SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

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7ᵗʰ INTERNATIONAL MARDIN ARTUKLU SCIENTIFIC RESEARCHES CONFERENCE
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CONCEPTUALIZING BENEFITS OF ZOOM FOR ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected all aspects of life, including the foreign language teaching contexts. Universities and schools abandoned classrooms and moved into online education settings. During immediate lockdowns which brought physical distancing, terms like "online", "virtual", and "distant" education started to dominate language teaching and learning. Universities and related institutions tried to ease the immediate transition from face-to-face education to online platforms while students and teachers began working from their homes. Educational institutions have taken advantage of various online synchronous platforms to quickly find an alternative way for face-to-face classes in the COVID-19 pandemic. One of those platforms that have been extensively used during these emergency circumstances is Zoom which is a video conferencing and online meeting service for both individual and group classes. Within this frame, this qualitative descriptive study aims to conceptualize the benefits of Zoom as a synchronous tool for online foreign language education at tertiary level during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reach the objective, first the related literature on three specific words "Zoom", "language education" and "COVID-19" was concentrated by using Google Scholar search engine. Then, in order to limit the studies, the researchers focused on the ones indexed in the Web of Science. Thus, a total of four theoretical and empirical studies were collected and inductively analyzed. This inductive analysis revealed five main themes; Zoom (1) embodies beneficial functions and tools for educational contexts, (2) mediates the transition from face-to-face education to online education, (3) creates a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education, (4) provides synchronous interaction, communication and cooperation, and (5) helps develop foreign language skills. Additionally, based on these themes and the relevant literature on the benefits of Zoom, the researchers uncovered the associations among these five themes to conceptualize the actions and processes of forming the positive contributions of Zoom on foreign language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Zoom, Foreign language education, the COVID-19 pandemic, Online education

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease 2019 or the famous abbreviation the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken our world and changed our lives almost completely. The virus has been spreading globally since the first confirmed case in China in December 2019. By severely interrupting the normal functioning of the entire education system, this negative wave put educational contexts at stake too by altering the modes and means of delivering and receiving education. Together with the physical distancing and immediate lockdowns, terms like 'online', 'virtual', and 'distant' education dominated every school setting. Governments and institutions tried to ease the

transition while students and teachers worked from their homes. Thus, due to COVID-19 pandemic, online education became one of the fastest growing types of education and "de rigeur mode of instruction" (Reingold, 2021, p. 5). In other words, online education has become the most extensive form of education in the emergency circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, online education includes two main modes that enhance various types of communication and learning experiences: asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous mode "does not require the teacher and student to communicate simultaneously" (Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020, p. 439). Instead, asynchronous communication provides students the opportunity to interact and learn at their own pace in time and place free circumstances. However, synchronous mode refers to "a distance learning through a real-time live web-conference platform" (Rahayu, 2020, p. 68). Synchronous learning is e-learning organized around real-time instant communication with online participants located in different places (Nuryanto, 2021). Indeed, in synchronous communication students virtually connect in real-time online settings via videoconferencing platforms. It can be said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in lockdown times, synchronous communications via videoconferencing platforms allowed teachers and students to engage in spontaneous online lessons and discussions.

Considering the use of synchronous platforms in foreign language education, both students and teachers not only found the chance of being connected virtually in online classes, but also attended instant interaction by receiving and giving feedback, answers or acknowledgement (Bailey et al., 2021). This made them feel as if they were in a face-to-face (f2f) session.

Nowadays, there are several platforms offering such synchronous learning and communication. One of those industry-leading synchronous platforms benefited by educational institutions, teachers and students in foreign language education is Zoom (Can & Silman-Karanfil, 2021; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). In fact, during the transition from f2f learning to online education, Zoom as an educational tool has been used to sustain real time educational communication and interaction (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021). Zoom offers and supports virtual group meetings and long video calls for up to 1000 online participants who can take the advantage of some functions and features of Zoom like full-screen view, recording of sessions, whiteboarding, breakout rooms, HD video and voice, group messaging, simultaneous screen sharing, and so forth (Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). In view of the above-mentioned, in this study it is considered that an analysis of the benefits of Zoom for online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic can bring relevant information regarding sustainable online foreign language education via Zoom as a synchronous educational platform.

THE STUDY

Objective of the Study

The objective of this qualitative descriptive study is to conceptualize the benefits of Zoom as a synchronous tool for online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to reach this objective, the focus is on the following:

1. investigating and describing what has been exactly stated so far in the use of Zoom in foreign language context during the COVID-19 pandemic,

2. specifying key themes on the benefits of Zoom,

3. presenting the possible relations among the generated themes constructing conceptualization of the benefits of Zoom, and

4. demonstrating the visual representation of the conceptualization.

