Foreign Language Learners' Perceptions and Preferences of Synchronous and Asynchronous Online Language Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic[*]

Rakiye ÖZDAL [**]

Ceyhun YÜKSELİR [***]

Oktay AKARSU [****]

Abstract: *This study explores the perceptions of English Language and Literature (ELL) students, their preferences, strengths and weaknesses of synchronous and asynchronous modes as well as a comparison between face-to-face language learning and online learning. The participants were 56 ELL students studying at two state universities in Turkey. Adapting mixed methods research design, the study employed the instrument developed by Perveen (2016) and also a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions to gain deeper insights of the participants' perceptions of online language learning. The findings show that the participants were well aware of the features of online learning modes that they preferred synchronous online mode which is claimed to resemble face-to-face learning better. However, based on the overall findings, it can also be stated that online language learning was not as effective as face-to-face learning. The implications of English language teaching through online learning are addressed.*

Keywords: *Online learning, synchronous and asynchronous language learning, higher education, ELL department*

COVID-19 Küresel Salgını Döneminde Senkron ve Asenkron Dil Öğrenimine Yönelik Yabancı Dil Öğrencilerinin Algıları ve Tercihleri

Öz: *Bu çalışma, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı (İDE) öğrencilerinin algılarını, tercihlerini, senkron ve asenkron öğrenme modlarının güçlü ve zayıf yönlerini ve ayrıca yüz yüze dil öğrenimi ve çevrimiçi öğrenme arasındaki karşılaştırmayı araştırmaktadır. Çalışmanın katılımcıları Türkiye'deki iki devlet üniversitesinden 56 İDE öğrencisidir. Karma yöntem araştırmasını benimseyen çalışmada, Perveen (2016) tarafından geliştirilen araç ve ayrıca çevrimiçi öğrenme algılarının daha derinlemesine kavranabilmesi için açık uçlu sorular içeren yarı yapılandırılmış bir anket kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, katılımcıların çevrimiçi veri aktarım modlarını bildiklerini ve yüz yüze öğrenmeye daha çok benzediği iddia edilen*

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[**] Research Assistant Osmaniye Korkut Ata University Department of English Language and Literature (e-mail: rakiye.ozdal@gmail.com) ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5589-3852

[***] Associate Professor Osmaniye Korkut Ata University Department of English Language and Literature (e-mail: ceyhunyukselir@gmail.com) ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4781-3183

[****] Assistant Professor Doctor Atatürk University Department of English Language and Literature (e-mail: oktayakarsu@hotmail.com) ORCID ID. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2923-6565

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Rakiye ÖZDAL
Ceyhun YÜKSELİR
Oktay AKARSU

senkron çevrimiçi öğrenme modunu tercih ettiklerini göstermektedir. Ancak, bulgulara dayalı olarak, çevrimiçi dil öğrenmenin yüz yüze öğrenme kadar etkili olmadığı da söylenebilir. Çevrimiçi öğrenme yoluyla İngilizce öğretimine yönelik çıkarımlara değinilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Çevrimiçi öğrenme, senkron ve asenkron dil öğrenimi, yükseköğretim, İDE bölümü*

I. Introduction

In today's world, technology dominates almost every aspect of human life and educational aspect is not an exception. Downes (2014) claims that in this technology era we are not only able to learn more, but also learn in different ways thanks to the plenty and greater capacities technology provides for us. In the last decades, innovative and emerging technologies have extended people's approaches to using technology for their own benefit. Beyond any doubt, these emerging technologies like Information Technology (IT) as well as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) have given opportunities in the field of education.

Being directly related to transfer information, technology can be considered as one of the educational supports by offering various communication mediums for learning purposes. Therefore, it provides great opportunities for language learners especially if they are learning target language as a foreign language. Learning English can be a tough process for its learners when regarded properly. In an environment that lacks input, it is hard for learners to acquire the target language. Nonetheless, distance education, online learning, or virtual classes for the purpose of promoting language acquisition can provide for language learners' needs such as developing language skills. As it is known that English is a lingua franca and there are many demands to learn it, ELT and English language learning have many opportunities in terms of online learning.

Up until 2020, distance learning, online learning, or virtual classes have depended on institutions', educators', and learners' requests as an option. However, after the critical effects of COVID-19, educational systems in the world have undergone sudden and drastic changes, such as transitioning from face-to-face education to online education. Liberalized with the regulations and legislations developed by governments, educators and learners have been attending virtual classes.

