

The Views of Students Towards Foreign Language Literacy Through Synchronous Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

The process of education has been affected mostly by the COVID-19 pandemic process, and distance education methods are getting popular. In line with this situation, the aims of this study are to examine the opinions of prep-class university students on foreign language literacy via synchronous distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic process, to analyse their experiences, and to make forward-looking suggestions. This research has been designed as a case study which consisted of 78 university students (43 male, 35 female) studying at the preparatory classes comprised of different faculties of a state university in Turkey during 2019- 2020 academic year. The data of the study were collected with a questionnaire form consisting of open-ended questions. The data obtained from the research were subjected to content analysis, and the findings were supported by direct quotations from students' statements. The results showed that comfortable learning atmosphere at home and easy time management are appreciated whereas technical problems and distraction factors affect learning process negatively. Practical applications like online dictionaries increase motivation and transform learning process into a fun activity. On the other hand, decreased participation and lack of face-to-face language practice opportunities cause low motivation and affect the language learning process adversely. In terms of acquiring language skills, it has been found out that SDE slows down skill training, time allocated for speaking practice is not sufficient, and traditional teaching methods are preferred; however, reading is thought to be relatively more appropriate for SDE compared to other language skills. Last but not least another positive finding of the study is that lecturers' time management skills, professional knowledge, and technological competence are appreciated by the students.

Key words: Synchronous Distance Education, Distance Education, Skill Training, Prep Class University Students, Foreign Language Literacy

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic process has had much influence on every part of all individuals' lives. The educational process has been affected by the pandemic to a great extent, and distance education methods are getting more popular and popular these days. Distance education (DE), a new instructional phenomenon, evolved from correspondence study, open universities, teleconferencing, and networks to today's web-based technologies such as internet and virtual classroom in over a century (Passerini & Granger, 2000; Moore et al., 2011). DE during pandemic process could also be defined as a form of emergency remote teaching (ERT) which "is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (Hodges et al., 2020).

DE is an overarching term used to describe a kind of teaching and learning process that includes the use of various technologies to serve students who are not physically present

in the classroom setting (Benshoff & Gibbons, 2011). Moore and Kearsley (1996, p. 2) actually define DE as "planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result, requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology as well as organizational and administrative arrangements". This general definition involves all the critical elements of a distance education system.

There are many reasons why DE has been highly popular for years. Even though most people would think that the classroom is crucial as a place for formal learning or teaching (Anastasiades et al., 2010), some individuals might have difficulties to attend classroom instruction in certain situations. For example, working adults might not be able to attend face-to-face classes regularly because of family commitments or work problems (Gillies, 2008). There can be limited classroom space because of increasing number of

students in the future, and young students or pupils may be prevented from going to school in certain periods due to poor health, bad weather conditions, pandemic or catastrophic events (White et al., 2010). Similarly, millions of students and children have had to stay at home for months during the COVID-19 pandemic process. Moreover, individuals who are physically disabled might not have equal opportunities to attend school like other people (Norberg, 2012). Thus, it is crucial and meaningful to explore how to create technology-based learning environments that enable people to attend classroom instruction when they are away from the school and the campus (Wang et al., 2017). The perceived benefits of distance learning can be categorized as follows: (1) Flexibility of the material and the time; (2) Accessibility to the material; (3) Visibility of the multimedia and (4) Availability of the data (Bounik & Marcus, 2006, p. 300).

When the related literature is analysed in detail, it could be observed that various terms are used to express DE such as online learning, e-learning or computer-based learning with no difference in meaning (Urda & Weggen, 2000, pp. 8-9; Harasim, 2000). Keegan (1996) and Urda and Weggen (2000) suggested that the term DE is an umbrella term, and these terms (distance learning, distance education, e-learning, and online learning) can be used interchangeably and synonymously. The term DE has been used in the present study on that account.

