A Lost Year? Perspectives of foreign language students before and after the COVID-19*

Mehmet Ali AYAZ** Esed YAĞCI***

Abstract: This study aimed to explore the similarities and differences between face-to-face and online education based on the opinions of two groups of students using the qualitative method and a comparative case study design. Of the 38 tertiary-level participants, 19 had finished the program before COVID-19, while the other 19 completed it online during quarantine. A structured interview form was used for collecting the participants' opinions online, and content analysis was utilized for data analysis. The analysis resulted in three main themes were *expectations*, *learning processes* and *outcomes*. The first theme, expectations, yielded two shared categories for both groups: four language skills and academic/departmental expectations. Also, one separate category appeared for the face-to-face group: daily use of language. The second theme, the learning process, produced a shared category that was related to educational opportunities. The different categories were classroom atmosphere for the online group and physical opportunities/facilities for the face-to-face group. The last theme, which was about the outcomes of the program, provided two shared categories: faculty use and faculty-level challenges. The findings showed that participants' opinions about online and face-to-face language programs were mostly similar. More comparative studies should be conducted to further explore the differences between online and face-to-face education in the long term.

Keywords: Online education, face-to-face education, curriculum, language learning

Introduction

The world has been undergoing a bizarre situation since the end of 2019, which is completely new to this age. The World Health Organization announced the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, more commonly referred to as COVID-19, as a pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Not long after that notice, many countries started to move their education online. According to UNESCO (2020a), an approximate number of 1.29 billion learners, almost 82 percent of all enrolled learners, were affected by closures worldwide towards the end of March 2020. Türkiye was one of the countries that quickly adapted to the emergency remote teaching environment, which included language education, too. Language teaching programs in Türkiye started to move to online education in March 2020 after the announcement by the Turkish Council of Higher Education (2020). Due to the sudden change, many issues and opportunities arose forthe tertiary-level educators and learners. Teaching was delivered online during most of the spring 2020 semester and all the 2020 fall and 2021 spring semesters. After almost one and a half years of teaching online, many institutions around the world started to transition back to the traditional face-to-face (F2F henceforth) education environment. Türkiye also reverted to F2F at all levels of education as of the 2021 Fall semester.

Although the concept of online education is not new to the world, the COVID-19 emergency led to an incredibly rapid flourishing and transformation in online learning. Before this period, technological advancements and their adoption by stakeholders were slower. Technology giants invested enormous amounts of money into the online learning sector, and some educational software gained worldwide popularity during the COVID-19 closures. Contrary to the previous state, using these applications became an obligation rather than an option. Therefore, educational institutions had to pick one of these technological means and offer online education in a very short time (Abu Taleb, Bettayeb & Omer, 2021). Online learning and emergency remote teaching have been defined differently in the literature (Ferri, Grifoni & Guzzo, 2020). However, we adopt the term "online learning" throughout this paper since this study focuses on the fact that language education was received via computers or other electronic devices, regardless of whether this was due to an emergency. UNESCO (2020b) explains distance or online learning: "In a broad sense, distance learning is a term often used synonymously with online learning…Common features of any form of distance learning are the teacher-learner separation by space or time, or both, and the use of media and technology to enable communication and exchange during the learning process despite this separation." (p. 2). This study, by comparing the views of two different learner groups, aims to find the differences and similarities between face-to-face and online language education. We aim to find out these two groups' opinions about their expectations, how their learning processes were, and what outcomes they experienced at least one semester after their language education finished.

Literature Review

Although the practice of online learning and research about it have been increasing in the last few decades, the sudden novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has boosted this process. At the very beginning of the COVID-19 quarantine days, educational institutions panicked about the upcoming challenges (Onyema et al., 2020). They had to change too many things in their systems on a large scale that had never been experienced before. Students had their own fears as well. The studies that were conducted at the beginning of the closures reflect the panic and fear in the education field. Unger and Meiran (2020) surveyed 83 undergraduate students to find out their attitudes toward the rapid transition to online learning resulting from COVID-19. More than 75 percent of the participants expressed anxiety about that sudden shift. Almost half of the participants stated that the upcoming online education would provide a different experience from traditional classes. Researchers also asked for written responses, and 49 participants replied to them. They reported that most of their participants expressed negative emotions about the sudden transition. These included feelings about the different atmosphere and learning opportunities, leaving campus, fear of getting lower grades, and losing direct contact with professors. Few students expressed positive emotions, such as getting accustomed to the new conditions in time and gaining discipline.

Research on online learning has provided bilateral results, even three-dimensional and debated results. Some have found that online learning is more effective than F2F education (Herman & Banister, 2007; Koory, 2003; Means et al., 2009; Weber & Lennon, 2007), and some have found that F2F education is more effective (Rahim, Ali, Ali & Fayyaz, 2020; Evisen, Akyilmaz & Torun, 2020). The number of studies that have found no difference between the two modes of education is high as well (Bernard et al. 2004; Karakuş et al., 2020; Şentürk, Duran & Yılmaz, 2020; Warren & Holloman, 2005). Means et al. (2009) performed a meta-analysis of online education for the United States Department of Education. It included studies from 1996 to 2008 where online and traditional modes of education were compared using effect sizes. Fifty-one studies that met the criteria of the study showed that online learners had "modestly" better performance. They found that eleven studies showed significant positive results in favor of online or blended learning, while only two studies favored F2F learning. On the other hand, in a study conducted by Rahim, Ali, Ali and Fayyaz (2020), the results were more in favor of F2F education. The data from 160 participants in a medical college showed various results about online and traditional education. The rate of participants who thought online education could not replace traditional education was around 70 percent. Similarly, around 67 percent of the students expressed that their attention to online classes was insufficient. Issues related to online education include network problems and a lack of computer skills. On the other hand, around 59 percent of the participants accepted online education as a convenient means of learning.. Also, approximately 65 percent thought that online education was an acceptable mode of learning for them. Similarly, Evisen et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study with six participants at a preparatory program of a university to find out their attitudes and feelings towards the sudden transition to online education. The results of interviews and journal analysis