Focusing on these regulations, 2019-2020 academic year spring semester courses were decided to be given through distance education as much as possible at many universities from all around the world. To make sure their learners are home safely, universities have created quick solutions by either using their already existing online education systems or benefitted from already existing online platforms to end this semester successfully. Through these online learning environments, virtual classes have taken place synchronously (which is a form of simultaneous learning), asynchronously (which is a form of learning occurring in a broad of time), or as a blend of the two modes.

Without doubt, it is not certain how long the pandemic will last and when it will stop so, the academic world including the one in Turkey have changed their education to online, which sometimes brings challenges both for the teachers and learners. Soon after the outburst of COVID-19, almost every university in Turkey commenced to carry their education online, as in Atatürk University and Osmaniye Korkut Ata University did. In this study, as EFL learners, ELL students' perceptions of synchronous and asynchronous English language learning discussed to find an answer to whether they are satisfied with online learning. Therefore, the rationale behind carrying out this study is to fill the gap related to ELL learners' perceptions and satisfactions of online learning with the following goals:

- ✓ What is the perception of students on synchronous and asynchronous English language learning?

- ✓ Which data transmission mode do they prefer in online learning?

- ✓ How do the students define the strengths and weaknesses of synchronous and asynchronous language learning?

- ✓ Do they believe that online learning outweighs face-to-face learning?

II. Literature Review

Being familiar with electronic devices and their applications and uses are the new normal for the recent generations. In today's world, electronic devices are forming a whole for the young people that could not be imagined separately, and this is why they are so good at technology use or featured as "digitally skilled" (Karaaslan et al., 2018). Naming them as "Digital Natives", Prensky (2001) claims that actually, digital language is their mother tongue. Looi et al. (2010) clarify this point that as learners, most of today's generation has been growing up integrated to digital tools or electronic devices, and the existence of these ubiquitous technologies causes them to be good at digital skills.

The rapid growth of technologies results in rapid changes in human life. Alibakhshi and Mohammadi (2016) claim that the emerging technologies can affect as well as change the way people learn. Especially considering the rapid change in innovative technologies, more pedagogical applications have been becoming available for language learners (Bosmans & Hurd, 2016). Given the fact that this new phenomenon represents a new, vital, and future promising way of learning, it is expected to "meet the pedagogical needs" (Liu et al., 2017). According to Karaaslan et al. (2018), the use of digital tools in language learning can motivate and engage learners in language learning activities when these tools are integrated to learning process effectively to provide for learners' needs. Therefore, online courses occur in three different modes to meet these needs with different features, which are synchronous mode, asynchronous mode, and a hybrid mode as the blend of former modes.

After the spread of coronavirus, the influence of digital tools on learners' lives gives new ideas for teachers to find new ways to integrate this digital part more into students' learning process. In terms of language learning, technology use in the classes has turned

into technology use beyond the class for educational purposes. Peacock (2013) explains that language teaching or learning has a very promising future in terms of technological advances. He also claims that the digital revolution in learning may cause a fundamental change in our existing idea of the classroom. Moreover, the growing interest in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that provide both large scale and free learning opportunities for learners may help learners and teachers facilitate ELT more efficiently in the near future, which can offer them a common language to communicate with people from all around the world (İlin, 2019).

A. Distance Education in English Language Learning

Distance education is an education system that happens out of school. Nowadays, with the effect of emerging technologies, it has taken the shape of virtual education where the learning process occurs in online environments. After the coronavirus, the institutions have increasingly been employing ready to use applications like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, etc. or developing their own Learning Management Systems (LMS) to provide MOOCs for their learners. Considering that language learning mostly lasts for a lifetime, distance education provides a great opportunity for the learners by enabling formal and informal learning environments, especially for those who have limited conditions (Demouy et al., 2016).

The demand for distance education has been increasing parallel to technology dominance in our lives. As mentioned before, new generations are now considered to be born with digital skills; thus, using the Internet or online environments and integrating them into the language learning process are becoming inevitable in today's conditions. Regarding that, these features increase learners' motivation and interest towards the target language, ongoing evolutions have proceeded in distance education which offers two different learning modes with different pedagogical intentions (Alibakhshi & Mohammadi, 2016).

