



Behind the screen: A case study on the perspectives of freshman EFL students and their instructors

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Abstract

Owing to the fact that all educational activities have been moved to an online setting due to restrictions to control the spread of the Corona Virus, the realm of education has been subject to unprecedented changes. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the perspectives of freshman English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and their instructors at Anadolu University regarding the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) practice. Designed as a qualitative case study, this research has employed reflective journals, virtual focus group discussions, and virtual classroom observations as sources of data. A total of 15 participants took part in this research, 11 freshman students and 4 of their instructors. The data have been analyzed through qualitative content analysis, and the research findings have shown that the ERT practice has been a challenging and mostly disadvantageous process for both students and their instructors. Among the disadvantages are technical problems, self-related problems, student and instructor-related problems, live session-related problems, and assignment and exam-related problems. The advantages reported by the participants include self-related advantages, live session-related advantages, and exam-related advantages. Besides, relevant suggestions are put forward by both the instructors and students. The findings have been discussed in accordance with the relevant literature, and various implications have been drawn along with suggestions for future studies.

Keywords Case study · EFL freshman students · EFL instructors · Emergency remote learning · Emergency remote teaching

“The only constant is change” by Heraclitus can summarize that change is an indispensable component of human life. Analogizing Covid-19 pandemic to other major

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shifts in the way we live, change has once again become unavoidable across all major parameters of our social life, and education has been no exception. Conducting all educational processes online has become compulsory rather than optional. Although distance education has been a familiar phenomenon with the advent of more user-friendly technological devices within the last three decades (Shearer et al., 2020), the circumstances created by the pandemic have converted it from an option into a “must-do” necessity in the form of ERT, a term first coined in the United States of America (Shea, 2020).

ERT is different from online education in which courses are purposefully planned around completely online syllabi prior to the commencement of the courses (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT utilizes totally remote remedies for learning that would, under normal circumstances, take place in a face-to-face or hybrid setting, and return to the normal format after crisis end. Thus, the goal of ERT is to swiftly set up a temporary system allowing open-access to instructional and educational services during crisis.

Higher education institutions in Turkey were shut as a precaution to slow the spread of the virus on March 16, 2020. University officials and administrators organized crisis management units and analyzed how they could modify the face-to-face curriculum content to fit in a remote web-based distance education environment (CoHE, 2020a). A board of experts from universities determined five pillars of the crisis plan as the curriculum, infrastructure, human resources, content, and implementation. The new route was formulated by March 17, 2020 and all decisions regarding each of these pillars gained official validity at once. Since the pandemic was still at large during mid-August, the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), on August 13, declared that universities in Turkey were empowered to make their own decisions regarding the medium and mode of practices to be implemented for different programs throughout the new academic year of 2020–2021 (CoHE, 2020b). Accordingly, the majority of higher education institutions decided to move all their face-to-face content to an online platform as part of the ERT practice. Such precautions have introduced changes in educational understanding, created new definitions for students and teachers, and imposed novel educational requirements enforced by the Covid-19. As a matter of fact, ambiguity and disagreement regarding what to teach and how to teach have grown (Zhang et al., 2020), and most tangible and direct educational consequences of the Covid-19 have been experienced by teachers and students.

The outbreak struck so suddenly that educators and decision-makers did not have the time to develop preparedness plans in order to preserve and continue educational activities. Educators, all of a sudden, had to work from home, detached from students, and learn how to make use of modern technologies. The same was also true for students with no ERT experience before the Covid-19. Especially freshmen were affected the most by this dramatic shift as they had to adapt to a new curriculum along with a new mode of course delivery (Daniel, 2020). In addition, they needed to cope with the unfamiliarity of the environment, specifically classmates and instructors. Another issue that surfaced in this new educational setting was the inequality among students as not all had internet access or technological devices giving rise to “digital divide” (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 221–222). Tümen Akyıldız (2020) reported that a majority of students in Turkey did not have access to the Internet and many did not have the necessary equipment. Accordingly, Köksal (2004) pointed

out that *digital divide* should be taken into consideration, especially within foreign language teaching, because unfamiliarity with necessary technology and absence of materials significantly decreased the opportunities for EFL students to contact with the target language.

1 Overview of online education

Online education is the advance of online technological revolution, which led to the creation of classroom-like environments allowing students to interact with each other and the instructors at any given time or place. A synthesis of definitions proposed for online education throughout the last 30 years specifically underpins online delivery of course content and modules created by the instructors to facilitate learning either synchronously or asynchronously (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Undoubtedly, the current convenience of online education can and should be attributed to the efforts of cryptologists and computer scientists who laid the foundation of affordances that sustain educational activities today, even during a worldwide crisis. Though dating back as early as the end of the 1960s, the alternative to attain a degree through a fully online program was not available until 1986 (Harasim, 2000), and the term *online learning* was first introduced in 1995 (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

The development of WebCT (Web Course Tools) in 1995, the first Learning Management System (LMS), can be noted as one of the preliminary and tangible outcomes recorded in the history of online education (Singh & Thurman, 2019). This LMS, which later evolved into Blackboard, allowed uploading only PDF files and texts, framing the boundaries of online education at the time (Bates, 2014). Regardless of the limitations at the beginning, the system has been still recorded as a “revolutionary solution to diverse educational problems of inequality” (Lee, 2017, p. 15). Removing the barriers impeding equality of opportunity in education increased the accessibility of university education for everybody, and it was regarded as an imperative to embed online components to higher education (Lee, 2017).

Early 2000s witnessed a considerable increase in technological tools; and the globalization of the Internet together with the arrival of the Web 2.0 made editing, interaction, and publishing of any content through the internet possible. Students located in different places could partake in collaborative and collective learning by the support of hyper technology. As of the end of 2010, online resources such as podcasts, PowerPoint™ presentations, videos, and campus-course recordings became accessible to students, eliminating the differences between on- and off-campus courses (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016).

1.1 Online language learning

Technology use in EFL started with films, radios, and language laboratories in the 1980s, and expanded to include videos, computers, and applications. As a result of the efforts to integrate new technologies into language education, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) was introduced with the intent to refer

to technology-based language learning. Chapelle and Jamieson (2008, p.1) define CALL as “the area of applied linguistics concerned with the use of computers for teaching and learning a second language”. A closer look at the literature shows that technology use in language education is far from being a uniform practice, ranging from established computer-based programs to recent tools that are still in the process of development. Likewise, results reported in the relevant literature are diverse with respect to technology use in language classes as reported by Golonka et al. (2014) in their study reviewing 350 articles on online learning and technology.

Some studies, for instance, mainly focus on how technology can be potentially used for ESL/EFL students (Ayres, 2002; Barr & Gillespie, 2003). In his study on students’ attitudes towards the use of technology, Ayres (2002) investigated the attitudes of 157 adult non-native speakers learning English, and concluded that students liked the integration of technology in their language courses, but not to the extent of replacing their teachers. Barr and Gillespie (2003), likewise, acknowledged the benefits of making use of technology in language classes in terms of not only establishing communication purposes, but also bringing in various activities to the learning and teaching setting. Technology has also been noted to act as a catalyst which promotes autonomous language learners (Raby, 2007), improves participation and motivation (Lai et al., 2016), and enhances communication between students and teachers and among students themselves (Barr & Gillespie, 2003).

Along with studies noting that technology assisted language learning environments produce substantially favorable outcomes (Gunuç & Babacan, 2017; Parvin & Salam, 2015), some researchers have investigated skill-specific gains technology offers. For instance, Yen et al. (2015) conclude that technology has the potential to by-pass cultural and environmental barriers such as pressure stemming from examinations and the absence of authentic speaking settings that hinder writing and speaking skills in a foreign language. According to Yen et al. (2015), language learning anxiety and the need for authentic and interactive speaking settings can be overcome through use of technology, which enhances students’ active participation. Similarly, Dişli (2012) who investigated the effectiveness of computer-assisted language activities on English Language Teaching (ELT) learners’ writing skills, underlines the facilitative effect of computer-assisted activities to better students’ writing skills in English.

Teaching in an online language learning program with technology integration also bears benefits for instructors in terms of implementing a variety and diversity of materials and methods in the classroom, in the sense of cultivating learning for students with different learning styles/preferences. Employing software for assessment and grading allows instructors to focus more on the learners as their workload diminishes. In a study by Manegre and Sabiri (2020), 35 English teachers were surveyed in order to explore their perceptions and views on online language learning within virtual classrooms. The results indicated that English teachers regarded virtual classrooms as more positive learning environments because students were more engaged, and they got to know their students better on a personal level. The teachers also highlighted that they can structure their lessons in better ways when teaching online, and that learning occurs even faster compared to face-to-face education.

