

EFL Students' Views about Distance Education at Higher Education in Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to look into the preferences and opinions of English preparatory students about distance education. These students, after completing their first semester of instruction in person, had their second semester of instruction online as a result of the two earthquakes of magnitude 7.7 and 7.6 which struck Kahramanmaraş in Türkiye in 2023. A Google Form questionnaire with both open-ended and closed-ended questions was administered to 55 students in the preparatory class. According to the study, the advantages of distance learning for EFL students are that it is a convenient and affordable form of education, while the disadvantages involve technical issues, a lack of interaction between teachers and students, a lack of a conducive environment for instruction, and health issues brought on by distance learning. The study also reveals that while 72% of the preparatory students preferred face-to-face instruction, 28% favoured the distance education model. The study's final finding is that 58% of the participants, EFL preparatory students, believe that 30-minute is the right length for a distance learning course. These important results will contribute to a better understanding of the distance education model, which is frequently offered as a substitute for in-person instruction.

Keywords : Distance Education, Online Education, Virtual Learning

EFL Öğrencilerinin Türkiye'de Yükseköğretimde Uzaktan Eğitime İlişkin Görüşleri

ÖZ

Bu çalışma İngilizce hazırlık öğrencilerinin uzaktan eğitime ilişkin tercihlerini ve görüşlerini incelemek amacıyla yapılmıştır. Bu öğrenciler, 2023 yılında Türkiye'de Kahramanmaraş'ta meydana gelen 7,7 ve 7,6 büyüklüğündeki iki deprem sonucunda, ilk dönem eğitimlerini yüz yüze tamamladıktan sonra ikinci dönem eğitimlerini çevrimiçi olarak gerçekleştirmişlerdir. Hazırlık sınıfında okuyan 55 öğrenciye hem açık hem de kapalı uçlu soruların yer aldığı Google Form anketi uygulandı. Araştırmaya göre, uzaktan eğitimin yabancı dil öğrencileri için faydaları arasında rahat ve makul fiyatlı bir eğitim şekli olması yer alırken, dezavantajları arasında teknik sorunlar, öğretmenler ve öğrenciler arasındaki etkileşim eksikliği, eğitim için elverişli bir ortamın olmaması ve uzaktan eğitimin getirdiği sağlık sorunları yer almaktadır. Araştırmada ayrıca hazırlık öğrencilerinin % 72'sinin yüz yüze eğitimi tercih ederken, %28'inin uzaktan eğitim modelini desteklediği ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu araştırmanın son bulgusu ise katılımcıların, İngilizce hazırlık öğrencilerinin, %58'inin uzaktan eğitim ile verilen bir dersin ideal uzunluğunun 30 dakika olduğunu desteklemesi olduğunu ortaya çıkarmasıdır. Bu önemli sonuçlar, her fırsatta yüz yüze eğitimin bir alternatifi olarak devreye sokulan uzaktan eğitim modelinin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Uzaktan Eğitim, Çevrimiçi Eğitim, Sanal Eğitim



INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is defined by Gunawardena & McIsaac (2013) as “a structured learning experience that can be done away from an academic institution, at home, or at a workplace” (p. 358). According to Chaney et al. (2008), distance education is “an educational delivery system in which technology applications are used to deliver education to students who are geographically separated from the instructor” (p. 6). According to Coe & Gandy (1998), distance education refers to formal teacher-learner arrangements in which the learner and teacher are physically apart for the majority of the time and communicate using technology such as audiocassettes, telephones, radios, televisions, computers, and interactive videodiscs. Distance education connects teachers, students, and resources that are physically separated by using a wide range of devices and interactive telecommunications to deliver formal instruction (Kentnor, 2015; Simonson et al., 2011). Combining all of those definitions, it is possible to define distance learning as an educational method that occurs when the teacher and student are located in different places, and is sometimes used as a full substitute for face-to-face teaching during emergent situations like earthquakes, pandemic, or similar calamities.

The objectives of distance learning as an alternative to traditional learning are to provide degree-granting programmes, combat illiteracy in developing nations, provide training opportunities for economic growth, and provide curriculum enrichment in non-traditional educational settings (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2013). Overall, distance learning has become an increasingly popular option for individuals seeking a flexible and accessible education. With its ability to reach students in remote locations and provide a range of educational opportunities, it has become an important tool in promoting global education and economic development.

