



## Research paper

# Perspectives of EFL teacher trainers and pre-service teachers on continued mandatory distance education during the pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the world experienced a fast transition to online education, starting in March 2020. This study aimed to review the process from the perspectives of prospective teachers and teacher trainers in a foreign language teacher education program after two semesters of mandatory distance education to make adjustments and take precautions for online possibilities in the future. Data was collected through questionnaires composed of open- and closed-ended items. A range of themes emerged from the responses, presented in terms of participants' preferences, their perceived benefits and challenges and recommendations for the future.

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education unprecedentedly with sudden school closures all over the world initially affecting 66.6% of the world's student population from pre-primary to tertiary levels (UNESCO, 2021). In Turkey, 25 million students have stayed out of school since a week after the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in March 2020. While pressing measures were taken nationwide to prevent the spread of the pandemic, educational institutions including teacher education programs took swift action to transform teaching and learning from face-to-face to virtual classrooms.

This abrupt transformation has occurred regardless of the technological infrastructure of universities, teachers' and students' readiness, and of their ability to use technologies effectively to teach and learn content. While four million university students in Turkey left campuses for their homes, the universities asked their departments to revise their courses to enrich their content for asynchronous and/or synchronous distance education (henceforth

DE) in response to the regulations issued urgently by the Turkish Council of Higher Education. Some universities asked their teaching staff to record their classes to make them available to their students through their learning management system. Other universities started synchronous teaching as of the second week of lockdown with or without a requirement to record these teachings. During this forced and fast transition to online education, the universities took the initiative to maintain their educational practices mainly based on their own resources and infrastructure.

Although emergency DE provided quick solutions for an immediate need, it entailed a number of challenges and constraints in different parts of the world (e.g., Flores & Gago, 2020; Judd et al., 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020; la Velle et al., 2020; Scull et al., 2020). In the Turkish context, while teachers have undertaken an extraordinary duty, the students were deprived of face-to-face education. Internships, practicum experience in school settings, and labs were all cancelled. One semester after the initial emergency DE the situation has not changed much. As the World Health Organization called for preparedness for future pandemics, a necessity for understanding the process with its benefits and challenges from the perspectives of those involved in it emerged for a well-planned DE in the future. Therefore, after a two-semester involvement in mandatory DE, the current study was inspired to join the voices of teacher trainers (henceforth TTs) and pre-service

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teachers (henceforth PSTs) enrolled in the English as a foreign language (henceforth EFL) teacher education program in a state university. More specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) What are EFL PSTs' and TTs' general views about mandatory distance education?
- (2) What are the advantages of mandatory distance education for EFL PSTs and TTs?
- (3) What are the challenges of mandatory distance education for EFL PSTs and TTs?
- (4) How does EFL PSTs' and TTs' experience inform distance education needs in the future?

## 2. Literature review

DE is a formal teaching delivered by an institution through a variety of technologies and interactive telecommunications that connect teachers, students and the resources that are physically apart (Kentnor, 2015; Simonson et al., 2011). These technologies enable the delivery of teaching synchronously and asynchronously, which provides learners with a more flexible, accessible, and relatively an affordable alternative for education at the comforts of their home at any time of their convenience (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2018; Xia et al., 2013). However, this mode of learning necessitates self-discipline, autonomy, motivation, and well-being on the part of the students (Baker, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2018) and certainly some digital competencies, a shared institutional vision, strategic planning, and budget to develop programs and maintain the equipment (Berge & Muilenburg, 2000; Chen, 2009). Although the literature has well documented the key elements of effective distance teaching and the barriers to it, emergency shift to DE during the pandemic occurred regardless of the availability of prerequisite conditions. Hence, researchers were inspired to explore the experiences of teachers and students including TTs and PSTs to understand the opportunities and challenges of mandatory transformation to online teaching.

One of those studies conducted at tertiary level explored TTs' experiences and perceptions of online education in England (Kidd & Murray, 2020). The participants frequently mentioned how moving online blurred their 'work-home boundaries', and disrupted their routines with "longer working hours", a sense of 'constant availability' with students and colleagues, feelings of 'cognitive overloading', and 'brain buzzing adrenaline' " (p. 548). However, they developed new technological skills and after the initial feelings of pedagogical discomfort they needed to reconfigure pre-pandemic practices for online teaching. In a study conducted in a Russian higher education context with 87 university teachers, Almazova et al. (2020) found that teachers perceived online teaching as different from conventional ways of teaching. They agreed that electronic content preparation was very time-consuming, and that the lack of digital literacy, lack of interaction with students, and inability to adapt collaborative teaching methods to online teaching were the main obstacles. According to the participants, the students had sufficient knowledge and skills to perform the tasks appropriately in the online platforms, however they had motivation problems and difficulties in meeting the course datelines. In South Korea, EFL instructors with no previous experience in online education perceived this experience as beneficial to their professional development as they would have the chance to improve their knowledge and skills in technology use (Bailey & Lee, 2020). While the teachers with low experience felt challenged by online teaching tools, the study revealed a strong association between the lack of experience in online teaching and

the fewer number of activity types planned.

Al-Nofaie (2020), in a study with 25 university students in an English morphology course, identified lack of necessary technological skills and facilities, distractions at home, lack of physical interaction, and online exams as the main difficulties of online education in Saudi Arabian context. Students preferred the asynchronous mode of teaching due to its flexibility. The EFL students in Octaberlina and Muslimin's (2020) study complained about the lack of human contact and real-time interaction, poor internet connection, and health problems during online education. They also admitted that they got distracted by online games and videos.