According to Wiebe and Kabata (2010), there are also problems in online education despite the prevalence of positive findings on how teachers and students perceive and experience online learning. For instance, the use of online platforms for language learning has been associated with a certain degree of demotivating effect compared to traditional learning settings. The lack of a real atmosphere in online settings, referred to as authenticity gap, has been reported to cause reluctance on students when learning online. The virtuality of the learning environment plays a downgrading role on learners' motivation (Henry, 2013). Moreover, online learning environments are considered weak in terms of provoking interaction between/among students and teachers (Ware, 2005), which is the goal of language classes.

2 Emergency remote teaching

The transition from traditional to online settings is not an innovative attempt, but rather the result of disasters, crises, or outbreaks. The suddenness and urgency of such a shift, according to Hodges et al., 2020, is classified as 'Emergency Remote Teaching' (ERT), which is different from distance and online teaching, albeit sharing similarities.

The most common definition of distance education denotes that all educational endeavors that are distanced in terms of time and/or place should be classified as distance education (Moore et al., 2011). Online education, rooted in distance education, refers to teaching and learning by means of technological tools and access to the internet (Moore et al., 2011). In general, online courses are purposefully planned around completely online syllabi several weeks prior to the commencement of the courses (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT, on the other hand, is employed as a temporary change of mode in the delivery of instruction because of uncontrollable variables, which is not comparable to a learning experience designed to be online. ERT includes utilizing totally remote remedies for learning that would, under normal circumstances, take place in a face-to-face, blended, or hybrid setting, and that will return to the normal format in the aftermath of the crisis circumstances.

Unlike earlier instances of transitioning education to an online setting, the global-scale impact of the current situation – the Covid-19 pandemic – designates ERT as the common tool employed by all countries in the world to sustain the continuity of education (Johnson et al., 2020). Considering that the current practice of ERT has a global scale across all disciplines, relevant research in three different contexts will be discussed separately, ERT studies conducted across different countries, in Turkey, and in the field of EFL.

2.1 ERT studies conducted within higher education across different countries

As the decisions to move all educational activities to an online setting were made abruptly all around the world, researchers have become interested in students' and/or teachers' readiness, perceptions, views, attitudes, experiences, along with the challenges, disadvantages, or advantages of the ERT practice. In addition, assessment procedures which are an integral component of educational processes, have also been examined.

Mohalik and Sahoo (2020), for example, carried out a study in India with 318 pre-service teachers to determine their readiness for and perceptions of online learning. Though pre-service teachers were *e-ready*, they faced many difficulties. Readiness was also the topic of inquiry for Aboagye et al. (2020) who found that the students were not ready due to their apprehension regarding potential difficulties of a new approach. Attitudes of students towards the ERT practice was also the focus of study for some scholars (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Kamarianos et al., 2020). In their study, Kamarianos et al. (2020) administered an attitude questionnaire to 331 Greek students in order to attain information regarding students' technology use for their social life and educational purposes. Based on the findings, the authors concluded that students' initial negative attitudes towards the new practice were replaced by positive ones in time, and this change was attributed to their fluency in technology use as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). The academics and students' contentment with the ERT procedure was investigated by Alqurshi (2020). The results showed that connection problems, concentration issues, lack of interaction made it hard for students to understand the content during virtual lessons, which resulted in insufficient education. In addition, the academics were not able to reach all the learning outcomes, and they mostly utilized homework assignments and online oral exams for assessment, which were disfavored by the students.

Some scholars investigated the overall first-hand experience of students during the ERT practice. Petillion and McNeil (2020) examined 64 s-year chemistry students' ERT experience in Canada. The findings based on online survey and semi-structured narrative interviews showed that students had negative learning experiences due to lack of communication and interaction, feeling of stress and anxiety, focusing issues, and closed-book and timed online examinations. Especially the feeling of surveillance by a test-proctoring software, had a downgrading influence over the students' academic performance and aggravated their anxiety levels. The authors suggested tutorial opportunities where students could have a simulated experience of the test process and to refrain from the use of a proctoring software as a means to improve academic performance and lessen anxiety. Students also reported positive views, among which recorded lectures were found to be beneficial as they could be played anytime and as many times as needed.

Instead of working around perceptions, experiences, and attitudes, some researchers were motivated to directly identify the challenges, difficulties, disadvantages, benefits, opportunities or advantages experienced by students and teachers. In other words, pros and cons of such a mandatorily new channel of delivery have been investigated in several studies. For instance, Dogar et al. (2020) conducted a case study in Pakistan to investigate the problems or constraints faced by students and faculty members within distance education. The findings showed that there was a communication gap between students and instructors, and among the students as they were not able to turn on their cameras and microphones either due to the software or connection issues. Some of the students did not even have access to the internet or technological devices to join the classes. Therefore, majority of the students found the quality of education questionable. On the other hand, though few, there were also some benefits of online learning such as freedom of action, flexibility, recorded lectures, and no transportation.

Being an integral component of educational processes, assessment procedures have also been examined. In a case study by Guangul et al. (2020), the challenges of remote assessment within tertiary education were examined. The researchers gathered data from 50 students studying at the Middle East College in Oman via questionnaires. The findings revealed that inadequate technological infrastructure, academic dishonesty, cheating, and addressing learning outcomes were among the challenges of remote assessment. Suggestions to lessen academic dishonesty or cheating included preparing different questions for each student for small-scale classes and employing various assessment methods such as online presentations and projects for larger classes.

Table 1 summarizes the ERT studies discussed above.

2.2 ERT studies conducted in turkish higher education

The number of studies investigating the ERT practice in the Turkish higher education system is limited. Among the foci of these studies are readiness, perceptions, and perspectives; challenges of ERT, and views regarding assessment practices.

As the outbreak caught the globe off-guard, Sarıtaş and Barutçu (2020) examined whether students were ready for a remote learning experience through Hung et al.'s (2010) Online Learning Readiness scale – a 5-point Likert scale. The results indicated that readiness varied among undergraduate students depending on the number of years in college and previous online learning experiences. However, the authors also reported that the readiness levels of associate degree program students did not vary.

Several research studies have been conducted to investigate university students' and instructors' perceptions, perspectives, and opinions regarding the ERT practice. Tümen Akyıldız (2020) carried out FGDs with 12 undergraduate students to capture their perceptions and suggestions regarding remote education. The study showed that students had mostly negative perceptions as the disadvantages outnumbered advantages. Among the disadvantages were lack of interaction, communication gap, an increase in the number of assignments, examination issues, and time management while the advantages included flexibility of time and place, easier examinations with instant exam results, and being more responsible. As for the suggestions, three categories emerged namely, changing the lecturing style, the style of the instructor, and the style of assessment. Students highlighted the need for interaction during the lectures and believed that instructors should be more open to communication and more competent in terms of technology use. Concerning the exam style, students' suggestions for the instructors included employing a clear rubric to avoid ambiguity, providing more feedback, and reducing the number of assignments. In Kürtüncü and Kurt (2020) study, students were mainly concerned about online examinations not being fair as they were more conducive to cheating compared to face-to-face examinations. Based on these problems, students preferred homework assignments instead of online examinations. Keskin and Özer (2020) proposed that remote learning was not as permanent and effective as conventional learning since the students had technical problems as well as difficulties in interacting and communicating with instructors.

Table 1 ERT studies conducted within higher education across different countries

#	Author(s) & year	Setting	Aim	Participant (s)	Design	Data collection instrument(s)	Major findings
1	Mohalik and Sahoo (2020)	India	to determine pre-service teachers' readiness and perceptions towards ERT	318 pre-service teachers	mixed	open and close-ended questionnaire	Pre-service teachers were e-ready but lacked proper internet connection and electricity supply. The advantages were improved technological skills and cost-efficiency
2	Aboagye et al. (2020)	Ghana	to identify students' readiness and challenges of ERT	141 students	quantitative	questionnaire	The students were not ready. The challenges included accessibility, social, instructor, academic, and generic issues
3	Kamarianos et al. (2020)	Greece	to determine students' attitudes towards ERT	331 students	quantitative	questionnaire	Students' initial negative attitudes towards ERT were replaced by positive ones in time
4	Adnan and Anwar (2020)	Pakistan	to explore students' attitudes regarding ERT	126 undergraduate & graduate students	quantitative	questionnaire	Majority of the students had reservations due to limited internet access, limited interaction, and groupwork assignments
5	Petillion and McNeil (2020)	Canada	to explore students' ERT experience	64 students	mixed	survey & semi-structured narrative interview	Students' ERT experience was largely negative due to lack of interaction and communication, focusing issues, and online examinations
6	Rahiem (2020)	Indonesia	to explore students' ERT experience	80 students	qualitative	diary, reflective essays & online focus group discussions	The advantages included home comfort and flexibility while excessive assignments, noise, connection issues, and sibling interference were among the challenges
7	Shin and Hickey (2020)	USA	to explore students' ERT experience	52 undergraduates & 12 graduates	mixed	survey & open-ended questions	Students had varying online learning experiences depending on their course instructors

