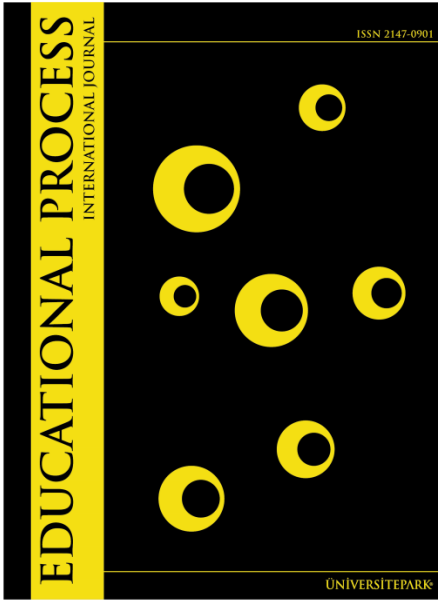




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Views and Evaluations of University Students about Distance Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

AHMET SAHBAZ

Abstract

In recent years, technological devices and the Internet have become an integral part of our lives, changing many of our habits and daily routines. This change became more rapid and intense during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when countries compulsorily locked down their populations in an attempt to impede or halt the spread of the novel coronavirus. In order to continue their education, students stayed at home and were required instead to study online using a computer or a mobile device such as a smartphone. According to UNESCO (n.d.), “more than 1.5 billion students are or have been affected by school and university closures during this period.” As a result, distance education has become the “new normal” of the educational system. Prior to the pandemic, many studies had been conducted regarding the opinions and attitudes of university students toward distance education; however, publications on this subject since the beginning of the pandemic are still very new. Indeed, the current study aimed to reveal the views and evaluations of university students towards distance education since the beginning of the pandemic. This qualitative study was carried out at the Turcology Department of Tuzla University in the Bosnia Herzegovina Federation. A questionnaire comprised of 12 open-ended questions was used to collect the data, which was then analyzed using the conventional content analysis approach. From the results of the study, it can be concluded that almost 90% of the participants were against distance education, but firm supporters of face-to-face education.

Keywords: COVID-19, distance education, online education, face-to-face education, Turcology.



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Introduction

Technology touches on multiple and diverse areas of life and, during the past two decades in particular, it has changed multiple aspects of human life. Today, for the most part, our shopping, communication and socialization styles and habits are unrecognizable from 20 years ago. As a result of technology, people are able to conduct much of their life online; and a significant change has also been seen in education. The terms *online education*, *online learning*, *e-learning*, *distance education* are used with increasing regularity in educational circles. As a result, many schools and universities had already launched distance education programs long before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.

The most unpleasant surprise of 2020 so far is without doubt the COVID-19 pandemic. The entire world was caught unawares and largely unprepared and is still facing difficulties in coping with the impact of the virus. The change in people's lifestyles and routines were felt more quickly and more intensely during the early weeks. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, many countries compulsorily placed their populations in some form of lockdown in order to protect them from the virus. With regards to education, virtually all schools and universities were closed worldwide. During this period, almost every student experienced distance education in some form. According to UNESCO (n.d.), "more than 1.5 billion students are or have been affected by school and university closures due to the pandemic" (n.p.). Prior to the pandemic, many studies had been conducted on distance education, in which face-to-face and distance education were generally compared in terms of students' perceptions, success and satisfaction. Recently, however, research studies on the effects of the pandemic on education have started to be published. The current study is one of the most recent, with its objective being to reveal the views and evaluations of university students regarding distance education since the start of the pandemic. Therefore, it is anticipated that the findings of the current study could assist other universities and higher education institutions with their educational planning.

