

9 Sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: the case of Arabic at Qatar University

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Abstract

The present chapter focuses on the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education sector, presenting the case of the Arabic for Non-Native Speakers Center (ANNS) at Qatar University. It evaluates what actions the center has undertaken to pledge its integrity to the cause of higher education throughout the pandemic and considers a sample of students' responses to a survey about the approaches and strategies adopted when learning shifted online. In order to speak to the book project rationale, the questions herein addressed concentrate on what has changed in language teaching practices as a result of COVID-19; on which changes might become permanent changes and which are expected to return to their pre-pandemic conditions; on reconsidered language pedagogy and new educational purposes and on informational progress for remote teaching. The chapter also aims to identify a number of techniques to be researched further.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, student perceptions, technology-enhanced learning, Qatar.

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1. Introduction

Since the arrival of COVID-19 and the consecutive lockdown in all countries, higher education institutions have had to proceed speedily toward online delivery to guarantee the continuity of teaching and learning. It seems that this transition was less challenging for those countries that had invested in the online sector and approached digitalization as a tactical strategy. The pandemic forced an adjustment to educational techniques, on account of the infeasibility of conducting physical classes, in effect requiring the educational sector to experiment with educational means and approaches to achieve distance learning (UNESCO, 2020).

At Qatar University, the ANNS modified their existing educational program and transitioned to virtual learning, replacing face-to-face lessons with online procedures, completely or partially. Solutions for teaching and learning online have progressed since then, and consequently, in spite of the complications in the transformation to an utterly different methodology for teaching, the ANNS rose to the challenge of finding solutions to enable the continuity of teaching and learning during the pandemic.

There are many indications that this global crisis will change many aspects of life (e.g. Johnson, 2020; Minello, 2020), and if distance learning proves to be effective, education may be one of those sectors that finds itself profoundly and permanently changed. Arguably, several effects of the pandemic, although not immediately observable, are regrettably very significant and will rise in the medium- and long-term. Universities have therefore been called upon to answer the central question: How do we understand whether distance learning is indeed successful or not? As discussed by a summer 2020 post published in Qatar University Newsroom², in order to answer this question, it is essential to collect and analyse data extensively and place focus on quality higher education.

2. <https://www.qu.edu.qa/newsroom/Qatar-University/Education-and-Learning-Post-Pandemic---Covid-19?>

Many educational leaders acknowledge that the shift in modality was the result of an unpredictable contingency situation. At the same time, they acknowledge that they ought to start to plan for online teaching in the future with better pedagogical support and resources, prognosticating that the continuance of the crisis will amplify over time (for example, see the post and related comments on *El Corona Teaching*, which appeared in the educational blog³).

In this study, the case of the ANNS is considered and in particular how the center has responded to the unexpected shift to online learning following the closure of the university as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. After describing the institutional context and scope of the ANNS, students' responses to an informal survey were analyzed in order to distill their views and perceptions of technology-mediated modes of learning. In particular, the questions posed to the students concerned the kinds of support systems and collaborative efforts which enabled the learning process during the initial phase of COVID-19 for learners taking one of the ANNS' courses, and the use of technology in the ANNS during the first wave of the pandemic. Students' confidence and satisfaction with distance modes of learning was also elicited through survey items. The first question is addressed in Section 2, while the second and third in Section 3 and 4. Section 5 draws some conclusions on some of the lessons learned and a number of techniques to be researched further.

2. Institutional context

On 15th March 2020, the Government of Qatar announced a state of emergency in the country and established a set of measures to fight the spread of coronavirus. The following actions were taken on behalf of educational institutions: all educational facilities were closed, extracurricular activities were nullified, sports and other types of in-person activities were discontinued, both indoors and outdoors. Institutional measures have included rigorous health checks, adaptation of schedules, contributions of research on alleviating the pandemic,

3. <https://edumorfosis.blogspot.com/2020/04/el-corona-teaching.html>

ensuring the continuity of the pedagogical scenario through remote education, bibliographical and technological resources' endorsement, and also socio-emotional encouragement to the university community.

In this context, Qatar University embraced the use of the latest technologies from the very beginning of the emergency and employed virtual platforms for its faculty and students, in line with Qatar's efforts to keep the education system going and as effective as before the pandemic. Moreover, the university also allowed for faculty to continue their meetings remotely, so that university life would continue regularly but through virtual platforms. As far as digital resources are concerned, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning played a crucial role in setting up a repository of tools⁴ as well as pre-recorded guides to online teaching and learning available both in Arabic and English⁵ to help faculty and students alike to cope with the new learning environment. Along the same lines, best-practice guides to evaluating students in a distance setting were made available to the university community⁶. Qatar University also provided faculty, staff, and students with a unique hotline number for remote technical support and requests⁷. The ANNS shared the same concern to continue providing education for the whole term for all students and to accomplish crucial learning outcomes.

