OPEN PRAXIS

On Becoming an Online University in an Emergency Period: Voices From the Students at a State University

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This study purposes to examine the emergency transition to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of university students. Based on this purpose, university students were asked open-ended questions about their distance education experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transactional Distance Theory was used as the theoretical framework to form the questions and interpret the findings. 441 university students from a state university participated in the study, and 1443 comments were analysed by using text mining techniques. The findings of the study have revealed that students acknowledge the rapid transition positively, but they have also indicated that the effectiveness of distance education is low. The reason for the ineffectiveness was observed as the lack of interactive elements in the content and the low level of communication between faculty members and students. As a result of the findings of the study, several recommendations on how institutions can take precautions are presented.

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INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology and the widespread use of Internet have affected how the individuals access education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2018). The access of the Internet to the pockets of people thanks to mobile phones (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013) has enabled information to be accessible from anywhere at any time. These improvements have facilitated the access of individuals to educational opportunities at a distance. In this sense, distance education is defined as a formal education that "occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization." (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 2). Accordingly, many universities have integrated the distance learning into their educational curriculum and continue to integrate it day by day (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013).

The year of 2020 stands out as a different year in terms of distance education history. The COVID-19 process, first seen in Wuhan, China and later experienced at the global level, has affected all the aspects of life as well as education. The countries have taken decisions (UNESCO, 2020) to ensure uninterrupted education, and universities have played an essential role in implementing these decisions. Many universities across the world have announced that they will remotely continue their education. A similar situation exists in the universities in Turkey, and the mandatory transition from face-to-face to distance education, which may also be called as remote teaching, was carried out in line with the decision by Council of Higher Education as of March 16. Although some universities already have the required infrastructure for distance education, many instructors were unprepared for this transition (Bao, 2020). Many of the universities in Turkey similarly have established centres for the distance education to provide education online to their students (CEH, 2020). However, the establishment of technological and administrative infrastructure does not guarantee effectiveness of the distance education practices.

Due to the nature of distance education, unlike face-to-face education, there is not only a spatial distance but also a psychological and communicative distance between the students and the instructors. This psychological and communication distance is called as transactional distance (Kara, 2021; Moore, 1993). The transactional distance theory proposed by Moore (1993) has three pillars such as Dialogue, Structure, and Learner Autonomy. Moore (1993) states that the transactional distance is affected by many factors, from the interaction types to the design of content and materials, from the character and emotions of teacher to the teaching methods and strategies.

The materials developed by the instructors for face-to-face courses are not suitable for distance education, and it is likely possible that their misconceptions about distance education (Kara et al., 2018) have increased the transactional distance in this rapid transition process. Generally, when preparing a distance education material, the instructor should be involved in teamwork (Moore, 1993). Content experts, instructional designers, and media specialists are required to be included in this team to support the instructors in developing materials. However, this situation was not able to be applied in the rapid transition to distance education because of both personnel and time constraints. The misconception that the printed materials they use in face-to-face teaching would be sufficient for the distance education (Kara et al., 2018) also causes them not to involve in a material development process.

Furthermore, it is known that the instructors are not aware of the tasks that they are responsible for learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content interaction in distance education (Kara et al., 2018). Therefore, the online learners have experienced transactional distance more during the emergency transition. Inevitably, the students who stay away from their friends and lecturers owing to the global pandemic will feel lonelier. At this point, the roles of an instructor have gained more significance considering that material development appropriate within the context of distance education was quite limited in this period.

The global pandemic has shown that the distance education is now an essential part of our lives. All the teaching staff must have an awareness of distance education philosophy and pedagogy to increase the quality and effectiveness of distance education. One way to evaluate this awareness is how the faculty members use their knowledge and skills in distance education practices or how they implement their roles in distance education (Kara et al., 2018). The

misconceptions of teaching staff about distance education (Kara et al., 2018) necessitate that the practices by the instructor in the emergency period are required to be evaluated through the perspectives of the students. Therefore, this study purposes to examine the distance education practices in the emergency period from the perspectives of the university students.

TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORY

Transactional Distance Theory is one of the most widely used theories about the distance education in the literature. As transactional Distance experience affects the learning outcomes (Kassandrinou et al., 2014; Bolliger & Halupa; 2018), it is considered as a useful framework to evaluate the learning process and to determine the learner satisfaction. The theory conceptualizes the transactional distance as the psychological and pedagogical distance between the instructors and the learners as well as the geographical distance (Kara, 2021; Moore, 1993). Although many scholars have contributed to the development of the theory by studying on Transactional Distance over time (e.g., Giossos et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2016; Zhang, 2003), Dialogue, Structure, and Autonomy constitute the basis of the theory. Whereas the responsibility of lecturers in Dialogue and Structure and the institution that organizes distance education are high among these concepts, the characteristics of the learners come to the fore in Autonomy. Communication and interaction between the instructor and learner create dialogue, and the combination of the necessary elements to meet individual needs in such course components as content, learning outcomes, and activities create structure (Horzum, 2011). As the autonomy needed by the learners in distance education is dependent on dialogue and structure, it was excluded from the analysis in the current study considering the limitations on instructional design to support learner autonomy. Thus, the current study examines dialogue and structure, which are also influential on the autonomy needed by the students, during the distance education in the pandemic period.

DIALOGUE IN TD THEORY

Dialogue refers to the positive communication between the teacher and the learner. For the dialogue in TD Theory, each participant is expected to contribute to the communication and be an active listener. Achieving this is directly related to a properly structured communication environment. The responsibility of the instructors in the design of this environment is high. The design of the contents, the selection of the right instructor, the training of the lecturers, and the learning styles of the learners should be considered in the design of the right communication environment (Moore, 1993).

In the literature, it is possible to encounter some studies that define dialogue as the interaction of learners with distance education components like content, other students, instructors, and institution (e.g., Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Garrison et al., 2001; Shin, 2002). In addition, it is possible to see findings in the literature that the learner-instructor interaction is associated with such variables as student success, motivation, and perceived learning (e.g., Eom & Ashill, 2016; Jiang & Ting, 2000; Kara, 2021).

STRUCTURE IN TD THEORY

The structure in TD Theory points to the purpose of teaching, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods. According to Moore (1993), the structure in distance education is directly related to the communication environment, as well as the philosophy and emotional state of the instructor, the characteristics of the learners, and the constraints imposed by the institutions. For example, the transactional distance between the learner and the instructor will increase in an environment where there is no interaction between the instructor and the learner, and which is conducted with completely structured and inflexible contents. Virtual classroom applications are an opportunity to avoid such distances. Therefore, the structure in the TD Theory is directly related to the design of education (Aluko et al., 2011). In other words, how the instructor structures the lesson is directly related to the transactional distance. Learner – Content interaction is the most important and effective interaction type in distance education (Kara, 2021). Learner – Content interaction is related to how the instructor designs the structure of the course content (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The method and reporting of the research were carried out in four steps. These steps are presented in ***Figure 1***. The process that started with data collection was made ready for analysis by clearing the data. Then, it was analyzed and reported.

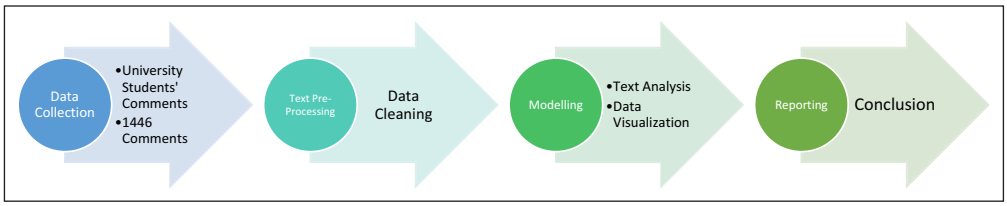

Figure 1 Data Analysis Process.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has begun to appear in Turkey in March, and the universities started distance education upon the decision taken by the Council of Higher Education (CHE). In the university where the study was conducted, the distance education programs are also carried out before the pandemic, and there are LMS, Virtual Classroom, and Online Exam Module used in these programs. After the pandemic started and CHE decided to transform all university education into distance education, distance education was started with asynchronous courses in associate and undergraduate education and synchronous courses in graduate education. Midterm and final exams were carried out through the projects and online exams. It was the first experience of distance education for many of the faculty members.

