

Student Motivation in CORONAPOLIS: Effects of Transactional Distance Perceptions on EFL Undergraduate Students' Motivation¹

Motivación estudiantil en CORONAPOLIS:
Efectos de las percepciones de distancia
transaccional en la motivación de los
estudiantes universitarios de inglés como
lengua extranjera

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Abstract

The concept of Transactional Distance (TD) experienced in distance education has been recorded as a focal point in many studies examining its effects on various dimensions in different courses. However, there is scarcity of research on TD in relation to learner motivation in language learning. This exploratory case study investigated TD perceptions of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduates participating in distance education courses held at a Turkish university within the boundaries of CORONAPOLIS, an imaginary city which is under the threat and destructive effects of Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study examined the effects of TD perceptions on the motivation of 87 EFL students. The data were collected through the participants' informal self-reports and open-ended questions. The results of the content analysis showed that the participants had varying perceptions of the dimensions of TD; dialogue, structure and autonomy. The results also showed that they had different motivational experiences in relation to their perceptions. In the light of the results, theoretical and practical training of the faculty and integration of distance education courses in under/graduate programs are suggested.

Keywords: motivation, transactional distance, distance education, Covid-19, EFL, tertiary education

Resumen

El concepto de Distancia Transaccional (TD) experimentado en la educación a distancia se ha registrado como un punto focal en muchos estudios que examinan sus efectos en varias dimensiones en diferentes cursos. Sin embargo, hay escasez de investigación sobre TD en relación con la motivación del alumno en el aprendizaje de idiomas. Este estudio de caso exploratorio investigó las percepciones de TD de estudiantes universitarios de EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera) que participan en cursos de educación a distancia realizados en una universidad turca dentro de los límites de CORONAPOLIS, una ciudad imaginaria que se encuentra bajo la amenaza y los efectos destructivos de la pandemia de Covid-19. Específicamente, este estudio examinó los efectos de las percepciones de TD en la motivación de 87 estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los datos se recopilaron a través de autoinformes informales de los participantes y preguntas abiertas. Los resultados del análisis de contenido mostraron que los participantes tenían diferentes percepciones de las dimensiones de TD; diálogo, estructura y autonomía. Los resultados también mostraron que tenían diferentes experiencias motivacionales en relación con sus percepciones. A la luz de los resultados, se sugiere la formación teórico-práctica del cuerpo docente y la integración de cursos de educación a distancia en los programas de grado/grado.

Palabras clave: Motivación, distancia transaccional, educación a distancia, Covid-19, EFL, educación terciaria

Resumo:

O conceito de Distância Transacional (TD) experimentado na educação a distância foi registrado como um ponto focal em muitos estudos que examinam seus efeitos em várias dimensões em diferentes cursos. Porém, existe escassez de pesquisa sobre TD em relação com a motivação do aluno na aprendizagem de idiomas. Este estudo de caso exploratório pesquisou as percepções de TD de estudantes universitários de EFL (inglês como língua estrangeira) que participam em cursos de educação a distância realizados em uma universidade turca dentro dos limites de CORONÁPOLIS, uma cidade imaginária que se encontra sob a ameaça e os efeitos destrutivos da pandemia de Covid-19. Especificamente, este estudo examinou os efeitos das percepções de TD na motivação de 87 estudantes de inglês como língua estrangeira. Os dados se recopilaram através de auto relatórios informais dos participantes e perguntas abertas. Os resultados da análise de conteúdo mostraram que participantes tinham diferentes percepções das dimensões de TD; diálogo, estrutura e autonomia. Os resultados também mostraram que tinham diferentes experiências motivacionais em relação a suas percepções. Considerando os resultados, sugere-se a formação teórico-prática do corpo docente e a integração de cursos de educação a distância nos programas de grau/grau.

Palavras chave: Motivação, distância transacional, educação a distância, Covid-19, EFL, educação terciária

Introduction

As an alternative to face-to-face education, distance education has taken its unique place with growing popularity around the world with the invention and widespread use of tools available for this type of education. Though it has received some criticism because of the separation of students and instructors (Moore, 1997, Robertson, Grant, & Jackson, 2005) and because of the physical distance which is to block face-to-face communication (Keegan, 1990), an increasing number of universities have adopted distance education in conducting their under/graduate programs. However, what has been usual so far is the consideration of distance education as an alternative form of education instead of being a compulsory system through which educational processes are followed.

The exceptional case of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has taken hold of all regularly-working systems almost over the world, the education system is not an exception. Therefore, in order to compensate for the cessation of face-to-face education, most universities in the world have switched to distance education platforms. Turkey has also been one of the countries in which education at all levels has been conducted through distance education during the Corona pandemic. Experiencing a dramatic shift in their daily lives, students in Turkey have also gone through a sudden change from attending familiar face-to-face education to participating in distance education in which they had almost no previous practice. Therefore, students who had the first-time experience in distance education formed various understandings and perceptions affecting their participation and practices in distance education.

When learners participate in distance education, they are inevitably to go through different experiences of Transactional Distance and, therefore form various considerations of their experiences affecting their motivation in the educational process. Literature on Transactional Distance experiences and perceptions of learners shows that almost all the studies have been conducted in periods when distance education is adopted as an alternative form of education instead of being a compulsory way to go on with educational processes. This mandatory case created by the pandemic can be assumed to have affected learner perceptions and motivation in relation to their pandemic-directed educational experiences. In addition, particular consideration of the dialogue, program structure and learner autonomy components of TD revealing additional challenges for learners in their adaptation process to distance education underlines the need to investigate learners' motivational experiences in relation to their TD perceptions. Therefore, examination of learner motivation shaped under mandatory TD experiences is to hold great significance both to understand the challenges decreasing learner motivation and to find practical solutions for similar cases to be experienced in the future.

