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## Transition to Modular System during the Pandemic: A Study from a Distant EFL Program

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Modular systems, which involve several self-contained modules where skills and knowledge are developed in separate units throughout the program, are gaining popularity in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). This qualitative study aimed to reveal language instructors' and administrators' experiences and opinions about an online modular teaching system adopted newly due to the pandemic in an English preparatory program of a tertiary level of a state university in Turkey. Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews from with five instructors and three administrators and observations of online classrooms. Thematic analysis was utilized to form systematic patterns from the data. The results revealed that although the modular system provided clear goals and objectives for both instructors and learners, a number of challenges and obstacles were experienced, stemming primarily from the online implementation of the modular system, such as learners' lack of engagement in the absence of physical classroom environment, online assessment, and instructors' increased workload. These issues led to confusion for instructors regarding the true nature of the modular system. It could be concluded that it would be more productive to implement the modular system as a hybrid model, allowing for some face-to-face interaction and assessment, rather than relying solely on the online mode.

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## Introduction

Language learning requires competence in linguistic and communicative skills; therefore, educational institutions attempt to find the most effective ways to teach English. In

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Turkey, the importance of English is well-recognized, and schools of foreign languages at the tertiary level are one of the key institutions where English courses are offered. These courses can be offered through modular teaching systems based on programmed learning that considers individual differences and learning at one's own pace. Although innovative systems like modular ones are getting popular, it is still possible to confront some education-related problems in these institutions, and these institutions are seeking efficient solutions to overcome these problems in English education. In Turkey, some program evaluation studies show that specific issues in the preparatory programs need to be addressed, and improvements in these programs are needed to ensure the quality. This study aimed to understand instructors' and administrators' perspectives on an online modular system implemented in an English preparatory program of a school of foreign languages during the pandemic. Additionally, this study intended to guide the stakeholders in improving the quality of the program and provide valuable information about the modular system.

### ***Modular System***

A Modular approach in teaching English has become increasingly common in a progressive education system. The term "module" originated from computer science. In education, it can be defined as "a unit of work in a course of instruction that is virtually self-contained and a method of teaching that is based on the building up of skills and knowledge in discrete units" (Sejpal, 2013, p.169). Each module is a part of a learning experience with specific goals conducted within a specified period, which is generally short. Many educational institutions have found the modular system attractive and adapted it to their learning environment. Several advantages of utilizing a modular teaching system in language education can be mentioned. To start with, each module is independent and gives the learner control over learning (Sejpal, 2013). Moreover, a modular system provides extrinsic motivation by setting short-term goals and allowing flexibility (Logaw, 2015). Thomson (1988) argues that a modular system provides learners and teachers with ownership of the process. Another significant benefit is that it allows learners to proceed at their own rates. In a progressive system, students may fall behind and find themselves unable to catch up with the program, creating a discrepancy between the expected student level and their actual levels. The idea behind modular pedagogy is that each student is different in terms of learning speed. Thus, the system allows students to realize their strengths and weaknesses, recycle, and close the gap through remedial modules (Klingstedt, 1971). Additionally, students have the opportunity for constant feedback through level exit exams. Each module includes a limited number of learning subjects, and therefore learners do not have to start from the beginning if they are unsuccessful in a module. A modular system allows more learners to reach a higher standard than a progressive system through re-sit opportunities. In particular, less successful students benefit from re-sit opportunities that involve tests of smaller units. These functions as a remedy for those slow learners, reducing dropout rates (Hayward & McNicholl, 2007). Also, regular feedback can help students identify their learning needs. (McClune, 2001). On the other hand, it is essential to acknowledge some constraints of a modular system. The modular teaching system is only suitable for mature students (Sejpal, 2013). Additionally, as the modular system is by nature fragmented, it may lead to assessment problems. Also, it may cause a lack of coherence in the learning experience, with students possibly adopting an approach based on exam success rather than comprehending and internalizing the subject due to the importance of assessment in this system. (Rodeiro & Nádas, 2012). Furthermore, the self-pacing aspect of the modular system may lead to wide variation in student achievement at the end of the process (Dochy et al., 1989). From the teachers' perspective, it might also involve more planning time to determine pacing, and thus, the materials and exams.