Selection and Analysis Process

In order to document the benefits of Zoom in this qualitative descriptive study, the study selection phase began with searching for what is known from the existing literature on the use of Zoom within foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The three keywords searched for in this study were "Zoom", "language education" and "COVID-19". This search was realized via the Google Scholar search engine by concentrating on the studies published in only 2020 and 2021. As a second step, during the process of selection, the studies focusing on the use of Zoom in contexts other than foreign language education at tertiary level and the journal articles to which the researchers did not have full access were excluded. For the next step, the researchers limited studies and concentrated on the ones that were indexed in the Web of Science. A total of four studies (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Guillén, Sawin & Avineri, 2020; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Zaiarna, 2021) clarifying the use of Zoom in foreign language contexts were collected and inductively analyzed. The selected studies consisted of theoretical and empirical accounts in the format of research articles.

Following a bottom up process for the analysis phase, the content of the studies was inductively analyzed without any predefined categories. During this phase, both researchers first worked on the studies individually to write the emerging themes and then worked together to constitute common themes. As a last step, they looked into the relations among the generated themes together via online Zoom sessions. At the end of the analysis, the following five main themes emerged on the benefits of Zoom: Zoom (1) embodies beneficial functions and tools for educational contexts, (2) mediates the transition from f2f education to online education, (3) creates a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education, (4) provides synchronous interaction, communication and cooperation, and (5) helps develop foreign language skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to conceptualize the benefits of Zoom for online foreign language education at tertiary level during the COVID-19 pandemic, selected four studies were thematically analyzed, and five themes were extracted. In addition to the five generated themes, the researchers proposed a visual representation of how those five themes interact with each other in demonstrating the beneficial aspects of Zoom in foreign language education context (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptualization of Zoom's Benefits for Online Foreign Language Education
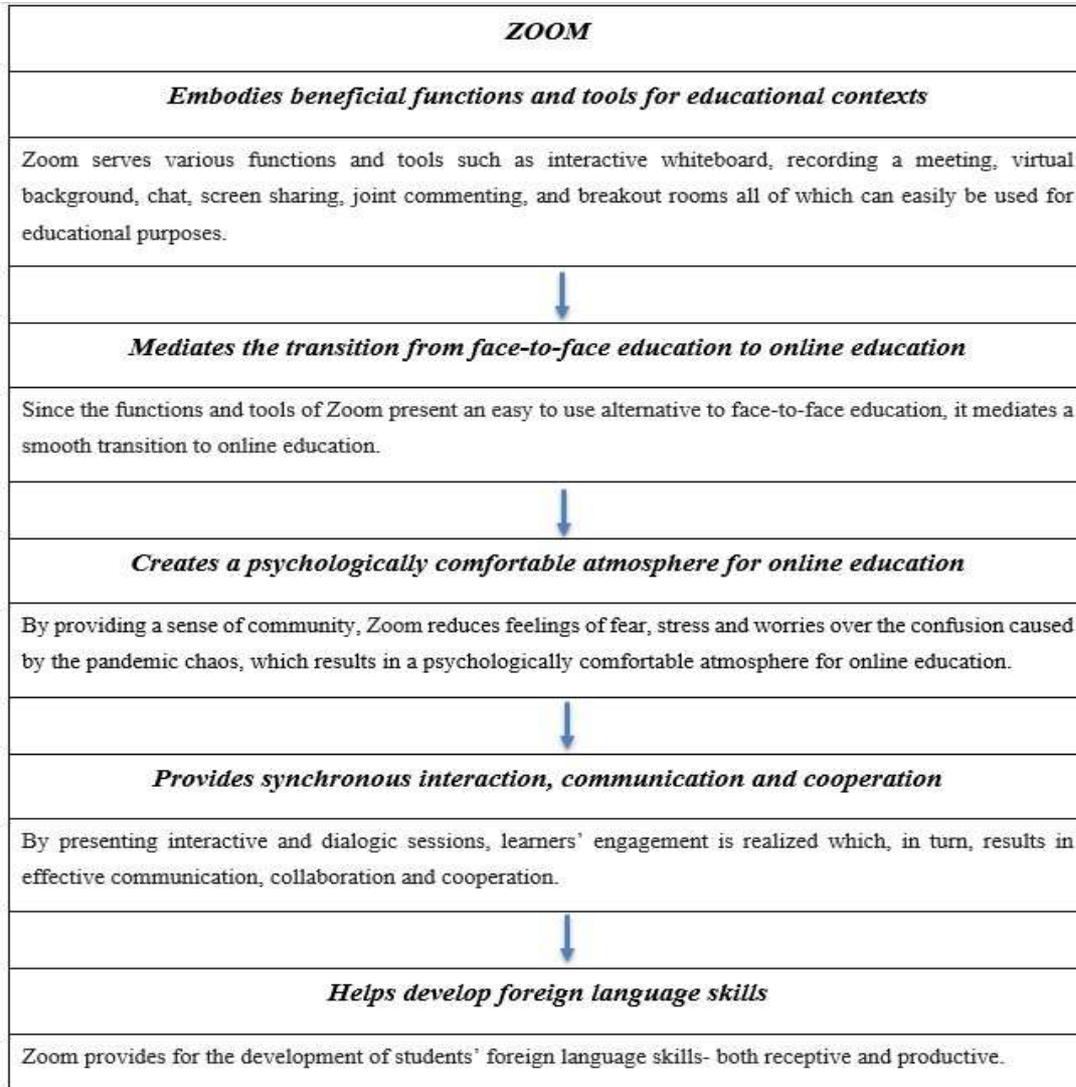
Each theme was defined on the basis of the analyzed studies. Additionally, the relations among themes were also explained so that each theme paved the way for the next one.