Literature Review

With the rapid development of technology and the Internet in recent years, distance education has become a crucial component of the education system. As a result of this development, distance learning has gained in popularity and is increasingly being used by educational institutions. For instance, Lytle (2011) indicated that "online education has become an integral part of many colleges and universities, with 65.6% of all chief academic officers reporting that online education is critical to the long-term strategy of an institution". Distance education, which has recently gained remarkable popularity, has been defined by researchers in many ways. For instance, Sampson (2003) defined distance learning as "a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study texts and non-contiguous communication)" (p. 104). For Curran (as cited in Glover and Lewis, 2012), "online education is a type of distance learning that generally refers to any course of study that is accomplished exclusively via the Internet". According to Ekmekçi (2015),

Distance education mainly serves learners who cannot attend face-to-face courses or programs for one reason or another. Learners remain in the home or office and follow the course, do the assignments, and interact with each other and the teacher via the Internet. (p. 391)

Many studies have been conducted to ascertain students' views and evaluations about distance education. Having scientific and reliable findings on distance education is

important, as they will be beneficial for researchers wishing to study in this area. In this context, La Piana (2014, p. 9) considers that through the studying of students' perceptions of distance learning, instructors can better understand their students. Thus, instructors can help their students cope with any reservations towards the distance learning of a foreign language. The objective of Paechter et al.'s (2010, p. 228) study was to obtain a general view of students' expectations and experiences of e-learning. They found that with e-learning, the students' achievement goals and the instructor strongly contributed to learning achievements and course satisfaction. The findings of their study showed that teacher performance is crucial, not only in the traditional classroom but also in distance education. Oliver et al. (2012) examined the results of a survey conducted at the North Carolina Virtual Public School, which was completed by students in 2009. Their study compared the responses of 559 foreign language students with five other subject area groups, and revealed that the foreign language students had significantly lower perceptions of their online courses. The students mostly complained about limited interaction levels between teachers and students during online classes. One student asserted that "foreign language students are deprived of talking every day and listening to other classmates. Being able to answer and be in a social environment for Spanish is the best way to learn the language" (p. 276). Another student claimed that "languages are hard to learn without any direct face-to-face instruction time from the teacher" (p. 275).

In another study, Reeves (2008) sought to reveal the level of satisfaction of community college students for online and traditional classes. Reeves (2008, p. 2) found that students who had full-time jobs and did not attend on-campus classes were more positive about distance education when compared to other students who attended traditional classes on campus. Moreover, Reeves' study (2008, p. 2) revealed distance education students to be more motivated and willing to take other distance learning courses than other students. Reeves' study indicated that where students had experience in distance education, their attitude is more positive and their motivation higher.

Akimova et al. (2015, p. 348) found that distance learning resources enhanced students' academic performance and learning independence. Gündüz and İşman (2018) conducted a study to investigate the perception of pre-service teachers towards distance education according to different variables such as gender, department, class level, personal computer ownership, and their Internet connection. From their study, Gündüz and İşman (2018, p. 125) found no difference between students' perceptions of distance education based on gender, personal computer ownership, or Internet connection variables. However, there was a significant difference noted regarding the students' department and class level.

Through the application of both qualitative and quantitative methods, Ziyadah attempted to establish the attitude of female students towards online learning. The study's findings indicated that Saudi women working as faculty members, administrators, and graduate assistants in universities were mostly positive towards online education. In the qualitative part of the study, Ziyadah (2012) asked participants to compare distance education with traditional education. The comments of the participants differed, with some supporting distance education, whilst others supported traditional education. One participant asserted that, "distance education was very flexible in terms of time and place". However, another participant claimed that, "distance education is good but is not equal to traditional education because of the absence of communication between student and

teacher” (p. 136). Another student believed that both online and traditional classrooms provided a high standard of education, but that “distance saves time” (p. 136).