However, the last advances in DE such as web technologies, web conferencing, the extensive availability of internet, and additionally virtual classrooms constitute a bridge between instructors and students and make it possible to communicate more easily and to interact more flexibly thanks to both asynchronous and synchronous education (Simonson et al., 2012; Taylor, 2002; Urda & Weggen, 2000; Wang & Sun, 2001). Today's technology has improved so impressively that students can access instruction from a desktop computer or a smartphone via web conferencing tools that can simulate the traditional classroom experience (Skylar, 2009). Therefore, increasing implementation of synchronous and asynchronous instruction can open a new series of learning opportunities for education (Passerini & Granger, 2000; Chen et al., 2005; LaBonte et al., 2003)

Asynchronous courses provide learners with a flexible environment that is self-paced with learners accessing course content using a variety of tools such as CD-ROMs, streamed pre-recorded audio/video web recordings, and audio podcasts (Skylar, 2009). Asynchronous learning allows the sequence of interaction between a teacher and a student to occur at different times and also allows learners to access the information anytime and anywhere (LaBonte et al., 2003; Hrastinski, 2008; Romiszowski, 2004). On the other hand, it is possible for teachers to apply traditional instructional methods in online learning environments through the use of synchronous video conferencing platforms. In real-time synchronous courses, the instructor leads the learning, and all learners log on simultaneously and communicate directly with each other at the same time without time and place constraints (Chapman, 1996; Driscoll, 1999; Falowo, 2007; Shi & Morrow, 2006). Synchronous instruction allows

all students to interact and work in groups to complete assignments and to exchange ideas during class discussions (Weiler, 2012; Wang & Sun, 2001).

As synchronous distance education (SDE) environments develop and evolve especially during the COVID-19 pandemic process, there have been a lot of chances to apply it to different programs or courses, and foreign language literacy can be counted as one of these fields. There are some studies on synchronous language learning thanks to DE in the literature, so it is known that synchronous interaction should be a distinct feature of distance language learning in the 21st century since language learning is a skill-based process where especially the acquisition of speaking and listening skills need continuous real-time interaction in the target language (Wang & Chen, 2009). In addition, six defining elements of distance language education were brought together by Wang and Chen (2009, p. 7) as follows:

- Physical distance from teachers and other learners (Keegan, 1996), and possible isolation from the target language community;
- The influence of an educational organisation both in teaching and in the provision of student support services (Keegan, 1996);
- The use of a combination of technologies and media such as print, audio, video and internet tools to provide a learning context both synchronously and asynchronously (Wang & Sun, 2001);
- The provision of multi-way synchronous communication and interaction through media and technology (Wang & Sun, 2001);
- Learners as the key agents of the distance learning process (White, 2003);
- The presence of learning groups for collaborative and cooperative learning.

Together with the COVID-19 pandemic process and thanks to today's developing technology, it is clear that the educational system has been changing irreversibly, and distance education methods are going to be used much more than before in every sector and stage of education with all students from various age groups. This situation requires more studies on DE, in-depth examinations of the issue, analyses of what the stakeholders have experienced in the process, and detection of possible problems in advance. The fact that this study is exclusively about DE in the pandemic process makes it quite influential, and it is believed that it will bring new perspectives to DE. At this point, the aims of this study are to examine the opinions of university students about SDE during the COVID-19 pandemic process, to analyse their experiences, and to make forward-looking suggestions. As an inherent part of similar studies, students' recommendations in order to increase efficiency in SDE process have also been included in the scope of the study. Considering these general objectives, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the students' views on the advantages and disadvantages of SDE in terms of foreign language education?
2. What are the students' views related to SDE method on the acquisition of language skills and sub-skills

(speaking/writing/listening/reading) in foreign language teaching?

3. What are the students' views on lecturers' competency and online exams in SDE?
4. What difficulties do students encounter during synchronous education process?

METHOD

This research has been designed as a case study, which is one of the qualitative research methods, in order to enable university students to evaluate the process they go through during the compulsory and emergent distance education period brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic period around the world. According to Merriam (2018), the case study is an in-depth analysis and description of a limited system.

Study Group

The study group consisted of 78 university students (43 male, 35 female) studying at the preparatory classes comprised of different faculties of a state university in Turkey during 2019-2020 academic year, and the questionnaire form was delivered to the students via Google Forms. Voluntary participation was taken as a basis, and 170 students who were attending SDE classes were reached out via WhatsApp (a free cross platform messaging application). After informing about the study by giving detailed information, the students were asked whether they would like to participate in the study. A total of 78 students agreed to participate and were included in the study group. Information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data of the study were collected with a questionnaire form consisting of open-ended questions which was developed by the researcher (See Appendix 1). While creating the questions, the relevant literature was reviewed, and the opinions of field experts were taken. The questionnaire form was delivered to students via e-mail using Google-Forms and WhatsApp since there was no face-to-face meeting opportunity due to the pandemic. Thanks to internet-based tools allowing multiple mail or message exchanges, interviews could be implemented online or asynchronously in-depth (Creswell, 2018; Kazmer & Xie, 2008). Standardized open-ended questions are prepared in advance and carefully and could be asked to participants in a certain order (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2018).

