

English Speaking Online in the Turkish Teaching Context: A Theoretical Approach

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The world initiated a new era with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Education all around the globe, including Turkey, was impacted to a great extent. Both teachers and learners were required to adapt to online education within a short period of time. Although previous studies had focused on the impacts of teaching English in general for teachers and learners, studies focusing on teaching of the speaking skills online particularly in the Turkish context was absent in the literature. Therefore, the gap which was to be considered appropriate for this research is related to comprehending the perceptions and challenges EFL teachers confronted while attempting to teach the speaking skills online within the Turkish context. This article aims to have a theoretical contribution to the current research, in order to see the significance of the Turkish context, as online teaching of English speaking was to be considered beneficial for learners, as it increased confidence for the interaction.

Keywords: English teaching, speaking, online higher education, Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

This article aims to investigate the perceptions English teachers have, regarding the instruction and teaching of the speaking skills online during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the challenges they have encountered during this period. The study also aims to provide a greater understanding of how English teachers in the Turkish context view the teaching of this specific skill and approach its effectiveness while attempting to comprehend the challenges they have faced.

The main focus of this article is to understand the perceptions of EFL teachers in the Turkish context and receive a genuine reflection of their experiences in teaching the speaking skills online during the period of the pandemic. It relates to the teaching of English speaking skills online during the pandemic, alongside, considering the perceptions and negative aspects teachers have faced in this particular field.

Teaching English Speaking Skills: Theory

Followed by the initiation of the Covid-19 pandemic, online education became widespread around the globe. Instructing the English language online led to specific challenges along particularly concerning the teaching of speaking skills. According to Nunan (2004), there is a change in perspective of how language is viewed. Rather than considering it as a system consisting of rules and functions, it is now perceived as a dynamic resource for

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meaning making. Hence, students should be able to distinguish between knowing the rules and being capable of using them effectively when communicating. Consequently, learners should be provided with opportunities to practice their learnt knowledge.

Furthermore, Littlewood (1981) declared that for effective communication to be maintained, it is crucial for learners to establish particular strategies that they adapt to their use of language. Moreover, he argues that it is also important for language learners to gain knowledge of the social significance of certain language forms. This may involve the learners' reputation within a situation or a group and therefore is crucial to be implemented and practiced within the learning environment. This may relate to communication which is authentic and spontaneous that learners must be prepared for considering unplanned communication environments.

Long (1991) proposed that "acquisition takes place in the process of the learner communicating with another speaker", and hence can be related to the importance of communication amongst learners within the classroom. According to Hedge (2008), speakers are required to use communication strategies such as gestures, paraphrasing, and negotiation of meaning. Classroom interaction can be considered crucial for learners due to its chances for students to enhance their language learning process and exchange meaning. This can be maintained through comprehensible input, practice, and interaction amongst peers until the language they have learned becomes automatised. Hedge (2008) further discussed that it may be considered practical for teachers to instruct their students' language which will contribute to the negotiation of meaning and provide opportunities for practice. He further deduces that communication strategies may be a crucial field in guiding teachers to make decisions on what to focus on in feedback. He presumes that these strategies are powerful indicators of gaps and uncertainties in language knowledge and should be approached in an appropriate manner.

Naqvi and Zehra (2020) examined online EFL emergency teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic and investigated the challenges and innovative practices. The results demonstrated that the main challenges encountered were the lack of interaction. This involved group and pair work, and face-to-face communication. Providing learners with opportunities for interacting in pairs and groups was also perceived as a challenge. Further on, teachers emphasised on the minimum response and contribution from students as an issue. If insisted on answers, the only response received was via written forms in the chat box. Hence, most participants in this study reported the lack of interaction to be the main barrier throughout the period of emergency remote teaching. This was believed to have a major impact on learners acquiring and comprehending language skills.

Online English Teaching in Turkey

Bates (2005, p. 9), defined virtual education as "fully online courses are distance courses". During the online education period, breakout rooms were used through applications such as the Zoom platform. These were virtual rooms that enabled participants to interact and speak in pairs and groups which teachers could also observe from time to time. However, despite the breakout rooms and effective activities planned appropriate to students' levels, the majority of students were not willing to communicate. These consisted of the personality of participants, for instance, individuals feeling comfortable interacting with only people they feel that they have a close relationship with. Additionally, the nature of online education was a factor, as there were fewer opportunities to interact and communicate. Further on, the lack of self-confidence participants had in speaking skills was considered a factor as they were mostly concerned about speaking incorrectly, humiliation, and the lack of experience of speaking in public before.

Sevik and Yucedag (2021) studied the perceptions of EFL teachers in the Turkish context considering online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study indicated that there were particular challenges experienced by the participants. These primarily consisted of the teachers' lack of technical knowledge of distance education, internet connection problems, technical problems, lack of technological devices, and the absence of internet. The study also emphasised on the lack of interaction between the teacher and the learners as well as within the students themselves. This was considered to be a major factor for the participants to perceive distance education to be less beneficial and supportive.

