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EQUITY OF OPPORTUNITIES AND THE FOUR CORE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION OF TURKISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

This study addresses the issue of equal opportunity in the distance education of Turkish as a foreign language and the impact of distance education on the four core language skills. Globalization and rapid advancements in information technology have made distance education a widespread and unavoidable practice in foreign language teaching, however, whether online platforms provide equal opportunity in education, particularly in the context of foreign language teaching, remains a subject of debate. The aim of this study is to review the existing literature on equity of opportunities in the distance education of Turkish as a foreign language and to identify both the strengths and challenges of this process based on instructors' perspectives. The research was conducted using a descriptive approach that combined both qualitative and quantitative data collection. In this regard, data obtained from a survey administered to 89 instructors working in the field of teaching Turkish to foreigners were analyzed. The results of the survey indicate that distance education can offer vital opportunities in such terms as flexibility or accessibility. However, equity of opportunities may not always be achieved because of a lack of technological infrastructure, differences in digital literacy levels, and socioeconomic inequalities. Concerning the four core language skills, the study shows that listening and reading skills can be taught more easily in distance education, while speaking and writing skills can face greater limitations due to a lack of interaction and immediate feedback.

Keywords: teaching Turkish as a foreign language, distance education, equity of opportunities, four core language skills.

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Түрік тілін шетел тілі ретінде қашықтықтан оқытудағы мүмкіндіктер теңдігі және төрт негізгі тілдік дағдысы

Бұл зерттеу түрік тілін шетел тілі ретінде қашықтықтан оқытудағы мүмкіндіктер теңдігі мәселесін және қашықтықтан білім берудің төрт негізгі тілдік дағдыға тигізетін әсерін қарастырады. Жаһандану және ақпараттық технологиялардың жылдам дамуы қашықтықтан оқытуды шетел тілін оқытуда кең таралған және сөзсіз тәжірибеге айналдырды, дегенмен, онлайн платформалардың білім беруде, әсіресе шетел тілін оқыту контекстінде, тең мүмкіндіктерді қамтамасыз ету мәселесі әлі де болса пікірталас тудырып отыр. Зерттеудің мақсаты – түрік тілін шетел тілі ретінде қашықтықтан оқытудағы мүмкіндіктер теңдігіне қатысты қолданыстағы әдебиеттерге талдау жасау және осы салада қызмет етіп жүрген оқытушылардың пікірлері негізінде бұл процестің тиімді тұстары мен өзекті мәселелерін анықтау. Зерттеу жұмысы сапалық және сандық деректерді жинау әдістері ұштастырылған сипаттамалық тәсілмен жүргізілді. Осы орайда, шетелдіктерге түрік тілін үйретумен айналысатын 89 оқытушыдан алынған сауалнама нәтижелеріне талдау жасалды. Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, қашықтықтан оқыту икемділік пен қолжетімділік тұрғысынан маңызды мүмкіндіктер ұсынады; десе де, технологиялық инфрақұрылымның жетіспеушілігі, цифрлық сауаттылық деңгейіндегі алшақтықтар мен әлеуметтік-экономикалық теңсіздіктерге байланысты іс жүзінде тең мүмкіндіктер қағидаты әрдайым сақтала бермейді. Төрт негізгі тілдік дағды тұрғысынан алғанда, тыңдалым мен оқылым дағдыларын онлайн ортада қолдау біршама жеңілірек екені, ал сөйлесім мен жазылым дағдылары өзара іс-қимыл мен жедел кері байланыстың тапшылығы салдарынан көбірек шектеулерге тап болатыны анықталды.

Түйін сөздер: түрік тілін шет тілі ретінде оқыту, қашықтықтан оқыту, мүмкіндіктер теңдігі, төрт негізгі тілдік дағдылар.