showed that students preferred F2F education to online education. They thought the former was more effective in terms of learning. Students expressed that they had challenges and worries at the beginning. However, they got accustomed to the new system in time, which gradually led to a feeling of appreciation for online education. Some students found online education advantageous because it is timesaving, comfortable, and flexible. Lack of interaction, the pace of the lessons, and technical issues were among the drawbacks noted by the participants.

Comparing online and traditional education, it can be seen that both have advantages and disadvantages. The benefits of online learning include flexibility of time and place, efficiency, overcoming sudden crises, comfortability, and interactivity; whereas isolation, lack of direct contact with peers and academics, lack of resources, such as computers or the internet, and lack of motivation can be counted among its drawbacks (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017; Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; De La Varre et al., 2010; Dhawan, 2020; Jeffcoat & Golek, 2004; Taş, 2022). A qualitative study conducted by Taş (2022) included 35 undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education. The content analysis concluded that online education had more downsides than F2F education. Technical problems, a lack of interaction, issues with teaching and learning, and problems related to testing were some of the disadvantages of online education, while opportunities and convenience were its advantages. For instance, the participants stated that they experienced a couple of technical issues, such as internet issues (bandwidth, internet quota), device-related (computer, smartphone) problems. On the other hand, the first theme about the positive aspects of online learning was the opportunities it provided, including technological resources, equality of opportunity and flexibility in terms of place and time. In another study about the positive and negative sides of online learning, a SWOC (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges) analysis was performed to evaluate online learning at the beginning of the 2020-crisis. In that study, Dhawan (2020) aimed to understand how important the concept of online education was, especially in case of an emergency. In the study, secondary data sources like journals, reports, company websites, research papers, and other academic publications were analyzed. The strengths of online education emerging from the SWOC analysis were flexibility of time and place, catering to a wide audience, an abundance of resources, and immediate feedback. In contrast, the weaknesses were technical challenges, learners' capability and confidence levels, time management, distractions,emotional issues such as frustration, anxiety, and confusion, and attendance problems. The opportunities related to online education included scope for innovation and development, designing flexible programs, strengthening skills like problem-solving and critical thinking, appealing to learners of all ages, and a radical transformation in education. Lastly, the challenges that await online education are the unequal distribution of infrastructure, the varying quality of education, digital illiteracy, and cost.

Most of the studies that have been conducted after - COVID-19 focus on the opinions of learners at the beginning phases of the disease. After an academic year was completely online, the opinions of learners from different profiles in a detailed fashion became highly significant in determining the effectiveness of distance education compared to the

traditional method. The aforementioned studies and many others have shed light on some aspects, like the advantages and disadvantages of online education. However, the comparison between face-to-face and online education in the eyes of learners who have experienced them for a longer time still needs to be explored further. Most of the studies regarding COVID-19 employ a one-way perspective. In other words, they include the learners who experienced the coronavirus period. This study, however, compares the situation before and after COVID-19 from the perspectives of two different groups. Another significant contribution of this study is that it relies on the opinions of the students who spent at least one semester —most of them longer — in their departments after they had completed their language education. Therefore, they were highly conscious of the effects of the language program they had received. This means they were aware of the positive and negative sides of the language program because they had the opportunity to use it in their departments and in their real lives. Hence, this paper aims to explore and compare the opinions of two different groups of tertiary-level language learners regarding the language program they received at a state university in Türkiye. One of the groups received the language education face-to-face, and the other group received it online. A qualitative method of research has been chosen for this study because a deeper understanding of learners' views needs to be explored. For this purpose, the following research question and its sub-questions were targeted in this study:

1. What are the similarities and differences between the opinions of two groups of participants about an online versus F2F language program?

    1.1. What are the similarities and differences between their expectations?

    1.2. What kinds of learning processes did the two modes of education offer?

    1.3. What were the outcomes of the two modes of education according to students' views?

These questions aim to explore the participants' opinions related to online and face-to-face language programs not from an academic achievement perspective but from a longer-term learner perspective regarding faculty-level survival. To ensure the long-term effects, we chose the participants from the students who had spent at least one semester in their departments upon finishing their language programs.

Method

Research Design

This paper used the comparative case study method to compare the views of two groups of learners on F2F and online education. Stake (2008) states that case studies allow researchers to have an in-depth understanding of cases. Comparative case studies, on the other hand, enable researchers to compare and contrast different cases (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). In this study, we aimed to explore learners' opinions on two modes of education and also find the commonalities and differences between their views regarding online and F2F education.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at the English Preparatory Program of a state university in Türkiye. Before COVID-19, the program was offered face-to-face. After the pandemic was announced in March 2020, however, the program was moved completely online. An academic year consisted of four 8-week modules in both modes of education. Also, the same language program and materials were used.