Some studies focusing on using the modular system in language teaching can be found in the literature. İřcan (2016) carried out a mixed-method study in the Turkish context aiming to determine students' and instructors' opinions on the modular teaching program and its various dimensions at a school of foreign languages. The results showed that the participants believed that the modular curriculum was more fruitful than the traditional system, and it could be revised to increase its effectiveness. In a study with similar positive results, Ibyatova et al. (2018) aimed to assess the effectiveness of a modular system on students' performance, achievement, and motivation, in comparison with the traditional system. They concluded that modular syllabuses were valuable and motivating and helped students follow the course, although improvements were needed. Furthermore, the study conducted by Nardo (2017) showed that the modular system enhanced learner autonomy. Studies conducted by Gmleksiz (1999) and Erarslan (2019) similarly revealed positive outcomes. However, it is also possible to encounter contradictory results. Cořkun (2013) investigated a modular intensive general English language program to reveal students' and instructors' perceptions concerning the materials, teaching process, and assessment. Based on the data from student questionnaires and instructor interviews, Cořkun concluded that the modular system had some weaknesses and should be replaced by a more manageable and feasible system. In a similar study, Tercan (2018) examined the modular system of an EFL preparatory program at a university to understand whether the students' and instructors' perceptions were consistent with the objectives of the program. The mixed-method study revealed some shortcomings of the modular system, such as the speed of the expected learning. In a similar vein, Shah et al. (2013) stressed participants' challenges regarding the lack of time to achieve curriculum objectives. Lastly, Abbasian and AfsharImani (2012) investigated teachers' and learners' perspectives toward the modular EFL program, revealing that many teachers thought that the modular system did not match the criteria for a well-organized English program.

### ***Program Evaluation***

Like other countries in EFL contexts, English was selected as the medium of instruction in many universities in Turkey. Thus, the importance attributed to preparatory schools has increased because of their crucial role in equipping students with necessary language skills for their departmental studies. Attending English educational programs in EFL countries became mandatory (Yıldırım & Okan, 2007), leading to numerous questions concerning the implementation of these programs. Therefore, evaluating language programs has become an area of research (Arap, 2016). Many possible reasons can be put forward to justify program evaluation. First of all, the stakeholders require information about the program and need assuring that any improvements made will be based on the evaluation results (Newcomer, Hatry & Wholey, 2010). Moreover, evaluation can be a reference point for decisions about the teaching process and the materials (Marcinkonienė, 2005). Nunan (1988) underscores that a curriculum will be incomplete without evaluation and many studies focus on this issue.

A number of studies investigated language programs in EFL countries. To mention but a few, Dehkordi and Talebinezhad (2018) investigated the effectiveness of a grammar teaching program. Based on the data from students and instructors, they found that the program was effective in many aspects, but some components needed revision, including productive skills, teaching methods, and the program objectives. Moreover, a similar study by Yousif (2017) examined the effectiveness of a language preparatory program with data from students and instructors. Interestingly, Yousif concluded that the program was ineffective in improving learners' skills, and the participants held negative attitudes towards teaching materials,

especially coursebooks. Mede and Uygun (2016) carried out an evaluation study to reveal the extent to which a preparatory program for English Language and Literature and Translation departments was able to fulfill language and learning needs. This mixed-method study showed that the students generally agreed that the program improved their basic language skills and their ability to apply language strategies in tasks. Lastly, four state university preparatory programs in Turkey were investigated by Arap (2016). After analyzing the mixed data, Arap concluded that students were satisfied, but instructors were more optimistic about the program than students.

