

Distanced Language Education during the Pandemic from the Perspectives of Foreign Language Instructors

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the opinions of foreign language instructors who teach at preparatory classes through distance education during the pandemic. Based on this objective, five instructors working at a School of Foreign Languages at a state university in Turkey were interviewed and their opinions regarding the positive and negative aspects of distance language teaching were revealed. Moreover, the problems they faced, materials they used, and their willingness to teach through distance education after the pandemic were questioned. Qualitative research method was used in the study. The interviews were decoded and themes were determined. The themes and codes were organized and interpreted using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis programme. The findings revealed four main categories: learning, student, teaching, and assessment and evaluation. Giving education without time and space restrictions, encouraging individual learning, fostering digital learning, and being economical were some of the positive aspects. As for negative aspects, it could be stressed that the instructors were not able to interact with the students adequately and, particularly, they were unable to teach and support the students' speaking and writing skills at the desired level. From the findings, the use of distance education partially after the pandemic can be suggested as it offers various advantages of time, place, and economy to learners and teachers in education.

INTRODUCTION

Interest and demand for foreign language learning are increasing in Turkey as in other parts of the world in line with the developments in technology. It is a fact that competence in one language is not enough for a person currently, and the need for competence in a foreign language is increasing day by day. Çelebi (2006) stated that Turkey has been dealing with foreign language teaching for about two centuries, and it adopted different approaches though they have not been enough in order to reach the targeted level. In Turkey, foreign languages are taught in foreign language courses at primary and secondary schools, public education courses, and universities. Additionally, foreign language education is provided at Schools of Foreign Languages (SFLs) of universities. SFLs offer foreign language courses in different languages such as English, German, and French through compulsory classes or optional preparatory classes as well as elective foreign language courses at universities.

Due to the pandemic (Covid-19) in 2020, foreign language classes have been given through distance education at SFLs. "Distance education is an interdisciplinary field whose

roots date back to almost three centuries ago" (Bozkurt, 2017, p.86). Al and Madran (2004, p.260) define the basis of distance education as "reformation of written sources into printed resources, thus they are easily reproduced, distributed and accessed". Distance education in Turkey began after 1980 with the establishment of the Open Education Faculty at Anadolu University (Seçemeli and Kurnaz, 2020). Accordingly, "the concepts such as e-learning, web learning, web 2.0 tools, online education and distance education along with the previous education concepts have been used and taken their place in literature" (Demir, 2004; as cited in Karakuş et al., 2020, p.222). Besides the fact that distance education has been implemented in the Turkish educational context for decades, the question arises on the efficiency of distance language education during the pandemic. For this purpose, this study seeks to find out the answer to this question.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are various definitions regarding the concept of distance education in literature. Distance education is defined as "an

education where teachers and students are in physically separated environments” (Akdemir, 2011, p.69), as “Web-based delivery of education to students with the help of developing Internet technologies and computers” (Newby et al. 2006; as cited in Keskin & Özer Kaya, 2020, p.60), as “a planned, institutional and managerial arrangement where students and teachers are located in different places, requiring the application of private lesson designs and teaching methods and the use of various technologies” (Moore and Kearsley, 2005; as cited in Demir, 2014, p.203), and as “a discipline that provides lifelong learning, fulfils the individual and social needs of education, uses technology and realizes the self-learning of an individual” (Kaya, 2002; as cited in Karatepe et al., 2020, p.1263). Accordingly, Uşun (2006) states that it is an education form where students and teachers are in different places during the learning and teaching process, and it is a form of education that provides individuality, flexibility, and independence in terms of time and space.

Distance education is generally applied both synchronously and asynchronously. Yorgancı (2015; as cited in Karatepe et al., 2020, p.1263) interprets synchronous education as “environments where students and teachers interact with each other simultaneously in different places, while asynchronous education as a system where there is no communication between the student and the teacher. The teacher shares the necessary course documents on the internet with the student independent of place and time”. While distance education has some advantages, it has also some disadvantages. Thus, there are both positive and negative opinions about distance education in literature.