Setting out from the consideration of these distance education experiences, this intrinsic case study investigated the effects of perceived transactional distance on the motivation of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) undergraduate students studying at a state university in Turkey. This study is believed to contribute to the field as it provides a novel perspective of the examination of learner motivation in relation to perceived transactional distance experienced during mandatory distance education in CORONAPOLIS, which can be assumed to be any hypothetical place not only in Turkey but also in any country in the global sense (For the purposes of this study, CORONAPOLIS refers to any hypothetically-existing educational setting under the serious effects of the pandemic which compelled the adoption of mandatory distance education processes at all educational levels). For this purpose, this study is grounded on the below research questions:

- What are the overall TD perceptions and motivational experiences of EFL students in distance education?
- How did the components of TD affect EFL students' motivation in distance education?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded on transactional distance and motivation frameworks. Transactional distance was selected as a related concept in distance education practices. Motivation was the second framework since the participants were expected to maintain adequate levels of motivation to continue their courses through distance education during the depressive survival period in which students had to meet the requirements of the continuing educational programs while putting effort to survive in the outside environment trapped by the pandemic.

Transactional Distance (TD)

Proposed by Moore (1993), transactional distance refers to the distance between teachers and students and is defined as “the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exist[s] when learners and instructors are separated by space and/or by time” (p. 22). From this definition, it can be inferred that TD encompasses both time-related and context-related separation. The specific case of distance education practices followed in CORONAPOLIS in this study can stress the physical separation caused by the cessation of face-to-face education. This was unavoidably followed by the psychological separation probably resulting in feelings of isolation. The separation caused by the transaction can be deeply evaluated in the light of the comment Moore and Kearsley (2005, p. 234) suggested:

The transaction that we call distance education is the interplay between people who are teachers and learners, in environments that have the special characteristic of being separate from one another. It is the physical distance that leads to a communication gap, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the instructors and the learners that has to be bridged by special teaching techniques; this is the 'Transactional Distance'.

It can be assumed that the physical and psychological separation experienced by the students and faculty during mandatory distance education in higher education had certain influences on the perceptions, understandings, behaviors and actions of the students.

Within this theory, Moore (1993) also pointed at the impact of three factors on the degree of TD; dialogue between students and teachers, program structure and learner autonomy. Dialogue refers to instructor-student and student-student interactions. Structure covers course flexibility, organization, content and instruction. Dialogue is considered to have a negative correlation while high program structure has a positive correlation with TD. Learner autonomy was regarded as the mitigating factor covering self-control and regulation in the learning process. Evaluating the case experienced by the EFL students, the limitation in faculty-student interaction can be considered as a consequence of the nature of distance education. As regards structure, the effort to compensate for the content to be conducted in face-to-face education may have resulted in a condensed program structure to be covered in distance education, affecting the EFL students' TD perceptions. In addition, the realization that they were expected to shoulder further responsibility during distance education may have increased the students' autonomy.

Expanding on Moore's (1993) theory, Chen (2001) pointed at the multifaceted structure of the theory and proposed TD four dimensions; instructor-learner, learner-learner, learner-content and learner-interface TD. In line with Moore, Chen supported the view that TD is not just a matter of geographical distance; it also covers psychological distance. The evaluation of the distance education EFL students took part in may indicate that the four dimensions proposed by Chen (2001) influenced the TD perceptions of the students as they had the first-time distance education experience.

Motivation

Regarded as one of the essential affective factors in education, motivation is defined as "the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (Dörnyei, 1998, p.117). Expanding the definition, Gardner (1985) proposed that motivation is "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language" (p.10).

Motivation is suggested to be supported through two main sources; intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Dörnyei (1994) described intrinsic motivation as the internal desire to learn while external motivation covers the outward motives beyond inner control leading to learning. Considering the peculiar case of distance education in CORONAPOLIS, one can state that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation played a critical role as the students found themselves in a novel educational environment in which they were expected to take responsibility as autonomous learners while showing persistence and carrying out the required actions. It was the motivation that kept the students on track during the new experience.

Research on Transactional Distance

The perusal of the relevant literature shows that research on Transactional Distance has mainly focused on such research topics as students' TD experiences and perceptions, the effects of TD experiences on learner autonomy, motivation and success, and scale development.

One of the early studies on perceived TD was conducted by Lowell (2004) who, in a dissertation study, examined the factors affecting TD in an online setting. Working with 147 undergraduate and graduate students at a university in the USA, the researcher concluded that social presence, dialogue and fluency were found to be factors affecting perceived TD. Regarding the TD experiences of novice online learners as the focal point, Stein, Wanstreet and Calvin (2009) conducted a naturalistic inquiry and collected data via online chat sessions and interviews. The results showed that new learners were engaged in creating a voice, a space and a time for learning while dealing with TD. Conducting interviews with two students registered for a distance learning program at a Malaysian university, Ustati and Hassan (2013) evaluated the experiences of the participants from TD perspective. The analysis of the interviews indicated that while the content was appropriate, the interaction was not much satisfactory. Examining the TD perceptions of 667 students enrolled in online courses at three private universities in the USA, Bolliger and Halupa (2018) reported that the participants had high levels of engagement and moderate levels of TD and these variables were moderately correlated. Studying the effects of TD on 168 undergraduate students in the Arts Program at a university in Kenya, Mbwesa (2014) concluded, as a result of the survey questionnaire, that student-student, student-teacher and student-content components predicted the perceived TD of the participants.