The criterion sampling technique, one of the purposeful sampling techniques, was used for choosing the participants. In this technique, the participants who meet certain criteria are chosen for a study (Patton, 2005). In our study, there were different criteria for each group. For the F2F group, the following criteria were considered: (1) having taken their language education completely face-to-face before the COVID-19, (2) having spent at least one semester in their department after the language education. On the other hand, the criteria for the online learners were as follows: (1) taking their language education completely online during the COVID-19 period, (2) having spent at least one semester in their department after language education. Details related to participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Demographics

Demographics		n	
		Online	F2F
Gender	Male	9	9
	Female	10	10
Entry Level	Elementary	2	13
	Pre-Int	4	0
	Int	3	4
	Upp-Int	10	2
Graduation Level	Elementary	0	0
	Pre-Int	0	0
	Int	3	4
	Upp-Int	16	15
Proficiency Exam Score	75-79	14	14
	80-84	3	3
	86-90	2	2
Department	English Lang. and Lit.	9	6
	Int. Rel.	1	6
	Law	2	3
	Economy	1	1
	Management	1	1
	Sociology	0	1
	Psychology	2	1
	History	2	0
	Political Sci. and Public Admin.	1	0
Total		19	19

Thity-eight participants from a state university in Türkiye voluntarily participated in this study. Nineteen of them had received their language education F2F and 19 online. In fact, four more participants had answered the form, but they were eliminated because they did not match the criteria for this study.

Data Collection

In this study, interview forms were exploited to collect the data. Due to COVID-19 limitations, data had to be collected online. Also, because the number of participants was 38, interviews were not utilized for practical concerns. Merriam and Grenier (2019) suggest that interview forms are among the tools that can be used for data collection in interpretive designs. To this end, the researchers developed an interview form.. The researchers built the interview form using many steps. Firstly, they reviewed the literature to identify the main concerns related to this study since relating interview questions to literature is key to developing powerful instruments (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Thus, theoretical foundations for this study were established, which led to the first draft of the form. The first draft was sent to two experts in the foreign language teaching department as well as three experts in the field of curriculum and instruction. Also, the form was sent to two potential participants to check for any misunderstandings or language-related issues. After the feedback was provided by the experts and the potential participants, the form was edited. Some questions were added to the form, and some were omitted. Also, the register was revised according to the experts' and potential participants' suggestions. After that, the final version was submitted to the experts again. Upon their consent, the final form of the instrument was turned into an online form and sent to the target participants using email. Ethical considerations were taken into account by seeking formal ethical approval from the university's ethical committee.Also, before answering the questions in the interview form, participants approved a statement that they voluntarily participated in this study. Due to COVID-19 limitations, face-to-face interaction was not possible at the time of data collection. Moreover, due to practical issues stemming from a high number of participants, online data collection using forms was preferred.

Data Analysis

The researchers utilized content analysis to understand the data and draw themes from the participants' answers. In the first place, open coding was utilized to make annotations and identify basic concepts in the data. The researchers achieved this by rigorously reading the data. After the initial step, axial coding was used to refine and categorize the concepts. The researchers were open to adding new codes and subtracting or changing the old ones throughout the analysis phase. Finally, the selective coding technique was exploited to thematize the categories found during the previous step (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Strauss, 1998). The themes were matched with the research questions, and three main themes emerged: *expectations, experiences,* and *outcomes*. One language expert and one curriculum professor were included in the coding process. Codes, categories, and themes showed a high level of similarity between those experts (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Data Analysis

To ascertain its trustworthiness, several actions were taken. Firstly, we utilized member checks, one of the important ways to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To achieve this, the categories and themes were shared with four randomly chosen participants from this study to collect their feedback about the analysis. Those participants approved that the categories and themes were convenient to their earlier replies provided during data collection. The next technique that we used was an audit trail (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We keep and report on all the raw data, the whole analysis process, and the themes and materials related to this study. Moreover, we had one curriculum expert check the research and the analysis process to ensure dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). We also provided a detailed description of the context and the participants, as well as the research process. While reporting the findings, we often quoted participants' opinions and made relevant explanations based on literature where possible.

Results

This study aimed to discover and compare the views of two different learner groups about F2F and online education. We addressed three sub-questions to seek answers to our main question.

Research question 1.1: What are the similarities and differences between the expectations of online and face-to-face learners?

When we analyzed the data regarding this question, one theme emerged after the coding process: *expectations*. Table 2 below shows the coding process for the first research question.

Table 2.

Coding process for research question 1

Online		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	Axial Coding (categories)	Selective Coding (themes)
▪ *speaking, reading,listening, writing* ▪ *spoken-written language* ▪ *speak English fluently* ▪ *write essays* ▪ *comprehension* ▪ *understand lectures* ▪ *enough for department*	➢ four language skills ➢ academic /departmental	❖ expectations

Face-to-face		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	*Axial Coding (categories)*	*Selective Coding (themes)*
▪ *speaking, reading,listening, writing* ▪ *participate in discussions* ▪ *express yourself comfortably* ▪ *academic life* ▪ *academic language* ▪ *department basics* ▪ *daily and academic life* ▪ *daily life and department*	➢ four language skills ➢ academic/ departmental ➢ daily language	❖ expectations

Overall, both groups appeared to have certain expectations from a language program. The most outstanding expectation of both groups seemed to be learning the basic four language skills, namely speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Expectations about department-related language skills were shared by both groups. However, there was one category that differentiated the two groups regarding expectations. The F2F group was also expected to learn the daily language at the preparatory program.

