



University-level EFL students' views on learning English online: a qualitative study

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to determine Turkish EFL (English as a foreign language) students' perceptions about learning English through distance education (henceforth DE) during the COVID-19 pandemic. To realize this aim, the study adopted a qualitative research design and used the metaphor elicitation technique, semi-structured telephone interviews, and an online focus group interview to collect data. The results of the analysis show that most of the students prefer face-to-face English education in a classroom setting rather than online education. Despite some positive comments about DE like it being more comfortable for shy students, students' attitudes toward DE were found to be mostly negative because of the challenges they faced like technical problems, health and focus issues, a lack of interaction and speaking practice in the target language, feelings of anxiety and isolation and low motivation, and DE not addressing all learning styles effectively. Using several qualitative data collection tools, this study provides valuable insights into the thoughts and experiences of students about online English language learning, which can be taken into account to enhance future online language teaching and learning efforts. This study also offers some suggestions to make online EFL education more productive and effective.

Keywords Distance education · Online language learning · ESL · EFL students' perspectives · COVID-19 · Metaphors

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had great impacts on education system worldwide and almost 1.6 billion learners were negatively affected because of school closures (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Governments, to prevent the spread of the virus, had to take some important precautions like social distancing, quarantine, the closing of workplaces, public places (e.g. shopping centres) and schools (Porcher, 2020; United Nations, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020). As in many other countries in the world, every school in Turkey moved to online education to slow and prevent the spread of this contagious disease. Like other education levels, higher education was also greatly affected by the pandemic because as a result of the measurements to prevent the spread of the virus, universities and colleges had to make a sudden move from face-to-face education to online education (Marinoni et al., 2020; Rashid & Yadav, 2020). This unexpected sudden switch to virtual learning was difficult and challenging for both teachers and learners, as most of them were not used to the world of online learning (Marinoni et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Although many studies on distance or online education¹ have been conducted before, it has never been as popular as it was during the pandemic. Therefore, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, DE, in other words, online education has become the focus of many researchers and it has been studied and is still being studied from different angles such as from students' perspectives (e.g. Maqableh & Alia 2021; Unger & Meiran, 2020); from both teachers' and learners' perspectives (e.g. Niemi & Kousa 2020); in terms of challenges and opportunities it brings (e.g. Adedoyin & Soykan 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Joshi et al., 2020); in terms of different variables like motivation, self-efficacy (e.g. Patricia Aguilera-Hermida 2020), online learning readiness, course satisfaction and perception (e.g. Wei & Chou 2020); in terms of the efficiency of different online learning platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet and etc. (e.g. Fuady et al., 2021); in terms of its role in different education levels like primary schools, high schools and so on (e.g. Setyowati Putri et al. 2020; Yates et al., 2020). However, the number of studies with a specific focus on language learners' perspectives on online language education is very limited, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. As language learning, being different from theoretical lessons, requires a learning platform where learners can effectively interact with each other and practice the target language, it seems critical to listen to learners' voices, experiences and feelings about this process to enhance online learning platforms in terms of language education. Considering this situation, the current study explores EFL students' thoughts and experiences regarding the distance language learning process by using different data collection methods like metaphor elicitation, telephone interviews and focus group discussions. To accomplish the objectives of the study, the following sections will be focused on in order: (a) background for the study, (b) methods and data collection procedure, (c) results of the analysis, (d) discussion, and (e) conclusion.

¹ In this study, "distance education" and "online education", and "distance learning" and "online learning" are used interchangeably.

2 Background

2.1 Distance education

The emergence of DE is based on the idea that education can continue without conventional means, that is to say, without face-to-face meetings between teachers and learners (Holmberg, 2005), and recent technological developments and the changing needs of society made DE possible (White, 2003). DE, as Moore and Kearsley (2005) state, refers to “planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements.” (p. 2). According to White (2003), the conventional form of education, i.e. face-to-face education, differs from DE in terms of place and time, and she states that distance learning occurs mostly in two ways: synchronously or asynchronously. While the synchronous education occurs at the same time (a particular, pre-determined real time) and different place (DP), the latter occurs at a different time (available at any time) and different place (DP) and learners are free to watch videos whenever and wherever they want. In synchronous education, communication between tutors and learners takes place within a fixed real time and this makes immediate feedback possible for the learners, which is not the case in asynchronous learning (White, 2003). Similarly, Holmberg (2005) explains the DE types from the perspective of two types of communication: one-way and two-way communication. While in one-way communication, pre-designed learning materials are sent to the target students to study in a flexible time and place; in two-way communication, interaction (e.g. teacher-learner or learner-learner interaction) is included in the learning process in a particular learning time (Holmberg, 2005). These learning or communication types in DE are especially important for language learners because in the online learning environment compared to face-to-face education context, learners do not mostly seem to receive the same amount of L2 input, teacher feedback and support, and they do not find the same amount of opportunity of practice and interaction in the target language, and learners take more responsibility for their own learning (Doughty & Long, 2003; White, 2003, p. 22). Therefore, it is critical to investigate distance language education through the eyes of learners. The following section gives examples of previous studies on this issue.

2.2 Previous studies

With a sudden transition to DE worldwide, language learners’ views and thoughts about online learning have become a popular focus of attention of some researchers. For instance, Maican and Cocorada (2021) conducted a study to focus on students’ perceptions about online foreign language education during the coronavirus pandemic. The researchers included Romanian university-level students studying different foreign languages like English, Spanish, German and French and used both quantitative and qualitative methods in their study. The researchers found that students had both negative and positive emotions toward online foreign language learning. Also, the students stated that limited interaction with their classmates and

teachers in the online platform was a problem for them and they also reported their concern and worries about the lack of improvement in their foreign language skills. Moreover, they reported problems like feeling stressed, unable to concentrate, having headache (migraine), feeling too shy to actively participate during class because of their concerns about their language proficiency level.

Similarly, Zhang and Cui (2010) investigated the beliefs of the Chinese undergraduate first year and junior students ($n=90$) who were learning English through DE. One of their findings was that ineffective instruction, insufficient feedback and communication with their teachers and peers were among the problems that the students underlined. Most of them reported that learning English via DE was more difficult for them compared to face-to-face language education. Especially, the first year students experienced anxiety related to learning English in DE. However, those students with more experience regarding DE reported less anxiety and believed that autonomous language learning was important for them.

