

Students' Online Learning Experiences Regarding Course Quality, Content, and Dialogic Interactions Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown forced institutions across the world to initiate online learning and switch to emergency online learning and teaching. The dominance of environmental factors in online learning has never been so high before. This necessitates research on revisiting the existing knowledge of students' perception with regard to online learning. This basic descriptive qualitative study set out to examine the learning experiences and perceptions of students attending online English courses at a foundation university in Turkey. Moore's transactional distance learning theory provides a basis for this research in understanding the dialogic interactions between course content, students, platforms, and teachers. Purposive sampling was used to select 12 students who volunteered to participate in the study. The data collection was multimodal with online observations and interviews. The data analysis was conducted through inductive coding in NVivo software. The results showed that students were satisfied with the overall quality of their interactions with platforms, and teachers. They also expressed their appreciation for the quantity and quality of the content that they were presented with through the learning management system, its learning and the Microsoft Teams despite some concerns over its variety of the materials they were provided with due to the repetitive tasks. The students with low autonomy, on the other hand, had difficulty adapting to online learning. They also complained about the lack of peer interaction and rigid structure of the writing and grammar lessons. Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on students' motivation, discipline, and attitudes towards the course. Students thus did not prefer online learning as a substitution for face-to-face learning. We argue that there is a direct relationship between course content including all course materials and the interactions during online courses and suggest that further research should be carried out given that online education has been gaining increasing popularity in educational institutions.

Keywords: Online learning, COVID-19, student perception, transactional distance.

INTRODUCTION

With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, more than 150 countries across the world decided to suspend face-to-face education as a precaution to prevent the

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pandemic from spreading and approximately 1.5 billion students were deprived of physical schooling (UNICEF, 2020). As such, schools swiftly turned to emergency online education prior to the implementation of mass vaccination since no one had been ready to fight such a global pandemic. The aim was to use community mitigation measures like social distance to limit the viral spread in schools and neighbouring communities during the pandemic (Uscher-Pines et al., 2018). This unprecedented transition caught both teachers and students off-guard and they have been trying hard to adapt to these extraordinary teaching and learning conditions (Sudrajat & Saefi, 2021). Initial actions were to optimize the curriculum, provide emergency in-service training, and set up learning management platforms that could be accessed by students staying at home (Perrotta, 2020). The pandemic, thus, forced institutions to undergo a radical transformation and give serious thought to improving course delivery (Bhagat & Kim, 2020). The institutions hesitated to lift closures for a long time in case the rate of infection might get worse. That's why; there was no other option, but to persist in online learning.

Literature Review

Online Learning

Online learning is defined as “learning that takes place via the internet either in a synchronous or asynchronous environment where students interact with educators and classmates at their leisure” (Singh & Thurman, 2019, p. 302). Online learning has seen rapid expansion over the last decade due to its significant characteristics including increased flexibility, accessibility, connectivity, and a large body of existing knowledge. In the digital era, throughout the world, online learning is also supported by government policymakers and administrations who have progressively been encouraging online learning, which leads to a transition from face-to-face education toward online learning. Online learning offers a highly authentic and meaningful learning ecosystem that bridges self-regulation and collaboration among students thanks to the emergence of sophisticated educational technologies (Hodges et al., 2020). Researchers, on the other hand, have stated their doubts regarding the quality of online learning and emphasized the key challenges in building the ecosystem with a sense of social presence and involvement (O’Doherty et al., 2018). Furthermore, some academics highlighted the primary issues associated with online learning as social isolation, paucity of engagement and collaboration, and lack of meaningful feedback (Baczek et al., 2021).

For the last decade, research studies have been demonstrating the benefits of online learning. While some studies have found that dialogic interactions between students and instructors have a significant influence on students’ impression of online learning (e.g., Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Paul et al., 2015), others indicated that the essential characteristics that influence the success of the students in online learning are the consistency in course design (Swan et al., 2000), social presence (Kim et al., 2005), instructors’ role (Hung & Chou, 2015), self-regulation (Matuga, 2009; Cho & Shen, 2013), and instruction (Gilber, 2015). However, most of these studies were conducted prior to the pandemic. It could be better to revise the existing knowledge on online

learning during the pandemic since the external factors are dominant and there has never been such a dramatic change in the course delivery for such a long time.

