



Learning from Pandemic to Shape Distance Education for International Students¹

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Abstract

Like their counterparts in many other countries, international students in Türkiye had to face additional problems during COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated radical changes in education. Distance learning was the most common form of education used in higher education system to cope with the challenges that emerged during the pandemic. Higher education institutions went through a demanding process in ensuring equity and inclusion particularly for those who had difficulty in getting proper education. This study was conducted to investigate the language related difficulties that international students might have had during distance education in that period. Within that aim, a qualitative study was designed to examine the views of international students in terms of four language skills, and the study group was composed of fourteen international students. The data obtained through interview notes, recorded voices and a semi-structured interview form were analysed by content analysis technique. Consequently, the language related difficulties that the participants had during the distance education in COVID-19 period were sorted under four main themes, namely productive skills, receptive skills, recommendations for better distance education, and curriculum based problems. Comprehensive and sustainable studies on distance education in higher education, particularly on curriculum development, were recommended for further research.

Key Words

Distance education
International students
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Language problems

About Article

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Introduction

Considering the growing emphasis on political, academic, social and cultural motivations for internationalizing the higher education, countries and institutions have paid special care and attention to improve education quality in the last decades (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). According to the statistics released by the Higher Education Council, the number of international students in Türkiye has increased significantly in the last decades, mostly from nearby countries such as Syria, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Afghanistan (Yılmaz & Güçlü, 2021). The factors that influence the international students' preferences to study in Türkiye were cited as geographical closeness, cultural, historical, religious and ethnic links along with low cost of living and scholarship opportunities (Özoğlu, Gür & Coşkun, 2015; Tamtekin, 2021). One of the prerequisites to ensure quality in higher education is student participation, but a considerable amount of research has revealed that international students in Türkiye have various problems in getting education at desired level due to various problems. Lack of a consistent curriculum, inefficient materials and problematic education practices are the mostly cited issues in literature (Aksoy-Hasırcı, 2021; Azizoğlu, Tolaman & Tulumcu, 2019; Biçer, Çoban & Bakır 2014; Boylu & Başar, 2016; Candaş Karababa, 2009; Demir, 2017; Demiralay, 2016; Er, Biçer & Bozkırlı, 2012; Göçer & Moğul, 2011; Kara, 2010; Keser, 2018; Konyar, 2019; Seymen & Tok, 2015; Tunçel, 2015).

International students faced additional problems all over the world due to the global health crisis caused by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). They were found to go through harder times compared to native students as they were in a foreign land during the sudden pandemic (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2020; Bardakçı-Özkan & Bardakçı, 2021; Bogenç & Bekçi, 2021; Chen, Li, Wu & Tong, 2020; Coffey, Cook, Farrugia, Threadgold & Burke, 2021; European Migration Network[EMN] /OECD, 2020; Firang, 2020; Güven, 2021; Güzel, 2022; Saatçi & Aksu, 2020). In a supplement document released by ACHA (2020), international students were considered as one of the vulnerable social populations on university campuses, which include people with Asian, African American/Black, Hispanic and indigenous American backgrounds, disabled students, and socio-economically disadvantaged groups. In the document, racism and discrimination, limited access to health care, occupational risks, newly emerged bureaucratic obstacles and low English proficiency were cited as additional problems they suffered from. Similarly, some studies argued that international students had some mental and psychological problems caused by linguistic and cultural barriers, economic problems and loneliness (Chen et al., 2020; Firang, 2020).

Though limited in number, recent studies into the education practices of international students in Türkiye have revealed various challenges and difficulties they had to deal with during the pandemic. Mostly cited issues in these studies were similar to those conducted abroad in terms of particularly financial and psychological problems (Bardakçı-Özkan & Bardakçı, 2021; Bogenç & Bekçi, 2021). Also, educational hardships and obstacles like lack of interactive learning, outdated teaching methods, isolation from other social groups, difficulties in accessing the Internet were cited in some others (Güven, 2021; Güzel, 2022).