La Piana (2014, p. 73) conducted a quantitative study both to discover the attitudes of students toward online language learning and any differences in their readiness and satisfaction between online and face-to-face language classes. In the study’s findings, La Piana (2014, p. 73) ascertained that students attending online or hybrid classes were more enthusiastic towards online education than those attending traditional classes. The study of Glover and Lewis (2012) explored the preferences of 152 college students on taking online courses versus traditional face-to-face. The results indicated that “students who have already taken a good number of online courses tend to prefer online courses and online courses are not deemed appropriate for all students or subject areas” (p. 1). In addition, the participants found online courses either more difficult or equivalent in terms of difficulty when compared to face-to-face courses. As can be seen, the findings of La Piana (2014), Reeves (2008), and Glover and Lewis (2012) are compatible with each other, and indicate that if students already have distance education experience, then they are more motivated and more ready for online or distance education.

However, all of the studies mentioned here were undertaken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is widely accepted that the pandemic has affected almost all aspects of daily life that have resulted in sweeping changes to daily routines, lifestyles and habits. Previously, the terms *distance* or *online learning/teaching* have been used to describe the kind of education in which students do not have to physically attend the school premises, but instead conduct their studies from elsewhere using a computer or other technological device. In a recent article by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020), this period has been referred to as “emergency remote teaching” rather than “online distance education.” Moreover, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) made this clear distinction between the two, stating that,

Online distance education involves more than simply uploading educational content. Instead, they say, it is a learning process that provides learners agency, responsibility, flexibility and choice. It is a complex process that requires careful planning, designing and the determination of aims to create an effective learning ecology. (p. 2)

With regards to emergency remote teaching, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) note it as being a temporary answer that has been adopted in order to resolve the problems of unprepared and vulnerable education systems.

As an unwelcome and unexpected guest, COVID-19 has caused wide-reaching changes in almost every aspect of life during much of 2020. Its effect has inevitably been felt in the world of education too. Between March 15 and May 31, 2020, most students and teachers worldwide stayed at home and studied using whatever technological devices they had available (e.g. desktop, laptop, or tablet computers, or via their smartphones). The situation same was also true for the Turcology students of Tuzla University in Bosnia Herzegovina Federation. Although many studies were conducted on the views and evaluations of students regarding distance education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study represents one of the first studies to examine the views and evaluations of university students on the subject of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The current study is formed as a qualitative piece of research, with the objective being to learn the views and evaluations of Turcology students concerning distance education during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to collect the data, a questionnaire was applied that comprised of 12 open-ended questions, some of which were inspired by Gündüz's (2013) Distance Education Perception Scale. The convenience sampling method was employed as the researcher was also the participants' teacher and was therefore able to contact them directly.

Prior to the study, it was anticipated that the students would be more interested in distance education and that their attitude towards distance education would be positive. This was based on the assumption that this generation of students had mostly been born into a technological world, and they were therefore more competent at and interested in the use of computer-based technology.

A total of 45 students were studying at Tuzla University's Turcology department. The aim of the current study was to include all of the students in the department. In accordance with this objective, the 12 open-ended question instrument was emailed to all 45 of the students. Each student was then contacted personally by the researcher to inform them about the content of the study, and they were advised that participation in the study was not compulsory. The students were then given 1 week in which to consider the questions. Then, the researcher called each student to ask if they had experienced any problems with the questionnaire, and if so, they were invited to call the researcher at any time. At the end of this process, a total of 40 students had voluntarily responded to the questionnaire. The number of participants according to their grade was as follows: nine participants were studying in the first grade; eight were second grade; 10 were third grade, and 13 of the participants were fourth-grade students. The respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old, and 37 of the participants are female whilst three are male. The reason attributed to the low number of male students was that the Turkish language and literature department was predominantly preferred by female students at enrollment. The participant students mostly lived in the neighboring towns and villages of Tuzla, and made the daily commute to the university by bus.

The spring semester commenced on February 17, 2020, but the university closed due to COVID-19 just 4 weeks later, with distance education offered as from March 16, 2020. This situation lasted until May 29, 2020, during which period the Zoom application was used to conduct lessons online. The data collection process occurred during the summer of 2020. The Ethics Committee Approval for the current study was granted on July 1, 2020, numbered 02/5-2825-1.15/20.