### ***Online Learning during the Pandemic***

In recent decades, technology has evolved, strongly affecting education via an increase in online learning platforms. However, this process has been intensified by the dramatic effect of COVID-19, which has deprived over one billion students of education from elementary to university level all around the world. As a result, distant education programs started to be implemented, and both synchronous and asynchronous teaching-learning platforms have replaced traditional face-to-face education, including English language programs. Online education provides flexibility to English language learners, who can learn anywhere at any time (Xia et al., 2013). Also, synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms provide learners with rich resources, helping them become more proficient in English (Fageeh & Mekheimer, 2013). However, it is essential to mention some burdens of online education for both educators and learners. First of all, educators might find themselves in an unfamiliar teaching platform. English lessons are sometimes conducted asynchronously in online education, which might block effective communication and interaction and reduce the authenticity of communication (Pazilah et al., 2019). Thus, students might have difficulties improving their language skills, especially speaking skills (Bailey & Lee, 2020). Technical issues are also considered as one of the common problems related to online education (Halim & Hashim, 2019), including problems with the internet connection or access to the necessary devices.

Recently, several studies have been conducted to investigate online education during the pandemic era. Oraif and Elyas (2021) investigated the effectiveness of online education in terms of learners' online engagement, showing that it increased overall engagement among EFL Saudi learners. Similarly, Rahim and Chandran (2021) concluded that EFL students perceive online learning as a better alternative to traditional face-to-face classrooms and stressed some disadvantages, such as technical problems and insufficient technology skills of teachers and students. On the other hand, some studies, especially in the COVID-19 period, yielded mainly adverse effects of online education. Octaberlina and Muslimin (2020) stressed some barriers in implementing online education, such as slow internet connection, unfamiliarity with e-learning and physical problems, such as eye strain. A similar study by Haryanto (2021) indicated mainly negative effects of online education, including focusing on assignments rather than the learning process itself and technical problems like internet access.

Currently, in the many English-medium universities around the world, students need to be proficient in English before starting their departmental courses. Therefore, University English language preparatory schools hold an important place in an EFL context such as Turkey. This study was designed to investigate the experiences of English preparatory program instructors and administrators during the implementation of a newly adopted modular system at a public university. The focus is the implementation of the modular system, and the pandemic makes this study more valuable because of the dramatic changes this caused. In this study, the main



aim was to reveal preparatory school instructors' and administrators' insights about a modular system, which, due to the pandemic, needed to be implemented online in a school of foreign languages of a Turkish university. Any program needs to be evaluated to see its effectiveness. The results and the implication obtained from this study can provide feedback to the stakeholders, in addition to the fact that the study can be utilized in improving better language programs.

The following research question guided this qualitative study:

- How are the instructors' and administrators' experiences and opinions about using a modular system implemented online during the pandemic?

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

The qualitative research paradigm was adopted to fulfill this aim. Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem" (p.15). The aim is to build a complex, holistic picture by analyzing comments, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducting the study in a natural setting. Moreover, the underlying reason for a qualitative research design was to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and views about the modular system and online education. As a qualitative research design, a case study was utilized. Creswell (2002) defines case study as "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection" (p. 485). In this case study, the observations and interviews were conducted to create detailed documentation of the implementation of the modular online EFL program.

### ***Research Contexts***

The current study was conducted at a state university in Turkey, which offered an intensive English program that aimed to furnish students with foreign language skills to pursue their studies in their departments and use English for communicative purposes. The institution hosted 1254 preparatory students, but only around a thousand of these were active because of the pandemic. Following a placement test at the beginning of the semester, students were divided into three basic levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate. The study was carried out in the 2020-2021 academic year, in which all classes were offered online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. By coincidence, online education started simultaneously with the transition to the implementation of the modular system. As a result, the academic staff witnessed radical changes in the education system in that academic year. The modular system included four eight-week modules (fall 1, fall 2, spring 1, and spring 2). During each module, the students were expected to attend daily online lessons and watch weekly videos that their instructors prepared and uploaded for the asynchronous part. The asynchronous videos were in lecture format and included materials from the coursebook. During the week, students attended synchronous online lessons, five hours per week in fall 1 and fall 2 terms, and ten hours a week in spring 1 and spring 2. In the synchronous lessons, the teaching focused on the writing and video parts of the book and the workbook. The rest of the book was covered through asynchronous videos. As for the assessment, there was one online quiz (25%), two tasks (25%) where students recorded and uploaded videos onto the



