

Evaluating Teacher Performances in Distance Education During The COVID-19 Lockdowns: Creative Efforts With the Unknown*

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Abstract

This study focused on teacher responses during COVID-19 in the 2020-2021 academic year about homework assignments, their preparedness, internet use, resources used, measurement and evaluation methods. The study is qualitative using content analysis and the N-Vivo program. Ten teachers in different types of high schools in different socio-economic regions in Adana/Turkey participated in this research. The results showed that the opinions of the teachers did not vary according to school type and socio-economic environment. They made creative efforts for effective instruction by integrating different types of evaluation, homework, and methodology. Based on the results, it is suggested that distance educational planning should be made preparing teachers for such unexpected events; it includes the development of software, alternative teaching platforms, providing government support for internet and access to equipment and technology. Additionally, it is noted that teachers may experience a lack of motivation during the pandemic and should be supported psychologically during such unexpected events.

Keywords: *instruction, teacher, COVID-19, distance education*

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Introduction

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused significant changes particularly in health systems, economic, social and pedagogical aspects all over the world. One of the areas most affected by this pandemic is education systems (Can, 2020). The facts that COVID-19 is fatal, spreads fast and currently has no definite solution for prevention other than social distance, isolation and hygiene rules, made it necessary to take some steps in teaching and learning as in many fields (Yeşilyurt, 2021). After the COVID-19 pandemic was announced through official channels, measures were taken by the Turkish government in the education sector and other fields.

With school closures, continuing education via alternative platforms becomes important. Distance education is the key element of MoNE (Ministry of National Education) to maintain its services and transmit these services to all educational stakeholders. Within the scope of distance education, MoNE decided to perform the courses via its online platform-Educational Informatics Network in Turkey (EBA) and the national television channel-TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation). EBA was developed in 2010. The existence of EBA gained more importance for maintaining educational and training activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the collaboration of MoNE and TRT, the preparation of educational materials for distance education through national channels was completed in a short time (Özer, 2020). In many universities, courses in distance education were processed through methods such as providing presentation files and sharing course content (articles, ppt, word, pdf, etc.), synchronous/asynchronous lecturing, asking instant questions, and giving feedback and sharing homework. In addition, it has been observed that universities use different online; these include homework, projects, online exams and quizzes with different measurement and evaluation methods (Higher Education Council, 2020).

In this study, the main objective is to examine Turkish high school teachers' opinions about instruction and instructional practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. It seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the evaluation and teaching methods used by teachers in distance education?
- What types of assignments are used in distance education?
- How did teachers use the internet platforms?
- How did teachers evaluate their own instruction and students in the COVID-19 period?

Through the use of distance education during the COVID-19 process, lessons were conducted remotely through various platforms. In order to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of educational institutions was added to the measures taken such as formal lockdowns and travel restrictions. Teaching was restructured through the distance education system in order to ensure the continuity of education and to keep the education system alive. The role of the teacher, who creates suitable learning environments for students in the distance education system where the students are at the center is crucial and gains more importance especially during this pandemic period that affects the entire world. The focus on the practitioners of the educational process is an important theme to examine during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Distance learning is a modern teaching approach in which courses can be delivered concurrently and asynchronously without regard to time or space constraints; lectures can be replayed and information technology is actively exploited (Valentine, 2002; Ekinici, 2017). Students and teachers interact with various educational resources and interactive communication tools in separate environments during the distant education process (Simonson et al., 2012). Online teaching methods and television-based courses are the most prominent platforms for distance education (Teaster & Blieszner, 1999; Valentine, 2002). For this reason, with the decision to transition to distance education during the COVID-19 period, online learning environments, and TV broadcasts have been actively implemented and integrated in this process in many countries (Stojanovic et al., 2020).

The distance education process poses various difficulties and problems in education systems that do not have a technical infrastructure or are relatively weak, similar to education systems even with a technical infrastructure. As distance education class offerings expand, student discontent with distance education classes, indicated by the rising attrition gap between distance education and regular face-to-face classrooms, is becoming an even greater problem (Patrick, 2009). Moreover, in the Babson Survey Research Study (Allen & Seaman, 2014), it is reported that it is more difficult to keep the students involved in distance education in 2013; that percentage has increased significantly since 2004.

