

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: AN EVALUATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF PREPARATORY CLASS STUDENTS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract:

A variety of action plans have been taken by countries during the global outbreak of COVID-19. The decision to suspend educational programs is one of the steps taken. Computers and the Internet have the power to study at home without the need for all learners to join a standard face-to-face program in the modern century. In general, distance learning, some of which call it open learning primarily serves students who for one or another reason are unable to attend face-to-face programs. This study explores the level of satisfaction of distance learning students and evaluations of distance learning courses conducted during the Covid-19 process. For this aim, a Likert-type questionnaire was applied to 50 students of the English preparatory program. Besides, structured interviews were used to validate the data collected from the questionnaire. The findings of the study showed that a large majority of learners were pleased with the distance English courses; nonetheless, some aspects of the synchronous were not satisfactory.

Key Words: Distance Education; Distance Language Learning, Covid-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 SALGIN SÜRECİNDE UZAKTAN YABANCI DİL EĞİTİMİ: HAZIRLIK SINIFI ÖĞRENCİLERİ PERSPEKTİFİNDEN BİR DEĞERLENDİRME

Öz: Küresel COVID-19 salgını sırasında ülkeler tarafından çeşitli eylem planları alınmıştır. Eğitim programlarının askıya alınması kararı atılan adımlardan biridir. Bilgisayarlar ve internet, modern yüzyılda tüm öğrencilerin bir yüz yüze programa veya okula gitmesine gerek kalmadan evde eğitimlerini devam ettirme gücüne sahiptir. Genel olarak uzaktan eğitim, bir veya başka bir nedenle yüz yüze kurslara veya programlara katılmayan öğrencilere hizmet eder. Öğrenciler evde veya ofiste kalır ve kursu takip eder. Başka bir deyişle, kendi öğrenmelerinden sorumludurlar. Bu çalışma, uzaktan eğitim öğrencilerinin memnuniyet düzeyini ve Covid-19 süreci boyunca yürütülen uzaktan eğitim derslerine yönelik değerlendirmelerini araştırmaktadır. Bu amaçla İngilizce hazırlık programındaki 50 öğrenciye Likert tipi bir ölçek uygulanmıştır. Ayrıca anketten toplanan verileri doğrulamak için yapılandırılmış görüşmeler kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, öğrencilerin büyük çoğunluğunun uzaktan İngilizce derlerinden memnun olduğunu göstermiştir; bununla birlikte verilen bu uzaktan İngilizce hazırlık eğitiminin bazı yönleri tatmin edici bulunmamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uzaktan eğitim, uzaktan yabancı dil öğrenimi, Covid-19 salgını

Introduction

The World Health Organisation announced a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Quarantine, quarantine and social distance have been suggested by the World Health Organisation (WHO and health authorities around the world to combat the transmission of the COVID-19 virus (Gelen et al., 2020). During COVID-19 circumstance, where physical contact is prevented to avoid the spread of the coronavirus, all conventional forms must be turned into modern norms. Epidemics is among the worst illnesses that people feel helpless and anxious when they experience. Tutku, Ilıman, and Dönmez (2020) stated people were fairly affected in every aspect of their everyday lives, such as health institutions, social interactions, educational achievements, etc. Each nation and even every region in the world has been fighting against the Coronavirus outbreak since December 2019. The swiftly growing number of cases in the world and the increase of deaths accordingly have made it necessary to take measures (Wang et al., 2020), in this sense, people need to adjust and rearrange their behaviors and relationships in these circumstances. Massive activities have been disturbed for providing social

isolation. As a result of the actions taken, education has been interrupted around the world, and countries have been trying to continue by choosing and implementing its system of how education continues.

In Turkey, primary, secondary and higher education have been suspended since March 16, 2020 (T.C. Sağlık Bakanlığı, 2020). The transition of universities to distance education has been quick during the Covid-19 pandemic. 121 of all universities in Turkey (64%) entered distance education on 23 March 2020, 41 (21.6%) on 30 March 2020, and 25 (13.2%) on 6 April 2020. (YÖK Evaluation Report, 2020). It would not be wrong to say that distance education has gained significance in offering the spectrum of learning and teaching for students as a result of the pandemic.

