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Difficulties encountered by students during distance education in times of confinement in Turkey

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This article presents the issue of distance education in times of confinement. In particular, it points out the difficulties encountered by masters and doctoral students at French Language Teaching Department (FLT) of Marmara University during distance education. In this research, a semi-structured interview form, one of the qualitative research methods, was applied to 20 students. The data was collected from May to November, 2020. The main objective of this research is to make a general assessment of the data collected in the university context, more particularly in the masters and doctoral programs. With regard to the results of this research, it has been found that overwork, some technical problems, physical, psychological and financial problems are among the most pronounced problems.

Key words: Distance education, French language teaching, difficulties, students, master, PhD, higher education, lockdown.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the emergent transition from face-to-face to distance education due to the COVID-19 health crisis. According to data published by UNESCO (2020), "191 countries have closed all their schools and more than 1.5 billion students from pre-school to tertiary level have been affected". This study also assesses the encountered problems only in higher education context.

As point out, Karsenti et al. (2020), "[...] the emergent transition from face-to-face to distance education, has become a central concern for universities around the world which seem to have transformed in a matter of months, thanks to Herculean efforts over the past summer, to prepare their trainers". As well as teachers, the emergent transition has influenced students around

the world. This research will only be covering the difficulties encountered by students in distance education.

The research problem covers Covid-19 pandemic, which is a global health crisis, that forced schools to immediately switch to distance education. The compulsory and immediate transition to distance education poses several problems such as overwork, technical, physical, psychological and economic problems. This period has negative effects on teachers as well as students.

The main purpose of this study is to make a general assessment of the situation regarding distance education by defining the difficulties encountered by masters and doctoral students during distance education in the university context. The research was carried out from

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May 2, 2020 to November 1, 2020 at French Language Teaching Department (FLT) of Marmara University with 20 masters and doctoral students enrolled in the Institute of Educational Sciences.

As regards to distance education, with the emergent transition from face-to-face to distance education due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it was discovered that new terms were used: “[...] to name this educational crisis (pedagogical continuity, alternative measures, teaching or learning at home, etc.)” (Karsenti et al., 2020). This definition shows that distance education has many names such as distance education, online teaching.

Distance education “[...] is certainly not just an “uploading” of content, but the conception of a new form of learning using innovative tools. Of course, it also requires a new conception of interactions among trainers, learners, tools, and content [...]” (Merle and Yerlès, 2003). In the present study, this quote shows the importance of interactions between teachers, students, technical tools and training content.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research method was used in the study. “Most of the qualitative studies carried out in education can be considered as case studies because the qualitative studies aim to shed new light on particular educational phenomena” (Poisson, 1992). The sampling consists of 20 masters and doctoral students enrolled in the Institute of Educational Sciences at Marmara University. As the data collection tool, an online semi-structured interview was conducted with 20 students and their responses were collected. Blanchet and Gotman (2013) define the interview “as an investigative technique, which emerged from the need to establish a sufficient egalitarian relationship between the investigator and the participants so that the latter does not feel like being interrogated. Instead, they are only being asked for their opinions on the subject”. Eight questions, three of which are open-ended questions, were developed for the semi-structured interview. After developing the interview questions, a pilot study was conducted and validated by the experts. According to the opinions of experts, necessary changes were made. Then, the interview was conducted with 20 students. All the participants gave their full consent to be interviewed. The data was collected and held anonymously. It consists of three main questions in addition to the demographic information of the participants:

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Nationality:
4. Civil status:
5. Do you work? If so, where do you work?
6. What platforms did you use during distance education?
7. What difficulties have you encountered during distance education?
8. What are the advantages of distance education?

RESULTS

According to interviews, the data was collected on the difficulties encountered during the distance education period for analysis. During the interview, 20 students

were asked eight questions and their answers were noted. The length of the interviews was approximately ten minutes.