The effects of TD experiences were also examined in relation to learner autonomy. Studies centering on learner autonomy basically examined this variable in relation with the dialogue component of TD. Conducting a survey with 237 undergraduate students enrolled in 18 online courses, Burgess (2006) underlined the direct relationship between learner autonomy and instructor-learner dialogue. In a similar vein, Falloon

(2011), following TD as a theoretical basis, conducted an online class with 30 graduate students in New Zealand to examine the efficiency of virtual classrooms in promoting dialogue and learner autonomy. The results of the data obtained through interviews indicated that while dialogue among students developed, learner autonomy decreased.

Learner motivation is another variable studied in TD research. A dissertation study in the USA on the relationship between TD and student motivation was conducted by Jung (2006), who studied with 79 graduate students of Business Administration. The analysis of the scale data indicated that there was not a statistically significant relationship between learner motivation and the perceived psychological distance. Zilka, Rahimi and Cohen (2019) were also interested in the feelings of challenge, self-efficacy, motivation and TD of 484 students from education, social sciences, business and counseling departments enrolled in virtual and blended courses. The results obtained from the questionnaires indicated that the TD perceptions affected the participants' feelings in virtual and blended courses.

Learner success is examined in relation to the effects of TD in the learning process, too. Investigating the relationship between learner-content interaction and success, Zimmermann (2012) collected data from 139 students enrolled in an online course. The results showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the time spent on content and learner success. Ekwunife-Orakwue and Teng (2014) investigated how interactions of 342 under/graduate students registered for online and blended courses affected their satisfaction and grades. The courses were for business, nursing, math and professional education programs at an American university. The interactions were assessed regarding the participants' interactions with their classmates, instructors, adopted technologies and course content. The results showed that the most influential effect on learning outcomes was the student-content interaction.

Relevant literature also presents some research on scale development in relation to learners' TD perceptions. Wengrowicz, Dori and Dori (2014) developed and validated an online questionnaire to assess the quality of teamwork during distance education and to evaluate TD perceptions of undergraduate students participating in a visualization-based environment. TD was assumed to be an alternative assessment tool to evaluate the quality of collaboration. Huang, Chandra, DePaolo, Cribbs and Simmons (2015) developed a scale to measure TD involving the constructs of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. Highlighting the existence of TD in distance education, Weidlich and Bastiaens (2018) developed a scale to measure TD between students and learning technology. The analysis of the scale showed that TD was the most important predictor of student satisfaction.

The above-presented studies have been conducted in different educational fields. Relevant literature also involves some research on learners' TD experiences in relation to their perceptions, autonomy development and learning outcomes in the field of language education. Kostina (2011) examined the relationship between learner

autonomy, instructor-student dialogue and student satisfaction in a distance course for the Russian language. The results of the survey obtained from 46 students in the USA pointed to a strong correlation among the three factors at the beginning of the course, but this correlation decreased towards the end of the course. In a dissertation study in the USA, Lawyer (2018) examined the effects of course modality, i.e. face-to-face, online or hybrid courses, on learner success in English composition courses and their perceived TD. The data were collected from 420 undergraduate students through course completion rates. The results showed that course modality did not significantly affect learner success and TD perceptions. In a mixed-methods research, Kara (2020) studied 190 EFL students' TD perceptions in relation to their learning outcomes. The results indicated that the components of TD predicted perceived learning and satisfaction. Specifically, TD between interface and learner affected perceived learning while TD between learner and teacher affected satisfaction.

Besides research on the international scale, TD experiences and perceptions have also been investigated in the Turkish context. Using different scales to measure social presence, perception, and satisfaction, Horzum (2015) worked with 205 students registered to online Theology courses at a Turkish university. The results pointed at a negative correlation between course interaction and transactional distance. Examining TD and social presence in knowledge sharing in virtual communities, Karaoglan Yilmaz (2017) studied with 217 undergraduate students taking Computing I course at a Turkish university. The analysis of the three scales showed that the TD and social presence perceptions were predictors of the participants' knowledge sharing. Karaoglan Yilmaz and Yilmaz (2020) studied the effects of feedback on transactional distance and critical thinking skills in online discussions. Based on the results of the quasi-experimental study, the researchers concluded that different feedback forms influenced transactional distance perceptions while having little impact on critical thinking.

The overall evaluation of the literature on TD signals several considerations. The first consideration is that since its introduction TD has become a topic receiving growing attention. An increasing number of studies have examined TD from different perspectives at an international level (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Wengrowicz, et al., 2014; Zilka, et al., 2019). However, there is scarcity of research on TD conducted in a Turkish context. The second consideration is that TD perceptions and their effects have been examined in distance education courses designed for different courses ranging from business and science to arts and theology (Horzum, 2015; Lowell, 2004; Mbwesa, 2014). Yet, there are few examples of TD research in distance language courses (Kostina, 2011; Lawyer, 2018), especially courses designed for EFL. The third conclusion is that though there was reliance on quantitative methodology in the existing research, there are a limited number of studies employing qualitative methodology (Falloon, 2011; Stain, et al., 2009; Ustati & Hassan, 2013), pointing to the need for further research examining TD perceptions and experiences

through in-depth analysis. The fourth conclusion is that although the effects of TD on such different aspects as success (Lawyer, 2018; Zimmarmann, 2012), interaction (Horzum, 2015) and social presence (Huang, et al., 2015) have been studied, its effects on motivation have not received adequate attention (Zilka, et al., 2019). The last conclusion is that all the TD studies were conducted in periods when distance education was an alternative platform for face-to-face education. However, no study was conducted when distance education became a compulsory medium of education due to the outbreak of the pandemic resulting in the cessation of face-to-face education at a global level. In the light of these considerations, this intrinsic case study aimed to investigate the effects of TD perceptions and experiences of ELT students on their motivational levels while participating in departmental courses held through distance education during the Corona pandemic experienced in CORONAPOLIS. This study is expected to contribute to motivation studies by providing a detailed picture of the lived experiences of motivation in distance language courses from the TD perspective.