This study was conducted to investigate the opinions of international students about distance education during COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of a considerable amount of research into the language related barriers that hinder international students engagement in face-to-face courses (Aksoy-Hasırcı, 2021; Azizoğlu, et al., 2019; Biçer, et al., 2014; Boylu & Başar, 2016; Candaş Karababa, 2009; Demir, 2017; Demiralay, 2016; Er, et al., 2012; Göçer & Moğul, 2011; Kara, 2010; Keser, 2018; Konyar, 2019; Seymen & Tok, 2015; Tunçel, 2015), the scope of the study was determined as the language related problems international students might have had during compulsory distance education. Within the perspective given above, the following research problems were developed to research the language related problems of international students during distance education in pandemic:

- What kinds of language related problems did international students have in distance education?
- In what ways did the problems vary in terms of four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing)?

As distance education is of remarkable significance for all social groups, the study is expected to contribute to curriculum development research in higher education, particularly on student participation.

Method

As a part of qualitative approach, in-depth review technique was adopted in the research. The reason for method choice was the literature review leading to the assumption that international students had some difficulties in expressing their opinions and feelings about the issues that needed comprehensive and detailed explanation. The reason for method choice was that qualitative research provides complex and detailed understanding of the issue through direct talks with people in a way to allow them express their views, share the stories and voice their comments in convenient settings (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). Through conducting in-depth interviews, it was also aimed to probe into the probable drawbacks that might have stemmed from the language difficulties of the international students.

Study group

The participants of the study were composed of 14 international higher education students from 9 different countries. Through the collaboration with the International Students Office of the university, where the research was conducted, the voluntary participants were determined. The distribution of the participants in terms of some demographic features was given in the Table 1:

Table 1. The distribution of the participants in terms of some demographic features

Variables	Sub groups	f	Total
Country of origin	Turkmenistan	3	14
	Afghanistan	2	
	Azerbaijan	2	
	Kazakhstan	2	
	Syria	1	
	Algeria	1	
	Chad	1	
	Ghana	1	
	China (East Turkestan)	1	
Department	International relations	3	14
	Theology	2	
	Economics	2	
	Sociology	2	
	History	2	
	Geography Teaching	1	
	Civil engineering	1	
	Medicine	1	
Gender	Female	5	14
	Male	9	

Data Collection Process and Data Collection Tool

The data were collected through interview notes, recorded voices and a semi-structured interview form. The seven open-ended questions in the form were prepared to determine opinions and suggestions of the participants about the language-related problems they had during the distance education process due to the COVID-19 period. In determining the content of the questions, various studies into the issue from different aspects were taken into consideration (Ekmekçi, 2015; Fidalgo, Thormann, Kulyk & Lencastre, 2020; Karadağ & Yücel, 2020; Karataş-Öztürk & Tuncer, 2020; Moore, Dickson-Diane & Galyen, 2011). The reason for asking open-ended questions was the convenience they provide to collect in-depth data from various perspectives (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). Depending on the expertise of the researcher in curriculum development and foreign language teaching, the latest form of the questions was given. Information about the nationality, department and gender of the participants was also collected through a section titled personal information in the semi-structured interview form. The open-ended questions in the form were as follows:

During the distance education period caused by COVID-19,

- (a) have you had any difficulty while reading? If yes, please explain the problem.*
- (b) have you had any difficulty while writing? If yes, please explain the problem.*
- (c) have you had any difficulty while listening? If yes, please explain the problem.*
- (d) have you had any difficulty while speaking? If yes, please explain the problem.*
- (e) what is the most problematic skill for you? What might be the reason for it?*
- (f) what is the least problematic skill for you? What might be the reason for it?*
- (g) what do you recommend for solution to the problems?*

The questions in the semi-structured interview forms were revised by a lecturer specialized at teaching Turkish as a foreign language to ensure the comprehensibility of the data collection tool.

Data analysis

The data obtained in the research were analysed by content analysis technique. As a method in social research, content analysis is used to minimize interviewer's biases with open-ended answers, and help the researcher obtain frequency distributions, scales, indexes and other variables to present information, knowledge and facts about the researched issue (Krippendorff, 1989, p. 405). Before analysing the data, interviewing forms were coded as p1, p2, ... p14 to identify the participants and the voice recordings were transferred to the computer. In the next step, the data were sorted into coded units and the themes were determined. In data analysing process, the researcher and an expert at educational science distributed the opinions according to themes independently. When the distributions were compared, it was found that there were some conflicts between two scholars. Through discussions, 6 items were listed under two different themes. For example, the statement by p9 "*the time given in the exams was too short. I could not write the answers*" was placed in both *productive skills* and *curriculum based problems* themes. Upon the consensus, the items were tabulated, and the precursor data were made ready in a systematic and comprehensible way to discuss and interpret the findings.

