Students' views on learning French online with Microsoft Teams® during Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Technological developments have made online learning tools become a part of educational process. The Covid-19 pandemic has made them a necessity. Learning a foreign language with the help of e-learning software is a debatable subject of 21st century. Microsoft Teams® is one of this software and understanding its effect on learning a foreign language is worth studying. Thus, this study aims to understand students' views on learning French online with Microsoft Teams. The design of this study is the case study. The participants were 23 students learning French as a foreign language. The data were gathered through semi-structured interview form and the data were analyzed through content analysis. The results of the study reveal three themes on this subject. These themes are the reality of distance learning, the user friendliness of Microsoft Teams, and learning a foreign language online. With these themes, this study tries to compose a deeper understanding about learning a foreign language with a popular software.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, online learning, French as a foreign language, Microsoft Teams.

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INTRODUCTION

During Covid-19 pandemic, many schools all over the world, including Turkey, were not prepared fully for coordinating and planning e-learning activities. The most important reason for this was that it was an unexpected situation and the Ministry of National Education, schools, school administrators, teachers, students and parents were not ready for this. As a result of this, some problems, important ones, were experienced.

Firstly, technological background was an important aspect about which problems were experienced. Even though we are in the 21st century, schools did not integrate technology as much as it should be. An online software for educational materials, EBA (EBA, Eğitim Bilişim Ağı, 2021) and an online software for evaluation, MEBBIS (T.C.Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2021) were used. However, EBA and smart boards in schools were not used effectively before the pandemic. When the pandemic occurred and schools were shut down, an immediate decision for continuing education from TVs and online software was a difficult process to be adapted. The technological background of web in Turkey was overloaded for quite a long time. Students could not log in

the system.

The second stakeholder that had problems during the e-learning process was students. Not every student had computer or tablets or smart phones. This resulted in problems about following the courses properly. Many schools could not prepare for carrying out online, synchronous and asynchronous courses fast. Some schools could plan them in the last month. Thus, students had only one choice to follow the courses, which was TRT EBA TV (TRT EBA İzle - Uzaktan Eğitim, 2021). It can be said that some students did not have the chance to follow the weekly course plan on the tv channel, since they had one or more siblings. This may cause problem, because all siblings had courses to follow and some of them were at the same time in different channel (e.g.: one was in TRT EBA ILKOKUL, and one was in TRT EBA ORTAOKUL). The Ministry of Education considered this problem and prepared a remedial training for the courses in evenings (Kaffenberger, 2021). However, this may not create and effective solution mostly. Also, it was observed that some students lost concentration and motivation to learn as a result of the planning which was

not as sufficient as expected.

Another stakeholder of the process which was affected by the unprepared e-learning activities was teachers. Teachers felt a kind of confusion when the Minister explained that e-learning would begin in one week (Sokal et al., 2020). They tried to understand how they should plan their courses, how they should change their existent plans, how they should use EBA to upload activities and course materials which support student activities, and so on. They had to wait for their school administrators' preparing online interface and software to carry out online courses. In addition to these, teachers had confusion about how they should evaluate students' success. Then, the Minister explained that students would not have any exams and they would pass their classes depending on their grades of the first term, and teachers could find answer to their important question. However, it was observed that this briefing caused some students' giving up attending online courses and teachers had difficulties to gather students up (Richards, 2020).

All of these problems can be said to be experienced because of lack of competency related to multimedia learning and e-learning. Mayer (2001) developed Generative Theory of Multimedia Learning. This theory believes that learning is an active process, and it consists of choosing the appropriate information, and making connections between new information and existing one (Mayer, 1997). Multimedia Theory puts forward the belief that there are three important and vital processes to create the meaning, and these are selecting, organizing and integrating. Generative Theory of Multimedia Learning also claims that the new information, which are both verbal and nonverbal, is taken firstly in short-term memory. Then, with the help of working memory, the verbal and visual information help learners understand and comprehend more effectively. Due to this fact, it can be said that learners could comprehend better when they are exposed to both verbal and nonverbal information (Ariew, 2006). To maintain these, e-learning tools are suggested to be used.

