

THE EMPTY CLASSROOM: EXPLORING NON-ATTENDANCE IN ONLINE FRENCH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

Although distance education offers flexibility and accessibility to students, dropout represents significant hurdles that adversely impact the success of programs. This study investigates the experiences of Anadolu University preparatory class students of French Language Teaching Programs during the 2022-2023 spring term, aiming to understand the issue of non-attendance within the framework of distance education. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, utilizing thematic analysis to analyze data collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 students. The results indicate that non-attendance is attributable to a combination of internal, external, and personal factors. Internal aspects include accessibility to registered courses, the perceived simplicity of online assessments, diminished social integration, and psychological issues such as stress, anxiety, and decreased motivation. Psychological distress and a reduction in intrinsic motivation were identified as major impediments. External factors include the absence of attendance mandates, insufficient technical infrastructure, and suboptimal home environments. The removal of the attendance mandate reduced external motivation, while unreliable internet connections and unsupportive home settings hindered students' class attendance. Additionally, personal attributes like inadequate self-discipline and ineffective time management contributed to absenteeism. To address these issues, pedagogical recommendations include increasing interactive course design, fostering social connections through collaborative technology, and enhancing institutional technical support. Moreover, ongoing instructor training in digital pedagogy and targeted interventions for students with low motivation are essential. Ultimately, recommendations were formulated based on the findings to improve engagement and retention in online language courses.

Keywords: Dropout, distance education, language education, motivation, French.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education has become an integral part of the mission of higher education institutions as a means to provide access to education for all individuals (Belanger and Jordan 2000; Carr 2000; Kearsley 2000). Despite its long-standing use alongside formal education, the significance and role of distance education were not recognized until recently as indicated by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 compelled all educational institutions to transition to remote operations and implement emergency remote teaching. Consequently, the distance education system has emerged as a viable alternative to the formal education system, attaining equal significance to face-to-face education in individual learning. Distance education can be defined as a framework that eliminates spatial and temporal constraints alongside institutional oversight, where learning and teaching environments are tailored to the latest technological advancements, prioritizing the individual and social attributes of participants while delivering mass education of a specified quality (Karatas, Karatas, & Kaya, 2012). The absence of temporal and spatial limitations mentioned in this definition is thought to make distance education accessible to everyone, but despite this spatial and temporal flexibility, it is possible to state that one of the biggest problems in distance education is the phenomenon of non-attendance or dropping out of the courses. According to Bozkurt and Elibol (2023), despite the increasing demand for distance education, institutions experience problems

arising from low retention rates in distance education. Likewise, Muljana and Luo (2019) emphasize that despite the popular demand and advantages, online learning has problems due to low retention rates. Moore and Fetzner (2009) argue that the completion rates of online courses are 10-20% lower than traditional courses, and postgraduate graduation rates are only 56%.

With the rising prevalence of online education, comprehending the factors contributing to student non-attendance is essential for enhancing course design and retention techniques. Understanding the causes leading to student non-attendance is crucial for improving course design and retention strategies in the context of the increasing popularity of online education. This study is significant since it examines preparatory class pupils in a foreign language program, a demographic where active participation and interaction are essential for language learning. In contrast to general education programs, language acquisition requires ongoing engagement and practice, making absence far more harmful. This research aims to analyze the variables of non-attendance in remote French language education to provide specific suggestions for enhancing student engagement and instructional design.

RELATED LITERATURE

Importance of Class Participation

One of the most important factors affecting students' academic achievement, learning processes and overall educational experiences is their level of engagement. Participation enables students to be actively involved in the course content, interact with their teachers and peers, and assume more responsibility in their learning processes. Regular attendance reinforces knowledge acquisition by ensuring the continuity of the learning process and increases students' academic motivation. Therefore, in educational research, student engagement is considered as one of the main determinants of academic achievement and learning effectiveness. Many studies indicate that there is a direct correlation between student engagement and student performance (Kirby and McElroy, 2003; Stanca, 2006; Horn and Jansen, 2009; Martin, 2012; Filsecker and Kerres, 2014; Wang and Degol, 2014 Serrano and Andreu, 2016; Oriol-Granado et al., 2017). Students' physical and cognitive involvement in the classroom environment allows them to participate more effectively in learning processes (Moore et al., 2003). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) show that students who attend regular classes receive higher grades and increase their academic achievement compared to students who are absent. Kassarnig et al. (2017) found that regular class attendance positively affects students' long-term academic performance by increasing knowledge retention. Crede et al. (2010) argue that as students' engagement in the course increases, the positive trend in their academic achievement becomes evident. Students' active participation in the lessons provides a better understanding of the topics covered in the course and provides a strong foundation that supports their academic development in the long term. Class participation not only increases the effectiveness of the educational process, but also contributes to the development of students' academic self-regulation skills, and as a result, their success in learning processes is positively affected (Raoofi et al. (2012).

Relationship Between Learning Process and Participation

Engagement enables students to understand the learning process and process knowledge in depth. Fredricks et al. (2004) considered engagement in three dimensions: behavioral engagement, affective engagement and cognitive engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to the student's active participation in classroom activities, while affective engagement is related to the social bonds that the student establishes with teachers and peers. Cognitive engagement refers to the student's mental investment in the learning process and critical thinking skills (Fredricks, 2015). Supporting these three dimensions in a balanced way increases the academic success of the student and the efficiency of the school (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012). Class participation is critical not only for academic achievement but also for psychological and social development. Students who participate develop a stronger sense of belonging and have a positive attitude towards school (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). In the social context, classroom interactions enable students to feel peer support and help them become more engaged in the learning process (Eccles & Wang, 2012). Li and Lerner (2011) state that students with low engagement have higher stress levels, experience academic anxiety and tend to withdraw from school over time.

