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Feedback and the imposed use of ICTsin the Moroccan English department

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ABSTRACT:*The spread of Covid-19 in 2020 has imposed the use of ICTs in higher education institutions all over the world. This includes some third world countries where professors and students have been reluctant to upgrade their teaching methods and tools. As such, thecurrent study's main objective is to account for the effects of this compulsory upgrade on the provision of feedback by Moroccan university professors. To achieve this goal, the study explores the Moroccan professors' views of feedback as well as the frequency and types of feedback they could provide before the 2020 lockdown. The study also enquires aboutthe changes that ICTs could presentin the new context. This study, which claims that the high student-teacher ratio in Morocco is the main obstacle to feedback provision, concludes that most Moroccan professors do want to provide feedback, and that the use ofICTs did affect the frequency and the types of the provided feedback positively.*

Keywords: Feedback; Morocco; ICTs; Higher education.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Teachers usually expect their students to grasp every piece of information provided to them. However, there is always a gap between what the teachers expect and what the students believe is expected from them. For Alastair Irons (2008), the problem for most students is not that they are incapable of understanding; it is mainly that they do not know exactly what they need to know. Hence, they need feedback to close the gap between what they already know and what they need to know(Irons, 2008, p. 74). Feedback then can be any follow-up activity that helps students show how much they know, and helps teachers understand 'where the problem lies'(Evans, 2016, p. 05; Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross, & Smith, 2004, p. 03). In other words, the students do not only need more explanation; the teachers do not always know what is needed, and feedback may be the only way for the two sides to bridge this gap(Evans, 2013, p. 71). To recapitulate, the main goal of feedback is to narrow the gap between the actual state of students' progress and the desired state, which matches the standards of a specific educator or a hosting institution(Morgan C., Tops A., & van Weert C., 2014, p. 03; Juwah, Macfarlane-Dick, Matthew, Nicol, Ross, & Smith, 2004, p. 05).

As the gap between the current and the desired state of learning differs from one situation to another, the feedback activities that fill that gap differ too. Feedback can directly target a specific task or concept and the way it should be performed or understood, and it can, at a metacognitive level, target the student's self-evaluation skills and personal attributes(Evans, 2013, p. 71; Karlsen, 2015, p. 115). However, the act of delivering feedback can take many forms, and despite the specifications of each form, it is usually believed that "students understand written comments to be feedback above all other forms of input"(Bond, 2014, p. 56). Therefore, though most other forms of feedback might occur in each class, students do not believe they receive feedback unless it is written as a response to a specific assignment or task. Hence, the current paper will be using the terms "feedback, good feedback, or systematic feedback" almost interchangeably to refer to written feedback that results from feedback-generating activities and that occurs frequently and systematically.

The current study was conducted under the unusual circumstancesof a global lockdown that was imposed by the spread of Covid-19. The pandemic that affected the whole world's politics, economy and social life has also weighed heavily on education. At the international level, Information and Communication Technologies, whichwere already used as a complementary tool that facilitates teaching and learning, has become the only medium of communication between teachers and students. In countries like Morocco, ICTswere barely used before this pandemic, which may have made the sudden necessity of their use relatively morechallenging. However, the current study tries to tackle the imposed situation as a positive opportunity for the provision of feedback in countries where the potentials of ICTs have beenhardlyexploited. In this sense, the

study will explore the Moroccan university professors' conception of feedback, their actual provision of feedback, and the extent to which ICTs could help them provide 'good' written feedback.

1.1. Context:

There is a big difference between the Moroccan educational system and its counterparts in countries like England, the United States, and France in terms of student-teacher ratios, student-teacher relationships, and the costs of education. In a sense, these three aspects or factors are closely related. Free education means that educational institutions are open to larger numbers of students, who are not treated like customers, which is the case in the UK and the US. This also means that the satisfaction of the students, who do not pay, may not be the primary goal of the educators. Consequently, these aspects of the Moroccan educational system impose an environment or a culture in which the student is generally perceived as a passive recipient of information, feedback, and evaluation, and the professor enjoys total power of choice and decision.

1.1.1. Paid education:

In the United Kingdom, and in the United States, for instance, HE institutions are chosen, by students, based on their quality, which includes the learning experience of the students, the prestige, the students' life, and the available commodities(Bond, 2014, p. 56; Darwin, 2016, pp. 420-424; Padró, 2011, p. 36). Seventy-four percent (74%) of the United States' students, who pay an average of twenty-one thousand dollars a year in tuition fees, for instance, choose colleges based on their quality and reputation (Bridgestock, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In UK universities, where the average tuition fees can go up to thirteen thousand dollars, quality and reputation are also the first qualities that the students check before enrollment(Heathcote, Savage, & Hosseinian-Far, 2020, p. 03; Playdon, 2018). In this context, the student has to be satisfied and hasto provide positive feedback about his institution and its staff(Puteh & Habil, 2011, p. 50).

