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**The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Students' Academic
Achievement and Online Courses in the Department of English at
MMUTO**

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Dedications

To my parents, my brother and sisters

To my beloved husband, who believed in me even when I did not

To my family-in-law

To my friends and colleagues

To all those for whom this work is a pride

Hanane Bourai

To my beloved family, the dearest people in my heart

And to my husband for making everything possible

A special feeling of gratitude to my parents who taught me the value of hard work,

without their help and support, I would never have succeeded

Yasmine Chabane

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Abstract

The current study aims to investigate the COVID-19 pandemic period's impact on the EFL students' academic achievement at MMUTO. Firstly, it investigates the impact of COVID-19 on students' achievement. Secondly, it seeks to identify the main causes of the students' low or poor academic achievement. Thirdly, it aims to find out the appropriate strategies that educational institutions should use to improve the students' academic achievement, especially in the post-COVID period. In order to carry out our study, we have relied on Abraham Harold Maslow's Pyramid of Needs (1954) as a theory applied to our research work. We have investigated how far it can be applied to the objectives of our research. The method we used is a mixed one: the quantitative research method combined with the qualitative one. The tools used to gather data are: a questionnaire which was submitted to 34 EFL students and an interview conducted with EFL teachers in the Department of English at MMUTO. The findings of this study have revealed that difficulties to have access to internet is one of the causes of students' low academic achievement. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic period impacted negatively the students' academic achievement. Suggestions and recommendations like working in groups and studying more outside the university were proposed by the participants in order to reduce the negative effects of the COVID-19.

Key words: academic achievement, COVID-19 pandemic, EFL, MMUTO, online learning.

List of Abbreviations

COVID-19: Corona Virus Disease, 2019

EFL : English as a Foreign Language.

E-learning : Electronic learning

ICT's: Information Communication Technologies

MERS : Middle East Respiratory Syndrome

MMUTO: Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou

SARS : Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

UNESCO : United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

WHO : World Health Organization

List of Figures

Figure 01 : Maslow's (1954) Pyramid of Needs	22
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List of Diagrams

Diagram 1: Students' Marks in English before the emergence of COVID-19	24
Diagram 2: Students' Opinions about whether their Grades/Marks in English have Changed Negatively before the COVID-19 Years.....	24
Diagram 3: Frequency of Students' Use of English during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period	25
Diagram 4: Students' Studying Online during the COVID-19 Pandemic	26
Diagram 5: Students' Opinions about the Sufficiency of Study Hours during the COVID-19 Pandemic	26
Diagram 6: Students' Grades during the COVID-19 Pandemic	27
Diagram 7: Students' Points of View about whether Attending Virtual Classes is Better than Attending Face-to-face ones.....	27
Diagram 8: Students' Opinions about the Effectiveness Online Learning during the COVID-19 Period.....	28
Diagram 9: Students' Achievement in Face-to-Face versus Online Tests	29
Diagram 10: Other Means to Improve Students' Level in English.....	29
Diagram 11: Students' Access to Online Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic	31
Diagram 12: Students' Knowledge about Technology during the COVID-19 Pandemic	31

Diagram 13: Students' Feeling of Stress and Anxiety towards Learning English during the COVID-19 Period.....	32
Diagram 14: Students' Virtual Contact with Classmates and Teachers during the COVID-19 Period	33
Diagram 15: Students' Difficulties Accessing Online Pedagogical Content.....	33
Diagram 16: Factors that Caused Students' Low Academic Achievement during the Pandemic	34

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	i
Acknowledgment	ii
Abstract	iii
List of Abbreviations.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
List of Diagrams	vi

General Introduction

Statement of the Research Problem	1
Aims and Significance of the Study.....	3
Research Questions and Hypotheses.....	4
Research Design and Methodology	4
Structure of the Dissertation	6

Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction.....	7
1. Coronavirus/Covid-19	7
1.1. Definitions of the Coronavirus.....	7
1.2. COVID-19 and Education	8
2. Academic Achievement.....	11
2.1. Definitions.....	11
2.2. Academic Achievement and Students	12
3. Theoretical Framework.....	12
3.1. Psychological Needs.....	13
3.2. Safety.....	14
3.3. Social Needs (Love and Belonging).....	14
3.4. Self-esteem.....	15
3.5. Self-actualization.....	16
Conclusion:	18

Chapter Two: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction.....	19
1. Data Collection Procedure.....	19
1.1. Context of Investigation and Research Participants.....	19
1.2. Data Collection Tools.....	20
2. Data Analysis Procedures	21
2.1. Qualitative Method.....	21
2.2. The Quantitative Method.....	22
Conclusion:	22

Chapter Three: Presentation of the Findings

Introduction.....	23
1. The Questionnaire Findings.....	23
2. The Interview Findings.....	35
Conclusion:	37

Chapter Four: Discussion of the Findings

Introduction.....	38
1. Discussion of the Questionnaire Findings.....	38
1.1. Students' Academic Achievement before, during, and after COVID-19.....	38
1.2. Causes behind Students' Low Academic Achievement.....	41
1.3. Strategies to reduce Negative Impact the of COVID-19 on Students' Academic Achievement	45
2. Discussion of the Results of the Teachers' Interview.....	46
Conclusion:	50
General Conclusion.....	51
Bibliography	54
Appendices	

General Introduction

General Introduction

Statement of the Research Problem

COVID-19 is a global pandemic that has affected the world for about three years. This infectious disease resulted in a lockdown as its spread increased. Consequently, all schools, colleges and universities were closed. This lockdown limited the access to educational opportunities (Khalil, 2020). With the Coronavirus disease, a major change to the remote education arrangements has arisen. Therefore, schools and universities were constrained to carry out their activities with students exclusively online (Sobaih, et al., 2020). Put differently, this exceptional situation forced students and teachers to adapt to a new educational context which is distance learning.

However, switching quickly from a traditional school environment to distance or online learning could not happen instantly and easily; this accelerated transition is associated with a number of barriers and challenges (Crawford et al, 2020). Students had several difficulties during the pandemic (Atreya & Acharya, 2020, p.2). COVID-19 had affected their studies in a variety of ways; they were unable to complete their school curricula, and reach academic achievements. Many educators and researchers raised concerns about the effects of COVID-19 on students' academic achievement due to school closure (Haug et al, 2020)

Thus, there is a need to address the significant issue in the field of education, especially in EFL learning. Previous research studies investigated effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, like the research conducted by Mahyoob (2020) at Taiban University, which aims to determine the challenges and obstacles faced by EFL, and the study done by Amazouz and Sebih (2021) in Algeria at the Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi Ouzou which aims to identify the main factors that

General Introduction

impacts students' will to learn during the lockdown and whether this impact was negative or positive. Both studies came with the conclusion that EFL students had issues with the new ways of learning imposed by the COVID-19 restrictions.

Another research includes Amiruddin and Jannah (2021) who conducted an experimental research on 36 students. They investigated the effect of COVID-19 pandemic on English proficiency level in higher education in Malaysia. The results showed that COVID-19 influenced student's achievement. Also, Hidalgo and Vateła (2021) investigated the effects of teaching English online on EFL students' achievement. They relied on the Hierarchy of Online Needs of Justin Shewell. The findings revealed that online learning affected academic achievement in EFL students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As in the previous studies, our study aims to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on students' academic achievement, and the techniques to help EFL students cope with their low academic achievement. However, this study is different from its predecessors in that the previous studies were conducted in settings different from ours (Algerian context). Thus, the sample population and classroom variables can lead to different results. Therefore, this study intends to examine the effect of the pandemic on EFL students' grades at MMUTO.

Aims and Significance of the Study

The present study attempts to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the academic achievement of university students, and reach three main objectives. First, it aims to identify the impact of COVID-19 on students' achievement. Second, we focus on the main causes of the students' low academic achievement. Then, it attempts to locate the main causes of students' poor academic achievement. Finally, it endeavors to look and find out the strategies that educational institutions should

General Introduction

use to improve the students' academic achievement, especially in the post-COVID period.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it is an exploratory research about the factors behind learners' low achievement and appropriate strategies that may improve it. Putting it differently, the present investigation sheds light on the effects of the pandemic on students' academic achievement, and by answering the research questions, it can help teachers understand the extent COVID-19 affects students' performance. Therefore, knowing the reasons that led to lower learners' academic achievement may help in finding solutions that may help in enhancing their performance.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This work attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) Does the student have a high or a low academic achievement?
- 2) What is the impact of COVID-19 on EFL students' academic achievement? Has the latter been impacted positively or negatively by this pandemic?
- 3) What are the causes of learners low academic achievement ?
- 4) What are the strategies that teachers use to help learners improve their academic performance?

To answer these questions, we advance the following hypotheses:

- 1) Students' academic grades are low because of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2) Lack of basic needs affected students' academic achievement negatively.

General Introduction

3) Students, together with their teachers, can overcome this negative impact by targeting its main factors and adopting appropriate techniques.

Research Design and Methodology

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of the Coronavirus on students' academic achievement, we opt for descriptive and exploratory methods. The reasons behind the use of these methods are due to the nature of our work. First, the description of the problem does not require the use of an experimental method. Another reason that has led to choosing the descriptive method is that it helps us describe population, situations, opinions, phenomena, and answer the “what”, “when”, and “how” questions. Second, for the exploratory one, it helps us to explore the causes behind this phenomenon.

A sample of thirty-four EFL students from the whole population of university students at MMUTO (first year students) are selected through a random sampling process in addition to six teachers, also chosen randomly from the same department. This is in order to avoid subjectivity. Besides, students are selected for the purpose of exploring and collecting their views about the effects COVID-19 had on their academic achievement and whether teachers use strategies to reduce its bad effects or not. In our work, we have chosen the research methodology that fits the objectives of our research, which is the mixed-method approach; the quantitative method helps us get statistical findings and the qualitative one allows us to collect and describe relevant information.

General Introduction

In order to answer the research questions, test our hypotheses, and obtain information required for the study, we rely on two main tools: a questionnaire for students and an interview for teachers. The fundamental reason behind the choice of these instruments is that a questionnaire is a very important research tool that may help us to gather a considerable amount of information in a short time. Concerning the interview, it is directed to teachers in order to know the extent to which COVID-19 influenced learners' grades. Interviews are useful for uncovering the story behind participants' experiences; it gives them more options for responding (Creswell, 2012). These instruments help to discover how individuals think and feel about the topic, collect richer sources of information, and investigate issues in a deeper way.