In distance education, measurement and evaluation become much more difficult as well. According to Gunawardena and LaPointe (2003), students in distance education can be evaluated in two ways: formal and informal. In assessment, assignments, short quizzes, quizzes, projects,

role-plays, online discussions, etc. are used. In the informal assessment, it is mostly aimed at improving the learning process via pros-cons forms from feedback about the lessons. Morley (2000) examined various measurement and evaluation methods in distance education as synchronous assessment and asynchronous assessment methods. Thus, semi-structured interviews via computer for synchronous assessment, oral exams with two-way video and real-time conferencing technologies and remotely supervised final exams can be used. Simultaneous assessment approaches, according to Morley (2000), help legitimize the distant education process. Measurement methods or approaches such as asynchronous learning networks, written assignments as a student-content interaction tool, research articles, and portfolios can be utilized for an asynchronous assessment.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in design and uses a case study approach. The most noticeable feature of case studies is that they allow you to study precise facts that may not be examined using other methods (Punch, 2014). A qualitative case study was preferred to examine teacher opinions on instruction during the COVID-19 period. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2011), the case method allows the researcher to examine an event that cannot be controlled in-depth with how and why questions.

Study group and site

The maximum variation sampling method was used in the selection of group members. It includes participants who may have different opinions regarding a subject or the situation (Patton, 2014). The purpose of creating a sample based on maximum variation is not only to provide diversity for generalization, but to identify common themes and values that might exist in a variety of situations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The participants were selected through a maximum variety sampling method which is used to study three different school environments in Adana. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used and effective in qualitative research where there are limited resources (Patton, 2002). This study aims to identify common themes in various situations. Adana is a multicultural city located in the Mediterranean Sea Region; it is the country's sixth biggest city with a population of 2.2 million (TUIK data cited by Adana Metropolitan Municipality, 2020). The study group consists of 10 teachers from different socio-economic environments who teach in different kinds of high schools in the city center. A Google survey form was prepared and

circulated; participants were informed that all opinions and views would be kept confidential. All participants consented to fill in the form.

Table 01
Participant profile

Participants	N	%
Gender		
Male	6	60
Female	4	40
Age		
26-35	2	20
36-45	2	20
46-55	5	50
56+	1	10
Professional seniority (years)		
1-5	2	20
11-20	1	10
21-30	6	60
31-40	1	10
Branch / Subject		
Geography	5	50
Literature	2	20
Psychological Counseling and Guidance	1	10
Biology	2	20

As seen in Table 01, slightly more participants were male than female (60/40), most were 46-55 years old, and 70% had more than 20 years of teaching experience. In Turkey, 43,35% of total teacher population (1.005.380) is male, 54,3% is female (MoNE, 2017). Teachers' ages were defined as follows: 27% are 22-30 years old, 37,9% 31-40, 24,5% 41-50, 9,7% 51-60; 34,5% have less than five years of teaching experience, 13,1% 5-9 years of teaching experience, 16,2% 10-14 years, and 19,7 more than 20 years of teaching experience (as cited in Commission, 2017).

When compared to the research findings, it can be stated that the research sample differs somewhat from the general teacher population.

Table 02
Type of neighborhood and school

Neighborhood	Public	Private	Religious
Low income	School 3		
Middle income	School 1		School 2
High income	School 5	School 4	

As seen in Table 02, the ten Adana teachers worked at different types of schools (public, private, religious) in low, middle, and high income neighborhoods during the 2020-2021 educational term. The schools represent different socio-economic neighborhoods. Three are public, one is private, and one is a religious high school. In this study, there is one public school in each income level.

The teachers were informed about ethical issues regarding the study; and consent forms were obtained from all before participating in the study. The consent form included statements that the risks from participating in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life. All the participants agreed on a voluntary basis to fill in the form and to answer questions anonymously.