The conventional content analysis approach was used in order to analyze the collected data. To begin with, the participants' responses for each question were read through one at a time. Then, their responses were reread and analyzed more deeply. At the end of the detailed analysis, repeated and similar responses were identified and were condensed into words and phrases. Finally these condensed words and phrases were ranked in tables from the most to the least frequent.

Results

The study's participants were asked a set of 12 open-ended questions. Their responses are presented in this section with one table reporting the results of each question. The tables are arranged in descending order according to the students' grade, with the most frequent answer at the top and the least frequent at the bottom of the table.

Table 1. What are the advantages of distance education?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
Enables comfortable language studying at home	1	7	4	5	17
Saves time	5	1	5	3	14
No obligation to travel to school by bus	1	2	1	2	6
No obligation to get up early	1	1	1	2	5
Saves money	1	2		1	4
Enables flexibility			1	3	4
Enables quick access to information	1				1
Enjoyable	1				1
Enables better learning opportunity				1	1

The greatest advantage of distance education for students is their being able to study in the comfort of their own home. Moreover, the students considered that distance education *saves time* and *saves money* and that they have *no obligation to get up early* and *no obligation to travel to school by bus*. When the student grades are compared, the only significant difference can be seen between the first and second items, with *enables comfortable language studying at home* considered less significant for first-grade students as for the other grades. However, the *saves time* advantage seems to be more important for first-grade students. In contrast, the second-grade students found the *enables comfortable language studying at home* advantage to be the most important, and the *saves time* advantage less significant for them as for the first-graders.

Table 2. What are the disadvantages of distance education?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
Having too much homework	2	3	2	6	13
Spending long hours in front of a computer	3	2	1	6	12
Not being able to learn some subjects due to lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers	1	2	6	1	10
Weak Internet connection	1	3	2	3	9
Not being able to see friends	1	1		2	4
Weak motivation		1	2	1	4
Stressful		1			1

The top four items of Table 2 were seen by the students as the most outstanding disadvantages of distance education. When compared, *having too much homework* and *spending long hours in front of a computer* seem were seen as the most problematic, especially for the fourth-grade students. During distance education, nearly every student complained about having too much homework, and constantly said that they were "tired of doing homework." The perceived disadvantage of *not being able to learn some subjects due to lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers* was seen as the most significant for third-graders. Also, a *weak Internet connection* was seen as another notable disadvantage of distance education. When taking online classes, a *weak Internet connection* could negatively affect the flow of the lesson, or even result in a synchronous lesson not being able to be

joined at all. Sometimes, students experienced problems hearing the lecturer and/or their classmates. In order to have more efficient classes, a fast and reliable Internet connection is therefore an essential requirement for online education.

Table 3. What are the advantages of face-to-face education?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Enables better learning environment	5	6	5	4	20
Enables face-to-face interaction and communication with teachers and friends	3	4	6	6	19
Less homework		1			1
More motivating		1			1
More effective		1			1

Nearly all of the students considered that face-to-face education facilitates a better learning environment through live interaction and communication with both their teachers and their classmates. When taking online classes, the students repeatedly reported missing the university campus environment, and that they were looking forward to the return of face-to-face classes as soon as possible. These findings show that face-to-face interaction was considered by the participant students to be vital to receiving a better education experience. One first-grade student commented that, "we realized the advantages of face-to-face education better after we experienced distance education. Distance education spoiled our routines and we are distant from our classmates and teachers."

Table 4. What are the disadvantages of face-to-face education?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Obligation to travel to school every day	1	5	1	6	13
Getting up for early classes	3	3			6
Meeting people disturbs us			1		1

As previously mentioned, nearly 90% of the participant students live within the neighboring towns and villages, rather than in Tuzla itself, and therefore need to get up very early each day and commute by bus to the campus. As can be seen in Table 4, *obligation to commute to school every day* and *getting up for early classes* are considered to be the biggest disadvantages of face-to-face education. When compared, the advantages of face-to-face education double the disadvantages of distance education. It can be concluded, therefore, that the participant students were mostly in favor of face-to-face education, even though that required them to commute each day to attend on-campus lectures.