As soon as the pandemic COVID-19 began, which lasted for almost two years, distance learning replaced in-person training as the primary delivery mode. Although education has resumed in person since the pandemic ended, some academic institutions have concluded that certain theoretical courses can be delivered online. Several educational institutions in Türkiye also started providing in-person instruction, with only a few courses being delivered online. However, this changed after two major earthquakes hit Kahramanmaraş, Türkiye. After the two earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6 on February 6, 2023, which were felt in many cities of the country and caused severe destruction in 11 provinces, in which more than 50 thousand people died and more than 100 thousand were injured, the universities had to switch to distance education again. Thus, after completing the first semester of the 2022–2023 academic year face-to-face, Turkish students in all levels had to continue the second semester through mandatory distance learning.

Studies should be conducted to improve the quality of distance education, which is the first education model that comes to mind in emergency situations when face-to-face training is unavailable. In this regard, this study investigates the opinions of EFL preparatory class students' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of distance education. There is no doubt that the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, as well as whether or not online instruction is preferable compared to in-person instruction, and how long an online lesson should last.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are the EFL preparatory students' views on distance education?
2. Which do EFL preparatory students prefer: distance education or face-to-face learning?
3. What should be the duration of the lessons in distance education?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of distance learning is not new, although it has gained more attention due to COVID-19. The first significant American correspondence programme with a distance between instructors and pupils was formed at the University of Chicago in the late 1800s. After the creation of the Open University in Britain in 1970, distance learning started to make use of emerging technologies to deliver more effective distance education. This led to the development of online learning platforms, virtual classrooms, and other digital tools that have revolutionised the way we learn remotely. These technological advancements paved the way for distance learning and online education, which have become increasingly popular in recent years. Numerous public and private organisations and institutions now offer distance learning programmes to school systems, colleges, the military, and large corporations.

The internet and digital devices have made it possible for students to interact with their teachers and classmates while also accessing educational materials from any location in the world (Aslan, 2023). People can access information or receive education anywhere in the world through some institutions that offer online education, thanks to the ubiquitous feature of contemporary technological devices. Although non-mandatory distance education courses and training may be satisfying for learners, how students feel about fully mandated distance education and whether they prefer having education via online instruction is an issue of debate.

In their survey of 185 individuals from various faculties at different universities, Illarionova et al. (2021) investigated the positive and negative aspects of distance education. The results indicated that students faced several challenges, including a lack of suitable study environments, weak internet connections, and negative moods due to a lack of communication

with friends. After analysing these drawbacks, researchers concluded that distance learning reduces educational quality. According to Karadağ et al. (2021), students reported unhappiness when they missed class because they had poor Wi-Fi or data packages where they resided or experienced issues with the technical devices (personal computers, tablets) they used to attend the class. Al-Nofaie (2020), who conducted a survey with 25 college students in an English morphology course, revealed that the primary difficulties of online education are the absence of sufficient technology resources, home distractions, physical limitations in interaction, and online tests in the Saudi Arabian setting. Al-Nofaie's study also showed that there were some students who preferred the asynchronous teaching approach due to its flexibility and ease, which allowed students who were shy to share their ideas.

According to Octaberlina and Muslimin's research (2020), EFL students expressed dissatisfaction with a shortage of real-time engagement and personal interaction, as well as with the bad internet connection and health issues associated with online learning. They acknowledged as well that online movies and games distracted them. In her survey of 69 EFL students at Ecuador's National University of Education (UNAE), Sevy-Biloon (2021) asked students to express reasons for which delivery method they wanted to be educated by and why. Students who prefer in-person instruction say that it is less distracting, they interact with teachers and other students better, it is easier to focus, and they are more motivated. In contrast, students who prefer distance learning said that they have more time with their families, saving money, feeling less anxious, and having more time to complete their assignments.

