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An investigation into the online language teaching and assessment practices during COVID-19[1]

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Abstract

Due to a growing number of casualties, company and school closures, and a lack of social connections, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in several unanticipated challenges. As a result, to cope with these challenges, online education served as a great way to bridge the distances through digital tools. For effective and quality online learning, all stakeholders involving active implementers of educational programs, namely teachers, students, and administrators, should be aware of its benefits and drawbacks. To this end, the current study attempts to uncover the perspectives of ELT instructors about online language teaching and assessment through a qualitative research design. The results showed that all participants considered online language assessment and teaching inevitable, thus making it necessary to employ efficient methods for designing and administering online assessments and interpreting the scores. On the contrary, the respondents noted many challenges and problems, including academic misconduct, difficulty in proctoring, being open to manipulation, validity and reliability concerns. The study ends with practical implications for teacher training programs and further research ideas.

Keywords: online language assessment, ELT, COVID-19

COVID-19 döneminde çevrimiçi dil öğretimi ve değerlendirmesi uygulamaları üzerine bir inceleme

Özet (Türkçe)

COVID-19 salgını, artan sayıda can kaybı, şirket ve okulların kapanması ve sosyal bağlantıların eksikliği nedeniyle bir dizi beklenmedik zorlukla sonuçlandı. Sonuç olarak, bu zorluklarla başa çıkmak için çevrimiçi eğitim, dijital araçlar aracılığıyla mesafeleri aşmak için harika bir yol olarak hizmet etti. Etkili ve kaliteli bir çevrimiçi öğrenmenin gerçekleşmesi için, yöneticilerin yanı sıra öğretmenler ve öğrenciler gibi eğitim programlarının aktif uygulayıcıları olan tüm paydaşlar, çevrimiçi eğitimin faydalarının ve dezavantajlarının farkında olmalıdır. Bu amaçla, mevcut çalışma, nitel bir araştırma tasarımı aracılığıyla ELT eğitmenlerinin çevrimiçi dil öğretimi ve değerlendirmesi hakkındaki bakış açılarını ortaya çıkarmaya çalışmaktadır. Sonuçlar, çevrimiçi dil değerlendirme ve öğretiminin tüm katılımcılar tarafından günümüz teknoloji çağında kaçınılmaz olarak görüldüğünü, bu nedenle çevrimiçi değerlendirmenin tasarlanması, uygulanması ve puanların yorumlanması için etkili yöntemlerin kullanılması gerekliliğini ortaya koymuştur. Buna karşın, katılımcılar tarafından akademik suiistimal, gözetme zorluğu, manipülasyona açıklık, geçerlilik ve güvenilirlik endişeleri de dahil olmak üzere uzun bir zorluk ve sorun listesi not edilmiştir. Çalışma, öğretmen yetiştirme programları için pratik çıkarımlar ve sonraki çalışmalara araştırma fikirleri vererek sona ermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: çevrimiçi dil değerlendirme, ELT, COVID-19

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Introduction

Having experienced a global pandemic, people have witnessed specific challenges and differences in education, human relations, health and business. As a result, to cope with these challenges, online education served as a great way to bridge the distances through digital tools. However, unlike planned online learning, online learning during the pandemic is termed "emergency remote teaching" by Hodges et al. (2020). During this emergency, the number of students who have to shift to online learning is 1,575,270,054, as reported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020).

Therefore, social distancing during the pandemic led to unprecedented difficulties for educational activities, particularly assessment. Similarly, since March 16, 2020, educational activities have been suspended in Turkey, including lecturing and exams at all levels (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2020). Due to this choice, students and teachers have experienced significant difficulties learning online due to technological issues or personal circumstances. These remarkable COVID-19 experiences highlight the critical necessity for knowledge of the abilities, requirements, and fresh methods for instructing or evaluating students. As stated by Erdoğan (2020), these experiences are valuable as they shape their performance in online learning in the future. However, there is a gap focusing on online assessment challenges, coping mechanisms, new assessment techniques, or questions appropriate for online platforms during COVID-19, providing the main impetus behind this study. Therefore, this study was designed to further our understanding of online language assessment by providing EFL teachers' experiences and opinions.