Agung et al., (2020) carried out a study to find students' thoughts about online education during the coronavirus pandemic. The study included sixty-six students (38 freshmen, 20 sophomores, 8 juniors) from the English Language Education Study Program in Indonesia. In their study, they reported that students had problems with the Internet connection because of the lack of infrastructure and most of the students did not show enthusiasm toward online classes. However, they were satisfied with the feedback they received from their lecturers during online learning.

Mese and Sevilen (2021) carried out a study with 12 English preparatory school students at a private university in Turkey to determine students' thoughts about DE and its effects on their motivation. As a data collection tool, in addition to semi-structured interviews, they used students' creative writings on the positive and negative sides of online education. The results of the thematic analysis showed that students generally were not satisfied with online education as it did not give them the opportunity to socialize with their friends and it was difficult for some students to maintain self-discipline at home. Also, other factors that caused a decrease in student motivation were the learning environment and content and organization of the online courses. Based on the previous research, this study explores students' perspectives about online EFL education by using various data collection tools like the metaphor elicitation method, telephone and focus group interviews, and addresses the following research question:

1. What are EFL students' perceptions about learning English through online education?

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and participants

The participants consisted of English preparatory school students of the Foreign Languages School at a state university in Turkey who were enrolled in different faculties like engineering, aeronautics and astronautics, social sciences and humanities, tourism, political sciences and so on. The preparatory school program offered Eng-

lish instruction to non-compulsory students who wanted to take English classes to improve their English as well as compulsory students who did not take or failed English proficiency exam at the beginning of the school year and were required to complete the English preparatory program before taking classes from their undergraduate programs at the university. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the school had to run classes completely online on Adobe Connect for both Spring and Fall semester. Every weekday, the students attended 6 online synchronous class sessions with the duration of 40 min each, which corresponds to a total of 4 h (240 min) of instruction per day. Four days a week were allocated for the main course, which focused on improving four language skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading, writing) along with coursebooks, workbooks, other supplementary materials, and the remaining one day was allocated for the reading and writing lessons for extra practice of these skills. The classes were held synchronously and recorded to be accessible to the students. The average age of the participants was 19.3, ranging from 17 to 23 years. The students were informed that participation in the study was on a voluntary basis and only those who consented to take part were included in the study. The data of the study were collected during the 2020–2021 academic year spring term. 108 (58 females and 50 males) students responded to the metaphor questionnaire, which was disseminated to participants through Google Forms. For the one-on-one telephone interviews, 21 students, 16 females and 5 males, volunteered to participate. For the semi-structured focus group discussion, 6 students (4 females and 2 males) consented to take part in. However, as one of the female students' internet connection was bad, she had to leave the interview. The focus group interview was completed with 5 students in total.

3.2 Data collection process

The current study employed a qualitative design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions about learning English through DE and used three qualitative data collection tools: a metaphor elicitation survey, one-on-one telephone interviews and an online focus group interview. The main reason to use diverse qualitative data sources was to see the learners' thoughts and beliefs from different perspectives and obtain comprehensive information. Franklin and Ballan (2001) state that "Qualitative researchers seek trustworthiness in data collection by using multiple methods and divergent data sources" (p. 283). Based on this explanation, to enhance data richness and enrich the conceptualization of the target phenomenon, individual interviews and focus group interviews were included in addition to the metaphor survey. This made it possible to see the various aspects of the topic under study and understand it better (see Caillaud & Flick 2017). Furthermore, using both direct and indirect methods in a study can help cross-comparison of the results of the collected data, which can help to get more reliable and valid results (Wan & Low, 2015, p.4).

3.2.1 Collection of metaphorical data

Metaphors refer to "the use of language to refer to something other than what it was originally applied to, or what it 'literally' means, in order to suggest some resemblance or make a connection between the two things." (Knowles & Moon, 2006, p.

3). Metaphors commonly exist in language as examples of figurative, i.e. non-literal language, and are used for different purposes like to express our thoughts and feelings, as well as to identify, describe, and compare things (Knowles & Moon, 2006). Since metaphorical analogies promote our understanding of the things most of the time (Knowles & Moon, 2006), in this study, metaphor elicitation, as one of the data collection methods in qualitative research, was used for direct elicitation of metaphors from the participants (see Schmitt 2005). Metaphor elicitation is an indirect method with the help of which participants can have the opportunity to evaluate the target topics more critically and from a different perspective, from an unusual angle (Wan & Low, 2015; Low, 2015) states that through metaphor elicitation “the respondent is prompted (linguistically or visually) by a researcher to produce a metaphorical expression or proposition” (p. 17). In this technique, participants can be encouraged to produce metaphors through the prompts like ‘A is B’; ‘A is like B’; ‘A resembles/can be compared to/is sort of B’ or non-verbal (visual) prompts like pictures, and as these make the metaphor explicit, there is no need for the researcher to deduce what the metaphor in the given expression is (Low, 2015, p. 17).

In this study, a short questionnaire that composed of two parts was delivered to the participants through Google forms. While the first part of the questionnaire required demographic information such as students’ age, gender, department, the second part required the use of metaphor. Similar to most of the other studies (e.g. Fisher, 2013; Ma & Gao, 2017), this study used “X is like Y” format. The students were given a written prompt “Learning English through DE is like.....because.....” and before they filled in the form, they were provided with a detailed written explanation with examples about what they were expected to do. As some other studies have done (e.g. Fisher, 2013; Wan et al., 2011), students were required to fill in the part with *because* to base their metaphor choice on a reason.

3.2.2 Collection of interview data

To achieve a high level of confirmation and verification of the results, metaphor elicitation was decided to be accompanied by interview research. A substantial amount of data comes from semi-structured one-on-one interviews and a focus group interview conducted with the students. As Creswell (2009) states, “In qualitative interviews, the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, interviews participants by telephone, or engages in focus group interviews, with six to eight interviewees in each group.” (p.181). Because of the pandemic, there was not a face-to-face education and so it was impossible to interview the students face-to-face, and therefore, based on previous studies (e.g. Archibald et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2015), telephone and online interviews were used. In their study, Ward et al., (2015, p. 2780) investigated what the participants (n=16) thought about being interviewed on the phone and found that they had a positive attitude toward telephone interviewing for the following reasons: being comfortable and convenient in terms of time and place; giving more opportunity to focus on the message, voice and conversation rather than focusing on the facial expression of the interviewer; reducing the feeling of being judged by the interviewer. Furthermore, an online focus group interview was carried out through Zoom platform to enrich the data. As Archibald et al., (2019) underline,

Zoom can be effectively used as a qualitative data collection medium. To see different viewpoints, the students for the focus group interview were chosen among the ones that did not participate in the telephone interviews.