Structure of the Dissertation

The overall structure of this dissertation follows the traditional-simple model. It consists of a general introduction, four chapters, and a general conclusion. The general introduction states the research problem, and presents the aims and significance of the study, research questions and hypotheses, research techniques and the structure of the entire dissertation. The first chapter is a review of the literature; it reviews the different definitions and concepts related to the topic of our investigation. The second chapter is entitled "Research Design and Methodology" and it presents and explains the procedures of data collection and data analysis. In other words, it gives a description of the research design, instruments and the data gathered from the respondents. In the third chapter, "Presentation of the Findings", the results are presented using different diagrams, along with detailed explanations of the data collected. The fourth and last chapter is entitled "Discussion of the

General Introduction

Findings”. It is where the results of the research are discussed relying on the chosen theoretical framework. In addition, this chapter seeks to answer the research questions and check the hypotheses. Finally, our dissertation ends with a general conclusion, which provides a summary of the main findings, indicates the limitations of the study, and provides suggestions for further research.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature underlying the present study, which is the impact of COVID-19 on students' academic achievement. We begin by presenting definitions of the Coronavirus. Then, we give a clear insight into education and the Covid-19. After that, we define academic achievement and its relationship with students. To explore the topic, we rely on the Hierarchy of Online Learning Needs by Abraham Maslow.

1. Coronavirus / COVID-19**1.1. Definitions of the Coronavirus**

COVID-19, also known as the Coronavirus, is a contagious disease caused by the most recently identified coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2. It has become a pandemic, affecting many countries worldwide to varying extents (Kowalik et al., 2020). This outbreak of atypical pneumonia is the largest since the SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak in 2003. Within weeks of its appearance, the total number of cases and deaths surpassed those of SARS (Wang et al., 2019).

Coronaviruses are a large group of viruses that can infect both animals and people. They are known for causing respiratory illnesses in humans, which can vary from mild conditions like the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). (Shnaiderman et al. ,2021).

1.2. Covid-19 and Education

According to Chelghoum and Chelghoum, (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on activities worldwide, including education. In other words, the pandemic has enormously influenced the world, and the education system was no exception. Siddique et al. (2021) stated that the closures of educational institutions across the globe affected more than 70% of the world's student population. Schools, colleges, and universities are closed to control the spread of the pandemic, and this had a significant impact on many students. Students found themselves struggling under unexpected conditions, with school shifting from traditional attendance at school to attendance via internet (Kuhfed & Tarasawa, 2020). Put differently, students and teachers witnessed a huge change from face-to-face learning to online or distance learning in response to the pandemic outbreak. Thus, most teachers are forced to quickly shift their traditional teaching to the online one which led to a number of challenges to learners.

To stop the virus from spreading, people had to stay home for a long time. This led many countries to stop in-person classes at schools, and switch to online learning to keep students safe from the virus (Cicha et al. 2021). According to Gonzalez et al. (2020), the challenge with this lockdown is that not only did the way we learn and teach have to change, but also the way we assess students, since in-person assessments were no longer possible.

The higher education system went through a lot of issues during the period of COVID-19 lockdown in which it introduced technological and digital means to the academic field (Aristovnik, et al. 2020). E-learning devices have played a massive role in helping schools and universities facilitate learning at home. As the pandemic had a massive impact on students' academic lives, it forced them to adapt to a new challenging way of learning, which is distance

learning (Aristovnik et al., 2020). In addition, students were asked to continue their studies online and carefully follow the courses posted by their teachers to avoid missing important due to lockdown (Gonzalez et al. 2020).

Higher education institutions faced numerous challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges encouraged many universities to give importance to quality education, improve accessibility to e-learning platforms (Rachid & Yadav, 2020). To put it in a concise way, schools and universities are facing a challenge to adapt to this change in learning and try their best to choose the right technology and approaches to engage EFL students in distance learning. University administrations directed students to download lecture materials, but given their limited experience with the Moodle platform, many students struggled to navigate it effectively (Ghounane, 2020) as they have little expertise in the field of technology. It is important to mention that instructors also played a vital role in adapting to the new circumstances by using various online platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom, and WebEx to deliver their lectures (Danish, 2020).

As the COVID- 19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, Algeria is not an exception where universities were not fully prepared for E-learning. The vast majority of Algerian students experienced disruptions in their education due to the pandemic. Institutions, like many others around the world, had to make significant adjustments. Students were required to shift from traditional in-person learning to new methods, including online and remote learning. Universities were obliged to suspend all in-person educational activities of teaching and supervision for the benefit of students during some months (Lassassi, et al., 2020). Student's

enthusiasm can be severely hindered by the computer screen, which acts as a barrier between students and their teachers and classmates, hindering their communication together.

There are many challenges facing e-learning in Algerian universities such as poor internet. There must be a high flow speed, which is what Algeria lacks, as the speed of flow according to the latest statistics is among the weakest in the world. Furthermore, Algerian university websites often lack organization and maintenance due to the lack of experts in the field of online education, making it difficult to create digital learning platforms (Ameziane & Nahi , 2024) . However, one of the most significant challenges lies in student motivation. Many students tend to favor traditional teaching methods. (Polfelaf & Shehab, 2013). It is also important to mention that the majority of students do not master technological instruments, which is a huge, existing problem in Algeria since most language students tend not to search for information on the Internet, but via hard copies of books and the information issued by the teacher (Kerras & Salhi ,2021).

Although Algerian teachers are used to the traditional ways of teaching and instruction, there is a decent number of research that proves that there are teachers who are interested in using the electronic learning and platforms like Moodle (Ghounane, 2020). There are many efforts presented by the authorities like the preparation of infrastructure, human resources, and materials like internet access in universities. But it is necessary to discover the real or actual use of this type of education, which is E-learning, in Algerian universities to keep up with the world's development because it is necessary to facilitate learning (Polfelaf & Shehab , 2013). According to Abbassi et al. (2020), most students did not like online classes as much as in-person learning.

2. Academic Achievement**2.1. Definitions**

Academic achievement has a very important place in education as well as in the learning process as it has been its crucial goal. The concept of “academic performance of students in higher education” first emerged in the United States in the evaluation of students' abilities at Stanford University around 1930, and began to be widely used in higher educational institutions around the world (Kuhfeld et al., 2006).

According to the Cambridge University Reporter (2003), academic achievement is frequently defined in terms of examination performance. Put differently, exams are commonly used as means of assessing student’s knowledge, understanding and skills in a specific subject. Dictionary of Education by Carter (1959) defines academic achievement as the knowledge attained or skills developed in the school subjects, usually determined by test scores. Crow and Crow (1969) defined academic achievement as the extent to which a learner is profiting from instructions in the given area of learning, i.e., achievement is reflected by the level to which skill and knowledge has been imparted to him. In other words, the achievement of students in schools is not only about their performance or what they achieve on exams, but rather about the extent to which they have benefited from what they learned in any particular school subject.

Astin (1984) believes that academic achievement includes cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, as well as psychological and behavioral outcomes. That is to say, cognitive outcomes refer to the knowledge students acquire through learning subjects like English. Unlike the cognitive outcomes, the non-cognitive ones include social, and emotional skills (teamwork, problem-solving, motivation and communication skills) of learners and their attitudes.

2.2. Academic Achievement and Students

Education revolves around how well students do in their studies, even though it is supposed to achieve other goals too. According to Siddique and al. (2021), doing well and showing your best performance is very important as school learning is becoming really competitive. Parents want their children to do their best academically, which can put a lot of pressure on teachers and students, and the whole education system.

There are many factors that can affect how well students perform in school, like how they study, how smart they are, how they feel about school, and their personality. In our society, how well we do in school is often seen as a big indicator of our abilities and potential. So, academic success is really important in education and learning, and it is influenced by your personality, opportunities, motivation, training and education. Other things that can affect how well students do academically include how they see themselves, how they study, how much support they get from their parents, how smart they are (Siddique et al.,2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study aims to investigate the main factors that caused the students' poor academic achievement during the COVID-19 and try to find the appropriate strategies to overcome this issue. Therefore, to reach our objectives, we rely on the theory proposed by Abraham Maslow (1943), which is entitled 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs'. It was adapted by Justin Shewell to illustrate the essential online learning needs.

In the early 1940s, Maslow (1943) proposed a hierarchy of needs model which contains five needs levels. It provides a better understanding of how needs are met. The five levels of motivational needs are: **Physiological needs**, such as food, water, and air that we, as humans,

need to exist, **safety needs**, such as protection from harm, and an orderly, familiar environment that is comfortable and non-threatening, **belonging**, including relationships with a spouse, partner, children, and/or friends, **self-esteem**, comprising both desire for achievement and for recognition and prestige, and **self-actualization**, referring to the ultimate self-fulfillment, essentially doing what one is meant to do in life.

According to Shewell (2020), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model can also be applied in distance education taking into account students' motivation and satisfaction within an online learning environment. This research considers how Maslow's model can serve as a framework for seeking to understand the factors influencing student needs in online learning.

3.1. Physiological Needs

Humans require basic needs to survive, including food, water, and air. In online education, these basics must be provided to students for successful learning. In the online classroom, there are several crucial elements and tools students must have access to in order to meet their first-level needs (Maslow,1943). In other words, if students have access to basic needs or resources such as textbooks, appropriate software, a teacher, and a computer with reliable Internet access , they will be satisfied and achieve successful learning.

Shewell (2020) stated that educational institutions can help prepare students to ensure basic needs such as the aforementioned ones through providing clear and concise checklists of essential items that should be obtained by students before classes begin. Lynch (2001) argues that it is important to ensure that students' basic needs are met in the virtual classroom. Teachers play a significant role in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. They should be informed about the needs of their students. This includes an understanding of their socio-

economic backgrounds, access to technology, and any specific challenges they may face in an online learning environment (Bennett, Priest, & Macpherson, 1999). For example, instructors should show empathy toward the challenges and concerns faced by students.

3.2. Safety

According to Maslow (1943), safety means a safe place to stay in and feeling comfortable and secure. Without safety, people can feel anxious and uncertain. Concerning online learning, classes can be stressful to students. According to Milheim (2012) states that many factors make students feel anxious and stressed. One significant stressor is that students often feel unfamiliar with the online classroom. Kenny (2002) argues that there is often a period of time needed to adjust to the virtual classroom, for both students and teachers. According to (Milheim, 2012, p. 162), “Issues such as learning how to communicate within the online environment, becoming familiar with the course, and understanding course expectations are all points of concern”. Adding to that, “there is much evidence that student preparation is a key factor in reducing issues related to student uncertainty in the online environment” (Milheim, 2012, p. 162). In a physical school setting, this would be like making sure the classroom is safe and secure for students. Thus, preparing students well can help reduce these uncertainties. (Lorenzi, et al., 2004)

3.3. Social Needs (Love and Belonging)

Moving upward in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs model, the third level is related to the need for belonging and being accepted by others. “In an online class, students have opportunities to build relationships with peers and with the instructor through dialogue and collaborative activities” (Milheim ,2012, p. 163). According to Milheim (2012) ,”In the online environment, collaboration can be seen as the cornerstone of the educational experience. Just

about everything that students engage in online, from participation on a discussion board to working in small groups, can be viewed as collaborative" (p. 163) . In other words, collaborative work is a fundamental aspect of online learning including activities like participating in discussions and working together in small groups.