Data collection tool and analysis

Research data are extracted from open-ended questions prepared by the researchers. The questions are as follows:

- What criteria do the teachers' use to evaluate students in distance education?
- What teaching methodology do they prefer in distance education?
- What kinds of homework do teachers assign in distance education?
- How do teachers use the internet in distance education?
- What are their own opinions about teaching during the pandemic?

The qualitative data analysis program, NVivo 10 software was used to analyze the results. It is used for coding, creating themes by combining coding, identifying frequently used words, and creating models including a word cloud. Also, content analysis methods were used to analyze the qualitative data in depth and identify major themes depending on the coding, frequency and percentage values (Sönmez & Alacapınar, 2013).

As Yıldırım and Şimşek (2008) suggest, direct quotations of the interviewed teachers were also sought as they are useful and also frequently included in qualitative studies. Content analysis allows the texts to be categorized according to their content within the framework of certain rules and to make valid inferences (Krippendorff, 2004).

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the NVivo 10 analysis, the participants' descriptions of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic were classified into major themes. The figures and tables are about evaluation methods, teaching methods, homework types, internet use, and views about the pandemic period.

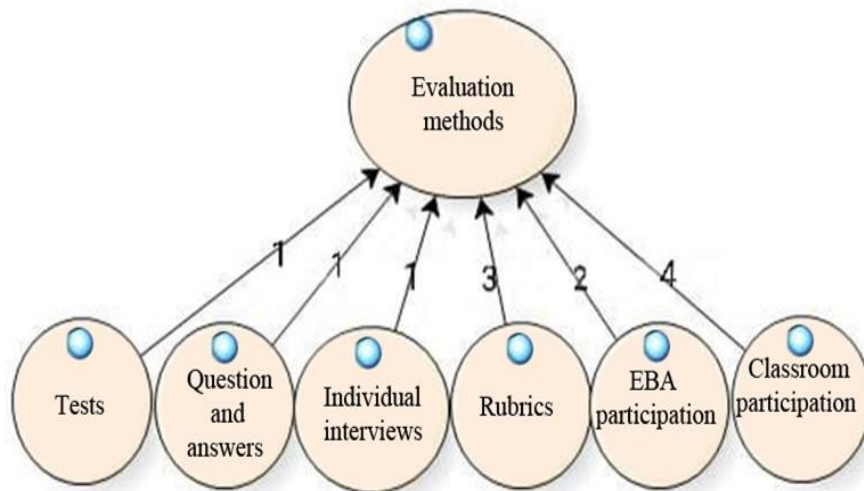


Figure 01. Teachers' evaluation methods of students

According to Figure 01, evaluation methods identify different themes. The theme with the highest frequency is “classroom participation” (n=4), “rubrics” has 3, “EBA participation” has 2, and “individual interviews”, “question and answers”, “tests” have frequencies of 1.

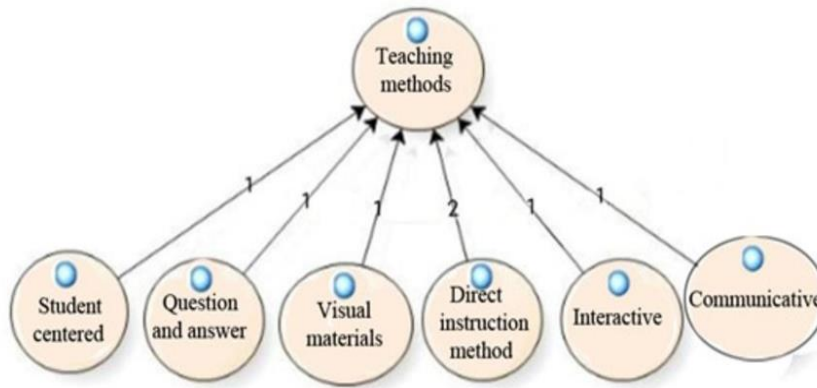


Figure 02. Teaching methods used by teachers

According to Figure 02, teaching methods differ in six subcategories. The theme “direct instruction method” has a frequency of 2, “students centered”, “question and answer”, “visual materials”, “interactive”, and “communicative” methods have frequencies of 1. The reason for the high frequency of direct instruction method may be time limits or students’ low willingness to comment or participate in the class during online education.