1.1.2. Free education

On the other hand, in France, whose educational system is, to some extent, similar to the Moroccan one, education is almost free. The undergraduate students in French public universities usually pay a subscription fee of 170 Euros at the beginning of each academic year, and the masters' students pay 243 Euros(Campus France, 2019). In this educational system, students do not choose universities based on quality or reputation; instead, they simply opt for the closest university to their home cities(Moyou, 2019). Based on this comparison, it might be fair to claim that tuition fees raise the expectation of quality, following the value-for-money logic, while a free educational system may just not be expected to impress.

In Morocco, education is completely free for Moroccans and for foreigners as well(Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2017, p. 10). However, free education comes with greater numbers of students, limited options when it comes to the teaching methods, and overwhelming student-teacher ratios. In the academic year 2018-2019, for instance, the number of students in Moroccan open-access institutions was 764 332, while the number of educators was only 8579(Direction des Stratégies et des Systèmes d'Information, 2019, p. 01). This means a ratio of 89 students to each professor, which is almost four times higher than the international average(Univstats, 2020; Complete University Guide, 2020). These numbers also impose the choice of lectures as the main form of teaching, and the end of semester exams as the only opportunity for evaluation(Direction des Stratégies et des Systèmes d'Information, 2019, pp. 15-23). Consequently, providing systematic feedback in Moroccan universities can be non-existent, rare, or at least poorly implemented, but it is certainly not obligatory.

1.1.3. Ibn Tofail University's English department

One of the extreme examples of the effects of free education on the student-teacher ratio can be found in the English department of Ibn Tofail University in Kénitra, Morocco. The official students' lists of the fall term of the academic year 2019/2020 show that the English department had a total of 5879 students. 3230 students were in the first semester, 1609 in the third semester, 1040 in the fifth semester, and only 25 permanent professors(Faculty of letters and Human Sciences Kénitra, 2019). In the English department of kénitra, the student-teacher ratio is 232 to 1. Every professor teaches three to five classes a week, of which every class is formed of a group of 400 to 700 students. These numbers are the main reason behind the current study's interest in exploring how such a small number of professors can provide systematic feedback to these overwhelming numbers of students.

II.   THE STUDY

1.2. Hypotheses:

The free Moroccan educational system does not impose the provision of feedback, the students' satisfaction, success and failure have no effects on educational institutions and their staff, and the numbers of

students clearly overwhelm the professors of the Moroccan English department. Keeping these facts in mind, the current study claims that the provision of written feedback that ispersonalized, systematic and frequent to the Moroccan students of the English department is undoable. However, as the context of covid-19 imposed the use of ICTs, the study also asserts that positive changes may have taken place. To recapitulate, the study makes two main claims:

- Professors cannot provide systematic written feedback to the students of the Moroccan English department.
- ICTs canfacilitate the provision of feedback for the Moroccan professors.

1.3. Research questions

As the Moroccan educational system does not impose the provision of feedback, the professors are not obliged to do so. As such, the effects of the student-teacher ratio and the use of ICTs will matter only as long as the professors do want to provide feedback. On the other hand, if all the professors managed, somehow, to provide systematic written feedback before the lockdown, then the use of ICTs will be of no significance to the current study. This makes the evaluation of the provision of feedback before the imposition of ICTs, if any, vital to the current study. Finally, the role of ICTs in facilitating the provision of written feedback will be evaluated only if the professors show their willingness to provide feedback, and their inability to do it because of the high student-teacher ratios. Consequently, the three main questions that the current research asks are to some extent symbiotic.

- How do Moroccan professors perceive the provision of feedback?
- If written feedback is provided, how often does it occur and what forms does it take?
- Has the imposed use of ICTs affected the provision of feedback in the Moroccan English department?

III.   METHOD

The current paper tries to examine the Moroccan university professors' conception of feedback, as well as the actual possibility of providing it in the Moroccan context. To do so, a questionnaire was sent to more than a hundred professors of the English department, in Morocco, and only thirty-two professors responded. First, theywere asked about the duration of their experience in the field of teaching, which was expected to affect their views about feedback and their access to new tools of communication. Subsequently, theywere asked about their personal beliefs about the type of relationship they think they should have with students. In other words, they were asked about independent learning, and whether or not it means that students do not need assistance outside the classroom i.e., feedback. Educators were also asked whether they appreciate the students' requests for feedback or not, and whether or not the students' opinions can affect their way of teaching. These questions were supposed to elicit subjective opinions about how the professors perceive their relationship with the students before delving into questions that show how they actually interact with them.