While Karakuş et al. (2020), Akdemir (2011), Bozkurt (2017), Dikmen and Bahçeci (2020), Bakioğlu and Çevik (2020), Durak et al. (2020) reached positive results, Can (2020), Serçemeli and Kurnaz (2020), Karadağ and Yücel (2020), Genç and Gümrükçüoğlu (2020) and Eroğlu and Kalaycı (2020) found out negative results regarding distance education system due to different reasons.

This study aimed to evaluate the opinions of instructors who teach at preparatory classes at SFLs about distance foreign language education. In line with this aim, answers were sought for the following research questions:

- a. What were the positive aspects of distance education according to the instructors teaching at SFLs?
- b. What were the negative aspects of distance education according to the instructors teaching at SFLs?
- c. What kind of problems did the instructors encounter during the distance education?
- d. What do the instructors think about course materials during the distance education process?
- e. Do the instructors want to continue with distance education after the pandemic?

METHOD

The research employed phenomenology as a research design, one of the qualitative research methods. Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016, p.41) define qualitative research as “a study in which qualitative data collection methods such as observation, interview, and document analysis are used and a qualitative

process is followed to reveal the perceptions and events in their natural environment in a realistic and holistic manner”. Phenomenological research is described as “an inductive, descriptive research focusing on the human phenomenon and aiming to define the meanings of the expression of life experiences” (Ersoy, 2019, p.84). Moreover, Baker et al. (1992; as cited in Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020, p.114) express the purpose of phenomenological research as to “exhibit a more general understanding of the phenomenon or situation through analysing the participants’ personal experiences regarding a phenomenon or situation”. This research was designed in a phenomenological pattern to evaluate the opinions and experiences of the instructors teaching at SFLs regarding distance foreign language education in a full, accurate, and thorough manner.

Participants

The study group of the research consisted of five instructors who teach at compulsory preparatory classes through distance education at the SFL of a state university in one of the provinces in Turkey. “In qualitative research, it is usually studied with small samples that are dependent in their contexts and analysed in-depth” (Miles and Huberman, 2016; as cited in Karakuş et al., 2024). 40% of the participants were women and 60% were men. The average age of the participants was 40.4. 40% of the participants had a bachelor’s degree, 40% had a master’s degree, and 20% had a Ph.D.

Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form was used as the data collection tool in the study. In semi-structured interview form, the researcher “has the freedom to ask additional questions in order to get detailed information about these questions along with the questions prepared in advance, but sticking to the questions and topics that he has prepared previously” (Türmüklü, 2000; as cited in Buluş & Ersoy, 2019, p.767). After preparing the questions in the semi-structured interview form, the researchers presented the form to two experts in the subject area. After clarity of the questions were ensured by the experts and they were determined as the research questions of the study and were directed to the participants.

Data Collection

The data used in the research were gathered during the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The data were obtained by taking audio and video recordings via a remote teleconference system using Zoom within the limits of the pandemic (Covid-19) measures. The researchers informed the participants about the scope of the study before the application and informed the participants about they are free to quit the interview at any time.

Data Analysis

The findings of the research were deciphered and transcribed by the researchers. The content analysis method was

employed to analyse the data. “The basic process in content analysis is to collect similar data within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them in a way that the reader can understand” (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p.242). ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis program was used in the data analysis. The data were analysed in four stages: (1) coding the data, (2) finding themes, (3) organizing codes and themes, (4) defining and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In line with this, the data were primarily transferred to the Microsoft Office Program, and themes and codes were formed using the ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis program.

Validity

Validity is expressed as “the ability to measure the feature desired to be measured without mixing it with other features” (Büyüköztürk et al., 2013, p.122). To ensure the validity of the study, two researchers analysed the contents, identified, and classified themes and codes independently. In this manner, they examined the data separately and compared their findings. They discussed the conflicted issues and reached a consensus.