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory

Many would argue that online learning is as efficient as face-to-face learning (Means et al., 2013). The drop-out rate in online education contradicts the widespread belief, though (Gregori et. al, 2018; Valldosera & Minguillon, 2014). The root cause behind this problem is the transactional distance (TD) proposed by Moore (1993) as an influential concept for distance education. TD is described as “the distance of understanding and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance, that has to be overcome by teachers, learners, and educational organizations if effective, deliberate, planned learning is to occur” (Moore, 1991, p. 2). In distance learning, the distance between the teacher and the students can cause communication gaps and may create a context where instructors' and students' behaviours may be misunderstood (Moore & Kersley, 1996, p. 200). The interactions among various elements such as learners, teachers, technology, and programs impact the quality of online learning. For example, research shows that the low level of experience of an instructor increases the transactional distance (Nwankwo, 2013). Additionally, the course technology with its distinct features shows a prediction for effectiveness (Sun, 2016). In this regard, the integration of social media and synchronous activities into online education augments the community culture of the classroom and thus strengthens social interaction (Banna et al., 2015).

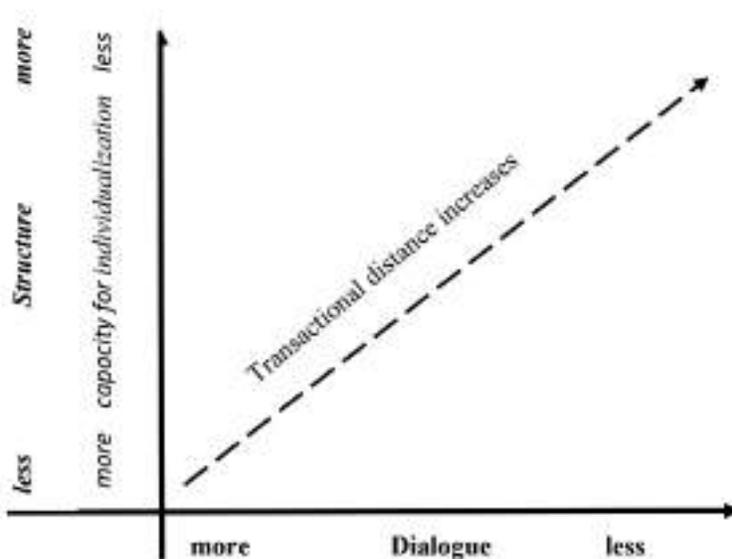


Figure 1. Relationship between Course Structure and Student-Instructor Dialogue

The construct of interactions should also include such factors as dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy along with instructional and learning patterns (Moore, 1997).

Dialogue represents mutual interaction between teachers and learners. Structure means the flexibility of a course design. Finally, autonomy is defined as students' capability to specify their own goals and act accordingly. The extent of transactional distance in online education might vary based on these factors (Moore, 1997). For example, when there is an increase in dialogue, the decrease is seen in the transactional distance and students act more autonomous. Conversely, when there is not enough space for a student for interaction with an instructor, transactional distance goes up in parallel to structure.

Emergency Teaching in ELT During the Covid 19 Pandemic

Some studies concerning online learning during the COVID-19 were conducted for the last two years such as Agung et al. (2020) indicating that learners were not prepared for the new learning method, and their devices could not support rapid high technology changes, and Shevchenko et al. (2021) stating that faculty member and students were caught ineligible for the emergency online education in Ukrainian universities. It is also emphasized that instructors were implementing traditional learning methods in online learning. Additionally, Adnan and Anwar (2020) found out that online learning might not lead to good results in underdeveloped areas of the world such as Pakistan due to limited resources to access high technology. In another study on Chinese parents' beliefs on online learning (Dong, 2020), traditional learning was considered superior to online learning due to students' insufficient self-regulation. Khalil et al. (2020), on the other hand, stated that online learning was valued by university students in Saudi Arabia, and this had significant implications for the future of education. A study by Laksana (2020) also showed that students in a private university in Indonesia appreciated the quality of education, interaction, and feedback during online learning. Additionally, Kumar et al. (2020) highlighted that the medical students in China favoured online learning as it promotes a sense of community and collaboration. Moreover, Clark et al., (2021) reported that online learning had increased students' exam scores.

Significance of the Study

Several studies across the world were conducted to understand the effect of the pandemic on online learning and provide insights into beliefs, challenges, implications, and strategies for the future. There is, however, a shortage of studies focusing on Turkish students' experiences and perceptions regarding online learning during and after the COVID-19 given that the popularity of online learning is constantly increasing in educational institutions.