At the beginning of the process, it could be predicted that the lecturers were not ready for the process. To prevent interruption of education, information was given about the features of the LMS, how it can be used, and what opportunities it offers to the lecturers. Later, short tutorials were created for each of the titles mentioned above, which can be accessed by the instructors at any time. In the first stage, many instructors started to use the content they prepared for face-to-face education for distance education. The Distance Education Practice and Research Center has organized webinars for teaching staff on how to develop content and how to use different teaching methods that can be used in distance education and provided support services to lecturers. However, most of the lecturers preferred to use content that they can carry online from the course content they use in face-to-face education.

PARTICIPANTS

The convenience sampling strategy was applied in the study, and the data was collected from the students studying at a state university in Turkey. The quantitative data collection instrument was distributed to the students through the LMS used for distance learning.

441 students from 58 different departments participated in the study: 3 (0.7%) prep-class, 131 (29.7%) 1st grade, 143 (32.4%) 2nd grade, 72 (16.3%) 3rd grade, 84 (19.0%) 4th grade, and 8 (1.8%) 5th grade. 135 of the participants are at Vocational School, and 303 of them are at faculty, and the other 3 are Institute students.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Within the scope of this study, the data were collected through the open-ended questions to examine distance learning within the framework of Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) during the pandemic period from the perspective of the university students. Accordingly, the students were asked questions about content, dialogue and structure. In the dialogue section, sub-questions were asked to get their views on the three types of interaction specified in Transactional Distance Theory. Because text mining was used in the analysis, no Word limitation was imposed on students to answer them. Some examples of the questions asked to the participants can be seen below.

- Could you evaluate the course contents of the lecturers in the rapid transition to distance education? Do you think the course contents were sufficient? How could it get better?
- How would you evaluate the communication with the instructors in the distance education process? Have you had any difficulties in communicating? If so, what could be the reasons for this?

DATA ANALYSIS

Text mining was applied for quantitative data analysis in the study. Text mining is a method conducted to find patterns in unstructured text data (Hung, 2012). Clustering, one of the text mining techniques, was used to analyze the data. Thus, it could be possible to evaluate the competencies of the instructors in distance education during the pandemic period.

It is essential in analyzing the data to purify it from the noisy data to improve the quality of the results of the study. If these data are found in clusters frequently used in the language structure, they are non-distinctive words (Aggarwal & Zhai, 2012). Open source Knime software was utilized to purify the data collected for this study. The nodes available in the Knime software are for this process. Namely, 'Punctuation Erasure' was used to clear punctuation marks, 'N Chars Filter' for character groups under three characters, 'Number Filter' for numerical characters, 'Case Converter' to convert all characters to lowercase, 'Stop Word Filter' for various words in the Turkish language that do not include any distinctive features.

Leximancer determines the main concepts of the text and presents an overview through a conceptual map that indicates their relationships (Chen, 2014). The software shows the frequency of the vocabulary that are used together in the text, and the words are formed together and evaluated high-frequency words as a concept (Cretchley et al., 2010). The obtained concepts are categorized under some themes according to their proximity to each other, and this helps to interpret the formed sets of concepts (Leximancer, 2018). The 'concept map' data developed thanks to this practice was interpreted in the context of MOOC.

FINDINGS

In the first question, it was asked how the students evaluated the transition to distance education in the COVID-19 process (***Figure 2***). According to the comments of the students, it is seen that six different clusters are formed. The largest cluster is "productive". The presence of the "exam" cluster in the center can be interpreted as that the students mostly have questions about how to evaluate.