Table 1 (continued)

#	Author(s) & year	Setting	Aim	Participant(s)	Design	Data collection instrument(s)	Major findings
8	Huang (2020)	China	to explore the views of instructors & students regarding ERT	56 instructors & 432 students	quantitative	questionnaire	The common challenge was lack of interaction while course recordings were the greatest benefit of ERT
9	Prokopenko and Berezina (2020)	Ukraine	to identify difficulties and benefits of the ERT practice	students & instructors	quantitative	questionnaire	The difficulties included technical and psychological problems while the benefits included flexibility of time and place, improved self-discipline, and mastery in technology
10	Guangul et al. (2020)	Oman	to identify the challenges of remote assessment	50 students	quantitative	questionnaire	The challenges were inadequate technological infrastructure, cheating, and addressing learning outcomes
11	Bashitlshaar et al. (2021)	Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, & Palestine	to explore the challenges regarding e-exams	university professors & students	quantitative	questionnaire	The challenges included personal, pedagogical, technical, and financial and organizational obstacles

Another aspect of online education, the quality of assessment practices was examined by Senel and Senel (2021) through students' views in their mixed-method study. Based on the results, there were two critical points that students regarded as negative. The first was lack of immediate feedback, and the second was lack of fair assessment. Among the positive aspects of online assessment were time and place independence, less exam anxiety, and measuring higher level skills such as problem solving, creative and critical thinking.

Details about these studies are given in Table 2.

2.3 ERT studies within higher education in an EFL context

Relevant literature on details and dynamics embedded in learning English via ERT has revolved around perceptions, preferences, challenges and opportunities, and advantages and disadvantages.

Todd (2020) conducted a study with 52 EFL instructors at a Thai university to explore their perceptions about the problems, advantages and disadvantages of online teaching. The EFL instructors were administered a questionnaire consisting of three sections. The first section included the tools and programs used during online education; the second included ratings of the seriousness of problems; and the third section was about instructors' perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages. The results revealed that teachers found teaching oral communication skills the most challenging as students could not be paired to practice their speaking skills. In addition, limited internet access, difficulty in checking understanding, preparing activities, assessing assignments/examinations, back and eye pain were also mentioned as difficulties for instructors. Among the advantages were flexibility of time and place, cost-efficiency and no commuting. In the same vein, Şener et al. (2020) explored 39 English instructors' perceptions regarding online teaching as well as the technical, pedagogical and institutional problems they experienced. It was emphasized that the instructors faced problems due to internet connectivity, lack of technical equipment (e.g., laptop, camera, and microphone), lack of communication, increase in workload, constant changes regarding the implementation of online teaching, students' unwillingness to turn on their cameras or microphones, lack of interaction, lack of student motivation, emotional well-being, and support.

As for EFL students' preferences and perceptions concerning platforms and applications such as Cisco WebEx Meeting, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp utilized during the ERT practice, Amin and Sundari (2020) conducted a study with 140 participants from two universities in Aceh and Jakarta. The survey results indicated that WhatsApp ranked the highest for material delivery, Google Classroom for presenting language exercises, and Cisco WebEx for online meetings. Although each platform was deemed useful in terms of language learning, WhatsApp was the most preferred one due to its practicality and students' familiarity with it. Cisco WebEx, on the other hand, was found beneficial as it provides not only authentic language for communication but also chat rooms for collaboration. The benefits of Google Classroom were reported as ease of material distribution, submitting assignments, and grading.

Table 2 ERT studies conducted in Turkish higher education

#	Author(s) & year	Setting	Aim	Participant(s)	Design	Data collection instrument(s)	Major findings
1	Sarıtaş and Barutçu (2020)	Denizli	to determine the readiness of students for ERT	2835 students	quantitative	online learning readiness scale	Readiness varied among undergraduates depending on the number of years in college and previous online learning experience
2	Tümen Akıldız (2020)	Elazığ	to explore students' perceptions regarding ERT	12 students	qualitative	focus group discussions	Students had mostly negative perceptions as the disadvantages outnumbered the advantages
3	Kurnaz and Serçemeli (2020)	-	to identify academics' perspectives about accounting courses delivered online	101 academics from private & state universities	quantitative	questionnaire	The negative sides were lack of interaction and difficulty assessing students' learning while the positive sides were recorded lectures, and cost efficiency
4	Uluöz (2020)	Adana	to explore the opinions of Sport Sciences students regarding the changes in education	18 students	qualitative	semi-structured interviews	The negative aspects were connection issues, lack of technological devices, decrease in class hours, and cheating while the positive aspects were cost-efficiency, course recordings, and unsupervised examinations
5	Kürtüncü and Kurt (2020)	Western Black Sea Region	to identify the challenges encountered by students	516 students	mixed	a 21-item (open and close-ended) web-based survey	The problems included lack of a personal computer and internet access, infrastructure issues and exam anxiety
6	Senel and Senel (2021)	-	to explore students' views regarding the assessment practices during the pandemic	486 students from 61 universities	mixed	Likert scale & open-ended questions	Lack of immediate feedback, and lack of fair assessment were the two major problems. The positive sides included time and place independence and less exam anxiety

How the ERT practice was experienced by pre-service EFL teachers was also among the research studies listed in the literature. In this sense, Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020) collected data through an online questionnaire, blog entries, and semi-structured interviews in their case study conducted with 27 Chilean EFL pre-service teachers. The researchers noted that the shortcomings of online teaching were lack of interaction, lack of face-to-face teaching experience, lack of communication and cooperation among teachers, difficulty to prepare appropriate materials and activities, inadequate technological tools and connectivity, and interference by the members of the household, which caused them to be distracted. Gaining experience in delivering online lessons, improved technological skills, and autonomous learning were noted as the benefits of online teaching.

Another research endeavor completed with pre-service EFL teachers in Turkey explored the advantages and disadvantages of ERT in terms of language skill development by surveying 118 participants (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020). The results showed that writing skills had an advantage over speaking skills as writing became the new medium of communication within the online platform and as it was regularly practiced during homework assignments and projects.

Table 3 provides an overview of these studies.

The current literature does not provide necessary information regarding what happens during the ERT process from the eyes of both EFL students and instructors especially in the Turkish context. Studies focusing on how the ERT practice has been viewed by both EFL students and instructors can potentially provide practical implications to fine-tune educational programs that would better correspond to their needs in case of an ERT without sacrificing the quality of education. Therefore, given the limited body of research on how the ERT practice has been experienced by language learners and instructors in higher education, the current study aims to explore the perspectives of both freshman EFL students and their instructors regarding the ERT practice. In line with this study aim, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What are the perspectives of freshman EFL students regarding the ERT practice?
2. What are the perspectives of instructors teaching freshman EFL students regarding the ERT practice?

3 Method

3.1 Research design

This research employs a qualitative case study design as the aim is to produce in-depth description of a phenomenon based on the detailed viewpoints of participants (Yin, 2018). Based on the fact that case studies generally rise on “multiple sources of evidence” to increase confidence in findings and to monitor compatibility among them (Yin, 2018, p. 15), data have been triangulated through reflective journals, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations.