Participation and Challenges in Online Courses

The development of digital technologies has brought major changes to educational systems and online education has been widely adopted by many educational institutions. While online education offers students a learning environment that is independent of time and space, it also brings challenges such as lack of social interaction, loss of motivation, and a study pattern that requires independence (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). While learning in the traditional classroom environment is based on social interaction, immediate feedback and a structured teaching plan, the lack of these elements in online education can negatively affect student engagement (Moore & Fetzner, 2009). Decreased student engagement in online courses is among the main factors that negatively affect the learning process (Moore & Fetzner, 2009). In this context, innovative approaches in educational design are needed to ensure sustainable engagement in online education (Kuo et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2017). The use of interactive learning materials is of great importance to increase students' engagement in online courses. Studies by Beldarrain (2006) and Fornara & Lomicka (2019) show that video lectures, simulations and interactive digital content encourage student engagement. In particular, the concept of social presence is recognized as one of the key components that strengthen student engagement in online education (Whiteside et al., 2017). In this context, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model developed by Garrison et al. (2001) emphasizes the importance of factors such as cognitive presence, social presence and instructional presence in online learning environments.

Feedback mechanisms are also of great importance in terms of student motivation. Lawson & Lawson (2013) state that providing timely and structured feedback to students enables them to participate more in the learning process. Fredricks (2011) suggests that instructors should adopt various learning strategies to increase student-student and student-instructor interaction. In particular, it is stated that synchronous interactive lessons (e.g. live video lectures) increase student engagement, but asynchronous lessons (e.g. video recordings and text-based forums) offer more flexibility to the student (Biasutti, 2011; Junn, 2021; White, 2014). Another factor affecting student engagement is the student's self-regulation skills. Zimmerman (1990) states that success in online education largely depends on the student's self-regulation and time management skills. However, research shows that most of the students who learn online do not have enough of these skills (Schulze & Scholz, 2018). In particular, Zoom fatigue causes students to lose their attention in long-term online courses and negatively affects their engagement levels (Lee, 2020). Therefore, it is recommended that course designs should be divided into short but effective learning sections to ensure effective participation in online education (Zhang et al., 2021).

The Importance of Participation in Online Language Classes

Foreign language education is a process that requires direct and meaningful interaction (Long, 1996). In this context, participation in online language courses is seen as a critical factor for students to improve their language proficiency. Lantolf & Thorne (2007) state that language learning is largely based on interaction and this interaction should be maintained in online environments. However, low student interaction in online language courses is a factor that directly affects the learning process (Russell, 2020). Studies by Gonzalez-Lloret (2020) and Lomicka (2020) show that building social presence in online language classes supports the language learning process and increases students' motivation. However, Fornara & Lomicka (2019) and Lord & Lomicka (2014) found that social media platforms and microblogging services are effective in increasing social bonding and interaction in online language learning environments. Students' interaction with each other in online language classes is of great importance for speaking practice and language production (Gass, 1997).

Teacher presence is also a determining factor in increasing student engagement (Garrison et al., 2000). Comas-Quinn et al. (2012) argue that online language teachers should not only be knowledge transmitters but also guides, moderators and support providers. In particular, it is stated that synchronous language classes are more effective than asynchronous language classes because they provide instant feedback to students and allow them to practice speaking (Beldarrain, 2006; White, 2014).

However, it is emphasized that the lack of student-student interaction in online language courses may cause students to feel lonely in the learning process (Schulze & Scholz, 2018). Russell (2020) states that student anxiety increases in the online environment and this may negatively affect course participation. In this context,

Carbajal-Carrera (2021) suggests that emotional regulation techniques (e.g., emoji use, emotional check-ins) in online language courses can increase student motivation. Student engagement in online education is a critical element in terms of academic success and effectiveness of the learning process. Especially since online language courses require a communication-based learning process, student-student and student-teacher interaction is of great importance (Long, 1996; Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Research shows that increasing social presence in online education positively affects students' motivation and academic achievement (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2020; Lomicka, 2020). Creating interactive learning materials, (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), providing clear and consistent teacher feedback (Fredricks, 2011), and increasing activities such as group work and discussion forums among students (Reeve & Tseng, 2011) are of great importance to increase student engagement in online education. In conclusion, in order to increase student engagement in online language courses, educators should focus on interactive materials, tools that support social presence, and strategies to increase student motivation in instructional design. Taking these elements into consideration will enable students to have a more effective learning experience in online courses and will positively affect their long-term academic success.

Although online education offers advantages such as flexibility and accessibility, it has higher absenteeism rates compared to traditional face-to-face education (Carr, 2000; Levy, 2007; Tello, 2007). The problem of absenteeism has serious consequences at both individual and institutional levels and directly affects the effectiveness of the education system (Willging & Johnson, 2004). Martinez (2003) defines student persistence as the successful progression to different stages of an educational program, while Kerka (1995) considers this concept as students' adherence to the educational program in line with their goals. In this context, the concepts of "persistence" and "retention" are often used interchangeably in the literature (Hagedorn, 2005; Hart, 2012). Rovai (2002) emphasizes that preventing absenteeism is an important criterion in determining the effectiveness of higher education programs. The factors affecting students' attendance in online courses can be analyzed under three main headings as individual, institutional and technological factors (Boateng & Boadu, 2013; Rashid et al., 2015; Budiman, 2015).