Online Teaching and Assessment: Challenges and Benefits

As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in several unanticipated challenges in educational and social contexts. The most dramatic challenge has been in the area of education; as a result, online teaching or distant learning has replaced formal face-to-face instruction in the epidemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Cicillini & Giacosa, 2020; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; König et al., 2020; Lie et al., 2020).

Transforming educational activities to online platforms has posed particular challenges, changes and impacts on each stakeholder, from policymakers to students and teachers (Sun, 2020). Therefore, these new circumstances have raised serious concerns about online teaching practices and experiences. In general, online education is a virtual classroom learning process to present the content and receive the information used by instructors and students for educational purposes (Amiti, 2020). Having classified online learning as synchronous or asynchronous, Amiti (2020) explains each version's key features. To start, synchronous learning is a process where learning/teaching occurs online in a virtual platform in real time.

In contrast, asynchronous learning does not require real-time interaction and is thus flexible. Both types of online teaching and learning have strengths and weaknesses. For example, while asynchronous learning enhances higher-order thinking skills and self-pacing, thanks to its flexibility and time independence, synchronous learning provides real-time interaction and engagement opportunities.

With regards to urgently adopted online teaching, fundamental questions should be raised about the readiness level of teachers and learners, their literacy level of information and communication technology (ICT), their attitudes towards online teaching and learning, the accessibility of the Internet, new ways of assessment methods and techniques. All these questions need to be addressed in detail to clarify the online teaching process during the pandemic, highlighting the unprecedented long-term effects. In terms of the challenges, Kopp et al. (2019) presented a category as (a) change, (b) pace, (c) technology, (d) competencies, and (e) financing. Accordingly, one of the most significant changes in online teaching and learning is the lack of socialising through interaction and social contact with teachers or peers. Similarly, Joshi et al. (2020) criticised the lack of face-to-face interaction in online teaching and learning as a threat to instructional achievement. Further concerns can be categorised based on the sources of the challenges as in the following: a) technology, b) competence, and c) attitudes.

Firstly, as a technology-related issue, the technology dependency of online learning can pose inequality among students or teachers, let alone other technical hindrances such as power cuts, internet accessibility, online teaching platforms, internet connection and so on. Moreover, interruptions caused by human beings or pets during an online course, heavy workload (for course design, material development suitable for online platforms, and online assessment problems) might be considered other limitations of online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Therefore, institutions must equip their teachers and learners with the necessary abilities to cope with the mentioned challenges and produce alternative ways to overcome the problems (Bond et al., 2018; Sandkuhl & Lehmann, 2017).

When it comes to the benefits, flexibility (Smedley, 2010), self-directed learning (Elzainy et al., 2020), time and place independence, suitability for larger groups of learners, the ability to redo activities multiple times, enhancing higher-order thinking abilities, and instant feedback opportunities are among the advantages of online teaching and learning. To take advantage of these benefits, one must be proficient in using digital tools and technology; therefore, having the skills, knowledge, and ability to use technological tools and devices effectively and appropriately to enhance learning is essential.

Considering assessment, various ways and formats can be employed in traditional face-to-face education to determine whether or not educational objectives are reached. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this common practice has

become a severe disaster due to technological, scientific, and safety considerations, necessitating careful evaluation. In this regard, Osterlind (2002, p.5) suggested some testing formats suitable for online testing, such as "constructed-response, performance-based formats, sentence-completion or short-answer, matching, true-false and cloze-procedure" (cited in Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Accordingly, in higher education settings, YÖK (Higher Education Institution) (2020) decided to conduct assessment practices through assignments and projects without questioning learners' and teachers' technical and pedagogical competencies. Regarding assessment practices, Elzainy et al. (2020) stressed the anticipated benefits of online examinations in increasing students' autonomy and critical thinking skills. It is also helpful regarding feedback because it delivers timely input via an online exam platform that allows students to view their results later. However, despite its promises, it has been demonstrated that online education does not provide teachers with tools or platforms to properly assess learning and provide feedback to learners, posing an additional challenge for continuing learning and improvement (EAPRO, 2020). More importantly, online assessments have disadvantages, such as cheating and technical difficulties during exams. As can be seen, it is necessary to investigate online assessment practices, considering both negative and positive issues addressed in the present study.