2.1. ANNS' students

Students in the ANNS come from extremely diverse backgrounds, namely Turkey, Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Serbia, Bangladesh, Ukraine, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Russia, Ghana, Greece, and Pakistan. As stated in the ANNS website,

4. <http://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/cetl/distance-learning>

5. http://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/cetl/distance-learning/teaching_online

6. <http://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/cetl/distance-learning/evaluating-students>

7. <http://www.qu.edu.qa/coronavirus>

“[t]he center serves future scholars, teachers of Arabic and Islamic sciences, journalists, diplomats, employees of Non-Governmental Organizations or cultural centers, and many others. Each year, a number of the ANNS students are accepted into other departments at Qatar University upon completion of the center curriculum, including Arabic Language, Computer Science, and Business”⁸.

With the movement to remote learning, students have been involved in classroom activities twice a week along with their participation in media-based classes and listening and speaking practicums. Students of the ANNS have had to reorganize their lifestyles to adapt to a situation of incarceration. Inescapably, the loss of interaction and acculturation that are part of the daily lives of higher education students has taken its toll. The separation that is unavoidably linked with confinement is likely to have a harmful impact on students’ socio-emotional stability, particularly with pre-existing issues of this nature. However, the established practice of remote education, that is, that in which educators proceed to instruct a regular class through live streaming and which can be regained on a delayed basis, appear to be welcomed by students because they are the ones that best replicate the dynamics to which they are already accustomed through exposure to digital media.

2.2. ANNS’ faculty and program

As mentioned on the ANNS website,

“[t]he center employs a number of full-time Qatar University faculty [members] with academic credentials and varied experience in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. Classes are small, with an average of 10-15 students in the Beginning and Intermediate levels, and approximately ten in the Advanced level”⁹.

8. <http://gpc.qu.edu.qa/artssciences/departments/anns>

9. <http://gpc.qu.edu.qa/artssciences/departments/anns>

In teaching modern standard Arabic, the ANNS uses the communicative language approach (see [Facchin, 2019](#) and [Littlewood, 2011](#) that discusses different traditions in the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language, particularly Chapter 6 on 21st century developments and communicative approaches). This includes a focus on learners' exposure to language varieties used throughout the Arabic speaking world, both in print and electronic media, in educational and academic settings, as well as other aspects of daily life. The courses offered by the center are designed to develop all communicative skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing, as well as to cover media in Arabic and modern and classical literature. Before the lockdown, the center would also organize monthly excursions and cultural activities around Doha where Arabic is used. Trips to museums, the Al Jazeera television studios, and recreation sites were an integral part of the center extracurricular program to help students link the language acquired in class to the larger Qatari and Arab contexts¹⁰.

3. Technical support offered by ANNS

The ANNS has encouraged its staff to take part in a variety of training sessions organized by the university's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning aimed at illustrating principles and forms of digital learning and education at large, e.g. by introducing the key differences between face-to-face and online education, by distinguishing between synchronous and asynchronous forms, and illustrating the different tools. Different videoconferencing applications and platforms were explored, namely WebEx, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. The learning management system chosen by the university and used by the ANNS was Blackboard and Blackboard Collaborate and Echo360 for video management and recording. In all, the experience of the ANNS with the use of the Zoom platform was positive enough to guarantee the completion of all teaching programs for the whole semester. In this respect, we share [Oyedotun's \(2020\)](#) view that "there is no doubt that the online mode has proven to be the saving grace for the completion of the semester in difficult times" (p. 2).

10. <http://www.qu.edu.qa/artsscience/departments/anns>

Moreover, Qatar University has provided both its employees with high-tech computers to be able to work remotely and its students with help with online resources, offering extra support through its Student Learning Support Center¹¹.

The ANNS has introduced special assistance for both students and staff due to the pandemic. For example, it has used digital technologies to provide:

- tools for lectures such as WebEx in order to host interactive webinars or large-scale virtual events;
- the Zoom platform for video meetings and interactive lectures;
- Microsoft Teams for communication between lecturers and students and for file storage and integration of applications;
- solutions for home office, including Blackboard Learn, an interactive learning management system suitable for higher education institutions; and
- pedagogical advice for professors on how to make teaching digital, and for students on how to maintain study habits when going digital, and the creation of a help desk for digital services assistance for students and staff.

4. Collected responses from the students

In a moment when face-to-face classes are necessarily substituted with the online format, it is crucial to examine students' perceptions of the latest reality during the COVID-19 crisis (see [Cohen, 2017](#)). The author of this chapter, in her capacity as lecturer of the ANNS, has informally collected and analyzed responses from as many students as possible, aged between 19 and 30 regarding

11. <http://www.qu.edu.qa/students/success-and-development/student-learning-support>

this transition. Students who took part in the survey were asked to comment on questions about the new learning environment and the activities in which they had been involved when learning shifted online, their experience with collaborative language learning methods as a result of the emergency situation, the level of support and collaboration they received, and the challenges and opportunities experienced. A total of 40 students completed the questionnaire. The analyses of the responses demonstrate the following.