Main Causes of Absenteeism in Online Education

While online education offers significant advantages in terms of providing equal opportunities in education and expanding access, high rates of absenteeism remain one of the biggest challenges of this system (Carr, 2000; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Absenteeism not only affects individual student achievement, but can also threaten the academic effectiveness and sustainability of educational institutions (Levy, 2007). There are many factors that determine student engagement in online learning environments. These factors can be analyzed under three main headings as individual, institutional and environmental variables. These factors need to be analyzed in detail in order to increase students' academic success and commitment to online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011; Levy, 2007; Osborn, 2001). Students' previous academic experiences, time management skills and self-regulation strategies are among the factors that greatly affect their success in online education (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). In particular, it is stated that students with previous online education experience can adapt to a new online course more easily and tend to attend classes regularly (Osborn, 2001; Xenos, Pierrakeas, & Pintelas, 2002).

Time management and self-regulation skills are also important factors that directly affect students' participation in online courses. It is emphasized that students who cannot manage their time effectively have difficulty in online courses and this causes them to disengage from the courses (Pierrakeas et al., 2004). Bawa (2016) and Parker (1999) argue that intrinsic self-regulation skills and students' perception of locus of control are directly related to academic achievement and this situation becomes more evident especially in online learning processes. Students' self-efficacy perception is also a psychological factor that determines their participation in the online education process. Morris et al. (2005) and Holder (2007) show that students who are successful in online education have a high self-efficacy perception and can direct the learning process more independently. Similarly, Ivankova and Stick (2007) show that students with high levels of self-efficacy take more responsibility in the academic process and have higher completion rates

It is seen that the support mechanisms offered by the institution play an important role in students' adaptation to the online education process (Boston et al., 2011; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). In this context, the structure of the course content, the difficulty level of the program and instructor support stand out as factors that

affect students' commitment to the program. Orientation programs are one of the most effective factors that increase participation in the online learning process. Clay et al. (2009) and Cheung & Kan (2002) state that it is critical for students to go through an appropriate preparation process in order to be successful in online courses. Effective design of orientation processes helps students to adapt to online learning platforms more easily and increases their attendance rates. Instructor support is also a determining factor in students' academic processes. Bocchi et al. (2004) show that instructors' regular communication with students and monitoring their academic processes strengthen students' commitment. Likewise, Ivankova and Stick (2007) argue that guidance role of instructors towards students should be strengthened and especially the effective implementation of feedback mechanisms increases student achievement.

Environmental factors are among the external factors that determine the extent to which students can continue their academic processes. These factors include work and family responsibilities, social support mechanisms and cultural factors (Packham et al., 2004; Pierrakeas et al., 2004) and family responsibilities constitute an important barrier to participation in online courses. Working students have difficulty in maintaining their academic processes due to their workload and this situation causes high rates of absenteeism (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Packham et al. (2004) state that successful students are able to balance academic and professional obligations effectively and this contributes to academic success.

Family support is another important factor that directly affects students' academic achievement and participation in online education (Park & Choi, 2009). It has been shown that students with high family support can maintain their academic processes more consistently, have lower absenteeism rates and are more motivated to the learning process (Hart, 2012). Finally, cultural factors are seen as an important determinant of participation in the online learning process. Bozkurt and Akbulut (2019) state that cultural diversity should be taken into account in online learning processes and that designing culturally sensitive education programs will enable students to better adapt to the process. The fact that online education platforms accept students globally necessitates an approach that takes into account the learning processes and interaction styles of different cultural groups.

The factors affecting participation in the online education process are shaped by a combination of individual, institutional and environmental components. Individual factors such as academic experience, time management and self-regulation skills are the most fundamental elements that determine how much the student will stick to the online learning process. Factors such as institutional support mechanisms, course design and instructor feedback stand out as incentives for students to continue their academic processes. Environmental factors include variables such as the student's working conditions, family support and cultural context and indirectly affect academic success.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

In this framework, it is thought that this study will help to reveal the reasons for absenteeism of individuals who do not participate in distance language education. The limited number of studies examining the participation rates and reasons for absenteeism in distance language education at public universities in Türkiye increases the importance of this research. In this study, the concept of absenteeism is not considered in the traditional sense of "dropping out" or "not participating in the educational process at all". Contrary to this situation, which is frequently seen in distance education, the students included in the sample of the study maintain their enrolment but do not attend the courses consistently. For example, for a course in which 50 students are enrolled in total, only 7 students actively participate in online courses.

In this context, the main purpose of the research can be summarized as follows:

- To determine the main reasons for low participation rates in distance language education,
- To analyze the impact of institutional, individual and environmental factors on student engagement,
- To provide suggestions for reducing absenteeism and increasing participation in distance language education.

This study aims to contribute to the development of strategies to increase participation in distance language education and to create mechanisms that support student success.

Research

1. Which factors are related to the non-participation of FLT Programme preparatory year students in distance language education?
 - 1.1. What is the impact of the institution and lecturers on attendance?
 - 1.2. What is the effect of the changing examination system on student absenteeism?
 - 1.3. How do students' individual characteristics (motivation, learning strategies, self-regulation, etc.) affect their participation in distance courses?
 - 1.4. What is the effect of technological infrastructure on participation in distance education courses?