Yavuz and Kaplan (2024) conducted a study in a state university in Türkiye with 182 EFL students to investigate their readiness and perception of emergency remote teaching (ERT). According to the results of the study, while 62 of the participants had a positive perception of emergent distance teaching, asserting that it is an effective, flexible, improving, supporting, and comfortable way of teaching, 120 of them had a negative perspective, claiming that distance education is insufficient, ineffective, hard-to-attend, unsystematic, compelling, and limited. Okyar (2023) conducted a qualitative study to find out how EFL Turkish students felt about distance education. She discovered that while some students had positive things to say about it, such as how it made shy students feel more at ease, most students had negative attitudes towards distance education due to the difficulties they encountered, which included technical difficulties, health and focus issues, a lack of interaction, feelings of loneliness and anxiety, low motivation, and not addressing all styles. Evisen, Akyilmaz, and Torun (2020) conducted a qualitative descriptive study with preparatory class students of a state university, in which they found that students perceived some advantages of distance learning during the world epidemic. Some of the students stated in the interviews that while they initially struggled with technical issues, they eventually grew accustomed to distance learning. Many

students felt more at ease learning in their own homes in a secure atmosphere since they had more time to finish assignments and could work more autonomously. Others, who were still having trouble, believed their education was inadequate since they were unable to attend face-to-face sessions. Evisen, Akilmaz, and Torun (2020) reported that some of the students had connection problems; many were still getting used to the novel teaching style; some were easily distracted while studying outside of the classroom; and some just missed going to class and interacting with their peers and teachers in-person. Summarising their study, they concluded that the overwhelming majority of their students did not appreciate online education and desired to return to traditional classes as soon as the COVID-19 danger was removed. However, it is certain that a sizable portion of students found online learning to be beneficial, useful, and practical, and they wanted to continue their education online in the future.

All in all, the disadvantages of distance education, which are highlighted in most of the studies mentioned above, are the lack of interaction with teachers and friends, not having a private environment for an online lesson, being distracted, and technical problems, whereas the advantages mentioned include saving money, having more time with families, and making even shy students feel more at ease.

When it comes to whether students prefer online education or face-to-face education and how long an online lesson should be, there are very few studies that directly search for the students' preferences in delivery methods. Investigations were generally about learners' perspectives on distance education or the affordance of technical devices used in online education. In reality, the majority of research on remote learning has been micro-educational in nature, concentrating on topics like curriculum development, characteristics of learners, and interactions and communication with educational organisations and technologies (Beccaria et al., 2016). In her study with EFL students, Sevy-Biloon (2021) found that 74.5% preferred face-to-face instruction while only 24.5% preferred online instruction. Additionally, in a study done by Illarionova L. P. et al. (2021), while 76% of the participants stated that they were not satisfied with distance education, the number of those who were completely satisfied with distance education was only 13%. In an investigation of the views of EFL Turkish students on distance learning, Okyar (2023) came to the conclusion—without providing a percentage—that the majority of students preferred face-to-face instruction in a classroom over distance learning.

The investigation also considers the duration of online courses. It is challenging to determine the ideal length of a lesson due to its subjective nature and the variability of attention spans based on factors such as the subject matter, instructor, and teaching method. The study evaluates the attention span of interactive lessons where both the teacher and students are actively engaged. In this research, an online language learning course is evaluated, covering speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. The subject matter's entertainment value may affect the results. However, experts generally agree that an online

course should last between 15 and 30 minutes, with some suggesting larger segments up to a maximum of 1.5 hours, similar to a traditional lecture (Winstead, 2022).

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Data were gathered through purposeful sampling of 55 students who received English preparatory education at a state university during the 2022-2023 academic year. The participants comprised of 5 male and 50 female students aged between 17 and 22 years. The number of male students in language departments of present university is quite low in the year when the study was conducted which is a limitation of this study. Participants completed the first term with face-to-face training and the second term with compulsory distance training due to the earthquake that occurred in the country. At the end of the semester in which they completed their education through distance education, students were asked to participate in this survey to express their opinions about distance education, and 50 out of 90 students volunteered to respond questions in the open-ended questionnaire shared with them via Google Forms.

2.2. Data Collection Tools and Data Analysis Process

A concurrent triangulation design, one of the types of mixed method (Ivankova, et al., 2009), was applied in this study because a Google Form-generated questionnaire including open ended and closed ended questions was used as a data collection tool. The questionnaire contained both quantitative and qualitative questions, and their interpretation was done separately. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the first research question was answered through qualitative data, while the second and third research questions employed quantitative data analysis. This approach not only allowed for a comprehensive examination of the research questions, but also provided a robust and reliable set of results.