Findings

According to the findings obtained from data analysis, the language related difficulties that the participants had during the distance education in COVID-19 period were sorted under four main themes, namely *productive skills*, *receptive skills*, *recommendations for better distance education*, and *curriculum based problems*. The results of the frequency analysis of the content were presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Distribution of participants' views according to themes

Themes	Frequency (f)
Productive skills (speaking and writing)	43
Receptive skills (listening and reading)	32
Recommendations for better distance education	11
Curriculum based problems	7
Total	93

As seen in Table 2, nearly half of the students cited problems related with speaking and writing skills while almost a third of them had difficulties in listening and reading. The frequency of recommendations for distance education was lower than the language skills, and slightly higher than curriculum based problems, which was the least cited theme. In order to get more comprehensive understanding of problems international students encountered during distance education, a detailed analysis into themes was conducted.

Categories of *productive skills* theme

The results of analysis into the *productive skills* (*speaking and writing*) theme revealed three categories: *vocabulary-based problems, social and emotional problems, and sentence structure-based problems* (Table 3).

Table 3. Categories related with the participants' views about productive skills theme

Categories	Frequency (f)
Vocabulary-based problems	20
Social and emotional problems	16
Sentence structure-based problems	13
Total	49

It was revealed that the participants felt themselves inefficient at writing skill due to some reasons as they could not remember the proper words particularly in the exams. They also said that they they had difficulty in composing sentences since they had forgotten many words. They cited lack of regular writing homework and social isolation from Turkish class mates as the main reasons for the decline in their language skills. For example, some participants that their speaking skill got worse as they were not able to get interactive communication with Turkish native speakers. Some of the participants stated the problem as follows:

I have forgotten most of the words I learned last year because I do not use them. Last year was good. Our teacher gave us a lot of homework. (p4)

We are staying in a student dormitory and there is no Turkish student in our dormitory. We do not hear and speak Turkish language. We are locked here. It is so bad. (p2).

The first year students are the most badly affected of us because they have never had Turkish native speakers around. This is their first year and they just see and hear the teacher on computer. When we were first grade, we could practice speaking in various places like schools, supermarkets, restaurants, etc. (p11)

I cannot write in the exams because I don't remember the words. My sentences are very bad. (p13)

Categories of *receptive skills* theme

The data related with the second theme in the study showed that almost a third of the participants had problems in using their receptive skills during distance education (Table 2). When the categories were determined through a deeper analysis, it was revealed that international students had difficulty in understanding the talks and texts due to several reasons (Table 4).

Table 4. Categories related with the participants' views about receptive skills theme

Categories	Frequency (f)
Text-based problems	17
Speaker-based problems	10
Technical problems	5
Total	32

As presented in Table 4 above, text-based problems had the highest percentage among the difficulties that the international students had while following talks and texts. Very long texts on slides, high academic language and non-interactive lessons were the common problems expressed by the participants. As for speaker-based problems, pronunciation and intonation deficiencies of lecturers, long talks and monologue-like lesson presentations were mostly cited. Technical problems were mostly related with internet access and connection, voice and image quality, and inefficient computers. The opinions of some participants were given below:

Some teachers write too many words on slides. They also read them. I cannot do reading and listening at the same time. (p8)

There are too difficult sentences in the reading texts for me to understand. They are very long. (p11)

We always have Internet problem in our dormitory. I sometimes cannot hear the voice of the teacher. Screen sometimes freezes. I usually get lost in Turkish. (p7)

Last year I could ask the teachers to repeat what they said when I did not understand, but this year I cannot do that. Some teachers speak too fast, and I don't understand them. (p14)

Teachers speak without pauses. Too long. They don't ask anything. I lose my concentration and miss what they said. (p6)

Categories of recommendations for better distance education theme

The third theme was defined as a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the participants' opinions about what could be done to make things better, and to help students overcome language difficulties during distance education. The detailed analysis into the third theme, *recommendations for better distance education*, brought out two categories (Table 5).