METHOD

This study aims to examine the reasons why students enrolled in FLT Program preparatory classes do not continue online education. In order to achieve this aim, a qualitative research design was adopted. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth examination of individuals' experiences, perceptions and the contextual factors that shape these experiences. In particular, this study was conducted within the framework of phenomenological research method. Phenomenology is an appropriate approach to investigate and explain phenomena that are known but not fully understood (Yildirim & Simsek, 2013). The phenomenological research method allows individuals to express their understanding, feelings and perspectives on a particular phenomenon based on their own experiences (Rose, Beeby & Parker, 1995). In this context, the study aims to provide an in-depth analysis to understand students' reasons for not attending online preparatory class courses. In the study, the institutional, individual and technological factors that affect students' attendance will be analyzed and the basic dynamics related to attendance in online education will be revealed. Focusing on the subjective experiences of students, this approach aims to uncover the underlying meanings and patterns that shape participation in the online education process.

Research Group

The population of this study consists of 50 students enrolled in Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages FLT Program preparatory classes in the spring semester of 2022-2023. The sample of the study was determined using convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling method that allows the researcher to select accessible and willing participants (Creswell, 2014). In order to ensure homogeneity in the sample selection, only students enrolled in the French Language Unit who showed low attendance to the courses were included in the study. The absenteeism rates of the participants ranged between 1% and 15%, and these students either did not attend any classes or attended only a few classes during the semester. The selected participants represent a specific group of students who have difficulties in participating in online courses and provide an opportunity to analyze the main topic of the study in more detail.

Data Collection Tool

This study uses a semi-structured interview form as a data collection tool, which was developed in line with the researches examining the factors that cause course dropout in online education and the related literature review. Semi-structured interview method is a data collection technique that is frequently used in qualitative research and allows the researcher to collect information about a specific topic, while providing participants with the opportunity to express their own experiences, thoughts and opinions in detail (Creswell, 2014). In the process of preparing the interview questions, the related literature was analyzed and the main themes in the previous studies on absenteeism in online education were determined. In addition, expert opinion was sought to increase the validity and reliability of the form. In line with the expert evaluations, the questions were made clear and understandable and organized in a way that students could easily respond. The interviews were conducted in Turkish because the sample of the study consisted of preparatory year students studying at a state university in Türkiye. However, students were also allowed to respond in French when necessary in order to express their answers more easily. The complete interview questions are presented in the Appendix.

Data Collection Process

This study aims to examine the reasons why students in the FLT Program preparatory classes do not attend online language classes. Qualitative research methods were used in the study and semi-structured interviews were conducted to determine students' reasons for not attending the courses. After obtaining the necessary permissions, the interviews were conducted on the Zoom® platform and recorded with the consent of the students. The voice recordings were transcribed, and themes and sub-themes were determined. These data were then analyzed with the MaxQDA® coding tool as it offers advanced coding and analysis tools for large data sets, facilitates establishing relationships between themes, and enables visualization of qualitative data by supporting analyses such as conceptual maps, code clouds and graphs. The findings were analyzed in detail and suggestions were developed to solve the problems that emerged.

Validity and Reliability

Miles and Huberman's (1994) inter-coder agreement formula was used to ensure the external validity and internal consistency of the research. The formula is expressed as $\Delta = C \div (C + \partial) \times 100$ where Δ represents the dependability coefficient, C denotes the number of topics/terms with agreement, and ∂ signifies the number of topics/terms without consensus. Δ : Reliability coefficient, C: The number of codes agreed upon by the coders, D: Represents the number of codes with disagreement between coders. It is accepted that the agreement between the coders should be at least 80% (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The main reasons for using this formula in the research are to increase consistency between coders, to produce reproducible results and to contribute to the systematic analysis of qualitative data. In qualitative research, consistent coding of the same data by different researchers is critical. This formula helps to ensure the objectivity of the coding process. At the same time, coding is expected to yield similar results by different researchers to increase the reliability of the research. Since qualitative data are often based on subjective judgements, it offers a quantitative approach to test coding reliability. In this context, an academic expert in the field of open and online education was used as a second coder in the study. Two randomly interview forms were recoded and the consistency between the coding was calculated using Miles and Huberman (1994) formula. As a result, a coding agreement of 87% was obtained for the student interview form and the data were accepted as reliable. In addition, LeCompte and Goetz (1982) state that direct quotations from the data obtained by descriptive method will increase internal reliability in qualitative research. In this direction, direct student quotations obtained during the analysis process were used

Table 1. Sample Coding

Participant Discourse	Code	Theme
"I can't wake up in the morning, for example, no matter what time I go to bed."	Lack of Time Management	Personal Factors
"I was a little less participative in online courses because it made me a little nervous."	Anxiety and Stress	
"There may be constant noises at home or noises from my siblings."	Physical Learning Environment	Environmental Factors
"internet problems, were sometimes disconnections."	Technical Infrastructure Problems	Environmental Factors
"Since the exams are online, it provided convenience, so I don't agree much."	Online Exams and Participation	Academic Factors

FINDINGS

This section presents the details of the data analysis conducted to determine the reasons for the lack of participation in online foreign language courses. Within the scope of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen students who were not enrolled in the FLT Program and the data obtained were coded based on Miles & Huberman (1994) thematic analysis model. During the data analysis, the themes, categories and codes identified in Yilmaz's (2020) doctoral thesis on the reasons for dropout in open and online education were taken as reference. However, the reason for using this approach is that Yilmaz's study provides an up-to-date and comprehensive model that addresses the reasons for student dropout in the context of open and online education. At the same time, in order to increase the validity of the research, an existing classification in the literature was used to analyze the data in a systematic way. Finally, it was observed that the reasons expressed by the students participating in the study largely overlapped with the factors in Yilmaz's model. However, in case the model did not completely overlap in the data context or some factors remained miscellaneous, open coding method was also applied while determining the themes and codes and unique codes were added