The early COVID-19 publications on teacher education were also concerned with online practicum implementations or alternative strategies that left a "practicum vacuum" for teacher education students during the mandatory DE (Kidd & Murray, 2020, p. 545). Flores and Gago (2020) stated that practicum had been the most challenging component of teacher education during this time of uncertainty, and a "real-time" (p. 512) adaptation process for PSTs who were placed in virtual classroom settings. In Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison's (2020) study, Chilean EFL PSTs regarded online practicum teaching as a positive autonomous experience through which they learned new things including different online platforms and strategies to create new learning content and materials. However, they asserted that the lack of direct interaction with students increased their anxiety while lowering their motivation; and that the lack of live teaching experience deprived them of an opportunity to put what they have learnt in their teaching program, like classroom management strategies, into practice. Besides, they found distance teaching more tiring and difficult than in-class teaching due to the distractions of the home environment, and the lack of internet connection and technological devices.

That the schools need sufficient technical infrastructure and facilities for a successful online teaching was also acknowledged by the participants of Ersin et al.'s (2020) study in the Turkish EFL context. In this study, the teacher candidates were involved in 'e-practicum' microteachings followed by 'e-mentoring' sessions in which they received detailed feedback on their teachings from their peers and e-mentors. Although the PSTs encountered some technical and classroom management problems while doing their microteachings, they described this experience as unique, compensatory, and helpful in overcoming their online teaching fears thanks to e-mentoring. As shown in these studies, TTs have developed fast online pedagogies for the training of prospective teachers in mandatory DE. However, the fundamental issue of whether it is possible to train PSTs without the opportunity of being in real classroom settings as pointed out by la Velle et al. (2020), remains as one of the constraints of online teacher education.

Above-mentioned studies provide an understanding of university teachers' and students' initial experiences when engaged in mandatory DE in a variety of contexts during the pandemic. Their findings revealed that some teachers and students perceived this experience as contributing to their development with newly acquired skills (e.g., Bailey & Lee, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). However, it was mostly perceived as challenging due to the difficulties caused mainly by the lack of necessary technological and digital literacy skills and facilities (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2020; Almazova et al., 2020); and the deprivation of real classroom opportunities as well as the distractions of home environment (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2020; la Velle et al., 2020; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). Further exploration of mandatory DE in different EFL settings, however, is necessary to understand the unique contextual factors which make DE an effective or ineffective experience for all stakeholders. Especially the suggestions directly coming from those involved in this extraordinary experience will be valuable to enable teacher

education programs to better plan training in online platforms. Hence, this study serves not only to explore participants' views of DE, but also to voice their suggestions for its advancement.

### 3. Methodology

This research presents the case of an EFL teacher education program at a state university in Istanbul. It documents the experiences of PSTs and TTs in relation to online education that they underwent during the recent pandemic. Although a single department is analysed, the responses may reflect other students' and teachers' experiences in similar national and international settings (Langemeyer & Nissen, 2005). The study utilizes descriptive cross-sectional survey design within the qualitative research paradigm. This design is used to collect data from many participants at a single point in time to investigate the prevalence of an outcome (Creswell, 2014).

#### 3.1. Setting

The department offers a four-year program, embodying a large group of students of about 600 with ten full-time and around ten part-time instructors. In the middle of Spring 2020 semester, due to the threat of virus spread, education had stopped, to continue within two weeks in the form of DE. In the meantime, the university announced to its instructors to prepare for online education with self-recorded video lessons and power-point presentations to be shared with the students. Yet, within two weeks, the university purchased access to a virtual learning environment (Perculus), and over ten thousand courses were transferred to the system. Instructors started to use the new system and provided synchronous distance teaching despite inadequate training, except a few video-guides prepared for them. This meant that most instructors configured the system on a trial-and-error basis. Instructors of courses with fewer than 25 students were allowed to conduct their lessons via other applications of their choice, such as Zoom. The following semester (Fall 2020) was held in the same way, at the end of which this research took place.

#### 3.2. Participants

Data were gathered through purposeful sampling from 123 university students enrolled in the English Language Teaching (henceforth ELT) program to become EFL teachers and 15 teacher trainers in the same department. Thirty-nine (32%) of the PSTs were sophomores, 68 (55%) were juniors, and 16 (13%) were seniors within the program. Of these students, 85 (69%) were female while 38 (31%) were male. Eighty percent of the student participants were between 19 and 21 years of age. Detailed demographic information can be found in Table 1.

As for the TTs, 7 (47%) were full-time faculty members and 8 (53%) were part-timers. Thirteen (87%) were female while 2 (13%) were male with an age range between 26 and 62 years. Teachers

**Table 1**  
Demographic background of the participants.

	Total PSTs n = 123	2nd Year n = 39	3rd Year n = 68	4th Year n = 16	Total TTs n = 15
Male	38 (31%)	16 (41%)	18 (26%)	4 (25%)	2 (13%)
Female	85 (69%)	23 (59%)	50 (74%)	12 (75%)	13 (87%)
Age	19–45	21–45	19–34	20–40	26–62
Employment					
Full-time					7 (47%)
Part-time					8 (53%)

had one to 24 years of teaching experience. Twelve (80%) TTs held a PhD degree in ELT and related areas (e.g., linguistics, English literature), and only 3 (20%) had an MA degree.

The demographic section of the questionnaire also included questions about familiarity with technology. Seventy (57%) of the PSTs indicated that they were comfortable using technology while 48 (39%) were partially comfortable. Only 5 (4%) of them did not feel to be competent users of technology. Similarly, of all PSTs, 117 (95%) received no training on technology use during the last two semesters and/or before while four seniors and two juniors attended few national and international webinars to increase their technology knowledge. They also resorted to YouTube videos and/or online courses for the same purpose. None of the sophomores, however, indicated technology training taken during the pandemic.

As regards TTs, 12 (80%) indicated that they felt comfortable using technology for educational purposes. However, two (13%) were partially competent while one (7%) was not comfortable with technology at all. Moreover, only four teachers attended online technological training before and after the Covid-19 struck, comprising 27% of participating TTs.

#### 3.3. Data collection

Two questionnaires were prepared and administered: one for PSTs and one for TTs. Each questionnaire included information about the study, assurance of privacy, a consent letter, and three parts. Part I comprised questions on background information, such as age, and year of study. Part II included specific questions about participants' attainment of and involvement with ELT-related matters as well as benefits and challenges of DE. Part III investigated their general experiences with DE and suggestions for the future of it. The questionnaire items were mostly in the form of open-ended questions, with few close-ended questions.