Before the application of the questionnaire, a pilot application was conducted, and a couple of changes were made to improve the comprehensibility of the items based on the feedback received from the students. It is noteworthy that the questionnaire was administered to participants who volunteered to attend the study. Prior to the questionnaire's administration, participants were fully informed of its purpose and the expected outcomes. This approach ensures that the participants are adequately informed of the study's objectives and that the data collected is reliable and valid. The content validity of the survey was ensured by taking the opinions of three educators who are experts in their field. The students were given online access to the Google form-generated questionnaire, and while Excel 2016 program was used to analyse quantitative data, MAXQDA 2020 was exploited to analyse their responses and content analysis was applied. Content Analysis was performed to analyse the

qualitative data. To do this, initial codes were created and subsequently categorised following a thorough and repeated examination of the responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

3. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings obtained in this study for each research question will be included. While qualitative analysis was conducted to answer the first research question, answers to the second and third research questions were sought with quantitative analysis method. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire to find an answer to the first research question were for the students to write down the advantages and disadvantages of distance education in their viewpoint. For the second research question, we asked the students which of the face-to-face and distance education methods they preferred. Finally, to find an answer to the third research question, participants who received intensive English preparatory education through distance education for approximately four months were questioned how many minutes the ideal English language course given via distance education should be. The responses given by the students to the questions was analysed and included under subheadings in this section.

3.1. What are the EFL preparatory students' views on distance education?

In this study, students were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning in order to better understand their views on the subject. Students' responses to open-ended questions were coded through content analysis and they indicated that distance learning has two advantages and four disadvantages.

3.1.1. Advantages of Distance Education

As Figure 1 illustrates, the first advantage of distance education is that is convenient and affordable, and the second, as mentioned by a few students, they feel more comfortable in speaking English in a distance learning environment.

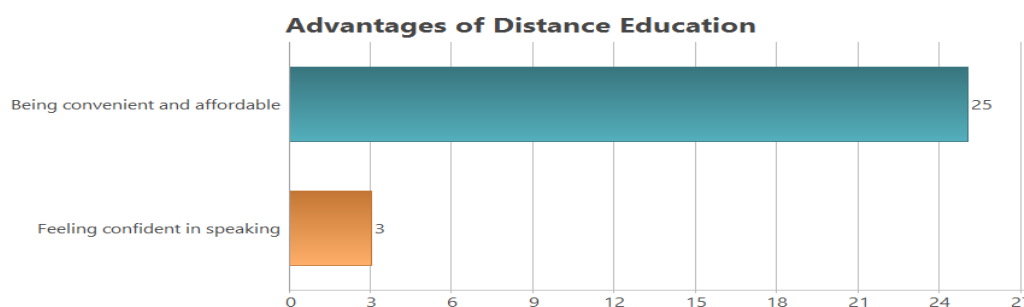


Figure 1: Advantages of Distance Education

Figure 1 shows the advantages of distance learning for EFL preparation students. As can be seen from the figure, while the majority of students consider distance education to be convenient and affordable, some students state that they feel more confident when speaking

in courses offered through distance education. Depending on the students' responses, each of these benefits is going to be discussed discretely.

3.1.1.1. Being convenient and affordable

A large majority of students express that the most important advantage of distance education is its ease and affordability.

When education is online, you do not have transportation problems. As long as you have internet access, you can attend the class anywhere. Distance education is more convenient (S 19).

Some of the advantages of distance education are as follows: saving on situations like transportation, food, time, money, etc. (S 21).

I think the advantages are that you don't have to get up very early in the morning and that you are more comfortable financially (S 35).

They are not required to attend school and can easily complete their education at home without having to pay for transportation, meals, or living expenses.

The advantages are that I do not have to get up early in the morning, I have enough time during the day, and I can live comfortably in the family home (S 51).

Since the lessons are online, we do not need to wake up early in the morning, and there is no need to pay for the road (S 10).

The biggest advantage of distance education is that we do not get tired physically (S 50).

3.1.1.2. Feeling confident in speaking

Shyness is arguably the biggest barrier to language learning. Since the affective filter limits language learning, as stated by Krashen (1992), some students who are uncomfortable in a traditional classroom setting may feel more at ease in an online learning environment and participate more actively, as indicated by student 39, who utters, "We can speak more confidently."

Student 49 states that *students who cannot actively participate in face-to-face education feel more confident in online education.*

On the other hand, I must say that some students, who normally have high potential but are passive in the course, are more confident and active in the online environment (S 53)

3.1.2. Disadvantages of Distance Education

As Figure 2 shows, the inability to hold classes due to frequent internet outages or some other technical problems, the failure of students to interact, the lack of a disciplined learning

environment, and an unhealthy environment due to spending a lot of time in front of a computer are, in order of importance, the disadvantages of distance education, according to the EFL students.