Subsequently, the questionnaire inquires about whether or not the professors provided personalized feedback and assigned feedback-generating activities before and during the lockdown. Given the high numbers of students and the lack of material incentives to address the students' needs, the paper tries to see whether the educators refuse the idea of providing feedback or lack the means of doing it. In this sense, if the educators refuse the idea, then being obliged to use ICTs would not change their educational behavior in any way. On the other hand, if all they needed were better teaching conditions or more practical means of communication, then the imposed online teaching might encourage them to engage more with their students.
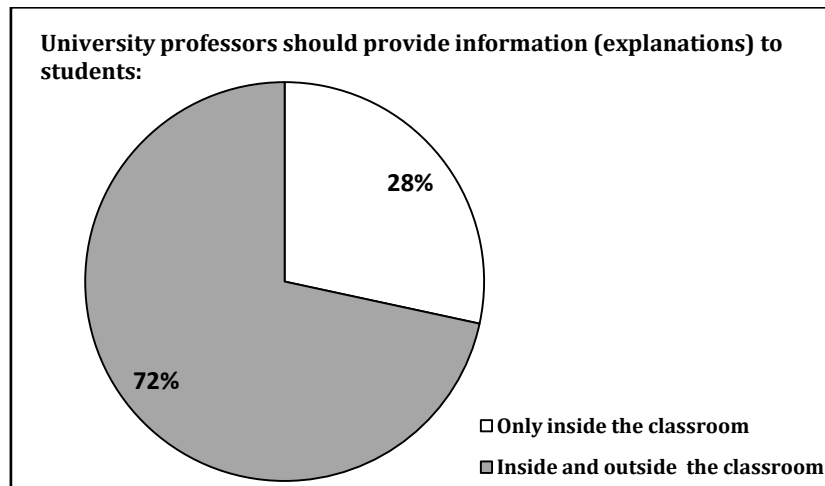
The questionnaire provided the professors with multiple-choice questions. However, to avoid limiting the respondents to the expected answers, almost all the questions have the option other, in which short answerscan be added. Adding open-ended questions was meant to open the space for unforeseen answers and to raise the reliability and credibility of the results(Hyman & Sierra, 2016).

IV.   RESULTS

1.4. The professors' perception of feedback

In general, it is assumed that traditional university professors perceive students as passive recipients of information, do not feel comfortable using online tools of communication, and believe in some sort of power over students (Deeley, 2017, pp. 02-07). These traditional views are usually believed to be held by senior faculty members more than novice ones. However, this was the first assumption to be debunked by the results of the current study. The latter has shown that, as far as the personal views of the professors are concerned, seniority has no effects on their responsiveness to online communication tools, and their perception of the educators' role inside and outside the classroom.

Figure 01: Perception of the educators' role.

University professors should provide information (explanations) to students:

28%

72%

☐ Only inside the classroom
■ Inside and outside the classroom

The question of whether professors should 'provide information (explanation) to students only inside the classroom or also outside the classroom' has been asked to check the Moroccan English department's educators' general perception of the student-teacher relationship. In a sense, providing information and explanations only inside the classroom may consist of many forms of feedback. It may include questions and answers, discussions, and even advice to individuals. However, written feedback, which is more specific, more concrete, and more likely to be perceived as feedback by the students(Bond, 2014, p. 56), requires other forms of contact outside the classroom. In this vein, only 28.1% of the participants do not believe in any form of contact outside the classroom, which means that most professors are willing to provide the students with academic assistance outside the classroom, and most of them believe that "good" students are the ones who ask for feedback. Nonetheless, taking the students' feedback into consideration when deciding the adopted teaching methodology seems to remain controversial in Morocco.