Table 3 ERT studies within higher education in an EFL context

#	Author(s) & year	Setting	Aim	Participant(s)	Design	Data collection instrument(s)	Major findings
1	Allo (2020)	Indonesia	to investigate EFL learners' perceptions of ERT	EFL students	qualitative	semi-structured interviews	Students were mainly satisfied with online learning as it enabled them to learn new vocabulary and gain technological competence
2	Todd (2020)	Thailand	to examine EFL instructors' perceptions about problems, advantages & disadvantages of ERT	52 EFL instructors	mixed	survey & open-ended questions	Teaching speaking skills was the most challenging. The advantages included flexibility of time and place, cost-efficiency and no commuting
3	Şener et al. (2020)	Istanbul	to explore the perceptions of English instructors' about ERT	39 EFL instructors	mixed	Likert scale & open-ended questions	Problems included lack of internet connection or technical equipment, lack of interaction, and increase in workload
4	Amin and Sundari (2020)	Aceh & Jakarta	to identify EFL students' preferences and perceptions regarding platforms and applications used in ERT	140 EFL students	quantitative	questionnaire	WhatsApp ranked the highest for material delivery, Google Classroom for presenting language exercises, and Cisco WebEx for online meetings

Table 3 (Continued)

#	Author(s) & year	Setting	Aim	Participant(s)	Design	Data collection instrument(s)	Major findings
5	Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020)	Chile	to determine challenges and opportunities of ERT	EFL pre-service teachers	mixed	questionnaire, blog entry & a semi-structured interview	Challenges were lack of interaction and communication, inadequate technological tools and connectivity. Improved technological skills and autonomous learning were the benefits
6	Karataş and Tuncer (2020)	Turkey	to explore advantages and disadvantages of ERT in terms of language skill development	118 EFL pre-service teachers	qualitative	open-ended question form	Writing skills had an advantage over speaking skills as writing became the new medium of communication within ERT

3.2 Setting and participants

After receiving relevant permission(s) from Anadolu University Ethics Committee, the participants were selected through homogeneous sampling – a type of purposive sampling – which is utilized when the aim is to describe a subgroup in-depth, to reduce variation, and to facilitate FGDs (Palinkas et al., 2015). The research sample consists of 15 participants; 11 freshman EFL students and 4 of their instructors at Anadolu University. Among all students, especially those graduating from high school and starting tertiary education were affected the most as they had to adapt to a totally new and unfamiliar system in terms of teaching, learning, and assessment procedures. Besides, language learning programs may be difficult to adapt to an online context considering that they require necessary technology and digital savviness to provide opportunities for EFL students to contact with the target language.

After getting permission from each participant via consent forms, information regarding instructors' age, gender, years of experience, access to modern information and communication technology, previous online teaching experience, and technology training was collected through a background information form, which is summarized in Table 4 together with the English skill courses the instructors taught. Additionally, the video conferencing tools utilized by the instructors during the remote classes are also provided.

Information regarding students' age, gender, access to modern information and communication technology, access to internet connectivity, and previous online learning experiences was gathered through a background information form which is summarized in Table 5.

The details in Table 5 show that S2 and S5 did not have computers, and S2 did not have residential internet connection as well. None of the students had an online learning experience prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 4 The profile of the instructors

N	Gender	Age	Years of experience	Personal devices	Technology training	Previous online teaching experience
I-1	M	45	21	computer & smartphone	+	-
I-2	F	51	30	computer & smartphone	+	-
I-3	F	41	18	computer & smartphone	+	-
I-4	F	44	22	computer & smartphone	+	+
N	Distribution of English Skill Courses					
I-1	Listening and Pronunciation-1					
I-2	Oral Communication Skills-1					
I-3	Reading Skills-1					
I-4	Writing Skills-1					
N	Video Conferencing Tools Utilized During Online Classes					
I-1	ZOOM					
I-2	ZOOM, MS Teams & Mergen					
I-3	ZOOM, MS Teams & Mergen					
I-4	ZOOM, MS Teams & Mergen					

Table 5 The profile of the students

N	Gender	Age	Personal devices	Residential internet connection	Previous online education experience
S1	M	18	computer & smartphone	+	-
S2	F	18	smartphone	-	-
S3	F	19	computer & smartphone	+	-
S4	F	18	computer	+	-
S5	F	18	smartphone	+	-
S6	F	17	computer & smartphone	+	-
S7	F	17	computer & smartphone	+	-
S8	F	18	computer & smartphone	+	-
S9	F	20	computer	+	-
S10	F	18	computer & smartphone	+	-
S11	F	18	computer	+	-

3.3 Data collection instruments

3.3.1 Reflective journals

Reflective journals were utilized to explore how participants understand, assign meaning to, and interpret the novel phenomenon, the ERT. The participants were told to keep a total of 6 reflective journals during the Fall term regarding their views about the ERT practice. However, the instructors could complete only four journals due to their heavy workload throughout the term. In the end, a total of 82 reflective journals have been collected – 66 from the students and 16 from the instructors.

Rather than merely telling students to keep journals, it is recommended to train and scaffold them with guidance such as semi-structured and explicit prompts (Lee, 2013). Thus, the participants were provided with a handout designed in accordance with the opinions of six experts¹ (1 Full Professor, 4 Associate Professors, and 1 Research Assistant). Due to the fact that any sort of language barrier could hinder precise expression of ideas and perspectives if participants are forced to keep their journals in a foreign language (Lee, 2013), the journals were written in the participants' native language.

3.3.2 Classroom observations

The researcher conducted classroom observations and took field notes on a classroom observation form to reach a “greater understanding of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 60). The classroom observations were carried out by watching the video records of the live sessions. The researcher was assigned as a

¹ The same experts were consulted for all the data collection instrument forms.

“complete observer” (Creswell, 2013, p. 167), thus she was not seen or heard by any of the participants during the lessons. A total of 10 virtual classroom observations (4 lessons from 1 instructor and 2 lessons from each 3 instructors) were conducted. The total duration of the observed sessions was 11 h and 20 min.

3.3.3 Focus group discussions

FGDs were conducted as they are more conducive to extract valuable information through exchanges among participants as opposed to “one-on-one interviews” (Creswell, 2013, p. 164) in which hesitation on part of the interviewee may hinder obtaining detailed information.

Two separate FGDs (one with instructors and one with students) were carried out on ZOOM. The first FGD was conducted with 3 of the instructors, as one was not able to participate due to health issues. The second FGD was conducted with 5 students; 6 students didn’t want to attend due to their hectic schedule. When holding FGDs, the open-ended questions formulated in accordance with the experts’ opinions were displayed on the screen to provide participants with time and space to gather their thoughts and recall their experiences (Kuru Gönen, 2019). The FGD with the instructors lasted 1 h 54 min, and the one conducted with the students lasted for 1 h 24 min. Both FGDs were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

The current research utilized an inductive approach (i.e., data-driven) by employing qualitative content analysis (QCA), which is defined as “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material” (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). In the data analysis, Elo and Kyngäs’s (2008) approach was adopted, which stipulates that QCA should be completed in three steps, namely open coding, creating categories, and abstraction.

Among many techniques to establish inter-coder agreement, a “consensus process” (Forman & Damschroder, 2007, p. 55) approach was adopted since the use of quantitative measures is not a requirement for the reliability of QCA (Forman & Damschroder, 2007), and reciprocal communication through reflexivity matters more than meeting a level of coefficient agreement for qualitative research (Mason, 2002). During the consensus process approach, the researcher and the second coder met twice on ZOOM where they compared and discussed their analyses until a hundred percent agreement was achieved based on “cogency of argument” (Eisner, 2017, p. 113). The three phases of Elo and Kyngäs’ (2008) approach in qualitative content analysis were carried out by two coders.

Following the same steps taken for the analysis of the reflective journals, the two coders analyzed verbatim transcriptions of the FGDs. The second coder once again independently worked on the documents, and two online negotiation sessions were held for consensus building. Furthermore, the field notes taken during the classroom

observations were resorted to support and further clarify the categories emerged from both journals and FGDs. In addition, external audit trials (Creswell, 2013) were completed with an Associate Professor and a Full Professor teaching graduate courses on qualitative research to resolve any concerns as to the validity of the study.

Obtaining ecologically valid data requires a channel through which participants can express their perspectives, ideas, and experiences most freely. Therefore, the medium used in the reflective journals and FGDs was Turkish. Following the data collection process, all the journals and transcripts of FGDs were translated into English by the researcher. Subsequently, the English version was back-translated to Turkish by a field specialist to check the coherence between the original and the translated versions. Due to some discrepancies between the original and translated versions, the problematic parts were discussed and re-translated.

4 Findings

The findings are presented separately for students and their instructors in line with the research questions. The findings have indicated that this recent phenomenon has been a comparable experience for the two groups as both found the ERT practice having more disadvantages than advantages.

4.1 R.Q.1: What are the perspectives of freshman EFL students regarding the ERT practice?

Based on the classroom observations, students' reflective journals, and FGD, the following categories have been formulated (See Table 6).

As can be seen in Table 6, the main category of disadvantages is composed of five generic problem categories, such as technical, self-related, instructor-related, live-session-related, and assignment and exam-related problems. On the other hand, the advantages experienced by the students are established on three generic categories, namely self-related, live session-related, and exam-related advantages. It is noteworthy to mark that assignments and exams conducted within the ERT practice are reported to have both disadvantages and advantages. Besides, the students have also come up with a number of suggestions regarding interaction, assignments and exams, and notifications.