Reliability

The reliability of the study was also provided by the consistency between the evaluators. The consistency between them was expressed as “the harmony between the evaluations of independent experts” (Büyüköztürk, 2013, p.122). In this context, to ensure the reliability of the study, the researchers analysed the data independently and determined the themes and codes. By doing so, the researchers made separate evaluations regarding the mistakes, and the evaluations were compared in terms of consistency. Thus, subjective evaluations were prevented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After preparing the questions, the interpretations regarding the findings were revealed. The first research question, “What do you think the positive and negative aspects of language education through distance education were in terms of learning and students?”, was directed to the participants. The answers were presented under two main headings: 1. Positive aspects of language education through distance education method, and 2. Negative aspects of language education through distance education method. In addition, the findings were presented under both main headings of learning, student, teaching, assessment and evaluation, and sub-themes formed from the encodings. In the findings section, the opinions regarding using materials, problems encountered, and whether to give language education through distance education after the pandemic were included.

Findings Regarding the Positive Aspects of Language Education through the Distance Education Method

When the answers regarding the opinions of the participants about the positive aspects of distance education were

examined, it was seen that the content was gathered under four main themes: learning, student, teaching, and assessment and evaluation.

Findings regarding the positive aspects of distance language education in terms of learning

According to the issues that were considered as positive and prominent in terms of learning were examined, it was understood that the transition to online education due to compulsory reasons, and thus *the opportunity to learn in different ways and in the digital environment* (P5) were emphasized. A participant highlighted that there was no one way of learning and that the opportunity to learn in different ways was possible by saying: “*Maybe we would have achieved this in 10 years, but now it has been a rapid transition for us.*” (P5). However, *online education was accessed easily* (P5) depending on the precondition that there were not the Internet infrastructure problems. It was stressed that there was no longer an obligation to get education depending on a place through online education, and *students had the opportunity to receive education at any environment (home, work, etc.) especially where they felt comfortable* (P5), in addition, *saving time and space* (P5, P1) was mentioned as another aspect. As it was clearly understood from the expression of “*for example, a student will come here, take care of accommodation, then, he will come to school, right? He will take time to come to school. He may prepare for school, then, he will spend time going home after school* (P5)” that online education resolved many problems of a university student living in a different city such as going to a new city, finding a place to live, spending time on going to school, and arriving home. In that case, it could be inferred that online education helped to save time. Besides, as *students were able to watch the class records again* (P5), it allowed the students to review the topics they were not able to comprehend. As a result, *individual learning could be easier* (P5, P1) in online education.

Above all, the view “*thanks to the experience we gained this year, we had some questions about how efficient students could be in distance education, but we found that there were no big differences, which was one of the positive aspects.*” (P1) refers that learning can also be efficient in online education. As a matter of fact, through the view “*the student who wants to learn learns online as well as face to face*” (P2), it can be told that the realization of learning does not depend on being face-to-face or online, but is related to the student’s desire.

Findings regarding the positive aspects of distance language education for students

The evaluation of the participants’ opinions regarding the positive aspects of distance education in terms of students showed that *providing a more economical education opportunity* (P5, P1) to the students through distance education was the most prominent one. It was expressed that the expenses in face-to-face education for transportation, photocopying, and additional materials were unnecessary in

distance education, and as a result, it was emphasized that distance education enabled financial savings. Moreover, it was believed that the students were had an opportunity to reach education at their home environments in a comfortable way, and this had a positive effect on students.

Findings regarding the positive aspects of distance language education in terms of teaching

When the opinions of the participants regarding the positive aspects of distance education in terms of teaching were analysed, it was seen that these were mostly about the economic savings thanks to distance education. In this context, *space and time saving* (P5, P4, P1), *fuel and paper saving* (P5) were discussed. Thus, it was expressed that there was no need for some expenditures during education. Another issue mentioned about the space was that it was *possible to teach independent of the place* (P5, P4). In other words, it was the emergence of *the opportunity to teach in every environment* (P5). Besides, *the effective use of time* (P5) in distance education and *easiness to prepare for the class* (P5) were also among the positive aspects. In this way, *flexibility in teaching* (P5) could be provided without space and time restrictions.

Findings regarding the positive aspects of distance language education in terms of assessment and evaluation

By examining the positive aspects of distance education in terms of assessment and evaluation, it was stated that it helped to *change traditional understanding and techniques into using alternative techniques such as portfolios and homework* (P5). Also, it was mentioned that online assessment and evaluation was *easy to use* (P5). Although it was expressed that online assessment and evaluation had not been implemented in formal language education beforehand, it was stressed that the online method has been successfully applied for many years in internationally recognized language exams such as TOEFL, E-YDS that aim to assess and evaluate foreign language level. Additionally, it was considered that there were no problems in assessing and evaluating linguistic knowledge and skills in distance education (P2).