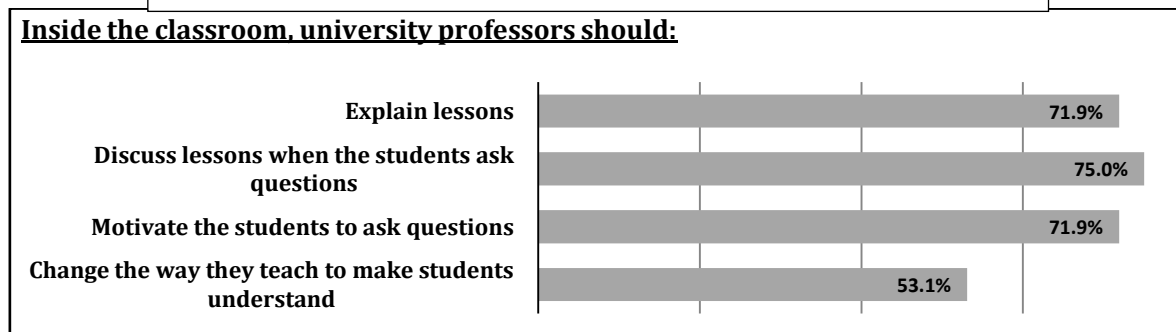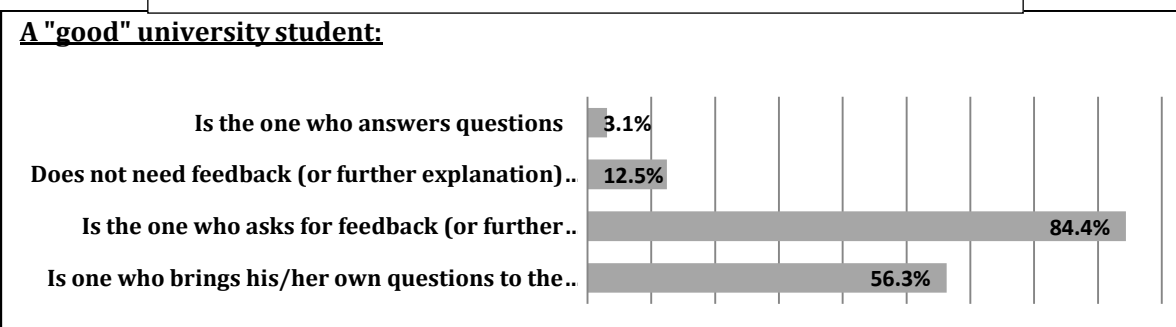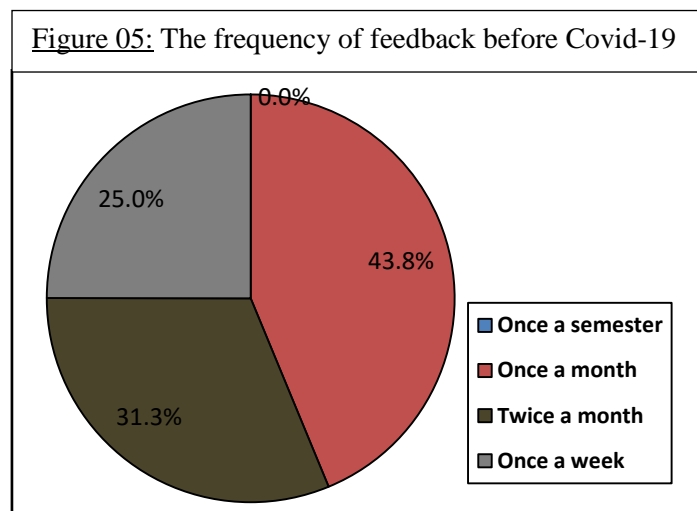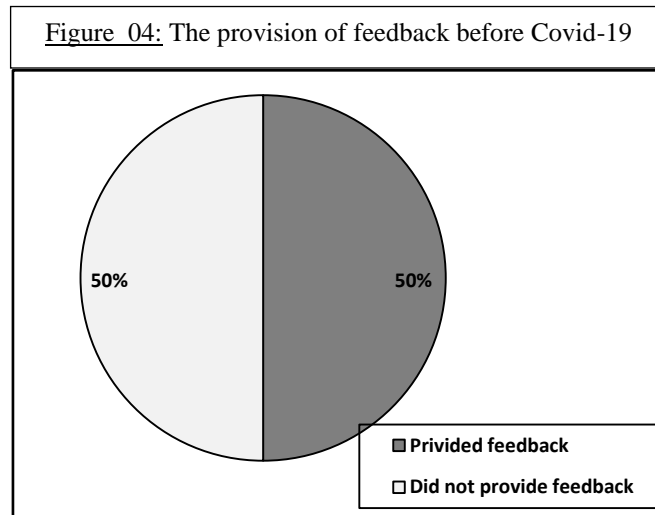Figure 02: Perception of the educators' role inside the classroom.

Inside the classroom, university professors should:

Explain lessons — 71.9%
Discuss lessons when the students ask questions — 75.0%
Motivate the students to ask questions — 71.9%
Change the way they teach to make students understand — 53.1%

Figure 03: Perception of the students' feedback requests

A "good" university student:

Is the one who answers questions — 3.1%
Does not need feedback (or further explanation).. — 12.5%
Is the one who asks for feedback (or further.. — 84.4%
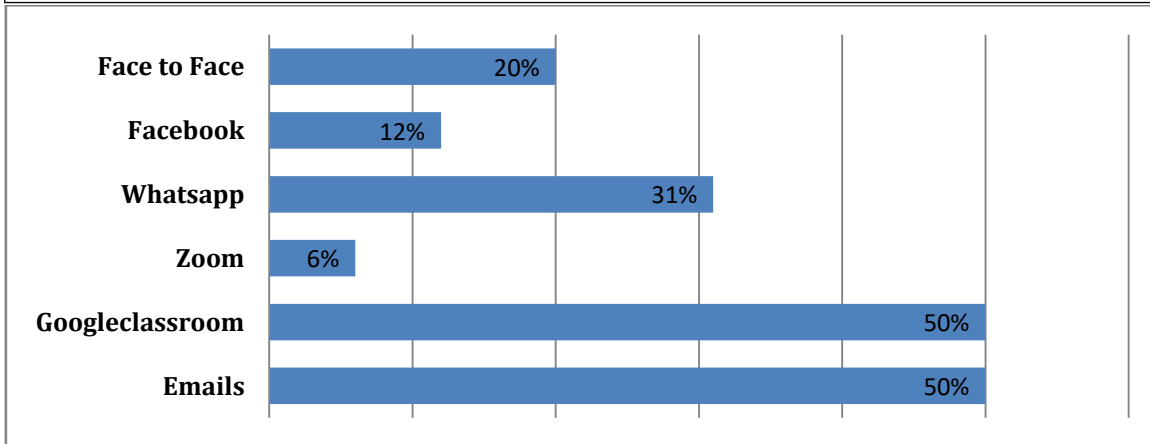Is one who brings his/her own questions to the.. — 56.3%

