Virtual Classroom Instruction during Covid-19 Pandemic and Students' Opinions

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has affected all the countries around the world. It has huge effect upon all areas as well as education. Since the beginning of the pandemic schools were closed as well as universities. Turkey's decision was to move on distant education for universities. However, not all universities were ready for a complete distant education. For that reason, few universities needed to use online educational platforms such as Google Classroom. Minimal interaction between the instructors and students caused heavy reliance on the homework assignments. Although there were instructors who used online exams still, most of them used a traditional approach in education. Thus, purpose of this study was to investigate pandemic's effect on education. For that reason, opinion of 16 students who were studying at science education department at 4th grade level was taken via a semi structured survey. Purposive sampling method was used for the study. For that reason 4th grade students were selected for the study. Since those students were about to become teachers, it is acknowledged that they would also had full comprehension on the given education and its positive and negative sides. Four themes emerged as a conclusion. Those themes were, flexibility of distant education and its effect on instruction, importance of feedback, meaningful learning and, assessment and evaluation. Results were discussed under the respective themes.

Keywords: Covid, Covid-19, Distant education, Education faculty, Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The first Covid-19 case reported to WHO by Turkey was in 3 January 2020. Since then, number of infected people increased dramatically and Council of Higher Education declared all the universities in the country will continue their education online (Aktaş, 2020). Due to unexpected immediate shutdown of institutions in Turkey almost in all area naturally affected educational settings. Most countries' responses were similar to Turkey's response. Universities' decisions were based on their readiness to distant education. Few universities continued their education via their already set-up distant education system. On the other hand, most universities used other means such as Google Classroom (Sobaih, Hasanein & Abu Elnasr, 2020). Like other countries, Turkey also supported usage of internet, provided free internet to the students and universities used online communication software in increasing demand (Hassounah, Raheel & Alhefzi, 2020). Although those efforts also created a way to modernization of efforts (Chen & Mullen, 2020), it also brought some problems due

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to unprepared educational institutions, instructors, teachers and students. The most significant observable effect was on learning and assessment of learning (Onyema et al., 2020). Since only few instructors used online lecture before the pandemic, transition from face to face instruction to distance education caused an unanticipated usage of online environments. Yet, assessments habits of instructors and students were still mostly based on face to face instruction (Toquero, 2020). Problems with online course content and its disadvantages on meaningful learning have already been discussed in some papers (Dhawan, 2020). However, to fully comprehend the situation more studies need to be done and students perspectives need to be taken account. Thus, purpose of this study was to examine the students' opinions on carried out lessons in virtual classrooms and determine the outcomes of forced distant education.

METHOD

Research Design

Research design of this study is phenomenological research. Phenomenological research design helps researchers to gain perspectives on the individuals who were in the center of purpose of research (Yildirim & Simsek, 2006).

Sampling Method

It was assumed that 4th grade level students were able to analyze and judge the quality of instruction since they were about to become teachers. Consequently, it was assumed they would make better judgments. For that reason, sampling method used for the study was purposive sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Study Group

16 students studying at elementary science education department at 4th grade level were chosen for the study. Study was carried out after finishing the spring semester for 2019-2020.

Data Collection Tool

For the purpose of the study a semi structured survey was prepared by the researcher. The prepared semi structured interview form was consisted of three questions. First question aimed to get the perspective of students on the carried out instructions which were carried out via distant education. Second question aimed to learn students' opinions on which instructional methods could be used with distance education. Third question aimed to control first and second questions and provide more in-depth information for the study. Questions directed in the semi structured interview form were also presented below.

Question 1) How would you carry out the distant education if you were the instructor? Please present your arguments.

Question 2) Which instructional methods might be used in distance education? Please present your arguments.

Question 3) Could you give a detailed example of your instructional method?

Validity Analysis

Prepared survey was analyzed by 1 elementary science teacher and 1 academic. After getting the opinions from both elementary science teacher and academic the draft survey form finalized and applied.

Data Collecting Procedure

Interview form was delivered students via Google classroom. Students gave their answers via Google classroom.

Coding Procedures

Students' sentences were shown in " " alongside with italic font type. Then, data coding determined with respect to empiric coding. Empiric coding is useful in revealing the data and generated through the data examination. Throughout the data coding the emerged themes (Gibson & Brown, 2009) were presented under their respective headings in the discussion section.

DATA ANALYSIS and DISCUSSION

Flexibility of Distant Education and its Effect on Instruction

Since the Covid-19 epidemic affected whole world and education systems were rearranged with respect to pandemic. Thus, all the instruction was done via distance education. Although faculties prepared and announced scheduled programs yet, they provided flexibility to the instructors since Covid-19 pandemic was unexpected disaster and universities were shut down by the Council of Higher Education on March 2020 in haste (Aktaş, 2020). For that reason, instructors were able to make distant education also on flexible times. On the other hand, it was understood from the student responses that instructors tend to give longer instruction and would dive in details too much.

"I wouldn't suffocate students by preparing and presenting clear and short notes"

"I would give examples and solve problems after a short instruction"

"I would make live lecture during a two week period because it is boring to take live lectures every week"

"We get live lectures every week, it is boring, becomes monotone"

Yet, three students wanted to take live lectures every week. Two students indicated that they would want live lectures on time which was announced on faculty distance education schedule.

"I would make live instruction every week"

And other student similarly indicated that s/he would want to take live lectures as in scheduled program before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, that student also mentioned that s/he wouldn't want a long lesson instruction via distance education by indicating

"I would want to have a 60 minutes instruction but divided into half. For example, 30 minutes instruction following 20 minutes breakup and then again 30 minutes instruction"

Similar argument presented by a third student who wanted also live lectures and also indicated that if live lectures were not possible then a video lecture would be useful.