Students' collaboration in an online class is influenced by several factors like the need to form connections with peers and teachers. It is worth mentioning that building such relationships with peers or instructors is important for effective learning. It also allows students to seek guidance when needed. However, this may not be easy because of the lack of face-to-face communication. As a result, "instructors must rely primarily on tools like discussion board postings, e-mail, and feedback on assignments to communicate with students, and vice-versa" Addint to that, "To fulfill the need for belonging (the third level in Maslow's need hierarchy), students must understand how to build a sense of community with their peers"(Milheim, 2012, p. 163). Similar to "traditional classroom" where attendance and active participating are important, online learning requires a "suitable degree of presence". According to Milheim (2012):

'The instructor plays a crucial role in encouraging students to take part through monitoring patterns of participation and setting goals and expectations for online presence. He participates as an equal member of the learning community, allowing students to become experts in their own learning'' (p 163)

3. 4. Self-Esteem

The fourth level in Maslow's hierarchy (1943) is self-esteem. Maslow (1943) described it as the need for humans to be respected and valued by others. This need exists in an online learning class and its absence is considered to be a challenge for students. It is important to say that establishing mutual respect with peers and teachers is crucial. Students in the virtual

classroom can feel underestimated, and self-esteem or a sense of value cannot be achieved in the absence of a strong community of learning and collaboration.

Additionally, “student uncertainty and low self-esteem can be intensified when they don't receive or misinterpret positive reinforcement from both their peers and the instructor” (Milheim, 2012, p. 164) . In other words, students often have limited verbal feedback and mainly rely on written communication, which can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. For example, students may not hear verbal praise or encouragement from their peers or instructor. Instead, they depend on written comments and messages, which lead to misinterpretations. Shewell (2020) argued that factors such as lesson preparation, positive reinforcement, and feedback play an important part in assessing students and helping them feel valued, and respected.

3.5. Self-Actualization

The fifth need level in Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization. Onah (2015) perceives self-actualisation as self fulfillment; the need to develop a person's full potential in order to enable him or her to become the best that he or she is capable of being in the society. In other words, providing assistance to students in an online learning is important to help them develop their full potential. In the online classroom, the role of the instructor changes significantly. Instead of being the primary source of information and guidance, the instructor becomes more of a facilitator who helps learners take charge of their own learning (Levitch & Milheim, 2003). The instructor should adopt a more facilitative approach, called self-directed learning. It is worth mentioning that self-directed learning is a method in which students take the initiative in managing their own learning. Students are actively engaged in the learning process instead of relying solely on the instructor as it is advocated by Kanuka (2008). For example, students can

look for additional resources for their learning through articles, videos or online lessons. They can also think about what they learned, how they have grown or what to do in the future to improve their learning (Butcher, & Sumner, 2011). Using various strategies, resources, and tools help students get a better understanding of themselves and their learning process (Milheim, 2012).

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, reaching Level 5, which is self-actualization, requires fulfilling each level that comes before it. According to Milheim (2012) :

“For instance, before students can even start a class, they must have access to essential resources like computers and books. Without these basics, they can't begin their process of learning. The role of teachers is essential in making it easier for students to use online learning platforms. They provide training and information to help students prepare. Without it, students may feel uncertain and unsafe in online courses (p. 164)

Level three is about building relationships, which is important in online courses. Since there is no face-to-face interaction, students and teachers must communicate through tools such as emails and forums. Teachers and peers play an important role in creating a supportive and collaborative learning community. Teachers should be prepared to provide students with insightful feedback, which helps building relationships and a sense of belonging. To meet the needs of Level 4, students must feel respected, valued and confident in their performance. This can only happen within a strong learning community that is part of Level 3. When students have a trustworthy group to rely on, they can positively influence each other's learning (Milheim, 2012). In summary, Maslow's hierarchy reminds us that each level of needs, from basic resources to building community, contributes to students' self-actualization in the online classroom.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Figure 01: MASLOW'S (1943) PYRAMID OF NEEDS

Conclusion

To put it all together, this chapter has reviewed the literature related to the topic under investigation. It has provided definitions related to the COVID-19, and its relation to education. Then, this chapter introduced academic achievement, and how it is connected to students. Finally, it explained the underlying framework of Abraham Maslow (1943) upon which this work is based. The following chapter is about the research design and methodology of the study.

Chapter Two:
Research Design and
Methodology

Introduction

This chapter aims to present the research design used to conduct our work. It presents the research instruments used to collect data and explains how we analyzed our findings. It also describes the context, explains the setting, and presents the participants involved in our research work. It is composed of two sections; the first section is dedicated to the procedure of data collection, including the context, the participants and the data collection tools, and the second one is concerned with the methods used to analyze the collected data.

1. Data Collection Procedure

Kabir (2016, p.202) defines data collection as “the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes.” That is to say, data collection is a process of gathering and classifying research findings so as to interpret them, check hypotheses, and obtain answers to a given research problem.

1.1. Context of Investigation and Research Participants

This study was conducted in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, between August 30 and September 2, 2022. It was meant to help us study the contrast between the level of EFL students’ academic achievement before and during this period. Our research involved L1, L2, L3, M1 and M2 levels of EFL students and teachers from MMUTO where, like the other educational institutions of Algeria, the studies were stopped for six months (from March to August 2020) and resumed in September 2020 with a system of groups studying in turn (the classes in the English Department were divided into two groups that studied and sat for their exams in turn during the whole year). Students were cut off from their university, their teachers and their friends, and their studies were suspended for a part of a school year and

disturbed for another one. Moreover, the students were not required to attend all the lectures and classes because of the sanitary restrictions.

The participants are students of the English Department at MMUTO at the time the study was conducted, *i.e.* during the 2021-2022 academic year. Their number is 34. No specific criteria were required from them to participate; this was done in order to avoid subjectivity and get answers from various students, without distinction of gender. The other participants are teachers at the MMUTO Department of English, they are six and the only criterion needed for their participation in this study is that they should have taught in the Department of English during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

1.2. Data Collection Tools

To conduct our research study, we have used a questionnaire for students and addressed a semi-structured interview for teachers (See Appendices). A questionnaire, according to Creswell (2012: 382), is “a form used in a survey design that participants in a study complete and return to the researcher”. Our participants were asked to answer an online set of eighteen questions that is designed with the Google Forms application and posted on the Facebook group of EFL students of the English Department at MMUTO and also sent individually to some of them via Facebook Messenger with an invitation to answer it. It is composed of three sections. The first section is concerned with EFL students’ academic achievement before, during and after COVID-19. The second section deals with the causes behind students’ low academic achievement. Concerning the third and final section, it deals with proposed ways to reduce the negative impact COVID-19 had on students’ academic achievement and searches for solutions to reduce it. Our questionnaire contains different kinds of questions including yes/no questions, questions requiring long answers and multiple-choice ones.

The interview, designed initially to be conducted face-to-face with teachers, is composed of four questions concerned with the impact COVID-19 had on students' academic achievement from their teachers' point of view. An interview, defined by George (2023) is: "a qualitative research method that relies on asking questions in order to collect data. Interviews involve two or more people, one of whom is the interviewer asking the questions" and a semi-structured interview "relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework" (George, 2023). Because of some circumstances related to distance from the university and other personal reasons, we could not do it face-to-face. Therefore, we put it in a written form and distributed the copies to teachers. Six of them answered the questions on the same sheet and gave it back to us for analysis.

2. Data Analysis Procedures

This study aims to answer the research questions related to students' academic achievement during the COVID-19 pandemic and the solutions suggested to face the issues they encountered during that period. It employs a mixed-method approach; the quantitative method to analyze statistical information of the participants' answers and Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to analyze and interpret the answers to the open-ended questions derived from both the questionnaire and the interview.

2. 1. The Qualitative Method

Qualitative research is "a research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data" (Bryman, 2008a, p.366). Textual data are interpreted using text analysis (analyzing the individual answer of each participant to the open-ended questions included in the forms). The answers to open-ended questions were analyzed one by one in order to identify the specific features described by every participant in the study. Their answers are reported textually and, when necessary, in their own words.

QCA, which is a “method that bridges qualitative and quantitative analysis” (Ragin, 1984), was used to interpret this type of answers. The latter were first classified into categories. Each category represents a pattern and each pattern was then analyzed and interpreted in relation with the topic in concern.

2. 2. The Quantitative Method

For Creswell (1994, p.25), quantitative research is “an inquiry into a social or human problem, based on testing a theory composed of variables, measured with numbers, and analyzed with statistical procedures, in order to determine whether the predictive generalizations of the theory hold true”. Statistical analysis was used to analyze the short answers of the students in the form of percentages. The results were gathered using the same mobile application (*i.e.* Google Forms software) that provided us with the statistics. All the diagrams included in the results chapter were taken from it. The statistical findings are presented in pie charts and bar graphs displaying the percentages of the students’ answers.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research design and methodology used to carry out our study. It first presented how the data were collected through the introduction of the tools used for this aim (the questionnaire and the interview), the participants who answered it and the context in which the research was conducted. In its second section, it showed the methods we used to analyze the collected data. The findings are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Three:

Presentation of the Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings collected after submitting a questionnaire to a sample of students in the Department of English at MMUTO about their academic achievement during the last two years, and an interview directed to a number of teachers in the same department. Their answers are presented in this chapter in a textual form for qualitative data and percentages for quantitative results (Yes/No questions and multiple choice ones). The diagrams are copied from Google Forms software.

1. The Questionnaire Findings

After having collected the answers of the students who answered our online questionnaire, we have deactivated it and, thanks to the mobile application we have used, we came to organize them in order to analyze them. Here is an analysis of the answers we obtained:

Section One : Students' Academic Achievement before, during and after COVID-19 [The Impact of Covid-19 on Students' Learning]

Q1. Before the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic, how were your marks in English?