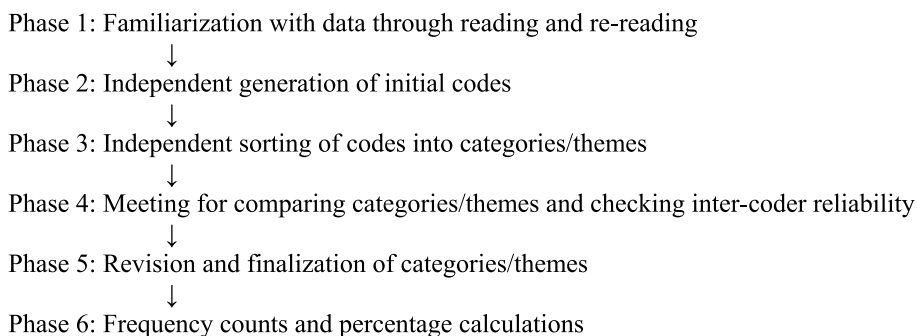
Before data collection, the questionnaire was peer-reviewed for further refinement and then piloted for wording and clarity. Based on the feedback received, appropriate changes were made. After receiving Ethical Board approval, the questionnaires were distributed to 200 students and 20 teachers in the program. Responses were retrieved over two weeks with a 62% student return rate and 75% teacher return rate.

#### 3.4. Data analysis

For analysing the qualitative data, Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis methods were used. To analyse the more specific questions (e.g., What kind of support did you need with distance education during the pandemic?) Content Analysis was used. For this, after careful and repetitive scrutinization of the answers, initial codes were developed and later categorized (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the more general questions (e.g., Please describe your personal experiences, opinions, and feelings about online education in the ELT department during the pandemic) Thematic Analysis was employed since this method is considered to be especially useful to explore participants' experiences and opinions (Merriam, 2009). As shown in the flow-chart in Fig. 1, data were read and grouped under recurrent themes that emerged, which were further reviewed and revised (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To increase reliability, the two authors first analysed the responses concurrently but independently. They then met to discuss discrepancies, and reach a consensus (Creswell, 2014). A high level of consistency was achieved between the coders (95% agreement). As the final step, frequency counts of the categories and themes were done, converted to percentages, and ordered from the most frequent to the least indicating the order of importance. To ensure

*Data Analysis Flowchart*



**Fig. 1.** Data analysis flowchart.

trustworthiness, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were attended to as described in the above-mentioned stages of methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All of the categories and themes that emerged from the data will be presented in the Results section.

**4. Results**

*4.1. General views about distance education*

*4.1.1. PSTs' views*

To investigate feelings towards DE, PSTs were asked to comment on their experiences in the past two semesters. The following table shows the numbers and percentages of PSTs who perceived this experience as positive, neutral, and negative at all grade levels.

As Table 2 shows, 49% of PSTs reported unfavourable feelings with statements indicating that they do not prefer or like it, and that they do not think it is efficient, some saying that they wanted it to end as soon as possible. For instance, one 1st year student stated:

I think online education should not be considered an education and we should be given another chance to actually learn what we could have learnt. I feel disconnected and tired towards online education ... No, we did not learn anything. We could not. (PST 21).

Another student, who was in the 3rd year said "I felt like I had nothing to do with the courses or the school. Despite all the assignments, I was like I wasn't studying. I've missed everything about my campus life ..." (PST 109).

Several prospective teachers who had negative opinions articulated concerns about becoming inadequate teachers specifically because of the DE that they received during the pandemic. The following statements, all from third-year students, reflect their views of teacher education through DE: "I think that we will be the worst teachers of the century." (PST 67).

As we are teacher candidates, our education should be face to face. Because, classroom environment, presentation and getting

used to being a teacher are must for all of us. Online education system is not an appropriate way for faculty of education. We should be in 'real classes'. (PST 75).

PSTs who had a neutral stance (24%) either accepted remote learning to have both advantages and disadvantages or stated that they do not feel any differences between DE and face-to-face education. "It could have been better, but overall, it wasn't that bad. Mostly manageable." said a sophomore (PST 26). A junior student added:

I think online education can be used especially in theoretical lessons ... it does not have any harm or difference. However, it could cause difficulties in the lessons that require practice, but I do not think there is a lesson in our program that may cause such a problem. (PST 103).

PSTs who were positive about online learning (24%) made comments of liking it and finding it useful, some adding that they adapted to it over time. For example, a sophomore said, "It is no doubt a unique experience for me ... Two semesters have passed with online education, and I have gotten so used to it that I almost see it as the norm" (PST 19). A junior student commented in the following way:

It was useful. Teachers all helped us in so many ways. They gave us valuable feedback for everything we asked ... Also, online education helped me to reduce my stress. I made plans for everything. I read my chapters, did so many research and studied enthusiastically. (PST 104).

*4.1.2. TTs' views*

When TTs were asked their general feelings about the DE process, most of them responded with a neutral or negative stance, as shown in Table 3.

As for neutral remarks (47%), they stated that they were aware of strengths and weaknesses of DE (See Table 3). TT 3 said "Overall it

**Table 2**  
PSTs' views about distance education.

	Total PSTs N %	2nd Year N %	3rd Year N %	4th Year N %
Negative	60 (49%)	21 (54%)	33 (49%)	6 (38%)
Positive	30 (24%)	8 (21%)	18 (26%)	4 (25%)
Neutral	29 (24%)	10 (26%)	14 (21%)	5 (31%)

**Table 3**  
TTs' views about distance education.

	N %
Neutral	7 (47%)
Negative	6 (40%)
Positive	2 (13%)

has been a novel experience for me both with positive and negative aspects. I have also found the chance to modify my course materials in accordance with online education.” and TT 15 verbalized it as “I think online education should be used in certain cases, just like the recent months we have had. For example, when we have evening classes, difficulty in face-to-face education, or with international students.”