Before starting the interviews, the researchers called the students and informed them about the content of the study and with those who consented to participate, a convenient time was scheduled. The students were assured that the interviews would be kept confidential and after getting their consent, both the telephone interviews and focus group discussions were recorded to be transcribed. The semi-structured telephone interview focused on getting students' views on online English learning and included questions like *What are the advantages of learning English through DE*, *What are the disadvantages of learning English through DE*, and similar questions were used for the focus group discussions. The researcher created a positive atmosphere so that the students can express their ideas, experiences and feelings clearly about learning English online without hesitation. They were also informed that they can turn on their speaker or use their earphones so that they can feel more comfortable. 21 students participated in the telephone interviews. The duration of the interviews was as follows: The shortest duration was 26 min, the longest one was 71 min, the average was 37 min. Additionally, the online focus group interview started with 6 and completed with 5 students in total and it lasted approximately 1 h.

4 Data analysis process

4.1 Metaphor data analysis

The stages suggested by Huang and Feng (2019, p. 609) were followed in the analysis of the metaphorical data: (1) Naming/Labeling, (2) Sorting, and (3) Categorization. As a first step of the analysis process, at the naming/labeling stage, metaphorical and non-metaphorical expressions were identified. Then, at the sorting stage, as Knowles and Moon (2006) suggest, each response was sorted considering three elements: the vehicle, the topic, and the ground, in other words, "...the metaphor (a word, phrase, or longer stretch of language); its meaning (what it refers to metaphorically); and the similarity or connection between the two" (p.9). As some students did not produce valid metaphorical expressions, their responses had to be removed from the analysis. Considering the previous studies (e.g. Alarcón et al., 2015; Huang & Feng, 2019; Li & Zou, 2021), non-metaphorical expressions and non-sense metaphors; metaphorical expressions which did not contribute to the understanding of the target theme and could not be placed under a certain conceptual category; and metaphorical expressions without a proper explanation or reasoning were excluded from the study as there was no clear, logical association between the metaphor and the reason. 108 students responded to the survey and 52 of them were excluded as they did not meet the specified criteria. As one of the students used two metaphorical expressions, the total number of metaphors obtained was fifty seven. After the sorting and elimination process was completed, the categorization stage was conducted. At this phase, similar to the previous research (e.g. Alarcón et al., 2015; Fisher, 2013), the main categories were classified based on both the metaphorical expression and the data obtained from

the part after “because....” that is, the reasoning behind the use of a metaphor. Conceptual categories were created from the identified metaphors (see also de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002) and these categories were then grouped under two broad categories as the following: (a) Benefits of online education; (b) Challenges and difficulties of online education. During this process, an iterative approach was adopted and the data were read repeatedly by the researcher. To ensure reliability, the categories were checked by another researcher and some discrepancies were negotiated and discussed until arriving at a consensus (see Gibbs, 2007).

4.2 Interview data analysis

The responses that the participants gave to the interview questions (both telephone and online interviews) were analyzed qualitatively through content analysis to identify emerging major themes in the participants’ responses (see Patton, 1987). Considering the steps suggested by Creswell (2012) and using the linear and hierarchical approach (Creswell, 2009), in the first step, the data were transcribed verbatim into a word document to make the data ready for analysis. After the organization of the data, the researcher read the data several times to get a deeper understanding of participants’ thoughts and then started the coding process, which is defined as follows: “Coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). After the obtained codes were reduced, similar codes were grouped into broader themes through an inductive process. During this process, as Creswell (2009) underlines, the researcher worked on the data in an interactive manner by going back and forth between the data and the themes to get more comprehensive results. To control for bias and ensure reliability, another researcher in the field other than the researcher of the study was collaborated to cross-check the codes and themes to reach an agreement (Creswell, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). There were small differences in terms of codes and themes and they were discussed and negotiated between the two researchers until reaching a final consensus. For all qualitative data, participants’ names were coded as S5-S21-FG1 (student/focus group+number) to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

5 Findings

Examples from the metaphorical expressions and interviews were extracted to exemplify the categories that emerged.

5.1 Findings of the metaphors

Under the two main overarching categories as benefits, and challenges and difficulties of online English education, fifteen subcategories were identified. While the majority of the metaphors were concerned with the disadvantages of online education, there were only a few metaphors related to the positive aspects of online education. The categories along with the metaphors are displayed in the table (Table 1) below.

Table 1 Distribution of metaphors in conceptual categories

Main Category	Subcategory	Metaphors	
Benefits of online education	An enjoyable way of learning	A candy apple	
	Time-saving	Traveling by plane	
	Comfortable	A soft pillow A bed	
Challenges and difficulties of online education	Encouraging	Being an anonymous user	
	Lack of interaction and speaking practice	Lack of interaction and speaking practice	Beating a dead horse (+ 1)
			Teaching someone to swim without practice
			Being a spectator at a movie
			Finding your way without a compass
			A fish out of water
			A baby who is just starting to speak
			Eating bitter chocolate
			Learning a sport without practice
			A missing puzzle
			An iceberg
	Half of an apple		
	Talking to a ghost		
	Entering a cave without light		
	A radio		
Limited and insufficient	Limited and insufficient	Theoretical knowledge	
		A glass of water	
		An electronic device limited memory	
		Driving on a simulator	
		A cassette	
Not being able to substitute for face-to-face education	Not being able to substitute for face-to-face education	A modern phone with low memory	
		A puzzle with a lost piece	
		Eyeglasses (+ 1)	
Needing self-discipline and effort	Needing self-discipline and effort	A half-broken stick	
		Playing football with a burst ball	
		DiETING	
Ineffective and useless	Ineffective and useless	A balance scale	
		A rope in tug of war	
		Piggy bank	
		A blank page	
		A lazy animal	
		A stopped clock	
		A bee that does not make honey	
		A garbage can	
		A rotten apple	
		A bad watermelon	
Reading an unsuccessful book			
Hard to focus	Hard to focus	A torn pocket	
		Looking for a needle in a haystack	
		Climbing Everest	
A process full of obstacles	A process full of obstacles	Moving ships over land	
		A plane in turbulence	
		Lack of proper guidance and complexity	
Lack of proper guidance and complexity	Lack of proper guidance and complexity	A leaderless herd	
		A labyrinth	
		A daisy growing on the sidewalk	
A feeling of instability	A feeling of instability	DiETING	
		Roller coaster	

Table 1 (continued)

Main Category	Subcategory	Metaphors
	A feeling of uncertainty	The movie “Inception” A closed box Dark gray
	A feeling of captivity	A bird in a cage

5.1.1 Benefits of online Education

An enjoyable way of learning The student who found the online education process enjoyable likened it to a *candy apple* (S104) to express that learning through DE is as pleasurable as eating a candy apple.