Demographic information

Regarding the data relating to demographic information, there are five variables such as age, sex, nationality, marital status and work. While for the age of the students, it ranges from 22 to 49 years old and the average age is 29.5 years old. The demographic information of the participants is shown in Table 1.

Regarding the gender of the students, the sampling consists of sixteen women and four men shown in Table 1.

Sixteen participants are Turkish citizens. The other participants consist of one French, one Cameroonian along with two French-Turkish dual citizenship holders. Considering the marital status of the participants, nine participants are single and 11 are married.

When the participants were asked about whether they were working, it was learnt that 14 of the participants were employed and all of them were working in the field of education. The remaining six participants continue only their education. When the occupation of the masters and doctoral students was examined separately, it was observed that all doctoral students were working. It was determined that all of the doctoral students, except one student, work in different public universities, and only one student was teaching at a private school. As for the master students, it was observed that six participants were working as French teachers in different private schools, from kindergarten to high school. It was found out that only one student gave private lessons, and another was working as a lecturer at a public university.

Considering the programs used in the department of French Language Teaching during the distance education period, all masters and doctoral students have only used Zoom and Skype without exception.

Difficulties encountered by students during distance education period

The problems encountered by the students in distance education period are shown in Table 2. All of the participants in the study pointed out that the workload has increased in terms of both education and chores. While everyone, except for one participant, mentioned that the workload has increased in this process, all female participants (16) highlighted that the workload at home was higher than in the past. During this period, all participants encountered some technical problems, while the most important problem was seen as the internet connection failure and its efficiency. Only one participant complained that she could not attend classes regularly due to the power failure. Most of the participants

Table 1. Demographic information.

Variable	n
Sex	
Female	16
Male	4
Nationality	
Turkish	16
Franco-Turkish	2
French	1
Cameroonian	1
Marital status	
Married	9
Single	11
Occupation	
Working	14
Not working	6

Table 2. Problems encountered by the students during distance education period.

Types of problem	n
Overwork	
Education	19
Chores	16
Technical problems	
Internet connection	16
Weak network	14
Power failure	1
Physical complaints	
Back pain, neck pain and headache	15
Eye disorders	14
Physical fatigue	11
Psychological difficulties	
Concentration problem at home	8
Mental fatigue	8
Lack of motivation	5
Isolation and loneliness	2
Financial difficulties	
Lack of materials	3

mentioned that their physical problems such as back pain, neck pain, headache, and eye disorders are among the most common problems. Intense physical fatigue is stated by more than half of the participants (11). Another

problem is grouped under the title of “psychological problems”. Half of the participants experienced psychological problems arising from this period. Concentration difficulty, lack of motivation and mental

fatigue is among the most common psychological problems. Only two participants complained of isolation and loneliness. Economic difficulties are another problem and only three participants expressed this problem.

DISCUSSION

In this research, which was conducted in the context of this model and centers on the university students, it is aimed to determine how distance education has affected students and its positive and negative sides. As a result of the study, it was observed that there were more problems and difficulties, as well as various advantages. Our findings are supported by other researchers (Kaddouri and Bouamri, 2010).

After analyzing the data, the following problems were found: overwork, technical, physical, psychological and financial difficulties.

Overwork

Regarding the workload that all students complained about, Hérou and Lantheaume (2008) also described this period as «endless work». It has been stated that distance education takes more time than face-to-face education and requires more energy. Therefore, distance education is more tiring. In line with the data collected from female participants, it has been observed in many studies that women's workload both at home and at work has increased more compared to the past (Alon et al., 2020; Cin, 2020; Fabre, 2020). All these studies, as in almost every subject, draw attention to gender inequality even in higher education. While it was observed that both women's mental and physical workload increased (Fabre, 2020); in another study, inequality between men and women in terms of workload was also emphasized (Alon et al., 2020).

However, as Fabre (2020) mentions, "confinement is particularly a difficult time for women, in that, the burden of their mental load is increasing which can also be observed through comments shared on social media. It is particularly difficult to manage the teleworking, children's education, cooking and cleaning together.