This study, therefore, set out to investigate students' perceptions of their own online learning experiences and their interactions with the instructors, the course content, and one another during the pandemic at a foundation university in Turkey. Consequently, this study seeks to obtain data that contributes to the field in terms of online learning and teaching experiences and interactions during online classes as well as offering insights to stakeholders including instructors, instructional designers and administrators to improve course content and quality. Moreover, it aims to examine

the factors that impact students' online education experience and explore how these factors contribute to the quality of online education from the viewpoint of learners.

In the light of all these, the following research questions were developed with an intention to practice ethical research and with no intention to cause any harm to participants:

- How do students perceive and describe their online learning experiences during COVID - 19?
- How do students perceive and describe their interactions with the instructors, students, the course content, and online platforms?

METHOD

The design of the current study is based on a constructivist-interpretive qualitative research design, which relies on the data gathered through participants who share their inner experiences. The goal of the study is to derive patterns of meaning from participants' interpretation of online education and their interaction with the course, other students, and the instructors during the pandemic. Thus, an interpretive-constructivist approach was found appropriate to serve for the above-mentioned research questions.

Participants

The number of students in an English Preparatory School Intensive English Program at a private university and the sample was 12 students from Prep-C classes (see Table 1). A purposive sampling technique was implemented to identify and select the participants of the study. In addition to knowledge and experience, it is important that the participants were available and willing to participate and had the ability to communicate their experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective way. Given all the above and considering the fact that Prep-C level students were both domestic and international students who were more capable of expressing themselves in English. 12 students who were willing to participate in the study became the population of this basic interpretive qualitative study.

Setting

The context of the study was a private university in Turkey in a School of Foreign Languages (SFL) English Preparatory School Intensive English Program (IEP) where 121 domestic and international teachers instruct English as a foreign language. During the pandemic, a total of 24 hours of synchronous classes were held on Microsoft Teams (a web conferencing tool) and Itslearning (a learning management system) synchronously and asynchronously. Students were provided with both weekly digitized content prepared by level coordinators to supplement the course books in all levels and digitized self-study materials parallel to the syllabi in all skills prepared in cooperation with level coordinators and the Technology Enhanced Learning Unit (TELU). Also, the students were assessed online through online tests, online tasks, online participation, and their completion of the weekly video tasks on English Central by completing the video tasks prepared in accordance with the syllabi in all levels except for Prep-C level,

in which students were not assessed but taught to better prepare for the proficiency exam they were required to take to be exempted for the prep school. In the placement test, those who scored 65 and above became eligible to study at their departments. The ones who scored below 65 were streamed into classes in different levels between A1 and Prep-C depending on their language proficiency levels to start studying at the IEP. The IEP consisted of five modules each of which lasted eight weeks and the students whose overall module passing grades were below 65 were required to take the same module. Due to the breakout of the pandemic and the unprecedented lockdown, the whole program had been delivered fully online.

Table 1. *The Demographics of The Participants*

Participants	Pseudonym	Age	Gender		Department
Student 1	S1 BNK	20	Female	Turkish	Mechatronic Engineering
Student 2	S2 HGK	23	Female	Turkish	Sociology
Student 3	S3 ACE	20	Male	Turkish	International Trade and Management
Student 4	S4 ITA	20	Male	Turkish	Business Administration
Student 5	S5 AGI	19	Female	Turkish	Political Science and International Relations
Student 6	S6 BM	19	Female	Turkish	Law
Student 7	S7 VES	19	Male	Turkish	Computer Engineering
Student 8	S8 YY	18	Female	Turkish	English Language Teaching
Student 9	S9 DAY	20	Male	Turkish	Artificial Intelligence Engineering
Student 10	S10 SK	18	Female	Turkish	Law
Student 11	S11 SA	18	Female	Turkish	Sociology
Student 12	S12 ZBK	23	Male	Turkish	Public Relations

Data Collection

The qualitative data were collected from 12 participants of the study during Module 4 of the spring 2021 semester via interviews and observations to analyse their perceptions. Due to time limitations, semi-structured interviews were preferred as it was proved to be a better alternative in cases when interviewers do not have the chance to meet the participants more than once. Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research, the researchers have completed the following steps: (1) member checking, also known as a participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results, (2) prolonged engagement time which refers to intensive contact with the participants, (3) Triangulation by employing multiple data sources, (4) peer debriefing that enables a peer researcher to review and assess transcripts, (5) thick descriptive data, (6) interrater-reliability with dual coding by different researchers, and (7) audit trail referring to documenting every step of research to make better analytic decisions.