Forty percent of TTs embodied negative feelings in relation to online teaching and found it ineffective. For example, TT 2 said:

I've already told my students that if online education is the trend for the future, I will not be in this career much longer. I have other things that I can do that don't require me to spend long hours in front of a computer.

Only two (out of 15) teachers (13%) stated that they liked or preferred online teaching and found it effective. TT 4 expressed feelings as such:

I like it. I have positive opinions about online education and my experience about it is good so far because I liked my classes even more than F2F. I was more patient with my Ss and more energetic toward them in online education.

#### 4.2. Advantages of distance education

##### 4.2.1. Advantages for PSTs

When PSTs were asked to list the main advantages of online education for them, nine themes emerged from their answers, as outlined in Table 4. The opportunity to rewatch recordings, in other words having instant access to lectures at any time was the most frequently cited advantage (44%). They used this asset in different ways, as stated by a junior level PST:

I get to re-watch classes and stop to take notes when it is necessary. Also, there is the opportunity to watch them when I'm the most alert, at night-time. I'm not exactly a morning person and being able to watch the classes when I know will be the most fruitful for me so I can learn better. (PST 123)

The benefit of saving time, money and energy was also frequently stated by the PSTs (39%). They added that they could use the saved time on personal matters, such as taking extra courses or finding a job. This advantage was observed by a bigger percentage of 4th year students, most probably because of two reasons. Firstly, many senior students start teaching part-time before they graduate. Secondly, they used to visit schools one or two days per week as part of their practicum, which got to be conducted online during the lockdown, and this led to spare time. A senior student's comment was “Also, we can spare more time for ourselves. I have

**Table 4**  
Advantages of distance education reported by PSTs.

	Total PSTs N %	2nd Year N %	3rd Year N %	4th Year N %
Instant access to lesson recordings	54 (44%)	17 (44%)	28 (41%)	9 (56%)
Time, energy, and money saving	48 (39%)	14 (36%)	24 (35%)	10 (63%)
Research-based assignments	27 (22%)	9 (23%)	16 (24%)	2 (13%)
Easy and practical	24 (20%)	4 (10%)	18 (26%)	2 (13%)
Personal skill development	19 (15%)	4 (10%)	14 (21%)	1 (6%)
Stress-free learning	19 (15%)	5 (13%)	13 (19%)	1 (6%)
Technological skill improvement	14 (11%)	2 (5%)	8 (12%)	4 (25%)
Safety and comfort	14 (11%)	1 (3%)	13 (19%)	—
Collaboration	7 (6%)	1 (3%)	5 (7%)	1 (6%)

read more books and started to learn a new language during the pandemic.” (PST 42). A sophomore thought in the same way:

It enables us to focus more on classes, because it gives us more time. Before online education, for example, I had to travel for 3 h to go to the faculty every day. However, I can spend more time studying and trying to improve myself as much as possible. (PST 6).

Close to a quarter of the PSTs (22%) benefited from online assignments in that these required research, analysis, and synthesis, rather than memorization, as in this junior PST's remark:

I think that we have developed ourselves in terms of autonomy because the courses we have been taking, especially the ones in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, require us to research on our own or in groups and we must study, collect information, and synthesize them in a unique way in our homework or exams. (PST 80)

One-fifth of the PSTs (20%) indicated that DE was easy and practical for them. They added that some of their “more theoretical” courses were especially suitable for online education. Fifteen percent of them said that they were feeling relaxed and confident as they thought DE provided a stress-free environment, and 11% valued being able to study in a safe and comfortable environment with their families. Another 15% listed as benefits the attainment of various personal skills, such as autonomy and problem-solving ability, while 11% stated getting the chance to improve their technological skills. Finally, 6% liked that they could collaborate easily with classmates. Two senior PSTs verbalized these benefits in their comments: “My ability to do research has improved. I am better at finding reliable sources. I also use technology much better ... I think my skills in writing essays and using language have improved. Also, my vocabulary expanded”. (PST 40).

I learned so many tools that I can benefit from when I prepare homework to decrease my workload ... I learned how to share and receive help from my group members when we are completing an assignment. We learned the importance of being flexible, problem-solvers in case of need and more independent when we come across a problem related to technology. (PST 43).

##### 4.2.2. Advantages for TTs

TTs' responses were grouped into six categories as listed in Table 5. More than half of the TTs (60%) said that DE saves energy and time since they do not have to commute or attend meetings and thus can spend the saved time and energy on teaching or updating their course content instead. One teacher described this situation as:

**Table 5**  
Advantages of distance education reported by TTs.

	N %
Time and energy saving	9 (60%)
Flexibility	6 (40%)
Comfortable and practical	4 (27%)
Better relationship with students	4 (27%)
Technological skill improvement	3 (20%)
Opportunities for future DE	2 (13%)

It is less energy consuming not in terms of course preparation or grading, but in terms of commuting to the campus, interacting with colleagues sometimes about useless matters, being distracted by factors such as a meeting to be held in the middle of your class, having to rush your lecture, etc...I run small errands in between classes. Online teaching makes me a better teacher because all of my energy is in my teaching. (TT 4)

Close to half of the TTs (40%) expressed ideas regarding the increased flexibility that online education provides. Nearly one-third of them (27%) noted that it was comfortable and practical to stay at home, and close to one-third (27%) reported that they were able to form better and more positive relationships with their students through DE, as they became more patient and energetic. Three TTs reported that DE helped them to become more skilled technologically, while two mentioned the potential for the future of DE. TT 10 said "I came over the fear of technology and understood that the new generation is not better than me in technology."

### 4.3. Challenges of distance education

#### 4.3.1. Challenges for PSTs

Analyses of the PSTs' data revealed a variety of cognitive, emotional and physical challenges caused by themselves, their instructors, the nature of DE, their home environment, and the pandemic itself. The 17 categories identified by these themes are presented in Table 6.