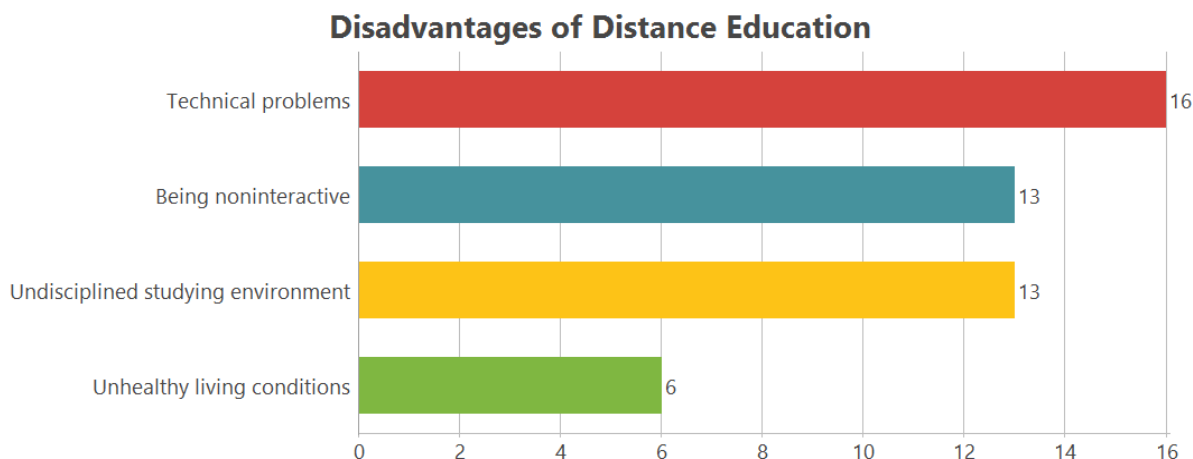


Figure 2: Disadvantages of Distance Education

As can be seen from Figure 2, the most fundamental problem of distance education, as stated by most of the students, is technical problems. These problems can range from power outages to lack of infrastructure. While the fact that it is not interactive and does not have a disciplined education environment is equally expressed as a disadvantage by the students, the fact that it causes some health problems stands out as another disadvantage. In terms of the students' responses, each of these is going to be discussed under identified themes.

3.1.2.1. Technical problems

Those who took part in Ersin et al.'s (2020) study in the Turkish EFL environment agreed that schools need enough technological infrastructure and resources for an effective distance learning programme. Besides schools, learners also need a lot of devices and tools for online learning. The most common and troublesome situation in distance education is internet interruptions or lack of internet access. Due to the importance of the Internet in the delivery of language education via distance learning and the fact that each lesson consumes almost 1 GB of Internet space, at least 24 GB of Internet space is required for the 24 hours per week, which is a sizeable amount. Students who live in small towns or rural areas encounter significant challenges, whereas there are typically no place in urban areas where Internet access or Wi-Fi is accessible. Additionally, frequent power outages make it impossible to access the internet and cause students to miss classes.

In distance education, we need to have the Internet all the time to attend classes, but there are times when we cannot access the Internet. When we enter classes with Wi-Fi, since we are in the earthquake zone, the electricity is constantly cut off and our lessons are interrupted again (S 14).

Sometimes I cannot attend class due to the electricity shortcut, or I cannot hear the teacher's voice clearly because my internet is not fast enough, and sometimes the teacher does not hear my voice (S 25).

Since I live in a village where there is no internet, I have a lot of trouble in this regard. At the same time, because I do not have access to a computer, I cannot make presentations as well and efficiently as I want (S 43).

3.1.2.2. Being non-interactive

Distance learning prevents students from participating in a social setting where they can share their knowledge and collaborate with one another, which is essential for language learning. With collaborative learning, students or peers regularly exchange helpful knowledge, unite, and use their collective abilities to address common issues (Sun & Yuan, 2018). A sociocultural perspective on the acquisition of a second language holds that interaction and proximity to speakers of the target language are essential to language learning (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978), but this is not possible in distance learning. Due to their dispersed locations—either in their hometowns or elsewhere—the students are unable to come together and can only complete the theoretical aspects of language learning on their own, leaving out the practical aspects. Students can find people to practise using technological resources or useful applications, but this requires self-discipline, and sadly, the number of such students is not high (Gorbunovs et al., 2016).