Interviews

The researchers contacted the rest of the 12 participants of the study through Microsoft Teams chat messaging system and elicited some demographics about them by asking them about their age, their gender, their nationality, and their departments. Soon after this, the participants were given pseudonyms. Then, the researcher as an interviewer explained (1) what the following steps of the interview procedure would be like, (2) made sure whether all the participants read, signed, and returned the participant connect form and interview protocol, (3) agreed on an interview date and time once again. Then the participants were sent an email and a Microsoft Teams chat message a day before the interview for confirmation. On the day of the interview, the researcher read the interview protocol to the participants. The semi-structured interviews had 12 questions (Appendix B) generated based on Moore's transactional distance theory. The interviews were conducted and recorded on Microsoft Teams. During the interviews, the software Otter.ai was used to turn the conversations into smart notes as transcriptions.

Observations

The class observations in the current study were carried out on Microsoft Teams and therefore, its video recording, the video recordings of two other classes as well as the notes were taken by the researchers during the actual observation and while watching the class recordings constituted the data resources for the observation report.

After being granted permission for the study, the teachers whose classes would be observed voluntarily were contacted to ask for their consent to be observed and they were asked to inform their students that their class would be observed by the researcher.

The researcher observed one live class on Microsoft Teams. The observation was planned to be an overt observation process during which the researcher would play no part and simply observe the online interactions in the online classroom as a non-participant. Natural observation technique, which involves studying the spontaneous behaviours of participants in their natural surroundings and in which researchers simply record what they see in whatever way they can. As for the recording of data, the event sampling method in which the researchers decide in advance what types of behaviours are to their interest and what behaviours or events are to be recorded, ignoring all the other types of behaviour. For this specific observation, the researcher focused on the online interactions among the instructors, the students, the content, and the online platform.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis for this study was employed with the inductive coding approach. After having transcribed all the interviews, the researchers uploaded the transcriptions to NVivo software individually to identify the code and then reach the theme and initiated the inductive coding process. When they compared their NVivo codes, they found that they identified almost the same in different numbers and the wording of the codes was quite similar. They also found that the themes and codes they identified

corresponded to the themes of Moore's Transactional Distance theory. The researchers, then, agreed on the wording of the themes and sub-themes and switched to the deductive coding process. For the next six transcriptions, the researchers identified the phrases or sentences of the participants to find references for them from the text. They both drew individual tables to compare the number of the codes, the number of the appearance of the codes, and finally, they agreed on the codes and themes.

The second data analysis procedure was carried out with the class observation notes. One of the researchers attended a synchronous session for observation purposes. She then shared the video recordings of the live observed class as well as two other class recordings with the second researcher. The researchers individually took memos and notes on the interactions during the classes. They then compared their memos and notes and drew out one final observation report for the results.

FINDINGS

Six themes emerged following the data analysis (Table 2). The researchers provide a thick description of each theme by exemplifying interviewees' experiences and perceptions about online learning with the course content and their interactions with the instructor and other students in online classes.

Table 2. Themes

Themes	Sub-themes	
Structure	Structure	13
Dialogue	Student - Student Interaction	43
	Student - Teacher Interaction	29
	Student - Platform Interaction	30
	Student - Content Interaction	11
Learner Autonomy	Time Management	8
	Goal-orientedness	11
Environmental Factors	Lockdown Effect	8
	Technical Support	15
Quality	Overall Quality	12
	Content Quality	12
	Platform Quality	15
Instructional Preference	Interaction Quality	22
	Instructional Preference	15

Theme: Structure

Most of the students agreed in complaining about the rigidity of the course while others highlighted the flexible structure. Specifically, 7 out of 12 students emphasized that the rigid structure of the course demotivated them. For example, Student 7

explained, "In grammar and writing lessons, I got bored. There were narrowly focused lessons. We had to follow the strict guidelines and practiced them without interaction". Also, Student 1 commented, "It's just writing because we are learning, just one specific way and we are making these continuously, like, we are not changing our style, we are just writing disagree or agree paragraphs". Student 2, on the other hand, underlined the flexibility by saying, "I can reach the content whenever and wherever I want. Also, it was easy to get in touch with teachers. They always replied to my private messages". In addition, Student 6 stated, "You know you can reach it wherever you want, and even on your phone, I have the apps. It's easy and useful for me". Several factors are known to be associated with the rigid or flexible structure of the course such as teacher role, content, platform, and course. It is clear from these findings that these factors did not satisfy some students whereas the easier access to content, teacher, and platforms influenced some other students positively.