As Liu et al. (2017) state that the rapid advancements of information technology (IT) have diversified distance education, especially in terms of the structure of online courses. Differentiating from traditional education, distance education embraces more student-centered methods with the purpose of facilitating the learning process as much as possible for the learners (İlin, 2019). As a result of ongoing evolutions, there are two modes in diversified distance education; synchronous and asynchronous, to provide for different pedagogical intentions related to language learning.

1. Synchronous Language Learning

Synchronous learning can be defined as a simultaneous learning in which both the teacher and the learners are present at the same time and the same place. Perveen (2016) defines synchronous online learning as a simultaneous learning mode that occurs in a digital environment. She explains that through synchronous online learning courses, both the teacher and the learners can interact and collaborate with each other. To clarify, synchronous online learning environment can be considered as the online version of the

traditional classroom where face-to-face learning occurs. The teacher and the learners meet at the same time and at the same digital platform where they can use their webcams to have face-to-face interaction. Resembling face-to-face classes, synchronous virtual courses occur simultaneously for all the participants. Thus, throughout the course time, learners can interact with their teacher and peers either by using their microphones or the online chat as well as ask questions and give answers immediately (O'Rourke & Stickler, 2017; Perveen, 2016).

Perveen (2016) believes that the synchronous online learning environment is the better version of face-to-face class regarding that there is no distance barrier to spend time in traveling. She claims that as long as the learners are available in the times of synchronous online learning courses and have the Internet with high bandwidth, there is no better digital learning mode with human feel. From another perspective, Hung and Higgins (2016) state that a synchronous online language learning environment reduces the learners' anxiety level as well as helps them develop their fluency and improve their pronunciation ability. Similarly, in the study of Kato et al. (2016) synchronous online language learning helps learners improve their listening and speaking skills in the target language. Moreover, as a result of their study, Lotfi and Pozveh (2019) emphasize synchronous learners' overachievement in learning vocabulary owing to interaction and collaboration.

2. Asynchronous Language Learning

Contrary to synchronous learning, asynchronous learning does not need both teachers and learners to be online at the same time and place. The learning process takes place at any time or in any place as the learners desire. According to Perveen (2016), in asynchronous online learning, the learners are provided with course-related materials that are available mostly via LMS or other platforms to which they can access whenever they want. Furthermore, she explains that in the asynchronous mode, the learners are not obligated to give simultaneous or immediate responses. They can take their time to think deeply about their responses and construct them carefully by improving their critical thinking skills.

As Murphy et al. (2011) state, asynchronous online learning is more student-centered learning in which learners can study independently by adjusting their own pace. Moreover, considering the lack of simultaneous interaction, Perveen (2016) emphasizes that learners feel less anxious in distance education and the effects of their calmness can be observed in their innovative and creative responses. Additionally, asynchronous learning mode if used efficiently can increase learners' motivation (Fan et al., 2017). In other terms, this distance learning mode encourages learners to create and follow their own learning pace, which can be challenging for those who do not have self-discipline in the long haul (Perveen, 2016). As a matter of fact, Bernard et al. (2004) explain asynchronous online learning as a learning process through which the learners are guided by their teachers yet continue to work independently and with their self-pace as it is stated by Murphy et al. (2011). However, they note that teacher and learner interactions occur over the postal system which is the actual deal making this learning mode

asynchronous due to "postal deals". Similarly, O'Rourke and Stickler (2017) mention that teacher-learner communication in asynchronous online learning takes a long time compared to synchronous mode.

In terms of language learning, due to communicating or doing assignments in the written form and mainly reading the information, asynchronous online language learning essentially improves learners' writing and reading abilities (Perveen, 2016). Therefore, learners become more aware of their writing fluency by avoiding making any kind of mistakes as well as have more opportunities to express themselves without feeling anxious they experience in simultaneous communications.

B. Distance Education in Turkey After COVID-19

Hertsch et al. (2016) point out that as a part of educational globalization, distance education has been increasingly employed by higher educational institutions with an increasing number of participants. According to them, the higher educational institutions in Turkey are not an exception. Regarded as the future of education, rapid evolutions of distance education are traced carefully and closely as well as integrated to Turkey's educational system in higher education. Moreover, in their study, they state that the first step in distance education was taken by Hacettepe University in Turkey by employing applications like Blackboard and Moodle. They admit that the use of these kinds of applications provided learners an improved learning environment that is available at any time and place.