Very good/excellent (from 15/20 on)

Satisfactory (from 11/20 to 14.99/20)

Average (from 10/20 to 10.99/20)

Under Average (from 8/20 to 9.99/20)

Insufficient (under 7.99/20)

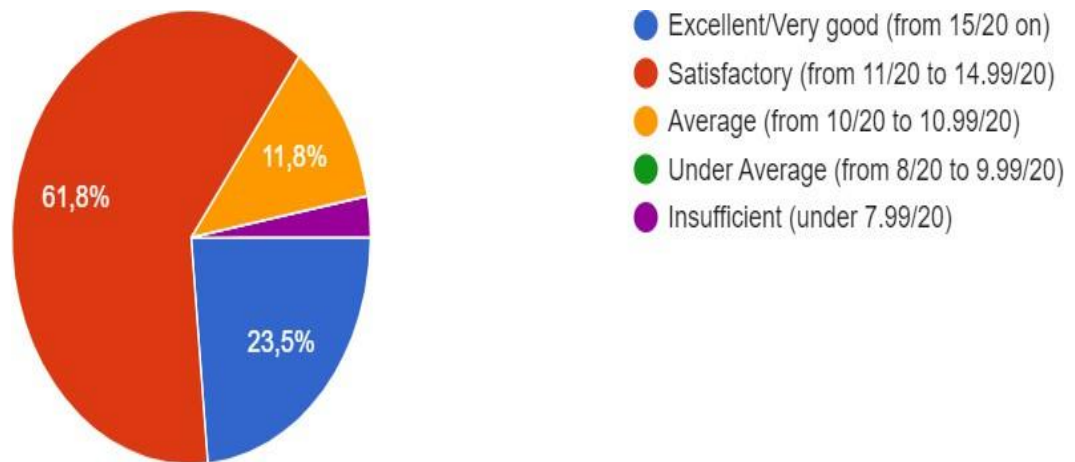


Diagram 1: Students' Marks in English before the emergence of COVID-19

As shown in Diagram 1, concerning the results of the students before the COVID-19 period, the majority (61.8%) had satisfactory marks in English (between 11/20 and 14.99/20), 23.5% had excellent ones (from 15/20 on). Another group, representing 11.8% of the students questioned, had average marks (from 10/20 to 10.99%). Only one (1) student reported having had insufficient marks (under 7.99/20).

Q2. Do you think that your grades/marks in English have changed negatively within the past two years?

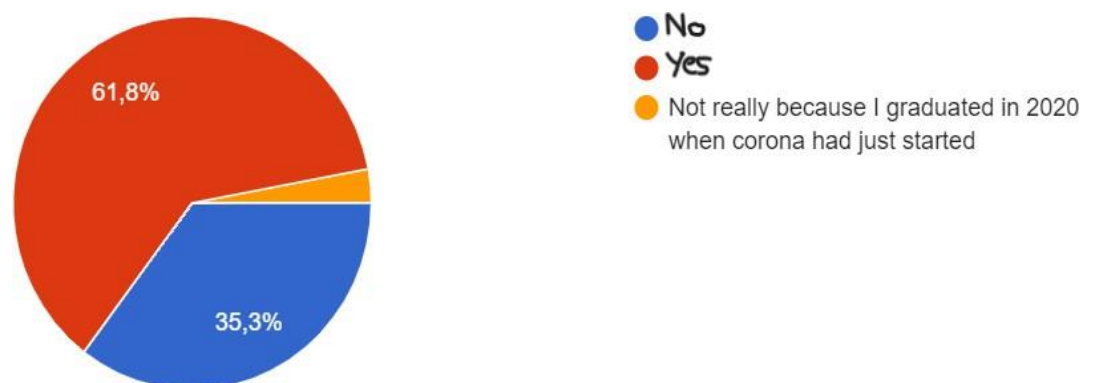


Diagram 2: Students' Opinions about whether their Grades/Marks in English have Changed Negatively before the COVID-19 Years

In this question, which is concerned with the students’ academic achievement before COVID-19, students were asked if their grades had changed negatively within the last two years. Most of them (61.8%) answered that it was the case, as shown in Diagram 1. Only one student justified his/her answer by saying that s/he was not a student at MMUTO during that period.

Q3. How often did you have the occasion to use the English language during the pandemic?

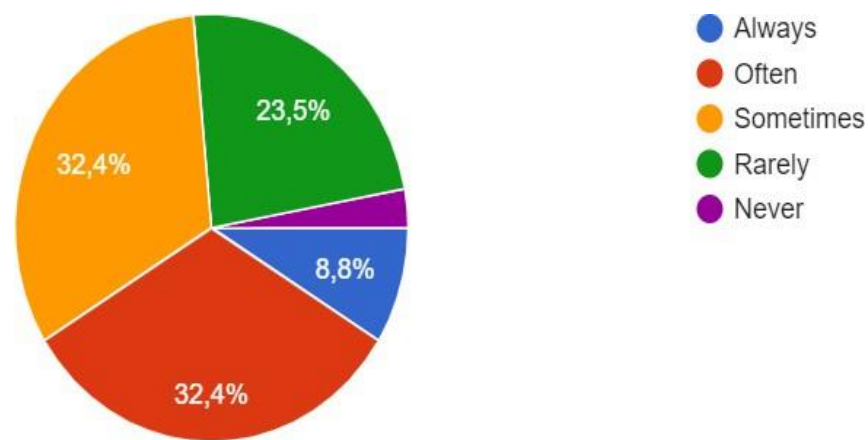


Diagram 3: Frequency of Students’ Use of English during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

In this question, where we have focused on the students’ academic achievement during and after the COVID-19 period, only 8.8% of the sample group had the occasion to always speak English. Diagram 3 shows that the same percentage of students (32.4%) had often or sometimes this occasion. The remaining 23.5% had rarely this opportunity, and one (1) student never had it, as presented in Diagram 3.

Q4. Have you been studying online during the pandemic?

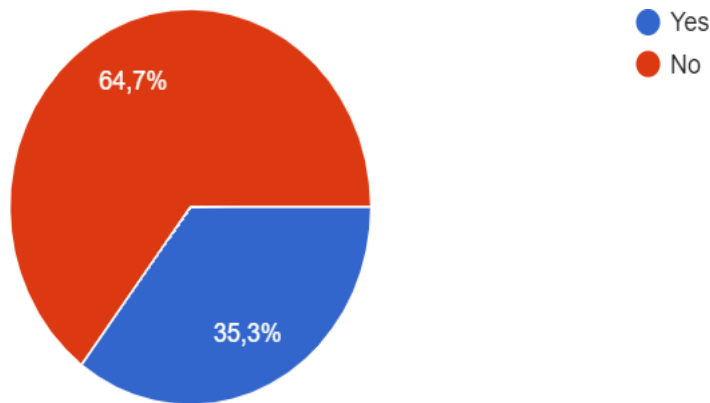


Diagram 4: Students' Studying Online during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The majority of the sample group (64.7%) had not been studying online during the pandemic, and the other part (35.3%) had, as Diagram 4 shows.

Q5. Do you think the number of hours allotted to your studies during the pandemic was sufficient?

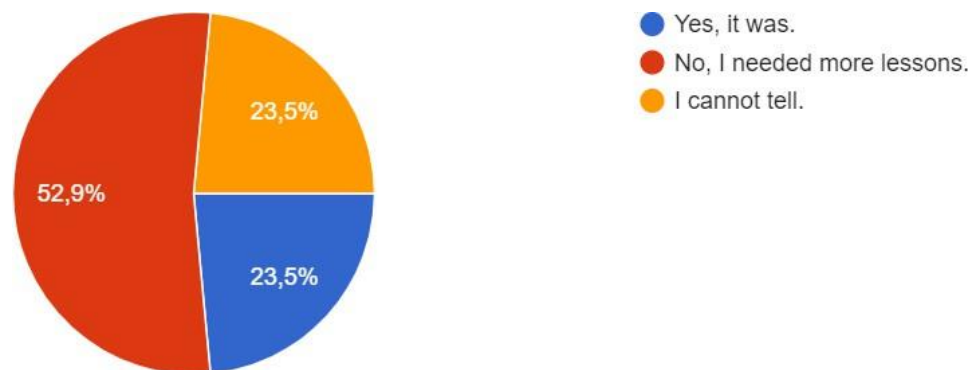


Diagram 5: Students' Opinions about Sufficiency of Study Hours during the COVID-19 Pandemic

When asked if the number of hours allotted to their studies during this period was sufficient, 52.9% of them said that they needed more lessons and two (2) other groups (23.5% each) either found it sufficient or could not tell, as displayed in Diagram 5.

Q6. How had your grades become during the period of the pandemic?

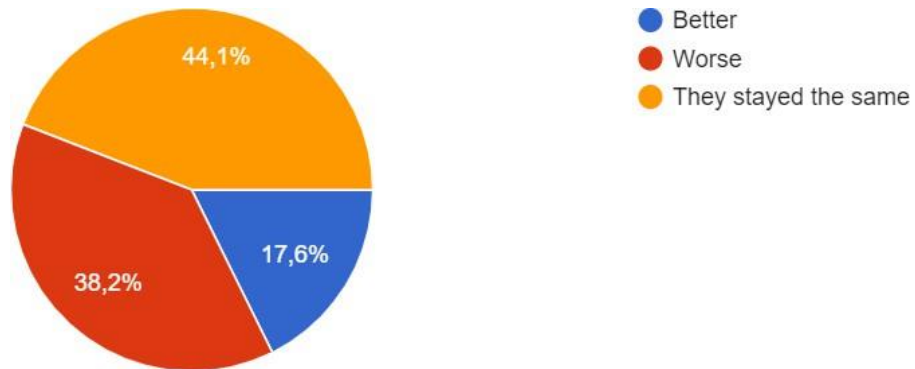


Diagram 6: Students' Grades during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Concerning their grades, diagram 6 reveals that 44.1% of the students said that their academic outcomes stayed the same during the pandemic, 38.2% said they worsened, and 17.6% said they got better.

Q7. "Attending virtual classes is better than attending face-to-face ones".

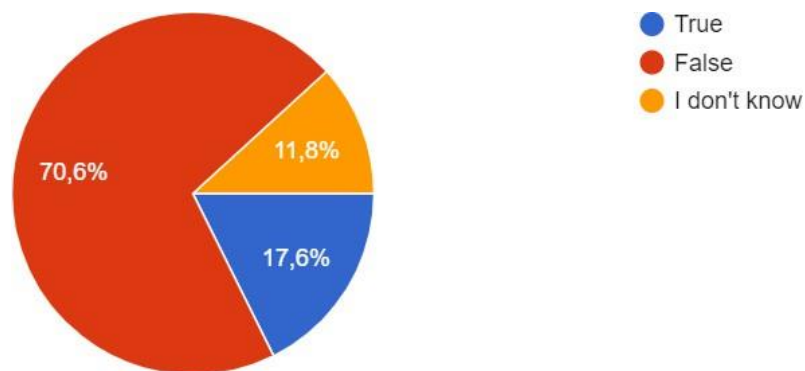


Diagram 7: Students' Points of View about whether Attending Virtual Classes is Better than Attending Face-to-face ones

As shown in Diagram 7, the students were asked to give their opinion about the statement “Attending virtual classes is better than attending face-to-face ones”. 70.6% of them found it false, 17.6% said it was true, and the rest (11.8%) did not have an opinion about it.