UBYS (online system), three portfolios (25%), and a class participation grade (25%). The class participation grade included synchronous lesson participation (5%) and completing coursebook activities online (20%). The lower synchronous lesson class participation grade was to avoid excessively penalizing students with technical limitations, thus providing equal education opportunities. Thus, synchronous lesson participation could not be forced, reflected by its small proportion in the total grade. Students with at least 55 points at the end of the module had the right to take a level exit exam/proficiency exam to pass the module. The exams included reading (60%), writing (20%), and speaking (20%) parts and were administered online, including the speaking exams, conducted through Microsoft Teams. For the speaking exam, one student was assessed by two teachers in each session, and students were required to use their cameras and microphones. Students scoring 65 or above passed the module. The exam for the last module was the proficiency exam for the whole year.

### **Participants**

In the prevailing study, convenience sampling was implemented. Convenience sampling can be defined as "selecting a group of individuals based on them being available for the study" (Fraenkel et al., 2012). For observations and interviews, all the instructors and administrators in the institution (the institution is the workplace of one of the researchers) were invited to participate in the study. Eight academic staff volunteered: the vice director, two coordinators, and five instructors. All were senior instructors with M. A. degrees. Three were male, and five were female. To provide confidentiality, pseudo names were used, which can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Information about the participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Experience (year)</b>	<b>Education</b>
Burçak	Male	15	M.A. in English Language and Literature
Derin	Male	12	M.A. in English Language Teaching
Bilge	Female	10	M. A. in Adult Education
Azra	Female	13	M.A. in Educational Administration, Inspection, Planning, and Economy
Bulut	Male	9	M.A. in English Language Teaching
Akya	Female	11	M.A. in English Language Teaching
Adalet	Female	14	M.A. in English Language Teaching
Birce	Female	10	M.A. in English Language Teaching

### **Data Collection Tools and Process**

For this study, observations and semi-structured interviews were utilized. Of the eight participants, two had no classes. Therefore, observations could not be conducted with those two participants. Each of the remaining six instructors was observed twice (90 minutes in total). All the observed lessons were online. After the observations, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the participants' responses revealed further issues. The online interviews lasted about 20 minutes for each participant and were conducted in Turkish, their mother tongue. Interviews were all recorded and transcribed by the researchers.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis, "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.57). A six-phase approach was utilized (Braun and Clark, 2012). In the first phase, we familiarized ourselves with the data by repeatedly



watching the observation videos and reading the observation notes and interview transcripts. In the second phase, we generated initial codes by highlighting chunks of coded the data. Following this, we searched for themes, which "capture(s) something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 82). We reviewed potential themes concerning the coded data and entire data set in the next step. Finally, we produced the report. In order to ensure valid and reliable results, the researchers collaborated in the analysis process and the data collection process, as suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000). Additionally, the data was triangulated by various tools, including observations and interviews. Finally, the trustworthiness of the themes was confirmed by taking the opinion of an ELT instructor.

### ***Role of the Researchers***

This study was conducted as part of a research methods course offered at the English Language Teaching Doctorate Program at a public university during the spring term of the 2020- 2021 academic year. This study was conducted with the collaboration of three researchers. After the research aim and the design of the study were decided, the first two authors collected data. The first researcher had an outsider role as a research assistant at another university. He provided an etic perspective during the data collection and analysis phases, whereas the second researcher, an instructor at the institution, provided an emic researcher perspective. The third researcher provided guidance throughout the process as the instructor of the doctorate course and was involved in the writing process of the research.