Online group analysis for theme 1: Expectations

The online group's opinions on the theme of *expectations* were grouped into three categories. Some of the opinions are reported below. As can be seen in the quotations, the online group's expectations from the language program were partly related to four language skills.

> *My expectation from the preparatory program was to develop the four language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) required in language learning. The thing that helped me the most was the writing skill. (P2)*

> *To develop my speaking, writing and comprehension skills and to use them correctly.*

This group drew the most attention to the importance of writing and speaking skills. This might be because they were unaware of the concept of four language skills, but they were conscious of the importance of speaking and writing.

> *To maximize my writing and speaking skills. (P4)*

> *To successfully learn English in both spoken and written language. (P15)*

> *It is a well-known fact that English education in our country's high schools is not sufficient. My biggest expectation before starting the preparation was to improve my speaking and writing skills.. (P16)*

Some participants complained about their previous language learning experiences, which were mostly based on teaching grammar. They stated they wanted to learn more than grammar while choosing that university.

Since I have a good command of grammar, I did not have any expectations in this regard, I cannot say anything against it, but I expected to improve my writing skills and practice speaking. (P6)

Apart from the basic language skills, they were also expected to learn the language skills required for their departmental or faculty needs.

To be able to speak fluent English and to have enough knowledge of English to understand my lectures in the department. (P3)

To have sufficient English for my courses in the department. To be able to learn to write essays in order to do my homework. (P5)

Given that students expressed opinions stretching out to their departments, it showed that they havelong-term expectations from a language program rather than only having high grades in the language program. This is why program evaluation should focus on academic success and longer-term achievement, such as success at faculty, social life, or work life (Stake, 1967).

Face-to-face group analysis for theme 1: Expectations

This group's opinions under the theme of expectations were clustered into three categories. Some of the opinions are reported below. The first category was four language skills like the previous group, namely speaking, reading, listening and writing.

I expected good development of my listening, speaking, writing and reading skills due to my department. (P2)

Not only learning English, but also being able to speak English fluently. (P4)

Developing my speaking and writing skills at a sufficient level. (P9)

They also expressed opinions about academic expectations or departmental language, meaning the language they could use at the faculty level. This point was also mentioned by the previous group.

I also hoped that it would prepare me in the most appropriate way for the situations that I may encounter in academic life (presentations, seminars, discussions, translations, etc.) (P2)

Since I started the program at the lowest level, my expectation from the program was to reach a level where I could understand the basics of my department, participate in discussions, and express myself comfortably. (P16)

The last category for this group was learning the daily language. This group seemed to have expected to learn the language not only for academic purposes, but also for daily use. This, again, shows that academic achievement is not the only predictor of a successful language program. Being able to use the language outside the classroom effectively seemed to be another important criterion for a successful language program.

Before I started the preparatory program, I had zero English, and I wished that I could finally be at a level that I could use in daily and academic life. (P7)

To have sufficient knowledge of English both in daily life and in the department. (P10)

Participants were also asked to express their views on whether their expectations from the language program were met. In both groups, the rate of participants who stated that their expectations were met sufficiently, mostly, or completely was 16 out of 19 participants, or around 84 percent. All in all, the first theme, expectations, produced mostly similar results for the online and F2F groups although the latter also talked about daily uses of the language.

Research question 1.2: What kinds of learning processes did the two modes of education offer?

When we analyzed the data regarding this question, one theme emerged after the coding process: the *learning process*. Table 3 shows the coding process for the second research question.

Table 3.

Coding process for research question 2

Online		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	Axial Coding (categories)	Selective Coding (themes)
▪ *adaptation of a real classroom to the virtual environment* ▪ *actively participate, communication* ▪ *group work, online meeting rooms* ▪ *active environment in class* ▪ *Self-access Center sessions* ▪ *attention of students* ▪ *question and answer* ▪ *allows everyone to speak* ▪ *the atmosphere* ▪ *friendly, comfortable environment* ▪ *sincere*	➢ educational opportunities ➢ classroom atmosphere	❖ learning process
Face-to-face		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	Axial Coding (categories)	Selective Coding (themes)

- *speaking completely English*
- *videos and music*
- *English games*
- *have a pleasant time*
- *active participation, group work*
- *question and answer, practice*
- *student's attention*
- *both fun and academic*
- *exchange of ideas, interaction*
- *smart board, internet connection*
- *small classes, library, study rooms*
- *Self-access sessions and facilities*

➢ educational opportunities

➢ physical opportunities/facilities

❖ learning process

When the comments related to the learning process were analyzed, one common category appeared for both the online and F2F groups, which was educational opportunities. Besides, the online group had one more category, namely classroom atmosphere. The F2F group yielded one more category, too, related to the physical opportunities or - facilities provided to them. These categories are presented in more detail with quotations below.