The findings of this study are in agreement with previous studies. Additionally, Bautier (2020) stated that teachers also complained about the same problems.

Technical problems

One of the important problems encountered in the period is the technical problems relating to the internet connection. These problems were observed in all participants. Similarly, this observation complies with other studies. In a study conducted with 3300 university students in Morocco, it was found that "78% of the participants had problems with internet connection" (El

Marhum et al., 2020). Technical problems encountered in distance education have also been discussed in many studies and their findings support the present research (Bautier, 2020; Karsenti et al., 2020; Kaddouri and Bouamri, 2010).

Physical problems

Physical problems are also among the important issues mentioned by the participants. It has been observed that the vast majority of participants suffer from back pain, neck pain, headache, and various eye problems, caused by sitting for too long in front of a computer. A study conducted by "Association Paritaire Pour la Santé et la Sécurité du Travail, Secteur Affaires Municipales (2020)" indicates that physical fatigue and headache were among the most common complaints. So, this association found also similar disorders.

Psychological difficulties

Psychological problems are also important side effects of this period. Half of the participants in the study complained of some problems such as lack of concentration, lack of motivation, mental fatigue and loneliness. Béché and Schneider (2019) also mentioned isolation and emphasized that the students felt lonely in this period. While psychological problems were found in half of the students in this study, the rate was one in four in our previous research on teachers (Yücelsin-Taş and Le Lièvre, 2020). In our previous study, it was observed that teachers also encountered the same problems. In another research, the problem of isolation and concentration difficulty was observed (APSAM, 2020).

Financial difficulties

Economic difficulties are also among the problems most commonly stated by the participants. In the present study, a small number of students (three) pointed out that there was only one computer at home and they shared it with other family members. In addition, it was stated that there were problems in attendance to the lessons and preparing homework, especially if there is more than one student at home. Similarly, there are publications that mention the necessity of using the computer with family members: "I share my personal computer with my daughter[...]" (Bautier, 2020).

In addition to the problem of the financial difficulties, our study also mentions inequality among students. "The most worrying point is inequality among learners. Already existing inequality in our education system will grow because families are neither on economic equality nor especially social and cultural to help their children and guide them" (Bouvier, 2020). Also, another study points out that "[...] the pandemic has further exacerbated

existing social inequities, both in educational institutions and in digital use. More specifically, learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds seem to have encountered particular difficulties, especially with regard to access to digital devices and the Internet"

Benefits of distance education

Besides the disadvantages mentioned earlier, it has been observed that this period has some positive aspects. Many of the participants mentioned not going to work as an advantage. Therefore, it was pointed out that not wasting time on the road and having a free environment at home are some positive aspects for the participants.

The following examples are cited on the subject: fifteen students mention some advantages such as "there is no more travel to do" and "distance learning has more freedom". Université Laval (2020) has been offering distance education courses since 1984 and today the university highlights several advantages of distance education. Another example is "greater flexibility in the organization of travel and work schedule for students and teachers". In other words, it is possible to say that we can talk about autonomy in terms of time management.

Conclusion

Distance education has become a way of communication and teaching/learning required by the Covid-19 pandemic today (International Association of Universities, 2020). Although advancing technology will necessitate distance education in the future, the existence of the pandemic today has exposed us to the reality of distance education. Distance education, which was not used often before, has become very important today. It will not be easy for teachers and students to adapt to this type of education in a short time. Teacher training is also an indispensable reality for successful and effective distance education (Vachon, 2013). Although distance education has some advantages, it is a fact that it also carries more problems. In the present study, similar results were found in accordance with the literature review. This study had to be conducted on a small sample due to the low quota of the current masters and doctoral programs; this situation is the most criticized part of the study. Therefore, it is believed that conducting studies with broader participation and more detailed inquiries will reveal the realities of distance education.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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