## **Results**

### ***Experiences and Opinions regarding the Modular System***

#### ***Teaching objectives and assessment***

Each module in the new system lasted eight weeks, and the students had to pass an exam to continue the next term, which provided regular feedback. In this case, the participants believed that this system enabled the students to be aware of and prepare for future requirements. By preparing for each exam, they would avoid falling behind on the course topics. The following excerpt reflects the participants' general beliefs about this issue.

*"In the modular system, the targets are closer, and the intended outcome is more obvious for all of us. In the previous system, the pre-intermediate level was divided because of the break. However, this system is different because the instructor can clearly see the short and long-term goals. A more compact system, I love it" (Bulut).*

Bulut highlighted the students' greater awareness of the short-term targets like other student participants. The instructors also were able to stay focused on these targets and feel more confident in the process. They were also happy because classes were more homogeneous, which made the teaching process more manageable. In that sense, introducing the modular system brought some advantages in terms of assessment. The participants underlined that the modular system enabled a more systematic testing procedure. They highlighted that a more systematic assessment became possible because the students had to take an exam at the end of each level, as well as quizzes and other tasks and portfolios. In this respect, the participants stated that the weighting of the exams became easier to manage.

### *Workloads for instructors and administrators*

Despite positive attitudes toward the modular system, the instructors and administrators were aware that the new system had brought extra concerns and increased their workloads. The modular system was divided into four eight-week terms. At the end of each module, they were responsible for an exit exam and the quizzes applied during the term. Moreover, they covered a coursebook each term, i.e., the workload of the courses was also intense. Because of the long and intensive academic calendar, the academic staff had to relinquish part of their summer breaks. Many of the participants touched upon these issues, summed up in Bilge's comment:

*“The academic calendar also intensified because of this new system. Many teachers complain about it. Normally, we started to conduct the finals around the end of May. We are going to do this in the first week of July right now. This is not very desirable. Most complaints at the moment are about the shortened summer break and having to give lectures in repeat classes as well as the intensity of topics.”* (Bilge).

As seen in the excerpt, the longer and more intense workloads terms were an issue of concern. The repeat class issue is another negative aspect discussed by other participants, and a consensus seemed to emerge that the number of repeat students would increase in face-to-face education. As a result, the instructors and administrators were concerned with the potential number of demotivated students in the coming years. They believed that this problem would coincide with the end of the academic year, already a time of mental tiredness and extra duties.

### *Blurring the Lines between Online Education and Modular System*

Because of the pandemic, the implementation of online education preceded by a few months the introduction of the modular system in the school of foreign languages. That is, online education was not planned, and implementing the modular system in online education was naturally unexpected and therefore not favored by the participants. In the study, it was seen that the participants tried to distinguish between online education and the modular system but were not always successful in this, which made it hard for them to evaluate two aspects separately. Still, the general tendency was that they supported the modular system while they uttered unfavorable statements about online education. To be more specific, they tended to associate the well-functioning parts of the program with the modular system and the negative parts with the online education.

*“Actually, the objectives are clear enough and realistic under normal conditions, but not realistic under online conditions. But this is not about the new system. We couldn't get close to any target we set. I'm not very happy with the online. Maybe, a hybrid model is okay. I think the modular system goals are clear enough when it is face-to-face. It is even clearer for each level. Each level has its own targets and objectives.”* (Akya).

As clear from the statement above, Akya was convinced that the objectives of the program were clear and reachable. However, they might be more difficult to achieve under online conditions because certain limitations of online education prevented them from effectively implementing the modular system. Nevertheless, we see that the participants were unwilling to completely abandon online education because it had some advantages, and the instructors





and administrators indicated that a hybrid system might be more helpful.