Face-to-face education is more fun and efficient than distance education. Distance education is both boring and tiring (S 15).

The home environment and the classroom environment are very different, and interacting with my friends and teachers makes me happier and more successful (S 43).

As a disadvantage, interaction is less since it is not face-to-face. It is not clear who is listening to the lecture and who is not. In terms of efficiency, face-to-face is better (S 45)

Researchers have generally found that technology-enhanced collaborative language learning improves language input resources, diversifies learning tasks, lessens the load of lecturing on teachers, and increases learner interest (Arnold & Ducate, 2019; Dooly & Sadler, 2016; Tsai, 2019, as cited in Su & Zou, 2022). However, this feature of technology does not apply to compulsory distance education because students who have a busy curriculum and usually spend their time in front of the computer for online courses cannot spend much time on the collaborative features of technology. For example, when a preparatory class student participates in compulsory online education 24 hours a week, he does not have much time to socialise and communicate with his friends. For this reason, some students who participated in the survey stated that distance education creates an asocial environment for them.

Student 53 thoroughly articulates this scenario, stating that *language classes need an active, sociable, and social environment because learning the target language is not just about books and exercises; we need to constantly practise that language to internalise the language and understand its logic. This is not possible in the online environment, and it turns into a rather cold environment. Sometimes we do not understand who said what to whom, we can either understand it late or wrongly, which causes our reactions to be more formal. After classes, we only text with the teacher and classmates, and we hardly speak English with one another, which makes us blunt.* Another student complains that *we stay away from our social environment and lack the opportunity to learn the language or develop that skill when we are away from our classmates* (S 13).

3.1.2.3. Undisciplined studying environment

Success requires a structured and organised learning environment (Doyle, 1986), which is almost impossible to provide in a distance education setting. Although its definition varies depending on the situation, *discipline* is frequently defined in its abstract form as "the practise of training people to obey rules and orders and punishing them if they do not; the controlled behaviour or situation that is the result of this training" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2023). It is clear from students' responses that the home environment is frequently unsuitable for concentration on the course, and it is regrettably naive to expect success in such a disorganised environment. Most of the students attend classes while still in their pyjamas at home, possibly in front of the television, while others are eating or visiting family.

Since the number of people living in our house is high, the house is generally not available. Since we are at home, there is a perception that female students have to help their mothers in all kinds of matters, so both housework and online lessons cannot be done at the same time. I can't focus on the lessons as much as I want (S 10).

Not being able to focus, being disturbed from time to time by external factors, screen addiction, and a lack of information due to connection or device problems seriously limit education (S 21).

There is slackness at home, and sometimes we can miss the lesson, whereas we can be more disciplined and serious in face-to-face education, and this seriousness reflects positively on success (S 26).

The disadvantage of distance education is that we get distracted much more quickly. We attend classes in the home environment, and our eyes are caught on other things or the noises coming from the house affect it. Apart from that, we can't make eye contact with the teacher, so we quickly break away from the lesson (S 36).

3.1.2.4. Unhealthy living conditions

One of the most important proverbs is "Health comes first." which means that without good health, everything we need to do is incomplete. The detrimental effect of distance learning on our health is one of its obvious drawbacks. Rather than mental health problems

that started with COVID-19 and grew worse due to the earthquakes in Türkiye, the situation described here is the detrimental effects of distance learning on our physical health. While looking at the screen for a long time can spoil learners' and instructors' eyes, standing in front of the computer for a long time disrupts their posture and causes back and neck pain.

Being in front of the screen in isolation from everyone and everything until the end of the lesson and the back and eye pain that this process brings are among the important health-related disadvantages of distance education (S 33).

I also feel pain in my eyes because we study on the phone for at least six hours four days a week (S 14). Our eyes hurt from looking at the screen for hours (S 34).

Additionally, there are students who wake up late in the morning and do not have the opportunity to have breakfast, like S17, who states that *“we go to class without eating until noon because the breaks are almost 10 minutes, we cannot have breakfast, and our health is badly affected, and when the health is bad, the psychology deteriorates.”*

3.2. Which do EFL preparatory students prefer: distance education or face-to-face education?

The second research question is to reveal the preference rates for distance education and face-to-face education among EFL preparatory class students. According to Figure 3, the study's findings indicated that while 78% of EFL preparatory students preferred face-to-face instruction, 28% preferred distance learning.