4.2 Disadvantages

4.2.1 Technical problems

Technical problems have been a major concern for 10 of the 11 students during the ERT practice. The urgent transition of educational activities to an online setting created an overwhelming demand on all the systems and the internet

Table 6 Main, generic, and subcategories for the students

Main category	Generic category	Subcategory	Students	<i>f</i>
Disadvantages	Technical problems	System-induced problems	1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11	7
		Connection problems	2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11	7
		Inadequate technological infrastructure	2, 4, 5, 6	4
		Power cut	2, 11	2
		Computer-related problems	3, 11	2
	Self-related problems	Increase in workload	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	10
		Physical distress	1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10	6
		Lack of motivation	5, 8, 9, 11	4
		Reluctance to join with camera	1, 9	2
		Lack of technological know-how	7, 8	2
		Hesitancy in communicating with instructors	4, 8	2
	Instructor-related problems	Lack of feedback	3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11	7
		Delayed exam assessment	5, 8, 9, 10	4
		Poor instruction regarding homework assignments	3, 5, 10	3
	Live session-related problems	Insufficient class time	2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11	7
		Distractors	1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11	6
		Lack of interaction	4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11	6
		Lack of a real classroom atmosphere	5, 6, 7, 8	4
	Assignment & exam-related problems	Procedural issues	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	10
		Challenging take-home exams	1, 3, 7, 10	4
		Groupwork issues	3, 6, 8, 9	4
		Cheating	5, 4	2
Advantages	Self-related advantages	Convenience	6, 10	2
		No bias against each other	5, 10	2
		Cost efficiency	10	1
	Live session-related advantages	Course recordings	1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11	7
	Exam-related advantages	Take-home exams	1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11	8
		Instant results of online exams	1, 6	2
Suggestions	Interaction	Asking questions	10	1
	Assignments and exams	Sharing exam specifications	5, 1	2
		Providing more time	8	1
		Having a moving back and forth option	6	1
	Notifications	Having a single portal	5	1

connection infrastructure. Consequentially, **system-induced problems** were commonly mentioned by seven of the students. For instance, some students had problems either accessing the system or joining the live lessons due to system malfunctions:

- (1) "...all my instructors start or try to start the classes on time. I say they try because during some hours the system is overloaded and it crashes. Then, we look for some other alternatives, which results in loss of time." (S4, RJ-1)

Connection problems were as frequent as system-induced problems. Unstable and poor connection caused seven of the students not only to experience broken video/audio reception but also miss some classes.

Four of the students reflected on the challenges they encountered due to **inadequate technological infrastructure** such as lack of residential internet connection and relevant hardware (e.g., computer, camera, microphone):

- (2) "This week, I had some problems as I don't have a computer. Thus, I missed some classes. It's very hard to join the classes via phone. The computer is a huge requirement for me in terms of the lessons and assignments." (S5, RJ-2)

A stable supply of power is vital during all online educational activities, but two of the students mentioned that **power cuts** in their region caused impediments.

Computer-related problems were also listed as one of the issues that gave students a difficult time, and they had to attend the classes through their phones.

4.2.2 Self-related problems

Excessive homework assignments, keeping track of notifications, and preparation before classes were the factors leading to **increase in workload** for almost all the students ($n=10$). For instance, nine of the students complained about the excessive number of homework assignments:

- (3) "The instructors give homework assignments like crazy, and due dates for all are 6–7 days later, to be submitted on the same day, but when am I supposed to do all of these? Sorry, but I really don't feel like a student, I feel like a slave because I always have to do homework in front of the computer in my room. I submit 3 assignments, then I look and again I see 3 more!" (S4, RJ-4)

Given the fact that all educational practices have been moved to an online setting, some students felt the need to prepare more for their classes than in face-to-face education:

- (4) "I've realized that preliminary preparation is a must in this ERT process. When I attend the classes unprepared, I have difficulty understanding what the instructor is teaching." (S11, RJ-2)

Physical distress came up as another issue causing five students to experience health concerns. Sitting in front of a computer screen for long hours not only gave

them concerns about their posture but also led to eyestrain, weight gain, headache, backache, neck pain, etc.

Lack of motivation was noted by four of the students, indicating that they had difficulties maintaining their motivation towards the end of the Fall term:

- (5) "... I realized that many people didn't attend the classes. I guess they are tired and don't want to study. To be honest, I'm also losing my motivation day by day. It feels like torture to wake up and join the classes in the morning. Fortunately, it's almost over." (S11, RJ-6)

Consistent with the classroom observations, two students reported their **reluctance to join with cameras** during the live sessions:

- (6) "... However, being obliged to turn on our cameras during the lessons is a factor that bothers many of us." (S1, RJ-1)

For two of the students, **lack of technological know-how** was another issue. S7 stated that the ERT experience was a bit challenging as she had little knowledge and interest in using technological means while S8 highlighted the trouble she had sharing a video link for her midterm assignment.

The last subcategory of self-related problems has emerged as **hesitancy in communicating with instructors** based on what two of the students mentioned during the FGD:

- (7) "Since we don't know the instructors much, we are scared to ask something, to be honest. Because neither I know the instructors nor they know me. You don't know what to write, there was always a hesitancy between me and my instructors." (S8, FGD)
- (8) "I agree with S8 because I also hesitated to e-mail my instructors since I don't know them." (S4, FGD)

4.2.3 Instructor-related problems

Some of the problems the students went through were related to their instructors. One common issue as stated by seven of the students was **lack of feedback**, especially for the Writing Skills course:

- (9) "... I did all my homework assignments for the Writing course but didn't get any feedback. All I know is that they were graded during the finals. When this is the case, one cannot really improve herself/himself. Therefore, this course, unfortunately, wasn't beneficial for me at all." (S4, FGD)

In line with the lack of feedback, four of the students underlined that **delayed exam assessment** was also a problem for them:

- (10) “Finals are approaching, but I don’t even know if there is a course I failed since some of the instructors still haven’t announced the midterm results.” (S9, RJ-6)

Based on what three of the students reported, **poor instruction regarding homework assignments** has emerged as another instructor-related problem:

- (11) “I didn’t get what our instructor wanted from us regarding the assignment in the first e-mail. It wasn’t that clear, and also the feedback that I got from our class’ chat-group indicated confusion about the homework.” (S10, RJ-4)

4.2.4 Live session-related problems

The data have shown that the students faced four kinds of live session-related problems. **Insufficient class time**, for instance, was a common difficulty for seven of the students:

- (12) “I don’t think we can get efficiency from online classes because we try to squeeze a three-hour lesson into one hour, we rush, and it’s not working.” (S4, RJ-3)

Besides insufficient class time, **distractors** were also reported as a major problem by seven of the students. Among the distractors were noise due to family members and camera feed causing one of the students to become distracted as she was either watching herself or her classmates.

A total of six students indicated **lack of interaction** as a significant issue they experienced. Based on their reflections, interaction was either limited or missing both among the students and between the instructors and students:

- (13) “While having classes on Mergen, the students’ cameras and microphones are generally off. I don’t get what they do during the lessons without interaction and feedback.” (S6, RJ-1)
- (14) “There were some classes with no interaction at all. For instance, the important thing for me was the Writing course. I haven’t seen any interaction. I was not able to do anything, thus I bought myself a book and now I follow that.” (S8, FGD)

Moreover, attending online lessons did not compensate for absence of a real classroom as reported by four of the students. **Lack of a real classroom atmosphere** made them feel tense and alienated during the lessons.

4.2.5 Assignment and exam-related problems

The difficulties encountered by the students also include assignment and exam-related problems. **Procedural issues** such as insufficient exam time, no access to

previous questions, and no preview of all the questions were major problems during online exams:

- (15) “The exams were a complete nightmare. The system’s biggest problem is not letting us return to previous questions. I’m aware that this is necessary to prevent cheating within the distance education process, but at least we should be allowed to skip one or two questions that we can return to later.” (S6, RJ-4)

Along with the procedural issues, **challenging take-home exams** were overwhelming and demanding for the students:

- (16) “Midterm exams for four of the courses were in the form of assignments. The assignments were really detailed and exhausting [...] Some of the assignments were so long and required so much detail that I sometimes thought about not doing them.” (S1, RJ 4)

Among assessment and exam-related problems, **group work issues** were noted problematic since they were not familiar with each other, and they had difficulty reaching each other.

In addition, two of the students stated the possibility and/or ease of **cheating** during exams as a disadvantage and a concern about the fairness of evaluation process.