However, the distance learning barriers identified by Galusha (1998) which are also mentioned in Hertsch et al.'s (2016) study can be still existing nowadays. These barriers can be summarized as not having comprehensive knowledge of technology integrated courses, support for distance learning, and lack of provided distance learning courses. As it is stated that while it is easier for learners to adapt to changes, it could be difficult for teachers to integrate their courses into a digital environment (Hertsch et al., 2016). Bosmans and Hurd (2016) also point out that teachers need help to have a better understanding of digitalization as a new trend.

The pandemic, COVID-19 has bewildered people's order of everyday life. Suddenly, in order to prevent the spread of the pandemic globally, people have had to seclude themselves in their homes. Considering the beginning of the spread increasing at the start of the spring semester of 2019-2020 academic year, each educational institution providing formal education in the world has been affected crucially. After the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of COVID-19 on 10th Marc 2020 in Turkey ("19 Halka Yönelik Sıkça Sorulan Sorular", n.d.), the government has taken severe measures to prevent the spread by publishing informative texts for the public. However, the increasing number of diagnosed cases firstly caused university students to have a three-week break from their schools on 16th March 2020 ("Koronavirüs (Covid-19) Bilgilendirme Notu: 1", 2020). On 18th March 2020, the principal of Council of Higher Education made a statement to the press that the universities have established committees for pandemic solidarity and the higher educational institutions that are

capable of providing distance education in digital environments, began providing online courses on 23rd March 2020 (Saraç, 2020).

In one week's time, Turkish higher educational institutions have swiftly changed their formal education into distance learning in digital environments. Thus, distance education has become compulsory for most of the higher educational institutions. Through this distance education, both synchronous and asynchronous online learning courses have been provided for the learners. However, while the universities that had already had their own LMS led their learners to continue their learning process, the universities lacking LMS preferred free to use applications in providing online courses. Furthermore, evaluation and assessment of learners' exams or assignments have occurred in these digital environments.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

Participants of the study were undergraduate ELL students who study at the Department of ELL at Atatürk University and Osmaniye Korkut Ata University in Turkey. The participants of the study were composed of 56 respondents in total, 42 of whom were female and 14 of whom were male. Before applying the questionnaire, the researcher obtained informed consent letter from the participants. The gender frequency of the participants is given in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Gender Frequency

Gender	N	%
Female	42	75
Male	14	25

B. Research Setting

After the statement of the principal of Council of Higher Education on 18th March 2020, Atatürk University announced on 19th March 2020 that COVID-19 was not an obstacle for education at Atatürk University on the university's web site. In this announcement, the authorities of the university declared how distance education would be working by introducing course information system (Ders Bilgi Sistemi, DBS), learning modes of both synchronous and asynchronous online learning as well as giving detailed information about the capacities of the online courses. Moreover, in the case of more questions or any kind of problems of the learners, they created a distance education communication center for each department. The Department of ELL has provided online courses for their undergraduates by making use of Atatürk University's LMS and also using free applications if the instructors needed.

As a result of the statement of the principal of Council of Higher Education on 18th March 2020, the committee of COVID-19 at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University announced their decision about online courses on 20th March 2020 at the university's web site ("Tüm Öğrencilerimizin Dikkatine! Üniversitemiz COVID-19 Komisyonu Kararları", 2020). This announcement declared that Osmaniye Korkut Ata University would make use of the application "Microsoft Teams" (MT) for the online courses by providing them both synchronously and asynchronously. The authorities of the university also shared a link of a web site describing learners how to set up this application on both their personal computers and mobile phones. For further questions or any kind of problem, the university created a new network related to distance education by sharing an e-mail address for the learners. The Department of ELL was provided online courses synchronously and asynchronously for their undergraduates by making use of MT. However, learners have also made use of WhatsApp interaction application for comprehension problems.

C. Research Design

One-time survey was adapted to the participants by adopting the pragmatist research paradigm to determine ELL learners' perceptions about synchronous and asynchronous online language learning. Employing explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; John et al., 2000) to obtain more detailed data, the data were gathered both qualitatively and quantitively.

D. The Instrument

The data about the undergraduate students' perceptions of synchronous and asynchronous online language learning were gathered through a questionnaire containing both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to ensure triangulation and gain deeper insights about the learners' perceptions. The instrument developed by Perveen (2016) was administered to measure ELL students' perceptions of synchronous and asynchronous online learning, their attendance rate to synchronous classes, the ideal duration of synchronous classes, which mode is better for language learning and what strengths and weaknesses these modes have. The instrument of this study comprised four sections with 15 items: beginning with demographic questions to collect data about the participants' gender and their general attendance rate to online courses, synchronous online learning, asynchronous online learning, and the comparison of these two modes.