Table 2. Themes, Categories and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes	Number of People Indicating	Number of Codes	Total Percent.
Internal Factors	Accessibility	Technical and Equipment support	2	2	84.6%
		Keeping Course Records	9	12	
	Exams	Reliability of exams	4	5	30.8%
		Social integration	Need for socialization	6	
		Instructor-student interaction	2	2	61.5%
		Psychological situation	Anxiety	5	
		Depression	1	2	92.3%
		Personal stress	1	1	
		Loss of intrinsic motivation	6	6	
	External Factors	Course Design	Lessons are not interactive	3	4
Obligation of camera using			1	1	
Quality of the course resources			1	1	
External barrier		Teaching environment	5	6	76.9%
		Quality/adequacy of technical infrastructure	5	5	
Motivation		Social situations creating uncertainty	2	2	92.3%
			10	14	
		No attendance obligation			
Personal Qualities	Self-organization	Self-discipline	7	10	69.2%
		Time management	2	2	

After conducting an analysis of the table 2 presented above, the reasons for students not enrolling in foreign language classes through distance education may be categorized into three groups: internal factors, external factors, and personal qualities.

Internal Factors

Analyzing the internal factors, it becomes evident that the accessibility of courses, examinations, social integration, and the psychological state of the students are crucial. Upon analysis of course accessibility, it can be asserted that a contributing factor to student non-attendance is the consistent maintenance of

course records. 9 students stated that the recording of the courses eliminated the obligation of attendance and therefore they did not participate in the lessons. Similar to the epidemic period, students were allowed to participate in foreign language classes delivered via distance education, both synchronously and asynchronously. As indicated by STU 4 *"Also, now that the courses are recorded and especially when the problem of absenteeism is lifted, there is inevitably a comfort because the courses are also recorded. In other words, even if we do not attend, we can somehow make up the lessons."*(STU-4)

Furthermore, participants emphasize that the recordings cause them to miss class. They argue that by watching the lecture recordings, they can make up the subject covered in the lesson they did not attend. The fact that the examinations were administered online was a relief to the participants. Several students said that online tests were more comfortable and that they could more readily get outside assistance. As a result, they stated that they did not feel obliged to attend the classes. *There are also resources and we are a bit more relaxed because we will have a lot of materials to help us. That's why I don't attend the lectures much. I mean, I don't feel obliged to attend sometimes. Because as I said, can I handle it myself, Yes, I can handle it."*(STU-5)

When it comes to attending courses, it is possible to say that this circumstance makes it more comfortable for the majority of the students. 5 Students also underlined that the anxiety they felt in online tests was less than in face-to-face exams. *"The fact that the exam program continued online provided me with a great comfort, and I thought, "I don't have to go; can I handle it if I don't go? "Because when it is online, that stress is a little more eliminated. [...]"*

A significant intrinsic aspect contributing to non-attendance is the necessity for students to engage socially during the distant education process. 6 students involved in the research reported difficulties with socialization in distance education courses: *If the lessons were 100 face-to-face, I would continue completely, because I really like learning languages and studying, and if they were 100 face-to-face [...] I was participating a lot in the lessons; I got a lot of efficiency, but when it was like this, I lost motivation and I couldn't get efficiency from the lessons.* (STU-7)

The students reported greater enjoyment in in-person lessons, noting that their motivation in language learning was enhanced by one-on-one interactions with peers. They also indicated that teacher-student engagement positively influenced their motivation. *"...Being face-to-face made the lessons more fun, more participatory. I think spending time with the lecturers and friends and learning the lessons in that way contributed more to us."*(STU-3)

Another important factor influencing students' decision to discontinue distance foreign language education for intrinsic reasons is the psychological state of individuals throughout the course duration. Students reported experiencing difficulties in attending classes, attributing these challenges to stress, anxiety, and a decline in intrinsic motivation stemming from their disconnection from social interactions.

Within this theme, a significant number of students (5) expressed the anxiety they feel when participating in online courses alone, such as: *"When the attendance decreased, I didn't want to attend the lesson with only a few people. I felt under more pressure, and this was happening, so I was anxious."* (STU-6)

Students reported experiencing anxiety and stress, particularly in situations where attendance in lessons is low. Simultaneously, they refrain from engaging in the courses as they encounter a decline in motivation stemming from both the distance education format and their own personal challenges.

"Since the first time I was exposed, I have realized that the classroom environment in the virtual environment makes me very nervous and I cannot focus on the lessons in any way and therefore I stopped attending the lessons because I could not overcome this fear." (STU-12)

In addition to feeling anxious during online courses, students may experience a decrease in enthusiasm to participate in classes. This effect significantly improves student efficiency in courses. Students reported that despite their familiarity with online courses, their interest waned, leading to lower attendance. *"In terms of not continuing the lesson, I mean, I couldn't get myself motivated; I couldn't wake up in the morning for example."*(STU-6)

Analysis of intrinsic components indicates that students' motivation diminishes as a result of their psychological state. *"As I said, I am normally a person who already has anxiety disorder. I also go to therapy for this, and for this reason, I lose motivation very easily. Because I have a structure that gives up very easily."* (STU-7)

Apart from the issues mentioned above, 2 of the students who could not attend the courses due to internal factors stated that they needed technical and equipment support. One student stated that the equipment support provided by the institution was not sufficient.