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Равенство возможностей и развитие четырех основных языковых навыков в дистанционном обучении турецкому языку как иностранному

В данном исследовании рассматривается вопрос обеспечения равных возможностей в дистанционном обучении турецкому языку как иностранному, а также влияние дистанционного образования на четыре основных языковых навыка. Глобализация и стремительное развитие информационных технологий сделали дистанционное обучение широко распространенной и неизбежной практикой в преподавании иностранных языков. Однако вопрос о том, обеспечивают ли онлайн-платформы равные возможности в образовании, особенно в контексте преподавания иностранных языков, остается предметом дискуссий. Цель данного исследования – обзор существующей литературы по вопросам равенства возможностей в дистанционном обучении турецкому языку как иностранному и выявление как сильных, так и слабых сторон этого процесса с точки зрения преподавателей. Исследование проводилось с использованием описательного подхода, сочетающего качественный и количественный сбор данных. В этом контексте были проанализированы данные, полученные в ходе опроса 89 преподавателей, работающих в области преподавания турецкого языка как иностранного языка. Результаты показывают, что дистанционное обучение предоставляет значительные возможности с точки зрения гибкости и доступности, однако равные возможности не всегда достигаются из-за недостатка технологической инфраструктуры, различий в уровне цифровой грамотности и социально-экономического неравенства. Что касается четырех основных языковых навыков, исследование выявило, что навыки аудирования и чтения легче развиваются в онлайн-среде, в то время как навыки устной и письменной речи сталкиваются с большими ограничениями из-за отсутствия взаимодействия и немедленной обратной связи.

Ключевые слова: обучение турецкому языку как иностранному, дистанционное обучение, равенство возможностей, четыре основных языковых навыков.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the expansion of global communication networks has made it increasingly easier to conduct large-scale distance education that allows for two-way interaction. These global communication tools provide students and teachers from different parts of the world with opportunities to engage in effective mutual communication (İşman, 2011: 4). In addition to the widespread use of these networks, distance education which became a necessity during the global Covid-19 pandemic has continued to expand and remain widely practiced even after pandemic-related restrictions were lifted.

“Technological advancements such as computers, the internet, and satellite communication constitute the most important driving force behind globalization. This technology has caused a major transformation in terms of time, space, and processing speed” (Çınar, 2009: 17). It is natural that education is also affected by this rapid change. Authors state that “the rapid development of technology is increasing the need for information day by day. Today, what is important is not just accessing information, but being able to access it at the desired time

and in the desired format” (Kışla et al., 2010: 2). They also point out that the increased need for information has created a number of problems. Due to the inadequacy of face-to-face education in meeting the need for information, distance education institutions have been striving to implement distance education in recent years (Kışla et al., 2010).

Both developed and developing countries are turning toward distance education for different reasons, and in a globalizing world distance education has become a necessity and one of the most effective educational models of the twenty-first century. In addressing the question “Why Distance Education?”, İşman (2011) states that education is one of the most fundamental factors determining the development of societies and therefore emphasizes that substantial investments should be made in educational systems. Alongside the increasing demand for education due to population growth, the lifelong learning requirement brought about by the information age is directing countries to restructure their educational systems in accordance with contemporary conditions. In this context, distance education is regarded as a cost-effective solution for underdeveloped countries, a means of providing mass education for developing countries, and a model that

meets lifelong learning needs and enhances educational quality for developed countries.

The main problem considered in this study is whether distance education of Turkish as a foreign language truly create equal opportunities. Whether online education provides equal opportunities in education, especially in the context of foreign language teaching, is still a subject of dispute. In this context, the aim of the study is to examine the issue of equal opportunities in the distance teaching of Turkish as a foreign language in light of both the relevant literature and data obtained from the field, and to evaluate the effects of online education on the four basic language skills.

Material and methods

The research is descriptive in nature and was conducted using an approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The research data consist of the relevant literature and survey data obtained from instructors working in the field. The sample of the study comprises 89 instructors working in the field of teaching Turkish to foreigners. Data were collected and analyzed through a questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. 52 participants (57.5%) stated that they are working abroad, and 37 (42.5%) stated that they work within the country. The participation of both types of instructors who are within the country and who are abroad is important for determining the current situation. Prior to administering the questionnaire, ethical approval was obtained from the Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University Human Research Ethics Committee with decision number 31 dated 26.01.2021.