Theme: Dialogue

Student - Student Interaction

There were some factors directly affecting the interaction between students. Firstly, all the students complained that the cameras were off during synchronized online learning sessions. For example, Student 1 commented, "Generally, we do not open our cameras, we are not feeling like interactive, we don't know our friends so it's important you know we are staying at home, and we are feeling lonely". Likewise, Student 2 explained, "My friends do not participate in the lesson. Their cameras and microphones are always closed. Our teachers say 'hello' or 'Where are you?'. They always do not respond". Moreover, Student 5 confessed, "I don't open the webcam, just listen. I don't speak. Only the teacher is speaking. Students do not attend lessons. These lessons are boring for me".

Another aspect that students ($n = 6$) emphasized regarding interactions with their classmates is the interactive activities provided by teachers to enhance their speaking skills in the breakout rooms, which is a feature of the video conferencing platform. All the participants valued collaborative tasks in the breakout rooms, adding that such activities enabled them to interact and practice speaking. In this respect, Student 12 underlined the importance of these activities by explaining like this:

"Sometimes we speak in the different rooms in the lessons. The teacher gives us a topic and says, "Talk about this with your friends". And we speak with two or three friends in the other room in the Microsoft Teams. While speaking with my friends, I learned a lot. Sometimes we correct our mistakes and discuss the questions about the topic. I think it is beneficial".

Based on the findings, it could be said that while some students were not delighted with the camera-off situations, others promoted the good side of the breakout room feature in interacting with their classmates.

Student - Teacher Interaction

Except for one participant, the rest of the interviewees were pleased both with the interactions they had with their teachers and with the attitudes of their teachers toward them. They mentioned several factors that teachers did to improve their learning during online education. For instance, Student 6 commented, “I can reach my teachers by email. Also, I can text them through my phone. They are available all the time and trying to text or connect us back as soon as they can”. Also, Student 5 said, “Teachers’ emotions are important. They are energetic every time. I don’t remember any teachers saying we are tired. Their mood affects our performance in the class”. In addition, Student 4 reported the following:

“Our teacher is really good. She tries to help me. Before the exam, I called her and said I have problems with noun clauses. She called me after that and helped me. It was really good. I love my university”.

It is obvious that nearly all the students reported positive ideas about their interactions with teachers.

Student - Platform Interaction

The participants of the study were using Itslearning and Microsoft teams as online platforms (1) to have classes online, (2) to have access to the course content, (3) to interact synchronously and asynchronously, (4) to communicate through short messages, and (5) to do the homework, and (6) to have synchronous and asynchronous tests. Some students including Student 1, Student 2, and Student 3 favoured itslearning more by saying, “I prefer itslearning because it’s easy. We can check grades and feedback directly, and our teacher can check the moment we submitted. It makes sense”. Some others, however, found Microsoft Teams more useful and user-friendly than itslearning. Yet, the participants’ overall perceptions of the online platforms were quite positive. All of them reported that the platforms were good enough to continue online learning. For instance, Student 9 commented, “When I compare with other platforms, Microsoft Teams and itslearning are so easy. They are user-friendly”. Also, Student 10 stated, “I was comfortable because I can easily find anything on the Teams or itslearning, I can also get in touch with my teachers and friends”. Clearly, students were content with the online platforms which were exploited in the program as they enabled them to reach their course content, have online sessions, do homework and tests, interact, and communicate without having problems.

Student – Content Interaction

Another aspect that students emphasized during interviews was the student-content interaction. Students made a total of 43 comments on how they interacted with the course materials and content. 9 participants commented positively on student-content interaction. For instance, Student 7 reported the following:

“I think it’s great (referring to the content on Teams and itslearning) because whenever we want to open a document, like a vocabulary or reading, we have a chance to reach them any time. Yet, that’s great because we don’t get the chance to lose anything. Everything is online. So, that’s good I think in online sessions”.

