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EXPLORING THE CASE OF ONLINE LEARNING: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Abstract. This article aims to describe the difficulties the master students faced during education in distance and attempts to describe the solutions undertaken to solve them at one of the private universities in Kazakhstan. To identify the problems and solutions the researchers used a questionnaire consisting of closed and open-ended questions and semi-structured interview. The findings showed that the most important difficulties were: time-management; demotivation; adaptation to online learning; technical issues; internet connection problems. Also, various strategies were identified that master students tried to apply to solve and avoid these problems. Some of the most effective ones were: peer support; using a laptop instead of a smartphone; getting the recordings of the lessons; improvement of ICT skills and asking support from online instructors.

Keywords: online learning, distance learning.

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала магистранттардың қашықтықтан білім алу кезінде кездескен қиындықтарын және оларды шешу үшін Қазақстандағы жеке жоғары оқу орындарының бірінде шешілген шешімдерді сипаттауға бағытталған. Мәселелер мен шешімдерді анықтау үшін зерттеушілер жабық және ашық сұрақтар мен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттан тұратын сауалнаманы қолданды. Зерттеулер көрсеткендей, ең маңызды қиындықтар: уақытты басқару; демотивация; желілік оқытуға бейімделу; техникалық мәселелер; Интернетке қосылу ақаулары. Сондай-ақ, магистранттар осы проблемаларды шешу және болдырмау үшін қолдануға тырысатын әртүрлі стратегиялар анықталды. Кейбір тиімділері мыналар болды: құрдастар тарапынан қолдау; смартфонның орнына ноутбук қолдану; сабақтардың жазбаларын алу; АКТ дағдыларын жетілдіру және онлайн-нұсқаушылардан қолдау сұрау.

Түйін сөздер: желілік оқыту, қашықтықтан оқыту.

Аннотация. В данной статье описаны трудности, с которыми магистранты столкнулись во время дистанционного обучения, а также попытки описать решения, принятые для их решения в одном из частных университетов Казахстана. Для выявления проблем и решений

исследователи использовали анкету, состоящую из закрытых и открытых вопросов и полуструктурированного интервью. Результаты показали, что наиболее важными трудностями были: тайм-менеджмент; демотивация; адаптация к онлайн-обучению; Технические неисправности; проблемы с интернет-соединением. Также были определены различные стратегии, которые магистранты пытались применять для решения и избежания этих проблем. Среди наиболее эффективных из них были: поддержка со стороны сверстников; использование ноутбука вместо смартфона; получение записей уроков; улучшение навыков ИКТ и обращение за поддержкой к онлайн-инструкторам.

Ключевые слова: онлайн-обучение, дистанционное обучение.

Introduction

The Internet has become one of the vital ways for both teachers and learners in sharing information [1]. Moreover, online learning includes use of the internet and application of other technological resources in producing materials to learning and teaching processes [2]. However, implementation of online learning faces some challenges due to several reasons and therefore, the issue of online learning is of great importance for all educational stakeholders, from learners who take online courses, to international communities who want to improve a quality of online education [3,4].

Suleyman Demirel University (hereinafter-University) started the implementation of online learning in 2017 when it was decided to deliver the classes for master programs in the blended format. The teaching staff was thoroughly trained to use the platform Webex for online streamings, LMS Moodle and Turnitin for managing the teaching process. Therefore, the total transition to distance education during the pandemic of Covid 19 for the most part of the university instructors was not so unexpected and sudden. However, for some master students of linguistic majors studying online became quite a challenge and brought considerable difficulties. It is widely understood that the effective functioning of the online learning processes depends on the understanding of the problems and providing the appropriate solutions. Thus, this paper aims to deliver a discussion of the difficulties that master students faced during education in distance and attempts to describe the solutions undertaken by them to solve these problems.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore SDU university master students' perceptions about challenges and solutions of online learning in the TEFL program. Realization of this purpose is achieved through the following objectives:

- To investigate students' perceptions of challenges of online learning;
- To determine the ways students cope with the challenges of distance learning.

1 Literature review

1.1 The definition of online learning

Since online education is an innovative and growing trend, there is a debate about common definitions among scholars. Most studies emphasize on characteristics of online learning, by defining it as computer-assisted, technological-mediated, and internet connected. Moreover, online learning does not only convey wholly online courses: however, it has various definitions. For example, according to some definitions, online education has changed from a fully online course by application of technological resources for delivering whole or part of the course free from stable place and time [5].