1.5. Feedback before the lockdown:

It is important to mention here that the previous questions were about personal opinions of how things should be, and that this is the first question about what the professors actually do. Though most of them believe that a good student is the one who asks for feedback, only half of them used to assign feedback-generating activities. Nonetheless, 50% of the professors had never assigned feedback-generating activities and had never provided written feedback before Covid-19. This might seem like some sort of dissonance between the professors' beliefs and their actions.However, the professors justified it by asserting that 'the large number of students' is the main obstacle they face.

Figure 04: The provision of feedback before Covid-19

- ■ Privided feedback
- □ Did not provide feedback

Figure 05: The frequency of feedback before Covid-19

- ■ Once a semester
- ■ Once a month
- ■ Twice a month
- ■ Once a week

Only a small number of the professors, who provided systematic feedback, did it on a weekly basis, while the majority did it less often. To provide feedback before covid-19, they relied mostly on ICTs, and they provided feedback that is more personalized than the feedback they provided in the classroom. The large number of students, according to the professors, was the main cause behind the low frequency of feedback, along with the "other academic and administrative duties that take most of the professors' time". So far, it may make sense to assume that the choice of providing systematic feedback, which entails an almost unsupportable load of work, may be difficult to make even by professors who do believe that students need and should receive feedback.

Figure 06: Means of feedback provision before covid-19 (Only by the professors who did provide feedback)

Category	Percentage
Face to Face	20%
Facebook	12%
Whatsapp	31%
Zoom	6%
Googleclassroom	50%
Emails	50%

1.6. *Feedback during the lockdown:*

While the use of ICTs can be the solution to many issues, their integration in higher education might be problematic(Deeley, 2017; Irons, 2008). In 2020, as the spring term classes were suspended because of the covid-19 pandemic, ICTs became the only means of communication between professors and students in Morocco(L'economiste, 2020; Telquel, 2020). Predictably, this was a new situation for everyone, and it was specifically unusual for professors and students who had been reluctant to use ICTs. Unpredictably, as figure 07 shows, while only 50 % of the professors provided systematic feedback before covid-19, only 15/5% failed to do so after. The frequency of the provided feedback has also changed during the lockdown as weekly feedback increased significantly
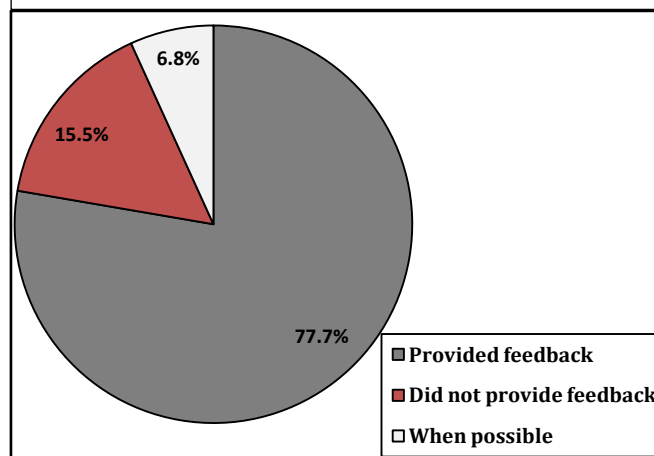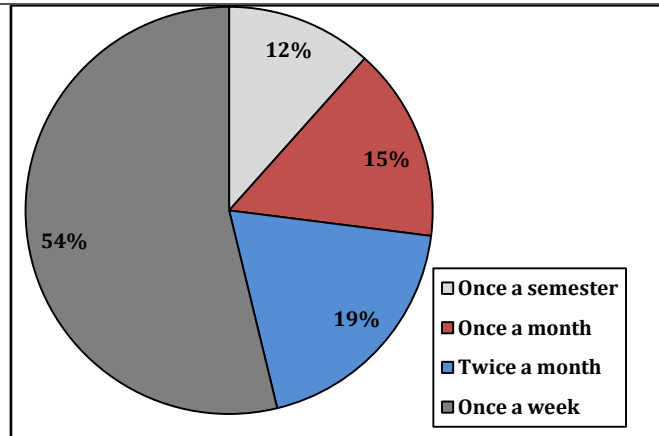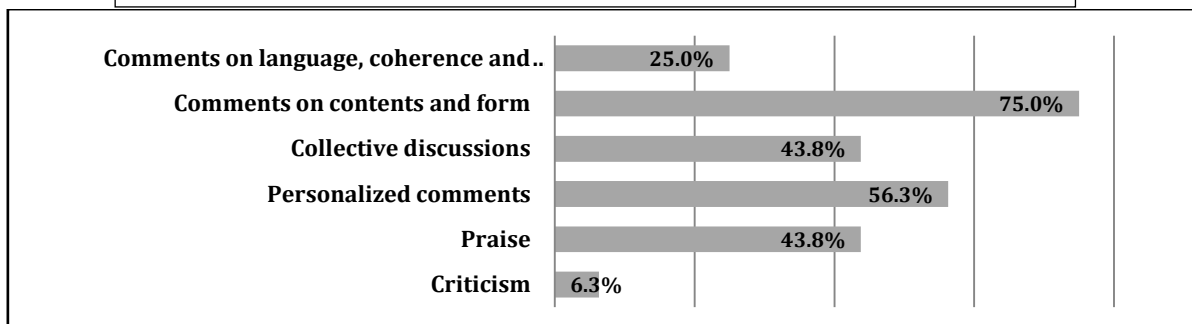
Figure 07: The provision of feedback after Covid-19