Similarly, Student 11 stated, “Teams and itslearning... I think it is easy to access information. We have extra documents there. Content in itslearning is good but it can be improved with enjoyable things”. Student 7 said, “We were doing collaborative tasks in the first module. The materials were interactive. It was great for me...”. However, three of the participants provided negative ideas about student-content interaction. For example, Student 5 said, “Content is sometimes boring. I like to see more games and enjoyable materials” and Student 3 stated, “When we use too many classical things for example, the teacher writes something in the word or reading in the class. I can do it after the lesson. I am responsible. These are boring things”.

Theme: Learner Autonomy

Goal orientedness

The researcher asked the reasons why they wanted to learn English and preferred taking online courses although they had a chance to drop out during the course period due to the pandemic. Most of the students ($n = 8$) were aware of the importance of learning English. In this respect, Student 2 emphasized, “I studied scholarship 100%, and I really want to attend this university, and I really want to learn English. I want to speak very fluently, and I want to listen very fluently”. In addition, Student 8 explained, “There was no chance to improve my English for IELTS and TOEFL. I have dreams to live abroad. I forgot English in my country because of studying for exams”.

Time Management

Some students ($n = 8$), on the other hand, felt that they were having a hard time adapting to online education. In distance learning, students have more responsibility for their own learning. Thus, some students with low autonomy might have problems in fulfilling required activities. It was apparent in the interviews that some of them struggled to be on time during online learning. For example, Student 7 asserted, “Mostly, I struggle with waking up early. As I am learning online, I feel more comfortable. So, I had a hard time attending lessons on time.”

Theme: Environmental Factors

Lockdown Effect

Understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is significant for researchers as it was the unique side of the context in the current study, so they directed questions to the participants to consider their online educational environment. As expected, the majority of the students ($n = 8$) uttered the hardships of studying online due to the lockdown. For example, Student 5 remarked, “It was really difficult to be motivated at home. I was mostly sleepy. Due to the pandemic, I could not get out of the house. I miss my friends”. It can be clearly inferred that the lockdown effect posed a difficulty for students in terms of their moods and motivation.

Technical Support

The above-mentioned challenges should be overcome by either student or external support. 8 out of 12 students did not demand any technical support, whereas the rest asked for technical support from teachers and the technical support unit of the school (n = 4). Student 12 illustrates this point clearly by saying, “I haven’t got any technical problems so I don’t need this but some of my friends need some help for technical issues and they could solve it with BAU SFL”.

Theme: Quality

Table 3. Student Ratings on the online program

Area of rating	Very Good	Good	Moderate	
Overall quality	Students 2,3	Students 1,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11	Student 12	
Platform Quality	Students 3,7,8,10	Students 1,2,5,6,9,11,12	Student 4	
Content Quality	Students 3,7,8	Students 1,2,4,5,6,9,10,11	Student 12	
Student –Student Interaction Quality	Student 3	Students 1,2,5,6,7,9,10	Students 8,11	Student 12
Student –Student Interaction Quality	Student 3	Students 1,2,5,6,7,9,10	Students 8,11	Student 12
Student – Teacher Interaction Quality	Students 1,3,7,9,10,11	Students 2,4,5,6,8,12		
Student - Content Interaction Quality	Student 3	Students 1,2,4,5,6,7,10	Students 11,12	
Student Platform Interaction Quality	Students 3,8,10,11	Students 1,2,4,5,6,7, 9,12		

Theme: Instructional Preferences

In our interviews, we asked the participants to make a choice between traditional face-to-face education and online education. All the participants stated that they favoured face-to-face education rather than online education despite emphasizing the merits of distance learning. For example, Student 1 stated that she preferred face-to-face education since she found online education demotivating as they could not see their classmates when their cameras were off. She explained, “When we are in an online classroom, we don’t have to open our cameras. This takes my motivation down”. In addition, Student 6 said, “I feel more energetic and motivated in face-to-face education. Studying at home demotivates me because the home is comfortable, and we often attend the classroom in our bed.” Furthermore, Student 5 commented, “I prefer face-to-face. It is better I think because I want to live a college life in Istanbul but now

there is only me and my computer trying to stay alive.” It can be clearly understood from these answers that face-to-face education is valued more by all the participants when compared to online education.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study sought answers to the research questions of how students perceive and describe their online learning experiences during COVID - 19 and how students perceive and describe their interactions with the instructors, students, the course content, and online platforms. The findings are discussed taking the research questions and the components of transactional distance theory into consideration.