In this study, online learning is regarded as “distance learning”, which is defined as transmission of video presentation lectures to distant places [6] and which includes implementation of technology that facilitates the studying procedure, besides the online teaching [7].

1.2 Challenges of online learning

There are some challenges of online learning. For example, a recent research [8] indicates some particular difficulties, which are connected to technology services, equipment, facilities and digital skills, socio-economic reasons (a disparity in education), assessment and regulation, plenty of assignments, and consistency (some fields, which is a sport, need physical communication). Moreover, a deficient connection to the internet causes huge difficulty in online courses for learners in Southeast Asia [9]. In particular, there is no opportunity for instructors and learners in rural places to access the internet of good quality and to use modern technological tools, and this causes obstacles to successful online learning [10]. Moreover, parents of learners, from low socio-economic status cannot afford enough money, also cannot allow technological tools such as computers/laptops in order to maintain their children’ online study. Thus, they attend online courses and obtain learning materials, submit home tasks, and also pass the examination through their smartphones, instead of using computers [11].

1.3 Solutions of challenges in online learning

There have been several recent studies on the challenges and solutions of online learning. For example, one of the studies that was carried out on the solutions for the challenges of online learning was [12]. According to the result, a coping strategy to the difficulties of online learning depends on students’ flexible identity management style, which means that if the student has a flexible management identity, he can adapt to online learning. Furthermore, it is suggested that the Ministry that is responsible for education and science and the Bureau for Development of Education might solve the challenges of online learning through systemic solutions [13]. Besides, the learners should be consulted, where decisions are made according to the needs and views of students. Grading also must be implemented descriptively rather than numerical. Moreover, a purposeful approach will be required, where different people from

multiple areas come together and share their experiences in online education. Finally, achieving compromise might be the best solution. Additionally, Daher & Baya'a grouped several challenges of online learning and suggested the possible solutions from the teachers' perceptions. For example, in order to solve participants' availability problems, a teacher should be flexible in setting online lessons that meet the time requirements of the students. In addition, an instructor should explore the reasons why some students do not attend synchronous classes and encourage them to participate. Moreover, a recording of the lessons might be useful for students who did not participate in those lessons [14]. In addition, a teacher should give more feedback to students, by asserting the teacher's presence in order to overcome the students' emotional problems in studying online. Furthermore, sending learning materials to students beforehand might solve infrastructure problems, such as the internet connection problems [15].

2 Methodology

This chapter describes the choice of methodology that is applicable to the aim and questions of the study, sampling strategies, participants and research tools that were used to collect data. The purpose of the study is to explore challenges of online learning and solutions that are used by master students in order to cope with the challenges. According to this purpose, the following research questions were set:

Research question 1: What are the challenges of distance learning from master students' perceptions?

Research question 2: How do master students cope with the challenges of distance learning?

2.1 Research design

Having defined questions and the purpose of the research, qualitative design of the research was chosen. The aim of choosing qualitative design is that it allows obtaining detailed information from participants and provides empirical investigation of the research issue. Moreover, data is obtained through interviews. This research tool is essential in maintaining reliable and consistent information about master students' perceptions of online learning. In addition, qualitative data facilitate an understanding of possible benefits and challenges of online learning, and coping strategies that allow students to overcome those challenges.

2.2 Research site and participants

As an area of research Suleyman Demirel University in Kaskelen was chosen. The type of sample strategy, non-probability was chosen. This kind of sample strategy represents a particular group of master students. Additionally, it is applicable to a small number of participants. SDU was convenient as an area of study, as the researcher had access to the university. Having access and permission to practice is important to a researcher [16].

Table 1. Participants in interview

Sampling	Total number of participants	Coded	names Specifics
Students	8	Student 1 Student 2 Student 3 etc.	Master students of TEFL program

2.3 Ethical issues: The names of learners who took part in the study were kept anonymous and coded, as Table 1 shows, since the purpose of the research is to investigate learners' perceptions of online learning, but not to judge the university and its staff. As, researchers have to consider the impact of research work on participants of the study and behave in a way that the participants' dignity is protected as human beings' [17]. The process of gathering data was direct, structured, and formal with a consent form. Additionally, it is important to have a consent form (See Appendix A) while gathering data, since it emphasizes ethical rules. The main task of the consent form is to get permission of participants to take part in the study. The participants of this research were informed about the purpose of the study and their privacies are respected and kept confidential. Moreover, before conducting an interview, participants' privacies are respected, and the interviewer asked their permission for taking the interview and recording their voices.