Relevant Research

In general, despite the wide range of studies (Arslan et al., 2019; Cakir et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2020; Zhao & Mei, 2016) investigating online education from implementers' perspectives in the literature, there is a gap focusing on online assessment challenges, coping mechanisms, new assessment techniques, or questions appropriate for online platforms during COVID-19.

On an international scale, there are several studies mainly researching engagement concerns (Lie et al., 2020), effecting factors on online teaching (König et al., 2020), EMI (English medium instruction) context (Cicillini & Giacosa, 2020). For example, in analysing the predictability of certain factors in adapting to online teaching during COVID-19, König et al. (2020) conducted a study revealing that digital teacher competence and self-efficacy have a facilitating role. Taopan et al. (2020) identified the obstacles in EFL classrooms as information technology literacy, internet access, and teachers' ability to manage engaging tasks in their study. Furthermore, the survey by Lie et al. (2020) investigated online engagement, difficulties, and practices, concluding that the factors affecting online learning are "learners, teachers' prior exposure to online learning, technological knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and the support system" (p.804). According to the findings of this study, ICT-related courses in pre-service teacher education favourably impact prospective teachers' positive attitudes and levels of preparation. Another study conducted by Cicillini and Giacosa (2020) addressed participation and interaction concerns in online EMI classes during COVID-19 using quantitative and qualitative

analyses, concluding that two categories of obstacles are internal and external. According to the findings, internal barriers (participant feelings) and environmental barriers (internet connection problems, disturbing noise) have to do with the quality and success of an online EMI class. Moreover, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, digital competency levels and positive attitudes fostered students' engagement and productive EMI pedagogy.

In the Turkish context, the critical emphasis areas of research include attitudes and satisfaction levels of implementers and the implementation process of online education during COVID-19. To exemplify, Erdoğan (2020) conducted a mixed-method research study using a questionnaire and structured interviews with 50 preparatory program students to evaluate distance English courses regarding online tools, materials, and the implementation process, thus showing learners' satisfaction levels. As highlighted by researchers (Arslan et al., 2019; Sun, 2020), positive attitudes towards online learning and learner-centred pedagogies are of great importance to optimise the effectiveness and quality of online learning. From a different angle, Karataş and Tuncer (2020) attempted to investigate the effect of online teaching on language skills at a pre-service teacher education program through a qualitative study gathering data from 118 pre-service EFL teachers, providing evidence that online teaching was most beneficial for the writing ability and least helpful for speaking.

The brief literature presented above on the online teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic during school closures demonstrates the need for further research into online assessment practices, methods, and challenges, as having a clear understanding of online assessment provides valuable insights into the principles and techniques in the design and implementation of online assessment. To this end, the current research study attempts to answer the following research question:

1. What are the in-service EFL teachers' perceptions about online language assessment?

Method

Qualitatively, this current study reports the findings of semi-structured interviews through e-mail, video-conferencing tools, and online platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom, thus providing an in-depth understanding based on participants' responses (Cohen et al., 2007). By doing so, the qualitative data served as an excellent opportunity to understand what participants believe and think about online language assessment.