"An old computer of a professor has been given. I am grateful, but it is not very good, because it was a bit difficult to use the battery and so on."(STU-8)

External Factors

Upon analyzing the external factors contributing to student absenteeism, the primary determinants are absence of attendance requirements, detrimental course environment, insufficient technical infrastructure, and lack of interactivity in the courses. The majority of students conveyed favorable assessments on the quality of the resources utilized in course design. Only a single student proposed the diversification of materials utilized in the course. The elimination of the attendance requirement resulted in a loss of external motivation for students (10 students). As stated, STU 5, *"I mean, the fact that it is not compulsory, that is, the absence of absenteeism, is the biggest reason for not attending, because it provides us with a great comfort."* (STU-5)

It can be stated that this situation has negatively affected students' motivation for online language courses.

"Well, as I said, I lost my motivation at the beginning, but I was still attending the classes despite that lack of motivation, but then I said when the absenteeism disappeared. Then it will not affect my progress at all." (STU-7)

The analyzed data revealed extrinsic challenges that led to student course dropouts. The majority of participants (5 students) were required to pursue their education in the cities where their families resided. In households lacking enough family support and housing several individuals, challenges may emerge in establishing an appropriate course environment. *"...After we came home, some of our relatives were staying with us because our house was undamaged. That's why it was so crowded. I couldn't attend class either. I could not create a working environment."* (STU-13)

Because of this setting, the students were unable to participate in the class under favorable conditions, which resulted in a decline in their motivation to fully engage with the lecture. *"My family life is a bit complicated; I take the responsibility at home. Being in Istanbul and dealing with family members in the family home. Family life also has such an effect on my loss of motivation."* (STU-7)

The aforementioned arguments indicate that inadequate organization of students' learning surroundings adversely impacts attendance. The quality of the technical infrastructure is a paramount concern in distance education. Both teachers and students require a robust internet infrastructure to effectively engage with and comprehend the courses. Issues within the internet network may lead students to discontinue online courses as indicated by STU-1: *"The problems related to the course were mostly because of my internet connection."*(STU-1)

In addition to the abovementioned external obstacles that caused them to drop the distance education foreign language courses, some students stated that their interest in the courses decreased due to the social situation, and their motivation to continue the courses decreased for this reason. STU 7 and STU 9 indicated that the economic and political circumstances in the country significantly demotivated them, leading to a greater interest in these issues than in their lessons. *"Something else happened that demotivated me. I lost a lot of motivation before and after the elections. You know, I had it before, but after that time I lost it completely. I was very much interested in that issue."* (STU-7)

"The agenda of the country changes very often. We have to follow something all the time. The elections and the earthquake disaster, I think these also affected me a little psychologically." (STU-9)

Consequently, they experienced a loss of motivation and did not attend classes.

Personal Qualities

Ensuring attendance in distance education is also related to self-discipline (7 students) and time management (2 students). Especially in cases where there is no attendance obligation, the student's inability to manage his/her own education and training life may be directly related to dropping out or not attending the courses.

Students stated that they did not attend classes because of the lack of attendance obligation. *“First of all, attendance is not compulsory. Because it does not add an obligation and we can watch the lectures afterwards. That’s why I don’t attend”* (STU-3)

“I mean, the most difficult thing for me was getting up early in the morning, it was very difficult. You know, the requirement for absenteeism was entirely eliminated, and I’ll look at the videos later.” (STU-6)

It is possible to say that students who do not attend classes have some problems in terms of self-discipline and time management. Most of the students stated that they did not attend the lessons because they could not wake up in the morning.

DISCUSSION

The study’s results about the non-attendance of French language teaching students indicate that a combination of intrinsic, extrinsic, and individual variables influences attendance levels. While the flexibility and technological advantages of distant education enhance students’ learning experiences, they have also fostered a comfort zone that detrimentally impacts their willingness to participate in courses. This section provides a comprehensive analysis of the data to elucidate the dynamics behind student behavior.

Internal Factors: Accessibility, Psychological Challenges and Social Integration

The availability of teaching materials stands out as a crucial internal factor influencing absenteeism. Providing recorded courses for asynchronous viewing, although it seems advantageous, it has resulted in a decline in their participation in online courses. The statements of the participants show that the comfort provided by course recordings at some point causes students to move away from the learning process. These findings reveal that while the ease of access in distance education makes a positive contribution on the one hand, it can have negative effects on the commitment to learning on the other hand. By postponing the lessons, students lose motivation and weaken their connection with the lessons. This aligns with findings by Moore and Fetzner (2009), who suggested that excessive flexibility in distance learning may lead to procrastination and disengagement. Consequently, the rising dropout rates underscore the unintended consequences of flexible learning systems, as noted by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020). Similarly, students cease their participation. This leads to a decline in motivation and academic achievement. Observations indicate a decline in student motivation during the distance education process, attributed to both intrinsic factors and external influences. Consequently, it can be concluded that the students ceased their attendance in the courses. Numerous studies (Parker, 2003; Kinnunen and Malmi, 2006; Levy, 2007; Lee and Choi, 2011; Tinto, 2017) indicate a significant correlation between both internal and extrinsic motivational decline and course attrition. Osborn (2001) posits that students with lower motivation levels are at a higher risk of dropping out.

Psychological obstacles like anxiety, worry, and diminished motivation also present significant challenges. Participants indicated that the seclusion of online courses heightened their anxieties. According to the results of the research, students experienced loneliness, stress and loss of motivation during the distance education process. It is seen that students’ anxiety levels increase in courses with low attendance and this situation reinforces their decision not to attend the courses. Especially In a setting without social connection, students diminish their interest in classes and experience a decline in academic production. These results highlight the significance of psychological support systems in distance education. Universities should provide psychological assistance for students to address emotional challenges such as loneliness and anxiety. This observation aligns with Rowai’s (2003) assertion that psychological distress significantly influences persistence in distance learning. Additionally, decreased motivation in online environments is related to a lack of social stimulation. Tinto (2017) posits that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation substantially affect student attendance. This effect significantly improves student efficiency in courses. Zimmerman (1990) argued that students encountering psychological barriers frequently exhibit a more significant decline in self-control.