Online group analysis for theme 2: Learning process

This group put forward several ideas linked to the educational opportunities they had during the learning process. Some of their comments are provided here. Several opinions, such as the following, were general evaluations of the educational opportunities.

> *The atmosphere was as I expected. Everyone in the class came together to really learn this language, the teachers were just as eagerly trying to convey what they knew, and there was an atmosphere of silence while the teacher was teaching, as anyone could take the floor and speak. In short, it was an adaptation of a real classroom to the virtual environment, which was perhaps more effective than the real classroom. In the online environment, mostly through the "Zoom" program and together with the book, everything necessary for learning any language, whether visual, auditory, or verbal, was provided, and their contribution increased efficiency by 80%. (P10)*

Some comments were related to active participation in the class. Participating actively in classes is a vital element of language classes (Cabi and Kaalelioglu, 2009; Swan et al., 2000), making it worth considering while language programs are assessed.

> *Our teachers made great efforts to make us active in every minute of the lesson instead of just lecturing themselves. Group work was very important. Sometimes we would write or talk, and then we would find our own mistakes and criticize them. It was an environment where I was having fun without getting bored. (P14)*

> *I think that there was an active learning environment. Teachers tried to make students actively participate. (P4)*

Participants also emphasized the importance of online meeting rooms, which were a component of the software that was used for online classes. The instructor could allocate a desired number of students to each group via the software used for classes, and a range of activities, especially speaking activities, could be performed in those meeting rooms.

> *Environments such as speaking groups were offered. And by speaking spontaneously, it contributed a lot to the consolidation of speaking. I think it also influences self-confidence. (P1)*

> *By creating rooms in groups, I was given the opportunity to practice speaking with my classmates.These were very useful activities for me and generally allowed me to focus on my speaking skills. (P11)*

The last point under this category that students focused on was the Self-Access Center (SAC). SAC is a place and opportunity designed to help learners with the language learning process in a stress-free environment. It aims to help them become more autonomous learners. Most of the sessions are voluntarily held by former students of the preparatory program and some by instructors. When F2F education is possible, these sessions are normally held in the venue allocated for SAC. However, during the online education time, all the sessions were offered online.

> *In the school, there was an environment called the SAC (Self-Access Center). In this environment, we were able to get tips about language learning from our teachers or students who went to the department. In addition, we were able to make up for our shortcomings by taking classes in the areas we had difficulty with. (P18)*

> *We were able to improve our English with the Self-Access Center. (P4)*

The second category in this part was classroom environment, which mostly refers to the psychological conditions in the class. One of the most distinguished language professors in the world, Krashen (1982), argues that classroom atmospheres should be comfortable, motivating, provoking positive emotions, and providing a low affective filter. Psychological conditions and emotions are among the most crucial factors determining learners' success and failure (Oxford, 1996). Some participants in this study also highlighted the importance of classroom atmosphere and psychological situations, which became a separate category under the theme of the learning process. Some of these opinions are provided here.

> *It was more sincere than I expected. It was fun, even if I didn't listen to the lesson, I never completely disconnected from the lesson because it was a subject that interested me at some point or because I was communicating with my friends. (P5)*

> *It was mostly a friendly and comfortable environment where we interacted with each other, and of course it contributed to the lessons. I didn't feel like I had to be there because I was more comfortable. It was more comfortable, and I willingly learned and attended classes. (P8)*

Instructors play an important role in the success of language education (Chen and Guo, 2005). A participant brought together the role of instructors with the positive atmosphere in the class and expressed their opinions below:

> *Sometimes, when no one except our teacher was speaking, we could talk as a class on appropriate topics, and it was really fun. I can say that it is not the environment that I expected at all. At first, I was very afraid that my accent would be made fun of, but the teachers were very warm, and the students were very mature. (P16)*

Face-to-face group analysis for theme 2: Learning process

The first category under the theme of the learning processes was educational opportunities for the F2F group, just like the online one. Educational opportunities yielded some more subheadings, and direct quotations for them are provided below.

To start with, some comments gave an overview of the educational opportunities they had.

> *From the beginner level to the advanced level in the preparatory program, our teachers spoke completely English in every lesson. While this increased our focus on the lesson, it also allowed us to stay in an audio-visual environment that is completely in English and to be surrounded by the language we are trying to learn. While the videos and music used in the lessons affected us positively, the English games in which we took an active role in the lesson helped us both have a pleasant time and approach the lesson more warmly. We used to speak English with our classmates under the supervision of teachers, but this was not enough, more should be done. (P18)*

> *We had opportunities such as videos, listening pieces, speaking activities, writing lessons, slides, and Self-Access Center sessions suitable for our topics and levels. These have really helped me to apply and practice what I have learned… (P3)*

Active participation in the lessons was an area of interest for the F2F group. Some comments related to this are reported below.

> *It was a fun and educational environment where everyone could exchange ideas with each other. (P1)*

> *I think it was productive, as there were lessons with the active participation of students. (P16)*

Educational opportunities included various positive elements of the curriculum according to some participants' opinions below:

> *Classes changed according to a certain period; and ideas were constantly diversified. Homework assignments were given during the period when our knowledge was fresh, and we supported them with four methods: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. (P5)*

> *The curriculum was created to improve our visual, auditory, and speaking skills. I think this was useful, too. (P9)*

The second category under the theme of the learning process was physical opportunities for the F2F group. The F2F group received their education under normal conditions before the coronavirus period. Most of the participants expressed quite positive comments about the physical environment. The first comment reported below summarizes some of the facilities and their effect on learners.