Methodology

This study was based on an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2014) as it aimed to reach an in-depth analysis regarding the effects of perceived transactional distance on EFL undergraduates' motivation. The rationale for selecting this design was the opportunity to reach a detailed analysis of particular cases (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) enabling researchers to approach the issue through its details from the participants' lived experiences.

Research Context and Participants

This study examined a particular case of distance education in CORONAPOLIS, which is any setting in Turkey and around the world under the unpleasant effects of the Covid-19 pandemic experienced since the beginning of 2020. During this period, people had to go on dealing with life requirements under the threat of the pandemic. Therefore, the educational lives of higher education students had to progress along with their common survival and life-related experiences.

Setting out from the reality that most of the higher education institutions in Turkey had to follow their under/graduate courses through distance education, this study investigated the motivational experiences of ELT undergraduates during distance education held at a state university in this country. What made this distance education practice a unique case was that it was carried out during the Corona pandemic which penetrated the regular face-to-face education and almost forced all higher education

institutions to continue their under/graduate education through distance education. Before this peculiar case of the pandemic, distance education was, of course, a popular practice over the world with the development of information technologies and the Internet. Yet, this pandemic process has been the first of its kind resulting in the cessation of face-to-face educational practices and leading the way to mandatory distance education, as also followed in the city of CORONAPOLIS, purposefully termed to denote the fate of higher education which had to be away from university campuses.

Following the decision to cease all face-to-face educational practices in all higher education institutions in Turkey, faculty members at all the departments, including the ELT Department, were required to conduct their courses both asynchronously through CMS (Course Management System) provided by the university and synchronously through online sessions via different programs and applications. Within this context, ELT students had to adjust themselves to a new system of distance education in which they did not have previous practice. They were informed to participate in a/ synchronous sessions to be held for each departmental course and follow the course requirements through the CMS system.

The participants were 87 students studying at the ELT Department. There were 362 students registered in total at the Department but 72 of them showed voluntary participation in the study (18 freshmen, 23 sophomores, 26 juniors and 20 seniors). They were taking between five and eight courses each term. Because of the outbreak of the pandemic during the spring term of the 2019-2020 academic year, the courses in the ELT Department started to be conducted via distance education following a four-week of face-to-face education. Therefore, students in each grade were required to follow courses held through Course Management Systems and participate in online classes. The sudden transition from face-to-face classes to distance education was an unforeseen case for the students who did not have experience in distance education practices. This inevitably resulted in initial confusion and challenge for the students to adjust themselves to the new system, which was also to affect their TD perceptions.

Data Collection Tools

The data were collected through the participants' informal self-reports and open-ended questions. The participating students were required to keep informal self-reports (three in total for each). They were explained the three dimensions of TD (dialogue, structure, autonomy) and asked to consider these dimensions in relation to their motivational experiences during distance education. There were no limits on the length of the reports, and the reports were kept in English.

The open-ended were formed by the researcher who was also a faculty member at the Department. The following questions were designed in the light of the dimensions

of TD proposed by Moore (1993) as well as the observations and experiences of the researcher who, too, followed her classes through distance education. The questions were checked for clarity and appropriateness by another field expert:

1. How do you evaluate your experiences in distance education in terms of your overall motivation?
2. How did the interactions you had with your instructors and classmates affect your motivation during distance education?
3. How did the structure of the courses you attended affect your motivation during distance education?
4. How did your sense of autonomy affect your motivation during distance education?

These two tools were utilized so that the TD experiences of the participants were cross-checked, which was also to increase the validity of the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Collection Process and Analysis

Before the data collection process, ethical permission was obtained from the Department. All the students were sent an e-mail asking for their voluntary participation in the study. Those who responded to the mail were considered voluntary as original signatures could not be obtained because of the quarantine process. Eighty-seven students volunteered to keep self-reports and provide written answers to the open-ended questions.

Before collecting the data, the participants were explained TD and its dimensions so that they could evaluate their motivational experiences during distance education touching upon the related dimensions. The reports were informal in nature to decrease the affective filters of the students and encourage them to reflect on their perceptions comfortably. Each participant was asked to keep three reports in total at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the mandatory distance education process. In this way, the participants had the chance to consider their experiences from the beginning to the end, revealing the change in their TD perceptions.

The open-ended questions were sent through institutional e-mail to the participants at the end of the term so that they had enough experiences in distance education practices. They were expected to answer the questions in three days and, though the questions were in English, they could also switch to Turkish, their native language, if they wanted to narrate their experiences more effectively. The parts written in Turkish were translated into English by the researcher and proofread by a native speaker.