Time-saving One of the students (S63) explained the time-saving feature of DE as follows: “Learning English through DE is like *traveling by plane* because we can save time and comfortably reach our destination (goal).”

Comfortable Some students believed that learning English through DE is very comfortable as they attend classes from home and there is no need to commute to the school, and used a *soft pillow* (S67) and a *bed* (S85) as metaphors to express this comfort.

Encouraging A student (S9) stated that the online platform encouraged them to join the learning process more confidentially and expressed this as follows: “Learning English through DE is like *being an anonymous user* because through DE, I can avoid many stressful experiences and learn more confidently, ask questions, and I can speed up the learning process by getting help from the Internet on the subjects that I do not understand.” It was inferred from this metaphor that the DE platform can be a good and an encouraging context for shy students.

5.1.2 Challenges and difficulties of online education

Lack of interaction and speaking practice: Most of the students highlighted that one of the most important limitations of online English education is the lack of interaction and speaking practice and they explained this problem through a variety of metaphors. For instance, some participants used the metaphors *beating a dead horse* (S4, S75) and *talking to a ghost* (S77) to emphasize the lack of learner-learner and teacher-learner interaction and speaking practice in DE, which results in a waste of effort and time. Some students stressed that online education is more based on theory rather than practice and speaking. In other words, they state that they learn rules (theoretical knowledge) but they cannot put them into practice effectively and so they used these metaphors: *theoretical knowledge* (S91), *teaching someone to swim without practice* (S8), *learning a sport without practice* (S42). Here, it was emphasized that just as practice is vital for learning sports, so too is it for language learning.

Another participant (S18) stated that DE is like *finding your way without a compass*. Without a compass, it is difficult to find your way, so it is difficult to learn and use English without enough speaking practice. The metaphor *a missing puzzle* (S56) was used to express that a missing piece in the puzzle is speaking skill. The participant here indicates that in online education speaking skill is not focused on and improved like the other skills such as reading and writing. Another participant (S58) used *an iceberg* as a metaphor. Here, the tip of the iceberg represents the things learned, and the invisible part of the iceberg represents speaking skill which is not improved through DE as there is not enough speaking activity as in face-to-face education. Another student (S71) thinks that English learning through DE is like *half of an apple*. Here, it is stated that while listening represents one half of the apple, speaking represents the other half, which is neglected. Another metaphor (S24) *a baby who is just starting to speak* was used to express that students learn something in online English education but they cannot put it into practice effectively and speak fluently. Thus, they feel like a baby who has difficulty in speaking, as they struggle to use the English they have been taught. Another participant (S28) stated that DE is like *eating bitter chocolate*. Here, it was emphasized that although it is very intense while eating, bitter chocolate loses its effect after a while. Like this, DE no matter how it is good, loses its effect over time since there is a lack of speaking practice. Another student (S21) used the metaphor being like *a fish out of water* as the lack of speaking practice in DE makes them feel uncomfortable when they cannot speak English.

Some of the other extracts are as follows:

S4 “Learning English through DE is like *beating a dead horse* because no matter how hard we try, we cannot improve ourselves without face-to-face bilateral interaction. Even if our teachers try to do their best, the activities to be done online are limited...”

S12 “Learning English through DE is like *being a spectator at a movie* because I watch, listen, and understand, but I can’t be in it and speak. I can’t fully develop myself and I feel the lack of the atmosphere of that scene, the classroom.”

S78 “Learning English through DE is like *entering a cave without light* because, in my opinion, a language like English cannot be learned by only memorizing words and practicing grammar with exercises with inefficient interaction in front of a screen remotely, but the language is learned by speaking and this seems more possible with close contact (with other speakers).”

S81 “Learning English through DE is like *a radio* because it is like listening to something with a one-sided interaction without practice.”

Limited and insufficient The metaphors in this category suggest that online English education is limited and insufficient. For instance, the participant (S101) used the metaphor of *a cassette* and another one S108 used *a modern phone with low memory* to emphasize the limited capacity of DE. Here the second comparison also implies that although online learning platforms are modern, they are still not sufficient for

language learning. Another participant (S74) stated that DE is like *driving on a simulator*. Here s/he wants to emphasize that driving a car in a simulator is insufficient for learning to drive in the real world because it is not really like driving a car in real life. Likewise, learning English through DE is not sufficient to help them use the language effectively in real life. In other words, the benefits of DE are limited. Another participant 103 said that DE is like *a puzzle with a lost piece* to show that just as the missing piece in a puzzle is a problem, there is always something missing in DE. Another participant (S3) likened it to *a glass of water* because we can fill a glass up to a certain point and then it does not take more and overflows. That is to say, it has a limited capacity. Like this, the student indicated that distance learning lessons only get them to a certain point and then stops. After that point, both their and their instructor's efforts are wasted. The extract below also shows that what learners can gain from DE is limited.

S11 “Learning English through DE is like *an electronic device with limited memory* because the capacity of computers and phones is limited. We can load (information) as long as memory is available. In other words, what we can learn and gain through DE is limited.”

Not being able to substitute for face-to-face education In this category, metaphors were used to stress that online English education cannot substitute for face-to-face education. One of the participants (S50) likened it to *playing football with a burst ball*. Here it was underlined that when you try to play football with a burst ball, you cannot have the same pleasure and effect as you get from playing with a normal ball. Similarly, for this student, DE cannot be a satisfactory alternative to face-to-face education. Two students (S27, S41) compared it to eyeglasses to indicate that online education cannot be an effective alternative to face-to-face education. Some replies were as follows.

S41 “Learning English through DE is like *eyeglasses* because even though they are useful most of the time, we are aware that they can never replace our real eye. DE is just like this. Although it is beneficial, we cannot benefit from DE as we do from face-to-face education.”

S29 “Learning English through DE is like *a half-broken stick* because although you can do something with the part you have, you feel the lack of the missing part. That is to say, online education does not fully substitute for face-to-face education.”

Needing self-discipline and effort Some students believe that the online education process requires being self-disciplined and needs extra effort; otherwise, it is difficult for them to keep up with the schedule. For instance, the participant S37 compared it to *dieting* because when people take a break from their diet for one day, it becomes difficult for them to make up for later. Likewise, DE process needs self-discipline and effort to go on. The participant S69 used the metaphor *piggy bank* to suggest that saving money in a piggy bank depends on a person's self-effort and likewise, attending online classes depends on students' own effort and dedication. Finally, DE

was likened to a *rope in tug of war* (S54) because in a competition like this, holding the rope takes a lot of effort as the two teams pull the rope against each other. Similarly, it needs great effort and determination to keep on learning English through DE. Another extract is as follows.