Table 5. Categories related with the participants' views about recommendations for better distance education theme

Categories	Frequency (f)
Ending distance education process	6
Improving distance education practices	5
Total	11

It was found that seven participants did not answer the question about their recommendations in the survey form. The interview notes also revealed a similar result. On the other hand, it was found that six participants suggested ending distance education as a solution to the problems. Two of the participants expressed their opinions about improving distance education practices. They made some suggestions such as giving pre-reading texts to make students learn vocabulary and revise sentence structure before the unit. They also suggested giving extensive reading and listening materials to expose students to Turkish as much as possible. Devising some projects through which Turkish and international students can work together was another suggestion made by the participants. The suggestion made by one of the participants was as follow:

I think some videos about academic writing rules should be uploaded in distance education system. I cannot write academically. I make vocabulary and grammar mistakes (p3).

Categories of curriculum-based problems theme

Though not included in the survey questions directly, the educational practices during COVID-19 pandemic were found to be closely linked to the language related problems, and two categories were determined as a result of the content analysis (Table 6):

Table 5. Categories related with the participants' views about curriculum-based problems

Categories	Frequency (f)
Lessons	4
Exams	3
Total	7

As might be expected, while the participants were talking and writing about the language based problems during distance education, they stated some drawbacks which stemmed from educational practices in lessons and exams. Monotonous lesson presentations, overloaded course content and insufficient time for exams were criticized as given in the following examples:

There is too much information for me to understand in a short time. We have eight teachers and they give too many assignments (p8).

I think teachers must use some videos, pictures and similar things to attract our attention. They just read the notes on the slides. No question. No answer. (p4).

The time given in the exams was too short. I could not write the answers (p9).

The data analysis revealed that the most problematic skill for the participants was *speaking* while the least problematic was *reading* during distance education process in COVID-19 pandemic. It was also found that students had difficulty in remembering vocabulary and word order in Turkish as they were not exposed to target language in natural language environment. In addition, the long written texts read by teachers in synchronous lessons, overloaded content of units, higher language level in teacher presentations, comprehension difficulties due to the pronunciation and intonation of the teacher, and various technical problems during synchronous sessions were found to cause significant problems for international students. It was also revealed that the disproportion between the amount of information asked in exams and the time given to answer them was a handicap for the participants. Increasing the amount of extensive reading and listening materials was particularly recommended as participants thought their reading skill was effected less negatively due to the reading list given by the teachers.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

There has been a huge amount of research into the sudden and unexpected COVID-19 pandemic that has caused immense health and societal problems all over the world (Callegari & Fedel, 2022; Marinoni, Van't Land & Jensen, 2020). According to ClinicalTrial.gov (2022), a web-based resource that provides the public with information about a range of studies into health-related issues, more than eight thousand studies related with COVID-19 has been published in the last two years. As for social studies, it was found that the number of studies related to COVID-19 published from 2019 to 2021 in SSCI journals exceeded ten thousand (Liu, Yuan & Zhu, 2022).

Compared to that immense amount of research into the issue, literature review revealed that the number of studies into the international students in Türkiye during pandemic is rather limited (Bardakçı- Özkan & Bardakçı, 2021; Bogenç & Bekçi, 2021; Güven, 2021; Gücel, 2022; Saatçi & Aksu, 2020). As distance education is quite likely to be one of the hallmarks for future universities, international students, another significant component of higher education, should be studied from various aspects.

This study was conducted to investigate the language difficulties that international students in Türkiye might have encountered during distance education in COVID-19 pandemic. As a whole, it could be said that international students had additional problems during the pandemic other than those they usually have for being a foreign student. The language based difficulties were discussed from two interrelated aspects: (a) skill-based problems, (b) non-interactive language learning environment.

The participants had most difficulty in performing their speaking and writing skills, which suggests that distance education practices might have increased the problems international students already had in expressing their opinions. As put forward in previous literature (Alagöz & Geçgil, 2017; Demir, 2017; Genç, 2017; Keser, 2018), productive skills are more problematic for international students. Considering the lack of opportunities to conduct interactive communication with native speakers particularly during the lock-down times, deterioration in the Turkish language performance of the participants might be expected to some extent.