Category	Percentage
Provided feedback	77.7%
Did not provide feedback	15.5%
When possible	6.8%

Figure 08: The frequency of the provision of feedback after Covid-19

Legend:
- Once a semester
- Once a month
- Twice a month
- Once a week

Values: 12%, 15%, 19%, 54%

1.7. ICT's and the types of provided feedback

The results of the study also show that the medium of communication affects the type of the provided feedback. Inside the classroom, as figure 09 illustrates, most of the provided oral feedback was in the form of comments about form and contents. On the other hand,75% of the professors the online feedback, before covid-19, focused on personalized comments and individualized advice. Perhaps the professors, who had different ways of communication, direct and virtual, had chosen a specific form of feedback for each medium. They used the classroom to fix problems of form and contents, and they relied on ICTs to make their comments more personal.

Figure 09:Forms of feedback in the classroom feedback before Covid-19

Category	Value
Comments on language, coherence and..	25.0%
Comments on contents and form	75.0%
Collective discussions	43.8%
Personalized comments	56.3%
Praise	43.8%
Criticism	6.3%

During the lockdown, the options were more limited, and the educators had to make some changes. The comments on form and contents became the most dominant type of online feedback. This may also show that most educators prioritize comments on form and contents over all other types of feedback. As the use of ICTs was basically optional in the Moroccan higher education, the educators devoted it to what could be perceived as optional forms of feedback, like personal comments and advice. On the other hand, comments on form and contents were prioritized in the classroom, and when the classroom was not an option, they were given primacy online too.

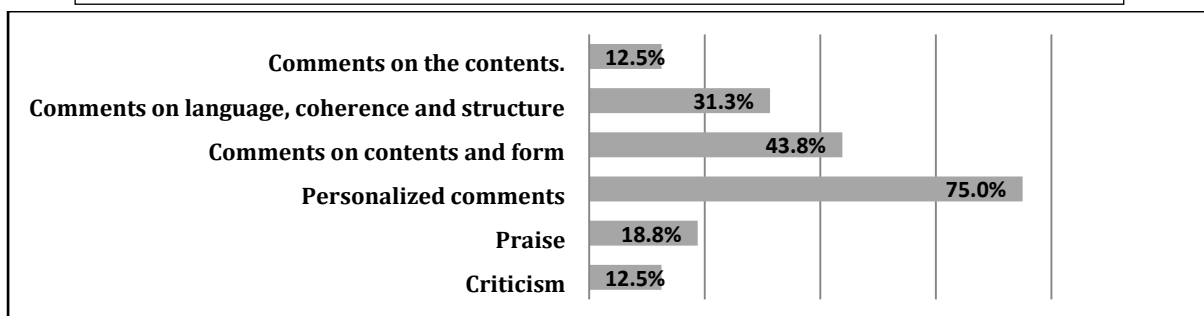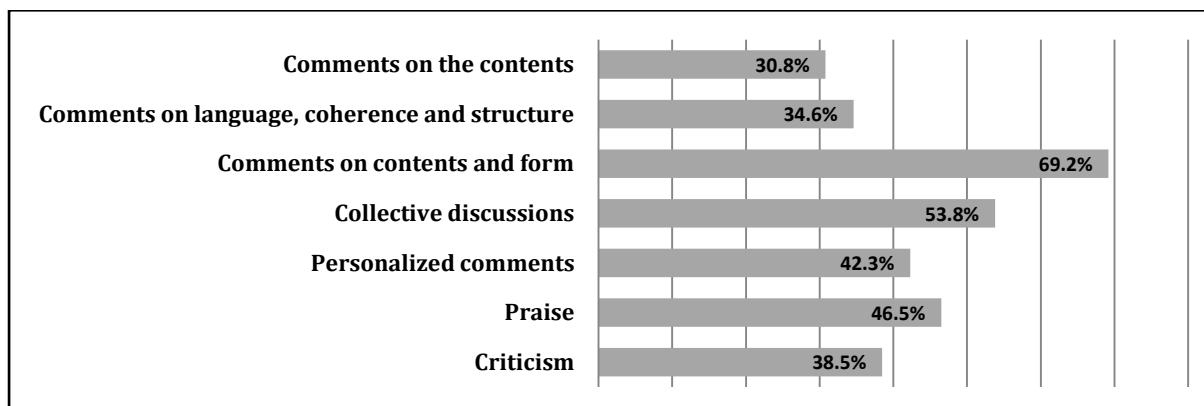Figure 10:Forms of feedback outside the classroom feedback before Covid-19