*“Frankly, I am a supporter of the modular system because as we observe, we can see that success rises and slow learners are eliminated. Also, when we see that there is a homogeneous group in the same class, the motivation increases. You know what to give to the students. But whether a modular system can be online or not is a matter of question. I wish we could do this face-to-face. Our goals would be more realistic if it was face-to-face, but it's hard to know how far they've been achieved in online education.”* (Adalet).

Above, Adalet also clearly underscored that the modular system was favorable because slower learners would be filtered out, and the success rate for the learners could be increased. However, Adalet was also hesitant about the modular system being implemented in online education, reflecting doubts about the modular system despite the general feeling that the system would be more effective in face-to-face education. They preferred to reserve their judgment until seeing how it would function in face-to-face education.

### ***Experiences and Opinions regarding Online Implementation***

#### ***Assessment***

Assessment was a significant issue regarding the implementation of the online modular system. Students were required to take an exit examination for each level in the modular system, and quizzes had to be administered online during the term. However, a procedure similar to a face-to-face test was needed without a system that could facilitate the implementation of reliable online exams. Students were given timed exams in online sessions and were not obliged to turn their cameras on, making it impossible to monitor the exam process. Students had many opportunities to exploit this flaw of online education by unauthorized behavior, and maybe they even allowed others to take the exam in their place. Both instructors and administrators addressed this issue. Especially, Azra underscored the issue with the following words.

*“We do not know whether students receive support because online exams are not supervised. They can take the test with someone else, or their friends can attend the exams for them or use different internet resources during the exam. We do not know any of these. It is a question to answer whether they are learning or taking advantage of the system.”* (Azra).

Alternative assessment tools also were available in the online program. The students were required to complete some online tasks and portfolios and watch the course recordings for missed synchronous lessons. However, the students can easily log on to the lesson without participating or even being present in front of the screen. In this case, the system would assume that the recording had been watched. As for the portfolios, the instructors noted that some students directly copied and pasted the information from internet sources to complete the work, i.e., deliberate plagiarism.

### *Students' sense of responsibility*

Another critical issue regarding the implementation of the online modular system is the students' sense of responsibility. One of the limitations of online education is that it puts considerable responsibility onto students studying at home on their own. Put differently, it requires autonomous learners to get prepared for the online courses in advance. However, the study revealed that the students were not fully aware of their responsibilities. The instructors, in this respect, pointed out that the students were often unprepared for the classes and did not follow the assignments or attend the online courses. Correspondingly, some students felt demotivated as the teaching term proceeded. Relatively few students attended the online classes, supporting the participants' statements. Additionally, the instructors reported difficulty contacting the students because they did not check their e-mails or read messages in online groups. All these factors created difficulty in communication for the academic staff, which negatively affected the education process. Burçak made a comprehensive comment on these issues:

*"For example, not many students attend classes in the last term. We cannot prevent this because every student doesn't have the necessary technological equipment, so we can't make online lessons compulsory. Also, it is challenging for students to reach critical information. Although our teachers report on WhatsApp or Instagram, we still have difficulties reaching the students. Our students still ask the same questions over and over."* (Burçak).

Obviously, participants generally agreed that the students were far from being responsible or autonomous learners. They often did not attend the online classes and sometimes failed to follow the assignments. Nevertheless, many of them were successful overall. The participants tended to associate this success with flaws of the online assessment rather than students' positive behavior. Some students did not have the technological equipment. This and other factors showed that neither the institution nor the students nor the academic staff was prepared for online education, regardless of the system being implemented.

### *Lack of classroom environment*

Given that the students were experiencing their first year in the preparatory school, there was little opportunity to meet instructors and peers face to face. Their interactions were possible during class hours. However, this was insufficient to develop close relations. Most of the participants emphasized this issue. In such an environment, it is to be expected that the teaching atmosphere is generally silent, contrary to the nature of language learning. According to participants, these issues also affected the teaching process, and the instructors reported great difficulty in making students active participants.

*"The students join the online classes at first, and then the participation decreases because they see that they cannot communicate with the instructor and their friends. As a result, they gradually become demotivated and fail. Also, many students drop out after a while."* (Birce).