Research findings indicate that in-person contacts are essential to students' learning processes. Studies show that social presence and learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions have a significant impact on student retention and satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2017; Whiteside et al., 2017). Social connections and direct communication serve as significant motivators, particularly in the context of language acquisition. Students reported a deficiency in social connection during remote education, which diminished their motivation. As indicated by Yang et al., (2013) social connections in in-person courses greatly influence the learning process and overall motivation. Budiman (2015) claims that a traditional classroom environment, social interaction between instructors and peers is an important factor in supporting student motivation. Since such social support may be limited in online courses, students need to be self-motivated. Social interaction plays a critical role in keeping students engaged in the learning process the findings align with Tinto's (1975) theoretical framework, highlighting the connection between academic and social adjustment in enhancing student retention. He claims a significant relationship between student attendance and both social and academic integration. Burns (2013) highlights the significance of fostering connection in the online learning environment. Adams, et al. (2013) observed that insufficient social interaction diminishes students' sense of belonging and engagement. They also highlighted that the excessive influx of information in online settings poses a challenge to establishing meaningful connections. This creates challenges for students in forming social and academic connections. This finding reveals that social ties and interaction are indispensable in language learning. Especially in an interaction-oriented field such as the teaching profession, students' loss of social ties may negatively affect their professional development.

In the context of distance education, it is of utmost significance that examinations are carried out in a dependable manner (Gunduz and Karaman, 2019). Exams can be taken by students who are able to acquire assistance from outside sources. However, since there is a lack of active usage of test security technology, it is difficult to keep track of the students when they are answering questions throughout the exam. Students' evaluations of online exams emphasize that they experience less stress compared to face-to-face exams and that this situation eliminates the necessity to attend classes. The flexible structure of online exams and the use of resources reduced the need for students to actively participate in the lessons. Students do not feel the need to go to the lectures, thinking that they can get external support in the exams.

These findings indicate that the connection between the examination system of distance education and learning processes has weakened. Students' motivation to learn decreases with the decrease in the pressure on exams and this situation negatively affects the attendance rate.

External Factors: Organizational Guidelines and Technological Obstacles

The absence of an attendance obligation policy is regarded as a significant external factor. Participants recognized that the absence of attendance regulations impacted their decision to miss lessons. They stated that the attendance requirement is a source of motivation and that the removal of this requirement is one of the most important factors that reduce attendance. This clearly shows the effect of extrinsic motivation on learning. This trend has also been observed by Hart (2012). Finding that extrinsic incentives such as attendance standards are important for maintaining participation, Lee and Choi (2011) noted that systematic policies are consistent. Evaluating and enhancing retention rates in digital learning environments. The elimination of the attendance obligation resulted to students assuming more responsibility for supervising their own learning processes. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that many students have challenges in meeting this obligation.

Technical barriers, including inadequate internet connectivity and an unsuitable home environment, represent a significant factor contributing to absenteeism. The situation shows that the sustainability of distance education depends to a great extent on the technical infrastructure. This finding aligns with the work of Gunduz and Karaman (2020), who emphasized that insufficient technological infrastructure serves as a significant obstacle to engagement in distance education, as suggested by McAuley, et al. (2010) the digital divide significantly affects students' participation in online courses. Technical problems in accessing online courses (e.g., internet outages, system crashes) can negatively affect student attendance (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023, in particular, students living in economically disadvantaged regions face difficulties in accessing technological infrastructure and are at risk of being disconnected from educational processes (Yukselturk et

al., 2014). The environment in which students reside significantly influences their participation in distance learning courses. In order for students to attend class regularly, they need to create a clear study plan, follow the course materials in a specific order, and fulfill their own responsibilities (Rashid et al., 2015). Hart (2012) emphasizes that issues arising from an inadequate learning environment in congested home settings may impact retention rates, and he demonstrates a linear association between parental support and school attendance. Oliveira et al. (2017) in their research emphasize that although online education is an attractive option, especially for students with family responsibilities, it is also a factor that increases absenteeism rates (Oliveira et al., 2017) as it mentioned by the students of tis present study. Overcrowded familial settings, insufficient peaceful study areas, and domestic obligations hindered students' ability to concentrate on their academic pursuits. The results indicate that optimizing students' physical settings is essential for the effectiveness of distant education. Facilitating calm study environments and offering technical equipment assistance, particularly for underprivileged students, might enhance attendance.