Table 5. Do you find Turkish classes more effective with distance or face-to-face education? Why?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Face-to-face, because I understand and learn better	3	6	9	6	24
Face-to-face, because there is direct interaction and communication	3			5	8
Face-to-face, because I have higher motivation		2		1	3
Face-to-face, because I do not experience technical problems	2				2
Face-to-face, because it is more fun			1		1
Distance education, because I can do anything via email	1				1
Distance education, because I do not lose time traveling to school				1	1

Most of the students found face-to-face education more effective than distance education since they believed that they were able to learn better, and that they were afforded the opportunity to interact and communicate directly with their teachers and friends. There were only two students who reported finding distance education to be the more effective medium. The most popular response overall, *face-to-face, because I understand and learn better*, was overwhelmingly the most significant for the third-grade students when compared to the other grades. For the second item, *face-to-face, because there is direct interaction and communication*, both the first-grade and fourth-grader students appear to care more about direct interaction and communication than the other students. Generally, it can be concluded from these findings that the participant students are not sufficiently mature in academic terms to receive distance education yet.

Table 6. If there were a distance education option for your department, would you prefer it? Why?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
No, because face-to-face lessons are more motivating and instructive	6	7	7	6	26
No, because I feel better at university			3	1	4
No, because there is too much homework		1		3	4
No, because there is always a problem				1	1
Yes, because it is easier	2			1	3
Yes, because it is high time	1			1	2

Even if there were a distance education option for their department, most of the participant students stated that they would not prefer it. They consider that they are more motivated and learn better with face-to-face education. One third-grade student stated, "I would not prefer a distance education option for my department because we have too much homework and I do not like sitting in front of the computer for many hours." Just five students out of 40 preferred the distance education option. No remarkable difference was found between the students' grades in terms of the reasons stated.

Table 7. Will you teach Turkish language classes online when you become a teacher? Why?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
No, because students will not learn well	5	6	5	7	23
No, but I will share materials			3		3
No, because students will not be motivated	1		1	1	3
No, because I would like to have face-to-face interaction		1		1	2
No, because I can only make language teaching fun face-to-face	1				1
No, because students can turn off the camera and pretend to follow the lesson				1	1
Yes, if the students want	1			2	3
Yes, if the weather is bad		1	1		2
Yes, because it is easier	1			1	2

As seen in the first item of Table 7, participants stated that they were predominantly unwilling to teach Turkish language classes themselves online since they mostly believed that their students would not be able to learn the Turkish language very well that way. One student from the fourth grade stated that, "I would not teach Turkish online because some students can cheat. They can turn off the camera and pretend as if they are still listening to

me.” A few of the participants stated that they would teach Turkish online depending on certain conditions. The striking point here was that the third-grade students were unwilling to teach online, but that they would share materials, which differed from the responses given by the other grades.

Table 8. Is face-to-face interaction necessary to teach the Turkish language well? Why?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes, because language is learned better this way	3	2	6	5	16
Yes, because some subjects are understood better this way	3	2	2	3	10
Yes, because it is more fun		1	1	2	4
Yes, because grammar is learned better this way		2			2
No			1	3	4
No, because I myself learned a foreign language online	2				2
No, because we have the chance to practice online	1				1
It is necessary for some lessons, but not all		1			1

Most of the participants consider that face-to-face interaction is necessary in order to teach Turkish language classes well, as they mostly stated that languages are learned better that way. The third-grade and fourth-grade students in particular considered that languages are learned better when face-to-face interaction is included. Just a few of the respondents found face-to-face interaction to be unnecessary, and two supported their opinion from their own personal experience. These findings again show that the participants strongly support face-to-face rather than distance education.