Findings Regarding the Negative Aspects of Language Education through the Distance Education Method

The answers to the question about the negative aspects of distance education revealed four main themes: learning, student, teaching, and assessment and evaluation.

Findings regarding the negative aspects of distance language education in terms of learning

When the negative aspects of distance education about learning were taken into consideration, it was seen that the greatest failure was *the lack of interaction in face-to-face learning* (P4, P3, P1). It was observed that foreign language classes should be carried out interactively, but the students were not eager to open cameras and microphones during the online classes. Another important issue was that having classes in

a comfortable home environment, which was considered as positive in learning, could be negative contrarily. Therefore, according to the participants, the home provided students with a very comfortable environment and led them not to give necessary importance to learning.

Findings regarding the negative aspects of distance language education for students

Considering the negative aspects of distance education for students, it was expressed that the biggest problem was *socialization, in other words, not being able to socialize*. The students who stayed with their families during the distance education were *deprived of the sense of studying at the university* (P5), they had to live in a family environment where they did not feel comfortable. Along with the financial and moral contributions of studying at home, the students would not face the problems that they would encounter during face-to-face education, and *would not develop problem-solving skills* (P5).

Findings regarding the negative aspects of distance language education in terms of teaching

Focusing on the negative aspects of distance education in terms of teaching, it was understood that *the inability to see the students* (n=3) and *the lack of face-to-face interaction* (n=3) were among the biggest ones. One participant highlighted this situation by saying: *"You cannot look in the eye of the student"* (P5). Another participant said: *"I am a person who attaches great importance to eye contact with my students, and wants to interact with them personally, sits down and works with them if necessary, so distance education does not allow these things"* (P4). It was observed that the inability to see students was associated with *the inability to see physically if the student could understand or not* (n=2).

In addition, the fact that *education was dependent on the Internet infrastructure* (n=2) and the interruption of education and training due to technical problems on the Internet were considered as negative aspects. Other problems were expressed as *students and their families did not take distance education seriously enough and they evaluated the quality of education as inadequate* (P5). *Education could not be provided equally to improve reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills* (P4, P3) was seen another important disadvantage.

Findings regarding the negative aspects of distance language education in terms of assessment and evaluation

When assessment and evaluation with online methods and techniques in distance education were examined, *the problem of trust in students* (n=2) and *inability to control the student* (n=1) were inferred as problems. In other words, it was not clear that whether the student got external help especially during multiple-choice examinations and trusting the students on the examinations became a problematic issue. Online exams were underlined in terms of *difficulty in reading questions on the screen, inability to switch*

between questions, and inability to use time effectively (P3). Moreover, the fact that linguistic skills were not able to be assessed equally well was among the issues considered as negative in assessment and evaluation in distance education. It was also stated that language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), especially speaking skill could not be assessed adequately (P1).

Findings Regarding the Problems Encountered during the Distance Education Process

When the opinions regarding the problems encountered in distance language education were evaluated, it was found out that the problems related to the sub-technological structure were more prominent. It was mentioned that the Internet infrastructure of the students and the systems of the instructors need to work properly, and the problems encountered in distance education were mostly related to infrastructure problems. In addition, it was emphasized that *adaptation* (P1) because of *the sudden transition* (P2); and *the potentials of the programs used were not fully known* (P1) were among other problems. However, it was mentioned that *systemic problems* (P4, P3, P2, P1) occasionally resulted in interruptions during distance language education, but these problems could be avoided by using various programs.

Findings Regarding the Opinions on using Materials During the Distance Education Process

It could be said that there were mostly positive opinions about using materials during the distance education. Accessing materials easily (n=3), providing more materials to students (n = 3), and the opportunity to lead students more about materials (n=3) were among the positive aspects listed. The possibility of transition to new platforms (n=2) was also considered positive in terms of using materials in distance education. However, a participant (F4) who had writing skill classes mentioned the lack of using board, paper, and pencil in the online classes for writing skill and the difficulty of doing exercises especially for writing skill through distance education.