As mentioned before, mixed methods design was employed in this study. Therefore, to gain deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions and preferences of synchronous and asynchronous online language learning and their overall assessment of face-to-face and online language learning, 3 open-ended questions were prepared and used to gather qualitative data in the last phase:

- What do you think about online language learning? Do you believe that online learning contributes to improve your English proficiency? Why or why not?

- Can you compare synchronous and asynchronous learning? Which one do you think is better for English language learning?
- Do you believe that online learning is better for language learners compared to face-to-face learning?

E. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was prepared electronically in Google Docs (see Appendix A), by using Google Forms, a web-based survey administration application offering to create online questionnaires for its users. As the study was conducted in two research settings, first the permissions were provided respectively, and then the link of the questionnaire with the consent form was shared with the students in two different ways. Since the Department of ELL at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University has a small community, the link was shared in the department's WhatsApp group. However, at Atatürk University, the link was shared with the students of the Department of ELL during a synchronous online course. In order to make them give intimate answers and feel comfortable, the participants of the study were not asked to share their names.

In the data analysis process, the variables were grouped and analyzed in two main groups as qualitative and quantitative. While the qualitative data were analyzed by coding, the quantitative data were descriptively analyzed via a statistical software package named IBM SPSS Statistics Base 22.0. The quantitative data were presented in the tables to show the descriptive statistics in terms of percentages, mean, and standard deviation. In the analysis of the data, Cronbach's alpha value was found 0,725 meaning that the accuracy of the instrument was both valid and reliable.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. What is the perception of students on synchronous and asynchronous English language learning?

Table 2 shows that 60,7% of the participants attended more than 40% of their online courses actively. As a matter of fact, the majority of them are familiar with synchronous and asynchronous online language learning and have knowledge of the basics of these two learning modes to differentiate them from each other. In general, online learning or the use of technology raises learners' motivation which leads learners to notice details or give more attention to courses (Alibakhshi & Mohammadi, 2016). In the current study, synchronous and asynchronous modes as a part of the online learning environment are found motivating by the participants.

Table 2. Attendance to Online Courses

Item	Less than 40%		40% - 70%		70% - 100%		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Attendance to Online Courses	22	39,3	21	37,5	13	23,2	1,83	0,78

In terms of language learning, **Table 3** presents that 46,4% of the participants preferred synchronous learning for the reason that it resembles face-to-face learning by providing immediate interaction as well as simultaneous communication with the teacher and peers while only 14,3% of them responded in favor of asynchronous learning positively; however, 37,5% of them preferred the blended version. Similarly, in Perveen's (2016) and İlin's (2019) studies, the participants preferred synchronous mode for language learning because they were able to interact with their teachers face-to-face like in a traditional class even if this interaction did not occur in a physical sense. Thus, as expected, the majority of the participants stated the importance of face-to-face learning both in their qualitative and quantitative responses.

Table 3. Better Mode for English Language Learning

Item	Synchronous Mode		Asynchronous Mode		A blend of the two		M	SD
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Better Mode for English Language Learning	26	46,4	8	14,3	21	37,5	1,90	0,92

The ones who preferred asynchronous online language learning claimed that they believed in individual learning which provides more free time for learners to study regarding their own needs. As also mentioned in previous studies, the asynchronous mode is more student-centered considering it works in accordance with the learners' self-pace as well as self-discipline (Perveen, 2016). Therefore, these participants asserted that their learning process is more about their self-improvement which is facilitated better in the asynchronous mode.

B. Which mode do they prefer in online learning?

The gathered data show that there are three groups of participants with three different preferences: synchronous mode, asynchronous mode, and hybrid. The first group claimed that synchronous mode provides many opportunities for distance education learners:

"Synchronous learning is better for students because they can think actively and react simultaneously to teacher questions and comments" (P.15).

The first opportunity can be named as face-to-face interaction which is highly significant for the participants to communicate easily with their teachers and peers. In the previous studies, interaction with others in a simultaneous way were found not only more meaningful for language learning but also beneficial (Kato et al., 2016). O'Rourke and Stickler (2017) point out that face-to-face interaction can be evaluated as a shared

activity between the participants. Furthermore, Lotfi and Pozveh (2019) state that interaction and collaboration are vital for the language learning process.