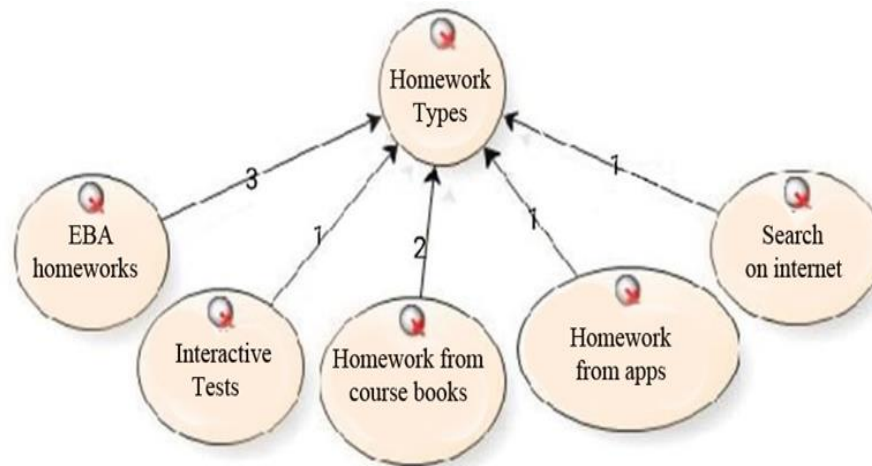


Figure 03. Homework types

As seen in Figure 03, homework from the EBA platform has a frequency of 3, “homework from course books” has a frequency of, 2 and “search on the internet”, “interactive tests”, and “homework from applications” have frequencies of 1. EBA platform is compulsory for many class levels and branches. Also, interactive activities and tests are ready and easy to assess and to follow the students on the platform. This may be the reason for the high EBA frequency.

Table 03

Participants' internet use

Participants	N	%	Aim of internet use
Geography, Biology, Literature, PCG	4	40	Lecturing in online classes
Geography, Biology	2	20	Interactive activities during lessons
Geography, Biology	2	20	Search about the daily course subjects
Geography	1	10	Share lesson visuals
Geography	1	10	Communication with students
Total	10	100	

As seen in Table 03, all the teachers (n=10) experienced increased use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Geography, Biology, Literature, and PCG teachers used the internet for lecturing online classes; Geography and Biology teachers used it for interactive activities and search about daily course subjects; Geography teachers used it for sharing lesson visuals and communicating with students. All the categories include geography teachers which means they used the internet for various aims during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 04
Participants' opinions on teaching during the pandemic

Schools	Teachers	Negative evaluations	Positive evaluations
School 1	Geography	Too many unknowns Exhausting Hard to assess students' performances	-
	Biology	Full of anxiety Too many unknowns Hard to assess students' performances	
School 2	Geography	Hard to assess students' performances	-
	Literature	Too many unknowns Exhausting Too many demands	
School 3	Geography	Full of anxiety Overwhelmed Too many unknowns	-
	Biology	Frustrating Hard to assess students' performances	
School 4	Geography	Frustrating Full of anxiety Overwhelmed Too many unknowns Too many demands Hard to assess students' performances Exhausting	-
	PCG	Frustrating Full of anxiety Exhausting Overwhelmed Too many unknowns Too many demands Hard to assess students' performances	
School 5	Geography	Full of anxiety Hard to assess students' performances	-
	Literature	Too many unknowns Exhausting Hard to assess students' performances	

As seen in Table 04, the theme with the highest frequency is “hard to assess students’ performances” (n=8). “Too many unknowns” theme has a frequency of 7, “exhausting” and “full of anxiety” have 5, and “too many demands”, “overwhelmed”, “frustrating” themes have 3.