Personal Qualities: Self-Discipline and Effective Time Management

One reason student did not attend the sessions was their lack of self-discipline and time management skills. The not compulsory nature of attendance requires that students take responsibility for their own educational progress. Nevertheless, several students encountered challenges in this procedure and subsequently lost their enthusiasm to participate in lessons. Pierrakeas et al. (2004) draw attention to the importance of the relationship between time management and dropping out and point out that individuals who manage their time well have higher attendance rates. Zimmerman (1990) argues that students who take an active role in their education typically demonstrate significant self-discipline and possess clear motivations for enrolling in courses, emphasizing the complex interplay between motivation and the learning experience. Attributes of students specifically, self-discipline and effective time management play crucial roles in maintaining one's presence in an academic environment. Research shows that effective time management skills positively affect learners' retention, whereas difficulties in time management are strongly associated with early online education dropouts (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Nichols, 2010; Traver et al., 2014) and self-regulation skills play a critical role in students' commitment to learning processes (Gomez, 2013; Lee et al., 2013; O'Neill & Sai, 2014). The absence of a structured timetable in online education heightens the obligation to oversee student learning endeavors. This aligns with Zimmerman's (ibid.) findings on self-regulated learning. Individuals exhibiting higher levels of self-discipline are likely to navigate the complexities of distance education more effectively. Parker (2003) highlights the significance of intrinsic motivation and effective time management as key factors in forecasting student success within the online learning context. Students who demonstrate a deficit in self-discipline frequently find themselves facing issues related to absenteeism. Kinnunen and Malmi (2006) highlight the significance of self-regulation skills in the context of online education. Suggesting that students with low time management and organizational abilities face an increased risk of decline, Morris, Wu, Finnegan (2005) argued that these personal characteristics have a greater impact on the opportunity to persist academically, especially in a self-directed learning environment. The given situation highlights the significance of students' self-regulation abilities in remote learning. Students with poor time management skills may have difficulty following course material regularly, may miss homework assignments, and may be pushed out of education as a result (Schulze and Scholz, 2018). Many students find it difficult to manage their own learning process in online learning environments. As stated by Duckworth et al. (2019), students with high self-control are more loyal to their study programs and can manage their time more effectively by avoiding distractions. This enables them to complete their academic tasks on time and efficiently.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aims to elucidate the factors contributing to course attrition among students engaged in distance language education. The results derived from the interview analysis were elaborated upon in the preceding section. These findings indicate that the availability of recorded lessons for asynchronous access diminishes the real-time participation of students who do not attend the French preparatory courses, despite the intention to enhance flexibility. Students said that they could sustain their foreign language study by consistently reviewing these recordings.

A number of students tended to withdraw due to insufficient social integration in online courses. The absence of social integration, a critical issue in distance education, significantly contributes to student course attrition. Furthermore, online courses must be structured to maintain optimal levels of interaction between students and between students and instructors. Students expect lecturers to develop effective communication, implement appropriate course design, and give timely feedback (Yilmaz, 2019). Burns (2013) emphasizes that course design significantly influences the decision to withdraw from or persist in the course. The inadequate organization of the educational environment is a contributing factor to student attrition. The absence of a structured home environment and insufficient familial support hinders pupils' successful engagement with their education.

A primary reason for students to withdraw from the course is a decline in motivation. Students experience a decline in motivation due to intrinsic and external factors, leading to course withdrawal. Upon analyzing the students' expressions, "loss of motivation" emerges as one of the most frequently employed terms. Ultimately, attributes like self-discipline and time management among students underscore the significance of personal accountability in online education. Students who experience difficulties with these skills are prone to withdrawing from the classes, particularly in the absence of external mandates like attendance.

Recommendations

This research provides important findings for understanding the reasons for students' absenteeism in online French language education program. The results suggest that various strategies should be implemented to increase students' participation in online courses. Among these, increasing interactivity in course design, strengthening social ties, improving technical support, and training for instructors to increase their digital pedagogical skills stand out.

This present study analyses in detail the intrinsic, extrinsic and individual factors affecting student retention in distance education and provides recommendations for educational institutions, instructors and students themselves. For educational institutions, the research findings will contribute to the revision of curricula and assessment processes in order to increase participation in online courses. It will help instructors to understand how students lose motivation in online courses and how non-interactivity becomes a problem. It will also contribute to the students' awareness of how they can overcome the difficulties encountered in the online learning process and will provide students with a perspective on how important self-regulation skills are. French language learning is a process that requires intense interaction by its very nature. In order to ensure students' active participation in the online learning environment and to reduce absenteeism rates, the following suggestions have been developed. Course contents should be supported with visual and audio-visual materials, not only text-based, and should be diversified to appeal to different learning styles of students. Interactive learning methods such as group work, discussion forums and virtual classroom activities should be used to encourage student participation. Even if asynchronous learning opportunities are offered, synchronous courses should be made compulsory or more attractive

Encouraging student-student interaction: Peer co-operation is of great importance in language learning. Platforms (e.g., virtual chat groups, student clubs) should be created to enable students to communicate with each other. Increasing teacher-student interaction: Feedback mechanisms should be created where students can communicate with their teachers individually and teachers should provide more individual guidance to students. Organizing virtual cultural activities: Students' interest in language and culture can be increased by organizing virtual trips, film screenings or cultural events related to French-speaking countries

Support mechanisms should be provided for students experiencing technical problems such as lack of internet or hardware. In order to minimize technical problems in accessing courses, regular technical support should be provided to students and user manuals should be prepared. The accessibility of the university or institution's digital learning platforms should be increased, and user-friendly interfaces should be designed. Regular training programs should be offered for instructors to increase their competence in online learning tools and pedagogical approaches. Guidance programs should be established to ensure that instructors are more aware of how to increase student motivation and interactivity.

Limitations of the Study

This research is limited to students enrolled in a specific university's French preparation program and cannot be directly generalized to all distance education systems. The research focused only on the views of students; the perspectives of lecturers, administrative staff or managers were not adequately addressed. The number of students in the sample is limited and a more comprehensive study may enable broader generalizations to be made. The study covers only a specific period and does not provide precise information about long-term learning trends.

In conclusion, this research provides important findings for understanding the reasons for students' absenteeism in online French language education. Solutions such as increasing interactivity in course design, strengthening social ties, improving technical support mechanisms, and enhancing instructors' digital pedagogical skills can help reduce absenteeism rates. Moreover, further research analyzing the views of different stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators) in detail would contribute to making online foreign language education processes more effective.

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