"I would want an live lecture as in scheduled program. However, if conditions were not adequate for that then I would want video lectures through the digital platforms"

A detailed look upon the answers revealed that the reason for the students to take lectures on time was due to instruction methods used by the instructors. Since Covid-19 precautions helped instructors to choose their own time to lecture, it also created a free time for them. On the other hand, students might not have that free time, in addition their state of mind might not be ready as for instructors. For that reason, not using a fixed time for lectures breaks the homeostasis of the education. Each scientific area has a vast knowledge and instructors may want to deliver those but one should note that a course covers the content, instructional method, readiness of students to learn, creating enough time for feedbacks, students' expectations and aptitudes towards the lesson (Hativa, 2000). Using a classical approach through digital media led instructors to give detailed and longer lectures more than usual in other words, same as lecturing in the classroom. However, providing the students need by taking their interest and feedbacks may provide learning in shorter time (Mercadier & Lagarrigue, 2020).

Importance of Feedback

From the responses of the students it was understood that students needed more feedback from the instructors. Instructors tended to give instruction via live lectures or offline lectures. Assessments for those lectures were mostly carried out by online exams but the most frequent way was via assignments. Few instructors tended to give assignments and gave grades without focusing on live lectures. Consequently, feedbacks given by the instructors were not enough and not clear for the students. A few examples of the student responses were indicated below.

"I wish instructors wouldn't lecture on topics but explained them via examples or problem solving"

"if I were the instructor I would deliver some short notes and provide examples on the topics"

"I would keep instruction short… and then would do some problem solving"

"I wouldn't lecture for hours, it is too boring…. I would solve example problems"

"Instead of giving more assignments ... I would ask from the students to tell me what they know and learned later, I would present some videos showing how an instructional technique is applied…. For example micro instruction"

"I would ask preparing lesson plans and then tell the students on where they get wrong"

"I would spare first 10 minutes of the lectures to see whether students understand the material"

"Instead of making live lectures every week, I would make online meetings between few weeks and ask students what they didn't understand"

Crook et al., (2012) studied the effect of video feedback and researchers indicated that providing feedbacks to students via videos may increase the quality of feedbacks. It was also pointed out in the study that using video feedbacks also considered advantageous for the instructors. Although Crisp (2007) couldn't determine effectiveness of the feedback on students achievement, it should be noted that learning is a process which continues through time and affected by several factors. For example, Poulos & Mahony (2008) state that effective feedbacks effects are beyond the feedbacks themselves and enhances learning and teaching.

Meaningful Learning

After carefully examining the codes and student arguments it was understood that students want feedback for meaningful learning. Instructors gave assignments to the students and made live lectures. However, not getting enough feedback from the instructors and "boring" long lecture hours confuse students so, they were still unsure whether they learned correctly or not. Students couldn't construct the meaningful learning and they wanted to construct the knowledge they have.

"Through assignments we search and learn things"

"After giving short notes to students, I would tell them how to do and what to do"

"I would give examples to relate the knowledge with life"

"As an instructor I would present some videos to students to show how a method was applied"

"Students could join to elementary school teachers' online lessons and learn from it"

"I would solve some problems and ask students to discuss for the solution so they could comprehend the material"

"I would use Socratic method …ask few questions and help students to think on the issue"

"I would create a WhatsApp group so, students could reach instructor and share their question with other students and ask what they need to know"

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"I would use social networks to share information and reach out students who can't always attend the lectures"

Information accumulates into learning in pieces and every individual constructs his/her learning to become a problem solver (Shuell, 1990). Consequently, meaningful learning means retention of the knowledge and transferring it into problem solving. For that reason, meaningful learning may appear in various shapes but its appearance exists in problem solving (Mayer, 2002). From the student responses it was understood that students were unable to make a meaningful construction with given information.

Assessment and Evaluation

It is understood from the students' statements that flexibility of distant education caused instructors use assignments more than usual and eventually it leaded feedback problem and less meaningful learning. Final theme revealed by the study was assessment and evaluation. Few student statements were shown below.

"I would divide assessment into two half, 50 point for presentation and 50 point for the multiple choice exam"

"I would use assignments instead of exams in grading since most students just tend to crib….. I would definitely use plagiarism programs to detect those"

"I would use assignments in intervals to understand whether students work or not"

"I would use assignments instead of online exams. Because I can't prevent students to cheat in the exam but assignments are specific to students"

"I would use assignments instead of final exam, there are even few instructors who didn't make a single live lesson"

When assessment doesn't associate with "fairness" as called by students then, it may hinder learning (Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005). For that reason, assessment should be proper with validity (Murphy & Winkler, 1970). Consequently, establishing standards and informing the students about the requirements could provide better solutions (Sadler, 2005).

CONCLUSION

It is concluded by the study that instructors neglecting the importance of key features in a successful education. Flexibility may provide opportunity for both instructors and students. However, instructors are the key factors who could provide meaningful learning by taking account the proper feedback, assessment and evaluation methods. Based on the interview results it was concluded that focusing on the revealed themes could provide a qualified education.

Recommendation and Limitation

This study was only carried out with limited number of participants. Also sampling method might have impact on the results. It should be noted that not all educational

institutions provide education in the same way. For that reason, a more comprehensive study on effect of instruments used in Covid-19 pandemic times might provide more data to comprehend the issue.

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