Table 9. Will face-to-face language education be replaced by distance language education in the coming years? Why?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes, because technology develops every year	6	3	6	6	21
No, because face-to-face language learning is better	2	5	3	4	14
I hope that will not happen because I am not ready for it	1		1	3	5

The responses to the previous questions have shown that the participants mostly favor face-to-face over distance education. However, this finding is surprising when the participants stated that they believed that face-to-face education would be replaced in the future by distance education. This shows that even if the participants are mainly against distance education, around half of them believe that it will happen sooner or later.

Table 10. Is your motivation higher with distance or face-to-face education? Why?

<i>Answer</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>Total</i>
It is higher in face-to-face education because I feel a lot better when I am with my friends and teachers	5	1	5	6	17
It is higher in face-to-face education because I learn better	3	7	2	5	17
It is higher in face-to-face education because using computers can be unhealthy			3		3
It is higher in distance education because it is better	1				1
It is higher in distance education because I do not have to travel to school every day				1	1
It is higher in distance education because it is more flexible				1	1

Motivation can be counted as one of the key factors in learning a foreign language, because it is believed that the higher the learner’s motivation, the better they will learn. As can be seen from Table 10, most of the participant students were more motivated from

face-to-face education because they feel that they learn better that way. Just a few of the students reported feeling more motivated through distance education, but for different reasons. The outstanding point here was that the number of responses was notably higher for the second-grade students for the second option, *it is higher in face-to-face education because I learn better*. For the other items, there was no notable difference between the students' grades in terms of the reasons they provided.

Table 11. Are Turkish language lessons more entertaining with face-to-face or distance education? Why?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
Face-to-face education is more entertaining because there is live interaction with the teacher and with classmates	6	8	8	9	31
Face-to-face education is more entertaining because I always experience technical problems in distance learning			2		2
Both of them are entertaining	1			3	4
Distance education is more entertaining	1			1	2
It depends on the teacher	1				1

As with motivation, making language learning enjoyable for the student is another crucial factor in language teaching, as a humorous learning atmosphere can reduce the stress of learners. As can be seen from Table 11, the participant students mostly found face-to-face education to be more entertaining than distance education due to the element of live interaction with both their teacher and their classmates. The noteworthy points here are that the second-grade and third-grade students all found face-to-face education to be more entertaining than distance education.

Table 12. Is it possible to teach Turkish language only via distance education? Why?

Answer	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total
No, because face-to-face interaction and communication is necessary with teachers to learn the language well	1	3	9	8	21
No, because it is very difficult and tiring				2	2
Some subjects can be taught, but not all	1	4	1	1	7
Yes, if the students study hard	5	1			6
I don't know	2			1	3
Yes				1	1

According to most of the students in the second, third, and fourth grades, the Turkish language cannot be taught solely through distance education; considering that face-to-face interaction is a necessary part of learning the language well. The surprising result here is that more than half of the first-graders believed that the Turkish language could be taught via distance education if the student was prepared to study hard. Some of the students, and especially those from the second grade, thought that some subjects could be taught using distance education, but that others could not.

Discussion

Prior to the pandemic, numerous studies were conducted on the perceptions and attitudes of students towards distance education. When these studies are reviewed, it can be seen that there is no consensus reached on the merits or shortcomings of distance education. In some research, the attitudes of the students have been mostly found to be positive towards distance education, whilst in others less so. However, this is considered normal because these various studies were conducted in different parts of the world and