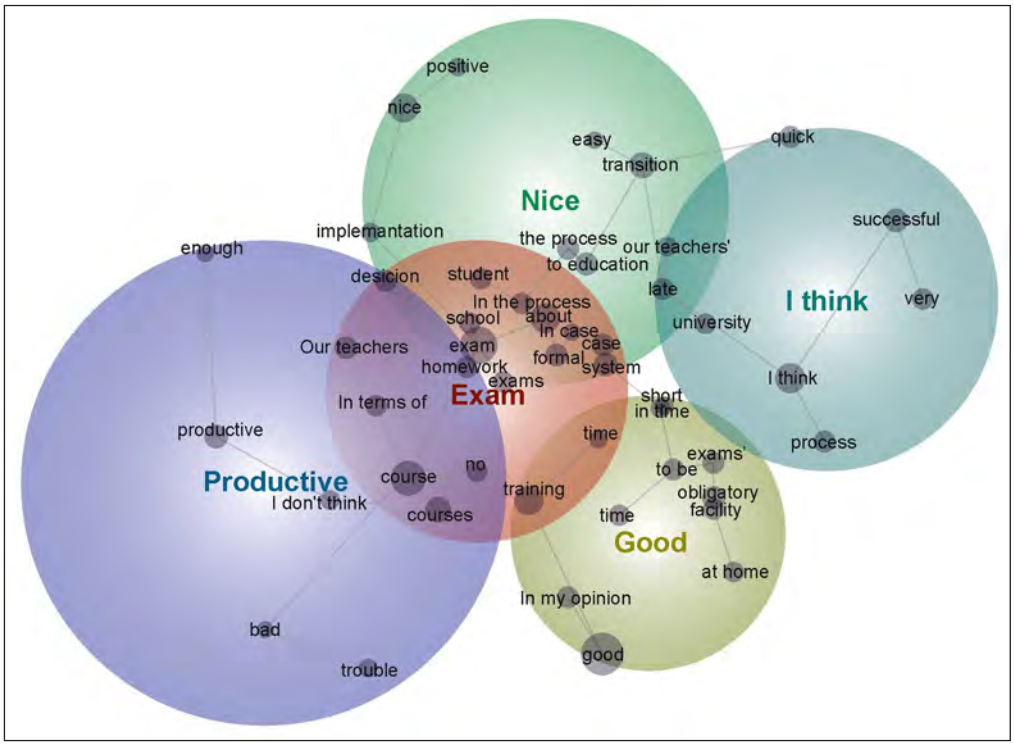

Figure 2 Clusters for General Evaluation Comments.

When looking at the clusters of comments by the students, it is observed that the cluster of "nice" is formed and that the concepts in this cluster generally find the application useful, and the transition is easy for the university.

In the "productive" cluster, it is observed that there are mostly comments of students who think that the transition process is negative. It is also seen that the concepts of "productive" and "I do not think" are at the center of the cluster. This finding indicates that the students do not efficiently evaluate the transition to distance education. In the same cluster, the concept of "sufficient" has also been found to be related to "productive" but remains the farthest element of the cluster. Therefore, the data in this cluster can be interpreted as follows: The students who negatively evaluate the transition to distance education argue that the lessons are not efficient.

When the concepts under the "Good" cluster are examined, it is understood that the students stated that the process was born with an obligation, and despite this obligation, it was passed in a short time. In addition, it is comprehended that they evaluate that the transition made in a short time is good.

When the learners are asked to evaluate the rapid transition process to distance education in terms of content, it is concluded that four different clusters are formed (***Figure 3***). It has been determined that the largest cluster is formed as the "Course" cluster. Within the "Course" cluster, the comments that "the contents are not sufficient" and "quite sufficient" draw attention. Some of the students who thought that the content was not sufficient expressed their thoughts as follows:

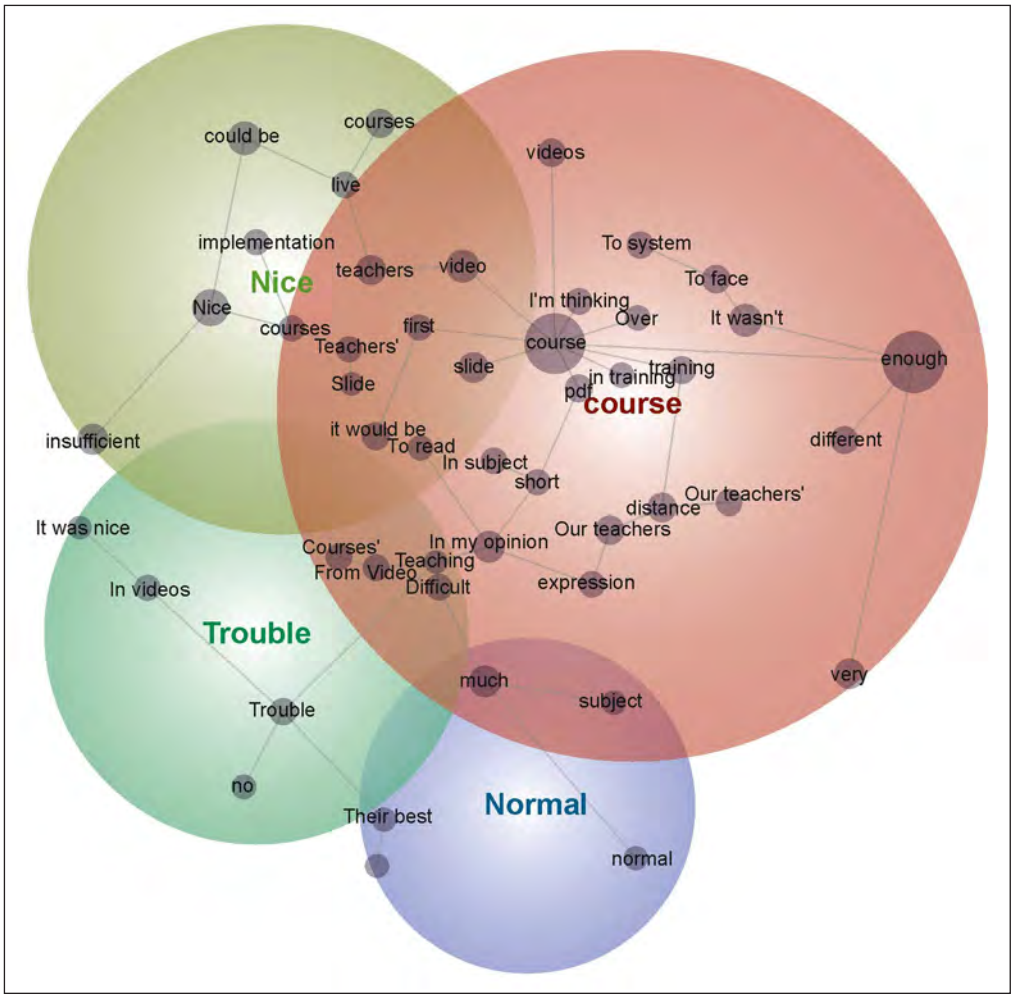

Figure 3 Clusters for Comments on Content.

"It is not the same for every lesson, but it was generally insufficient. If instructors were going beyond reading slides in video, we could get more efficiency."

"I think it was incomplete and inadequate. I think not being able to capture the live class environment and talking against a camera was troublesome for the teachers and the students."

> *"It was enough in some aspects. It was insufficient in some other aspects. They should not have studied the lessons by simply recording their voice and then uploading documents. I wish our lessons were online and in the form of mutual communication. Other than that, I wish the instructors' use of computers and applications would be more rapid."*

Some of the students who thought that the contents were sufficient expressed the reason why they found the contents sufficient as follows;

> *"I do not know how to actively conduct lessons through distance education, but now it seems like it was enough."*
>
> *"It was enough but could be better, more detailed"*
>
> *"The course contents were sufficient, but mostly in the form of reading the slides in the videos. So distance education could be helpful."*
>
> *"It was enough, and there was much better content than face-to-face training. In fact, in face-to-face training, the course contents did not catch up, as the topic was often distributed. But, in this system, it is much better."*

As can be seen from the opinions of the students, the contents were presented to the students through the videos, and it is understood that the instructor generally uses power point in the videos. Such concepts as slide, video, and reading passages in the "Course" cluster also confirm this. However, the absence of the concept of interaction within this cluster can be interpreted as that there is no interaction element in the contents.

When the "good" cluster is examined, it is comprehended that the students generally consider the contents positively. However, it is seen that the connection between the concepts of "live", "lesson", and "could have been" shows that the students dominate the idea that the process will be better through synchronous lessons.

Within the "normal" cluster, considering the requirements of the students in the process and the profile of the instructors, it is observed that the teaching staff expressed that they did their best.

As in the "normal" cluster, it is seen in the "problem" cluster that the problems related to rapid transition are considered as normal by the students.