Q8. Do you think online learning during the COVID-19 period was effective?

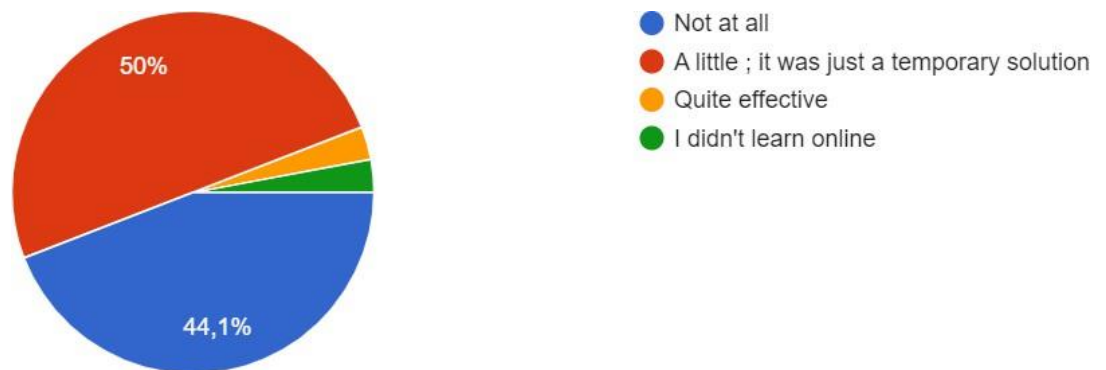


Diagram 8: Students’ Opinions about the Effectiveness Online Learning during the COVID-19 Period

Asked about the effectiveness of online learning during COVID-19, half of the students (50%) said it was of a little effectiveness and that it was just a temporary solution. 44.1% said it was not effective at all. One (1) student said it was quite effective and another one said he or she did not learn online, as Diagram 8 demonstrates.

Q9. You achieve better in:

A. Face-to-face tests

B. Online tests

C. The same in both

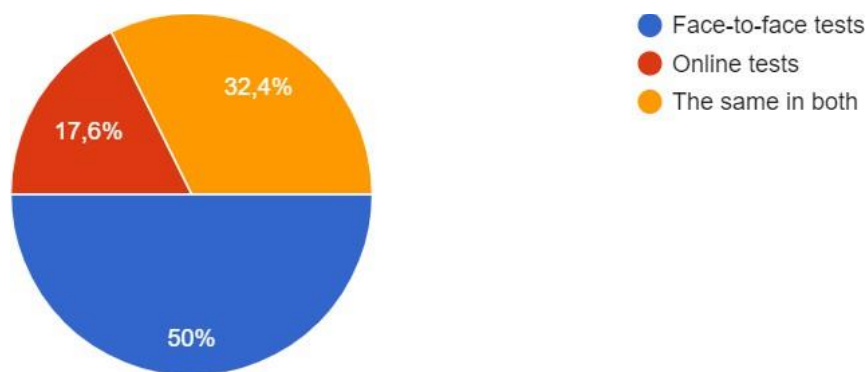


Diagram 9: Students' Achievement in Face-to-Face Versus Online Tests

Diagram 9 shows that half of the sample group said they achieved better in face-to-face tests and 17.6% said they performed better in online ones. The remaining students (32.4%) did the same in both kinds of tests.

Q10. What other means did you use to improve your level in English?

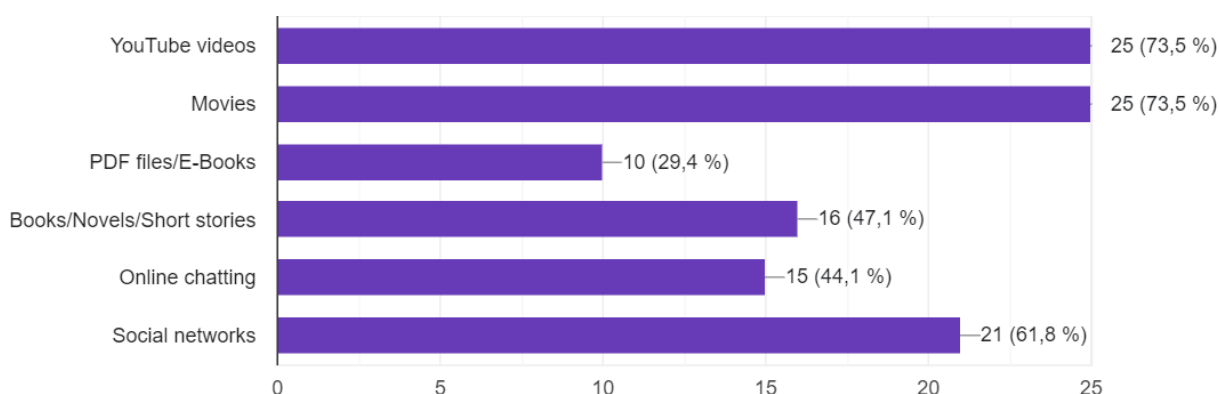


Diagram 10: Other Means to Improve Students' Level in English

As shown in Diagram 10, students tried other means to improve their level in English during the pandemic. Among them, YouTube videos and movies were used by 73.5% of the students, PDF-files/E-books by 29.4%, books/novels/short stories by 47.1%, online chatting by 44.1%, and social networks by a percentage of 61.8%.

Q11. Do you think these aforementioned means can replace face-to-face learning? Why and why not?

When asked if the aforementioned means could replace face-to-face learning, the answers varied: 20 students out of 34 (58.2%) said that the latter could never be replaced because of different reasons. Some found that class learning enhanced students' motivation by creating an atmosphere of comprehension and conviviality. In addition, learners were in a better state of mind when being heard, conducting fruitful discussions, and having real contact with other class members. Others said that the learning culture in our country is based on face-to-face learning and on the teachers' central and irreplaceable role through his/her motivation, explanations and guidance, and found E-learning odd, strictly virtual, and not effective.

Eight (8) students said that online learning could perfectly replace teachers in class because they found face-to-face classes boring and thought that technology helped learners become fluent and enhanced their skills more easily. They also thought that E-learning was more comfortable and thus more effective. The other six (6) students did not give precise answers to the question (neither "yes" nor "no") and just enumerated some advantages of both online and face-to-face learning. On the one hand, they stated that online games, videos and music helped acquiring language skills subconsciously and in a more enjoyable and motivating way and that without using English outside class, there would be no improvement in learning it. On the other hand, they did not deny the importance of the traditional way of learning especially for some university modules like Study Skills and Linguistics.

Section Two : Causes behind Students’ Low Academic Achievement

Q12. I had access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

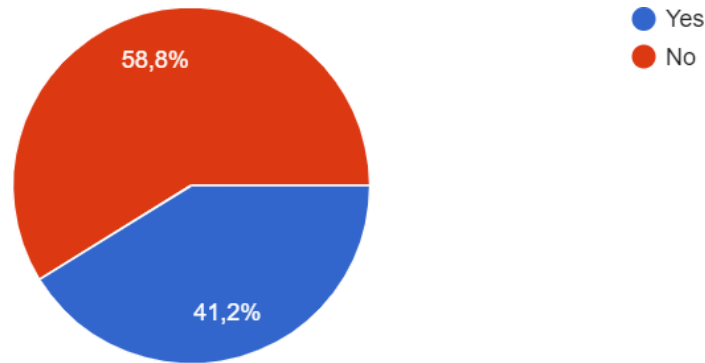


Diagram 11: Students’ Access to Online Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In Section Two of the questionnaire, we tried to find out the causes behind students’ low academic achievement. 58.8% of the students said they had no access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The others (41.2%) said they did, as demonstrated in Diagram 11.

Q13. I had better knowledge of using technology.

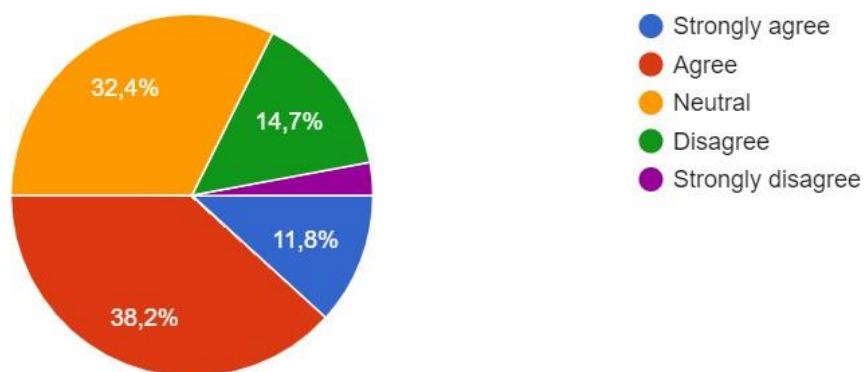


Diagram 12: Students’ Knowledge about Technology during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the answers to question 13, 38.2% of the participants said they had a better knowledge about technology during that period, 11.8% strongly agreed about it, 32.4% provided a neutral answer, 14.7% disagreed, and one (1) student strongly disagreed.

Q14. I was very stressful and felt that I did not study English for years.

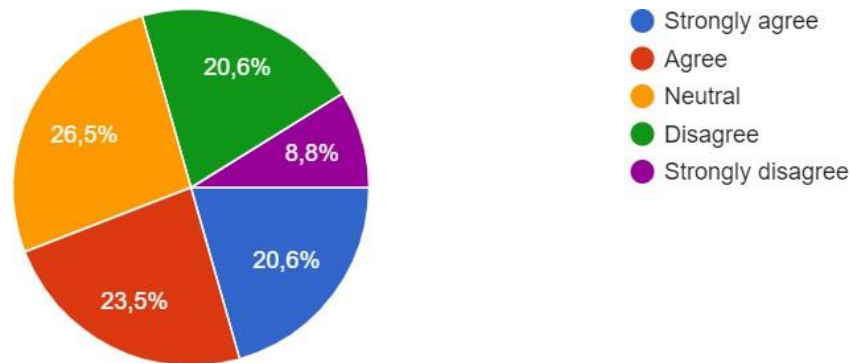


Diagram 13: Students' Feeling of Stress and Anxiety towards Learning English during the COVID-19 Period

As presented in Diagram 13, 20.6% of the learners strongly agreed that they were very stressful during the pandemic and that they felt they did not study English for years, 23.5% agreed with the statement, 26.5% were neutral, 20.6% disagreed, and 8.8% strongly disagreed.