It is useful to include the comments by some of the teachers as they express challenges as well as emotions. School 1 is a public school in a middle income neighborhood. In this school, a Geography teacher evaluates teaching in COVID-19 acknowledges too many unknowns, exhausting, hard to assess students’ performances. A Biology teacher comments about being full of anxiety, too many unknowns and difficulty in assessing students’ performances.

School 2 is a religious school in a middle-income neighborhood. In this school, the Geography teacher evaluates teaching in COVID-19 time as being hard to assess students’ performances. The Literature teacher also acknowledges that there are too many unknowns, and too many demands, and also teaching was exhausting. Teachers in this school expressed only 4 themes—the least of all schools. Perhaps they were more accepting of the situation.

School 3 is a public school in a low-income neighborhood. In this school, the Geography teacher evaluates teaching in COVID-19 time as one full of anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and experiencing too many unknowns. The Biology teacher evaluates her job as frustrating and hard to assess students’ performances

School 4 is a private school in a high-income neighborhood. In this school, the Geography teacher evaluates teaching about COVID-19 as frustrating, full of anxiety, being overwhelmed by too many unknowns, too many demands and also finding it hard to assess students’ performances all of which leads to exhaustion. The PCG teacher evaluates her performance as frustrating, full of anxiety, exhausting, overwhelmed, too many unknowns, too many demands, and difficult in assessing students’ performances. Both teachers from this school expressed all 7 themes. It seems they had the most difficult time teaching even though they and their students would have the best technology to deal with the situation! There is a bigger expectation from the private school teachers in regard of public school teachers to coordinate the responsibilities for both the students and the parents. In distance education, the private school teachers tried to make the students active in online lessons, and provide study discipline at home, as well. Additionally, the private school teachers often informed parents to minimize their anxiety. In face-to-face education, the parents never have additional responsibility after they send their children to school, but in distance education, the private school

teachers worked as mentors to direct and recommend the parents for support.

School 5 is another public school, this one again in a high-income neighborhood. Here the Geography teacher evaluates teaching in COVID-19 time as full of anxiety and hard to assess students' performances. The literature teacher evaluates her job as having too many unknowns, feeling exhausted and having difficulty assessing students' performances. There were no positive evaluations about teaching during COVID-19, itself a major finding.

Discussion

A theoretical and logical framework is essential for effective instruction in any subject. Some of the best techniques for teaching in any medium include the following: making interactions challenging but supportive for students, asking students to be active participants in the learning process, acknowledging the variety of ways students learn best, and providing timely and constructive feedback. All are examples how to make interactions challenging but supportive for students (Tobin et al., 2015). In distance education, it is seen that most of the teachers are doing their best to teach effectively during the pandemic. Simonson et al. (2011) published a review of distant education research and concluded that distance education is an effective teaching and learning approach. The US Department of Education, in 2009 in a meta-analysis and review of online learning studies, concluded that online learning students performed better than traditional students because they spent more time studying. It is undeniably true that instruction supplied to distant learners is effective and that learning outcomes can be achieved when offered to students at a distance (Anglin & Morrison, 2000). These studies were published before the COVID-19 outbreak.

This study revealed that teachers used tests, question-answers, one-on-one interviews, rubrics, EBA participation, and in-class participation as a method of evaluating students during the COVID-19 period. Experienced Geography teacher (with more than 30 years of teaching experience) stated that "*Çalışmaları genellikle soru cevap şeklinde değerlendirdim (I evaluated the students through questions and answers).*"

The first statements of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE)/Turkey (2020) include the course evaluations of the students, that is, teachers saw them and taught them face-to-face. The grades of the first semester would be valid and students could proceed to the next grade. This procedure was the need for developing measurement and evaluation tools during the distance education period. Teachers felt differently in

evaluating students during the COVID-19 period. However, with the online learning platform (using rubric, comments, feedback, video or audio message), it was possible to provide effective feedback for students and families and to measure and evaluate student achievement (Can, 2020). However, the measurement and evaluation of the subjects presented with distance education remained incomplete. The major objective is to ensure the motivation of the students continues without breaking their relationship with the school and education and to ensure that they remain educationally engaged (MoNE, 2020). According to Hill (2020), it is especially challenging to assess how engaged kids are with subject matter content because only around 44% of schools monitor student achievement. Another research finding during the COVID-19 process was that teachers stated that the teaching methods they adopted were student-centered, question-answer, visual materials, lecture, interactive and communicative. The young Literature teacher 1 (with less than 20 years of teaching experience) stated that “*Öğrenci merkezli görsel materyaller odaklı ders anlatımını tercih ettim (I preferred student-centered teaching based on visual materials in distance education).*”