> *The environment in which we were educated was prepared with our comfort in mind, and this increased our desire to learn and a positive mood. It is obvious that the color white brings peace to people. Our classrooms consisted of white cabinets, tables, chairs, and white walls. The tables and chairs we used were quite comfortable. The floors were carpeted. We had a smart board, computer, and sound system. We were able to open the book from a large screen during the lesson, which made it easy for us when we did not have a book. Thanks to these tools, we were able to open videos, music, and games that would contribute to the content of the course and help us learn while having fun. The internet connection we could access made it easy for us to play the common games in the lesson. These physical opportunities, which were beneficial to us, made us focus more on the lesson and increased our desire to learn. We were able to listento the lesson, and we could research what we were curious about on the computer. These, in turn, were improving our language knowledge and practice. (P18)*

As can be seen in the comment above, the physical components offered along with the language program play an important part in a successful language program. Next, a considerable number of the F2F group participants focused on the importance of the SAC. Even in the online education period, where all SAC sessions were held online as well, students expressed many positive opinions about SAC. However, for the F2F group, there were even more comments about it because they could actually visit the place and exploit the opportunities it offered.

> *The Self-Access Center (SAC) at our university provided a great opportunity for us to develop. Thanks to the activities we did among ourselves and the contributions of our teachers, our English learning process became more enjoyable, and our desire increased. (P13)*

> *In the self-access center, there were environments where we could work on our own, in a group, or together with our teachers, and there were many activities for speaking, writing, reading, and listening. It was a good environment for us to learn the language, and its contribution to language learning was quite good. We had the opportunity to practice a lot, especially in the field of speaking. (P2)*

SAC is a facility that universities around the world adopt to offer students a more comfortable and autonomous language learning experience. The participants of this study —both online and F2F— expressed that SAC was one of the driving factors in their language learning process.

Research Question 1.3: What were the outcomes of the two modes of education according to students' views?

The last theme that emerged from the content analysis was about the *outcomes* of the language program participants received. Table 4 summarizes the categories and codes for this theme:

Table 4.

Coding process for research question 3

Online		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	Axial Coding (categories)	Selective Coding (themes)
▪ *good enough for the department* ▪ *high scores on assignments* ▪ *never had a hard time* ▪ *course recordings helped* ▪ *English in general* ▪ *not specific for departments* ▪ *different content than departments* ▪ *different terminology and vocabulary* ▪ *four language skills, both good and bad*	➢ faculty use ➢ faculty-level difficulties	❖ outcomes

Face-to-face		
Open Coding (emerging concepts)	Axial Coding (categories)	Selective Coding (themes)
▪ *meets the needs in department* ▪ *useful in general* ▪ *general English* ▪ *not specific for department* ▪ *different terms* ▪ *new vocabulary* ▪ *four language skills, both good and bad*	➢ faculty use ➢ faculty-level difficulties	❖ outcomes

When outcomes were categorized, two main categories appeared for both the online and F2F groups: faculty use and faculty-level challenges. The participants' views on each of these are going to be presented in the upcoming paragraphs.

Online group analysis for theme 3: Outcomes

Faculty use refers to the opinions of the participants on whether the language skills they had received from the program were useful in their departments and how useful they were. Many participants thought the language program had provided them with enough skills for their departments. Some of the related comments are presented below.

> *I think that the education provided in the preparation is suitable enough for the department because I have not had any difficulties in understanding and conveying until now. (P12)*

> *Pretty good enough. In my experience so far, it has made learning a foreign language something that is not challenging for me in the lessons. (P11)*

On the other hand, some participants expressed that the language program at the preparatory school was sufficient generally but insufficient regarding the language or register of their specific departments. That was quite understandable because their prep school offered general English, not English for specific purposes. Still, they did not deny the contributions of the prep school.

> *You gain English in general, but there is no English in this department. I would like to say that I learned the language for the department in the most efficient way when I moved to the department. (P14)*

> *It met most of my needs. Since we did not have a good command of the words related to our field, they made it a bit difficult, but of course it is not a problem that cannot be solved. (P18)*

The vocabulary issue is explored in more detail in the following category, which is about faculty-level challenges. This category brought together the language-related issues that the participants experienced at their faculties. The most notable challenges that were expressed by the students were vocabulary-related problems. They said that they had learned certain sets of vocabulary at their departments, but the terms and register in general were different at their departments. As with some previous comments, this was quite natural because each department requires a different vocabulary. Some of the comments are presented below.

> *It took me a long time to understand the specific English jargon of my department. In addition, it was very difficult for me to come across words that are not used or are rarely used in daily life in English. (P9)*

> *The hardest part is the vocabulary part. For example, while I can understand the grammatical structure of a 20-word sentence I read, it is really challenging to not know the meaning of 10-12 words. (P10)*

> *From time to time, I have difficulties when I come across words that are too terminological and that I have not encountered before. (P11)*

Some of the opinions related to faculty-level challenges were about the writing skill, while some participants had challenges with the speaking skill.