Q15. I had contact with my classmates and teachers through online platforms.

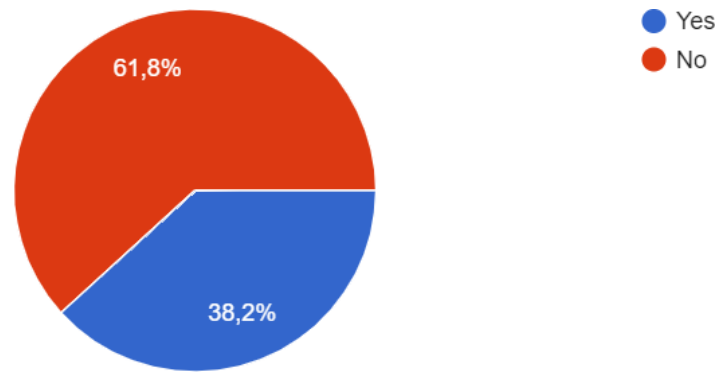


Diagram 14: Students’ Virtual Contact with Classmates and Teachers during the COVID-19 Period

During the lockdown period, 61.8% of the sample group did not have contact with their classmates and teachers through online platforms, but others (38.2%) said they did.

Q16. Learners encountered some difficulties accessing online lectures or open online tests on their phones and computers.

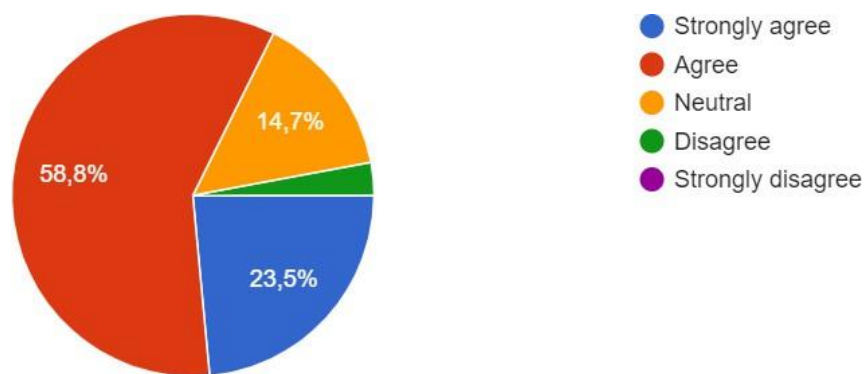


Diagram 15: Students’ Difficulties Accessing Online Pedagogical Content

When asked whether learners encountered some difficulties accessing online lectures or open online tests on their phones and computers, 23.5% of students strongly agreed, 58.8% agreed, 14.7% were neutral, and just one (1) student disagreed, as shown in Diagram 15.

Q17. Which of the following factors may have caused your academic achievement to lower during the pandemic?

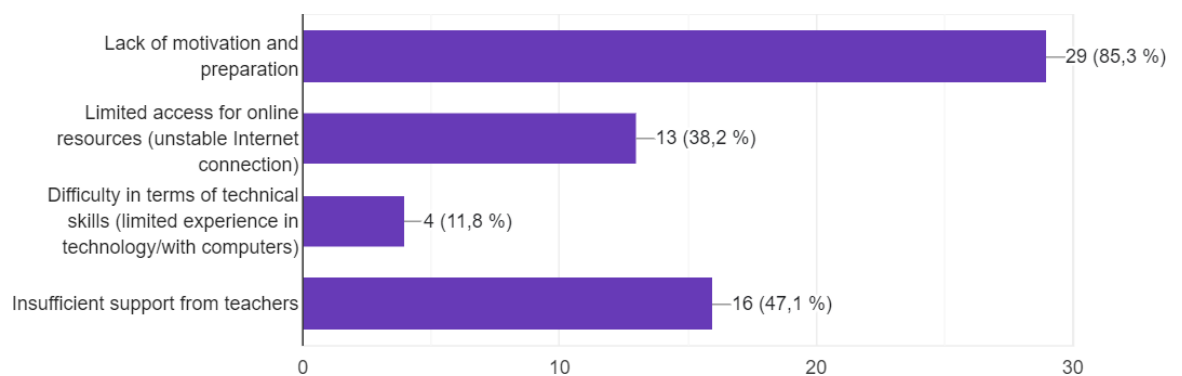


Diagram 16: Factors that Caused Students’ Low Academic Achievement during the Pandemic

According to the students, many factors may have caused their academic achievement to lower during the pandemic like the lack of preparation and motivation (85.3%), limited access to online resources (unstable Internet connection) (38.2%), difficulties in terms of technical skills (11.8%), and insufficient support from teachers (47.1%). Other causes include stress and lack of online classes.

Section Three :Reducing the Negative Impact COVID-19 had on Students’ Academic Achievement

Q18. What are your suggestions to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 on your academic achievement?

In the last section, the students were asked to give suggestions to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 on their academic achievement. Their answers may be grouped as follows. Some of them suggested psychological assistance, taking the mental health of the learners into account, and avoiding stress. The role that teachers should play was emphasized by suggesting their help in order to make the students overcome their difficulties. In addition, the students should be aware of the special conditions they are going through, should try to stay motivated, and take advantage of every way of learning including the mass media, reading, and listening to native English speakers. Other suggestions included the amelioration of the online platform and its implementation, together with face-to-face learning, in every university. Four (4) students had no suggestion.

2. The Interview Findings

Concerning the teachers' interview, the answers vary since the questions they were asked need long answers that contain personal opinions, individual deductions, and relative suggestions.

Q1 - *Have you noticed that during the COVID-19 period your students' marks or grades have changed or lowered compared to the previous years before the pandemic? If yes, what do you think are the reasons behind this low academic achievement?*

The results revealed that 100% of the interviewed teachers said that the students' grades have lowered during the COVID-19 pandemic period. According to what they wrote, the reasons are: The students' long break with the professional setting (i.e. university) where they learn and practice their target language (English in our case), the reduced number of study hours (because of the sanitary restrictions imposed during that time), not practicing English, the difficulty to get connected to the Internet for some students hindered their access to online learning, and the fact that the majority of students did not attend most of the lessons because

of their fear to get contaminated with the disease or simply because they were not obliged to be present in class in that period. Two of the teachers questioned focused on the negative psychological impact on their students; they said they were in a state of uncertainty and some of them were undergoing difficult situations, the things that reduce the ability and the will to learn and concentrate on an academic task.

Q2 - *Some researchers believe that the Coronavirus pandemic has had a bad impact on EFL students, and thus has influenced negatively their academic achievement. Do you share this perspective or do you think that other factors might have influenced academic achievement?*

Four of the teachers questioned agreed with the perspective stated in the question above and the two other ones stated that other factors may have lowered the students' academic achievement. The factors given are: the lack of practice of the language among students, their use of mass media more for other purposes than for educational ones or studying and, finally, focusing on getting marks instead of trying to improve their level.

Q3 - *How did the COVID-19 affect students' performance in class?*

The teachers interviewed had divergent answers to this question. They replied that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the students "avoided physical communication" because of the safety measures imposed then. The long break from their studies led them to "forget what they already know" in some modules, and some of them "got absent-minded". Not working in groups caused a lack of oral communication in English and the long absences of some students made a cut in their language skills acquisition. In addition, wearing the mask made verbal communication difficult for both students and teachers.

Q4 - *What are the appropriate strategies that you suggest to use to improve your students'*

academic achievement?

The teachers proposed some solutions. They suggested “encouraging communication between the students themselves along with their teachers to improve oral skills”, “encouraging reading to improve the students’ reading and writing skills”, “providing help (extra explanations)”, motivating their learners to practice more at home, using technology to fill in the blanks the COVID-19 period created in their language acquisition (e.g. creating online groups), targeting the students that need help the most and working in small groups with them, encouraging them to try to catch up what they missed, and providing lessons online or recording them to be uploaded on social media to provide better access to them.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the research results gathered from the students and teachers who answered our online questionnaire and written interview. Their interpretation and discussion are dealt with in the next chapter.

Chapter Four:

Discussion of the Findings

Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss and interpret the main findings presented in the previous chapter. It provides answers to the research questions and test the hypotheses presented in the General Introduction. The results are interpreted and discussed in relation to the framework proposed by Maslow and the literature presented in chapter one. This chapter is divided into two sections. The first one deals with the interpretation and the discussion of the results obtained from the students' questionnaire and the second one with results of the teachers' interview.

1. Discussion of the Questionnaire Findings**1.1. Students' Academic Achievement before, during and after COVID-19**

The findings obtained from the first section of the questionnaire revealed important information concerning students' academic achievement. From the analysis of the first question relating to students' grades before the pandemic, the majority 61.8 % said they had satisfactory marks in English (between 11/20 and 14.99/20), 23.5% had excellent ones (from 15/20 on) and 11.8 % of the informants had average marks. This shows that students did not have a low academic achievement before the outbreak of the pandemic and their marks varied from satisfactory to average and then excellent. In addition, only one (1) student out of 34 said having had insufficient marks.

In question (02) dealing with students' opinions about whether their grades in English have changed negatively during COVID-19 (see Diagram 02). The results revealed that the grades of EFL students in the English department at MMUTO changed in a negative way. This shows that the COVID-19 pandemic had negative effects on the EFL students' marks, and that it impacted negatively their academic achievement. This goes hand in hand with Meng et al. (2020) who stated that the pandemic had a terrible impact on students' education.

Concerning the frequency of students' use of English during COVID-19, only 8.8 % of the students said they always used English. From the results of this question, we deduce that EFL students did not have the occasion to always speak English. Thus, COVID-19 affected foreign language learning of the majority of the participants.

Carrying on with the fourth question, the findings showed that 64.7% of students did not study online during the pandemic, whereas 35.3% of the participants did. We deduce that many students did not have access to online classes because they faced challenges or difficulties during that period, which affected their academic performance. Moreover, when asked if the number of hours allotted to their studies in English during this period was sufficient, 52.9% of the students asked affirmed that they needed more lessons and only 23.5% found it sufficient or could not tell (see Diagram 05). This finding indicated that the number of hours allotted to study English was not sufficient, and students did not have enough time dedicated to their studies.

Concerning their school grades, 38.2% of the informants said that their results worsened, and only 17.6% said their grades got better (see Diagram 06). Therefore, the data obtained answer our first question (Does the student have a high or a low academic achievement?), and confirm our first hypothesis which is: Students' academic grades are low because of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the basis of the data obtained, we conclude that COVID-19 influenced students' academic performance negatively.