The data obtained from the research were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis is defined as a systematic technique in which some words of a text are summarized with smaller content categories with specific encodings (Patton, 2002). The process of coding and defining themes continued until two raters agreed on a mutual decision in order to eliminate the bias of the raters and establish reliability of the analysis. Additionally, the findings were supported by direct quotations from students' statements (EN-M-11: male student 11 from Engineering Department, TE-F-45: female student 45 from Technology Department).

Table 1. The Study Group

Gender	n	Department	n
Male	43	Engineering (EN)	32
Female	35	Business and Administration (BA)	16
		Education (ED)	12
		Technology (TE)	9
		Political Sciences (PS)	6
		Forestry (FO)	3
		Total	78

Distance Education Process

With the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities had to switch to DE on March 20, 2020. During this process which is called Urgent Distance education, all universities in Turkey had to run their courses synchronously or asynchronously online. SDE was implemented in the preparatory classes of the university where the study was carried out, and the English preparatory course program including 24 classes a week, which had been implemented through traditional method, was transformed into a distance education course program. Since the students were used to communicate with the chat groups that were already created on the WhatsApp, they were easily informed about the process and asked to participate in simultaneous foreign language education. Some students were not able to participate in simultaneous education because they had problems regarding, their computers, smart phones or the internet connection. SDE was carried out through Google-Meet program, and the link to join video meeting was shared with the students after they logged in. Then the students were connected to the lessons from their homes or anywhere provided that they had an internet connection. Through Google-Meet software, the lecturer can share the course material on computer screen and lecture the class with video and audio so that the students can easily follow the course. During the pandemic process, the lessons were taught in this way for 10 weeks. The data of the study were collected at the end of the course.

Findings

1. Students' views on the advantages and disadvantages of SDE in terms of foreign language education

Considering the views of students regarding the advantages and disadvantages of SDE in terms of foreign language learning in Table 2, it can be said that students mostly think that SDE has disadvantages. The prominent disadvantages mentioned are the inability to be as active and effective as formal education and to practice the language in a realistic setting and technical problems (such as internet interruption, sound fluctuation).

It is possible to assume that expressions of the students who think SDE has various advantages have gathered around ideas such as being comfortable at home, spending more time on foreign language learning, and saving time. The evaluation of students' opinions on synchronous education reveals that most students are in favour of the idea that

SDE has more disadvantages compared to the advantages. Some of the students' responses are as follows:

"The advantages, I suppose, are we don't wake up early every morning and we continue learning. Being wakeful is probably the biggest advantage. The disadvantage is that sometimes there is a focusing problem." (EN-M-11)

"Advantages: Being able to feel more comfortable at home and spend time learning and developing more about the language you are trying to learn. Disadvantages: While learning a language, face-to-face activities are less effective from a distance because of lack of attention, etc." (ED-M-37)

"Positive sides: we need to follow the lesson more carefully to understand, and consequently we learn better. Negative sides: there could be connection problems or difficulty hearing the teacher." (TE-F-45)

"There are no positive sides, but many negative sides. For example, DE is not as efficient as face-to-face education. This reduces our interest in English, so I think, our language education has not been completed yet." (EN-M-65)

"I can join as soon as I wake up because I am at home. That is on the positive sides. The disadvantage is that sometimes you get bored sitting in front of the screen." (BA-F-72)

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of SDE in terms of foreign language education

	Opinions	f	
Advantages	Lessons are taught comfortably in a home environment	15	
	Allocating more time to learn a foreign language	8	
	Continuing education from the point where it stopped	6	
	Fast processing of topics without interruption	5	
	To be able to devote personal time	5	
	To allocate time for practical applications in lessons	5	
	Quick access to the dictionary	3	
	Being able to learn something in the process	3	
	Provides a fun process	1	
	Provides disciplined homework awareness	1	
	Increasing motivation towards the lesson	1	
	Disadvantages	It is not like formal education	30
		Technical connection issues	18
Little practice		11	
Low motivation		9	
Distraction of attention / interest		7	
Decreased participation		5	
The things learned are not enough		1	
Homework pressure	1		
Increased craving for school	1		