Birce's statement points out that both students and instructors suffered from the limitations of the online environment. The students were obliged to be a part of an online teaching environment where they encountered unfamiliar people they could not get to know because of the environment and technical limitations. To be more specific, the students did not have to

turn on their cameras and could be recognized only by their voices. All these factors caused many of the students to lose their motivation. Most quit the live session, and some even completely dropped out of school. In classroom observation, it was seen that only a few, generally silent, students attended the live sessions.

As for the instructors, most admitted that they could not adapt their teaching methods to online education, which was forced on them by the pandemic. Therefore, this process caught the academic staff and the students unprepared. They could not produce interactive activities such as pair work and role-plays in an online environment. They had to rely on the coursebook or the material that they were able to share on the screen during the class. The instructors also underlined that they were constrained to directly lecture students, who were left in a position where they could only listen. These issues were also evident in classroom observations. They mostly follow traditional teaching methods, firmly focused on the coursebook.

At first, the instructors' qualifications for online education were open to question, but participants reported an opportunity to improve their technical skills during this process. Although they had more to learn about the use of technology, they were generally optimistic about their progress. It seemed that this unexpected situation had helped them understand the importance of incorporating technology into the teaching process and using online sources. The participants agreed that they could change the organization of the teaching by, for instance, adopting 'flipped' or at least 'flipped-like' learning. In this respect, online education may provide instructors with greater flexibility in their teaching processes.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to shed light upon the online implementation of a modular system to an English preparatory school program by drawing attention to the instructors' and administrators' perspectives. The focus was on the newly adopted modular system implemented through online education. Considering the novelty of the situation, the study revealed interesting results. Firstly, the participants generally held positive attitudes toward the modular system while they were hesitant about the online implementation. Similar to findings of other studies (e.g., Gömleksiz, 1999; Erarslan, 2019; Ibyatova et al., 2018), the results of this study also revealed language instructors' and administrators' positive perception of the modular system. The participants found the modular system valuable and motivating since each module had its targets, making the objectives more visible and, thus, more comprehensible, potentially making students more dynamic and focused. Therefore, both English instructors and administrators generally believed that the modular system yielded positive outcomes. The participants underlined that each module had short-term goals, making the students more aware of their progress and improvement. Given the newness of the modular system, the participants had the chance to compare it with the previous, more traditional system. Regarding this, the new system was generally agreed to be more fruitful. This finding was consistent with İşcan's (2016) study, which found the modular system more effective than the traditional one. A general characteristic of the modular system is that it facilitates early detection of the students' weaknesses, allowing remedial actions to be applied before students continue (Hayward & McNicholl, 2007). The instructors and administrators were aware of this aspect and stressed that the modular system allowed them to filter out the students who failed to progress by returning them to the same level in repeat classes. Therefore, regular feedback and systematic continuous assessment provided the instructors with plenty of opportunities to refocus on the topics that students failed to comprehend.

Homogenous classes could be formed, and the instructors were able to adjust teaching to classes of students with similar characteristics and success levels.

As for the drawback of the new system, the online modular system presented some significant challenges regarding the limited teaching and learning activities in online classes, the difficulty of monitoring learners' progress through learners' individual work, and doubts regarding the reliability of online assessment. The instructors initially found that they were unable to utilize effective teaching methods in online education. They had to cover the topic while students remained passive listeners. Therefore, the positive effects of the transition to the modular system were overshadowed by online education to some extent. The teaching was too dependent on the coursebook in the absence of opportunities for interactive activities like pair work and role-plays, which were more applicable in face-to-face education. Lack of classroom environment, thus, was seen as a hindrance for online modular education because learners need primary supportive materials in each module such as desks, classrooms, performances, equipment, which are facilitative for effective and meaningful learning as well as healthy human development (Panganiban & Madrigal, 2021).