Results and discussion

The role of the distance education model in terms of equal opportunity becomes more apparent when the advantages and limitations of online learning are considered together. In this context, it is essential to examine the extent to which the opportunities that distance education offers in theory are reflected in practice.

Distance education is defined as a planned educational activity where the learner and the instructor are not physically in the same environment, so that communication and interaction are provided through technological tools (Uşun, 2006; Demir, 2014; Güven vd, 2022). Technological advancements offer a significant advantage in delivering ed-

ucational services to broad audiences. In particular, individuals who work and lack the opportunity to attend face-to-face formal education during regular business hours can pursue the education they desire through distance learning applications tailored to their own free time. In a sense, this offers equal opportunities to individuals with limited free time, granting them the right to education regardless of time and place. The flexibility and accessibility of online education are its most significant advantages. Aspects of this model that foster equal opportunity include allowing students to progress at their own pace, the ability to re-watch recorded lessons, and overcoming geographical barriers to access resources (Barış & Çankaya, 2016; Güngör et al., 2020; Güven, 2023). Briefly, distance education may offer different opportunities that traditional education cannot provide for such group of people: working individuals or students with physical disabilities or people who live in different cities or countries.

From an economic perspective, distance education can facilitate access to education for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and provide them with educational opportunities due to factors such as reduced transportation, accommodation, and physical material costs (Gottschalk & Weise, 2023; Güven, 2023). For instance, applications such as the Distance Turkish Language Teaching Portal developed by the Yunus Emre Institute aim to spread language learning to a wider audience by offering free access. Furthermore, some studies (Ustabulut, 2021) highlight that online environments allow shy students to express themselves more comfortably. Taken together, these are among the positive aspects of online education in terms of widening access and opportunity.

İşman (2011) summarized the problems of the Turkish education system in thirteen items, such as “physical infrastructure, equipment, teacher quality, educational quality, standardized education, student numbers, attendance, and lack of parental involvement,” arguing that these issues could be resolved through the distance education model. In reality, if physical infrastructure were improved, equipment provided, and teacher quality enhanced, success in face-to-face education would naturally reach the desired level across the board. Yet the very areas İşman highlights are also ones in which distance education has not fully achieved the expected level of quality. In terms of these thirteen items, distance education faces similar challenges as face-to-face education. Regarding the issue of equipment, İşman (2011, p. 8) notes that “the second problem is the lack of suffi-

cient tools and equipment in every school. Through distance education, virtual laboratories can be established and made available to students.” However, in practice, despite the considerable time that has passed since the early stages of distance education, digital materials still fall well short of the desired and necessary standards perhaps even lagging behind those of face-to-face education. All the problems İşman listed for face-to-face education are, in the current state of affairs, hurdles that distance education has yet to overcome.

“The interaction between distance education and evolving computer technologies promises numerous innovations for both teachers and students across all fields of education, while offering society the chance to achieve higher education rates. However, although this interaction may sound appealing in theory, it also brings with it many problems in practice that still need to be addressed” (Karaca, Topal, and Aldır, 2011, p. 920). As a system fundamentally rooted in information technologies, the greatest challenge facing the distance education model today is that technological infrastructure and equipment have not yet reached the desired standards worldwide. Consequently, distance education which claims to offer educational opportunities and equal access to education to students across the globe can produce unequal opportunities among students who do not have equal access to technology.

The concept of the “digital divide” is overshadow the claim that online education creates equal opportunities. This concept encompasses not only access to technology but also adequate equipment, fast internet connections, and digital literacy; all these deficiencies deepen the gap between individuals (Gottschalk & Weise, 2023). Researchers state that for students living in rural areas or those with low socioeconomic status have serious problems with internet connection and power outages (Santosa et al. 2022; Güven et al., 2022; Güven 2023).

“Success in technology-based distance education also depends on technological readiness and infrastructure” (Duman & Yurdakul, 2021, p. 435). Consequently, infrastructural and technological problems can hinder the educational process. These technical issues can be experienced by both students and instructors. Ustabulut (2021) examined the distance education experiences of instructors who are teaching Turkish as a foreign language. The results indicated that the weakest aspect of educating online were “technical problems”.