Findings Regarding Whether to Continue through Distance Education After the Pandemic

The question "Would you like to give language education through distance education after the pandemic?" was directed to the participants, and one of them wanted to continue it 100%, but even if this was not possible, "*I can integrate distance education into my classes when face-to-face education is started*" (P1). Two participants said that they wanted it to a certain extent (P2, P5). One participant told, "*I would like to do it through distance education even if it is 30%*" (P5) and added that "*If such an opportunity was given, if an oral contract was made with the students, if it was told that we had such a choice, what should we do? And, if the vast majority wanted it, I would love to do it.*" (P5).

On the other hand, two of the participants stated that they did not want distance education absolutely (P3, P4), because

"*the contents of the course are very important, but in my opinion, language teaching is not something that can be done through this system, so I prefer face-to-face education as it is something to be done by doing, living, communicating, playing games if necessary, and doing activities with personally.*" (P4). Another participant who had a negative opinion about distance education justified it by saying: "*I mean, I need to see the students' eyes when I explain a subject, I need to know how much they understand, how they do the exercises, I need to see their strong and weak sides on the subject and the best way to do all of these things is face-to-face education*" (P3). However, it was said that these were not only based on the view that language education should be given face to face, but also a bit of a habit. Two of the participants explained why they did not want to continue distance education after the pandemic by saying: "*The students must be in front of you. We got used to such a system, we had classes like this. Our experiences had always been in this way.*" (P1) and "*But this may be because we are accustomed to traditional methods*" (P3).

CONCLUSION

The findings regarding the opinions of instructors on language education through distance education showed that this process had been evaluated both positively and negatively. It was understood that especially the systemic infrastructure and the Internet infrastructure need to be strong, and education was interrupted due to systemic problems. It was observed that the participants, who were accustomed to traditional methods beforehand, had difficulties in digital environments, and felt the inability to interact with students on a face-to-face basis more. Some of the participants also considered the fact that there was a sudden transition to distance education due to the pandemic and the transition without any preliminary preparation negatively. However, the features offered by the programs through learning by doing and experimenting were discovered, and different programs were started to be used. Another finding obtained from the study was the positive effects of distance language education on learning. In line with what the participants emphasized, the students could learn a language free from time and place restrictions, watch the recorded classes again, and adjust their learning pace according to their individual speeds. In addition, they could reach education in a comfortable home environment with their families in their cities without covering the expenses such as accommodation, transportation, food, and etc. In this respect, language learning through distance education was evaluated positively by the participants, but they also emphasized that these issues, which were considered positive, might become negative aspects. It was suggested that the lack of attention and seriousness during learning in an environment where was regarded to be too comfortable with their families caused distance education to be considered unqualified compared to face-to-face education. In addition, it was mentioned that the students did not encounter problems that they would encounter at university, and this situation prevented them to develop problem-solving skills, and it

was an obstacle to their independence. Moreover, they had no opportunity to socialize.

In terms of the instructors, it was emphasized that the education given without time and place restrictions offered various advantages, especially it was time-saving. Moreover, it was showed that they did not have to cover basic expenses such as photocopying and fuel, it was easier to prepare for the classes online, and the classes were more comprehensible thanks to the rich materials offered. However, it was also stressed that the studies for the improvement of linguistic skills were not enough to develop each language skill equally through distance education. It was highlighted that improving speaking and writing skills were more difficult with online methods, and online education did not adequately support the development of these skills. However, the findings of the study pointed out that although there was a sudden transition, the language education through distance education helped students to improve their language knowledge and skills, and offered many opportunities that they could not get in face-to-face education. This was why some of the participants were in favour of teaching through distance education to a certain extent, even if face-to-face education was possible. At this point, as one participant argued, there would be such a transition one day, but for obligatory reasons, this process had to be pushed forward and accelerated. The instructors who adopt traditional methods also experienced and learned to teach in this way. Although it had negative aspects, it was observed that language education through distance education is possible and can be applied after the pandemic. Even if it is due to the obligatory reasons, the new generation, who is accustomed to digital media, can get language education in a way that they can enjoy. After the pandemic, it is recommended to give education through distance education and online learning at certain extents.

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