become more adept at foreign language learning through better engagement, effective, and efficient learning when driven through making available new relevant study materials to learners. Moreover, the instructor can help students read and understand the meaning of sentences at the beginner level towards reassuring and supporting students in acquiring learning strategies.

In terms of the alignment of the modified content to meet the students' expectations, students expressed their inadequate practice of language and oral conversation. Due to the limitations of online remote learning, the students could not engage in interactive education opportunities. This resulted in an increase in the difficulty of the language creating obstacles in deriving practical communication benefits (like, while traveling). For beginners, in any case, online interaction poses challenges of diverse nature.

As such, it was observed that the criteria of suitability of the methodology used in accordance with the learners' needs was not met completely. Thus, in the future courses, the instructor can formulate learning scenarios that ensure provision of interactive and oral activities, like role playing in addition to developing reading and writing language expertise amongst the students. By appealing to sentimental, emotional, fun, enjoyable, confidence, friendliness, playing, singing, and interactive elements of foreign language learning within unconventional methodologies can help students become more vocal. For instance, the use of songs can aid grammar and vocabulary comprehension as well as memorization. Because in language class, the use of songs facilitate exposure to new sounds and in structures that remain in memory, as well as are well-accepted by learners (Kazlauskaitė et al, 2016: 247). Biquard, Eddatkra (1982: 71) claim that with these elements, the lessons do not merely function as a tool for transmitting knowledge but become synonymous with fun, play and communication. The learners' needs are met with the use of diversified activities in classroom through adoption of combined methodologies and as corroborated by Puren "the only bad method is the unique method" in teaching foreign languages (2018: 12).

This study focused on exploring the teaching and learning of French language within a holistic framework for education in emergencies. Notably, the modifications made in an early response to the situation cannot be considered commensurate with the specificity of the remote situation. The approach needs to take into account integrating extracurricular activities that are focused on the life skills related activities like culture and art, health awareness, and training teachers on psychological support for learners. Language learning and teaching cannot be treated in isolation from contextual events and conditions. For example, pandemic situations like coronavirus that affect the

entire student population, thus necessitating the framework to include these elements in course structure.

Moreover, the instructor can suggest extracurricular activities towards helping the students with psychological distress. These activities can include a virtual class visit to places of historical or cultural significance, for example, the Louvre Museum. Post which, the students can be asked to make presentations on their observations in teams. This will facilitate learners-learners, as well as learners-instructor interaction with reduced focus on content-based methods.

Blanchet (2018) says that there must be consistency between human relations and life in society, with regard to focusing on life skills in language teaching. Thus, it becomes necessary for the instructor to implement classroom practices revolving around building and fostering consistent attitudes around ideal behavior in the society. For example, in this scenario, the instructor can ask students about sharing their perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic and assign activities that can done remotely and shared online. For example, in a written activity, students can associate symbols related to the pandemic with corresponding words to talk about how to act in facing the pandemic. In another activity, they can prepare pamphlets in French language on how to maintain a good diet and sports to have a good health and prevent COVID-19.

Another important element is the teachers' training. All the above-listed activities can demonstrate better results with equipping the teachers with the right skill-set. It was observed that during this initiative to transition to online teaching, the instructors had to invest significant amount of personal effort. No didactical training was provided in the remote situation to support this procedure and it is the responsibility of education authorities to implement teacher training activities (INEE, 2010: 84). Moreover, in order to successfully navigate the changed scenario, the instructor needs training on how to adapt teaching content, learning materials and methodologies to the respective needs of the learners and to the learning objectives.

Also, the students are facing this scenario for the first time where the entire study module has been relegated to the online platform. As such, the students may need psychological support from the instructors. Herein, a working group of instructors can address this situation by identifying and sharing materials and resources that may assist the instructors to conduct virtual sessions in a thoughtful way, without compromising the quality of teaching. Also, the team can provide their expertise to research and analyze the learning theories underpinning the new materials and identify the most relevant materials to encourage collaborative learning and develop cognitive skills. Definitely, a crisis situation mandates rapid resolution of education disruption and instructor support from specialized teaching faculty can help strengthen the lecture designing and possibilities of professional development.

Conclusion

The paper focused on the curriculum and the teaching and learning of FFL course for beginners in online remote situations. The fundamental design of the course followed a conventional, face-to-face, classroom framework. Though, the demand of the change in educational scenario, the corresponding adaptation to transition to online remote learning enabled learners to use new materials without being limited to the textbook. Definitely, the program presented challenges like reduced session duration, lack of training of the instructors and any preparedness to conduct teaching activities in such an unprecedented situation. However, the situation also showcased an opportunity to ruminate and bring forward creative methods for online teaching FFL beginners' course.

 The significant observation for language teaching in remote situation showed the importance of teacher and the learner as the key roles. More specifically, despite the infrastructural support and expertise of created high-quality digital platforms being

made available by the university, the success or failure of these sessions to a large extent lies with the teacher and the learner. In this case, both the roles were subjected to same psychological distress and they assumed their responsibilities with fervor and open mind.

Notably, it is beneficial to consider the INEE standards that can help in responding better to the needs of the learners. The use of technology can be further customized to align with the teaching purposes, for example, more communicative tasks that promote learner-centered learning (Alsaied, 2016) can be achieved through a stimulating and interactive use of the Blackboard platform. Also, collaborative learning can be encouraged in Blackboard virtual classes through team activities. This experience, summarily, brought forth the significant role of a language instructor in teaching language courses to university students with enabling qualities like interdisciplinary competency in psychology, didactics of foreign languages, as well as computer science and in sociology.

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Assoc. prof. Rana Kandeel, PhD.,
Department of translation-French program
Faculty of Languages
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman university
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
RHKandeel@pnu.edu.sa