The extent to which distance education contributes to equal opportunity in teaching Turkish as a

foreign language, or in which situations it leads to inequality, remains a matter that warrants careful discussion. Continuity is fundamental in language learning; once lessons are lost or missed, the compensation for that lost time is far more difficult than in other subjects. This reality unfortunately strips away the chance to learn Turkish for students with little or no internet access. Even when lessons are recorded for later viewing, an inequality inevitably emerges between students who follow the course synchronously and those who watch it asynchronously. Furthermore, the very availability of these recordings can lead to another issue: students with full internet access may fail to follow live sessions with the necessary seriousness, assuming they can simply catch up later via video. In short, until the issues of infrastructure and technological equipment are resolved globally, it would be inaccurate to claim that distance education truly fosters equal opportunity.

In a research survey conducted in 2021 among instructors working in the field of teaching Turkish to foreigners, 89 participants were asked the following question: “Does your institution provide up-to-date equipment, educational platforms, application programs, etc., designed to support distance education?”. 47 participants (53%) stated that they received infrastructure support from their institutions, while 42 (47%) stated that they did not receive any support. These numerical values indicate that approximately half of the field instructors participating in the research did not receive infrastructure support from their institutions and conducted the educational process using their own resources. In response to the open-ended question regarding the type of support provided by universities, some participants stated that their institutions purchased unlimited, high-level access to their educational platforms, some reported that their institutions provided tablet and computer support, and others stated that they provided digital materials. Some instructors reported that their institutions updated their infrastructure, making improvements that facilitated material uploading, easier assessment, and e-learning. These responses demonstrate that distance education, which became mandatory for a period in many countries due to the global pandemic, led some educational institutions to update their infrastructure and take measures to adapt to distance learning.

When asked whether they took institutional or personal measures to improve their infrastructure, 51 participants (57%) answered “Yes,” while 38 (43%) responded “No.” Among those who answered

“Yes,” 15 participants left the open-ended question regarding the nature of their improvements unanswered. Of those who did respond, 5 participants reported purchasing new computers, 3 acquired tablets, and one person stated that they bought a higher-speed internet plan. Some participants also noted that they had purchased access to various educational platforms. Responses concerning institutional and individual infrastructure measures suggest that both educational institutions and instructors were unprepared for the distance education process triggered by the pandemic. At the same time, they indicate that instructors attempted to address some infrastructural challenges through institutional support and personal initiatives. However, the extent to which similar measures could be taken on the student side remains uncertain. Factors such as parental involvement in their children’s education, together with the adequacy of their economic means, can shape a student’s technical infrastructure. Consequently, students who are disadvantaged by limited parental support or economic hardship may be left without equal opportunity in learning Turkish as a foreign language through distance education.

The survey responses suggest that instructors are not fully satisfied with the educational platforms they use. When describing the downsides of their current systems, 32 participants (36.8%) identified limited session durations as the most common complaint. However, this problem seems solvable with measures such as institutions making free access to their educational platforms to instructors. Differences across universities such as whether they have the budget or the capacity to provide infrastructure support can result in different learning conditions for students. This will lead to unequal conditions and inequality of opportunity for students, even within the university context.

Complaints voiced in the survey, such as “echoing audio”, “insufficient voice interaction”, “connection issues” and “network problems” clearly demonstrate that instructors also struggle with infrastructure. In short, as long as the infrastructural and equipment hurdles preventing healthy global communication remain on both the instructor and student sides it is impossible to speak of a high-quality distance education conducted under equal conditions. The ability of distance education to function effectively and offer equal opportunity depends entirely on technological infrastructure and equipment reaching a state of global parity. In a world where disadvantaged groups still struggle with basic internet connectivity and lack access to the tablets,

desktops, or laptops necessary to follow a lesson, achieving equal opportunity in the distance teaching of Turkish as a foreign language remains an elusive goal.