The data were analyzed through conventional content analysis in three steps. In the first step, the researcher read the answers of the participants separately in order to reach an overall understanding of the experiences and perceptions. In the second step, the participant comments in each data set were analyzed separately to reveal major points, which also aimed to compare the comments in the same data set. In the third step, the two data sets were compared to reveal the common aspects, which also aimed to cross-check the comments in both sets. This three-step analysis was followed to increase validity. In addition, another field expert was consulted to follow the same steps to analyze the data to minimize single-rater bias. The Internal Rate of Return was calculated as %94 for exact coding and %6 for similar coding. Example analysis process is provided in the below figure.

Step 1: Overall analysis		
Step 2: Separate analysis (Analysis of Data set 1-open-ended questions)	Step 2: Separate analysis (Analysis of Data set 2-participant self-reports)	
“distance education offered an alternative version of cyber interaction which increased motivation for participation” (3 rd 5-OE)	“the interactional patterns available in distance education provided them with the stimulation to communicate with the peers and professors considering the communicative restrictions of the depressive period” (4 th 19-SR3)	Interaction and Motivation
“the structures of the departmental courses held through distance education as they compensated for the content to be covered in face-to-face education” (3 rd 4-OE).	“to keep on track to follow educational processes as it was in face-to-face education” (2 nd 6-SR2).	Structure and Motivation
Step 3: Cross-analysis of Data set 1 & Data set 2		Broader categories

Figure 1. Example data analysis

Results

The results are presented with excerpts from the participants' self-reports and answers to give a detailed narration of how their TD perceptions affected their motivation during mandatory distance education. Abbreviations are used for the excerpts; ex: 1st10-SR2-excerpt from the second self-report of the tenth student

studying the first grade; 1st10-OE=excerpt from the open-ended question of the tenth student studying the first grade.

Overall Motivation

The overall evaluations of the participants as regards their distance education experience pointed at the common initial concerns and challenges as it was their first-time participation in distance education. Most of the students stated that they “knew about distance education as an alternative form of education” (2nd13-OE) in courses during their face-to-face education; however, they “did not participate in genuine distance education during undergraduate education before the pandemic” (3rd8-SR1). Due to the unexpected change from face-to-face to distance education, the students “developed initial concern about how to go on with the new system” (3rd17-SR1).

The main source of the concern was the uncertainty about the new system. Most of the participants expressed that although they “knew almost nothing about the new system” (4th15-OE), they “were suddenly expected to follow all the course requirements in this unfamiliar system” (1st5-OE). The sense of uncertainty and unfamiliarity “naturally increased anxiety while decreasing motivation” (2nd19-SR1) of the participants. The below comment offers a vivid narration of the common initial concerns:

“Soon after the outbreak of the pandemic, we were informed that the departmental courses would be followed through distance education. Although our professors did their best to regularly inform and update us about the process, we clearly experienced the initial uncertainty and concern about what would happen and how we would follow the educational process. I felt quite demotivated during the initial phase.” (4th8-OE)

Another frequently stated source of the concern was about questioning their knowledge and capabilities to successfully follow the courses in distance education. Being used to the conventions and requirements in face-to-face education, the students experienced anxiety and had low levels of motivation because “distance education was different from face-to-face education and it required an almost totally different system” (2nd7-SR1). The sudden change leading to the questioning of their capabilities as students in distance education was also reflected as a source decreasing motivation, as presented below:

“Face-to-face education is what I have been used to so far. Normally, I have high motivation to actively take part in departmental courses. But this pandemic has changed many things. In the beginning I found myself questioning my knowledge and capabilities as a student to follow course requirements in distance education. It was quite depressing and demotivating.” (4th-13-OE)

The participants also experienced concern about evaluation and grading. As they got over the initial anxiety about adjusting to the new system, they started to think about grading. This source of demotivation again resulted from their “unfamiliarity with the new system that would also bring different assessment procedures” (2nd5-OE). “Not knowing how to be assessed and graded was among the major sources of concern after initial adaptation to the process” (3rd21-SR1).

The evaluation of the participant comments indicates that the students experienced primary concerns about how the new system would work, how they would deal with the transition and how assessment procedures would be conducted. What was common among these sources of concern was that all negatively affected the participants’ motivation since they led them to question their knowledge and capabilities and experience uncertainty.

Interaction and Motivation

The interactional patterns available in distance education practices received various considerations. While most of the participants favored instructor-student and student-student interaction, some evaluated it as inadequate. Those students favoring the interactions held the common view that “distance education offered an alternative version of cyber interaction which increased motivation for participation” (3rd5-OE) and that it “served as a source of stimulation for their contribution to ongoing interactions during synchronous sessions” (2nd8-SR2). This view was reflected in several statements pointing at the novelty in interactional patterns introduced with distance education. Calling attention to the effects of the interactions through distance education on their motivation during the pandemic, a participant explained that “the interactional patterns available in distance education provided them with the stimulation to communicate with the peers and professors considering the communicative restrictions of the depressive period” (4th19-SR3).

The participants who favored the interactional patterns available in distance education appreciated the motivating force of the interactions. The particular point of appreciation was the availability of synchronous interactions which “gave the motivation to move away from the depressive mood that the pandemic created” (1st 11-OE), which “offered a virtual satisfaction of interacting with professors and classmates for academic purposes” (3rd24-OE) and which encouraged them to “participate in interactions to share academic knowledge” (3rd13-SR3). Evaluating this experience from the motivational perspective, these participants referred to the positive contributions of the interactions to their motivation as the availability of communication helped them keep on their enthusiasm to interact with their instructors and peers for educational purposes, besides social purposes, despite the undesirable experiences they were going through.