Course Structure

The findings of the study suggest that just over half of the participants were not satisfied with the structure of the course specifically in grammar and writing lessons due to the instructional strategies implemented by teachers. This aspect of the lesson patterns was echoed unanimously by the participants who believed the existing high rigidity of the course as they reported to be doing repetitive tasks. A possible explanation for this might be shown as the teachers' role and the nature of learning a foreign language. First, teachers are responsible for delivering the content by employing proper instructional strategies. They need to make decisions to make learning fun even if the content itself requires structured one-way explanations (CITE). This reason appeared to be contrary to the students' attitudes towards teachers since all of them were satisfied with the performance of their teachers and appreciated their effort in providing necessary resources in or outside the class. However, teachers could have given serious thought to designing the online writing and grammar lessons. Second, learning a language is gradually getting expertise in a set of skills including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Additionally, to master these skills, learners need to receive a rich body of information on grammar or vocabulary. As Cook (2013) reminds us, those who learn a language find grammar or writing more abstract and compelling. Thus, students complain about the more compelling side of the language. 5 out of 12 participants, on the other hand, argued that the course was flexible enough to learn a language online. This result might be explained by the fact that the school was using one of the best online learning platforms (itslearning, Microsoft teams) in terms of interface, design, interaction, ease of use, etc. It could be understood from students' perceptions regarding platforms that they valued the well-designed interface and features including grading, feedback, assignment, the delivery of the content in folders on platforms, chat and message options, and spaces for collaboration, etc. These results corroborate the ideas of Goel et al. (2012), who proposed that the improvement in the quality of learning platforms would impact the flexibility of the course positively.

Dialogue

The findings provided the largest set of significant clusters of sound evidence for the effective interactions among the learner, content, and instructor. It is also noteworthy to highlight that the most obvious finding to emerge from the study is the success of

reciprocal dialogue between the attributes. Dialogue is the backbone of the transactional distance during online education (Best & Conceição, 2017) since its quality is the strong predictor for the learners' buy-in (Strachota, 2003). There are several possible explanations for this result. First, serious training was given to instructors for the purpose of decreasing the dropout rate and improving attention during the online sessions. Second, the content was revised and optimized by removing higher cognitive tasks which required strong personal investment. Third, extra materials were uploaded to the LMS for asynchronous learning. Fifth, the same LMS has been used for a few years in the school. Thus, instructors' familiarity with the LMS has expedited the process.

Contrary to expectations, the participants also expressed some concerns over the dialogic interaction amongst classmates during the online sessions. A possible explanation for this might be that there was not a compulsory open-camera policy for the participants. This influenced learners' attention and motivation as there were many distractors at home as stated by some students.

Learner Autonomy

Several issues were identified regarding students' autonomy during online learning. It is obvious from the findings that some students ($n = 8$) had problems managing their time, maintaining their motivation, and study discipline. These students also reported statements indicating low autonomy on their own learning. This result might be explained by the fact that students are more independent while having online education, which necessitates a high sense of self-management (Ribbe & Bezanilla, 2013). Therefore, the study confirms that learner autonomy is a significant component of online learning. Students who have low autonomy are having difficulty in keeping motivation and discipline. This finding is consistent with that of Hagel and Shaw (2006, p. 285) who state that "students studying off-campus need to take more responsibility for their own learning". In the same vein, Borges (2007) argues that confident digital students are those who have a higher autonomy in his or her own learning. These results are also in line with those obtained by Doğan and Mirici (2017) who stated that Turkish students tend to learn by means of spoon-feeding due to the perceived low autonomy.

Environmental Factors

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with environmental factors in the transactional distance during online learning. Moore (2013) holds the view that the effects of environmental factors need further investigation. In the interviews, a variety of perspectives was expressed in relation to environmental factors including the lock-down effect, and technical support. In all cases, the informants reported that they were badly affected by the pandemic due to the lock-down and stressful unclear times for the future. In this regard, Shevchenko et al. (2021) point out that the unexpected transition to distance education has raised questions regarding the readiness, motivation, and well-being of the students as well as uncertainties about the quality of learning. These results are also in an agreement with those obtained by

Dong (2020). Conversely, Kumar et al. (2021) and Clark et al., (2021) reported that online education was more effective in pandemic conditions compared to face-to-face learning. This result is likely to be related to extra efforts invested by institutions in shifting to online education. Most schools provided training for in-service teachers and bought software to improve the quality and satisfaction. These factors might explain the reason why these students held better feelings towards online education. In addition, some students needed technical support during distance learning. However, it could be understood from the findings that only two of them contacted the IT department to receive outer support. It seems possible that this is partly due to teachers' intervention for minor problems in advance. It could also be explained by students' and teachers' higher digital literacy because Nawaz and Khan (2012) posited, "the degree of dependence on technical support is determined by the degree of users' digital literacy" (p. 41).