Writing skills. Even when speaking and writing Turkish, we make a lot of grammatical errors, and it will be caused by the things I am exposed to, so I can experience the same problem in English, but I reduced my mistakes even more with the feedback of my teachers. (P6)

I think a little more practice is needed for speaking skills. Due to the literature department, the course contents are quite intense, and there may be too many unknown words. I personally try to improve my speaking and vocabulary in order to take an active role in the discussions in the course. (P17)

It should be noted that several students expressed that they did not experience many challenges with language in their departments.

There was never a point in my department where I had difficulty in terms of a foreign language. Maybe I can call it taking notes, but it was easily solved with course recordings. (P7)

I love learning languages, and I think I am prone to it. There hasn't been a point where I have had a hard time. (P14)

The language-related problems that online learners generally underwent in their departments were usually about vocabulary, while some had challenges with separate skills like speaking and writing. However, some of the participants reported no such issues with the faculty.

Face-to-face group analysis for theme 3: Outcomes

Just like in the online group, the first category that was derived from the opinions of the participants about the output theme was faculty use. Many students expressed that the language education they had received from the preparatory program was mostly enough for their departments. However, they also drew attention to the difference between the language used in departments and the skills taught in the preparatory program. As was expressed before, this was an expected situation since the prep school did not offer English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or solely English for Academic Purposes (EAP); rather, it offered general English with some academic content. Some of the comments are presented below.

I think that the education I received meets my needs in the department. However, the education we received was a general education, there were students from both international relations and economics in my class, and the education we all received was the same. But it would be better if we had focused on the topics related to the department each of us studied, and I think that our needs in the department would be better met if we had separate content-oriented training for each section. (P2)

Of course, some concepts in my department were foreign to me. Because we talked about daily life issues in preparation. When the meanings of the terms were defined by our department teachers, we did our homework with our knowledge from prep school. (P5)

Some of the participants focused on different language components in their comments. These included writing and grammar.

> *I can say that perhaps it was the grammar that was most useful to us. The essays we wrote during the year demonstrated the writing skills and grammar we needed for the assignments we did. In preparation, I think that these skills have been sufficiently developed y so that we can do homework easily in the department. (P4)*

> *It can be said that it was useful in general. Especially the lessons on writing techniques and concepts given during the preparatory period made our work easier in department classes, especially in exams and writing assignments. However, it should be noted that the concepts and words related to our department were not adequately explained during the preparation period. (P12)*

It can clearly be seen that the F2F group expressed similar opinions about using language skills in their departments and the problems.

When it comes to the last category, which is faculty-level challenges for F2F learners, most of the participants in the F2F group stated that they had experienced some challenges with the vocabulary in their departments. Some of the comments related to vocabulary issues are presented below.

> *The issue with which I had the most difficulty in terms of English in my department was the lack of academic words and not being able to understand the pronunciation of some words. Considering that every word has an academic equivalent, this is a very deep subject. (P18)*

> *Definitely vocabulary. This could be achieved with some personal support, but it could also be supported in the preparatory classes. Other than that, I haven't had any problems personally. (P11)*

Some of the participants expressed challenges related to speaking and writing.

> *I just had some difficulty with academic writing. But I think this situation is not entirely related to English but also related to mastering the academic language. (P16)*

> *I have difficulty with speaking due to my lack of emphasis and lack of practice. Other than that, I have no difficulty speaking. (P2)*

It was interesting to see that several students had challenges with their listening skills, unlike the online group, where listening did not seem to be an important issue.

> *I had difficulty completing my deficiencies in listening. (P10)*

> *I had some difficulty listening to the foreign language courses I took in my department. So, I can say that I have some problems with my listening skills. (P4)*

In summary, vocabulary issues posed the most challenging language problems for the F2F group, just like the online one. Similarly, some students mentioned problems related to different language elements like grammar, writing, and listening.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we aimed to discover the similarities and differences between online and face-to-face education based on the opinions of two groups of tertiary-level language learners. The first theme that came out of our study, which was about expectations from the language program, generated two shared categories. It was found that both the online group and the F2F group expected to learn the basic four language skills of a language and the academic or departmental language. Both groups had expectations about learning to speak, listen, read, and write before they started the language program. They also desired to learn the foreign language skills required in their departments. It was also discovered that both groups held similar views about the efficiency of the language program in terms of meeting their expectations. A vast majority of the students from both groups expressed that their expectations from the language program had been satisfied at a sufficient level or completely. This suggests that the language program was effective in terms of meeting the learners' expectations both in the online group and the F2F one. This finding can be supported by studies, such as Ali, Ramay and Shahzad (2011), who conducted a study with 245 college students and found that online education meets students' needs sufficiently in terms of interaction, instructor performance, course design, motivation, and course evaluation. Arbaugh (2000) reached similar results: online education meets students' expectations because it is suitable for an interactive learning atmosphere and is flexible. Our participants expressed that their academic expectations were met in terms of learning academic language skills. Multiple studies support the idea that online education is as effective as F2F education in terms of academic achievement (Aly, 2013; Brownson and Harriman, 2000; Chen and Jones, 2007; Dendir, 2019; Warren and Holloman, 2005). Aly (2013) compared the academic achievement of two groups, one of which took a course completely online, whereas the other took it in a hybrid environment. The results showed that both groups showed similar performance. Dendir (2018) compared an online group and an F2F group over four semesters during their economics course. The findings showed that online learners outperformed F2F students on exams, but the F2F learners were better at higher-order skills. These studies, as well as the current one, indicate that online learning can be as effective as F2F learning in many aspects.