Clark and Mayer (2016) defined e-learning as the computer network technology to transfer information and courses to learners over an intranet or through the Internet. The E-learning constructs new skills and apprehension related to learners' personal learning aims or to organizational performance, consists of content related to the course objectives, benefits from instructional methods such as activities to help learning, practices multimedia elements including words and images to deliver the content, and last but not the least, could be synchronously or asynchronously occurred. Especially the last feature of the E-learning makes it really important during Covid-19 pandemic. All of the education systems in Turkey use different e-learning tools to deliver information for distance education. Ruttenbur et al. (2000) suggested good reasons for using e-learning tools for different learning environment. It is personalized; it is interactive; e-learning is just-in-time;

e-learning is current and e-learning is user-centric.

When the information discussed above is considered, it can be highly reasonable to use the appropriate type of e-learning tools for different age groups. Zoom, Microsoft Teams® and Google Meet are some of the tools used in Turkey for all educational levels. This research is conducted in a public university which uses Microsoft Teams® for distance education with the aim of understanding students' views on this process. Since it is highly important and beneficial to use technology for teaching a foreign language, using software and analyzing their impact for this process have become an inevitable research area. By defining the effects, this study is believed to fill the gap in the literature and enlighten teachers, policy makers and education planners' way.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The design of this study is the case study. The case study is one of the qualitative research designs and it aims to understand one or more than one cases deeply by taking time and context into consideration (Creswell and Poth, 2007). Since this research aims to describe students' views on distance learning with Microsoft Teams® during Covid-19 pandemic, it can be said that this study is conducted as a descriptive case study.

Participants and context

The research was conducted during 2020-2021 academic year's fall semester, in a public university's school of foreign languages. The students were learning French as a foreign language, and there were one class which included 23 students. The students' age ranged between 18 and 20. Their background knowledge were similar. They all learnt French for the first time, they all learnt English as a foreign language in high schools. Also, they all participate online learning since last year.

Data collection tool

The data was collected through semi-structured interview form. The questions of the form are presented above:

- What is your opinion about distance learning?
- According to you, what are the pros and cons of learning French through a learning software?
- What do you think about Microsoft Teams® as a learning software? Do you find it user friendly?

The interviews lasted half an hour, approximately. The

researcher recorded the data with the consent of the participant. Then, the data were transcribed. While presenting the data, the researcher gave codes to each student to preserve anonymity (e.g.: S1 for student 1).

Data analysis

The content analysis was used to analyze the data.

During the analysis, the researcher read through all of the interviews to understand the main idea for each answer of participants. After that, the researcher analyzed the data with open coding approach. Next, the researcher asked three other specialists to conduct independent coding. At the end of this cycle, the researcher planned an online meeting with specialists to discuss the codes and categories, and themes were formed. The themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The main themes and sub-themes.

Main themes	Sub-themes
The reality of distance learning	The benefits of distance learning
	The handicaps of distance learning
The user friendliness of Microsoft Teams	
Learning a foreign language online	The pros
	The cons

FINDINGS

In this section, the themes and sub-themes are discussed comprehensively.

Reality of distance learning

The first theme of the study is the reality of distance learning. When students' answers are analyzed closely, it is seen that the distance learning and distance learning tools have become an important part of today's education world, and they believed this will remain so from now on. Some of the utterances are presented below:

"Because Covid-19, we are learning everything from our homes. I believe this will continue in this way for a while." (S3)

"Distance learning becomes a part of our lives. I believe that, even after this pandemic, it will continue to become a part of our education system." (S11)

"Since 2020, we are trying to get used to distance learning. I took YKS (Higher Education Exam) last year, and prepared for it through online courses. It was an unbelievable experience for me, and now I'm in university. I still got my courses online. Distance learning is a part of my life!" (S12)

Benefits of distance learning

The students divided into two groups in terms of their

opinion on distance education. Some of them believe that it is a beneficial process. The students' answers are presented below:

"I can learn more easily through online courses, since I can re-watch the classes if I miss it, or if I cannot attend. This is the best part of distance learning." (S5)

"Following courses online is super beneficial, in my opinion. Since we can reach our lecturers easily through their e-mails. Also, we can protect ourselves from the virus by staying at home." (S9)

"Without distance learning, I can't think of what we would do during Covid-19. Last year, when Covid-19 broke out, I was preparing for passing university exam. We continued our education through online software and prepared for the exam. Without distance learning, it wouldn't be possible." (S14)

Even though some students believe it is a beneficial process, the others think that distance learning has some handicaps.