2. Students' views related to SDE method on the acquisition of language skills in foreign language teaching

When the opinions of the university preparatory class students regarding the effect level of SDE method on obtaining language skills in foreign language teaching (speaking / writing / listening / reading) are examined, it has been found out that for speaking skill, 25 students expressed a positive opinion and 53 students expressed a negative opinion. Similarly, for writing skill, 34 students expressed a positive opinion and 44 students expressed negatively. However, 39 students expressed a positive opinion for reading skill, and the same number of students expressed a negative opinion. Lastly, the number of students who expressed a positive opinion (n = 21) was lower than those who expressed a negative opinion (n = 57). Then the reasons why students were on positive or negative side were aimed to find out, and their views on achieving these skills through SDE are presented in Table 3.

Students' views on the acquisition of language skills in foreign language teaching through SDE in Table 3 reveal that they show tendency towards having negative opinions. Negative opinions have indicated that the circumstances of SDE cause language skills to develop insufficiently, slow down skill development process, and most importantly listening skill and speaking skill are negatively affected. On the contrary, positive opinions have uncovered that SDE has a positive effect on skill development at an adequate level and that they have a positive effect on the development of reading and writing skills. Some of the students' responses are as follows:

"It slowed down a bit with SDE, but if it was not for DE, we would not be able to take lessons at all and we would fall behind the lesson and English." (TE-M-5)

"We can't gain. Our teachers think we could achieve." (PS-F-17)

Table 3. Acquisition of language skills in foreign language teaching

	Opinions	f
Positive	Sufficiently effective	8
	It positively affects reading and writing skills	7
	It positively affects by giving more homework	2
	It is productive as long as students pay attention to the lesson	2
	Unable to develop skills sufficiently	16
Negative	There are sound problems	7
	Face-to-face training is more effective in skill training	6
	It negatively affects speaking skills	6
	DE slows down skills training	6
	All responsibility in this subject matter is left to the student.	1
	Focusing on lessons decreased	1
	There is a shortage of time for keeping up with the program and raising questions	1
	DE cannot teach these skills	1

"I think it is efficient in terms of writing and reading." (ED-F-39)

"I think our skills continue to develop as homework assignments keeps on going." (EN-M-46)

"I think there is a limit where these skills can be developed with DE. Although the resources seem unlimited, the degree of utilization for each student will vary according to the student's wishes and work." (EN-M-74)

3. Students' views related to SDE method on the acquisition of language sub-skills in foreign language teaching

When the opinions of students regarding the effect level of SDE method on achieving language sub-skills (vocabulary/pronunciation/grammar) are examined, it has been found out that for vocabulary sub-skill, 32 students expressed a positive opinion and 46 expressed a negative opinion. For the pronunciation sub-skill, only 29 students expressed a positive opinion and the rest of them (n = 49) expressed a negative opinion. Finally, nearly half of the students (n = 35) students expressed a positive opinion and the remaining ones (n = 43) expressed a negative opinion for the grammar sub-skill. The students' expressions pertaining to the acquisition of these sub-skills are presented under positive and negative themes in Table 4.

Analysing the students' opinions regarding the acquisition of language sub-skills in foreign language teaching through SDE in Table 4 uncovered that the number of students who expressed negative opinions is higher than those with positive ones. It could be inferred that the students with positive views stated that SDE is as effective as face-to-face

Table 4. Acquisition of language sub-skills in foreign language teaching

	Opinions	f
Positive	Affects positively	11
	Provides efficiency in learning vocabulary	6
	Affects as much as face-to-face education	5
	It becomes effective when supported with homework	5
	Questions could be asked like in face-to-face education	1
	Focuses more on pronunciation	1
Negative	Pronunciation training is adversely affected by internet-related problems	12
	Affects negatively	12
	In face-to-face education, pronunciation and gestures are better understood	4
	Does not affect pronunciation and grammar	3
	DE slows down skill development	3
	Being active like in a classroom environment is impossible	2
	Focusing problem arises	1
Lessons are interrupted due to the Internet problems	1	

education, and it provides efficiency in learning vocabulary and grammar regarding the acquisition of these sub-skills. On the other hand, students with negative views stated that SDE is not effective in acquiring sub-skills as much as face-to-face education, and it has a negative effect especially in learning pronunciation because of internet-related auidial problems, and that pronunciation and facial expressions are better comprehended in face-to-face education. Some of the students' responses are as follows:

"It slowed down a little, but still we continue to learn and improve." (TE-M-5)

"I think these skills can be gained if we follow extracurricular activities." (EN-M-21)

"It just has a better contribution to the vocabulary section." (FO-F-28)

"We can study the words ourselves, but pronunciation is not very healthy, especially through the internet." (BA-M-43)

"During pronunciation activities, we sometimes cannot hear our teachers due to the application errors, but we try to correct it by writing, it is effective in language and vocabulary learning." (EN-F-71)

4. Students' views on lecturers' competency in SDE

The investigation of the students' opinions regarding their lecturers' competency in SDE revealed that for the statements *"I think that the instructors have sufficient professional knowledge for simultaneous distance education"* and *"I think the academic staff and the administration manage this process efficiently"*, 59 students stated a positive opinion and 19 students stated a negative opinion. In a similar vein, for the statement *"I think the lecturers have sufficient technological knowledge"*, 60 students expressed a positive opinion and 18 students expressed a negative one. For the statement *"I think the lecturers use their time efficiently while teaching"*, 63 students were on the positive side and only 15 students were on the negative side.

5. Students' views on online exams in the SDE

When the opinions of students regarding online exams in synchronous education process in Table 5 are taken into consideration, it is possible to say that students have both positive and negative views.

While students with positive opinions express that online exams are clear, understandable and similar to the ones in face-to-face education, students with negative opinions expressed that they experience difficulty regarding the duration of the exams which are more challenging than face-to-face exams and that they cause or lead stress and tension. In general, it could be interpreted that there exist the positive and negative aspects of online exams in SDE. Some of the students' answers are as follows:

"There was a problem regarding the duration of writing exam because it was difficult for me to type on the keyboard." (EN-M-54)

"The exams were very understandable and the system was easy to use, but the stress and tension vary

Table 5. Online exams in SDE

	Opinions	f
Positive	The exams were very clear and understandable	29
	They were not different from face-to-face exams at school	11
	It was the best way through such a process	6
	Created a less stressful environment	5
	They were a different kind of examination where pen and paper were not used	3
	They were efficient	2
	Negative	There was a time shortage
	They were harder than face-to-face exams	9
	Exams created stress and tension	6
	Internet problems caused problems	6
	They were open to cheating	4
	Focusing was hard	3
	Ideal for midterm exam but not for the final exam	2
	Waiting for other classes before the exam created low motivation	1
	It was scary to be in front of camera	1

Table 6. Experiences / difficulties

	Opinions	f
Personal Challenges	Feeling bored because of sitting at the computer	5
	Absenteeism due to sleep patterns	5
	Low motivation	5
	Inability to understand	2
	Inability to complete homework	2
	Low performance due to online exam	3
	Impromptu attendance	1
Environmental Difficulties	Inability to focus due to family	6
	Challenging lessons at home setting	4
	Absenteeism due to being busy at home	5
	Length of class time	2
	Lack of access to textbooks	1
Technical Challenges	Internet problem	30
	Problems with sound	3
	Lack of hardware (computer, camera, headset, microphone)	3
	Power outages	2
	Following the course on the phone screen	1

depending on the student. Of course, it affected me negatively.” (EN-F-7)

“I think the exam was decent. Because there was not that anxious exam environment. We took the exam comfortably at home.” (PS-F-18)

“The exams were very bad for me. I did not have a problem with my teachers since they explained everything very well, but the time given for procedures such as marking was very short and I had problem related to timing. In addition, I sometimes had Internet-related problems in listening parts, so I did not like it.” (ED-F-35)

“Online exams are similar to traditional ones, but we are used to holding a pen and paper in hand.” (TE-M-47)

6. Findings regarding students' views regarding difficulties

Students were also asked to mention about difficulties they encountered and their language learning experiences while attending SDE. Their statements were grouped under three themes and presented in Table 6.