There is no doubt that these changes in educational settings have affected distance language learning and teaching. English courses at universities have been given through online platforms, as well as the other classes. English preparatory class students have so far been used to learning dominantly through the face-to-face education system; however, with the pandemic, they have been obliged to go on their studies entirely online. In the literature, there are many studies which investigated student experiences in online education (Chen, Dobinson & Kent, 2020; Zhao & Mei, 2016; Cakir, Karademir & Erdogdu 2018). However, the number of studies that looked into the from the preparatory program students' perspective is scarce.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate English preparatory program students' perceptions about English courses in a distance language education program during the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of online tools and materials and their perceptions of distance learning due to COVID-19. This study is significant since it aims to determine the effect of distance education application on preparatory student success, and positive and negative aspects of implementation. There is a gap in the literature regarding the effect of distance education on the students of English preparatory program. It is believed that the results obtained in this context will be decisive in the education and training methods in the future.

Literature Review

Uşun (2006) defines the word distance education as "It is an educational technology that provides flexibility in terms of location, time, to the individual who receives an education, provides individual and independent learning, and does not require the obligatory for the resource and receiver to be in the same place" (p.16). Distance education programs that began to run on the internet in the late 1990s eventually shifted to mobile devices. Distance education programs are expressed as a practical method for both school and educational institutions (Gunawan, Suranti & Fathoroni, 2020). Correspondingly, İşman (2008) states, "communication technologies have been developing at an incredible speed. It can be assumed that these developments may affect the education system, too. One of these effects is distance education, which will

be the education model of the 21st century" (p.5). Therefore, during such difficult and troubling times as COVID-19, it can provide the necessary educational opportunities. Universities in Turkey have pushed into online education. Even if online education is not a novel way for many institutions, many professors and students did not have ample time to orient themselves but had to immerse themselves in a variety of channels and platforms (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). In this regard, recognizing students' online learning experiences as potential implementers of online language teaching for students is important because their online learning experiences will influence their future online teaching activities.

The key focus of the research on distance language teaching courses is the quality of language education, technological factors of language education, and autonomous learning. Language education courses. As Arslan, Bircan, and Eleroğlu (2019) emphasize, it is essential to know what students think and feel about these experiences to maximize the effectiveness of distance learning courses and to allow learners to have a positive attitude towards distance learning. The literature of distance language education shows that there are studies about university students' perceptions or lecturers' perceptions towards distance education (Sole & Hopkins, 2007; Işık, Karakış, & Güler, 2010; White, 2006; Dikmen & Bahceci, 2020).

Sole and Hopkins (2007), for example, contrasted two remote language learning methods focused on four language skills, the development of effective evaluation strategies, and the contribution of students to the learning process. They analyzed the philosophies of distance learning of two universities, clarifying certain similarities. However, the authors noted that institutions that plan to take distance language courses must rethink their setting and long-term effect on the technology.

Another research that focused on distance learning behaviors is conducted by Işık, Karakış, and Güler (2010). They investigated the perceptions of post-graduate students about distance education. They used the questionnaire and the population sample to collect the results. The findings of their analysis suggested that there was a relatively optimistic outlook on distance learning. The behaviors of female learners were considered to be more favorable relative to males. Scholars claimed that most of the participants felt comfortable with distance learning, while some show frustration during online experiences.

Additionally, White (2006) offered a comprehensive summary of the area of distance learning and language education. She declared that language learning from distance was conceived as the creation of language learning opportunities through technology. She added that the transaction between learners, teachers, and native speakers were being shifted from content delivery. She emphasized the value of individual learner ideas, but this is often supplemented by online education by shared learning groups.

As a very recent study, Dikmen and Bahceci (2020) conducted a study to examine the remote education strategy before and during the Covid-19 pandemic at Firat University, Turkey. The study analyzed detailed documentary scanning process and situation analysis in depth of distance education capacities, approaches, and methods of implementation of the universities and the circumstances for long-distance learning during the Covid-19.

Method

Participants

The study was administered to 50 English preparatory program students at a foundation university in Turkey. The participants have 26 hours of English classes per week. They received 20 weeks of face-face classes. However, after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, they continued their preparatory education online. They received 12 weeks of distance learning.