Based on the analysis of the seventh question (see Diagram 07), 17.6 % of the participants claimed that attending virtual classes is better than attending face-to-face ones, and 70.6% of them found this claim false. In this context, Polfelaf and Sheheb (2013) claimed that many students tend to favor traditional teaching methods. Likewise, Abbassi et al. (2020) stated that the majority of students did not prefer online teaching compared to face-to-face

learning. This suggests that most students favored face-to-face learning over online courses because face-to-face classes allow active interaction and communication among students and their teachers as well as peer-to-peer connection. In addition, students have more opportunities to work and collaborate together in traditional classes which can contribute to a sense of belonging and community. To put it in a concise way, having distractions and technological issues in the online class impacts student's ability to focus and learn effectively.

When asked about the effectiveness of online learning during COVID-19, half of the students 50% said it was a little effective and 44.1% said it was not effective at all (see Diagram 08). We can say that academic achievement is the most affected one by COVID-19 for our study participants as students had a low academic achievement because of the ineffectiveness of online learning.

Regarding question (09), half of the participants said they achieved better in face-to-face tests and 17.6% said they performed better in online ones. In this perspective, Trawick et al, (2010) argue that students in online courses have poorer performance than face-to-face classes. The statement suggests that students who take classes online generally perform poorly than those who take classes in person because online learning can be challenging; some students may struggle with technology, while others may struggle without a teacher or to stay motivated. That was supported in 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory' (1943), which claims that in online education, basic resources must be identified and supplied to students in order for successful learning to occur. To put it simply, if these basic needs, including physiological, safety, love, belonging, and self-actualization needs, are not well met, the active engagement of students in an online class can be negatively affected. Consequently, students often express a preference for face-to-face classes over online ones.

On the basis of the results obtained from the tenth question (Q10) about other means students used to improve their level in English, students used various means to learn and improve their academic achievement during the pandemic as their way of learning changed from traditional to online learning. They used YouTube videos and movies, social networks, books/novels/short stories, online chatting, and PDF-files/E-books. Therefore, we deduce that the majority of the participants used different means to try to improve their level in English.

Moreover, when asked if the aforementioned means could replace face-to-face learning, the answers varied. 58.2 % of the informants said that the former could never replace face-to-face learning because of different reasons like lack of social interaction. Put differently, some students find online classes unengaging. This can happen because of a lack of engaging activities like group discussions, role playing. When students are not engaged, they may not learn as effectively as they could, and this can hinder their academic achievement.

1.2. Causes behind Students' Low Academic Achievement

In the second part of the questionnaire, we investigated the causes behind students' low academic achievement. The findings (see Diagram 12) demonstrated that most students 58.8% did not have access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, the others 41.2% said they did. The results reached lead us to rely on the explanation provided by Maslow (1943). As students did not have access to online classes, we deduce that the first level of Maslow's hierarchy (basic resources) is not satisfied. To put it in a concise way, EFL students did not achieve the first level of the hierarchy as a result of not having access to basic needs such as access to internet connectivity. Therefore, many students did not have access to online classes as a result of not having access to internet, and this led to their low academic achievement.

The results of the thirtieth question (Q13) demonstrate that students agreed they had a

better knowledge of using technology during the pandemic period, 32.4% agreed about it, some were neutral, and 14,7 % disagreed. While many students reported having good knowledge of ICT's, the challenges they faced like poor internet connection, or difficulty adapting to online classes affected their ability to fully practice their knowledge to navigate online platforms. Knowing how to use technology is not always enough for successful academic performance. In other words, even students who are good with technology may struggle if they do not have a stable internet connection or the right resources at home, and this had a negative impact on their academic achievement. To summarize, despite students' ICT knowledge, they still faced other challenges that impacted their academic achievement. The study showed that even knowledgeable students in matters of ICT's can struggle with issues such as limited access to devices, unstable internet connections, and the sudden transition to online learning formats. These factors likely influenced negatively their academic achievement.

In addition, some students disagreed they had a better knowledge of using technology. This shows that there were still students who did not know how to use technology. As a result, some of them do not know how to use digital platforms, access e-books, or participate in virtual classrooms effectively. This limited access could hinder their ability to engage in their learning in an effective way. Moreover, students who lack knowledge in technology might struggle to communicate with teachers and peers through email, discussion, or video conferencing. In this respect, if the third level (the need for belonging) of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) was not satisfied, it could hinder students' learning experience.

The results obtained from question (14) demonstrate that learners strongly agreed that they were very stressful during the pandemic and that they felt they did not study English for years, and some of them disagreed. Stress influenced most of the participants' foreign

language learning, but with various extents. This leads us to agree with the explanation provided by Kenny (2002) who says students' unfamiliarity with the online classroom is one of the most significant stressors when studying in this mode. Therefore, we deduce that another factor that causes participants poor achievement is uncertainty, stress, and not having a safe environment. These outcomes confirm that if the second level (safety needs) of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is not met, students may feel unfamiliar with the online class and, as a result, experience stress.

Furthermore, when asked about having contact with teachers or peers, the majority of the informants answered no, and some of them said yes. To clarify this result, we can rely on Palloff and Pratt (2005) who argue that the instructor participates as an equal member of the learning community, allowing students to become experts in their own learning. In his hierarchy of needs, Maslow (1943) named the third level of the pyramid 'love and belonging' which is related to an individual's goal of belonging and being accepted by others. From this, we deduce that not being able to feel loved, be a part of a community, or develop relationships with teachers or classmates is a cause which hinders learners' grades.

The results displayed in Diagram (16) suggest that most learners encountered some difficulties accessing online lectures or open online tests on their phones and computers. In this regard, Kerras & Salhi (2021) claims that the majority of students do not master technological instruments, which is a huge, existing problem in Algeria. Ghounane (2020) also claims that students do not master the online platforms since they are still new users of such system. He also argues that university administrations directed students to download lecture materials, but given their limited experience with the platform, many students struggled to navigate it effectively. In other words, students who have difficulties with technology may find it challenging to access digital learning resources, engage in online

classes, or do homework that require the use of technology. Thus, learners tend to have a low academic achievement.

According to 85.3% of our informants, many factors may have caused their academic achievement to lower during the pandemic like the lack of motivation and preparation for exams and motivation. This prevented them from achieving better in foreign language classes. So, lack of motivation and preparation can be considered as major obstacles to students' academic achievement. Students were not motivated because they lacked learning facilities like internet connection and access to e-learning platforms. This was supported by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which claims that without these basic resources, students will not be able to achieve higher levels of satisfaction in their learning, and thus their academic achievement will be hindered. In addition, others answered that another source for their poor academic achievement is the limited access to online resources/unstable Internet connection difficulties. This can cause students to miss deadlines, and not complete their assignments. Adding to that, students with an unstable internet connection may miss out interactions with teachers or peers in virtual classes. Besides, other students said they had difficulties in terms of technical skills (limited experience in technology and computes). Put differently, students who lack experience with ICT's may struggle with some tasks like sending emails, writing exam papers, or doing online research. Thus, it can hinder their academic progress and limit their ability to engage with modern educational platforms. Moreover, some students find that insufficient support from teachers is another source of having a poor academic achievement. When students notice that their teachers are not available to help, it can lead to feelings of frustration. In addition, lack of teacher support can influence a student's motivation to learn and their academic performance. Based on these results, we can say that there are many causes of students' poor academic achievement.

EFL students at MMUTO consider the Coronavirus as a cause for their poor academic achievement. For instance, one student said:“ COVID-19 is one of the causes that hinder me to learn English and achieve better in it”. From these results, we deduce that the Coronavirus affected the academic achievement of the majority of the participants negatively. That is, COVID-19 is one of the causes of the participants' poor academic achievement. This proves our assumption on considering COVID-19 as a cause of learners' poor academic achievement, and thus answers our research question about its causes.

1.3. Strategies to reduce the Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Academic Achievement

In the final part of the questionnaire, we investigated students' suggestions for reducing the negative impact of COVID-19. Students' suggestions are: seeking the well-being of every student to avoid stress and anxiety and motivating every single learner to overcome his/her own difficulties by making more efforts and trying new ways to catch up the delay caused by the pandemic (reading, exploring different mass media and online platforms, and working in groups). To say it in a different way, it is important for teachers to support students emotionally since stress and anxiety can hinder their learning. So, creating a positive learning environment and encouraging students to make efforts and try new learning strategies is helpful.

The suggestions provided by students to reduce the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic achievement are essential. Teachers play an important role in helping students overcome their difficulties in online classes by encouraging collaborative work and creating a positive learning environment. Adding to that, it is important for students to make full use of learning resources such as mass media, reading, and listening to native

English speakers in order to explore different sources of knowledge and engage in self-directed learning.

2. Discussion of the Interview Findings

The second instrument of data collection that we used in our research study is an interview conducted with teachers in the department of English at MMUTO. The interview helped to bring more detailed data to our research. The findings of the interview revealed that teachers were aware that COVID-19 is one of the major problems that impacted negatively students' academic performance. Teachers claimed that many of their students' grades have lowered. In addition, some teachers used some expressions when responding to this question like “*yes; many learners*”, “*for sure*”, and “*of course*”. Teachers' positive responses and their unique expressions revealed that their students' poor academic achievement is an existing problem in their classes during the pandemic period.

As concerns teachers' answers about if they noticed that during COVID-19 their students' grades have changed or lowered compared to the previous years before the pandemic, all the six (06) teachers agreed and said ‘yes’. They used utterances like “*yes, students' grades lowered*”, and “*yes, COVID-19 is the main reason*”. From these answers, we deduce students' academic achievement was affected by the pandemic. COVID-19 is considered as one of the major factors that tend to influence students' academic performance.

Results obtained from the second part of the first question showed that respondents provided various reasons for their students' poor academic achievement. These causes are students' long break with the professional setting (i.e. university) where they learn and practice their target language, the reduced number of study hours, not practicing English, the difficulty to get connected to the Internet for some students made online courses not available

for everybody, and the fact that the majority of students did not attend most of the lessons because of their fear of getting contaminated by the disease. We understand that the teachers of English at MMUTO are aware of the factors that led to students' low academic achievement during the pandemic.