Those favoring the interactions in distance education also added that especially synchronous sessions helped them improve their speaking skills. They referred to the “contributory effects of these sessions in the development of conversational skills particularly considering the possible regression in speaking because of the long-break to face-to-face education” (3rd7-OE). Sharing a similar perspective, another participant commented that “the unavailability of face-to-face communication resulting from the pandemic was compensated with the virtual interactions in online sessions, which was a motivating factor during distance education” (2nd21-OE). This view was also held by another participant who explained that their “drastically decreased levels of motivation in continuing educational processes increased with the synchronous interactions available in distance education” (3rd2-SR2).

There were also negative considerations regarding the interactions in distance education. The participants with this outlook stated that “despite the availability of virtual interaction in distance education, it was not adequate in quality and quantity to maintain motivation in learning” (2nd7-SR2). The virtuality of interaction was explained to be “a drawback resulting in decreased levels of motivation to interact with professors and peers” (4th3-OE). Another participant also touched upon a similar point explaining that “the virtual interaction in distance education is not comparable with the genuine interaction in face-to-face education and its being artificial in nature was the source of demotivation decreasing participation in online interaction” (3rd6-OE).

A general consideration of the comments on the motivational aspects of interactions in distance education revealed two different outlooks. The contributory effect of interaction in distance education was the point of appreciation for most of the participants. They explained that virtual interaction in distance education compensated for the cessation of interaction in face-to-face education, which was a source of motivation stimulating their interaction. However, the virtual nature of the interactions was the point of criticism for some students since they perceived this type of interaction as artificial and inadequate, which was reported to decrease their motivation to participate in online interactions.

Structure and Motivation

As was the case regarding interactions, course structure was also evaluated within two distinct viewpoints; motivating and demotivating effects of the course structure. Those participants holding the first view commented that they were satisfied with “the structures of the departmental courses held through distance education as they compensated for the content to be covered in face-to-face education” (3rd4-OE). The “course structures which were adequate both in quality and quantity were also motivating factors to keep on with educational requirements” (2nd1-SR3). The quality and quantity of instructions and course content also received positive considerations

as they motivated the participants “to keep on track to follow educational processes as it was in face-to-face education” (2nd6-SR2).

Course structures were also considered motivating as they promoted students’ language development. Some participants stated that “besides synchronous instructions, additional materials were uploaded to the system and it was encouraging to study further” (2nd12-SR2). Further development of field-specific knowledge with the help of these materials was also among the positive evaluations of the participants. Distance education sessions were considered contributory and motivating because they helped the students “develop both overall English proficiency and specific knowledge in the field of language education” (2nd5-SR3). In addition, the students were “exposed to different forms of academic language use available in articles and books in the field, which was also a source of motivation for linguistic and academic development” (4th7-OE).

The other group of participants who did not consider course structure effective held the assumption that “the compensation for the content in face-to-face education created an overloaded content in distance education and it was tiring and discouraging after some time” (3rd8-SR3). The “intense course structures aiming to cover theoretical and practical information only in virtual platforms” (2nd13-OE) were criticized by this group.

Homework was also the foremost complaint of these participants who were not pleased with the overload in structure. They complained that “homework was not perceived as a reinforcing practice in distance education; instead, it is a time-consuming and hard-to-handle practice that decreased willingness and motivation” (3rd15-OE). Holding a similar perspective another participant expressed that “homework did not contribute to learning as an essential part of the process, it was mostly a duty to complete” (2nd20-SR3).

The evaluation of course structure in distance education indicated that the new design of the departmental courses motivated some students encouraging them to further develop in language proficiency as well as content-specific and academic knowledge. However, it also received criticism because of the extended workload discouraging students from following the required procedures effectively, which decreased their motivation.

Autonomy and Motivation

With respect to autonomy, though not many in number, the participant comments directed attention to the motivating and demotivating effects of the process. A few participants did not favor distance education stating that “it did not much support autonomy development due to the decreasing levels of motivation caused by its limited

flexibility and the feeling of distance” (3rd21-OE). Pointing to the interactional patterns in distance education, a participant expressed that “interactions with peers and instructors created an artificial sense of communication over which we had artificial control and this sense was demotivating, also affecting autonomy development” (1st12-SR2). Another participant with a similar viewpoint related the three dimensions of TD in her comment and explained that “autonomy development was restricted within the virtual nature and boundaries of the system that creates an artificial interactive environment full of dense structure” (2nd8-OE).

The dimensions that negatively affected some participants’ sense of autonomy were perceived contributory by the other group of participants. The presence of interaction, though it was virtual in nature, was appreciated as “a motivating source as it still offered the chance to control and direct interactions for educational purposes, which also supported autonomy” (2nd13-OE). Referring to the interactional patterns in distance education, another participant explained that “interacting with peers and instructors to share educational information was a stimulation for motivation and autonomy, particularly within the pandemic process in which people have almost no control over many processes” (4th18-OE).

Strict course structures in distance education were also considered as a dynamic contributing to learner autonomy by some students. These participants maintained that they “developed more control and regulated the learning process more effectively with the help of the motivation in synchronous sessions and the strict steps in asynchronous sessions” (1st7-OE). This self-control was also reported in “homework delivery because the automatic due date for submissions implied a stricter control compared to the face-to-face submissions” (3rd9-SR2). This strict schedule assigned to the system was perceived as “contributory to autonomy development as it formed an external stimulation to catch up with the course requirements” (2nd19-OE). Upon the positive relationship between autonomy and motivation resulting from the dense course content, a participant offered the detailed comment below:

“The content designed to compensate for the missing aspects available in face-to-face education was a source of motivation as it increased our willingness to put further effort to study in a more regular and conscious manner. With the help of this distance education process, I have taken more conscious responsibility in following the educational requirements. This obviously developed the sense of control and autonomy in the learning process.” (2nd15-OE).