Considering the difficulties students faced, it is possible to deduce that the drawbacks mentioned are personal, environmental and technical. In particular, it is apparent that the majority of students had difficulties related to the internet connection and audio problems in SDE process. On the contrary, students also stated that they have some other difficulties such as being unable to focus on the lessons due to being at home, feeling bored with the lessons, and being unable to attend the classes due to the problems experienced in their sleep patterns. Some of the students' responses are as follows:

“The only difficulty I have is that my sleep pattern is disrupted due to quarantine, so I miss lessons from time to time.” (BA-M-8)

“It can be difficult to focus on lessons while at home.” (BA-F-15)

“It is difficult to wake up early, and it is unnecessary to have online classes at usual school-time, and a 2-hour class is enough. Waiting in front of the screen for 5 hours does not help anyone.” (ED-M-30)

“There are many internet problems. Especially the internet connection is generally slow.” (EN-M-51)

“Due to my location, I have no chance to connect to the internet because the internet infrastructure is weak. The cost of Internet provided by mobile operators are highly expensive. We cannot use the internet service provided by CoHE on the platform we are using. There may be interventions during the lesson. We could also have difficulties because we do not have enough equipment.” (TE-M-73)

7. Findings regarding the recommendations of students in order to increase efficiency in SDE process

The last open-ended question aimed to gather suggestions of students regarding what could be changed in order to increase efficiency in language learning through SDE. The students' responses were grouped under two themes: (1) things students want to change (2) things students want to add and were presented in Table 7 below:

When suggestions of students regarding what could be changed within the context of SDE process in order to increase efficiency are examined, the important points came forward are reducing the course time, using another

Table 7. Recommendations of the students

	Recommendations	f
Things students want to change	Duration of classes could be reduced	7
	Instead of “Google-Meet”, another application could be used	3
	Less homework could be assigned	2
	A connection without internet could be provided	2
	Students could be given more right to speak	1
	The scope of the grammar classes could be increased	1
	Deadlines for homework assignments could be extended	1
Things students want to add	Club like activities could be added	2
	Entertaining activities such as “Kahoot” could be added	2
	Absence control could be provided with attendance list	1
	Regular break times could be created	1
	Training for general revision at the end of the process could be organised	1
	Coffee-Talk sections could be added between classes	1

application instead of “Google-Meet”, and reducing the number of assignments. Regarding what could be added, the remarkable ones are club activities, entertaining content such as “Kahoot”, and coffee-talk sections between classes. Some of the students’ responses are as follows:

“There are some sound problems with the Google Meet application, a better application might be found, if not, it does not pose much of a problem.” (BA-M-8)

“I would like to have an internet-free connection, and I would participate more.” (EN-M-24)

“I have two wishes: Class hours were not that long and less homework was given with at least a little empathy in this period.” (ED-F-40)

“I wish our breaks were regular like school.” (TE-M-44)

“I would like the clubs which were organised during face-to-face education to continue and the Coffee Talk (5-10 Minutes) sections between classes. Many browser extensions and platforms could be used for this, and therefore social relations of students and teachers would not be interrupted. For example, I think Netflix Party add-on would be a good example for TV series club or feedback could be given to students by using Google Documents’ instant text update feature for Writing club.” (EN-M-74)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Martin et al. (2012) asserted that virtual classroom technologies are a cost-effective method for SDE which were first realized through video conferencing tools. In overall, this study shows that the use of SDE in foreign language learning in preparatory classes at higher education level has a slightly negative impact on students. It has been concluded

that while comfortable learning atmosphere at home and easy time management are appreciated, technical problems and distraction factors affect learning process negatively. McBrien et al. (2009) suggested that due to the technical problems, some students had the feeling of losing control and decreasing “their sense of autonomy”. However, they also discovered in their study that the students who took part less in class discussions partook more in synchronous online ones.

In the present study, some students are in favour of practical applications like using online dictionaries during lessons which is another factor that increases motivation and transforms learning process into a fun activity. On the other hand, decreased participation and lack of face-to-face language practice opportunities cause low motivation and affect the language learning process adversely. According to Barbour (2012), what motivates students to become eagerly involved in SDE is the most challenging part. Unlike individual learning methods, SDE directs students to a social educational setting “where each student feels a part of a larger learning community” (Weiler, 2012). While homework assignments in distance learning mean pressure for some students, they could also be considered as a promotional activity that provides discipline for others.