When the extracurricular interaction between instructors and learners is evaluated, it is seen that some learners do not have any difficulties in communicating with instructors (***Figure 4***). However, in a larger cluster, it is concluded that the feedback from the academic staff is insufficient, and the feedback is received late. When the cluster members are examined, it is concluded that the students tried to communicate with the instructors through LMS and e-mail. However, it is observed that the lecturers do not respond to the messages sent through the e-mail and messaging module on LMS. The learners with difficulties in communication expressed their thoughts as follows:

> *"It was good to have the opportunity to communicate, but it was not possible to get feedback from the instructors."*
>
> *"We reported our troubles to some of our teachers, but they did not even bother to write an answer ..."*
>
> *"I've had difficulties, but I don't think it's technical. The questions I ask are answered late, sometimes not at all, so I had a problem."*
>
> *"I could not communicate with a few of my teachers. It was due to the technological inadequacy of our chamber teacher."*

In this case, it is not known which communication channels the students who stated that they did not experience any problems used with their instructors. For example, a learner states that he could not communicate with the lecturers and communicate through mobile phone with the following words:

> *"I was able to communicate with only a few teachers through Alms (LMS), and we could always communicate with the rest through WhatsApp."*

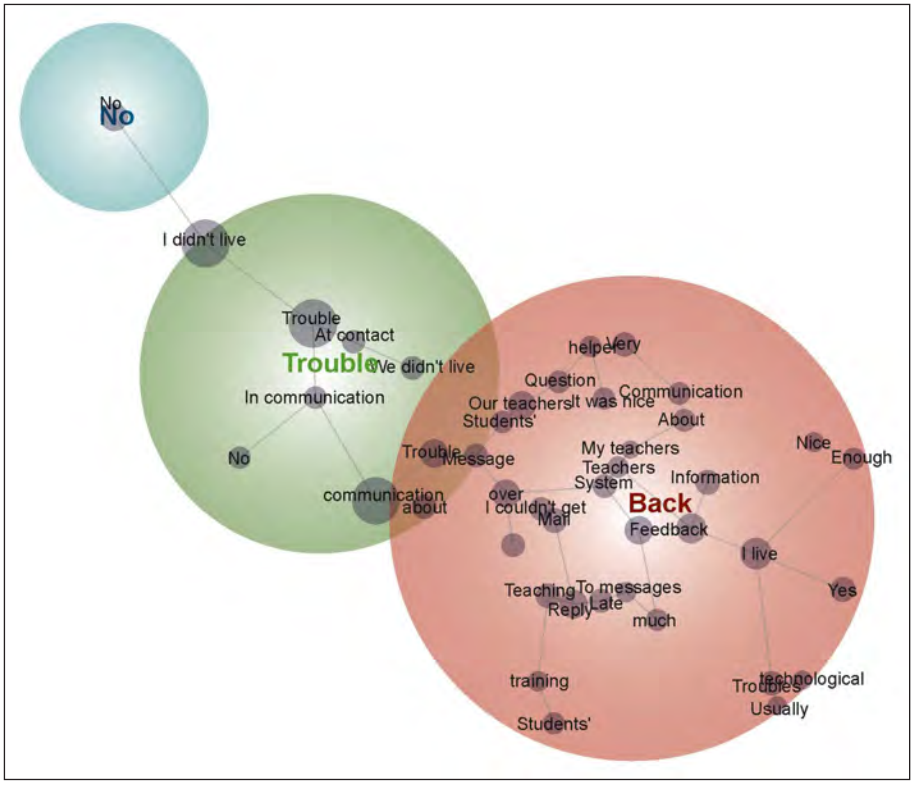

Figure 4 Clusters for Comments on Interaction with Instructor.

Some of the learners who do not have problems mention that they do not need to communicate, and therefore there is no problem.

When asked about the competencies that the students expect from academic staff in this process, it is seen that the largest cluster emerged as technology (***Figure 5***). When the elements formed in the clusters are examined, it is comprehended that the learners consider the instructors sufficient in terms of subject mastery but insufficient in terms of technological skills. Under the technology cluster, the nodes of informing learners about the exams stand out. Similarly, in the previous clusters, the learners have questions about their exam practices in distance education. It is understood that the lecturers do not adequately inform the learners about this subject.