The analysis of the effects of autonomy on motivation revealed that the interactional patterns and structure were the factors creating different senses of motivation for the participants. The density of duties and strict structure which were perceived as an overload by some students were evaluated as features supporting autonomy. As the students maintained regular control in the process to accomplish required tasks, they experienced an increased sense of autonomy, which also stimulated their motivation.

Discussion

The results of this exploratory case study revealed different considerations of a group of EFL students' experiences in distance education regarding learner motivation. The existence of the same component was evaluated as either motivating or demotivating based on the TD perceptions of the participants. The results can be discussed under the three dimensions (dialogue, structure and autonomy) proposed in TD Theory (Moore, 1997) in the light of the participants' experiences and relevant literature.

The first dimension to discuss is dialogue which is basically about the interactional patterns available in distance education practices. Within the discussion of the dialogue dimension; the availability of the interactions can be evaluated in relation to Chen's (2001) expansion of the dialogue concept covering learner-interface, instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction. As regards learner-interface interaction, the initial experiences of the participants were reported to be anxiety-provoking and demotivating as they did not have early practice in distance education format. Therefore, lack of experience and ambiguity in the steps to be followed in the new format resulted in initial demotivation for most of the participants. The existence of ambiguity can be assumed to have decreased the internal motivation of the students as they felt lost at the beginning of the process. As regards instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction suggested by Chen (2001), the comments of the participants showed that they were content with the availability of interaction with their instructors and friends through online sessions. Though the interactions were virtual in nature, they increased the participants' motivation as the students were able to maintain the connection with the people they were familiar with during the depressive atmosphere caused by the pandemic. Thus, from this experience, it can be inferred that distance education sessions provided the participants with an opportunity to get over the sense of isolation, as also reported in previous research (Andersen, 2009; Cho & Tobias, 2016; Hew & Cheung, 2013). In light of the results of previous research and those in this study, one can, therefore, reach the conclusion that the type of interaction available in distance education was satisfactory in compensating the drawbacks coming along with the lack of genuine face-to-face interaction. Unlike the participants reported to have experienced isolation and subsequent dissatisfaction in online courses in some studies (Hodges & Kim, 2010; Vonderwell, 2003), most of the ELT participants in this study were not negatively affected by the feeling of isolation. They maintained interactions with their instructors and classmates, particularly through online sessions and thus overcame the sense of having to live in a limited and threatening space. Taking the particular case of the pandemic into account, one can assume that the availability of interaction with other members of the educational process was of critical contribution as the participants were going through a mentally-tiring process which was full of depressing news in CORONAPOLIS. The participants were able to cope with the sense of isolation caused by the exceptional pandemic case with the help of the interactions through distance education. Hence, most of the participants

held positive considerations regarding the interaction dimension of TD, which served as a source of both external motivation as a venue to keep communicating and internal motivation driving their inner enthusiasm to participate in interaction for educational purposes. At this point, regarding the transition from face-to-face education to distance education mode, it can be maintained that the interaction in the new mode of education offered them a chance to preserve their motivation in the educational process, which can be regarded as a promising case considering the demotivating atmosphere created by the pandemic conditions.

Within the first dimension, the presence of instructor-student and student-student interactions were also valued by the students for the development of communicative skills. Since the participants were students learning English as a foreign language, they were experiencing contextual limitations for the development of their communicative skills, as a common case experienced in EFL contexts (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Nazara, 2011). For EFL learners, classroom was mostly the main setting to be exposed to and practice the target language. However, the cessation of face-to-face classes would mean the cessation of communicative production in practical and educational terms. Yet, synchronous courses conducted during distance education offered them an alternative platform for language practice with instructors and classmates. Therefore, assessed from the dialogue dimension, chances to interact with instructors and classmates and the opportunity to practice the language through these interactions increased the students' motivation in developing their communicative skills during Covid-19 distance education. Though results of research conducted under same conditions are not available, a similar point referring to the increase in motivation and development in language skills supported by interactional chances was also reported in previous studies (Abuseileek, 2012; Alshumaimeri & Alhumud, 2021; Balaman & Sert, 2017; Corraera, 2015). Still, not all the considerations of the dialogue dimension were optimistic. Some participants did not favor interactions in distance education as it created an artificial atmosphere and virtuality spoiled the natural pattern in face-to-face communication. This case was assumed to block effective communication, decreasing some participants' motivation. Interaction was claimed to be mostly limited in asynchronous sessions, which was also a point also touched upon in the literature (Pelowski, Frissell, Cabral, & Yu, 2005; Vlachopoulos & Marki, 2019). When the peculiar nature of language education is taken into account, it can be commented that distance education, though it offered overall satisfaction in interactional patterns, still posed some limitations in its particular comparison with face-to-face education which is rich of ample chances for exposure and genuine practice. However, upon the observation of the researcher both in face-to-face and in distance education, it mostly depends on learner's effort in benefiting from the interactive opportunities in the learning context. In other words, either in face-to-face or in distance education, it is mainly the learner who puts effort in finding paths to develop his/her language knowledge and skills considering the pros and cons of the learning environment.