Quality

The overall voices regarding the quality of a wide range of attributes including interactions, software, materials, and educators were quite satisfying. It seems possible that these results are due to the dedication of the instructors, rigorous planning and development, sophisticated software, and technical support of the school. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area linking the quality with those attributes (Harasim, 1989, Graham & Scarborough, 2001, and Li, 2002). These results also corroborate the ideas of McGorry (2003), who suggested that distance education describes five general factors that might impact learning experience and gratification with online courses: perceived usefulness of the course, flexibility, interaction, student experience, and engagement. Another possible explanation for the overall satisfaction is that being provided technical support and having access to institutional resources help increase the perceptions of students on quality (Phipps, and Merisotis, 1999). However, it is noteworthy to emphasize that some students uttered the hardships in communicating effectively with their peers during the classes. As mentioned, this is related to the school's policy on the use of cameras.

Instructional Preference

What is interesting about the data in the current study is the participants' instructional preferences. All of them preferred traditional face-to-face instruction rather than online learning. This is a rather remarkable outcome. Additionally, this result is somewhat counterintuitive as a large body of research considers online education as the future of learning with its flexibility (Tabatabaei & Gardiner, 2012; Nguyen, 2015; Palvia et al., 2018). This discrepancy could be attributed to the pandemic effect as there has never been such a long compulsory online education under a lethal outbreak in the world before. As noted by Daniel (2020), the increased anxiety based on uncertainties in life impacted both students and parents' well-being negatively. In other words, a note of caution is due here since this unusual condition may have influenced student experiences deeply. It is also worth mentioning that students having low autonomy and students who found the course structure rigid might have had difficulties in adapting to the new learning environment. In addition, these results are in accord with

recent studies (Dong et al., 2020) indicating that online learning could not become the replacement for traditional learning despite its merits such as accessibility. Instead, it could only be used as an extension of face-to-face education to enrich and diversify the instruction. Similarly, Sibirskaya et al. (2019) found that online education is effective when used in micro-levels but macro-level benefits require further empirical investigations. Furthermore, this finding broadly supports the work of Baczek et al. (2021) who indicate that students do not prefer online learning due to social isolation during the pandemic.

In this investigation, the aim was to assess the efficacy of online education in terms of different attributes including course content, quality, and dialogic interactions based on Moore's transactional distance theory. This paper has also argued the effects of the pandemic on online education. Overall, the results have shown that students were satisfied with the overall quality of their interactions with platforms, students and teachers despite hesitations regarding peer interaction. In addition, the structure of the writing and grammar lessons was found rigid. They expressed their appreciation for the quantity of the content despite some concerns over its variety due to repetitive tasks. Students with low autonomy, on the other hand, had difficulties in adapting to online learning. One unanticipated finding was that students did not prefer online learning as a substitution for face-to-face learning in spite of their positive remarks with regard to the dialogic interactions. This outcome seems to be contrary to the large body of literature on the association between transactional distance and online education. However, this inconsistency is likely to be related to the lock-down effect as an environmental factor during the pandemic since many were tired of staying at home or going out for only a limited time of the day. Additionally, students' low autonomy, insufficient peer interaction and partly rigid structure are the main reasons for this result. This work hereby contributes to existing knowledge of students' perception of online education by focusing on external factors as well as dialogic interactions during the pandemic. More broadly, research is also needed to determine the widespread beliefs on online learning amid COVID-19.

A limitation of the current study was the low English language proficiency level of the students, which posed some difficulties for them to express their ideas fluently and accurately. In addition, the study employed the limited number and profile of the participants in that all of them who volunteered for the study were Turkish students attending a foundation university in Turkey. The results of the study thus could have been more generalizable for the researchers if more students from a wide range of universities had volunteered to take part in such research.

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