4.3 Advantages

4.3.1 Self-related advantages

The ERT practice has brought along some advantages for the students as well, albeit few in number. For instance, two of the students pointed to the **convenience** of ERT in terms of saving time:

- (17) “We are attending the classes on the computer now, but we will get up two hours before the classes during our school life, because there will be transportation, dressing, breakfast, and stuff. Therefore, I can say that it is an advantage to attend the classes with sweatpants under and a t-shirt on top.” (S10, FGD)

Meeting classmates in an online setting, as noted by two of the students, bears a potential for building relations without prejudice. According to the following extracts, the students had **no bias against each other** since they were not able to create their own group of friends and exclude each other:

- (18) “...when you get to know other people from a distance, there is no room for biases. There is no profile picture on WhatsApp, you do not know who they are, where they are from. Therefore, everybody responds when somebody raises a

question. You don't see things like 'I don't like him/her' due to prejudice." (S5, FGD)

As schools were closed, students did not need to move away from home. This was mentioned as one of the advantages of ERT. According to S10, no need for extra expenses such as accommodation, food and transportation enhanced **cost efficiency** of distance education.

4.3.2 Live session-related advantages

Students stated that **course recordings** were advantageous because they were able to watch the lessons they missed, and they could resort to the recordings for revision any time.

- (19) "Distance education is actually beneficial as the lessons are recorded so that we can watch them later on for revision." (S9, RJ-3)

4.3.3 Exam-related advantages

Though **take-home exams** were found challenging and time-consuming, they were also stated to be practical and fruitful by eight of the students:

- (20) "The exams of some courses were comprised of assignments, and I had to write many paragraphs and texts this week. I also had to do revisions many times and I think it was beneficial." (S7, RJ-3)
- (21) "Our instructors gave us assignments for the midterms in general. I think assignments are much better because there can be power outages or connection issues during the exams." (S2, RJ-4)

The convenience of **instant results of online exams** has been formulated as another subcategory of exam-related advantages:

- (22) "The thing I like most about the system is getting the exam results instantly. The system automatically calculates the scores except for the open-ended questions, and you can learn about your score right after the exam." (S6, RJ-4)

4.4 Suggestions

4.4.1 Interaction

During the FGDs, one of the students – S10 – referred to the Writing Skills course and the limited interaction since the instructor was reading from the slides. Accordingly, she suggested employing elicitation to have an interactive lesson:

- (23) Another thing is that our teacher is reading the slides. I think it should be removed. After all, there is a presentation on the screen, our teacher reads it. We can also see the presentation. We can also read it. We just sit and listen, and an hour later we don't remember anything. That's why lessons should be interactive. For example, instructors should ask questions. (S10, FGD)

4.4.2 Assignments and exams

As for the assignment and exam-related problems, three of the students made suggestions such as **providing more time for online exams**, **sharing exam specifications**, and **having a moving back and forth option** across questions. Two of the students noted that they lack specific information regarding the exams and that they need to **know about the specifications** in advance:

- (24) For instance, if the instructors tell us in advance like 'The questions you need more time for are in this part.', even just this. Then, we can act accordingly. When they place them at the end and don't warn us, we feel jammed. How am I going to do that? How many questions are there? Well, there is one question but splits into 20, or that splits into 10. Therefore, it's tense, I mean waiting for what's coming next. We need some details. (S5, FGD)
- (25) "I was going to say the same thing with S5. Since we don't know how many minutes each question will take, or we don't know the next, forthcoming question, we cannot manage the time." (S1, FGD)

One of the students stated how time-consuming it was to deal with some technicalities during the online exams, and thus instructors should **provide more time for online exams**:

- (26) "I think it is important to give a longer time for online exams in the form of online tests, because there might be disconnections or for example, your computer might cause a problem." (S8, FGD)

S6 referred to the problem of not being able to skip or return back to the previous questions during online exams, and thus having difficulty in managing their time. Accordingly, she underlines the necessity of **having a moving back and forth option** across questions:

- (27) "The system's biggest problem is not letting us return to previous questions. I'm aware that this is necessary to prevent cheating within the distance education process, but at least we should be allowed to skip one or two questions that we can return to later." (S6, FGD)

4.4.3 Notifications

Following notifications were reported as problem by both the students and instructors. In line with this issue, S5 recommended using a single system, which would make it easier to follow all the notifications:

- (28) Not all of our lessons are conducted on a single system. Someone is sending an e-mail, someone is writing something from Teams, someone is writing from Anasis, someone is writing from Mergen, someone is writing from Zoom. If there is a single system, okay, I'm willing to check it, you just turn on the notifications and it's over. But like this, it is a mess. (S5, FGD)

4.5 R.Q.2: What are the perspectives of instructors teaching freshman EFL students regarding the ERT practice?

Based on the classroom observations, instructors' reflective journals, and FGD, the following categories have emerged as seen in Table 7.

As shown in Table 7, the main category of disadvantages is composed of five generic categories in accord with those of the students. More specifically, the findings indicated that the instructors also experienced technical, self-related, student-related, live session-related, and assignment and exam-related problems. On the other hand, advantages are established on only two generic categories, namely self-related and live session-related advantages. Apart from the advantages and disadvantages, the instructors have also come up with a number of suggestions regarding interaction, system-induced problems, assignments and exams. Analysis of the subcategories showed that ERT has been a comparable experience for both the instructors and the students.

4.6 Disadvantages

4.6.1 Technical problems

Technical problems include *system-induced problems*, *computer-related problems*, and *inadequate technological infrastructure*. As the transition of educational activities to online settings had to be completed rapidly, the system itself was not ready, thus **system-induced problems** have been one of the major sources:

- (1) "I was not able conduct any lessons on MERGEN this term due to its continuous malfunctioning for 2 weeks." (I-1, FGD)

Two of the instructors pointed out that **computer-related problems** were the second most frequent problem as they experienced overheating and screen shut-downs during both the live sessions and when working out of class hours.:

Table 7 Main, generic, and subcategories for the instructors

Main category	Generic category	Subcategory	Instructors	<i>f</i>
Disadvantages	Technical problems	System-induced problems	1, 2, 4	3
		Computer-related problems	1, 4	2
		Inadequate technological infrastructure	1	1
	Self-related problems	Increase in workload	1, 2, 3, 4	4
		Physical distress	1, 4	2
		Lack of technological know-how	3, 4	2
	Student-related problems	Reluctance to join with camera & microphone	1, 2, 3, 4	4
		Lack of preparation	1, 2, 3	3
		Concentration problems	4	1
	Live session-related problems	Insufficient class time	1, 3, 4	3
		Lack of interaction	1, 2, 4	3
		Lack of a real classroom atmosphere	1, 3, 4	3
	Assignment & exam-related problems	Difficulty checking understanding	2, 4	2
		Possibility of cheating on online exams	1, 2, 4	3
		Originality of homework assignments	1, 2, 4	3
Advantages	Self-related advantages	Working from home	2, 3	2
		Improved technological skills	4	1
	Live session-related advantages	Course recordings	1, 4	2
		Lecturing without interruption	4	1
Suggestions	Interaction	Turning on cameras	2	1
	System-induced problems	Improving the infrastructure	2	1
	Assignments and exams	Following notifications	2, 4	2
		Keeping cameras on	1, 4	2

- (2) “... As my laptop’s fan was not working properly, I faced problems when it overheated. I had to use a break. I even had to put an icepack under the laptop.” (I-1, RJ-4)
- (3) “The other day, while I was checking the homework assignments of the Writing Skills course, the big screen shut itself down. I thought something exploded, I got scared, it started working again in the evening.” (I-4, FGD)

Three of the students (S2, S6, and S9) also verified computer-related problems the instructors experienced. In their journals, they reported that the instructors were not able to conduct some classes due to problems with their computers.

According to one of the instructors, **inadequate technological infrastructure** was also a problem to be tackled on part of both the instructors and the institution.

4.6.2 Self-related problems

All four instructors expressed that **increase in workload** was one of the major consequences of online teaching, which were mainly attributed to assignments, examinations, and feedback procedures:

- (4) “I realized one more time how time-consuming it is to give individual feedback to students within distance education. In ERT, I feel like I need to give more comprehensive feedback to prevent students becoming estranged from education. This being the case, my workload has increased considerably compared to face-to-face education.” (I-1, RJ-3)
- (5) “I agree with I-1. Sure, we do respond to students, they constantly send messages to ask about something or we write messages to remind them of stuff. I mean, being in front of the computer all the time is also a huge disadvantage for me as I don’t have my own personal time.” (I-2, FGD)

In relation to increase in workload, two instructors complained about the **physical distress** they experienced. Common types of distress included migraine as well as eye, back, and neck pain, which were attributed to the excessive time spent in front of the computer.

Among the issues identified within self-related problems, **lack of technological know-how** made two of the instructors feel insecure about technology use as they were not competent enough.