In his study examining the perspectives of instructors on online Turkish language teaching to foreigners, Alan (2020: 432) draws attention to the critical issue of digital literacy: “One of the challenges emerging from these activities has been identified as a lack of digital literacy among instructors. The fact that online teaching requires a command of information technologies and that older instructors, in particular, may struggle in this area contributes to this situation.” This reality is no different on the student side. Students learning Turkish through distance education do not all possess the same level of digital literacy. Consequently, those who lack these digital skills find themselves at a disadvantage, losing the equal footing they might have enjoyed in a traditional face-to-face classroom.

Although the online distance education model is often described as a “two-way” learning environment, the reality in practice is quite different; typically, only the instructor’s microphone and camera remain active. Most students are reluctant to turn on their cameras, and having all microphones open simultaneously leads to poor audio quality, overlapping voices, and a classroom environment that is difficult to manage. Consequently, when students keep their cameras and microphones off, it inevitably creates a system where the learner remains passive and the instructor stays at the center. Furthermore, for an instructor who cannot see their students in the flesh or gauge their reactions, this situation leads to a loss of motivation and a breakdown in communication. In truth, for foreign language learning to be effective, the interaction between instructor and student, as well as among students themselves, is of vital importance. Thus, far from achieving equal opportunity in the distance teaching of Turkish, students are actually losing their standard learning prospects and quality. An instructor’s inexperience with digital technology or a lack of digital literacy directly manifests as an inequality for the student. As Birinci (2020: 352) notes, “to reach the desired level in distance teaching, there is a need for qualified instructors who are digitally literate and who know how to integrate technologies into teaching processes.”

When considering educational processes and outcomes, it is necessary to acknowledge that the distance education model has advantages as well as challenges and problems. “Despite offering many advantages, distance education can encounter nu-

merous problems due to technological shortcomings, difficulties in using and managing the distance education system, and a lack of quality and standardization” (Kışla et al., 2010: 3). All these negative aspects are problems that can deprive students of the opportunity to receive a quality education.

At this stage of the discussion, the question of how distance education impacts the four fundamental language skills in foreign language instruction comes to the forefront. The reflections of the online environment on these four core skills reveal the effects of distance teaching within the context of equal opportunity in a much more tangible way. Foreign language instruction aims for the integrated development of four primary skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The extent to which these skills can be acquired in an online environment is a subject of intense debate in the literature. In a study examining the opinions of instructors on foreign language teaching through synchronous distance education, participants expressed a significant number of negative opinions regarding the acquisition of foreign language skills through distance education, including: “inability to ensure active participation in speaking skills, decreased motivation in reading and writing skills, difficulties in teaching writing, inability to be physically present with the student for speaking and writing skills, difficulty in providing individual and immediate feedback, problematic and difficult listening skills, and the lack of effective methods for reading skills” (Dolmacı & Dolmacı, 2020).

When language instruction is conducted online, the four fundamental skills are affected by the process in ways that are both positive and negative. If we were to evaluate each of these four core skills individually, the situation could be summarized as follows:

Listening skills can benefit from certain opportunities during the online education process, depending on the circumstances. For instance, the most significant advantages that distant education offers for developing listening skills is the opportunity to watch lesson recordings constantly, which allow students to rewind and listen repeatedly to parts they didn’t fully understand (Güven, 2023). Moreover, tools such as podcasts, videos, and audiobooks provide students with the chance to experience diverse accents and varying speech rates (Başar & Çangal, 2021). On the other hand, factors like technical glitches and hardware deficiencies among the most common issues in distance learning hinder the development of listening skills at the desired level

(Santosa et al., 2022; Ustabulut, 2021; Duman & Yurdakul, 2021). Research highlights that students often struggle to hear and comprehend listening activities in distance education, and that the pace of speech in audio recordings can sometimes make understanding even more difficult (Güven et al., 2022).