Data collection and analyses

Data were obtained through a Likert- type questionnaire including 20 items which was designed by Ekmekci (2015). Questions were asked as a five-point Likert scale: (1) very poor, (2) poor, (3) fair, (4) good, and (5) excellent. The data gathered through the questionnaire were entered into SPSS 20. The reliability coefficient of the Likert scale was found to be 87 for all the items. To verify the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were also applied to the students. Content analysis is defined as a systematic approach to categorize data based on codes (Weber,1990). With respect to coding, current literature identifies two types of content analysis as emergent and a priori coding systems (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Priori coding works with pre-existing key words while emergent coding works with the emerging codes drawn from the data. This study used emergent coding system that detects the most common themes and expressions in the surveys. The data obtained by interviews were hand-coded; according to repetitive terms and ideas, the concepts were identified by the researchers. These conceptual topics were subdivided into various headings, and each heading included excerpts from participants.

Findings

Findings of the questionnaire

The first eight items of the questionnaire addressed course-related attitudes. The descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the items, and the results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Course Related Attitudes

Items	VP	P	F	G	EX
1. The English course offered via distance education as a whole was:	-	26%	36%	30%	8%
2. The course content was:	-	12%	26%	44%	18%
3. The organization of the course was:	-	14%	20%	40%	26%
4. Clarity of the course objectives was:	-	18%	26%	40%	16%
5. Usefulness of reading sections in the course was:	6%	24%	20%	28%	22%
6. Usefulness of writing sections in the course was:	14%	42%	16%	18%	10%
7. Usefulness of listening sections in the course was:	44%	24%	14%	6%	12%
8. Usefulness of speaking sections in the course was:	10%	22%	20%	28%	20%

In Table 1, it can be seen that the first statement was not responded very positively by the learners; only 38% of them thought the English course offered via distance education was good or excellent. Their overall evaluations of the English courses range mostly from poor to fair. The course content could be said to be evaluated more positively; a majority of the participants (62%) stated that the content was good or excellent. The organization of the course and the clarity of the course objectives were considered to be positive, as well. As for the four components of English language classes, the findings were varying. The reading and speaking sections were perceived relatively good; however, the effectiveness and usefulness of writing were considered mostly poor (42%). It is striking that the listening section was evaluated very poor (44%), only a minority of the participants (18%) considered it good.

The results of items related to instructors can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Instructor Related Attitudes

Items	VP	P	F	G	EX
9. The instructor's contribution to the course was:	-	10%	12%	52%	26%
10. Feedback provided by the instructor was:	4%	14%	12%	46%	24%
11. The instructor's overall abilities to convey information were:	2%	8%	6%	66%	18%
12. Tailoring of instruction to varying student skill levels was:	2%	12%	36%	30%	20%
13. Confidence of the students in the instructor's knowledge was:	4%	12%	10%	40%	34%

As can be seen from the table, the contribution of the teachers to the classes was evaluated as "Good" or "Excellent" by 78 % of the participants. The providing feedback issue was considered mostly positive (70%) by the students. The instructor's abilities were also appreciated by most of the participants (84%). The instructor's approach to the students having different skill levels was evaluated as positive by half of the students. Lastly, the confidence of the students in the instructors' knowledge could be perceived as very positive.

Table 3 shows the attitudes towards synchronous courses.

Table 3. Synchronous Courses Related Attitudes

Items	VP	P	F	G	EX
14. Effectiveness and quality of the synchronous courses were:	-	32%	12%	46%	10%
15. Time allotted for the synchronous courses was:	-	26%	24%	38%	12%
16. The instructor's help during the synchronous courses was:	-	8%	12%	42%	38%
17. Your involvement in the synchronous courses was:	2%	12%	24%	46%	16%

The students mostly appreciated the effectiveness and quality of the course, as the table shows. Secondly, half of the participants had positive attitudes towards the time allocated for the online classes. A great majority of the students (80%) were content with the teachers' help during the synchronous courses. The last item related to synchronous courses was about the learners' involvement. As can be seen, more than half of the students (62%) found their involvement positive.

The fourth dimension of the questionnaire was related to assignments, the results can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Assignments Related Attitudes

Items	VP	P	F	G	EX
18. Clarity of the assignments was:	4%	8%	18%	42%	28%
19. Clarity of students' responsibilities	2%	14%	12%	46%	26%

As seen in Table 4, 70% of the students thought that the assignments were clear. Moreover, 72% of the participants stated that they were aware of their responsibilities.

Finally, there was an item related to the grading system in the questionnaire, and the findings can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Grading System Related Attitudes

Items	VP	P	F	G	EX
20. Grading Techniques were:	10%	24%	24%	22%	20%

The results show that 34% of the students did not find grading techniques good enough.