S53 “Learning English through DE is like a *balance scale* because it is necessary to ensure the discipline of studying at home and adapting to home environment and to maintain balance both physically and psychologically.”

Ineffective and useless The students who thought learning English through DE as ineffective and useless experience explained this with a variety of metaphors. For example, one of the participants S30 stated that just like a *blank page* that does not have anything written on it, DE does not have anything beneficial in it. Another metaphor was a *stopped clock* (S39), which indicates that just like a stopped clock does not show the correct time and is useless, DE is useless as students do not learn effectively. Another participant S70 stated that DE is like a *bee that does not make honey*. Here it is implied that a bee that does not make honey is unproductive and likewise trying to learn English through DE is not productive and useful. Underlying that DE is slow and repetitive and so useless, a student (S35) likened it to a *lazy animal*. Moreover, another metaphor, a *garbage can* (S94), was used to indicate that there are lots of things in DE platform but none of them are useful. Furthermore, the metaphors a *rotten apple* (S96) and a *bad watermelon* (S100) were used to highlight the inefficiency and uselessness of learning English through DE. Another participant (S10) used the metaphor *reading an unsuccessful book* to indicate that DE is not an effective way to improve students’ language. Another participant S105 likened DE to “a *torn pocket* because when we put something in a torn pocket, it slips out of it....” After making this analogy, the student stated that what they learn through DE fades from their memory after a certain period of time like the things that slip out of a torn pocket.

Hard to focus As students were at home and in front of the computer screen most of the time, it was difficult for them to concentrate on the learning process. One of the students (S5) used the metaphor *looking for a needle in a haystack*, which implies a very difficult task to realize. By using this metaphor, the student underlined that it is hard for them to focus on online lessons as there are lots of distracting things around.

A process full of obstacles Metaphors in this category were used to explain the obstacles faced during online education. For example, the metaphor of a *plane in turbulence* (S63) was used to explain the Internet outages (disconnection) that reduce the efficiency of the lessons. Also, to emphasize obstacles and inequality of opportunity in DE, one participant (S106) used the metaphor *moving ships over land*. Another student (S34) stated that learning English through DE is similar to *climbing Everest*, which is a very difficult task for an inexperienced person and expressed that s/he faced many problems and obstacles like bad Internet connection, health problems in his/her family, loss of family members because of the COVID-19, which affected DE process negatively.

Lack of proper guidance, and complexity Students used different metaphors to emphasize the lack of guidance and the disorder and complexity that DE brings. A student likened it to being *a leaderless herd* (45) to express the disorder of the DE process because of the lack of guidance. Another student stated that it is like *a labyrinth* (S49) where they get lost and cannot find a way out without help. Yet another student used the metaphor *a daisy growing on the sidewalk* (99) to highlight that they struggle alone, that there is no one to help and guide them properly, and that they must flourish in poor conditions like a daisy growing alone through the crack in the sidewalk. All of these metaphors indicate that there was not enough guidance to help students during their online language learning process. This may have been the result of the lack of interaction between students and teachers during the online education process.

A feeling of instability To express the instability of DE, one participant (S62) said that it is similar to *dieting*. Being consistent in dieting is very important to lose weight; however, many people quit a few days after starting a diet and do not get the results they hope for as they are not consistent. Like this, the lack of stability in the DE process may sometimes be difficult for students. Additionally, another metaphor in this category is as follows:

S72 “Learning English through DE is like *a roller coaster* because there are too many ups and downs, and since we do not have many things with us that encourage us to learn English, we have a good learning adventure one day and a bad one on the next.”

A feeling of uncertainty Some students who think that DE process is an uncertain, in other words, is not a very clear process in terms of learning expressed this with different metaphors. For example, one participant (S88) likened it to *dark gray* to show that it is neither black nor white. Here, the student highlights that the advantages and disadvantages of online English education are unclear. Additionally, another student (S13) compared DE to *the movie “Inception”* to indicate that s/he could not understand it completely. Similarly, by using this metaphor, the student wants to state that it is difficult to understand everything clearly through DE. Another student (S48) indicated that s/he is uncertain about whether s/he learned or not, and used the metaphor *as a closed box*. Here it is implied that it is impossible to be sure about the inside of a closed box so the student by using this metaphor states that s/he is not sure about whether she learned in this process or not.

A feeling of captivity As students had to sit in front of the computer screen most of the time and could not go out very much during the pandemic, a student compared it to *being a bird in a cage* (S98), expressing a feeling of captivity.

5.2 Findings of the interviews

In addition to the metaphor results that helped evaluate the topic from a different perspective, interview findings allowed us to obtain more detailed and comprehensive information and insight into the topic. Using both metaphors and interviews enriched the findings. Most of the interview outcomes supported the results obtained by the metaphor analysis. The themes that emerged from the analysis are presented below one by one.

5.2.1 Being economic and beneficial

As a result of not having to be physically present in class, the key benefits of DE mentioned by the students are saving on time, not having to spend money on accommodation or transportation, having a lot of time to develop themselves, easy access to various resources at home, exposure to both visual and auditory content, i.e., rich digital content (e.g. videos, power point presentations), opportunity to watch the recorded lecture videos at any time. Some example extracts are:

S19 “Pros of DE is having so many resources at hand. I can be instantly informed from many resources. When I have something on my mind, I can search on the computer or phone at break times... Also, we do not have to go to school... We are at home; we can listen to the lecture comfortably... Those are the 2 biggest advantages for me, I guess.”

S13 “The positive point is that it saves time. That is to say, we don’t commute to the school. It actually saves us time.”

S21 “For example, I had a lot of time to improve myself. I can improve myself by focusing on speaking activities on online applications or by constantly reading scientific articles. If I had been in face-to-face education at school, I might not have had much time to do these things... Another positive aspect is, for example, when there is a topic that I cannot understand during the lesson, I can watch it from the recordings over and over again. The positive aspects for me were obviously being able to benefit from the advantages of technology.”

5.2.2 Health and focus problems

Many students reported that attending online classes from home affected their physical and mental health negatively. Increased screen time caused problems such as headache, eyesight problems, fatigue and not being able to concentrate on the lessons. Some of their explanations were:

S8 “We get very distracted at home. Noise, using our phones... Focusing on the screen is sometimes a problem too. Especially, headache, eye pain... This was a big problem for me, especially at the beginning. That’s why I was losing focus.”