Speaking skills, by their very nature, demand active interaction and real-time communication. The natural communication environment provided in face-to-face education, the use of gestures and facial expressions, eye contact, and group work are limited in online environments. Students’ reluctance to turn on microphones and cameras, technical malfunctions, and large class sizes reduce the opportunity for speaking practice. In their study examining learner and teacher opinions on the distance teaching of Turkish as a foreign language during the COVID-19 process, Güngör, Çangal, and Demir (2020) stated that students expressed the negative impact of distance education on speaking skills. However, there are also studies that find synchronous (real-time) tools such as Skype or Zoom more advantageous than face-to-face classes in developing listening and speaking skills (Salbego & Tumolo, 2015; Al-Qahtani, 2019).

Reading skills are considered one of the areas with the fewest problems in online education. “Reading skills will have the opportunity to improve in the distance education process, just like in face-to-face education, if the student has a microphone and sufficient internet connection” (Duman, 2024, p. 253). In synchronous online classes without hardware and internet infrastructure problems, reading skills can be developed smoothly with the teacher’s guidance; however, eye strain and distraction caused by prolonged screen time are factors that can negatively affect reading efficiency (Ustabulut, 2021). Nevertheless, the variety of materials and ease of access indicate that reading skills can be supported in distance education. In Yurdakul and Duman’s (2021) study, participants stated that the most successful skill in teaching Turkish as a foreign language through distance education was “reading comprehension”.

Writing skills present significant problems in terms of measurement and evaluation in online environments. Instant feedback, which is provided in a classroom setting, cannot be easily provided in distance education. Especially for A1 beginner level students, who cannot even properly copy what is written on the board into their notebooks, the presence of a teacher who walks between the desks and observes errors in real time is crucial. However

these opportunities are not available in distance education. The lack of dictation exercises and instant feedback, which are done in face-to-face education, can make it difficult to learn punctuation and spelling rules (Güven et al., 2022). In Güven's (2023) study, which examines the facilitating and hindering factors in distance Turkish language teaching, instructors express concerns about exam security and cheating related to measurement and evaluation, and particularly point out that it is not clear whether the student has produced the work themselves in the evaluation of writing skills. In Yurdakul and Duman's (2021) study, writing skills ranked first as the skill where distance Turkish language teaching was least successful.

Conclusion

The rapid evolution of information technologies, the acceleration of globalization, and the compelling circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic have swiftly shifted education into online environments. These developments have made distance learning applications an inevitable reality, particularly in the field of foreign language instruction. The teaching of Turkish as a foreign language has also been directly affected by this transformation. While distance education offers a range of opportunities, it can also lead to structural problems and inequalities.

In this study, the issue of equal opportunity in the online teaching of Turkish as a foreign language was examined in light of literature data and survey findings gathered from instructors teaching Turkish for foreigners. The findings demonstrate that, despite the widespread assumption that distance education provides equal opportunity at a theoretical level, this equality often fails to materialize in practice. Inequalities in access to technological infrastructure, socioeconomic disparities, and the

varying levels of digital literacy between instructors and students emerge as the primary determinants of this inequality in online Turkish instruction.

The findings of the survey state that there are group of people whom distance education can offer vital opportunities. This groups contain such people as working individuals, people with physical disabilities, and learners living in different regions. However, these opportunities depend on prerequisites such as a stable internet connection, appropriate hardware, and digital learning skills. For students who lack these prerequisites, distance education is less likely than face-to-face instruction to provide equal opportunity; instead, it can reinforce and deepen existing inequalities.

When considering the four core language skills in teaching Turkish as a foreign language, it is evident that online education does not support each skill to the same extent. While listening and reading can be developed more effectively online thanks to the range of digital materials and opportunities for repetition, speaking and writing face serious constraints because they rely on interaction, immediate feedback, and face-to-face communication. In particular, students' passivity in speaking activities and assessment and evaluation problems in writing bring into sharper focus the ways in which distance education remains contested in terms of both quality and equal opportunity in language teaching.

To sum up, the online model for teaching Turkish as a foreign language is neither a definitive solution for equal opportunity nor solely a source of inequality. For this model to truly foster equity, it must be supported by a robust and widespread technological infrastructure, the systematic development of digital literacy, the enhancement of instructors' pedagogical competencies in online language teaching, and the production of high-quality digital materials that encourage meaningful interaction among learners.

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