Theme 1- *Embodies beneficial functions and tools for educational contexts*

The first theme is that Zoom e*mbodies beneficial functions and tools for educational contexts* referring to the various functions and tools Zoom has as a synchronous tool for carrying out foreign language education. In fact**,** Zoom presents various functions and tools which are quite beneficial for educational purposes such as breakout room, screen sharing, record meeting, chatting etc., and has been updating itself and adding new ones regularly. According to Zaiarna (2021), one of the main advantages of Zoom is "availability of various educational tools and functions (interactive whiteboard, virtual background, chat, screen sharing, joint commenting, the ability to divide students into pairs and groups)" (p. 155). These tools began to be used so widely that using breakout rooms of Zoom was like "the default advice for language teachers

during the COVID-19 crisis" (Guillén et al., 2020, p. 2). Due to the presence of those tools and functions, Zoom provides communicative virtual systems "combining video conferencing, chat and collaboration between students and teachers" (Agapova, 2020, p. 129).

The ability to record meetings in Zoom provides flexibility so that students can watch them wherever and whenever they want while teachers can analyze their own recorded lessons to see the strong and weak points. Additionally, one of the benefits of Zoom related to recording meetings is that "the teacher has the opportunity to show the previous lesson to those students who, for some reason, could not attend the online lesson at one time or another" (Agapova, 2020, p. 129). In addition to recording meetings, screen sharing is one of the effective functions that allows teachers to demonstrate their files in many different formats such as doc., pdf., audio file, PowerPoint presentations etc. (Zaiarna, 2021). Asking questions through the "polls" feature of Zoom during an online lesson is another feature that adds variety to the lesson; the teacher can easily collect the opinions of students, and students get more involved in the content. Moreover, the breakout room function of Zoom imitates f2f interaction by giving "opportunities for students to use language productively, produce meaning-focused output and engage in student-to-student interaction" (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020, p. 3).

Theme 2- *Mediates the transition from face-to-face education to online education*

The second theme is *mediates the transition from f2f education to online education* pointing out the positive role Zoom serves in order to move into online education. This means with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students had to give up their physical settings by moving into online contexts to sustain learning and teaching in foreign language classes. Despite the abundance of videoconferencing systems during this transitional period, Zoom took the lead (Can & Silman-Karanfil, 2021) with its easy-to-use and easy-to-master functions and tools. Thus, Zoom can be thought of as a mediating tool for a quick transition from f2f classes to online education. The first and foremost feature that maintains its 'easy-to-use' label is the fact that it can be installed on a tablet, a computer, or on a smartphone, and students can easily join meetings by the link or ID information sent by their teachers. Zoom's ease of use and role in mediating transition were mentioned in various studies (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Archibald et al., 2019; Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). How students perceive ease of use is a crucial factor affecting students' attitude (Sumak et al., 2011), and positive attitude helps increase success.

Theme 3- *Creates a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education*

From the selected studies, *creates a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education* appears as the third theme within the conceptualization of benefits of Zoom. This theme is associated with the psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online foreign language education. Due to the changes the COVID-19 pandemic caused in different spheres of life, all parties in education were in confusion over what to expect in the future, and individuals lived through many negative emotional and psychological states. Possible questions centred around mainly how to maintain the education and which platform and tools to utilize. Considering the foreign language education, students who were experiencing online settings for the first time seemed to feel psychological discomfort during online classes. Nevertheless, various studies found that Zoom can help reduce feelings of social isolation and thus encourage a sense of community among students (Lowenthal et al., 2020), and within such an atmosphere students feel comfortable using Zoom to improve their English (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021).

This sense of community in which students leave their social isolation and anxiety behind was also highlighted by Alfadda and Mahdi (2021) by these words "Zoom can reduce feelings of social isolation and foster a sense of community among students" (p. 885). In sum, Zoom as a mediating tool for an easy and a quick transition helps reduce feelings of fear, stress and worries

over the confusion caused by the pandemic chaos, all of which result in a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online foreign language education.