The online modular system was new to both students and instructors. Additionally, the implementation coincided with the pandemic, forcing institutions to continue education in isolated environments. This sudden system change in an unexpected time hardened engagement among students. The students and instructors were deprived of a physical teaching environment. The feeling of alienation resulted in the sense of lack of classroom environment. This also affected the teaching process since the students' attendance in online classes declined over time. This problem was attributed to the lack of a friendly face-to-face environment because of online education. The instructors also highlighted the difficulties in being in touch with the students through online platforms, and they believed that that was the central problem in the program. Also, the students could sometimes use the nature of online education to their advantage by turning their cameras off to avoid participating actively in the lessons. Also, they tended to miss classes because it was not compulsory. Therefore, the study showed that these issues needed to be considered in the program. From this perspective, similar to Eraslan's (2019) study, the results showed that although the modular system was influential in many ways, good planning and organization were needed.

Since each module is independent (Sejpal, 2013) and the modular system provides flexibility (Logaw, 2015), learners can have control over their learning and be independent, responsible, and autonomous. The language instructors utilized the flexibility of the modular system by asking the students to study the topic individually, thus leaving more time for in-class activities. However, the results indicated that many learners were unable to behave responsibly or learn autonomously under the current conditions. They did not complete individual work and missed online classes. Furthermore, they failed to communicate with their instructors in or outside the classroom. As an example of this problem, the students needed to watch the recording of the online classes when they missed the live ones but playing the recording for just an instant would register the student as having watched the video. They also underscored that the online modular system had seemed to work well so far, although this may be an illusion since the students could easily exploit weaknesses in the online education and assessment. Another challenge of the online implementation of the modular system was the assessment. The instructors doubted the reliability of the assessment outcomes because the process could not be controlled. Additionally, there were some graded tasks, but the instructors felt that online systems could not be trusted because the students could easily cheat.



Some other drawbacks of the new system were evident. For example, the instructors highlighted the issue of workload: they had to work longer, with fewer breaks. The content of each module was intense. In the repeat classes, demotivated and less successful students required extra effort, and these classes were not popular with instructors. In many studies (e.g., Haryanto, 2021; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020; Rahim & Chandran, 2021), technical problems have been an important issue, hindering effective teaching. Some students lacked the necessary technological devices, and the instructors found it challenging to create an interactive teaching atmosphere in an online environment. Unfortunately, the absence of such an environment was an enormous obstacle for language teaching, which relies on interactive communication.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insights into how an online modular system in an English preparatory school program was being implemented from the perspectives of the program instructors and administrators as informants. The results indicated that the participants held relatively favorable attitudes toward the online modular system but experienced challenges while implementing it. The modular system provided clear goals and objectives for both instructors and learners and flexibility to learners to do individual study at home, thus, leaving more time for instructors to focus on the activities in online classes. It was revealed that the online modular system was influential in many ways. The targets were obvious; it let the students learn at their own speeds; and it put more responsibility on the students. Still, some issues needed to be addressed resulting from the online aspects of the program. Although the online modular system provided the students and instructed with a myriad of learning/teaching opportunities and a healthier process, the parties could not fully make use of these advantages. It appeared that a full online modular system created challenges for both instructors and learners in the learning process. The instructors were unable to apply all the teaching methods, create interactive activities, connect with the students, implement reliable assessments, or enforce attendance. On the other hand, the students refused to turn on their cameras or speak in class. Furthermore, they were neither sufficiently responsible nor autonomous to take advantage of the modular system. Technical problems also became a critical issue in the programs. It can be concluded that the stakeholders were ill-prepared for implementing the online modular system. Thus, the new system led to confusion for instructors regarding the true nature of the modular system. At this stage, it would be more productive to implement the modular system as a hybrid model, allowing for some face-to-face interaction and face-to-face assessment. In the meantime, it is recommended to provide in-service training to develop technological pedagogical knowledge of English instructors and raise language learners' awareness regarding learner autonomy.

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