2.4 Data Collection Tools

Interview: Interview is defined as "an interchange of opinions between two or more people on a topic of the same interest" [18]. There are several types of interviews, and one of them is standardized open-ended interviews, which tend to ask the same questions with the same order from respondents) [19]. This type of interview was chosen for this research. Moreover, according to other classification, a semi-structured interview was selected for this study. Semi-structured interviews are a combination of both structured and unstructured interviews, where a researcher plans the interview questions beforehand, however there is an opportunity for an interviewee to brainstorm and explain some issues through open-ended questions [20]. Interview consists of two major questions about challenges of online learning and the strategies that help master students to overcome the challenges of distance learning. In addition, it has follow-up spontaneous questions according to the context in order to make an interview question and aim more clear.

2.5 Data Analysis approach

Qualitative data is applicable to a small amount of participants; therefore it is detailed and descriptive. Coding approach will be used for evaluating interviews. Coding approach is transforming the responses to specific classifications for the aim of analysis [21]. Interview will be listened to several times by a researcher and transcribed to the written form. Then responses will be reviewed, also detailed information will also be taken into account. Moreover, this specific information will be classified and coded under particular topics according to frequencies of recurrence.

3 Results and Discussion

This part of the study presents findings obtained through the interview. Results are described according to two research questions, and are divided into two key topics: challenges of distance learning from master students' perceptions and solutions that help masters to overcome challenges of distance learning. Each topic is divided into several subtopics based on interview questions. The results are structured and described as answers for two research questions.

3.1 *Research question 1:* What are the challenges of distance learning from master students' perceptions?

3.1.1 Challenges that students met during their online learning.

Participants mentioned several challenges of distance learning. For example, they discussed *challenges of psychological nature*: time management, staying motivated; lack social relationship and adaptation to online learning:

There are a lot of challenges; sometimes it is difficult to stay motivated, because of housework, some tasks at work. Sometimes, we cannot manage our time, so it depends on the situation, and it depends on the person I know. Adaptation to online learning is a little bit hard, as all of us have children at home, and adaptation to technology was a little bit hard before, especially in the first time, it was difficult to join lessons, but then it is ok (Student 1).

I met several challenges, for example it was distracting from learning itself...I can not concentrate on one thing, because there is not always that kind of environment for learning, because I can participate and to study in the car, my home full of children, workplace, mostly it is hard to concentrate on the study, because there is no enough feeling of study itself (Student 2).

It is inconvenient to speak as you might have background noise or interference, as you are at home and your relatives may disturb you, and you are relaxed and your attention is disrupted by some things. Moreover, you have a lack of in-personal interaction (Student 4).

The Challenge of online class for me is having quiet places for classes. I live in a little flat with my brother's family, and there are 5 kids at home. So, for me, personally, onsite education is more preferable. Also, after each class I have a headache because of the excessive use of electronic devices. It is harming my eyes too (Student 5).

There are a lot of challenges, you cannot stay motivated. Also, you cannot communicate with the teacher face to face, it will not be interesting. Moreover, I have a child and live with my parents-in-law. I cannot manage the time, since I should pay attention to my family and do housework. For the first time I could not adapt to the Webex platform, but now it is ok (Student 6).

Staying motivated is impossible, when there is plenty of homework in online learning. You do not have time to finish all the assignments. Time management is also difficult, since I do not live alone (Student 8).

Other challenges that students discussed are related to ICT: internet connection problems, technical issues, technical skills of the teacher:

Also, sometimes the quality of internet connection is bad, especially where I live, I have really bad internet connection. It is very difficult to turn on my camera, when teachers ask me, because if I turn on my camera, I cannot hear what the teacher is saying, but they force me to do, open it and turn it on. And it is a little bit difficult (Student 1).

One of the challenges is internet connection problems, personally Another disadvantages of online learning is not all students have technical equipments, and technical knowledge and even some teachers don't have that kind of skills, it can be a huge problem for the process itself, because there are many ways of making online learning more comfortable, more interesting, and more flexible, but many teachers do not use it, and not many students can't use it (Student 2).

We had some challenges, for example, some teachers had internet connection problems, so we could not hear and understand the lesson (Student 3).

Challenges are based on my current experience: networking problems in some areas of our country there is a low quality of internet connection. For overcoming challenges of online learning, I think that it is better to have an internet connection, it is very important, but internet connection quality does not depend on us, because it depends on our localization. For example, in our country, it is a problem, if you live in the countryside, as me you have a bad internet connection. This should be solved by our government (Student 4).