Table 6 shows that 47% of the PSTs reported concentration problems during online education. They found it very difficult to get focused on the lessons as they were distracted quite easily. One 3rd year student said:

I found it too hard to focus on a lecture on a screen for hours ... It is more comfortable and engaging to be in a real class. Since our classmates cannot hear or see us and vice versa, we are distracted by other things going around even if the lecture draws our attention. (PST 80).

The PSTs also reported that being at home all the time affected their motivation adversely. Having described online education as boring, monotonous, and tiring that requires self-discipline, one fourth of them said they became lazier and lost their excitement and willingness to attend classes.

Learning through DE was not perceived to be natural and permanent by 24% of the PSTs, because it was difficult for them to comprehend the lectures via computers and remember new information without the opportunity to practice it. One student said "Learning was difficult for me because I learn by practicing. I took a drama course, and I would love to go to a school to practice what I learned and produce something. However, I couldn't realize it" (PST 60). Finally, 13% reported a variety of health problems including eye, back and neck pain aggravated by physical inactivity.

Another theme for challenges faced by PSTs was related to the technological nature of DE. Of all learners, 32% stated that online teaching did not allow them to ask questions during the flow of lessons and interact with their teachers and peers synchronously. The online environment which did not resemble a real classroom environment at all made it difficult to participate in interactive activities. A 3rd year student stated "I cannot share my opinions with my teachers and classmates as I did before. Group tasks are boring because I can't see my friends and create physical materials" (PST 59). Two PSTs even admitted that they lost their fluency in English due to this limited opportunity for interaction.

Table 6 shows that 26% of PSTs reported problems related to poor or lack of internet connection. Similarly, 15% of the students experienced a variety of technical problems while making online presentations and using the chat box mainly due to the overloaded system or system failures.

Other challenges related to the nature of DE were the need for socialization in general and the inequities in educational opportunities. While 11% of the PSTs defined online experience as deprivation from a social context, namely the school, where they also developed their identities, two of them regarded it as an unfair

**Table 6**  
Challenges of distance education reported by PSTs.

	Total PSTs N %	2nd Year N %	3rd Year N %	4th Year N %
<b>Student related challenges</b>				
Concentration problems	58 (47%)	20 (51%)	35 (51%)	3 (19%)
Lack of motivation	31 (25%)	12 (31%)	17 (25%)	2 (13%)
Learning difficulties	29 (24%)	10 (27%)	15 (22%)	4 (25%)
Physical problems	16 (13%)	9 (23%)	6 (8%)	1 (6%)
<b>DE related challenges</b>				
Limited interaction	39 (32%)	8 (21%)	27 (40%)	4 (25%)
Poor internet connection	32 (26%)	14 (36%)	9 (13%)	9 (56%)
Technical problems	19 (15%)	5 (13%)	12 (18%)	2 (13%)
Lack of socialization	14 (11%)	6 (15%)	6 (9%)	2 (13%)
Inequities	2 (1%)	1 (3%)	1 (2%)	–
<b>Instructor related challenges</b>				
Assignment problems	32 (26%)	10 (31%)	26 (38%)	2 (13%)
Ineffective use of technology	25 (20%)	7 (18%)	16 (24%)	2 (13%)
Inappropriate assessment	21 (17%)	5 (13%)	13 (19%)	3 (19%)
Lengthy classes	15 (12%)	2 (5%)	12 (18%)	1 (6%)
Limited document share	9 (7%)	4 (10%)	5 (7%)	–
Lack of communication	5 (4%)	–	4 (6%)	1 (6%)
<b>Other challenges</b>				
Adverse home environment	14 (11%)	3 (8%)	10 (15%)	1 (6%)
Pandemic stress	14 (11%)	5 (13%)	9 (13%)	–

experience for those who lacked the necessary devices and internet to continue their education. Regarding the former, a 3rd year student said “I cannot say that online education was a great experience for me because I'd like to socialize and learn in a ‘real’ learning environment where I can express myself and get positively influenced by others” (PST 61).

PSTs also reported some difficulties that stemmed from instructors’ ineffective use of technology and implementation of online courses. The main difficulty mentioned within this theme was the increased number of assignments. Twenty-six percent of the PSTs believed that they worked harder than usual to understand and complete assignments that sometimes overlapped in content. They believed that teachers had higher expectations during this period, which caused pressure. One student complained by saying “Unfortunately, our teachers give a lot of homework, thinking that we are sitting at home doing nothing all the time ... but exaggerated amount of homework causes psychological burden for us” (PST 119).

The other difficulty articulated by 20% of PSTs was that there were teachers who did not or could not use digital tools effectively. A 4th year student said “Our teachers tried their best, but they were unfamiliar with DE ... They tried to create a classroom environment instead of learning more effective delivery methods in DE” (PST 44). PSTs also said that teachers’ inexperience in online education prevented them from using instructional time efficiently. Besides, 17% found evaluation and assessment procedures in DE problematic, at the same time sensing teachers’ uncertainty about conducting online exams. Students mentioned the fear of disconnection during the timed synchronous exams and did not believe that they were assessed in a fair way.

The PSTs also mentioned that there were teachers who lectured all the time, sometimes without their cameras on, extended class hours without breaks (12%), and shared limited amounts of documents with students (7%), all of which decreased the quality of their teaching. Finally, a few PSTs (4%) mentioned that they felt lost but could not convey this to their teachers during online education.

In addition to all these, 11% of PSTs stated that being home all the time meant having more responsibilities in household chores and being distracted more frequently especially if there were other siblings who needed the internet, a device, and space at home for their online education as well. Besides, the pandemic changed the conditions of their families too. Some PSTs had to work to contribute to the family budget, struggled with time management stress, and thus believed that home environment made it difficult for them to be full-time students. A 2nd year student who spent the pandemic home expressed this challenge as follows:

I think the biggest difficulty is having more responsibilities in the home environment ... When I was in Istanbul, my only duty was to study and improve myself but here there are so many things. I do chores, cook, and help my family (my dad runs a mini market in town). I mean, I am expected to do other things, not just studying. Sometimes I don't feel like I am a student. (PST 7)

The final challenge theme concerns the psychological difficulties and stress caused by the pandemic itself. Eleven percent of PSTs expressed how worried they were due to the infection threat, which indirectly influenced their education.