In addition, Civelek, Toplu, and Uzun (2021) conducted a similar study regarding distance learning during the Covid-19 outbreak. The research analysed EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes during this period in the Turkish context. The study indicated that Turkish EFL teachers had negative views towards online instruction and its implementation in most aspects. There were many reasons for this with the foremost being the lack of knowledge and skills teachers had considering educational technologies, students' lack of willingness and to participate in live lessons, lack of interaction between the teacher and students and students within themselves, and students not being able to access sessions due to necessary equipment. These elements are considerably crucial for an effective lesson to be implemented, and the challenges faced can be considered as a barrier to the teaching and developing of the speaking skills. Furthermore, Nayman and Baylı (2022) established a study regarding the instruction of speaking and writing skills in EFL classrooms during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings of the study displayed that teachers struggled with challenges such as technical problems relevant to internet connection and access, problems related to the learner, lack of interaction, and lack of scaffolding. Therefore, it is essential to understand the perceptions of EFL teachers and the challenges they encounter while teaching the speaking skill online. This can impact the students learning progress which is why it is an important issue to address carefully and effectively.

Sevik and Yucedag (2021) argued that "most common challenges the teachers faced were the amount of time and planning required for online teaching and that the most frequently stated benefit was flexibility provided by online teaching" (p. 173). Students were not keen on interacting during virtual classes and tended to remain silent. Further on, another challenge identified was relevant to the type of interaction throughout the sessions. Teachers experienced great difficulty establishing interaction amongst themselves and the students, and also between the students themselves. Additionally, due to the nature of online learning, most students chose to keep their cameras and microphones off leading teachers to feel uncomfortable and demotivated, creating the emotion of talking into empty space. In an online classroom, teachers mostly found the lack of time allocation, network problems, and attitudes of students throughout the sessions to be challenging and de-motivating. With regards to productive skills such as writing and speaking, the major challenges observed involved the high number of students in the classrooms, emotional states of students such as anxiety levels and lack of self-confidence, lack of feedback from teachers to students, and not being prepared and trained to be teaching online. Further on, role play, drill, presentation, brainstorming, drafting, and similar skills had become a challenge. Group work and pair work were also considerably difficult to conduct in the online class. In addition, the findings indicated instant group discussions were also chaotic despite the efforts of the teacher due to students not being able to interact with each other freely at once.

Erkan and Balbay (2021) analysed how English language instructors coped with the onset of the pandemic and remote language teaching. The findings suggested that the majority of teachers felt as if they were inexperienced in teaching during the emergency remote teaching period. Additionally, other instructors found

the experience of lacking genuine face-to-face interaction to be frustrating. Demir and Sönmez (2021) analysed practical, technical, and affective aspects of teaching English online during the pandemic particularly focusing on the instructors' voices. The findings indicated that the majority of instructors disliked the idea of online education and did not find it as an effective way to teach languages. Particular instructors stated that the lack of interaction was the most demotivating issue during the distance learning period. Encouraging learners to participate throughout the sessions was viewed as a challenge resulting in low active attendance.

Online education came to be part of many educators' lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was also the case for language teaching classes around the globe. This literature review firstly discussed communication from an English language teaching perspective alongside relevant theories. Further on, interaction in the language classroom was explored. Moreover, teaching the speaking skills in the English language was analysed alongside teaching these skills online. Finally, an analysis of literature relating to the challenges and perceptions of English teachers during this period was reviewed.

The majority of studies conducted focused on challenges and perceptions of teachers during emergency remote teaching. The findings portrayed that most teachers did not agree on the effectiveness of online teaching of languages due to many factors. This involved teacher preparedness, student motivation and participation, technical aspects of distance learning, and, also the lack of interaction and face-to-face genuine communication. The majority of instructors recognised online teaching was not effective for students and teachers. It can be observed that due to the nature of distance learning, interactiveness was a challenge for the participants leading to the teaching of speaking skills to be inefficient.

Although most studies have considered the views of EFL teachers and the challenges they have come across, this tends to be an analysis in general. The gap which may be considered appropriate for my study relates to the teaching of speaking skills online during the pandemic, alongside, considering the perceptions and negative aspects teachers have faced in this particular field. Further on, the study aims to involve the Turkish context, and therefore will study this phenomenon in relation to the teachers within the country. The findings of this research may contribute to classroom practice through understanding the challenges of teaching a crucial language skill online as well as viewing teachers' perceptions on this subject.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to investigate the challenges and perceptions of EFL teachers while teaching the speaking skills online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Turkish context was taken into consideration and data were collected according to this factor.

The majority of teachers believed that online learning was not as effective in teaching speaking skills. Instructors stated that effective communication, interaction, and participation were major issues while conducting lessons online. Further on, pair and group-work were not considered to be efficient and monitoring students was a problem. When requested about the challenges confronted, a participant's response reflected that "It was really hard to make students turn on their cameras and they were quite unwilling to participate in speaking activities no matter how much I try". Similar views were presented by Civelek et al. (2021) in the literature review section. Students' lack of willingness to participate in live lessons and the lack of interaction between the teacher and students, and students within themselves were considered as a barrier to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers also reflected on time limitations for speaking activities to be conducted and feedback provided during sessions to be insufficient. Participants also expressed their views on the physical learning

environment of students, unequal opportunities, and technical problems to be a barrier in teaching and learning of the speaking skills. Learner profile and motivation were also considered crucial in the learning process to be efficient and fruitful. The overall views of instructors regarding online classes in regard to face-to-face classes were that the majority of participants disagreed with virtual learning to be effective. However, teachers also presented positive attitudes towards online education and some participants also stated that although the beginning of the online teaching process involved distress and discomfort, the current period showed that both teachers and students had adapted to remote teaching.

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