Participants

Detailed information about the profiles of the participants who took place in the interviews is demonstrated below, with their abbreviations coded as "T" for EFL teacher participants in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewed in-service EFL teachers' profile

Code	Interview Mode	Length of Interview	Gender	Educational Degree	Teaching Experience	Department of Graduation
T1	Email	Three pages	Female	PhD on-going	6-10 years	ELT
T2	Email	Four pages	Female	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT
T3	Email	Five pages	Female	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT
T4	Email	Four pages	Female	PhD on-going	6-10 years	ELT
T5	Email	Five pages	Female	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT
T6	Email	Three pages	Female	PhD on-going	16-20 years	ELT
T7	Email	Three pages	Female	PhD	11-15 years	ELT
T8	Email	Five pages	Female	PhD on-going	16-20 years	ELT
T9	Online	38 min. 58 sec.	Female	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT
T10	Online	25 min. 58 sec.	Female	PhD on-going	1-5 years	ELT
T11	Face-to-face	45 min. 35 sec.	Female	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT
T12	Face-to-face	59 min.	Female	PhD	11-15 years	ELT
T13	Face-to-face	32 min. 16 sec.	Female	PhD	11-15 years	ELT
T14	Face-to-face	32 min. 16 sec.	Male	PhD on-going	11-15 years	ELT

As seen above, ninety-two per cent % of informants were female, and 61.5% of them belonged to the group with 11–15 years of teaching experience, while 15.3% of female participants had 6–10 years of experience. In general, only three interviewees (3%) held doctorate degrees, while most (78.5%) were enrolled in PhD programs. The entire sample's graduation program is in ELT, which is a chance to obtain richer data since these students are accepted and familiar with language assessment techniques and expertise. The table indicates three possibilities for the interview mode: in-person, by email, and online. Just 14.2% of the sample participated in the online interview session, while the majority (57.1%) opted to interview by email. The interviews range from 25 minutes to 1 hour or three to 5 pages. During the interviews, it was observed that 2 of them voluntarily participated in the qualitative data collection through Zoom, which lasted for about 30 minutes.

Data Collection

The EFL instructors were initially asked to participate in interviews through email or WhatsApp in December 2021 and January 2022; participants were sent an email or WhatsApp message inviting them to the interview. In response to this request, 14 in-service EFL instructors offered to participate in the interview process. Five guiding questions regarding online language testing were created to frame the interviews. For the convenience of participants who could not arrange face-to-face

interviews due to the pandemic, e-mail, Zoom, and WhatsApp interviews were used. As a result, the interviews were semi-structured and recorded in a voice recording program or Zoom.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was chosen as the primary approach for data analysis to derive inferences from the acquired data. As a result, open coding was used to conduct a content analysis on the qualitative data from the interview recordings, taking into account trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and Creswell's (2013) principles as well as Bryman's (2015) technique. In this respect, preparing and structuring the collected data for analysis is the initial stage. As a result, the researcher transcribed the audio-taped or Zoom-recorded interviews. Second, the data transcripts were checked by reading them aloud multiple times and looking for any repeating words, ideas, thoughts, conceptions, or other expressions (Strauss, 1987). Then, open coding was used to classify related concepts and crucial phrases to demonstrate common ideas. The coded material was edited and written as themes in the fourth step, which involved examining the codes. By sorting the data by the interview questions, common themes and subjects were discovered and categorised into critical groups, ensuring that the emergent data matched the interview guiding questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Dornyei, 2007).

Last but not least, using tables and charts, the findings gained from the data set were presented cogently based on the recurrent themes and opinions (Creswell, 2007, 2013). After the first coding was completed, pertinent patterns were found. In this regard, the developed themes from the data set addressed the characteristics of a practical online language assessment and its advantages and disadvantages. More importantly, the qualitative findings were presented in both numbers (frequency and percentages) and quotations to maintain the qualitative data's reliability and validity. To put it in Miles and Huberman's words: "to keep yourself analytically honest, protecting against bias" (1994, p. 253).

Quality and Ethical Concerns

The present study's reliability and validity checks must be addressed to avoid potential dangers such as researcher bias, mono-operation, mono-method bias, and inadequate theory. The study employed several strategies to increase validity, such as "obtaining rich data, validating respondents' responses, data triangulation, peer debriefing, and member verification," as Maxwell (2010) noted. Moreover, extensive interaction with the data and detailed descriptions of the research context and participants are additional steps to address the reliability of the qualitative data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mackey & Gass, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Initially, the researcher adhered to the principles of "voluntary participation" and "no harm" to participants because the qualitative data of the current study attempts to elicit meanings and

replies to the respondents' feelings and ideas. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher achieved anonymity by giving numbers instead of people's names (e.g., T1). Finally, open and honest communication was used to prevent incorrect interpretations of participant responses. Thus, the researcher tried to dispel misconceptions and biases. The existing paper's trustworthiness and dependability would then be doubtful and troublesome.

