Şenol Deniz

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2553-1070
Dr. Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Ankara University, Turkey, sdeniz@ankara.edu.tr

Meltem Vardal Özkutlu

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6617-8897
Dr. Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Ankara University, Turkey, mvardal@ankara.edu.tr

Navigating the Evolving Landscape of Distance Education: Pivotal Challenges Faced by the Educators and Strategic Solutions

Abstract

This research study seeks to investigate the challenges encountered by the educators within the scope of distance education, particularly in response to the rapidly evolving educational and instructional technologies of the 21ˢᵗ century. Employing qualitative methodologies, specifically a comprehensive literature review and document analysis as a research method, the research identifies the critical issues the educators face in distance learning environments. The findings of this research indicate that prominent challenges include difficulties in classroom management, the diminished leadership role of the educators, and insufficient communication between the educators and students. In addition, the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT), coupled with the students' reluctance to engage in lessons, decreased motivation, and challenges in fostering socialization and participation, emerges as significant concerns. Further, the issues such as a lack of educator-student eye contact, an over-dependence on technology among the students, and problems related to the Internet connectivity and infrastructure are

also highlighted. The study also reveals secondary, yet important, challenges regarding the online course software and the inadequacy of the course materials in distance education. Based on these findings, this research aims to elucidate the obstacles faced by the educators in distance education environments, offering a comprehensive set of solutions and recommendations. This research article ultimately seeks to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on distance education, providing valuable insights for future pedagogical strategies and technological implementations.

Keywords: Distance Education, Educators' Challenges, Online Learning, ICT in Education, Pedagogical Strategies

Uzaktan Eğitimin Değişen Dünyasında Yol Almak: Eğitimcilerin Karşılaştığı Temel Zorluklar ve Stratejik Çözümler

Öz

Bu araştırma çalışması, 21. yüzyılda hızla gelişen eğitim ve öğretim teknolojileri ışığında, uzaktan eğitim bağlamında eğitimcilerin karşılaştığı zorlukları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, nitel yöntemler kullanılarak, özellikle kapsamlı bir literatür taraması ve doküman analizi aracılığıyla, eğitimcilerin uzaktan eğitim ortamlarında karşılaştığı temel sorunlar belirlenmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, sınıf yönetimindeki zorluklar, eğitimcilerin liderlik rollerindeki azalmanın yanı sıra, eğitimciler ile öğrenciler arasındaki yetersiz iletişimin önemli sorunlar arasında yer aldığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, bilgi ve iletişim teknolojilerinin (BİT) entegrasyonu ile ilgili sorunlar, öğrencilerin derslere katılmaya karşı isteksizliği, azalan motivasyonları, sosyalleşme ve derse katılımı artırma konusundaki zorluklar önemli endişeler olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bunun yanı sıra, eğitimciler ile öğrenciler arasındaki göz temasının eksikliği, öğrencilerin teknolojiye aşırı bağımlılığı ve internet bağlantısı ile altyapıya ilişkin sorunlar da vurgulanmaktadır. Çalışma, aynı zamanda uzaktan eğitimdeki çevrimiçi ders yazılımları ve ders materyallerinin yetersizliği gibi ikincil fakat önemli sorunları da ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bulgulara dayanarak, bu araştırma uzaktan eğitim ortamlarında eğitimcilerin karşılaştığı engelleri açıklamayı ve bu zorluklara yönelik kapsamlı bir çözüm ve öneri seti sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu makale, uzaktan eğitim üzerine devam eden akademik tartışmalara katkıda bulunarak, gelecekteki pedagojik stratejiler ve teknolojik uygulamalar için değerli içgörüler sağlamayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uzaktan Eğitim, Eğitimcilerin Karşılaştıkları Zorluklar, Çevrimiçi Öğrenme, Eğitimde BİT, Pedagojik Stratejiler

Introduction

In the analysis of the scholarly work conducted by Odabaş (2004), it is emphasised that in recent years, advancements in technology have led to educational environments becoming increasingly detached from temporal and spatial constraints. In the living conditions we live in, formal education is insufficient to fulfil the diverse educational needs of individuals. Due to such

a critical reason, Günüç, Odabaşı, & Kuzu (2012) assert that distance education and non-formal education have experienced significant growth in recent years, thereby reinforcing the principle of lifelong learning.