Handicaps of distance learning

The students highlighted the inequalities in opportunities, many problems related to internet, and the lack of face-to-face interaction. The utterances can be seen below:

"I think the universities should start face-to face education as soon as possible. I have some

problems to maintain internet access all the time, since I have 3 sisters and brothers, and all of us are students and have courses to attend, sometimes at the same time!" (S21)

"As we all know, there were problems related to internet because of heavy load at the beginning of the pandemic. The problem still continues from time to time, and we cannot take part in classes or even exams." (S23)

"Nothing gives the same opportunities with face-to-face interactions. I miss classroom environment and my friends and my teachers. I really would like to meet my lecturers in person, rather than on screen." (S15)

As it can be seen from students' utterances, they have different ideas about the distance learning. However, they share the common idea that distance education is a great part of our lives, and it will remain so.

User-friendliness of Microsoft Teams®

The second theme of the study is the user-friendliness of the software. The participants highlighted that the interface of Microsoft Teams®, the menus and following courses on the software were quite easy to follow.

"The Microsoft Teams® is a chance for us. The software is really user-friendly. It is quite well coordinated. The homepage let us reach whichever menu we want to so easily." (S10)

"The interface of the software was easy to follow for me. It sent notifications to us when our lecturer updated something or uploads a new material, which helps us to be updated about the courses." (S18)

"The best part of the Microsoft Teams® for me was that it makes it easy to communicate with both our friends in the classroom and our lecturer. It has some kind of instant messaging section during lectures. Also, it lets us send messages to our virtual classroom when there is not a lecture going on." (S1)

"The Microsoft Teams® is a very handy software, according to me. Firstly, it makes our lecturers jobs easier, since it lets them share their screens, use whiteboard to write something during lectures. Secondly, it is helpful for us. It stores recordings of lectures. Even if we cannot attend the class, we can watch and keep us updated. Its interface is very simple. This helps

us use it more easily." (S6)

"The icons on the Microsoft Teams® are really visible. They are big. You can find them so easily. It eases accessibility." (S17)

Learning a foreign language online

The last theme is learning a foreign language online. Students have different opinions about this subject. Some of them believe that it has some benefits which should be highlighted. Some of the utterances related to benefits of learning a foreign language online are presented below.

The pros

Some students believe that using a foreign language online is more beneficial than learning it face-to-face.

"Learning French online is easy for me. I can re-watch the lectures whenever I want. While I am doing exercises about 'Les adverbs de manière', for example, I can watch again the course our lecturer gave if I have a difficulty. If it was a face-to-face classroom, I should ask this over and over again and this may bother our lecturer. But now, I don't disturb him, and solve my problem on my own." (S4)

Some students mentioned that they can have many online materials thanks to online learning, which would be more difficult to afford if they should buy their hardcopies for face-to-face learning.

"As we all know, materials for a foreign language are quite expensive for us, since their prices are on euros. Thanks to online learning, we can find them much cheaper, or sometimes even free! And storing them to our computer makes them more long-living." (S20)

The next benefit participants underlined is the flexibility of learning a foreign language online.

"Thanks to online learning, I can reach my courses from wherever I want. Even if I'm sick and laying on my bed, I can attend and listen to my courses. The best thing learning a foreign language online is that it is quite flexible!" (S2)

"Learning a foreign language requires repetition. Learning it online makes it quite easy for me. Even trying to sleep, I can open my mobile phone, reach Microsoft Teams and repeat what we have learnt in the last course, which I believe

is very helpful." (S7)

Another benefit mentioned by participants is that online foreign language learning provides the reliability for exams.