As mentioned before, one of the reasons that may cause students to perform poorly in class is the reduced number of study hours and not being able to practice English. Put simply, this finding indicated that the number of hours allotted to study English was not sufficient, and students did not have enough time dedicated to their studies. One teacher reported that it was due to the students' long break from the academic setting where they learn and practice their target language (English in our case). Another teacher said that students' grades lowered because of the difficulty to get connected to the Internet making online courses not available for everybody. This was supported by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which claims that without basic resources, students will not be able to achieve higher levels of satisfaction in their learning, and thus their academic achievement will be hindered. Milheim (2012) argues if students have access to basic needs or resources such as textbooks, appropriate software, a teacher, and a computer with reliable Internet access, they will be satisfied and achieve successful learning. In addition, a teacher asserted that the majority of students did not attend most of the lessons because of their fear to get contaminated by the disease or simply because they were not obliged to be present in class during that period. Adding to that, two of the teachers focused on the negative psychological impact on their students, claiming that uncertainty and undergoing difficult situations is another cause that hinders their academic achievement. Kenny (2002) asserts that students' unfamiliarity with the online classroom is one of the most significant stressors. Therefore, uncertainty is another factor that causes participants poor achievement, along with stress, and not having a safe environment. These outcomes confirm that if the second level (safety needs) of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

(1943) is achieved, students may perform poorly in the online class.

As for the results obtained from question (02), four (04) teachers out of six (06) agreed that the Coronavirus pandemic has had a bad impact on EFL students, and thus has influenced negatively their academic achievement. In this respect, Aristovnik et al. (2020) stated the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the student's academic life, and because of it, they were forced to shift to new ways of learning. Students who take classes online generally perform poorly than those who take classes in-person classes. In addition, two teachers stated that other factors may have lowered students' academic achievement. The factors given are: the lack of the practice of the language among students, use of mass media more for other purposes than for educational ones, and focusing on getting marks instead of trying to improve their level.

When analyzing the teachers' answers about the effects of COVID-19 on students' performance in class, the respondents suggested different answers. Three teachers said that not working in groups caused students a lack of oral communication in English. Palloff and Pratt (2005) claimed that everything that students engage online, from participation on a discussion board to working in small groups and having real contact with other class members, can be viewed as effective collaboration, thus contributing to a successful academic achievement. Put differently, the absence of group work activities is a factor that contributes to a lack of oral communication skills, and students find it challenging to communicate because of the absence of group work. Additionally, online collaboration should be emphasized to improve EFL students' academic achievement. Furthermore, the other teachers added that wearing a mask made verbal communication difficult for both students and teachers. Both students and teachers faced difficulties while communicating because of mask wearing.

When analyzing the teachers' answers about the strategies to adopt in order to improve their students' academic achievement, the respondents suggested different strategies. The teachers agreed that encouraging communication between teachers and students is essential. Another teacher added motivating students to practice more at home. Indeed, motivating and encouraging learners to express themselves, giving them time to prepare and organize their ideas helps to improve their academic performance. A teacher said that since students struggled with ICT's during the pandemic, using technology to fill in the blanks the COVID-19 period created in their language acquisition is effective to help them improve their performance. Other strategies given by teachers are targeting the students that need help the most and working in small groups with them. Studying in groups with classmates is an effective way of learning and acquiring knowledge. They also added encouraging students to try to catch up what they missed and providing lessons online. These answers indicate that teachers are aware of their role in reducing the negative effect COVID-19 had on EFL students. They also show that they are knowledgeable about the ways that can help their learners to get rid of their poor academic achievement. Accordingly, we can say that teachers can adopt strategies that can help their students to improve their academic achievement.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter discussed the findings related the research questions and hypotheses of the current study. It is composed of two parts which interpret the findings gathered from a questionnaire distributed to EFL students, and an interview conducted with teachers. The results indicated that the COVID-19 lockdown had in fact a negative influence on the majority of the surveyed students in the Department of English at MMUTO resulting in a poor academic achievement. Students' academic achievement was impacted negatively because of the unexpected situation created by the pandemic and the lack of online materials necessary during lockdown. Thus, relying on the findings of the analysis, we can say that all the hypotheses advanced in the general introduction are confirmed and the questions are answered.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

This study explored how the COVID-19 pandemic period impacted the academic achievement of EFL students at MMUTO. It investigated the negative effects the special measures taken during this period had on the school outcome of the targeted students.

Our research aimed to achieve two objectives. First, it investigated the impact of COVID-19 on students' school achievement. Our first hypothesis is that the COVID-19 impacted negatively on the school income of the students. Second, it aimed at searching for solutions to the unprecedented situation caused by the pandemic in the academic field by asking our participants to propose ways to overcome it. In order to reach these objectives, we relied on Abraham Harold Maslow's Pyramid of Needs (1943-1954). We adapted it to our research work by applying it on the needs of students; every learner has basic needs in order to learn successfully and achieve better academically, just like every other human being does in his/her everyday life.

To check the hypotheses and answer the research questions, we relied on a mixed-methods approach which combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. We used Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to analyze the answers of the open-ended questions and the quantitative method for numbers and percentages obtained from close-ended questions. Concerning the tools, we made use of the application "Google Forms" to design a questionnaire divided into three sections. The questionnaire was submitted to 34 EFL students enrolled at MMUTO and their answers were collected using the same application we used to design the questionnaire. The findings were automatically represented in diagrams (pie charts and bar graphs) by the application and were copied and reported for analysis. We also used an interview designed for teachers that obtained four open-ended questions. It was submitted in a written form to 6 teachers and their answers were reported and analyzed in addition to those of the students.

General Conclusion

The analysis and discussion of the findings provided us with the answers to our research questions and confirmed the hypotheses we stated in the general introduction. It has confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the students' academic achievement negatively, and the results have shown that most of the students clearly encountered difficulties in learning during that period. These issues were caused either by the adaptation to the new ways of studying (online means and the difficult access of some students to them) or due to the absence of face-to-face interaction that most of the learners needed in addition to the support of their teachers.

Concerning the solutions, many students wished the E-learning platform of the MMUTO would be ameliorated in order to face eventual emergency situations like the one they faced with COVID-19. They also suggested a better help from the part of their teachers to go through the post-COVID-19 period safely and to catch up what they missed. The teachers also proposed giving extra-lessons and support to improve the students' level.

There have been some limitations while conducting this study. First, the students' answers to our questionnaire have been collected online because they were given holidays to revise for their exams and some answers were too short that we could not gather enough information from them. This led to some random answers from their part. Second, we wished to interview the teachers face-to-face to have their point of view about the matter and the interview was initially prepared for this purpose but, because of the lack of time and for other commodity reasons, we submitted it to them in a written form and collected the answers later.

Finally, it is hoped that the findings of the present work will be a basis for future dissertations concerning the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students' academic life or journey. Other studies may also include more teachers and even pedagogical

General Conclusion

administrators (like the heads of the departments) in order to diagnose the impact COVID-19 had on every member who was confronted to it during their academic career.

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Appendices

Appendices

Appendix one: Students' Questionnaire

Dear Students,

We would be thankful if you answer this questionnaire which aims to gather information about the theme "The impact of the COVID19 on Students' Academic Achievement" and find ways to reduce its negative consequences in the Department of English at MMUTO. The results of this research will be used only for an academic purpose; thus, we ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of your responses. So, feel at ease when answering the questions because your answers will be very useful for our research work. Please, give your answers sincerely to guarantee the success of this investigation. Read each of the following questions/statements carefully and tick (✓) the right answer (you can tick more than one option). Thank you in advance for your collaboration.

Section One : Students' Academic Achievement before, during and after COVID-19 [The Impact of Covid-19 on Students' Learning]

1. Before the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic, how were your marks in English?

Very good/excellent (from 15/20 on)

Satisfactory (from 11/20 to 14.99/20)

Average (from 10/20 to 10.99/20)

Under Average (from 8/20 to 9.99/20)

Insufficient (under 7.99/20)

2. Do you think that your grades/marks in English have changed negatively within the past two years?

Yes

No

3. How often did you have the occasion to use the English language during the pandemic?

Always

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

4. Have you been studying online during the pandemic?

Yes

No

Appendices

5. Do you think the number of hours allotted to your studies during the pandemic was sufficient?

- A. Yes, it was.
- B. No, I needed more lessons.
- C. I cannot tell.

6. How had your grades become during the period of the pandemic?

- A. Better
- B. Worse
- C. They stayed the same

7. “Attending virtual classes is better than attending face-to-face ones”. What is your point of view concerning this affirmation?

- A. True
- B. False
- C. I don't know

8. Do you think online learning during the COVID-19 period was effective?

- a. Not at all
- b. A little; it was just a temporary solution
- c. Quite effective
- d. Other (to be specified)

9. You achieve better in :

- A. face-to-face tests
- B. online tests
- C. the same in both

10. What other means did you use to improve your level in English?

- A. YouTube videos
- B. Movies
- C. PDF files/E-Books
- D. Books/Novels/Short stories
- E. Online chatting
- F. Social networks
- others:.....

Appendices

11. Do you think these aforementioned means can replace face-to-face learning? Why and why not?

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.....
.....

Section Two : Causes behind Students' Low Academic Achievement

Please choose: SA: *Strongly Agree* A: *Agree* N: *Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)*

D: *Disagree* SD: *Strongly Disagree*

12. I had access to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A. Yes

B.No

13. I didn't have a better knowledge of using technology.

SA

A

N

D

SD

14. I was very stressful and felt that I did not study English for years.

SA

A

N

D

SD

15. I had contact with my classmates and teachers through online platforms.

A. Yes

B. No

16. Learners encountered some difficulties accessing online lectures or open online tests on their phones and computers.

SA

A

N

D

SD

17. Which of the following factors may have caused your academic achievement to lower during the pandemic?

A. Lack of motivation and preparation

B. Limited access for online resources [unstable internet connection]

C. Difficulty in terms of technical skills [limited experience in technology/with computers]

D. Insufficient support from teachers

Appendices

If there are other causes, please state them.

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.....
.....

Section Three :Reducing the Negative Impact the COVID-19 had on Students’ Academic Achievement

18. What are your suggestions to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 on your academic achievement?

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Thank you for your collaboration.

Appendices

Appendix two: Teachers' Interview

This interview is part of our research entitled “**The impact of the COVID-19 on Students' Academic Achievement at the English Department of MMUTO**”. It investigates the impact of the COVID-19 on students' academic achievement, the causes of their low outcome and aims to find ways to increase their performances at the level of the Department of English at MMUTO. The results of this interview will be used for an academic purpose and your answers will stay confidential and anonymous.

- 1) - Have you noticed that during the Covid-19 period your students' marks or grades have changed or lowered compared to the previous years before the pandemic? If yes, what do you think are the reasons behind this low academic achievement?
- 2) - Some researchers believe that the Corona virus pandemic has had a bad impact on EFL students, and thus has influenced negatively their academic achievement. Do you share this perspective or do you think that other factors might have influenced language learning?
- 3) - How did the COVID-19 affect students' performance in class?
- 4) - What are the appropriate strategies that you suggest to use to improve your students' academic achievement?

Thank you for your time and collaboration.