As noted by İşman, Moore & Kearsley (2011), the advent of information and communication technologies has ushered education and training environments into a new era. Educational broadcasts via radio and television have largely supplanted traditional printed materials. Particularly with the integration of the Internet into daily life, educational and training activities have become accessible to a broader audience. As substantiated by Kılıç, Horzum & Çakiroğlu (2016), it is crystal clear that technological advancements in education have facilitated the transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to online learning environments. Furthermore, the assessment conducted by Gökmen, Duman, & Horzum (2016) indicates that the increasing prevalence of the Internet in both public and private institutions worldwide has led to a growing migration of educational and training activities to online platforms. Aljabre (2012) posits that the emergence of new technologies and tools has enhanced educational applications by offering improved learning and teaching opportunities for both learners and instructors. As accentuated by Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman (2007), synchronous learning environments, where these technological tools are employed, enable real-time communication between learners and instructors through Web 2.0 tools such as email, video conferencing, chat, forums, and blogs, independent of time and space constraints. According to Özarslan, Kubat, and Bay (2007), learning management systems and virtual classroom applications play a crucial role in enhancing interaction within educational environments. Consequently, as highlighted by Yıldırım et al. (2011), these tools enable learning and the assessment of academic performance without reliance on a single physical setting, thereby supporting synchronous learning in distance education contexts.

As interpreted by Al & Madran (2004), distance education is an educational framework that connects students, who may be in different locations or time zones, with teachers and course materials through various communication tools. Dinçer (2006) contends that this mode of education offers several advantages. It enables the simultaneous instruction of a large number of students, allows learners to revisit recorded lessons at their convenience, and supports education in any settings due to the absence of time and location constraints. Additionally, it reduces educational costs by serving many students at once and accommodates individuals with physical disabilities or health issues who require home-based learning. However, distance education also presents notable limitations. It lacks the opportunity for face-to-face interaction between teachers and students,

involves significant costs for technological devices, may lead to motivational challenges for students who struggle with self-regulation, and does not allow for immediate clarification of students' questions. Thus, while distance education offers many advantages, it also has its share of disadvantages.

Bakioğlu & Çevik (2020) argue that since the inception of distance education, both teachers and students have had to increase their engagement with digital devices and platforms. Many educators, who previously had limited experience with distance learning, now need to proficiently use digital content for presentations, thoroughly understand the features of live lesson platforms (such as Zoom, Teams, and EBA) to effectively manage lessons, and properly configure electronic devices used during instruction (including webcams, microphones, and graphic tablets). As observed by Kavuk & Demirtaşlı (2021), it is evident that the diminished face-to-face interaction in distance education has placed a greater burden on teachers, making them the central figure in the instructional process. Additionally, prolonged screen time and static sitting positions during this period are believed to negatively impact teachers' eye and bodily health. Furthermore, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic have led to psychological effects on teachers who are confined to their homes. It is noteworthy that no additional financial support has been provided by the ministry or institutions for the technological devices and internet infrastructure required for distance education, resulting in teachers using their own funds for these resources. A study also highlights that the negative perceptions of the teaching profession have intensified during the distance education process, with distance education increasingly viewed as a sedentary activity by society. In this context, it is evident that distance education presents numerous challenges and issues. Therefore, considering teachers' technological competencies, access to devices and internet, attitudes towards distance education, and the anxiety induced by pandemic-related restrictions collectively, it is clear that the problems faced by the educators in distance education warrant further investigation.