Findings

Five interview questions will be presented to discuss online language assessment (OLA), including online language assessment tools, tasks, challenges, coping strategies, and online feedback. Interview questions were expected to provide information on the issues above based on interviewee comments. As a result, table 2 below summarises and highlights the main findings based on in-service EFL teachers' replies, including research foci, main themes, and categories.

Tablo 2. Main themes identified for "online language assessment" by EFL teachers

Research Foci	Category	Main Themes Emerged	N	%	Interviewee Codes
Opinions of OLA	Overall tendency	Being Inevitable	14	100%	T1-T14
	Disadvantages	Academic misconduct	6	42.8%	T2, T4, T5, T7, T11, T12
		Difficulty of proctoring	4	28.5%	T2, T4, T5, T7
		Reliability-validity concerns	3	21.4%	T2, T4, T10
	Advantages	Off-place learning	4	28.5%	T2, T8, T9, T11
		Practical	3	21.4%	T8, T11, T12
		Fun	1	7.1%	T2
Suitable Tasks for OLA	Higher-order thinking tasks	Individual projects	5	35.7%	T3, T5, T9, T10, T11,
		Research-based tasks	4	28.5%	T3, T9, T10, T11
		Portfolios	3	21.4%	T5, T9, T10
	Interactive tasks	Dialogues with native speakers	1	7.1%	T1
	Traditional tasks	Multiple choice tests	1	7.1%	T4
		Writing	1	7.1%	T7
Challenges in OLA	Student-related	Academic misconduct	13	92.8%	T1-T14 (except T6)
		Lack of technological knowledge	2	14.2%	T2, T12
	Teacher related	Lack of technological knowledge	3	21.4%	T10, T11, T13,
	Technology related	Internet connection	7	50%	T3, T5, T6, T8, T10,
		Lack of devices	1	7.1%	T8
Coping Strategies	Technology-aided	Proctoring programs (Turnitin, Witwiser, etc.)	4	28.5%	T2, T7, T9, T11
		Limited time for each question	1	7.1%	T10
	Teacher-oriented	Distribution of questions	2	14.2%	T4, T7,
		Types of questions and tasks	3	21.4%	T7, T10, T11
Online feedback	Advantages	Practical	6	42.8%	T2, T4, T8, T10, T11, T12
		Enjoyable	2	14.2%	T4, T8
	Disadvantages	Difficult	5	35.7%	T3, T5, T7, T10, T12
		Time-consuming	2	14.2%	T5, T7

To examine "online language assessment" from all possible viewpoints, five interview questions were designed to elicit opinions on the following themes: "overall idea for OLA, relevant tasks and assessments for OLA, online feedback, challenges in OLA, and coping strategies if any". The replies received through interviews were coded to achieve the goals above, and the common themes were categorised. In this regard, the data linked to the first category, the overall attitude towards OLA, both positive and negative perspectives, were mentioned with diverse themes and focus areas, as shown in Table 2 above. Negative statements, for example, were associated with difficulties in academic misconduct (42.8%) and proctoring issues (28.5%), as well as reliability and validity concerns in OLA practices (21.4%). In comparison, positive aspects were reported as practical (28.5%), fun (7.1%), engaging for learners, and off-place nature.

Regarding relevant tasks and tests for OLA, the data identified three categories as "Higher-order thinking tasks", "Interactive tasks", and “Traditional tasks”. In each category, the in-service interviewees voiced specific language assessment tools. Individual projects (35.7%), research-based assignments (28.5%), and portfolios (21.4%) were deemed appropriate and preferred by respondents under the first category. Regarding interactive exercises, role plays, and group projects on online platforms are most frequently suggested since they were thought to allow learners to produce language in a context. These ideas were justified by the interviewee (T2) as follows:

“As for the concern about cheating, I would personally choose higher-order thinking questions as they cannot cheat, there is no right or wrong answer, and to be able to answer this type of questions, they need to master the topics they are taught” (T2).