First, the faculty's professional positive attitude advantages students in addition to the ANNS. All of the students' responses showed that some learners, who tended to be diffident and unwilling to partake in regular setting interactions, turned out to be more motivated during online sessions. Some of the students who previously felt uncomfortable in an in-person class found themselves feeling more empowered to perform their best when their webcams were turned off. In view of the fact that remote teaching and learning may be a new experience for the center as much as for the students, faculty should be clear, but realistic, regarding how they expect students to interact and function. The students pointed out that they missed being in the face-to-face classes; however, they felt safe in their online classes, which positively affected their performance. Additionally, three daily meals were offered, so as to allow the students to be secure and therefore able to focus on their studies. The online classrooms were appropriately organized, faculty was structured to keep its educational setting while students were involved in remote learning activities, and thus the experience was professional, secure, and not disturbing.

Second, students value faculty who maintain a confident and consistent approach. Teachers continued to show up on time in online classrooms. A number of activities and interactions had become unavailable to be taught online, as a consequence, alternative means needed to be established. Students, however, did not expect the online classes to be captivating to the same extent as with the face-to-face classes. Exams and activities were challenging, but nevertheless the students were delighted to explore absolutely modern methods, in particular play-acting educational video games such as Quizlet, Kahoot, and Socrative. In the present case, ANNS was felt as a privileged place, as both the center and the

students shared their ideas and emotions with one another and talked about their experiences as appropriate.

Third, students made a number of self-critical comments concerning acknowledging the limits of their own technical proficiency. Developing universally accessible models of learning is a vital feature of remote learning, and one way to start this process is by recognizing that whereas certain trainees may be capable of quickly figuring out how to partake in online instruction, others may need more support and endorsement. Fortunately, the teachers did not experience any complications with the access to online classrooms, as the connection to the internet in the dormitories of Qatar University has been sufficiently reliable.

Finally, students desire faculty to be untroubled with technology. There are many existing ways of teaching remotely. Both the teachers and students watched videos in online classrooms and discussed subject matters, which was similar to the pre-pandemic teaching period. The teachers encouraged students to deal with Microsoft Teams and Blackboard, so the educational conditions were settled and there have not been feelings of frustration. Additionally, if the center demands students to make notes, there is an option to provide them with the PowerPoint file as a starting point.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Planning for the future

The colossal attempts to adjust to new online-based forms of cooperation by both teachers and students also require that the ANNS monitor how teaching activities are executed and what are the requirements, of any types, that can appear in the academic community.

At the university level, emphasis must inescapably concentrate initially on how to handle the procedures, specifically teaching continuity, in the middle

and promptly after the crisis, and in addition, to gain benefit of the lessons learned to take into consideration the teaching and learning processes in higher education.

The ANNS has observed diverse implementations for remote education that can be efficient, despite the fact that a matter which is still not fully resolved is the determination of the student's identity when live streaming classes. Moreover, streaming can be problematic to access if the quality of connectivity required is not sufficient. However, technology can be exploited as a support tool rather than the sole medium of interaction. We therefore agree with the UNESCO-IESALC's (2020) statement that

“if virtualization is to be the primary informative instrument to uphold the performance of education, the tremendous technological gap must be taken into account. Its existence must be acknowledged, not to repudiate virtualization, but to structure approaches along with support devices that will facilitate it all the more actively” (p. 42).

Thinking today about what comes next, it is essential to begin with the principle of reality and produce plans of action that do not depend simply on a particular technology, but on several, to guarantee that all students are kept in mind or, which is similarly or increasingly important, that technological solutions do not further disadvantage those who are already underprivileged. The ANNS must discover the most suitable amalgamation of technologies and resources to enhance the academic effect. It is sufficient to carry out a realistic practice, implementing the principle that additional efforts should be inducted into those technologies, instructional materials should be circulated and supports offered to improve the quality of in-person teaching and strengthen hybrid methodologies; alternatively stated, hybrid methodologies coalesce the greatest of face-to-face instruction with the prospect of technology to support pedagogical renovation and enhancement (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020 and see also their website¹²).

12. <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/>

5.2. Lessons learned

In this chapter we have reported on the influences of the crisis on the Qatar University language program to document the experience of ANNS' students. For the students, the most instant impact has clearly been the temporary interruption of face-to-face teaching at the ANNS and, in the absence of any indication of how long it will continue, the immediate impacts on lifestyle, expenses incurred and financial burdens, and, of course, learning progression and international mobility.

Despite all this, and in line with [UNESCO-IESALC \(2020\)](#), the ANNS will have missed a valuable opportunity if they cease to reflect inwardly, with the engagement of students and teachers, regarding the experience acquired in times of crisis about the teaching and learning procedures. The crucial issue is whether the experience gained might be capitalized upon for a remodeling of these techniques, optimizing the benefit of person-to-person courses while making the most of the technologies, which then begs the question of how much further the ANNS can go.

This reflection may be specified if the ANNS takes initiative in increasing the pedagogical proficiency of teachers, in promoting pedagogical innovation and in spreading the findings arising from their evaluation. We have a saying that in each calamity, there arises a window of opportunity. Perchance, in this instance, there lies a possibility for a pedagogical reconsideration. It is consequently anticipated that the ASSN will undertake the direction of an essential pedagogical revival that encourages both high quality and equality.

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