As determined by Sezgin (2021), the problems and limitations encountered during the emergency distance education process are categorized into eleven headings. These include issues such as the digital divide, techno-pedagogical inexperience, content design quality, economic challenges, support deficiencies, pandemic-related psychological and health concerns, lack of practical application, and general problems. As elucidated and presented in the scholarly work conducted by Kavuk and Demirtaş (2021), it is found that in their qualitative study on the

challenges faced by the educators during the pandemic, they examined these issues under five main categories: the problems related to the teaching process, the technology use and access, the health concerns, the issues arising from the social life and future uncertainties, and the financial problems. It is highly notable in their study which highlights several specific difficulties such as the lack of technological tools and the Internet access, the communication gaps between the students and teachers, the limited teaching methods, the reliance on simplistic narration, the challenges in the assessment and evaluation, the health-related problems, and the decreased professional satisfaction. As elaborated in their analysis of the reports from UNESCO, OECD, and the World Bank on distance education carried out by Sarı and Nayır (2021), they identified several problems faced by teachers, including the confusion and stress, the inadequate preparation for distance education, the difficulties in creating and maintaining the effective distance learning environments, the high economic costs, the social isolation, the challenges in measuring the learning outcomes, the communication barriers with the parents, and the technological inadequacies.

Upon reviewing and analysing the previously conducted studies, it is discovered that, as identified by Tuncer & Taşpınar (2008), several problem areas in distance education emerge across four main categories: student-related issues, institutional problems, financial constraints, and teacher qualifications. They noted that teachers in distance education are responsible for preparing high-quality content, creating a conducive learning environment, and maintaining communication and motivation. As highlighted and accentuated by Yeşilfidan (2019), the issues faced by the faculty members in distance education, including the adaptation challenges due to the resistance to the change, reluctance to develop materials, difficulties with system use, and unresolved software and hardware deficiencies. In the analysis conducted by Kaya (2020), it is observed that the problems experienced by the faculty members include the difficulties in measuring and evaluating, the inadequacies in using information technologies, lack of preparedness, challenges in creating suitable course content, and inexperience with online education. As Ülger (2020) posits in his qualitative study, exploring the distance education issues from the perspectives of the students, teachers, parents, and technology, nine specific problems emerge, which teachers struggle with: the Internet access, access to the technological devices, the inability to provide application-based training, difficulties in mastering the digital education, the challenges in developing materials and content, digital management in the large classes, diminished leader role, reduced interaction due to the low participation in the distance lessons, and the difficulties in teaching utilizing the digital tools and the digital difficulty of teaching.

As contended by Kan and Fidan (2016), to identify and determine the problems experienced by teachers in distance education, it is essential to consider the perspectives of the teachers involved in the process. During the evaluation process to determine the importance of the teacher assessments, the physical characteristics of the variables being measured are not fully understood, and their physical dimensions are not clearly observable. Consequently, in behavioural sciences, where opinions, thoughts, and evaluations are collected, it is crucial to employ a more meticulous approach compared to the measurements in the physical sciences. The variables such as intelligence, personality, anxiety, attitude, success, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and motivation, which fall under the psychology and educational sciences, cannot be directly observed or measured physically. Measuring these variables is important for accurately describing the relationships among human behaviours. The development of the standard measurement tools and methods to make these indirectly measurable variables quantifiable is the focus of psychometrics. This field is concerned with creating measurement tools to assess the variables that cannot be directly observed. However, this research article does not involve any human participants; instead, it utilizes data and analysis through the documentation analysis method to find answers to its research questions given below.

1.Research Questions

- In the context of the rapidly advancing distance education technologies, can educators encounter any challenges that counteract the benefits of these developments? Do the advancements in the distance education technologies invariably yield the positive outcomes for educators?
- What recommendations can be made to enhance the teaching process within the scope of the distance education settings?

2. Purpose and Significance of the Study

The primary objective of this research article is to identify the challenges faced by the educators in the context of the rapidly evolving distance education technologies through a comprehensive literature review and documentation analysis. Additionally, the article aims to provide a collection of actionable recommendations to address these challenges, thereby bridging the gaps in the existing literature. This study is of considerable significance as it seeks to address the research questions related to the problems encountered by the educators and offers solutions based on its findings, thereby making a substantial contribution to the academic discourse on

distance education.

3. Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

To acquire the essential data underpinning this research study and to provide substantive answers to the research questions in line with its objectives, the study employs a method of document analysis. As articulated by Webster and Watson (2002), document analysis involves the systematic examination of existing written materials and scholarly works. Creswell (2018) delineates that this method typically encompasses several phases: initially, researchers collect relevant documents, such as reports, letters, articles, and other written materials; subsequently, they analyze these documents utilizing techniques such as content analysis or thematic analysis; and finally, they interpret the findings to discern specific themes, patterns, or insights. Document analysis is categorized within qualitative research, given its focus on extracting in-depth meanings and themes from textual sources. Unlike other qualitative methods, document analysis typically involves less interactive data collection, relying instead on pre-existing sources.

In this study, the researchers compiled data from relevant documents, articles, and other published materials to investigate the challenges faced by educators amidst the rapid advancements in distance education. Following this, the researchers analyzed the data obtained through document analysis in relation to the research questions and offered a series of recommendations for educational institutions and educators to address the challenges identified in distance education. It is pertinent to note that throughout the data collection and analysis phases, no human participants were engaged in this research study.

4. A Review of the Literature

Upon examining the literature in the evolving field of distance education, a literature review is conducted based on the previous studies addressing the challenges faced by the educators, with the aim of shedding light on the research questions posed in this article. As noted in another article conducted by Akkuş & Acar (2017), with the rapid evolution of the learning environments towards distance education and mass online learning, the educational usability of systems integrated into these environments has become increasingly significant. The advanced virtual classroom systems and learning management systems are utilized to deliver distance education effectively. This study aimed to identify the technical problems encountered during course delivery in synchronous learning systems at a university utilizing a distance education environment. The findings, derived from three distinct samples -learners, instructors, and the institution- revealed a myriad of technical issues. However, this current article specifically addresses the issues encountered by the educators,

as its focus is on examining the problems faced by the educators in distance education environments and the solutions sought to address these challenges.

As articulated by Akkuş & Acar (2017), the educators' feedback on distance learning environments frequently highlights subthemes such as "insufficient content support," "connection errors," and "problematic audio transmission." The predominant issues instructors encounter during courses with learners are often related to technical problems arising from individual computers or mobile devices used by the participants. Technical difficulties with learners' personal devices can disrupt the connection between the instructor and the student. Instructors have noted that distance learning courses generally present more technical challenges compared to traditional face-to-face classes. These issues contribute to higher absenteeism among learners and impede communication and interaction, leading to diminished educational outcomes. Furthermore, the educators who noted low learner participation in distance education environments suggested that enhancing content quality and providing additional technical support could address this issue. However, the research also indicates that the educators need to enhance their own skills and make their teaching more engaging through several innovative applications.

In the analysis of another research paper conducted by Çelik, Karakuş, Kurşun, Göktaş, & Alkan (2017), the researchers identified six fundamental issues faced by the educators through both quantitative and qualitative research methods. These issues are partially pedagogical in nature and were enumerated as follows: the educators reported feeling inadequately skilled in the use of computers and technology, expressed concerns about excessive workloads in distance education environments, highlighted difficulties with instructional methods, noted the necessity of seeking assistance from the students, and complained about the lack of eye contact and decreased motivation resulting from these challenges. Based on the findings of the referenced article, the educators felt they lacked sufficient proficiency in utilizing technology effectively, experienced difficulties in classroom management, lost their leadership roles within the classroom, and perceived a decline in their ability to communicate and interact with the students.

In a study by Erol and Akkuş (2022), the researchers investigated the problems the educators encountered during the distance education period, focusing on the participants' perspectives. Firstly, the participants' opinions were analyzed regarding the question of *what problems did the educators encounter during the distance education period*? In addressing this question, the following conclusion was reached. The findings were categorized into two main themes:

educational-teaching problems and technical issues. Among the educational-teaching problems, the most significant issue identified was the "low participation in the classes." This issue was attributed to the factors such as the "parents' indifference," "difficulty reaching the students in the rural areas," and "the challenges in measurement and evaluation." The researchers' second question was: *How were these problems reflected in the educational process?* To address this, the educators' opinions were analyzed and categorized into two themes: reflections on education and individual reflections. Under the theme of the reflections on education, the primary issue identified was "serious learning losses." This problem was found to stem from the factors such as the "increased disparities in the student achievement levels," the "disruptions in the reading and writing processes," and "difficulty adapting to the school culture."