#### 4.3.2. PSTs’ need for support

Despite the declared difficulties, most PSTs (90%) stated no need for support with online education. Only ten (8%) reported this need for various reasons (i.e., to reach the instructors and communicate with them, to solve technical or psychological issues), and indicated

that they received help on these matters from their friends, family, or teachers.

#### 4.3.3. Challenges for TTs

TTs were also inquired about main challenges they experienced during DE. The analysis of their responses revealed the nine categories listed in Table 7. As the table shows, restricted interaction with and between the learners was the most challenging problem cited by 80% of the TTs. One of them said “I'm very much an energetic person and teacher and like to use my body, facial expressions and voice a lot. Online teaching is a huge set-back in terms of providing this” (TT 5). Second, learners’ reluctance to participate and turn their cameras on made classroom management a difficult issue for 73% of the teachers. Thus, teachers felt they could not connect with their students as stated in the following quotation:

There were times on Zoom when students weren't using their cameras and I felt like I was creating a YouTube video. That's not why I'm in the field of education. Overall, the main disadvantage was the inability to connect fully with the students. It was difficult to get to know my first-year students. (TT 2)

Next, some TTs (47%) found online teaching less efficient, because due to the lack of feedback from students they did not know for sure if they could successfully convey the message.

Another difficulty stated by 40% of TTs concerned increased workload. While transferring courses to online platforms, teachers had to prepare more materials and files to share with students. Besides, TTs admitted that during that period they gave more assignments compared to face-to-face education in order to supplement their assessment, which in return meant more grading, more written feedback, hence longer work hours. They found this quite demotivating, exhausting, and boring.

The other difficulties articulated by teachers included technical and internet problems (33%), assessing learners through online exams (20%), health issues caused by sitting for long hours and being exposed to electromagnetic field (20%), and lethargy caused by being in the same environment all the time (13%). Finally, one (7%) teacher regarded the online sharing of course materials as a security issue.

#### 4.3.4. TTs’ need for support

Of 15 TTs, while most (67%) stated no need for any support, 5 (33%) stated that they needed various kinds of assistance to continue their online teaching. These included technical support, support with the grading system and exams, and support with some features of the video conferencing platform. They stated that they sought and obtained this help in varying types and degrees from their institution, colleagues, friends, or themselves.

**Table 7**  
Challenges of distance education reported by TTs.

	N %
Lack of interaction	12 (80%)
Learners’ reluctance to participate	11 (73%)
Lack of feedback from learners	7 (47%)
Increased workload	6 (40%)
Technical problems	5 (33%)
Assessment difficulties	3 (20%)
Health issues	3 (20%)
Boredom	2 (13%)
Security issues	1 (7%)

4.4. Suggestions for distance education

4.4.1. PSTs' suggestions

PSTs were asked to provide suggestions for future implementations of DE in the department, and 12 categories emerged from their answers (see Table 8).

Four categories were related to TTs and their teaching. The most frequently cited suggestion was about teaching style (32%), where the PSTs commented on the need for instructors to use dispersed slides, cover fewer topics, hold more interactive classes with brief lecturing and more discussions, and share abundant instructional documents. They recommended that teachers give clear guidelines and detailed explanations throughout the semester. In addition, PSTs advised that all instructors integrate interaction, turn on their cameras and use high-quality equipment. A senior level student indicated that:

Teachers can use more visuals when they are lecturing a theoretical topic. They can bring a video, or PowerPoint slides which is attractive to students to become more interested in the subject ... During an online lesson, teachers can ask more questions to enable student participation ... can keep us involved in the lesson. (PST 43).

PSTs also suggested that instructors maintain a high level of communication with students, give fast feedback to students' work, and arrange specific meeting times and hours with students (11%). A sophomore said, "Communication and availability of a teacher is much more important these days, since we can't visit them in their rooms or run into them on campus." (PST 10). A third-year student added "Not being able to ask our lecturers short questions right after classes is tough. Some questions require back and forth dialogue which can happen easily face-to-face but is hard in formal e-mails." (PST 110).

Furthermore, suggestions of an understanding teacher attitude, such as empathizing with students, and being tolerant and flexible were also made (11%). In relation to this teacher theme, some PSTs (8%) also recommended instructors to receive technological training and be technologically competent.

The improvement of the existing platform used by the university was the second most frequently offered recommendation (24%). PSTs stated that it should be practical and multi-faceted. In line with this, 17% suggested the use of alternative online meeting applications that provided various resources, as a second-year student did:

Perculus is very limiting, can have max 6 speakers, it's very unstable and gets bugged a lot, it has a very annoying beep sound close to the end of the lesson, and it doesn't count breaks

**Table 8**  
PSTs' suggestions for distance education.

	Total PSTs N %	2nd Year N %	3rd Year N %	4th Year N %
Instructors' teaching style to be developed	39 (32%)	16 (41%)	18 (26%)	5 (31%)
DE platform to be improved	30 (24%)	16 (41%)	12 (18%)	2 (13%)
Other DE applications to be used	21 (17%)	4 (10%)	13 (19%)	4 (25%)
Lessons to be shortened	16 (13%)	5 (13%)	8 (12%)	3 (19%)
Teacher feedback to be enhanced	14 (11%)	5 (13%)	9 (13%)	—
Teacher attitudes to alter	14 (11%)	7 (18%)	6 (9%)	1 (6%)
Student affairs to be considered	13 (11%)	1 (3%)	12 (18%)	—
Fewer assignments to be given	12 (10%)	4 (10%)	8 (12%)	—
Techno training to be provided for TTs	10 (8%)	3 (8%)	4 (6%)	3 (19%)
Nature of assignments to be enhanced	8 (7%)	1 (3%)	6 (9%)	1 (6%)
Future of education to be planned	7 (6%)	1 (3%)	3 (4%)	3 (19%)
More assignments to be applied	6 (5%)	1 (3%)	4 (6%)	1 (6%)

as 'time passed during the lesson' ... It would be so much easier if we could just use Zoom instead. (PST 10)

A further suggestion is that online classes should not be longer than one-and-a-half hours long, with definite breaks (13%). A junior-level student commented on this "The duration is really important. Because I can't listen to a lesson for hours and focus on everything said by sitting in front of the computer. This is hard in face-to-face education, and much harder in online education." (PST 104).