Theme 4- *Provides synchronous interaction, communication and cooperation*

Provides synchronous interaction, communication and cooperation can be defined as the fourth theme conceptualizing the benefits of Zoom. In fact, this theme is suggestive of the crucial use of Zoom for the creation of an online synchronous environment which promotes interaction, communication and cooperation as seen in real-time interaction and communication. During the COVID-19 crisis, most of the teachers and students felt lost in the emergency transition to online foreign language settings. One of the biggest challenges that were experienced during this emergency process was the possibility of sacrificing real interaction, communication and collaboration among their learners, which reduced the feelings of the sense of society. Nevertheless, within a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education created by Zoom, students can easily begin forming positive views about their online learning atmospheres. With these positive feelings and adaptation on one hand and Zoom's features for synchronous interaction imitating real-time communication with dialogic sessions on the other hand, learners' engagement can be realized, which, in turn, results in effective communication, cooperation and collaboration (Zaiarna, 2021).

That is, Zoom can give all concerned parties in education the opportunities to facilitate communication, interaction and collaboration by allowing them to engage with the others more by connecting from their homes. Due to this, it can be stated that Zoom can "facilitate communicative language learning through the use of authentic language instruction in interactive synchronous classes" (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020, p. 2). That is why, Zoom can be regarded as an effective platform for foreign language education due to sustaining communication which is the foremost issue to master language competence and to learn a foreign language (Agapova, 2020).

Theme 5- *Helps develop foreign language skills*

Helps develop foreign language skills is the last theme comprising the conceptualization of the benefits of Zoom. This refers to the fact that Zoom provides for the development of students' foreign language skills, which was supported with studies in the literature (Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). Driven by the four benefits of Zoom during the COVID-19 crisis in foreign language context mentioned above, Zoom's availability of various educational tools and functions like interactive whiteboard, virtual background, chat, screen sharing, joint commenting, and breakout rooms provided the opportunity for both teachers and students to implement and carry out different activities and tasks in order to improve both receptive and productive foreign language skills of students (Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020). All four skills can easily be nurtured; that is to say, teachers can find a suitable Zoom function and/or tool for improving reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. Specifically focusing on the use of Zoom for the development of receptive skills which are listening and reading, the screen sharing functions let the teacher show various types of files like audio, video, doc, pdf, PowerPoint etc. In addition to the improvement of the receptive skills, Zoom is easy to use to master productive skills - speaking and writing. Despite the fact that speaking skill was the most neglected one during the pandemic (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020), especially Zoom's breakout rooms can be used for nurturing speaking skills. For writing skills, chatbox, annotation tool and a shared Google drive file can be used in Zoom. With all the features and assistance of Zoom mentioned in those five themes, it wouldn't be wrong to state that Zoom provides windows of opportunities for effective development of foreign language competence in online settings.

CONCLUSION

In our world where unprecedented events have made online learning compulsory rather than optional, the dissemination of research results on the use of online tools is of significant importance for educational contexts. Within this frame, the purpose of this study was to investigate the benefits of Zoom associated with online foreign language education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the analysis of four Web of Science indexed studies which were selected with the keywords "Zoom", "language education" and "COVID-19", this qualitative descriptive study revealed five themes. These themes are: Zoom (1) embodies beneficial functions and tools for educational contexts, (2) mediates the transition from f2f education to online education, (3) creates a psychologically comfortable atmosphere for online education, (4) provides synchronous interaction, communication and cooperation, and (5) helps develop foreign language skills. Additionally, based on these themes and the relevant literature on the benefits of Zoom, the researchers uncovered the associations among these five themes to conceptualize the actions and processes of forming the positive contributions of Zoom on foreign language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There have been drastic changes in educational contexts since COVID-19, and negative effects of the pandemic such as "corona depression, decrease of academic standard, widening learning gap, and lack of social skills" (Lee & Yin, 2021) are among many others that should be considered deeply. According to the World Health Organization (2021), as of December 1, 2021, there are 261,435.768 confirmed cases and 5,207.634 confirmed deaths. Under these circumstances, it does not seem that it is possible to escape from the effects of the pandemic reality in the near future. Thus, what teachers, institutions or policymakers should do is to do what is their best within their own contexts, to learn what the others have done during the pandemic, to document the actions taken as much as possible, and to announce the best practices worldwide for the others' benefits. There is a great potential for practical application of Zoom in foreign language teaching contexts at tertiary level, so institutions and teachers should spend some time on improving students' skills in using Zoom in the best way possible as well. This study is thought to shed a clear light on the aforementioned points by revealing the themes about beneficial aspects of Zoom to concerning parties in the field.

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