S2 “Looking at the screen for 6 h is seriously making me tired. I also have migraine. When I look at a screen or anything too much, I have a terrible headache.”

S21 “There were too many distractions around. That’s why we couldn’t focus much. ... Since we are in a home environment there are of course some negative aspects psychologically: we can neither talk to our friends nor do anything else...”

5.2.3 Feeling of loneliness

The lack of student-student and teacher-student interaction, that is to say being away from teachers, peers, and the school environment in the DE process seems to have created a sense of isolation and loneliness in some students. In addition to being at home, social distancing prevented students from becoming social learners as studying online does not provide the same level of experience and interaction as face-to-face learning does. For example, one student (S1) emphasized that there is no one to help and guide them during this process, which is also indicated in the extracts below:

S2 “Being continuously at home and getting bored, and studying English alone at home affects us badly after a certain period of time. If we were in the school setting at least, we could get together and talk with our friends; we could strive together; we would push and support each other, but it is very difficult to do this in a home environment right now.”

S6 “We can’t do group activities, that’s a bit of a problem too...I feel a bit like I’m studying alone (at university).”

S10 “When I make eye contact with the teacher and learn, I remember a little more and it’s sufficient if I revise 5–10 minutes when I get home, but now I’m alone. I have to sit down and do it all by myself.”

5.2.4 Technical problems

One of the most important problems during online-only education was related to technical issues (e.g. poor connectivity and lack of technical equipment), which caused difficulties in students’ participation in live sessions. Some extracts were as follows:

S4 “My connection is bad. For instance, when I log into the lesson, the teacher’s voice breaks up. I do not have a computer. It has been broken. I use my phone. When I enter the chat section from the phone and switch to the normal screen, for example, I lose about 10 seconds. I can’t see the screen. There are many problems like this.”

S18 “My internet connection is really bad. The system is so bad. The teachers’ voice cuts out. The internet connection fails. Thus, all my enthusiasm for the lesson wears off.”

5.2.5 Good for shy students

Online English learning, as some students state, may serve as a good platform for shy and introverted students to speak and participate in the lessons. For example, the participant S17 highlighted that in online learning platform, since students do not know each other well, it is not a problem for shy students to make mistakes while talking or asking questions. Some shy students stated that DE provided them with the opportunity to attend lessons comfortably. One of them (S5) likened the online learning platform to a social media platform and added that in social media, people can talk more comfortably and like this in online learning, some shy students were able to talk and participate in the live classes without hesitation as explained in the following extracts:

S5 “I am one of those students who is a little more shy and doesn’t like to talk too much. Since I had a lot of self-discipline, I was constantly interested in the lessons and I always followed (the classes) and answered in a very comfortable way, I spoke, I talked about myself but if I had been in the classroom, I would probably have been lost among my extroverted friends.”

S15 “My favorite aspect is that it’s a little more comfortable. Maybe we would be a little nervous when we talk if we were in a classroom setting, but I think it’s comfortable that way.”

5.2.6 Desire for face-to-face education

All students except one believe that face-to-face education would be more effective than online education for learning English, especially in terms of speaking practice and one-on-one interaction. Only one of them (S5) who states to be very shy believes that DE would be better for her/him. Some explanations were as follows:

S17 “Online education also has a lot of comfort... We are comfortable, we can attend classes in our pajamas. But I would still prefer face-to-face education because I’m sure then our motivation would have lasted longer. We would be more enthusiastic toward the lessons. As I said, I think our face-to-face communication with you would be more effective. We would have had more opportunities to talk... That’s why I still prefer face-to-face education.”

S18 “I am someone who understands better when I make eye contact with people. It would have been much better if it was face-to-face. When learning a foreign language, I think it is better if we are with friends and teachers.”

S19 “You can do theoretical lessons (e.g. literature, history) remotely, but since English is something that requires you to talk to people, I think I will not be able to find a friendly atmosphere in any DE program. So at least for English, it makes more sense to have face-to-face education.”

5.2.7 The most and least developed language skills

Many students stated that writing was the most developed language skill during the DE process as a result of writing assignments and effective feedback given to them. Some extracts were:

S15 “Especially in the first term, we were writing almost every day, so I think it (online education) was very effective in terms of writing.”

S21 “I believe writing skills definitely improved during the lesson because the writing sections of the book are really good and our teachers are also very helpful. We could always ask questions in the chat section.”

As for speaking skill, the majority of the students stated that it was the least developed language skill in this process. The interview findings showed that most of them were not willing to participate in speaking activities, as explained in the following example extracts:

S5 “I didn’t feel too eager to participate. There are 2 reasons for this. One of them is, as I said, we couldn’t create a suitable environment at home to talk. That’s why we had to write, it was very burdensome to write. Second, the topics were not ones that prompted the student to talk... In the activities, there were not many topics that I wanted to talk about, that I could talk about, or that I could keep talking about... For some speaking topics, I did not have an answer because I did not have any experience, a thought, or even a dream related to them. Therefore, I didn’t talk.”

S7 “It is frightening to pause and think while speaking. This makes me embarrassed. I can’t talk.”

S8 “I guess I shy away from speaking because of the thought that I will not be able to pronounce or use English correctly.”

S11 “Actually, I didn’t feel confident. I’m not good at making full sentences when speaking. I write in the chat box and see my mistake there. It’s more reassuring. That’s why I didn’t participate much.”

FG1 “I don’t feel confident in terms of speaking...I am afraid of making mistakes...”

5.2.8 DE triggers learners to be more autonomous

During the DE process, students used a variety of online learning applications and did a wide variety of activities and exercises to improve their English on their own. Based on their explanation, it can be said that the DE process encouraged autonomous learning and led students to use and adopt different learning strategies. The extracts below show how the students took responsibility for their own learning:

S9 “I didn’t think that only online education would be enough, so I made an effort myself. I used different applications (e-learning apps).”

S15 “I study not only during classes, but also from different websites on the Internet, be it YouTube or other websites... For example, even the pages I follow on Instagram are now in English. I also choose tv series or movies that can improve my English. In this process, I learned that English can be improved even directly from the Internet.”

S6 “I read English books but some of them are really difficult in terms of vocabulary... I write the unknown words under the sentences and read it this way. Sometimes, I read without looking at the meaning of the words to see to what extent I could understand the text.”