Another challenge is technical issues, because not all of the students have a laptop (Student 6).

One of the challenges is you cannot get enough material online, since there is more material in the library on campus than online. I do not have challenges with internet connection, time management, staying motivated, technical issues. The single problem is the library (Student 7).

I met challenges as there is no light at home, internet connection problems, and other technical issues (Student 8).

Finally, according to the interview results, participants mentioned another challenge of online learning as plenty of assignments:

All the time, we have a lot of tasks to do from the lessons, also we have a lot of courses, and also we have to write articles and a dissertation (Student 1).

Thus, the following issues were reported to be the most challenging for master students: poor internet connection, lack of e-devices, a teacher's ICT skills, time management, staying motivated; lack social relationship and adaptation to online learning.

3.2 *Research question 2: How do master students cope with the challenges of distance learning?*

3.2.1 In order to solve the above mentioned challenges, most participants suggested the following coping strategies, for example, *psychological strategies*: motivation and self-organization; time management:

Sometimes I try to motivate myself like, I try to manage time, I try writing timetables for me and try to write time for lessons each day, and look for it in advance. Sometimes, I ask some help about technical issues from my colleagues, for example how to give access, how to enter Moodle (Student 1).

Personally, I think I am trying to make a more comfortable environment during the class, like isolating myself from other distracting things (Student 2).

I don't have any problems with time management (Student 3).

Also, you should set up a good learning environment, it is going to be difficult, for example for students if the computer is set up in the living room, you are attempting to study, while your family is watching TV. You need to have dedicated study space, where you won't be distracted (Student 4).

I started to walk and do some sports in order to cope with stress I have thanks to online classes (Student 5).

My coping strategy is that If I do not understand the topic, where to find materials I ask my groupmates (Student 7).

Moreover, another strategies mentioned by participants is *ICT strategies*: improvement of ICT skills, asking support from an online instructor, using laptop instead of smartphone:

What do I do to overcome challenges, like sometimes I stay at work, because at work I have good internet connection, because work in the center of the city, but I live in another end of the city (Student 1).

...and trying to connect to the internet, trying to connect to the class with a laptop, instead of phones, because phones are not comfortable enough in attaining classes, and I think there should be some classes for teaching how to study online. In that way, it would be easier to learn online (Student 2).

Basically, personally, I do not meet many challenges, as I live in the city, I have a good internet connection, I can open apps, and join without problems., technical issues, but my recommendation is students who study online, should solve their internet connection problems., but it can be solved, because teachers send materials beforehand or record lessons and put it in google classroom or moodle (Student 3).

Additionally to the 1st question.: One of the solutions to overcoming challenges of online learning is computer literacy. Not all our teachers and students are good at computer literacy. One of the ways of overcoming

challenges is the availability of online instructors, just because if you have problems with internet connection, or other technical issues, you can contact your online instructor, you can solve the problem (Student 4).

...However, I think problems like internet connection; technical issues should be solved by the ministry of education (Student 6).

I cannot solve it but I think I can solve some technical issues. (Student 8)

However, respondents did not suggest coping strategy for some challenges by explaining that it is not in their hands and impossible to solve:

I don't have any other coping strategy, because I can not solve the problem with eye headache issues and having noisy space for my learning. (Student 5)

I do not think that I can suggest coping strategies that allow me to overcome challenges, because it is not in my hand (Student 6).

By summing up, according to the results, motivation and self-organization; peer support; using a laptop instead of a smartphone; getting the recordings of the lessons; improvement of ICT skills and online instructors were strategies that are used by master students in order to cope with the challenges of distance learning.

Conclusion

This study critically reviews the literature related to online learning. More specifically, this paper had an overview on the concept, definitions, challenges of online learning and possible solutions. It was revealed that there is no common definition of online learning and while some scholars define it as internet based learning, or any learning, which is carried out electronically, others identify online learning as distance learning, hybrid learning and distributed learning. According to these definitions, the definition of online learning as “distance learning” was more suitable for this study. According to the students’ responses, the challenges of online learning for master students were time-management, demotivation, and adaptation to online learning, technical issues and internet connection problems. Moreover, by analyzing students’ responses, there were not exact coping strategies offered by students, since a learner himself cannot solve some challenges of online learning. Yet, some participants suggested solutions such as motivation and self-organization; peer support; using a laptop instead of a smartphone; getting the recordings of the lessons; improvement of ICT skills and asking support from online instructors. Overall, it is believed that identifying the challenges is the first step in finding the appropriate solutions.

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