The second theme of our study, which was about the learning process, provided three categories. The category of educational opportunities was shared by both groups. On the other hand, the category of classroom atmosphere was specific to the online group, while the F2F group yielded another category, physical opportunities. The online group elaborated on various aspects of the learning process, such as the positive and friendly atmosphere, active participation, SAC (Self-Access Center) sessions, and speaking activities. The F2F group had similar replies in this category, but they also added many advantages related to the physical opportunities they had. This group focused on active participation, interaction, enjoyable and academic activities, as well as physical components like classroom size and a smartboard. These findings can be supported by many studies regarding high motivation and psychological factors in online learning (Michailidou and Economides, 2003), instructor performance and motivation (Chen and

Guo, 2005; Hong, Lai and Holton, 2003; Selim, 2005; Webster and Hackley, 1997); interaction (Moore, 1993; Picciano, 2002; Sargeant et al., 2006; Swan, 2001; Young and Norgard, 2006), communication (Irani, 1998; Swan et al., 2000); active participation (Cabi and Kaalelioglu, 2009; Queiros and de Villiers, 2016; Thurmond, Wambach, Connors, and Frey, 2002); reflecting real-life situations (Northrup, 2002; Sahin, 2007). Regarding the qualities of instructors in online learning, Ali and Ahmad (2011) argue that teachers are one of the foremost stakeholders in the success of online learning. According to Volery and Lord (2000), although online learning promotes learner-centered environments, the role of instructors will remain undeniably important.

Outcomes were the last theme that came out of the content analysis in the current study. Both the online group and the F2F focused on two categories related to the outcomes of the language program they had received: making use of the language skills in their departments and the problems they underwent in faculty related to the language they had learned in the language program. In terms of the positive comments, many participants expressed that the language skills they had acquired in the language program satisfied their needs at the faculty. They stated that they had almost no problems related to language in their departments, including obtaining high scores. Ali and Ahmad (2011) also found online learning as effective as F2F learning in terms of motivation, interaction, instructor performance, and course evaluation. Previous studies on online learning, such as Volery and Lord (2000), also found that online learning was effective regarding interaction, although they articulated a need for instructor development in the area. Sahin (2007) also found that students were satisfied with online learning if they were involved in lessons and had enough instructor support. On the other hand, both the online and the F2F groups reported some issues related to the language program after they moved on to their departments. The most critical issue they had was related to the different terminologies and vocabulary in each department. Participants reported that it was quite challenging to adapt to the new terminology in their departments since they encountered many different words. This is indeed a predictable problem because, in the preparatory language program, mostly English for general purposes rather than specific purposes is offered. In other words, students do not learn English specific to their departments; they just learn general English according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It was also found that some participants had problems related to four language skills, and some of them reported positive feedback on the same issue. This can be linked to individual differences in learning. Some learners might be weaker in some language skills and stronger in others. As Hurd and Stella (2006) cited, these differences might arise from many factors, such as aptitude and intelligence (Carroll, 1981); attitudes and motivation (Dornyëi, 2001, 2003; Gardner and Lambert, 1972); personality factors (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991); styles (Cotterall, 1999; Kalaja & Ferreira Barcelos, 2003).

In conclusion, we have found in this study that online learners and face-to-face learners held similar expectations related to a language program. Interestingly, they also had similar views about their language learning programs' effectiveness in terms of meeting

those expectations. In other words, a vast majority of participants in both groups expressed that they were content with the language education they had been offered. On the other hand, the F2F group was more pleased with the physical opportunities and the facilities that they had been offered. This result was not surprising since the online group did not have the chance to exploit those physical opportunities. Nevertheless, both groups expressed similar levels of satisfaction with the educational opportunities they had, either online or F2F. This finding was also supported by the learning outcomes as they were treated by the participants. Both groups expressed that they benefited a lot from their language programs at the faculty level. They also complained about similar language-related issues in their departments, which were mainly linked to the specific jargon of each and every department. As the literature suggests, also as indicated by this study, online education has the potential to provide successful language learning opportunities similar to F2F education. This study was limited to only one language program at a specific institution. However, it is notable that it tried to unveil the relatively long-term effects of online versus F2F education. Further studies need to be conducted to compare the longer-term effects of online and F2F education on learners, not only in terms of exam scores but also in their daily, social, and academic lives. As online learning has proven to be effective in terms of learning a language, educators might continue to exploit it efficiently even if face-to-face education is fully possible.

Ethics Committee Approval: This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Hacettepe University (Date 21/02/20121; Document no: E-35853172-300-00001497539)

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their inclusion in the study.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Authors' Contributions: Concept - Author 1, Design – Author 1; Supervision – Author 2; Data Collection and Processing- Author 1; Analysis and Interpretation – Author 1; Writing – Author 1; Critical Review – Both Authors.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Financial Disclosure: The authors declare that this study has received no financial support.

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Authors	Contact
Mehmet Ali AYAZ, Instructor	Social Sciences University of Ankara, School of Foreign Languages
	E-mail: alimehmetayaz@gmail.com
Esed YAĞCI, PhD	Hacettepe University, Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Sciences
	E-mail: esedyagci@gmail.com