Category	Value
Comments on the contents.	12.5%
Comments on language, coherence and structure	31.3%
Comments on contents and form	43.8%
Personalized comments	75.0%
Praise	18.8%
Criticism	12.5%

Figure 11:Forms of feedback in the classroom feedback after Covid-19

Praise and criticism, on the other hand, were rarely part of the provided feedback. Though praise seems to be more preferable than criticism, the difference between the two is not that vast. Nonetheless, some professors had to explain the fact that they do not believe in criticizing students, regardless of the situation.

V.   DISCUSSION

1.8. *Positive and negative feedback practices:*
1.8.1. *Unidirectional feedback:*

Feedback is a "tricky interpersonal" skill that needs development, and if badly done, it can be confusing, misleading, demotivating and disempowering"(Harvey, 2011, pp. 20-21). As the main aim of feedback is to guide, motivate and, boost the students' learning, misconducting the activity can reverse these effects. Believing that feedback is a one-way process in which the teacher evaluates the students' work can also have detrimental effects. Feedback usually fails to recognize the students' needs, to rectify the teachers' learning practices, and to actually enhance learning if it is "unidirectional, finalistic and generic"(Ion, Cano-García, & Fernández-Ferrer, 2017, p. 01). In the Moroccan case, though most professors believe that the students have the right to ask for feedback, only half of them take the feedback they receive from students into consideration when deciding their teaching strategies. This means that the idea of receiving feedback should be highlighted in future studies for the Moroccan professors to start agreeing on its validity.

1.8.2. *Praise and criticism*

As the results show, both praise and criticism are slightly marginalized in the Moroccan context, as the professors try to avoid too much personalization. In this vein, Carol Evans (2013) argues that good feedback should be non-threatening, timely and not necessarily positive. It should be non-threatening in the sense that it should consider the student's ego. It should not compare his work to that of other students, and it should not contain comments that threaten his image in front of other classmates or even his own self-perception(p. 79). Feedback should also be timely, but in the sense that it should be either "immediate or delayed"(p. 84). The choice depends on the type of the activity on which feedback is given. Feedback, in this sense, may be delayed to avoid embarrassment in front of classmates, for instance, and it can be immediate to fix issues that help students perform a task or complete an assignment. As unexpected as it might be, positive feedback can have negative effects on learning(Evans, 2013, p. 96). From this perspective, a student who always receives positive comments on his work may not make efforts to improve. In brief, good feedback should be timely, should include negative comments, and should not make those comments personal or ego threatening.

A different approach advocates the idea that giving positive feedback can be more effective than negative criticism, and that giving feedback immediately can be more efficient than delayed feedback(Deeley, 2017, pp. 02-06). Nonetheless, it should be stated that "no one suggestion for feedback will be right for every occasion", and that teachers are not the only ones responsible for its success and failure (Brookhart, 2008, p. 105). "Feedback is a complex process, and its success is as much about the context and individuals involved as it is about pedagogy"(Henderson M. R., 2018, p. 100). In many cases, both students and educators are unsatisfied with feedback, and while students may criticize its ambiguity, timeliness and relevance, the educators may complain about the workload and the reluctance of students to act upon provided feedback(Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019, p. 01).