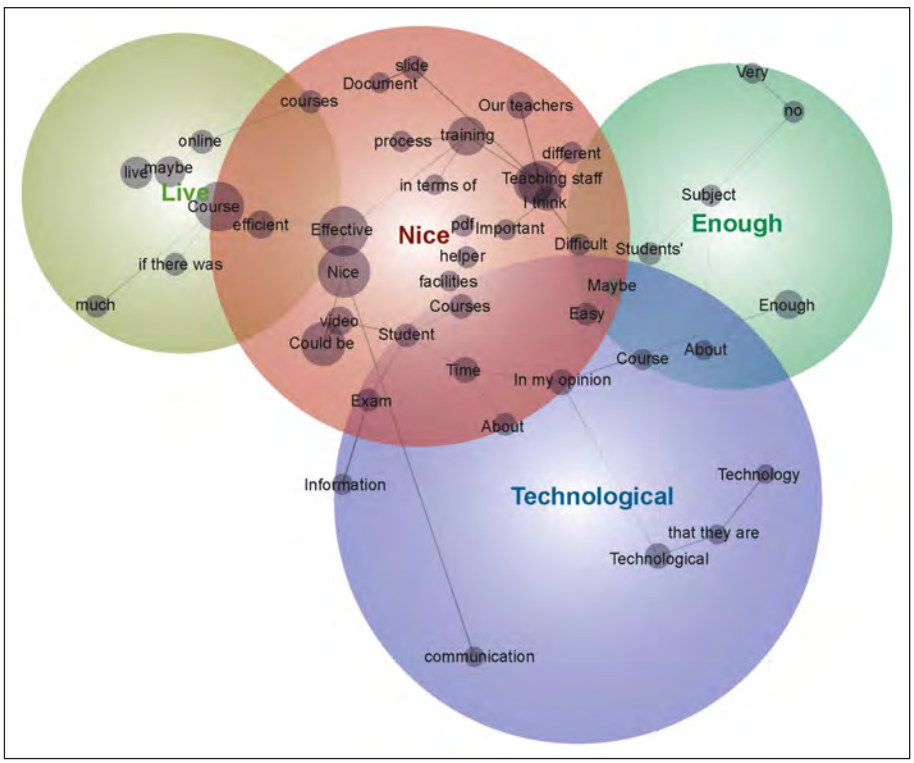

Figure 5 Clusters for Comments on Instructor Competencies.

The "Live" cluster again stands as a separate cluster. The idea that it would be more efficient to conduct the lessons synchronously was expressed by the learners here as well. Although the synchronous lesson is not a qualification, it can be stated that the learners have expectations from the instructors in terms of interaction with synchronous lessons.

DISCUSSION

This study purposes to examine the rapid transition to distance education in the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of students. For this purpose, the answers given by the students to the questions and their comments were analyzed through the data mining method. When the analysis results are examined, it is concluded that the transition to distance education process is considered as successful by the students, but they have negative thoughts in terms of educational efficiency.

That the university had Distance Education programs before the pandemic and the presence of institutional memory about distance education played a positive role in the rapid transition to distance education in the pandemic process. However, it was observed that the students had negative comments about the education provided.

When the students are asked to evaluate the contents in the rapid transition process to distance education, the reasons for the inefficiency of education in the previous finding are observed. It is seen that there are no interaction elements in the asynchronous materials prepared by the instructors, and even the instructors teach the course through direct instruction. In another saying, the use of a single teaching method by the instructors can be interpreted as not structuring the course. This situation indicates that the students are not satisfied with the effectiveness of the lessons and the general distance education practice. This finding is in parallel with the studies in the literature in which the teaching methods used by the instructors affect such variables as student satisfaction, commitment, and td perceptions (e.g., Baber, 2020; Gameel, 2017). That the instructors conducted the course by using a single method may be due to the fact that they could not find the opportunity to make an instructional design in the rapid transition to distance education.