S5 “We had to do most things ourselves...I’ve also had a lot of time as we don’t commute to the school and we are generally at home. That’s why I did a lot of practice in English. For writing, I kept my diaries in English. I tried writing English emails for my father’s work. He was working with a foreign company. I also tried writing English stories for a while.”

S9 “I am more interested in scientific texts. After reading a topic, I would write my own ideas about that topic. Then, I would compare the original text with the text I wrote....”

S21 “...I watched different documentaries and I tried to write essays about them. I sent them to a few of my teachers to get them checked.”

S2 “Sometimes I would stand in front of the mirror and speak. I would tell myself about my day. As I said, there were English applications where we could meet people and talk. I downloaded them, I met people there and talked.”

S13 “I listened to podcasts... Actually, listening to podcasts also helped me improve my speaking. I listened to the podcast, then sometimes I stopped and said my own opinion...I pushed myself to talk. I imagined there was someone in front of me. I spoke in front of the mirror, and then I read a text and explained it myself. Then I watched a movie and tried to explain it myself, what I felt, what it made me think...”.

S14 “I have a vocabulary notebook. To memorize the words, I write them on small cards, I write English on the front, Turkish on the back...I’m trying to get the meaning of a word out of the sentence. If I can’t, then I look at the meaning of the word.”

5.2.9 Loss of motivation

Most of the students indicated that they could not maintain their initial level of motivation and stressed that their motivation level decreased in this process, as shown in the extracts below:

S17 “I’ve been really bored lately. Being at home all the time and not being able to see any of our friends affected all young people. We are always at the computer as we have lessons every day. I am bored. I don’t want to attend classes anymore either. My motivation has dropped a lot.”

S13 “There is one more negative thing: A lack of motivation in students. We are at home and we can’t always maintain our motivation.”

S18 “I was really enthusiastic at first, but over time this enthusiasm wore off.”

S16 “At the beginning of the term, I used to participate in the lessons and answer everything. After a while, the coursebook began to be boring. Our classes are in the middle of the day. I started not enjoying the lessons. I attend classes in order not to fail due to absenteeism. I don’t benefit from the lessons. My motivation dropped.”

5.2.10 Feeling anxious

Most of the students expressed that sometimes they felt anxious during online lessons and exams. For instance, encountering technical problems during the lessons and exams, not being able to find the right English word while speaking, not being able to understand English videos during the lesson, the fear of running out of time and not being able to return to the previous question during exams were among the sources of anxiety for students. Some extracts are as follows:

S15 “For example, when there was a reading text, I got worried that the teacher would call my name or when I was in an exam, I was very afraid that my Internet or electricity would go out and my exam would be lost. When I was in online classes, I was afraid that the teacher would ask me to turn on the microphone and speak.”

S12 “I type slowly on the keyboard. Actually, it takes a lot of my time. I panic a lot in writing exams. When I would complete the writing exams, I would really have a headache from stress because I was afraid that I would not be able to finish on time, not be able to create the sentence structure instantly...My chair is so comfortable but I feel like I can’t sit on it. This makes me very nervous.”

5.2.11 Feedback to students’ questions

Most of the students indicated that they conveyed the points they did not understand to their teachers and the feedback they received was generally sufficient, understandable and satisfactory. Some of their replies were:

S19 “When I asked teachers to repeat subjects that I did not understand, they explained it very well. Even if I didn’t understand it in English at all, they would explain it again in Turkish. It (feedback) was sufficient.”

S9 “Our teacher explained the subjects that we did not understand. Also, s/he would send us additional materials on that subject after the lesson....”

S5 “My favorite aspect is that I could attend the classes comfortably...and I could get feedback quickly.”

5.2.12 Learning style

According to the answers of the students, while online education appeals more to the students who have an audio-visual learning style and love to learn alone, it did not appeal to the students who learn through social and group interaction and have a kinesthetic learning style. Some of the responses were:

S21 “It didn’t appeal to my learning style. I’m a very active person; I don’t like to sit too much. That’s why it’s a little hard for me to focus. I wish we were at school. It would be better for me if I went out at break time.”

S15 “I think it’s definitely a system that appeals to me because I study alone; I use my materials alone...I think it was perfect for me. I like writing by myself; I take notes. Like that.”

S18 “Online learning doesn’t appeal to me at all. I am a person who can learn better when I am with people and when I make eye contact with the teachers.”

S8 “As I learned English from tv series and movies, I like the combination of visual and auditory (learning)... That’s why it was good for me to see the combination of visual and auditory (information) on the screen.”

5.2.13 Home as a learning environment

During the pandemic, as the learning environment was not the classroom but home, some students, although not very often, stated that they received help and support from their families while learning English. However, most of the students stressed that their learning process was alone. One of them said:

S21 “Since my elder sister is an English teacher, we usually try to speak in English... Lately, my sister and I have been speaking English generally and this really helps me a lot.”

Another student described her communication with her siblings at home as follows:

S5 “With my siblings, from the moment we woke up in the morning, starting with good morning, we were speaking English as much as we could. When we couldn’t speak, we would get help from translation (tools). We were trying to continue (our

conversations) without speaking any Turkish... We did it from time to time, taking a break for 1 or 2 days and then started again.”

Another issue related to the learning environment was that as most of the students were with their families during this process, some of them emphasized that they had a crowded house and therefore, it was difficult for them to focus on lessons because of the noise at home. Also, some students indicated that it was difficult for their families to get used to the fact that they are learning at home and so sometimes they interrupted them during the lessons. For instance, the student S20 stated that his family was engaged in agriculture and sometimes he had to do some work that interrupts his participation in online courses for a short time. Other extracts were:

S5 “A suitable learning environment was never provided in the home, especially in large families. I live in a crowded house. A silent and a fully focused environment could never be provided... When our teacher wanted me to speak, I could not find a suitable silent environment to participate in the lessons... My family was often calling me to get something done because for them I was at the computer (not in the class) ... I could not convince them that I was in class....”

S12 “...not every home environment is the same. For example, I have siblings. Three of us have classes.... Everyone needs to go to a different place at home, but the Internet connection is not the same in every room. When one of us would turn on the microphone, the rest of us might be talking to his/her teacher at that time and we could then hear voices coming from each other. Sometimes problems can arise, it is very bad.”

S7 “We are in the home environment. I have 2 siblings at home. My elder brother is in his own room... My lessons with my other brother are always at the same time. There’s a lot of noise. Sometimes we have to attend classes in the same room. There are people coming home. There are such disadvantages.”

FG2 “Not everyone’s home environment is suitable. Not everyone has a room of their own. I can give a personal example. My sibling and I attend classes in the same room, s/he at one end of the table and me on the other. The Internet (speed) slows down. All kinds of difficulties arise”.