All the teachers (n=10) stated that their internet use increased during the COVID-19 process. Teachers use it to communicate with students, to do interactive activities, do research about the subject matter and share course visuals. The young Geography teacher 2 (having less than 20 years of teaching experience) stated that “*İnternet kullanımım arttı, internetten görseller ve alıştırmalar gönderdim (My internet use increased, I sent visuals and exercises to the students on internet).*”

It was found that the homework given by the teachers to the students during the COVID-19 period is EBA homework, interactive homework, homework from test books, homework from mobile applications and research assignments from the internet. In a similar study, Bayburtlu (2020) stated that 12 Turkish teachers teach Turkish with the EBA live lesson application, assign students homework and communicate with them via the WhatsApp application. Can (2020) found out that distance education applications carried out over EBA and TV to approximately 18 million students studying at primary, secondary and high school levels aim for both one-way and mass education and access to distance education activities via EBA remains limited. Uyar (2020) reported that social sciences teachers used the direct method in distance education. Question-answer and brainstorming techniques are the other methods. Bakioğlu and Çevik (2020) also found out that teachers use question and answer methods in distance education.

Teachers, regardless of age, type of school, length of service, gender, school type and socioeconomic environment, have negative thoughts about teaching during the COVID-19 period. Teachers used expressions such as frustrating, full of anxiety, exhausting, being overwhelmed, too many unknowns, too many demands and difficult in assessing students' performances. They did not express any positive views on teaching during the COVID-19 period in the survey perhaps because the challenges they faced daily were overwhelming or they could not express any positive feelings.

The ILO (2020) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the education and training process in all countries in the world even where the schools and teachers tried to adapt quickly to the pandemic to ensure the uninterrupted continuation of education. The report concluded that a variety of factors contributed to the negative feelings; these include lack of potentially useful technologies, the inadequacies of experts, and lack of knowledge about the impacts of the pandemic, all of which caused inequalities in the efficiency of education, especially for disadvantaged groups.

Almost all of the teachers (n=8) who participated in this research effort stated that students who do not have a tablet or internet and do not have access to these opportunities have difficulties in the distance education process. The Biology teacher (more than 20 years of teaching experience) stated that "*Teknolojik imkânı olan öğrenciler dersten kopmadılar, ama imkânı olmayan öğrenciler için büyük bir gerileme olmuştur (The students with technological equipments could follow the online courses, but for the ones without this opportunity, it was a great setback).*" The reasons for these failures and shortcomings should be eliminated with financial support (Kandemir, 2014, p.1172). According to Arık (2020), despite all the opportunities provided by the Ministry of National Education, there may be students who cannot access distance education. Identifying members of this group at risk should be monitored and supported by practices such as compensatory education.

Conclusion

Turkish teachers used tests, question-answers, one-on-one interviews, rubrics, EBA participation and in-class participation as methods to evaluate students during the COVID-19 period. In addition, they acknowledged that their teaching methods were student-centered, question-answer, visual materials, lecture, interactive and communicative in distance education during the COVID-19 period. Examples of homework assignments included materials in course texts, searches on the

internet, interactive tests, and homework from applications. Teachers, regardless of age, branch, length of service, gender, school type, and socioeconomic environment, expressed negative thoughts about teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some teachers acknowledged a lack of motivation during the COVID-19 period, a concern that also needs to be addressed for this and any unexpected circumstances that may arise. It is hoped that the experiences of teachers in various school settings can be used to help prepare teachers for future events like COVID-19 and aid teachers in adopting constructive and effective teaching methods but also engaging students in alternative learning activities and assignments in different learning environments.

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