1.9. *Main obstacles:*
1.9.1. *Workload:*

The study believes that the educators' workload may be one of the most obvious and infamous obstacles that make giving appropriate feedback a hard task. The most basic tasks of a HE teacher include, but are not limited to, "research, income generation, subject development, dealing with academic bureaucracy, embracing e-learning, promoting innovative pedagogy, programme management, and student pastoral support"(Irons, 2008, p. 71). This makes it very challenging for them to find time for effective feedback activities. No one can deny the fact that "the provision of detailed comments takes a great deal of time"(Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019, pp. 06-07). Hence, educators may have one of two choices: avoiding time-consuming feedback activities or providing broad or numeric feedback that is, in some cases, as good as not providing feedback at all.

1.9.2. Student-teacher ratio:

Besides the full workload of educators, other problems, which are beyond the educator and the learner, are caused by the state of higher education in general. The large number of students and the diversity of the student's body make a time-consuming activity even more overwhelming and eliminate the possibility of collective feedback(Savin, 2010, p. 56). While giving detailed and precise comments to tens of students is a hard task, the "high student-teacher ratios make it infeasible to give individual and supportive feedback to all students"(Karlsen, 2015, p. 111), regardless of the used medium, the sacrificed effort and the allocated time. The diverse body of students becomes another problem when it hinders collective discussions from which all students can benefit. In other words, in a classroom that has students with different levels of proficiency, group discussions may satisfy a group of students' needs, but they will be above another group and below another one, at least. This usually puts educators in a situation where they have to choose a group to target and other groups to marginalize.

1.10. Solutions:

1.10.1. Communication:

The obstacles that the current educational system imposes can be solved in one of three ways. The gap between what the professors expect and what the students need can be bridged through communication. Professors may need to encourage students to suggest the specific type of feedback that they think they need, and to discuss the difficulties they face when they submit their work(Irons, 2008, p. 76). Students may also be required to "take the lead in tutorials and seminars regarding what they would like feedback on"(Evans, 2016, p. 05). Good communication can also manifest in the clarity and accuracy of feedback, and the adoption of strategies that help the students understand exactly what they should do and why (Bond, 2014, p. 57; Sambell, 2011, p. 11).

1.10.2. Peer review:

Besides communication, the students may feel more engaged, and the workload of the professor may get lighter if students take part in the feedback process. Peer review is "perhaps the most constructive, and the potentially biggest time saving techniques" in situations where the workload is heavy and the students' numbers are overwhelming(Irons, 2008, p. 72). As well as solving the professors' workload issues, peer and self-feedback may "help students develop evaluative judgment about their own work"(Henderson, Ryan, & Phillips, 2019, p. 08). It may also raise their sense of "collaboration, confidence and autonomy"(Evans, 2016, p. 06). In fact, peer evaluation may even be considered as a better source of feedback than educators' feedback. The "explanation effect" helps students activate their critical thinking abilities, which allow them to "analyse the work of peers, diagnose problems and suggest solutions"(Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014, p. 105). In cases where peer or group work is not available, students may even be asked to evaluate themselves in indirect ways like writing diaries or self-reflective essays(Klimova, 2015, pp. 174-175), which allow them to look at their performance from a different angle.

1.10.3. ICTs:

The third way of solving the main issues of feedback provision in higher education is the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). (p. 02). This means that it enhances speed, clarity and communication, and it breaks the ice of the traditional learner-educator relationship. By developing an "individualised and nurturing relationship", ICTs may also "assist in coping with the diversity of student cohorts"(Jackel, Pearce, Radloff, & Edwards, 2017, p. 33). According to Alastair Irons (2008), ICTs solve "the challenges of rising student numbers" (p. 89). They reduce the load on teachers and they allow "students to use online discussion fora for peer-assessment and evaluation"(Irons, 2008, p. 90). Finally, Susan Deeley(2017) argues that 'using technology to deliver feedback can speed up the feedback process, clarify feedback communication, and create a sense of an individualised and nurturing relationship between staff and students'(p. 02). Hence, they facilitate the implementation of all the previously mentioned solutions.

VI. CONCLUSION

The question, in Moroccan higher education, is not whether or not to give feedback but how to do it.Based on the findings of the current study, providing "good" feedback is not always possible. Educators do believe, directly or indirectly, that different forms of feedback are needed for the learning process to be completed. This means that the problem is neithertheir lack of awareness of the problemnor their unwillingness to make efforts. The context is what imposes their pedagogical choices. When the context changed during the lockdown, more professors materialized their preparedness to give assignments and feedback. The change of the context may mean easier access to a large number of students, or simply fewer students attending online classes. Either way, the changing environment resulted in feedback activities that were more systematic, more frequent, and more personal, at least from the professors' perspective.

Based on the results of this study, the student-teacher ratio may be the biggest problem facing the Moroccan educational system. Enhanced communication, peer-review and ICTs may facilitate some processes, but the problem of the overwhelming students' body should be addressed too.Regardless of the economic, political, or social obstacles that prevent the recruitment of more professors and the building of more universities, the possibility of providing systematic feedback in the Moroccan English department remains very thin, and ICTs are simply not a magic wand that solves all problems.

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