The second dimension to discuss is structure covering course design in distance education. Participant evaluations of course structure revealed two perspectives; structure as overload and structure as a chance for language development. The negative perceptions of course structure as overload caused by excessive amounts of homework and limited flexibility were reported to decrease participant motivation. Losing the rationale of doing homework for developmental purposes, some participants felt demotivated and questioned the effectiveness of homework which was mostly perceived as a workload to be completed within a certain period in distance education. Regarding the flexibility and density of course structures, Moore (1993) and Drennan, Kennedy and Pisarski (2005) pointed at the negative correlation between these variables and TD perceptions. Therefore, the participants experiencing low levels of motivation because of their negative perceptions of course structure were not satisfied with the course content and flexibility levels. When this finding is evaluated, it sounds natural that the participants in this study may have experienced demotivation regarding the structure component in distance education probably because they were asked to accomplish certain course requirements without explicitly-explained rationale. Thus, it seems crucial that the faculty should be clear on the objective and content of their courses so that students do not feel lost and out-of-meaning in the educational process and are able to preserve their motivation in following structure effectively. On the other hand, there were also some participants who held positive perceptions of the course structure. These participants shared the view that the content, design and instruction of the courses, which were also suggested to be essential for effective course structure (Chen, 2001; Desharnais & Limson, 2007; Huang & Liaw, 2004), promoted their development in overall language proficiency and field-specific knowledge. Evaluated in the light of the suggestions by Moore and Kearsley (2005), the increase in the motivation of these students can be the result of the satisfaction they felt with the effectiveness and contributions of course content. Viewed from the motivational perspective, it can be maintained that the dense but satisfactory educational content offered a source of external motivation for these participants who also developed, in time, their internal motivation with further engagement in their studies.

The third dimension to discuss is autonomy in distance education. There were also two main considerations in this dimension. While some participants stated not experiencing explicit feelings of autonomy, others expressed that they had better control over and regulation of their learning, which was considered as the essence of autonomy by Holec (1981). The first group of participants reflected the view that strict course structure restricted their autonomy, therefore, motivation. The effects of high-structured courses on learner autonomy were also considered by Moore (2007), who proposed that high perceptions of transactional distance regarding course structure result in low learner autonomy. Therefore, low autonomy experienced by some participants during distance education can be a natural consequence of their structure perceptions. A practical suggestion to deal with the decrease in learner motivation

pertaining to the sense of autonomy can be to involve learners in the process of decision making while the program structure is established. When learners are given some voice in identifying course objectives, materials or course content, the sense of autonomy and therefore motivation is expected to increase. Student involvement in such steps can be even more vital considering the physical distance between learner and instructor within the nature of distance education. The second group of participants reported development in their autonomy and an increase in motivation referring to intense course structures as the main source of this development. This case was also reported by Irizarry (2002) reaching the conclusion that high structure in distance education courses increases self-discipline and learner independence, which increases learner motivation. The second group of participants also favored taking more responsibility in the learning process, accepted as a fundamental component in autonomy (Lenkaitis, 2020). Upon learner agency and autonomy, Kohn and Hoffstaedter (2017) explained that language learners, particularly non-native ones, need support to develop their agency and identity in distance education, which seems to be a condition met for some participants who felt the internal motivation to develop their autonomy in this study.

The results of this study showed that students formed different evaluations and perceptions of dialogue, structure and autonomy dimensions of TD; therefore, experienced varying motivational levels, internally and externally, during distance education sessions compulsorily held during the Covid-19 outbreak. In terms of dialogue; effective and sufficient instructor-student, student-student and student-interface interaction resulted in mostly positive considerations of the process and high levels of motivation. In terms of structure; satisfaction with course content, instruction and flexibility decreased negative TD perceptions while increasing motivation. In terms of autonomy, course structure was reported to be the main source increasing/decreasing learner autonomy, therefore, motivation. All in all, the findings of this study revealed varying considerations of EFL learners of distance education. At this point, it can be expressed that though the current research focused on the motivational experiences of EFL learners shaped under their TD perceptions, the positive and negative considerations of the participants regarding the three dimensions of TD point at individual differences in learners once again even under mandatorily-conducted processes.

Conclusion, Limitations and Pedagogical Suggestions

This study investigated the peculiar case of distance education which was conducted at an ELT Department at a Turkish state university within the physical, psychological, social and educational boundaries of CORONAPOLIS. The results of the study

revealed that the EFL students formed different perceptions of transactional distance regarding their participation in a/synchronous classes in relation to their motivation. In the light of the results, several pedagogical implications can be made as follows:

- Under/graduate programs can integrate courses in which not only theoretical but also practical dynamics of distance education are introduced to students in detail so that they can become familiar with this alternative platform.
- Under/graduate programs can revise their existing systems to integrate distance education into their regular operations. In this way, students can learn about the basic requirements and processes by actively participating in distance education sessions.
- In order to integrate distance education practices into under/graduate programs, faculty members are to be trained to be aware of learner expectations and needs during distance education in relation to three TD dimensions.
- Faculty members also need to promote chances for effective interaction besides planning an efficient course structure in order to respond to learner needs and help them develop positive perceptions of distance education.

Though introducing a diverse perspective to motivation studies, the results of this study are not generalizable as it reported the lived experiences only of a particular group of EFL students. Because of the restrictions of the pandemic process, no observation was possible to witness the in-class practices of the participants. Hoping that such a disastrous case of the pandemic will never be experienced again, the adoption of longitudinal studies including observations to evaluate learners' TD perceptions are suggested to reach deeper conclusions.

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