In the assessment of the scholarly article conducted by Yiğiter, M. S., & Gelbal, S. (2022), the researchers employed a scaling method based on ranking judgments to assess teachers' perceptions of the problems encountered in distance education. The study utilized a quantitative research approach through screening research. The research sample comprised 906 teachers employed by the Ministry of National Education, all of whom were actively engaged in distance education. Snowball sampling was used to assemble the study group. To determine the reliability of the teachers' judgments, internal consistency was calculated. Additionally, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient was computed to evaluate changes in stimulus orders based on variables such as gender and seniority. Teachers were asked to rank the problems encountered in distance education according to their significance. The scale values derived from ranking ten stimuli, along with their order of importance, are as follows. When participating teachers ranked the problems they encounter in distance education in order of importance, the "Students' Reluctance to Participate in Class" emerged as the foremost issue. This was followed by "Internet Access Problems," "Limited Visual Contact and Active Participation in Class," and "Lack of Technological Tools (e.g., Computer, Microphone, Webcam)" as the most significant challenges in distance education. Conversely, the problems deemed least important by teachers were "Online Course Software Issues (e.g., EBA, Zoom)" and "Insufficient Course Documents in Distance Education." The issue of the "Students' Reluctance to Participate in Class," identified as the most prevalent problem among middle and high school teachers, does not apply similarly to primary school teachers. This discrepancy may be attributed to the generally higher level of student engagement in primary school classrooms compared to the reluctance observed in distance education at the middle and high school levels. Conversely, the predominant issue faced by primary

school teachers, "Lack of Technological Tools," differs from the challenges reported by middle and high school teachers. As evidenced by the study, while the challenges faced by the educators are widespread, their significance varies across different educational levels.

In the referenced study, the researchers compared distance education with face-to-face instruction, examining both their advantages and disadvantages, but did not reach definitive conclusions. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the educational process had to transition to distance education, which became a crucial solution for curbing the spread of the virus. While distance education provided significant benefits during this period, it also presented various challenges. Addressing and resolving these issues is essential for enhancing the motivation of both students and teachers and ensuring the delivery of high-quality education. This study was conducted to prioritize the problems encountered by teachers in distance education.

In the study conducted by Kazak and Karaahmetoğlu (2023), the aim was to gather the educators' perspectives on the challenges faced by the primary and secondary school educators during the distance education process and to explore the solutions they employed. The research involved 260-minute interviews with 13 teachers, which were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researchers. The interview texts were classified and organized based on the responses provided. For the final analysis, the identified themes and sub-themes were reviewed by an expert in educational sciences and qualitative research, and inter-coder reliability was assessed. The results of the analysis revealed that the educators' opinions on the issues encountered during distance education were categorized into several main areas: the communication-related problems, the issues stemming from the low motivation, the technology-related problems, the student-related difficulties, several additional problems, and the socialization challenges.

Conclusion

In this article, the data meticulously gathered through an extensive review of the literature, complemented by the rigorous implementation of the documentation analysis method, not only underscores but also illuminates the multifaceted challenges encountered by the educators navigating the rapidly evolving landscape of distance education. These findings, intricately woven within the framework of the research questions meticulously crafted to steer the study, provide comprehensive recommendations aimed at not merely addressing these challenges but also at fostering sustainable enhancements and promoting innovative practices within the domain of distance education. Informed by the findings derived from the research data, a great number of

responses have been formulated for the core research questions underpinning the article. In accordance with these findings, the challenges encountered by the educators within the scope of distance education have been examined, accompanied by a collection of proposed solutions depending on the research questions, constituting the fundamental core part of the study, as follows.

a. 1. Research Question: In the Context of the Rapidly Advancing Distance Education Technologies, Can Educators Encounter any Challenges that Counteract the Benefits of These Developments? Do the Advancements in the Distance Education Technologies Invariably Yield the Positive Outcomes for Educators?