4.6.3 Student-related problems

Students’ **reluctance to join with cameras and microphones** during lectures has been reported by all four instructors and it was also noted during the classroom observations as the instructors kept asking the students to turn on their cameras and microphones; “I still see some of you resisting to turn on your cams. C’mon turn on your cams. Let’s see each other”. (I-1, CO, 10.22.2020). “Guys, please turn on your cameras and microphones.” (I-2, CO, 12.09.2020).

Among the student-related problems – **lack of preparation** has surfaced as another common problem for three instructors:

- (6) “It’s very boring to have classes with students who don’t read the assigned units because I cannot get responses to my questions, or 2–3 students read them, and always the same ones answer me.” (I-2, RJ-4)

Students’ lack of preparation was also verified by the same instructor’s remark during one of the classroom observations: “I can tell that again you haven’t watched this week’s videos.” (I-1, CO, 11.12.2020).

Poor attendance has emerged as another issue especially towards the end of the term:

- (7) “If I were to draw a graph, it would probably show a downward arrow regarding both interest and attendance [...] As I’ve said, it was not that bad at the beginning, but I think there was a decrease in attendance towards the end.” (I-1, FGD)

The final sub-category of student-related problems is **concentration problems** due to many health, family, or technical issues:

- (8) “I have students who got infected with Covid-19, who were even hospitalized, who had sick family members and funerals more this term compared to the previous ones. I have students who have a hard time concentrating due to technical or family problems at home.” (I-4, RJ-2)

4.6.4 Live session-related problems

The instructors have pointed to **insufficient class time** as a major problem. Three instructors indicated that time allocated for live sessions was not enough for students to internalize what is taught. During the classroom observation of Reading Skills course, I-3 had to rush towards the end of the session due to time limitation, and still was not able to cover the subject determined for that week. As a result, she asked the students to complete the rest on their own as an assignment.

Lack of interaction was another issue stated by two of the instructors:

- (9) “One of the most significant problems is that classroom interaction is mostly limited with instructor-student interaction, and there is almost no student–student interaction.” (I-1, RJ-1)

During classroom observations, no pair or groupwork activity was observed. Moreover, in one of the observations, the students did not even respond to the instructor’s (I-2) greeting.

The fact that all educational activities have been carried out in a virtual context has also harbored issues regarding **lack of a real classroom atmosphere** as reported by three of the instructors. As for I-1, live sessions hindered the conventional teaching patterns, and the ERT practice offered limited opportunities to be a role model for the students. By the same token, I-4 and I-3 shared their opinions as to the inauthenticity of a virtual classroom atmosphere, and I-3 further noted how that made her feel like an operator.

A collateral outcome of not being in close proximity with students caused three instructors to experience **difficulty checking understanding** during the live sessions as stated below:

- (10) “While teaching in the classroom, I could directly see whether students understood what I taught as I could clearly see their faces, but that was not possible in this setting.” (I-2, RJ-1)

4.6.5 Assignment and exam-related problems

The final generic category of disadvantages is assignment and exam-related problems. **Possibility of cheating** has been identified as a common factor exasperating three of the instructors as the online setting is considered more conducive to cheating:

- (11) "... the possibility of cheating for students is much higher in this online setting compared to face-to-face settings." (I-1, reflective journal-2)

Homework assignments were also problematic, in that online teaching–learning contexts do not bear the means to confirm the **originality of homework assignments**:

- (12) "I have been using Turn-it-in effectively for a long time. However, there is not a key criterion to confirm whether the person preparing the homework assignment or presentation is actually the student himself/herself." (I-4, RJ-2)

4.7 Advantages

4.7.1 Self-related advantages

Although outnumbered by disadvantages, two kinds of advantages have emerged from the data, namely *self-related* and *live session-related advantages*. Self-related advantages are based on two sub-categories, **working from home** and **improved technological skills**. As for I-3 and I-2, not leaving one's home when teaching and staying away from the rush hours are stated as a positive side of the lockdown and quarantine. According to I-4, constant use of technology and technological devices has inevitably enhanced her digital savviness.

4.7.2 Live session-related advantages

As the second positive aspect of the ERT practice, two instructors pointed out to **course recordings** and **lecturing without interruption**:

- (13) "Recording the lessons is something we have never experienced before. It's an advantage both for the students and as I-4 has said it's an advantage for us. If a student has a question about a specific topic, there is an advantage of saying 'Watch the course recording and if you still have questions, then let's talk'." (I-1, FGD)
- (14) "... like having for example more flowing lectures because there is no interaction, sure it is a bad thing on one side, but on the other it just flows, you are not interrupted, not really distracted. These were somehow the good parts." (I-4, FGD)

Analysis of the data indicated that the ERT practice was mostly disadvantageous for the instructors as well. Despite the prevalence of disadvantages, the findings also pointed to few advantages.

4.8 Suggestions

4.8.1 Interaction

Referring to the limited interaction, I-2 highlighted the importance of turning on cameras during the lessons:

- (15) “I expect students to turn on their cameras, if possible. Because when I consider my interaction with them, I did my best. My camera was always on, I mean they saw me and heard me.” (I-2, FGD)

4.8.2 System-induced problems

As for the system-induced problems, one of the instructors, I-2, stated that the infrastructure of the system needs to be improved:

- (16) “They [the students] either failed joining the system or tried to reconnect or something. Well, maybe if these problems are solved, if the students could log into the system on time that would be nice. Therefore, authorities should improve the infrastructure first.”

4.8.3 Assignments and exams

During the FGD, all of the instructors (I-1, I-2, and I-4) made suggestions regarding assignment and exam-related problems such as **following the notifications** and **keeping cameras on** during online examinations. For instance, two of the instructors suggested students to regularly check the notifications:

- (17) “They should follow the notifications. I mean, if they follow them I think we will at least find our way”. (I-4, FGD)
- (18) “You are right about this because believe it or not I learned that there was a student who did not attend the final exam because he did not know the date of the Reading exam. He sent a message “I didn’t know about the exam date”, how is that possible? This [checking notifications] should be a habit!” (I-2, FGD)

In order to establish a fair assessment, two of the instructors recommended **keeping the cameras on** during online examinations:

- (19) Well, this term there was a presentation plus assignment for writing. Of course, I had a lot of ideas in the presentations, at least who prepared what and how, how is his/her English, content knowledge etc. But despite everything, if we do not turn on the cameras while students are writing the composition, like some other universities, we cannot be one hundred percent sure whether that student has written that composition or not. (I-4, FGD)
- (20) “I agree with her. In fact, it seems that if the cameras were on during the exams, if they were designed exactly like that, we, as instructors, could have a clear conscience and face less problems in terms of exam security.” (I-1, FGD)

5 Discussion and conclusion

This qualitative case study showed that ERT has been a challenging and mostly disadvantageous process for both students and instructors. Similar findings were reported in studies investigating ERT in different contexts (e.g., Bashitialshaaer et al., 2021; Kürtüncü & Kurt, 2020).

The issues regarding computers and inadequate technological infrastructure correspond with those reported in the literature (e.g., Bashitialshaaer et al., 2021; Dogar et al., 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2020; Uluöz, 2020). The academics in Kurnaz and Serçemeli’s study (2020) underlined the need for better technological infrastructure on part of their institution. The students in this study, on the other hand, pointed to the lack of internet access or the necessary hardware. In that vein, Dogar et al. (2020) also emphasized limited opportunities for students to access the Internet and technological devices. Considering the digital divide, the issues in accessing necessary technologies signify that equity in online education is critical.

Issues in motivation, participation, feedback, and interaction may indicate that the need for a human element has remained constant throughout the ERT practice as also concluded by Ayres (2002), who reported that even students satisfied with online teaching did not believe that their teachers could be replaced by technology. Therefore, the emergence of an extra layer (namely computers or any means of technology) in student–teacher or student–student interaction due to online teaching may cause the involved parties to feel alienated. Although it is debatable whether face-to-face conversation in an online platform is essentially the same as in a conventional setting, the fact that students were reluctant to turn on their cameras was a common point of complaint for instructors, which made it harder to set up an interactive online environment. The limited nature of interaction (Huang, 2020; Kurnaz & Serçemeli, 2020; Kürtüncü & Kurt, 2020; Petillion & McNeil, 2020) may have impeded Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) opportunities for the students from a Vygotskian view (Vygotsky, 1978). However, in this context, the term ZPD could have been compensated with peer mediation.

Crucial aspects of learning such as receiving feedback, checking understanding and evaluating assignments have been significantly impeded for both students and their instructors. Similar to the findings of Bashitialshaaer et al. (2021), the instructors are skeptical as to the integrity of the students’ work as they feel they

have no means of checking whether the assignment in question is actually done by the student him/herself. The students, on the other hand, do not seem to be satisfied with the nature of online assignments and examinations. In line with Senel and Senel (2021), time pressure, in particular, has been identified as a common problem of online exams.