6 Discussion

This study set out with the aim of finding learners’ thoughts and views about learning English online. First, like some previous studies’ results (e.g. Maican & Cocorada 2021; Stewart & Lowenthal, 2021), the current study found that students had both negative and positive thoughts about online learning. For instance, some students stated some positive aspects of online learning, such as being comfortable, saving time and money, and providing an opportunity to access various resources immedi-

ately. Also, as indicated by Castro and Tumibay (2021) and some students in the present study, online learning context can be a good platform for shy students to express themselves more freely as they feel more secure. However, the study reported more negative perceptions than positive ones. In other words, students had mostly negative perceptions about learning English online. Additionally, the findings of the study showed that most of the students prefer learning English in face-to-face learning context rather than on an online learning platform. This finding was also reported in the studies of Unger and Meiran (2020) and Zhang and Cui (2010). Unwillingness to continue learning through DE could be explained through the problems that students faced during the online learning process. For example, most of the students complained about technology and Internet-related problems. This result matches those observed in earlier studies (e.g. Agung et al., 2020; Maican & Cocorada, 2021; Sofianidis et al., 2021). Also, not being able to speak and practice English effectively in online learning environment can be counted as a reason for students' reluctance towards DE. Another major problem that the current study reported was the lack of interaction on online learning platform. This result is in line with those of previous studies (e.g. Maican & Cocorada 2021; Niemi & Kousa, 2020; Zhang & Cui, 2010). Similarly, Stewart and Lowenthal (2021), in their qualitative parts of the study, found that students reported having problems in terms of interaction both with their peers and teachers and this gave them a sense of loneliness in the learning process. Likewise, in this study, the students also complained about the lack of interaction in the online education process, which was accompanied by a sense of loneliness and isolation. Moreover, the current study agrees with Unger and Meiran's study (2020) that found that students felt anxious when they switched to distance education. Likewise, in the current study, most of the students stated that they sometimes felt anxious during the online exams and lessons.

Another important finding in the study was related to learner autonomy. In Zhang and Cui's (2010) study, the students with more online learning experience reported that being autonomous was important to them. Additionally, in Xiao and Hurd's study (2007), it was found that students who were learning English via DE started to show the characteristics of being autonomous students rather than passive learners who always depend on teachers. Likewise, in this study, most of the students tried doing something on their own to improve their English. They reported to be more autonomous during this process. This may be the result of the feeling of taking responsibility for their own learning during this process through which they often feel alone. Furthermore, the current study's results reflect those of Niemi and Kousa (2020) who also found that students lost their motivation in time, had problems in concentrating, and believed that online learning requires maintaining self-discipline and self-effort. Similar results were also obtained in Agung et al., (2020) and Mese and Sevilen's (2021) studies like loss of motivation and enthusiasm toward online lessons. Furthermore, similar to the findings of this study, the students in Maican and Cocorada's study (2021) were worried about whether their language skills improved or not and they reported health (e.g. headache) and concentration problems during the online learning process. Furthermore, in this study, some students said that they had difficulty during online classes as they did not have a suitable home environment or private study room to keep up with online education. Likewise, Sofianidis et al., (2021)

found in their study that some students did not have a proper home environment or a private room to follow online lessons during the process of online education.

Contrary to these common findings, contrasting results with previous studies were also found. For example, this study is not in line with the findings of Zhang and Cui (2010) in terms of students' perceptions about feedback provided to them during online education. In their study, students reported that the feedback was not enough; however, the current study, like Stewart and Lowenthal's finding (2021), found that most of the students were satisfied with the feedback they received during DE. This may be the result of the fact that the participants of the current study took synchronous classes, which helped them receive immediate feedback from their teachers (see White, 2003).

The study also found that online education fell short of meeting the demands of different learning styles such as kinesthetic and interpersonal (social) learning style. One possible explanation for this is that as learners do not physically exist in the online learning environment as in the case of traditional learning environment, it can be difficult to meet their learning needs. Another reason for this problem might be that some English teachers, as is the case in Atmojo and Nugroho's study (2020), have difficulties addressing different learning styles using online platforms. However, online learning can provide beneficial learning experiences for some other learning styles like visual learning as also found in the study of Eom et al. (2006).

7 Conclusion

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, switching to online education was the only solution for educational institutions and, as mentioned before, this process was a bit challenging and painful for faculties, instructors and learners as they encountered many different and unpredictable problems. Considering this fact, sharing the experiences related to this process is of great importance to be well-prepared for such situations. Therefore, this study's findings along with the previous ones can provide important insights and implications for education stakeholders, such as administrators, instructors and policy makers for developing distance education in the future. More specifically, as this study presents students' positive and negative feedback on online English learning, it can contribute to and provide a basis for the future planning of online foreign language education. For instance, the students' comments show the necessity of the development of user-friendly technological infrastructure for effective online education. For this reason, it should be ensured that every student can easily access the online learning platform and each of them is included in the learning process without any problems. Another implication of this study is related to online class hours. Considering the negative effects of staying in front of the screen for a long time on learners' health and attention levels, the length of online lessons should be carefully arranged. Moreover, training instructors and arranging online learning platforms in a way that addresses different learning styles is one of the important issues that needs to be considered in online education. Therefore, it seems necessary to train and motivate teachers to use a variety of useful resources and activities while teaching English online. To reduce the negative influence of affective factors

on learning and active participation in the class, online instructors should encourage learners to participate in speaking activities along with other activities, and help them reduce their anxiety level and keep their motivation high. Furthermore, the findings of this study also provide some important implications for virtual online classroom developers and facilitators. As Garrison (1990) highlighted many years ago, DE platform should enable an effective two-way communication platform where information can be critically evaluated and analyzed from different angles through the interaction of teachers and students. Based on this, virtual classroom designers should enhance the interactive features of their platforms as in-course interaction, active and collaborative learning are especially important for language learners to actively use the target language and to reduce their feeling of loneliness during the learning process. Besides, both English language instructors and learners should be trained to use virtual classroom platforms and tools effectively and appropriately so that they can have the opportunity to spend the learning time more actively and productively. It would be useful to consider all these suggestions to make online English education more effective and sustainable. Finally, this study also offers some recommendations for future work. As this study only focused on university-level EFL students' thoughts and perceptions, further studies could also investigate the perceptions of other education stakeholders like administrators, teachers, and students from different levels of education (e.g. high school, primary school) to gain more detailed insights into online EFL education.

Conflict of interest None.

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