The issues and challenges emerging within the context of the first research questions encompass the common themes such as the issues with the classroom management, the educators' leadership quality, the low level educator-student communication, the difficulties with integrating the information and communication technologies into the lessons, the problems related to the heavy workloads, a lack of the student participation, the absence of the educator-student eye contact, the students' technology addiction leading to a low level of motivation, and the struggles with the students' adapting to the school culture and the students' difficulties with their socialization skills. Additionally, these themes are corroborated by the issues such as the inadequate online course materials, the infrastructure and the Internet connectivity problems, the shortages of the technological devices, and the difficulties faced by the students in the areas where the computer and the Internet technology have not yet been established.

b. 2. Research Question: What Recommendations Can be Made to Enhance the Teaching Process Within the Scope of the Distance Education Settings?

Within the context of the second research question, considering these challenges faced by the educators, the following solutions can be proposed. Based on the findings of this research study, as also suggested by Bilgiç & Tüzün (2015), several recommendations to address and improve the technical issues in distance learning environments can be made. The most prominent recommendation is to enhance the technical support for the educators. The suggested measures should be taken into consideration to improve the course presentations within the system, incorporating the visual materials, utilizing the question-and-answer techniques to increase the student participation and involvement in the online classes, and increasing the connection speed. It is crucial to tackle these technical problems from both the learner's and instructor's perspectives, with the resolutions supported by the institutional efforts. Additionally, to ensure the effectiveness

and the acceptance of the synchronous learning environments in distance education, a significant emphasis must be placed on the quality of the course content provided.

Another recommendation is to develop a strategic plan for the policymakers to address potential events that could emerge and adversely impact the education system. It is essential to provide in-service training to all educational personnel, particularly educators, on these matters. Additionally, proper work programs should be established to offer psychological support to students affected by the pandemic and potential natural disasters. Strengthening the school's computer and the Internet infrastructure is also crucial. Support should be provided to students with the limited financial resources to access the computers and the Internet. Furthermore, compensatory training programs should be implemented to mitigate the learning losses. The technological infrastructure deficiencies should be addressed and rectified. The relationship between parents and educators should be continuously strengthened throughout all of the phases of education. To ensure an equitable access, especially in the rural areas with the limited Internet connectivity, free Wi-Fi services for the communal use should be provided. Additionally, the EBA module and online resources available to educators should be enhanced and diversified.

In line with the recommendation made above; to enhance the engagement and effectiveness of their lessons, educators should improve their professional competence in using the beneficial computer applications supported by Artificial Intelligence. As proposed by Richey et al. (2011), this involves leveraging the adaptive learning technologies and incorporating the emerging trends in distance education, such as Media Theory, Communication Theory, and Systems Theory, using Web 2.0 tools. Educators should integrate these applications into their lessons promptly. Additionally, students should be encouraged to use these tools to boost their success and motivation, thereby increasing their attention, engagement, and involvement in the lessons.

It should also be noted that a review of the literature on the challenges faced in distance education reveals that, despite being in 2024, many recommendations from the previous studies on these issues have not yet been implemented. Considering both the recommendations in the current study and those from the earlier research studies, it is clear that addressing these issues could significantly minimize the challenges faced in the distance education settings. The immediate implementation of these suggestions is crucial for enhancing educators' readiness for any emergency transition to distance education. This readiness is vital not only for educators but also for students. Educators can engage the current generation, known as digital natives, more

effectively by integrating some artificial intelligence-supported computer applications. This approach can boost students' motivation, success rates, learning outcomes, participation, and communication during lessons. Moreover, addressing these suggestions will help dispel the negative perceptions of distance education.

The following recommendation can be made for future studies within the framework work of the current research study:

Since educators play a key role in managing the distance education environments, it is important to encourage them to undergo in-service training focused on distance education and to prepare their lessons using the necessary well-equipped tools. A study titled *What Can Be Done for Educators to Develop Positive Attitudes Towards Distance Learning Environments?* could contribute significantly to the literature by identifying educators' expectations through needs analysis. This recommended study would also underscore the importance of educators feeling both pedagogically and psychologically prepared.

Ethical Text

Due to the fact that the current research article employs qualitative methodologies, specifically a literature review through the document analysis method, ethics committee approval is not required. This study does not contain any studies with human participants and/or animals performed by any of the authors.

Declaration of Interest

Conflict of Interest: They have no conflict of interest.

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