Findings of the interviews

As for the first interview question, the participants stated whether the online English preparatory courses during the Covid-19 pandemic met their expectations or not. Twenty-four of the learners (48%) stated that it did not. The students declaring that their expectations had not been met stated their opinions as the following:

No. I feel I did not learn anything. Especially writing classes were not efficient. (P24)

No. I didn't like the online course because I like face to face education. It wasn't effective for me. (P50)

The ones whose expectations were met, on the other hand, declared their ideas as the following:

It was too dense, but it helped me a lot. (P3)

Yes, especially the main course and reading lessons were excellent. (P18)

Yes. I could not imagine online courses could be efficient, but they were good. (P23)

In the second interview question, the participants were asked to state three things they liked most about the distance courses. Two dominant themes emerged from the interviews: having the classes from home and teachers' contributions. For the first theme, students stated that many obstacles were eliminated since they were attending the classes from home, and they shared their opinions as following:

[...] In an online course, we do not go to school physically. It was very comfortable. (P7)

1. Stay home, work home 2. Comfortable place [...] (P10)

There is no transportation [...] (P13)

Attending class from home, late start of the lessons [...] (P49)

We were attending the classes in a stress-free environment. (P50)

The second frequent theme was the teachers' contributions. Of the students declared that they had great contact with their instructors, and stated their opinions as the following:

The teachers' interest was very good. (P16)

The instructors' attitudes were perfect. They helped us. (P25)

I felt that my teachers were trying to do their bests. (P43)

Lastly, the students were asked for the things they liked least about the course. The most frequent emerging theme was connection problems. The students told that they experienced so many problems with the connection, and shared their opinions as:

Disconnecting and software problems on the site that I faced many times. Some problems with the sound that I missed some sentences, so I hardly understood the things. (P23)

My connection was not good enough. I missed many things. (P33)

Furthermore, some of the students told that they did not like the assignments in the course, and shared their opinions as following:

There were so many assignments, and some of them were not necessary, I think. (P40)

Discussion and Conclusion

With the global Covid-19 epidemic in the world, as in every area of daily life, the field of education was also affected. This study aimed to investigate the English preparatory class students' perceptions about the distance education they received during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Quantitative and qualitative results collected through the scale and structured interviews indicated that online English preparatory courses

could be said that it generally met learners' expectations. On the other hand, some skills such as listening and writing were regarded as weak elements by the majority of the participants. Integrating different language skills in distance language classes needs to be planned carefully in advance. Since the Covid-19 pandemic was not predictable and all the education systems were transferred into the distance ones without any pre-planning, such issues occur. This online teaching period can be regarded as ERT. The word 'Emergency Remote Learning (ERT),' which can be described as a temporary change in education to build a fully comprehensive education response to lock-down situations is another term which may characterize current situation (Hodges et al., 2020). As Hodges et al (2020) stated "The primary objective is not to create a robust educational ecosystem" (p.27).

Assignments were also criticized by most of the learners. The interviews verified these results since nearly half of the learners stated that homework was among the things they like least about the course. This may also be caused due to immediate transfer into distance education. When it is planned well, the reactions will probably be better. On the other hand, it was deduced from the results that all the instructions and the responsibilities were clear, which is a great asset because the autonomy of learners in distance learning courses is of great importance.

The strongest aspect of distance learning was that it was flexible. The vast majority of students would prefer distance learning in English because it allows them to observe the lessons separately from time to time.

Although some weaknesses have been reported by the participants, positive attitudes towards the online program can generally be presumed. However, different recommendations for enhancement of the programs can be inferred from the results of this study. It is important to prepare for more distance learning and to develop a potential framework. We need to be well prepared in the coming years. Although COVID-19 has had a severe impact on traditional development in education, universities should take this unforeseen opportunity to identify gaps and accelerate the online education change by advanced training materials, cutting-edge technologies and successful management. As Sun et al. (2020) suggested, we need to transform this emergency into an opportunity to further foster international cooperation and exchange expertise, skills and capital to create a global online education network. The researchers suggest that new classes ought to be introduced into all undergraduate programs including the English Language Department, focusing on the lessons learned of the pandemic. In other words, classes such as global problems, digital literacy or stress management are typically not taught at the department of English teaching, and these courses have to be included in the program at the researchers' best understanding. It is recommended that the online/distance education practices and academic studies are carried out and implemented.

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