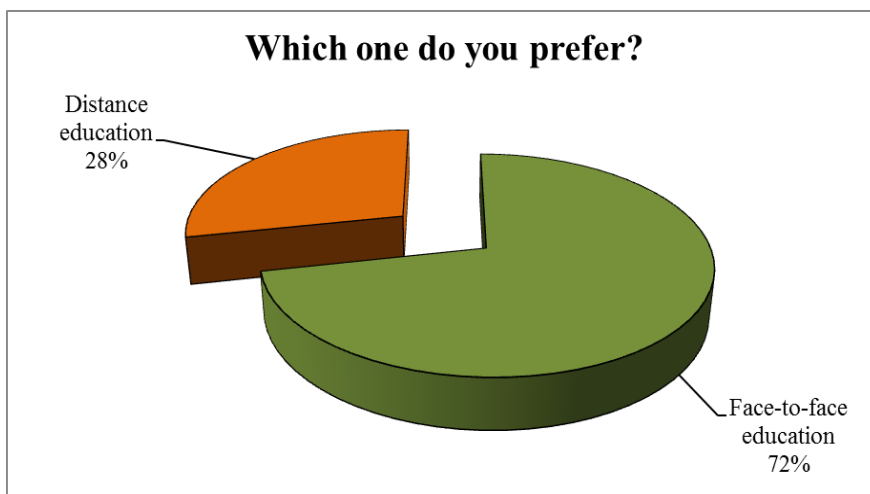


Figure 3: Students' preference of Delivery Model

As Figure 3 illustrates, most EFL students prefer face-to-face instruction. Occasionally shy students or those who want to spend more time with their families favour distance learning. The first research question lists the benefits of distance learning as the reasons why

some students, albeit relatively few, choose it. In a course delivered via distance learning, students may feel more secure even though they might feel shamed in a face-to-face setting. In addition, some students can be drawn in by the ease and affordability of distance learning. In the previous research question, the students' opinions regarding face-to-face and distance learning were solicited; consequently, in this closed-ended question, they were asked to select one of the two options without being required to provide a justification.

3.3. What should be the duration of the lessons in distance education?

Students' opinions on how long each distance education course should last were the subject of another closed-ended question in the questionnaire. Preparatory class online lessons were the same length as in-person lessons during the time this study was conducted, at 40 minutes. Since the School of Foreign Languages instructors knew the courses offered in the preparatory classes were rigorous, they decided to make the online lessons also 40 minutes long, in accordance with the university senate's recommendation that the length of the courses offered with required distance education be between 20 and 40 minutes. As a result of this study, the majority of the students preferred to have an ideal distance education course of 30 minutes in foreign language preparation classes, as shown in Figure 4.

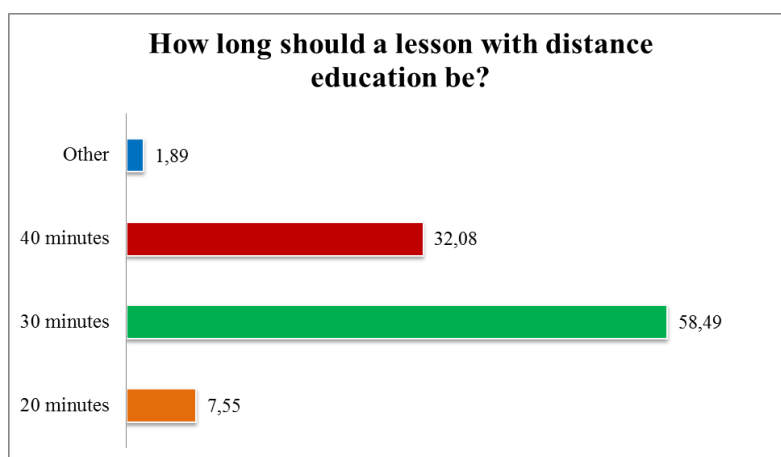


Figure 4: The Appropriate Length of an Online Course

As can be seen from Figure 4, 58.49% of the students stated that the ideal duration of a distance education course should be 30 minutes, while 32.08% of the participants preferred 40 minutes and 7.55% preferred 20 minutes. 1.89% of the participants stated that there should be a period outside the given periods, but this rate was ignored because the percentage was quite low.