under different conditions. Some countries are able to provide advanced technological solutions along with reliable broadband Internet connectivity, whilst many others cannot. Furthermore, in some countries, both the teachers and students have considerably more distance education experience than in others. These, together with many others, are the determining factors that shape the attitudes of students towards distance education.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities were rapidly forced to close all face-to-face campus classes, and distance education was increasingly seen as the “new normal” of the worldwide educational system. Educational institutions have prepared various guidelines and roadmaps to be implemented during this period in order to overcome the difficulties of this new normal. However, they have faced many challenges in their attempts to maintain a healthy educational process for both students and their instructors. Institutions have looked at various solutions to overcome these difficulties. Chick et al. (2020) stated that, “This unprecedented circumstance will change the way we educate our residents for at least the coming months, if not longer. This will require innovation and cooperation on the part of surgical residency programs” (p. 732). In another study, Flores and Gago (2020) tried to identify national, institutional, and pedagogical responses as a result of the pandemic’s closure of Portuguese schools and universities in March 2020. According to Flores and Gago (2020, p. 2), one of the challenges faced during this period was inequalities in the access to the required technological infrastructure and equipment, as well as in ensuring that adequate standards of online teaching were available to all children and young learners.

As for the current study, the difficulties that the participant students mostly faced were linked to motivation. An overview of the current study’s results are as follows:

First, it should be noted that 90% of the participants were reportedly against distance education for the teaching and learning of the Turkish language (see Tables 1 to 12). The students were shown to be firm supporters of face-to-face education, due mostly because they believed that they learned, understood, and were better motivated within a traditional face-to-face classroom learning environment. Similar results were also obtained by Adnan and Anwar (2020), who stated that, “Apart from technical and monetary issues students also reported a few other difficulties like the lack of interaction with the instructor, response time and absence of traditional classroom socialization” (p. 49). However, contrary to these findings, Nachimutu (2020) found that “student teachers of both genders have accepted the online learning method with an open heart without significant differences” (p. 8748). The objective of a study by Khalil et al. (2020) was to explore undergraduate medical students’ attitudes towards the effectiveness of synchronous online learning. The researchers concluded that despite some challenges such as technical issues, individual behavioral characteristics, institutional methodology-based barriers, and the absence of non-verbal clues, the synchronous online learning model was well-received by medical students. These findings indicate that there is no agreement, positive or negative, in the literature regarding the attitudes of students towards online learning during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as previously stated, the results were also similar prior to the pandemic.

For the participants in the current study, the most notable merits of distance education were seen by the students as being able to study from the comfort of their own home, having no obligation to get up early, or similarly no obligation to commute each day to attend on-campus lectures. Additionally, the students considered that distance education saved both time and money. The findings of the current study share certain similarities with

those of Ekmekçi (2015) and Tuncer and Bahadır (2017). In their study, Tuncer and Bahadır (2017) revealed that “being able to study at home comfortably and having an opportunity to revise were seen as the most positive aspects of distance education by the participants” (p. 36). Ekmekçi (2015) conducted research with 72 freshmen (first-year) students in order to investigate their level of satisfaction and evaluation of distance English language courses. Ekmekçi (2015, p. 396) reported that students mostly enjoyed distance learning English language courses, since they believed that it afforded them a certain flexibility in terms of their time and location. Similarly, time and location flexibility were also seen as the most crucial factors in Durak and Ataizi’s (2016, p. 98) study in terms of student preference towards distance education. Taking all these findings into account, it may be concluded that distance education offers students the opportunity to study from the comfort of their own home, and thereby some flexibility in terms of both time and place.

Having too many assignments; not being able to learn certain subjects due to lack of face-to-face interaction with their instructor; spending numerous hours sat in front of a computer; and having inadequate Internet connectivity were seen as the most prominent drawbacks of distance education. In his study, Ekmekçi (2015) obtained similar results in terms of assignments, with the least favorite elements of the course, according to the students, being the assignments and exams. It is, however, very common that students complain about the levels of homework they are set. Throughout a student’s education, assignments and exams are perceived as their most aggravating of their responsibilities.

In a study by Hayward (2010), the effects of homework were examined in terms of student achievement. The study’s findings reported that “giving homework does not result in greater student achievement, instead giving well-planned, purposeful, and engaging homework is more likely to affect student achievement in a positive way” (p. 63). It is considered true that homework is an integral part of education, but that the amount and aim of these assignments should serve the purpose of improved learning. To do otherwise may be considered as demotivating for students, not only in the distance education scenario, but also for face-to-face classroom education too.