The extract above shows that higher-level thinking tasks may be more effective for online language evaluation because they require critical thinking and research abilities through individual participation. When it explained interactive tasks, T1 explained it in her own words: “Having dialogues, like friendship, if someone is abroad (native speaker maybe), etc. being face to face with cameras”. Even though one of the interviewees (Teacher 7) criticised using multiple-choice questions in online language assessments because it allows learners to cheat easily, another participant (Teacher 4) supported using multiple-choice questions because they are simple to administer and score.

As shown, most of the difficulties encountered during online language teaching during COVID-19 were in the assessment procedure. As a result, interviewees' perspectives must be stressed to identify the most difficult challenges for online language assessment and their coping strategies. The qualitative data from the interviews regarding the problems are classified as student-related, teacher-related, and technology-related. When the findings for student-related concerns were

closely examined, it was determined that the highest percentage is related to "academic misconduct," with a rate of 92.8%, as acknowledged by numerous scholars in the related literature. Kruger (2015), on the other hand, suggested that online assessment methods can be more easily monitored through some web applications than traditional examinations.

Another significant area for improvement identified by respondents was a need for more technological expertise among students and teachers, as ICT-related knowledge or technology literacy is thought to facilitate online learning and evaluation. Furthermore, technical issues such as internet connectivity or a lack of necessary gadgets are among the hurdles teachers and students have faced during this experience. Teachers had to create solutions to address the concerns raised during online language assessment to overcome these issues. Based on the responses from the interviews, the following coping strategies can be summarised: proctoring programs (Turnitin, Witwiser, etc.), limited time for each question, distribution of questions, and types of questions and tasks with percentages of 28.5%, 7.1%, 14.2%, and 21.4%, respectively.

The difficulties and coping mechanisms are consistent with the findings of the related research studies. To illustrate, Elzainy et al. (2020) propose the following solutions to deal with these difficulties: time limits for each question and the entire test, designing brief exams, preparing scenario-based questions, randomising questions and answer choices, and not allowing students to return to previous questions, among others. In contrast to the traditional method of feedback (face-to-face, written input), interviewees thought online feedback was favourable since it was "practical" and "enjoyable" in general. Because online feedback allows for one-on-one interaction between learner and teacher, whether online or via video, it assures that each student receives individual attention. More comprehensively, the advantages of online feedback can be represented in the following comment of one of the interviewees:

“You can give feedback in video or audio recording format as well as written or coded- feedback options. It is also easier to document and store the feedback you have given” (T8).

It is also advantageous because it delivers rapid feedback via an online test platform, allowing students to view their scores after the test. Nonetheless, other respondents expressed worries about the difficulties and problems associated with online feedback, as illustrated below:

“I believe it is more difficult because giving real-time feedback is easier if you and the students are in class; however, for crowded classes, it is difficult to give real-time online feedback” (T7).

Conclusion and Discussion

Data analysis yields several significant issues. Almost all participants initially agreed that online language assessment (OLA) was inevitable. This highlights the concern that it is essential to consider efficient methods for designing and administering OLA and interpreting the scores in today's modern world. The respondents noted many challenges and problems, including academic misconduct, difficulty in proctoring, being open to manipulation, validity and reliability concerns. One conclusion drawn from these results is the need for practical solutions to conduct online language assessments effectively and reliably. To address the problems with assessment in online platforms, Elzainy et al. (2020) propose the following solutions: time limits for each question and the entire test, designing brief exams, preparing scenario-based questions, randomising questions and answer choices, and not allowing students to return to previous questions, among others.