DISCUSSION

This study basically shows that distance education has two advantages. The first of these is that it is cheaper and more comfortable since it is not necessary to go to campuses for education, and it saves money on transportation, food, or accommodation. Many participants

expressed this advantage of distance education, which is similar to the findings of some studies (Yavuz & Kaplan, 2024; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Sevy-Biloon, 2021; Evisen, Akyilmaz, and Torun, 2020). Another advantage of distance education, which was expressed by a small number of participants in this study and is also included in the results of the aforementioned studies, is that some shy students feel more comfortable in the distance education model compared to in-class education. In contrast to Ferdous and Shifat's (2020) study, which revealed that most students felt severely anxious during online lectures, Al-Nofaie (2020) and Okyar (2023) found that online learning enabled timid students to voice their thoughts more readily. The results of this study also indicated that some students feel more at ease speaking up during online lessons. This study did not find that there was too much time to spend with family members, which some studies have found to be an advantage of distance learning (Sevy-Biloon, 2021).

Studies on the negative aspects of distance education have generally show similar results. Although their order of importance varies, similar disadvantages of compulsory distance education have been reported in almost all countries, which are technological problems, teacher-student and student-student communication gaps, and the home environment not being conducive to distance education (Yavuz & Kaplan, 2024; Okyar, 2023; Illarionova L. P. et al., 2021; Karadag et al., 2021; Al-Nofaie, 2020; Octaberlina and Muslimin, 2020; Sevy-Biloon, 2021; Evisen, Akyilmaz, and Torun, 2020). Besides other disadvantages, very few studies (Okyar, 2023; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020) have discussed the finding that distance learning has a negative impact on student's health, which is another finding of this study.

There are only a few studies that directly show, in terms of percentages, whether students prefer face-to-face or distance learning. Surprisingly, in these studies (Sevy-Biloon, 2021; Illarionova L. P. et al., 2021), which have entirely parallel results with the current study; more than 70% of the students prefer face-to-face instruction. Judging by the results of these three studies, three-quarters of students prefer face-to-face education to distance education, which is an issue that educational institutions should consider when looking for an alternative to face-to-face education.

Surprisingly, not enough research has been done on the duration of an online course, which is a significant issue because, although it cannot be generalised, students' attention levels may not be as high as in a face-to-face course. How long is it reasonable for an online course to last as long as a formal course without adequate research into how long an ideal online course should be? In this study, a significant majority of the students stated that an online lesson should last 30 minutes. Since there is a 32% preference expressed that an online course can be 40 minutes, it can be concluded that an ideal lesson duration in preparatory courses can be between 30 and 40 minutes, with 30 minutes being preferred. Here, it should

not be is an ideal period of time for EFL classes. We can conclude that this time, 20 minutes, is not enough for language lessons, since the percentage of those who chose 20 minutes as online course time is very low.

LIMITATIONS

This research is limited to preparatory class students studying at a state university in Türkiye in 2022-2023 educational term. In addition, a homogeneous gender distribution among the participants could not be achieved due to the low number of male students receiving preparatory education at the specified university that year. Finally, since the education took place as online during the period when the study was conducted, data collection tools were limited to a Google form-generated questionnaire administered to the participants online.

CONCLUSION

Although the distance education model for the time being is a mandatory substitute of face-to-face education when a severe disaster occurs and when face-to-face instruction is not practicable; however, it not fully clear how the perspectives of EFL students are, or how an online lesson should be implemented. Based on the present research, EFL students perceive that distance learning as convenient and affordable, but it has drawbacks such as technical problems, limited communication with teachers and peers, unsuitable learning environments and health issues associated with it. Additionally, the study found that students generally prefer face-to-face instruction and express dissatisfaction with distance learning. Another finding of the study is that EFL students consider a 30-minute online lesson to be the optimal duration. By addressing the aforementioned questions in detail, this study indicates that, despite having some advantages, EFL preparatory students do not consider distance learning to be a useful or superior educational model. Therefore, researchers, educators, and education ministries are expected to develop or investigate a novel educational approach to address pressing problems or pandemics. Alternative educational models, such as blended learning, can be used in place of fully and compulsorily distance education, or more thorough research should be done on the model of distance education to improve its quality and appeal. Further, a variety of methods, like reducing online course lengths can be used to lighten the students' study load compared to face-to-face instruction and to enable the students to conduct independent research. In short, it is essential that researchers rapidly lay the groundwork for a higher standard education model that can be applied in emergency situations.

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