In terms of acquiring language skills, reading is thought to be relatively more appropriate for SDE compared to other language skills. However, speaking is thought to be the most challenging skill to acquire because of emerging technical problems and being unable to concentrate on the subject as well as the unfamiliar nature of distance learning. Moreover, it has also been deduced that SDE slows down skill training, time allocated for speaking practice is not sufficient, and traditional teaching methods are preferred. Bounik and Marcus (2006) suggested that teachers using SDE should overcome psychological and communication problems that could stem from the distance related to e-learning. Therefore, distance-learning courses should be designed to support a feeling of closeness. Cao et al. (2009) stated that in order to increase student satisfaction, simultaneous interaction is of great importance and practitioners should focus on utilizing synchronous interactions in virtual classrooms. Furthermore, Chen et al. (2015) put forward that suitable instructional plan and facilitation for class interaction should be provided.

When it comes to sub-skills, it has been understood that traditional teaching is much more preferred because pronunciation exercises and gestures are better recognized; on the other hand, in SDE, problems related to the internet connection arise, and students are not active as in a real classroom setting. Nevertheless, appropriate homework assignments could support teaching sub-skills in SDE.

Surprisingly, as for the lecturers’ competency in SDE, it has been seen that students appreciate their lecturers’ time management skills, professional knowledge and technological competence and think that their lecturers are able to handle the educational process efficiently.

While students mostly think that exams in SDE have the same characteristics as the ones in traditional teaching, there are also some opinions that they were harder, different from

traditional ones and cause some problems such as being unable to complete the tests in time, losing internet connection and leading to cheat. Whereas online exams create a less stressful environment for some students, they create stress, tension and scare for others. Thus, it could be suggested that further studies might focus on online exams and their psychological effects.

Regarding the difficulties students encountered through SDE, it has been observed that technical problems constitutes the biggest part. Studying at home creates difficulty, and lessons, which take relatively a long time when attended online, generate concentration problems. Although students did not give detailed information on what caused distraction, it has been thought that sitting in front of a screen for a long time and being physically far from their classmates might cause distraction. Traditional classroom setting provides a vivid social atmosphere where their presence, whether active or not, gives messages to others, so they communicate with them all the time. This physical existence keeps students awake and prevent distraction to an extent. On the other hand, students need to force themselves to follow virtual courses while they are physically alone. Moreover, it was their first year at university, and they had not met their classmates or lecturers in person. Therefore, they might have felt alienated and lost their motivation from time to time during SDE.

When students were asked to give suggestions in order to enhance SDE, they offered alterations and additions as follows: the number of homework assignments could be reduced, and their deadlines could be extended; more speaking practices should be placed, and the durations of the lessons could be shortened. Also, extracurricular activities, coffee-talk sections, regular break times, entertaining activities and general revisions were mentioned in this context. Apparently, these suggestions are related to not only SDE but also other types of teaching especially face-to-face teaching. Weiler (2012) asserts that “simply providing online experiences does not ensure a quality experience for student. Instead, online instructors must purposefully design learning activities that collectively create a quality educational experience for all students.” So, every step in SDE or ERT should be planned carefully and purposefully.

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APPENDIX 1

ONLINE INTERVIEW FORM FOR SYNCHRONOUS DISTANCE EDUCATION

CLASS NAME:
GENDER:
DEPARTMENT:

- What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous distance education in terms of foreign language education?
- What do you think of online exams in the synchronous distance education?
- What do you think of the effects of synchronous distance education method on the acquisition of language skills (speaking / writing / listening / reading) in foreign language teaching?

LISTENING
SPEAKING
READING
WRITING

- What do you think of the effects of synchronous distance education method on the acquisition of language sub-skills (vocabulary/pronunciation/grammar) in foreign language teaching?

VOCABULARY
GRAMMAR
PRONUNCIATION

- What do you think of the lecturers' competency in synchronous distance education?

I think the instructors have sufficient professional knowledge for simultaneous distance education
I think the lecturers have sufficient technological knowledge
I think the lecturers use their time efficiently while teaching
I think the academic staff and the administration manage this process efficiently

- How do you explain your experiences during the process? What difficulties did you experience?
- What do you suggest or want to change in order to increase efficiency in synchronous distance education process?