The second group of participants preferred asynchronous online learning mode regarding its advantageous features. The majority of the participants claimed that asynchronous mode is more practical for those who are having connectivity problems to participate in simultaneous courses:

"Asynchronous because there is no time limit, you can view your classes any time you want" (P.14).

Having access to courses, whenever or wherever they want without being obligated to, enables them to have a more individual learning environment. Moreover, the participants acknowledged that asynchronous mode reduces their anxiety level or the feeling of being ashamed because of providing a more relaxed environment for the learners.

However, the third group of the participants suggested that a hybrid version would be more beneficial for the learners. To illustrate this point, they believed that it would be wrong to even compare them considering they both help learners facilitate their learning with different useful features:

"Both of them are quite effective, because it's all about self-improvement" (P. 8).

"I am not sure if it is true to make a comparison, because I think that both of them work in harmony. Synchronous learning, for example, helps us reach our instructors, and we are able to ask questions or discuss the lessons. On the other hand, asynchronous learning makes us pay attention to the lesson with the assignments we have because through them we reach the topics we are responsible for. So, I think both of them important for English language learning" (P. 16).

"I don't think that I can compare them because I think they support each other Synchronous learning gives chance to connect with our instructors, and even if it is not the same, it gives the atmosphere of the class. On the other hand, with asynchronous learning, we take an assignment, and we make research. I think it is the good side of asynchronous learning because we study as we work on assignments. I am not sure if I can make the right decision, but I can say that synchronous learning is better just because we have a chance to connect our instructors directly" (P. 33).

Concerning this thought, the findings of the previous studies also mention the same idea that synchronous and asynchronous modes complement each other (Karaaslan et al., 2018; Perveen, 2016). Through this hybrid online learning, the participants thought that distance education would be facilitated in the broadest sense.

C. How do the students define the strengths and weaknesses of synchronous and asynchronous language learning?

The responses to the questions related to the strengths and weaknesses of both synchronous and asynchronous online learning modes clarified the participants'

perceptions of these matters. In general, as a part of online learning, these two modes are thought to be innovative, motivating, and time saving by clearing the traveling time away. Moreover, these modes reduce the anxiety level as well as the feeling of being ashamed in case of making mistakes in online courses. Bosmans and Hurd (2016) clarify this point by remarking that the lack of physical presence of both the teacher and peers makes learners feel more comfortable as well as relaxed in digital environments. However, when focused specifically on each mode, the participants pointed out the strengths and the weaknesses of both modes depending on their personal experiences.

For the synchronous mode, most of the participants stated that face-to-face interaction is quite significant for their learning process. As a result of face-to-face interaction, they were also benefiting from the simultaneous communication with both their teachers and peers throughout the online courses:

"Thanks to synchronous online learning, we talk with teachers and peers and ask questions and share our thoughts; however, asynchronous is not happening at the same time. We don't talk to teachers and peers, when we ask a question, teachers don't see it immediately and answer. We have to wait for it. Therefore, I think synchronous is better for English language learning" (P. 48).

However, as in Basri et al.'s (2021) study, connectivity is a crucial part of both type of online courses. The participants who had any kind of Internet problem or low bandwidth had been affected badly by not being able to connect the online courses simultaneously. To put it another way, in order to connect to online courses at the same time and place, the learners' digital devices should be working smoothly. As reported by one of the participants as well as in Perveen's (2016) study, some technological problems could cause them to miss online courses. Thus, even if they managed to reconnect their online courses, there would be other problems like focusing on, trying to catch up, etc.

On the other hand, the participants of the current study defined some positive features of asynchronous mode. From a positive perspective, some of the participants claimed that this mode is better to facilitate the learning process with less anxiety:

"I think none of them is better for English language learning, but if I chose one of them, it would be asynchronous. Because students may be more relaxed in this type of education (without panic or feeling ashamed)" (P.9).

They believed that learning occurs through self-improvement which is supported by student-centered asynchronous mode. Doing assignments in their self-pace was claimed to be more improving activity in terms of making research and giving more attention to courses. As mentioned in Perveen's (2016) study, doing assignments helps them to improve their reading and writing skills. Moreover, in this mode, learners are responsible for their own learning process by organizing and controlling it (Demouy et al., 2016; İlin, 2019). However, for the reason that asynchronous mode does not include the feature of the face-to-face interaction, as language learners, the participants claimed that through this mode it is hard and takes more time to interact with others. As a result, the

participants did not accept that asynchronous mode is an efficient way of learning a language in these terms for the most part.