> "Since all of our courses and exams are recorded, especially for speaking exams and activities, the reliability is getting higher. Because lecturers can explain on that record any detail if we have any questions or hesitations." (S8)

The cons

Besides benefits, some students think that learning a foreign language online have some handicaps:

> "I feel I need face-to-face interaction while doing speaking and reading exercises. Making them online is not always enough for me." (S13)
> "I sometimes feel something is not adequate. I cannot explain exactly what it is, but it can be face-to-face interaction with my lecturer and my classmates, for example." (S19)

> "You have to look at a screen during the whole course. I would prefer looking at my lecturer's face to see how he pronounces words, how he uses his mimics, etc. instead." (S22)

> "Especially for listening activities, the internet connection becomes really important. If it is bad, then you have to ask your lecturer to play it again and again. However, if we were in a classroom, we wouldn't need any internet connection and things would be easier!" (S16)

DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand and define students' views on learning French online with Microsoft Teams® during Covid-19 pandemic. The results showed that students have some different ideas about both distance learning and using Microsoft Teams® to learn a foreign language. The findings revealed that there are three themes which are the reality of distance learning, the user friendliness of Microsoft Teams®, and learning a foreign language online.

For the first theme, students divide into two groups, who thinks that distance learning is beneficial and who thinks it is problematic. The students who believe that distance learning is beneficial highlight that reaching courses is quite easy; distance learning helps them continue their education during pandemic, and watch their courses again if they want to repeat or if they miss

the class. These findings are in correlation with other researches. For example, Lei and Gupta (2010) highlighted that students can learn without any misunderstandings stemming from lecturers, they can take their online courses wherever they are, they can learn at their own pace, and they can enhance time management skills while taking online courses which would be helpful for them for their whole life. Koutsoupidou (2014) conducted a research on musical education by using distance learning materials and Koutsoupidou (2014) highlighted that online distance learning can cause some problems related to poor-quality audio and time delay, which are important for most of the courses in musical education and these courses which had better be taken synchronously.

In this study, the other group believes that distance learning is problematic. They mention the problems about reaching sources and internet problems mostly. Lei and Gupta's (2010) research also support this finding. They said that not everyone has access to technological devices necessary for distance learning, and the lack of face-to-face peer interaction may cause some problems' getting bigger during distance education.

The second theme of this research is the user-friendliness of Microsoft Teams®. Students emphasize that the interface, menus, and icons of the software and applications it provides are really helpful and make it easy to use. Poston et al. (2019) found out that using Microsoft Teams® helps professors in terms of its organized interface and providing many different opportunities such as chatting with students, posting images and notes, recording and posting videos easily, which are similar to the findings of this study. Tran (2021) also revealed that using Microsoft Teams® for teaching English to freshmen was helpful and students found it beneficial thanks to its features such as accessibility, and user-friendliness.

The third theme is learning a foreign language online. Students have diverse views on this subject. While some of them believe that it is helpful since it lets them watch the course to understand the subject more easily, it provides them with cheaper and even free course materials, it provides them flexibility and reliability. Wang (2012) revealed similar findings in the study about preservice teachers' perception about learning a language online. In this study, preservice teachers highlighted that learning a foreign language online improved their linguistic and cultural awareness and they can prepare with linguistic diversity in the classroom. Similarly, Alabay (2018) found out that students who took online courses outperformed that the ones that took offline courses. Also, Rojabi (2020) highlighted that learning English as a foreign language through online software, which is Microsoft Teams® in his study, motivate students participating these courses and understanding learning materials more easily.

Besides its pros, some students believe there are some

problems for learning a foreign language online. They highlight the lack of face-to-face interaction which they believe is a must, and problems related to internet connection and their effect on activities about skills, especially. There are some other studies supporting these findings. One of them was conducted by Chenoweth et al. (2006). In their study, Chenoweth et al. (2006) aimed to compare online and offline French and Spanish courses, and the results showed that students and instructors had some problems regarding to technology and needed ongoing support. Also, it was found out that students who took offline courses got higher scores than the ones who took online courses in certain tests.

As any other research, this one has limitations. It was conducted in a public university. Conducting a similar research in a private university would provide a deeper understanding about the situation. Also, it is conducted in Turkey. Similar researches from other countries may lead the readers and researchers to have the opportunity to compare and contrast how things are going on all around the world. This would give an idea to policy-makers and education planners about how to make the situation better for all students of the whole world during Covid-19 pandemic by providing equalities of opportunities.

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