Both the instructors and students in this study reported that homework assignments were the main factor that increased their workload, which complies with the findings of Şener et al. (2020). As for the instructors, the main additional layer of the increase in their workload was trying to cope with grading homework assignments and providing each student with detailed feedback. In addition, lesson planning and preparation for an online teaching context was another factor increasing the instructors' workload. Because an increase in workload means sitting in front of the computer for long hours, almost all the participants referred to several health concerns such as eyestrain, weight gain, headache, backache, and neck pain, which is compatible with the current literature (Huang, 2020; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; Mohalik & Sahoo, 2020; Todd, 2020).

In conclusion, the findings of the current study show that changes in the nature and context of an educational environment, be it compulsory or voluntary, should diligently be taken into consideration as such changes can directly influence how the new setting is experienced by teachers and learners. The stark difference between offering online education opportunities and adapting a face-to-face curriculum to an online platform resulted in the quality of education suffering. Therefore, developing backup plans for possible future emergencies that can lead to the suspension of traditional education should be taken seriously by all the stakeholders in education. Such support plans will help countries to be more prepared for any sudden shift in the delivery of educational activities without any loss in the quality of education.

It is also reasonable to conclude that the ERT practice has been more challenging specifically for the students based on the fact that they had to cope with two major transitions – from conventional teaching to ERT and from high school to university. According to Cumulative Stress Theory (Eccles et al., 1991), individuals undergo more negative experiences when they have to overcome multiple transitions. Since freshman year is noted as one of the most stress-evoking periods in life (Hicks & Heastie, 2008), this dual transition may have influenced the ERT experience more negatively for the freshman students.

Despite numerous disadvantages, both the instructors and students noted several advantages of the ERT practice, which is in compliance with the findings of other studies (e.g., Kurnaz & Serçemeli, 2020; Mohalik & Sahoo, 2020; Prokopenko & Berezchna, 2020; Rahiem, 2020). Especially, the course recordings were found highly beneficial within the ERT practice. In this sense, Dogar et al. (2020) also noted corresponding findings as to the benefit of course recordings for both instructors and students. The instructors in the current research underlined how convenient the course recordings were in terms of responding to the students' requests to revisit a specific subject, which is compatible with the findings of Kurnaz and Serçemeli (2020). Similarly, the students stated how advantageous it was to have course recordings when they missed some lessons

due to health issues or loss of concentration during the lessons, which is in line with the findings of Petillion and McNeil (2020) and Uluöz (2020).

Working from home and improving technological skills were stated as advantages by the instructors. According to the instructors, it was advantageous not to struggle with the rush hour to go to work, which resonates with the findings of Karataş and Tuncer (2020) concluding that the ERT practice offered a comfortable home environment free from stressors. The instructors' remarks about improving their technological skills can be regarded as a byproduct of being an active member of the ERT practice. In line with Prokopenko and Berezhna (2020) and Mohalik and Sahoo (2020), gaining experience in terms of conducting online lessons and assessment procedures may have rendered the instructors more competent in technology use.

The students, on the other hand, referred to more advantages of the ERT practice. Convenience was one frequently noted advantage as the students didn't have to spare time to prepare themselves before the lessons and there was no need to commute to school. The participants in Santana de Oliveira et al. (2018) pointed to a similar advantage because they were able to attend courses even when they were in another city, which bypassed the rigidity of conventional classrooms in terms of time and place.

The cost-efficient nature of the ERT practice was also highlighted by the students. Similarly, the participants of other studies (Kurnaz & Serçemeli, 2020; Todd, 2020; Uluöz, 2020) also underlined that the ERT was a cost-efficient practice as there was no need to commute to school. A notable finding that the students pointed to was the advantage of having no bias against each other during the ERT experience. According to the students, unfamiliarity and lack of a physical classroom, which were both viewed as disadvantages, prevented their classmates from creating their own friend groups and excluding others. As a result, none of the students had the opportunity to develop biases against the others.

6 Implications

The latest transition of teaching–learning endeavors to digital settings has caused instructors and students to struggle with several issues, technology to begin with. Since teacher training programs have long been criticized in terms of not equipping pre-service teachers with relevant technological skills, efforts to improve teacher candidates' digital skills should be orchestrated through a well-structured plan. Given the prominence of digital literacy skills in the ERT context, not only the students but also the instructors should be trained on technology use in distance education. ICT courses, Web 2.0 tools, online teaching, and assessment procedures should be incorporated into the curricula of teacher training programs. It is also important that during crises, everyone has an equal opportunity to access education. In this regard, disparities in reaching up-to-date technologies should be considered by examining accessible technologies together

with their efficacy in terms of realizing the outcomes of online education. In addition, university administrations and both software and curriculum developers should work closely to improve the infrastructure of the systems and schedule live sessions in a way that would control and lessen the demand on the interface.

The findings have clarified that the workload of instructors and students increased dramatically once they were immersed in the ERT practice, which was mainly attributed to homework assignments. Therefore, plausible cooperation among instructors to organize both the number and scale of homework assignments can reduce the pressure on students to cope with the requirements of the course and can regulate the feedback procedures at a doable level. In addition, employing combined evaluation methods can be practical, in that students' progress can be assessed across several performances such as PowerPoint™ presentations, online examinations, take-home exams, and group projects. Since the students generally referred to the impracticality of group activities in terms of accessing their classmates, the instructors may share the contact details of the students in a group with the group members. Alternatively, group assignments can be posted through applications such as Google Docs™ where members of the group can communicate with each other and the contributions of each member can easily be tracked down. Apart from the assignments, there need to be some regulations about online examinations which pose some threats for both students and instructors. In order to avoid cheating, cameras can be kept on during examinations as suggested by the instructors. In addition, a system which allows students to go back and forth across questions during the exam needs to be developed, so that it will eliminate students' anxiety and help them manage their time.

The most significant element missing in ERT, interaction is the key to establish a nurturing atmosphere conducive to sharing, caring, and improving a sense of belonging. Feedback, in this sense, stands as the critical building block of interaction. However, the findings have indicated that the students experienced a major problem in terms of receiving timely and detailed feedback from their instructors, especially for the Writing Skills course. The instructors can be advised to figure out effective ways to deliver feedback for students' works in the Writing Skills course either through conducting separate online feedback sessions or by employing an automated writing evaluation system (e.g., Virtual Writing Tutor), which can save time and energy at least in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation mistakes. Besides, the instructors might use other techniques while teaching writing skills from a presentation such as including students via elicitation as suggested by the students themselves. As for interaction among students, breakout rooms can be utilized to provide opportunities for them to interact with each other during online sessions.

Considering the limitations of an online platform in terms of communication means, students and instructors should decide on a single platform where they can follow any updates or share news. Otherwise, students may lose track and even miss the dates for exams and assignments. Following a single platform would be both time-efficient and less-complicated for students and instructors.

7 Limitations

This research is not without limitations since it has been designed as a small-scale single qualitative case study with its focus on a group of freshmen EFL students and their instructors at Anadolu University. Merriam (1998) underlines that case studies run the risk of not being representative of different populations and contexts, in that the findings cannot be generalizable. However, case study design is known for its strength to produce an in-depth description of the case under investigation by utilizing several sources of data. This detailed description has the potential to serve as a template since the research relates to a language learning and teaching context within ERT.

Although all the participants were requested to provide six separate reflective journals throughout the Fall term, only four journals were collected from the instructors due to their heavy workload. This apparent imbalance in terms of the number of journals from the students and instructors may have narrowed the variety of the data on part of the instructors.

Another limitation is that FGDs with the students were conducted with a small sample size because either some students were infected with Covid-19 or they were exhausted by the end of the term, which may have restricted the scope of the data.

8 Suggestions for further studies

Research can be undertaken by adopting mixed-method and quantitative designs accommodating larger samples as this study has employed a qualitative case study design. Alternatively, future research samples may combine participants selected from state and private universities to compare and identify if the perceived affordances of the students in private universities do lead to differences in how they experience remote education. In addition, pre-service EFL teachers can be the research focus of future studies to investigate how school-practicum courses are experienced within the confines of remote education. Considering that the research sample in this study is a homogeneous group at a state university, further research can be designed with heterogeneous groups of students to examine the effect of age, grade, and socio-economic background on how they view remote education, if any. Once the Covid-19 pandemic is over and educational practices resume their face-to-face education, the effect of the ERT practice on both students and instructors/teachers can be investigated.

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Declarations

Statement of disclosure We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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