Three types of suggestions were related with assessment and evaluation. As course evaluation, some PSTs recommended few and short assignments (10%), while some proposed challenging ones (7%), and others opted for a high number of assignments (5%). Thirteen PSTs (11%) made recommendations about student affairs, i.e., issues such as having the right to repeat a failed course at any semester. They added that class clashes need to be avoided, and timetables needed to be prepared with extra care. PST recommendations also included ideas related to the use of DE in the future, such as hybrid education or systematic training.

4.4.2. TTs' suggestions

TTs were asked to list and explain their suggestions for the improvement of online education in the department, and eight headings emerged (see Table 9).

Most TTs (60%) suggested the use of "more effective" platforms and applications for DE. They suggested "teacher-friendly" systems like Google classroom or Moodle, that ease completion of various tasks, check attendance easily, and enable interaction. TT 14 said "In some platforms, students have private channels, and they can do individual or pair tasks. The teacher can control all the channels." This was followed by TTs' suggestions for instructors to be technologically prepared and trained (20%). TT 13 commented as "All instructors should be trained on all education platforms and video-conferencing tools ... so they can teach them to their students and be sure they know everything."

For TTs, it was also necessary that all students have access to

**Table 9**  
TTs' suggestions for distance education.

	N %
Alternative DE applications to be used	9 (60%)
Techno training to be provided for teachers	3 (20%)
All students to have access to resources	3 (20%)
Effective examination system to be developed	2 (13%)
Interaction during courses to be prioritized	2 (13%)
Collaboration among instructors to be increased	1 (7%)
Technical infrastructure to be enhanced	1 (7%)
Technology-enhanced materials to be used	1 (7%)

resources (20%). As TT 9 asserted, “We should make sure the students have access to the necessary equipment and resources. Do we know under which circumstances they attend our classes?”

The issue of online exams was an area that needed attention for TTs as they suggested more effective, no-panic exam formats (13%). In addition, they recommended that interaction be prioritized and assured in online courses through teacher effort, as well as administrative means (13%). Establishment of a strong technical infrastructure and the use of technology-enhanced materials were additionally proposed (7% each). Collaboration among instructors was also recommended (7%), as in TT 5's idea:

I think all the staff should share what kind of assignments we ask students to do, so that we don't overload them with assignments that they cannot physically (in terms of time they can allocate) and cognitively (there is lot of cognitive load when you spend too much time in front of the screen) deal with.

## 5. Discussion and implications

### 5.1. Views about distance education

Prospective teachers and teacher trainers in the ELT department continued their studies and seemed to appreciate online education during the pandemic. However, analyses of their experiences showed that only some of them were actually content. Half of PSTs had negative feelings about DE and preferred face-to-face instruction, few even conveying feelings of inadequacy as future teachers. This finding is consistent with recent studies, where students indicated feeling more comfortable and capable in conventional classrooms (Al-Nofaie, 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Osman, 2020; Sutiah et al., 2020). The other half had neutral (as in Kibar & Özer, 2020) and positive (as in Shahzad et al., 2020) feelings and opinions about DE.

The TTs exhibited similar feelings, as they mainly indicated neutrality or dislike for online teaching (as in Almazova et al., 2020; Ferdous & Shifat, 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Rasmıtadila et al., 2020). The high proportion of undecided trainers hints that their decisions are subject to change. Colpitts et al. (2020) state that although institutional acts are highly important, instructors' willingness plays a bigger role. Accounts of potential influences on PSTs' and TTs' opinions presented in this paper show that such decisions depend on multiple factors.

Further research needs to be conducted on preferences of ELT students and staff, as well as the suitability of online ELT education for them. Research geared towards a better understanding of both PST and TT preferences will increase our knowledge and fruitfully direct future online implementations in teacher training programs.

### 5.2. Advantages of distance education

Reported advantages of DE (nine themes from PSTs and six themes from TTs) were in general consistent with previous studies (Allo, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Karataş & Tuncer, 2020; Kibar & Özer, 2020; Nambiar, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2020). As the most valuable advantage, PSTs cited reviewing the recordings of classes at their own convenience. The attendance requirement of the university had been a concern for many students during face-to-face education because they could fail a course if they missed 30 percent of classes. The requirement remained during DE, but the online platform documented any student entry, relieving the attendance stress. EFL PSTs appeared to enjoy and benefit from such independent forms of attendance that enhance autonomy, motivation and efficiency. Future DE implementations

should hence consider ways of balancing self-regulation, active participation and institutional requirements.

Another major advantage of DE cited by PSTs was that it saves a lot of time, energy, and money, at the same time being safe and practical, at especially a difficult time as the pandemic. Some PSTs added that it led to stress-free learning, about which previous studies yield mixed findings. Al-Nofaie (2020) for instance, found that online learning helped shy students to express their opinions more easily, while in Ferdous and Shifat's (2020) study, most of the students felt extremely stressed during online classes. This issue seems to be related to a range of factors, such as personality, learning styles or technology-fear, and needs to be further investigated, so that future DE applications in teacher education contexts can be based on relevant student profiles.

The assignment of research papers instead of synchronous exams was one of the important merits of DE as cited by PSTs. Anticipation of technological problems during synchronous testing made instructors modify their traditional assessment techniques and switch to projects, and PSTs saw the value of such alternative assessment methods (as in Colpitts et al., 2020 or Quezada et al., 2020). Future research can elaborate on the types of online assignments and tests that are efficient for EFL teacher education departments.