The results identify three categories for appropriate online language evaluation exams and tasks: "Higher-order thinking tasks," "Interactive tasks," and "Traditional tasks,". Individual projects, research-based tasks, and portfolio activities are just a few examples of the language assessment tools mentioned by the informants. One inference is that participants are conscious of interactive tasks requiring higher-order thinking skills, which could help prevent academic dishonesty. The assessment produces accurate and valid data that, in turn, allows for the creation of helpful feedback for the student. Overall, the researcher's classification of the challenges in OLA practices included challenges connected to students, teachers, and technology. The researchers are concerned about this situation because interviewees need more technological expertise to reduce the effectiveness and quality of OLA practices. The development of in-service training in information and communication technology (ICT) use is therefore urgently needed, as ICT literacy has a positive influence on online learning and assessment (König et al., 2020; Lie et al., 2020). Therefore, it is feasible to conclude that these strategies would assist teachers in reducing the adverse effects of problems and difficulties encountered in OLA.

The information gathered through interview questions 1 and 3 revealed that most informants argue against OLA because it is challenging to control and obtain valid and reliable results. Cheating is the main problem regarding the integrity of online assessments. However, it should be highlighted that cheating during an online test is neither more prevalent nor more straightforward than it is during a traditional test (www.onlineeducation.com). Also, contrary to widespread assumption, some web apps make it easier to oversee online assessment procedures than standard

examinations (Krueger, 2015). Nonetheless, maintaining the integrity of an online assessment is crucial, so some steps must be taken. Honesty comes to the fore when dealing with integrity issues in online assessments. Also, a balance between formative and summative evaluation, as well as a variety of question types and forms (multiple choice, open-ended, true-false, etc.), along with careful attention to time constraints, ensure quality, thus overcoming difficulties and problems to some extent (Elzainy et al., 2020). When considering the positive aspects of OLA, the results uncovered that practicality, having anywhere anytime, stress-free nature, and fun come to the forefront. In this respect, it is reasonable to consider making the most of OLA by organising in-service training activities in various contexts and purposes.

Considering the central tenets of online education, it can be stressed that instructors' competencies connected to their ICT abilities, online teaching pedagogical knowledge, and self-efficacy beliefs contribute to maximising students' learning, thereby boosting the quality of online education. Flexibility (Smedley, 2010), self-directed learning (Elzainy et al., 2020), time and place independence, suitability for larger groups of learners, the ability to redo activities multiple times, enhancing higher-order thinking abilities, and instant feedback opportunities are some of the advantages of online teaching and learning. To take advantage of these benefits, one must be proficient in using digital tools and technology; therefore, having the skills, knowledge, and ability to use technological tools and devices effectively and appropriately to enhance learning is essential.

Therefore, a competent teacher or student is expected to use their skills to efficiently manage online learning and teaching by using problem-solving skills, adjusting to challenges, working in collaboration, and having ICT skills. However, universities in Turkey chose to perform assessment procedures through assignments and projects (YÖK, 2020) without questioning the preparedness level of learners and teachers in terms of technical and pedagogical competencies, which caused chaos among teachers and students.

Last but not least, attitudes, as an umbrella term, can involve being prepared, experienced, motivated, and autonomous for online teaching and learning. The first two features -being ready and professional- undoubtedly cannot be said for such an unplanned shift to online education during the pandemic for many countries and institutions. That is why the inexperience of teachers and learners causes many difficulties. When it comes to motivation, it is clear that without a positive attitude towards online teaching and learning, it becomes the most significant hindrance. It further poses new problems such as poor course design, lack of positive learning environment and collaboration, non-attendance of learners, and unwillingness to communicate.

For these reasons, pre-service teacher education programs must be designed to develop digital competence, as using digital tools and having sufficient knowledge

about new approaches and pedagogy for effective online teaching is critical to achieving better and motivating online teaching (König et al., 2020). Moreover, analysing the online learning process from several perspectives is crucial, as new requirements, behaviours, and responsibilities have emerged due to the pandemic. Moving forward, it can be noted that teachers' competencies about their ICT abilities, understanding of online teaching methodology, online assessment competencies, and self-efficacy beliefs all contribute to maximising students' learning and raising the standard of distance learning.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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