It is observed that the satisfaction is low when the students are asked to evaluate in-class and extracurricular dialogue within the scope of Transactional Distance Theory. The instructors caused a decrease in the in-class dialogue with the course contents they developed and the teaching methods they used. This situation coincides with the findings of study carried out by Xiao (2012). In addition, it is observed that the students have problems in establishing dialogue out of the lesson. In cases where there are asynchronous practices and the course structure is not flexible, one of the elements that will increase the dialogue environment is the instructor. The misconceptions of instructors about distance education (Kara et al., 2018) may have led the teaching staff to ignore the need of students for an extra interaction.

When the competences expected by the students from the teaching staff are examined, the concepts of using technology and live lesson are seen. Even though live lesson is not a competence, it can be interpreted as that the students want live lessons to meet their interaction needs. In other words, instructors are expected to be proficient in interaction design in distance education regardless of whether the courses are synchronous or asynchronous. In addition, the high level of digital literacy is seen among the expectations of students in distance education from their instructors. This finding overlaps with the optimal faculty behaviors determined by Kara (2021).

CONCLUSION

This study purposes to examine the distance education processes, which started to be widely implemented in universities during the COVID-19 pandemic process, which affects the whole world, from the perspective of the students. The results of the study will shed light on the measures that the institutions can take to increase the quality of distance education.

Initially, it was observed that the learners were pleased with the rapid transition process. This situation is directly related to the existing distance education experiences of the institutions. However, the evaluations made by the learners regarding the quality of education once again

show that the success in distance education practices is not only systemic. In the comments made by the learners regarding the quality of education in this process, it is observed that they cannot interact with the content because of asynchronous practices and that the instructors prefer the way of direct instruction, and thus the motivation of the learner decreases. In this case, the instructors may need to be supported in some knowledge and skills (Distance Education, Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Communication and ICT Literacy (Kara & Yildirim, 2020) while creating the structure of the course. Considering the misconceptions (Kara et al., 2018) that exist even among the lecturers with distance education experience, it can be stated that the teaching staff without distance education experience need support in this process.

Secondly, it can be recommended that the institutions use asynchronous and synchronous practices together for a successful distance education application. Considering that the students also have problems communicating and interacting with their instructors, the synchronous applications will partially solve this communication problem. Apart from this, some sessions in which the teaching staff can answer the questions of the students at the hours determined by the instructors through an application like the office hour can be organized to strengthen the communication between the learners and the instructors (Kara & Yildirim, 2020).

Thirdly, since the learners cannot interact with the contents in this process, institutional support can be provided to faculty members in creating interactive content. Even if it is possible, instructional designers, media specialists, and instructors (Moore, 1993) can work together in the preparation of content.

Finally, it was observed that the students had question marks in their minds regarding the evaluation in distance education but could not get enough answers from the instructors. This may be due to the lack of knowledge of the instructors about evaluation in distance education. Support for faculty members may also include the issue of evaluation in distance education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The institutions had to move fast in the rapid transition to distance education to maintain education. The university with experience in distance education quickly achieved this transition process. However, it is thought that the instructors do not have enough time to make instructional design in the process. In addition to this, it can be examined whether the instructional design skills of the instructors for distance education are at a sufficient level, and if they are low, studies can be carried out to increase these skills. Since distance education will be an indispensable part of face-to-face education especially after pandemic, it is necessary for the instructors to have instructional design skills.

Considering the need of students for interaction, it is necessary to develop the skills of the instructors in taking measures to increase the interaction between the content – student, student – student and student – teacher.

In addition to interaction skills, instructors should be able to integrate the teaching methods that can put the student in the center in distance education into their courses. Thus, learner satisfaction and hence success can be expected to increase. However, as can be seen in the current study, the instructors used a single instructor-centered method in their lessons. If they conduct lessons by applying a single method other than distance education and with an approach that does not center the student, steps can be taken to improve the general pedagogical skills of the instructors.

Moreover, developing the digital competences of the lecturers and updating them in accordance with current technologies will be beneficial in terms of the effectiveness of the trainings.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was conducted in a state university that applies distance education practices in all units and departments in the pandemic process. However, since every university produces its own solution in this process, planning to study with larger data from different universities will give more accurate results. Examining this process according to different units by structuring the collected data more will be beneficial to produce solutions at micro level.

It should also be kept in mind that this process is called the rapid transition to distance education. Therefore, the concept of distance education in the research should be evaluated within this framework.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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