In addition, PSTs reported that DE improved their personal as well as technological skills. Previous studies illustrate reported development of various skills such as language proficiency and higher-level thinking abilities (e.g., Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). Follow-up research can comparatively analyse the attainment of specific skills through distance versus face-to-face education.

Thanks to DE, TTs were also able to continue their teaching, while sparing additional time. Online teaching presented teacher educators with extra flexibility and comfort, which are the most commonly acknowledged merits of DE in recent studies (Almazova et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020). Distinct from previous studies, some of the TTs noted that they were able to build a better relationship with students. The difficult times might have been influential in building rapport, and this finding is promising in that human connection is not being ignored in the digital setting. Being able to improve their technological skills was an additional benefit of conducting online classes for TTs, as verbalized by PSTs and teachers in other studies (Bailey & Lee, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020).

### 5.3. Challenges of distance education

Examination of PSTs' and TTs' opinions revealed multiple challenges (seventeen and nine themes respectively) with DE in the ELT department, partially similar to those encountered in other contexts (e.g., Al-Nofaie, 2020; Nasri et al., 2020; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). PSTs listed a wider range of difficulties, compared to TTs. They predominantly suffered from the lack of concentration and motivation, poor interaction with peers and teachers, excessive number of assignments, weak internet connection, and difficulties comprehending online information. Limited expertise of instructors in terms of technology use, ineffective assessment methods, technological mishaps and health-related concerns were among added challenges as perceived by PSTs.

Although fewer in number, the difficulties that TTs reported were quite in line with those experienced by their students. The fundamental challenge in TTs' recounts was about interaction. They referred to lack of communication during online classes, students' reluctance to participate in lessons, and lack of student feedback in and out of courses. The absence of any kind of reaction from

students and their inevitably limited cooperation made it difficult for TTs to monitor learning (Scull et al., 2020) and to connect with students (Kidd & Murray, 2020). Due to unfamiliarity and limited contact with PSTs on DE arena, TTs stated that they felt the need to assign extra work in order to compensate for this, which however lead to further problems, such as health problems and increased workload, as they had to prepare, assign and handle additional course activities (Pressley & Ha, 2021; Şener et al., 2020).

As can be inferred, participants underwent an array of difficulties, which need to be attended for a more rewarding future DE experience. Clearly, interaction is an important element of foreign language teacher education, and a solicited part of online teacher education. Studies show that effective teacher-student communication is an indispensable part of online education (Kaden, 2020; Scull et al., 2020; Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). It would not be wrong to assert that it is even more crucial for PSTs as they are soon-to-become language teachers. Its absence is not only a challenge by itself, but also a source of extended problems that PSTs and TTs experience in DE contexts. There is thus a clear need to integrate an interaction component to all DE platforms and courses.

Additionally, although few participants acknowledged the need for assistance during emergency DE, enlisted difficulties suggest that both PSTs and TTs might have actually needed more academic, technical or personal support than they verbalized. It would be wise for institutions and teacher education programs that plan to maintain online education to arrange various support and back-up services. These support services for students and trainers can for example be in the form of an academic advising office, a personal counseling center, a technological help desk, and an online collaboration network.

#### 5.4. Suggestions of participants

Compiling participants' recommendations about DE was a noteworthy contribution of the present study, where twelve themes emerged from PSTs' answers, while eight emerged from TTs' answers. A frequently mentioned PST suggestion was for instructors to improve their online instructional style, and design online lessons more suitably. Sun and Chen (2016) describe effective online instruction to be dependent upon well-planned content, interaction, and skillful instructors. As reported by PSTs, instructors were prepared, but they generally used lecturing and sometimes question-answer format in their online lessons. In many ways, lessons resembled traditional face-to-face classes conveyed through technological channels, whereas PSTs expected shorter but sophisticated, high-quality and innovative DE classes. This finding strongly indicates the need for extensive training for instructors, students, and administrators.

Both groups of participants illustrated an awareness that online teaching necessitates a specific set of technological skills and competencies beyond basic pedagogic and linguistic knowledge. Workshops that provide hands-on experience on materials and technological tools utilized in DE should be offered to TTs and PSTs. Specific courses (such as 'Online Teaching and Learning' or 'Teaching English Through Distance Education') can be offered as part of pre- and in-service training programs to help improve digital teaching abilities of teachers who participate in DE (Colpitts et al., 2020; Hakim, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). More importantly, a new perspective seems necessary for a high quality DE. Thus, guided by research, all stakeholders need to conceptualize what DE should involve and how it is to be conducted within a foreign language teacher education program.

Alternative DE systems were mentioned by both PSTs and TTs. They recommended pedagogic platforms with convenient examination systems and strong interaction facilities. Research studies

need to elaborate on characteristics of the most suitable and applicable DE tools for PSTs and TTs. In addition, collaboration between university administration, Ministry of Education and Higher Education Council need to be planned and applied to defeat social and educational inequalities that may arise during the attainment of proper DE equipment.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study investigated EFL PSTs' and TTs' ideas of and experiences with two semesters of mandatory DE. Their opinions about and the most prominent benefits and challenges of DE from their perspective were outlined, and their recommendations for future online processes were presented.

Findings of the study are valuable in that the topic is analysed by gathering ideas of both prospective teachers and trainers in the same department, through qualitative means that aim to reflect their authentic voices. Nevertheless, the study also has shortcomings. Questionnaire-derived information naturally embodies certain biases and dispositions, just as cross-sectional survey studies. Therefore, other research tools can be employed in longitudinal studies to ascertain the findings. Besides, the same research with a higher number of TTs and PSTs, especially a larger group of senior student participants and with the addition of freshmen, can be conducted.

Like in many parts of the world, for the EFL context where this study was conducted, DE provided continuity of language teacher education during the pandemic. Its impact here as well as at successive stages can only be assessed in the long run. However, reflections and evaluations must be noted and discussed, so that rearrangements can be made, both because it is not clear when the pandemic will end, and also because other serious worldwide crises can create similar situations. In any case, it seems highly likely that online education will hold a bigger place than before in education and teacher training; and teachers, both pre-service and in-service, have a vital role.

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