In addition to the disadvantage of having too many assignments, having poor Internet connectivity is seen as another significant disadvantage of distance education. In the current study, most of the participants live in the towns and villages around Tuzla itself, and therefore in areas where the Internet infrastructure is known to be underdeveloped. For this reason, a faster and more reliable Internet connection is essential in order to deliver more efficient online classes. When the various studies carried out during the pandemic lockdown period were analyzed, one of the biggest challenges noted was that students faced considerable problems in terms of the technological infrastructure as well as the technological devices they required. Due to the financial circumstances, many students are unable to purchase the necessary devices or adequate Internet packages to receive online education. Therefore, prior to launching online education, countries must first resolve the technical and economic problems faced by its students.

To summarize, when face-to-face and distance education were compared in terms of their advantages and disadvantages, it can be concluded that the advantages of face-to-face education outweigh those of distance education in many aspects, as has been discussed here.

In the current study, the students mostly considered Turkish language classes to be more effective with face-to-face classroom lectures, and repeatedly stated that they preferred face-to-face education because they believed that they learned more effectively through live interaction with their teachers. This conclusion is supported by the findings of Ziyadah (2012), in which one participant claimed that, “distance education is good but is not equal to traditional education because of the absence of communication between student and teacher” (p. 136). In a similar vein, the study of Flores and Gago (2020) mentioned the practicum of student teachers during the pandemic lockdown, stating that “the new reality of practicum did not compensate for the lack of a real context of practice” (p. 8). This result shows that when practical learning is necessary, online education can lag behind face-to-face education. It can be concluded from these findings, therefore, that practice and live interaction with teachers and classmates are both crucial issues in students’ learning.

Even if there were distance education options offered to students of the Turcology department at Tuzla University, most of the students in the current study stated that they would not choose it out of preference. They stated that they were more motivated and learned better with face-to-face classroom education than via online classes. Likewise, the participants appeared unwilling to teach Turkish language classes online themselves, presuming they become Turkish teachers in the future, since they mostly believed that their students would not be able to learn the language well in the online environment. These results show that the current study’s participants strongly believe in the power of face-to-face interaction with their instructors in terms of both teaching and learning a foreign language. However, when it comes to considering the future of distance education in language tuition, half of the participants believed that face-to-face education would be replaced by distance education in the coming years.

Motivation and making language learning enjoyable for learners was seen as crucial factors in language learning and teaching. The current study’s participants mostly found face-to-face education to be more motivating and more entertaining than distance education. They also believed that they could make language learning enjoyable only through face-to-face teaching if they later became teachers themselves.

Conclusion

When the results of the current study are taken into consideration, it can easily be asserted that the participant students were predominantly against distance education. This opposition to distance learning could be caused by the unusual and stressful atmosphere of the pandemic period, with the suddenly imposed lockdown process having caused students undue levels of stress. If these online lessons had taken place within the normal flow of their academic life, the students’ opposition may not have been as significant. Another reason for the students’ opposition may have been caused by their being distance education novices. Both students and instructors were very much caught unawares by the sudden onset of the pandemic, and many institutions had neither sufficient or appropriate materials to hand. Finally, it should be stated that, prior to launching a distance education program, the personal, instructional, technological, pedagogical, and institutional readiness of all stakeholders should be ensured, which is deemed essential to any program’s success.

Limitations of the Study

This current study was conducted at the Turcology department of Tuzla University in Bosnia Herzegovina Federation during the COVID-19 lockdown period of early 2020. In total, 40 students from first to fourth grades voluntarily participated in the study. Due to the pandemic, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants. The results indicate that nearly 90% of the students were against distance education. It would not be appropriate to generalize the obtained results to all Turcology students of Bosnia Herzegovina Federation, or in other countries or circumstances.

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