The data analysis revealed that the problems related to productive skills were mostly caused by some drawbacks in comprehending the oral and written input. This finding is consistent with the results of several studies on language skills of international students in Türkiye (Aksoy-Hasırcı, 2021; Halat, 2015; Keser, 2018; Tunçel, 2015). As some participants complained about the long and complicated talks and texts given by the teacher in a very short time, it could be inferred that international students had some cognition problems in understanding the language. There is a considerable body of research into the certain linguistic and cognitive similarities shared by reading and writing skills (Krashen, 1984; Stotsky, 1982; Stotsky, 1983; Wells, 1993). According to these studies, there is a significant correlation between these skills (Krashen, 1984; Stotsky, 1982; Stotsky, 1983), and students learn to identify and comprehend standard patterns, sentence structures and word relations through reading experiences before writing practice (Wells, 1993).

As for the other productive skill, speaking, similar views are common in literature. The finding that the most problematic skill for the participants was speaking was in accordance with the argument that speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills (Bailey & Savage, 1994). Though limited in use today, audio-lingual theory of language, which emphasizes the acquisition of common structures and patterns through repeated listening and speaking drills, hypothesizes that listening comes before speaking while learning a language (Harmer, 2001). Oral language is composed of various sub-skills such as production of phonemes, morphemes, words, fluency, pronunciation, tone, etc., along with some others aspects like cohesion, mimics, gestures (Brown, 2007). The learning environment in distance education might have created some handicaps in transferring verbal messages. The oral skill difficulties stated by the participants might be associated with the difficulties in the production and transfer of language input/output that increased due to technical problems, teaching methods, and lack of natural language learning environment during distance education. According to the results of several studies into willingness of learners to participate class communication, being outside a classroom setting has a negative effect on language learning orientation of the students (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010; Peng, 2013). Correspondingly, it could be argued that urgent and unprepared transition to distance education might have made some problems that already existed worse.

As a final point, it should be stated that being in a foreign country during a sudden pandemic upheaval added additional stress and difficulties for international students (ACHA, 2020; Bardakçı-Özkan & Bardakçı, 2021; Bogenç & Bekçi, 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Coffey, et al., 2021; EMN/OECD, 2020; Güven, 2021; Güzel, 2022; Firang, 2020; Saatçi & Aksu, 2020). Lock-down measures, social distance, lack of social interaction, stress caused by isolation, and some other issues like technical problems might have complicated the international student's educational problems.

In the light of the findings discussed above, it could be recommended that studies into higher education curriculum development be enhanced so as to meet the needs of international students. Teaching Turkish as a foreign language is a comprehensive research area that offers a variety of research fields. As it is significantly important to increase the higher education quality to ensure international recognition, language teaching programs that will facilitate and accelerate the participation of international students should be developed urgently. These programs should be diversified as face-to-face, remote and mixed (blended/hybrid), and the literature should be enriched, especially with experimental research. Furthermore, considering that universities and teaching staff were not ready for the distance education during the pandemic, particularly in terms of education programs, there is a need for versatile, comprehensive and sustainable studies on program development in higher education.

As can be concluded from the findings, the decrease in the amount of target language exposure during the pandemic hindered the natural language input for international students. Considering the significance of the language contact in and outside the classes, extracurricular activities involving various tasks, materials and resources in different contexts should be integrated into distance education plans, particularly through the technological conveniences. Project-based learning (PBL) environment that will bring native and international students together should be designed to provide the international students with natural language input. PBL is used effectively in foreign language learning, which requires students to create new knowledge with the discovered knowledge and to share this new knowledge with others through concrete projects so that they can realize the production and creativity stages in the product-based learning process (Beckett & Slater, 2020; Dooley & Sadler, 2016; Gibbes & Carson, 2014; Güven & Valais, 2014a; Güven & Valais, 2014b). Developing projects for real-life problems requires students to use their high-level thinking skills, working with others, and managing time and work (Larmer, Mergendoller & Boss, 2015, p. 2); therefore, it could be argued that PBL might contribute to language processing skills of international students.

Though it has caused significant losses throughout the world, the pandemic has taught that distance education offers various opportunities to meet the needs of people in the 21st century (Azorin, 2020; Daniel, 2020). Governments and schools alike should update their education programs to keep up with the increasingly mobilized world. As it is significantly important to remove language barriers

to ensure quality in higher education for international students, multi-disciplinary studies should be conducted in various aspects.

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