D. Do they believe that online learning outweighs the face-to-face learning?

The last research question of the study directed to the participants is "Do you believe that online learning is better for language learners compared to face-to-face learning?" the majority of the participants objected that online learning would be superior to face-to-face learning especially in terms of language learning. Here are some of the participants' remarks:

"Face-to-face learning is always the best and it will always be the best again in the future as well. A teacher always must be in the class. Face to face interaction is necessary" (P. 9).

"Nothing can replace face-to-face learning methods. Even robots" (P. 12).

"No, I certainly do not believe that. Actually, I do not believe the learning system which works online, because I think it is better to connect with the instructions or teachers face to face as it is easy to understand and makes the learning process more effective. Yes, the world is becoming an online world day by day, but I think face-to-face learning is the best because devices are the machines that works online, not people" (P. 33).

They strictly pointed out the problems they had been having throughout the spring semester in their online courses like their problematic connectivity, lack of one-to-one interaction, technological problems, comprehension problems, short class durations as well as a limited question asking time. Even though there were only a few participants mentioning that online learning environments or technology use in language learning help learners facilitate language learning, most of the participants emphasized the significance of face-to-face learning and specifically physical interaction, that is found not as effective in online courses (Mardiah, 2020).

Hertsch et al. (2016) indicate that the reason for being against online learning or digital learning environments arises from the traditional education methodologies that form the learners' learning behaviors from the beginning. These could be the reason for this common thought. Moreover, some even stated that traditional learning would never be replaced. On the contrary, the previous studies have shown that emerging technologies help language learners facilitate their language learning process by making use of digital environments as well as digital devices (Alibakhshi & Mohammadi, 2016; Hertsch et al., 2016; Karaaslan et al., 2018; Perveen, 2016).

Considering the fact that, the participants of the current study have changed their traditional education system into distance education swiftly in one week's time, the results show that they had some negative perceptions of online learning. This could be the reason of their unreadiness for compulsory distance education. However, another reason could also be the pandemic affecting the world both mentally and physically. As

Rakiye ÖZDAL
Ceyhun YÜKSELİR
Oktay AKARSU

mentioned by one of the participants, the unfavorable changes because of the coronavirus in the learners' lives could affect their motivation level negatively.

V. Conclusion

The current study explores foreign language learners' perceptions and preferences of synchronous and asynchronous language learning in online environment during COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study have shown that after the compulsory change in their education systems because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants find the features of synchronous and asynchronous online language learning modes not as effective as face-to-face learning. The majority of participants preferred synchronous online learning mode as the better one due to its resemblance to traditional learning. Most of the participants agreed with the idea that while synchronous mode has a 'face-to -ace interaction' feature as the greatest strength, it also has a 'connectivity bound' feature as the greatest weakness. On the other hand, the participants claimed that the greatest weakness of the asynchronous mode as 'no face-to-face interaction', while they thought that it has some great strengths: no time and place-bound, allows time to reflect ideas, enables written responses. Last but not least, the considerable majority of the students found the online learning environment ineffective and claimed that it can be hard to replace face-to-face learning completely in the near future no matter how technology integrated classes help them facilitate their learning process.

The findings of the study have also some pedagogical implications for promoting more effective online learning in terms of English language learning. First of all, both teachers and learners should develop digital competence which is a crucial feature for an effective online learning process anymore. The language teaching materials should also be chosen carefully for educational purposes and be introduced in a proper way for both teachers and students by the institutions. To meet different pedagogical needs, need analysis of the learners and teachers can be conducted beforehand. In a similar vein, based on the findings of the study, it can be suggested that online courses should be prepared and well-organized in accordance with the learners' needs. Moreover, these courses can be carried out both synchronously and asynchronously as a hybrid mode to help learners with different learner profiles to improve their target language skills and foster learning process.

The current study had also certain limitations in terms of data collection tools with a limited number of sample group studying ELL departments; therefore, future studies should be conducted with a big sample group from different universities to make an overall evaluation of online learning in the Turkish context using various instruments. Moreover, to facilitate online learning environments better, further research is needed.

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Rakiye ÖZDAL
Ceyhun YÜKSELİR
Oktay AKARSU

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Appendix A

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