

Student Motivation and Academic Achievement in Online EFL Classes at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of EFL learners' learning experiences in a virtual classroom on their academic motivation and achievement. It also explores students' reasons for changes in their motivations and their perspectives on learning a foreign language online. The study used the explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design. A total of 144 foreign-language learners at a state university in Turkey participated in this study. An online survey was used to collect students' academic motivation scores at the beginning and the end of an academic term. Ten students from the decreased and the increased motivation groups were recruited for online semi-structured interviews. Besides motivation, students' language development was measured using pre- and post-test scores on skill-based exams. Correlations show a moderate positive correlation between motivation and academic achievement. Motivation was also a significant

predictor of students' grades. The findings also showed that students' motivation to learn English in a digital classroom decreased over time. Through thematic analysis of the qualitative data, three major themes emerged: motivation-related factors, negative attitudes towards online learning and the benefits of online learning. One common characteristic was that students would prefer face-to-face learning and they also believed that in-class and out-of-class interactions were limited in online learning.

Introduction

Around the globe, schools of all levels have had to move their courses online in an attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The urgent action of moving classes online enabled students to continue their education during the global uncertainty, but it has also brought some additional obstacles with it. This move caused not only teachers, but students also to struggle to adapt to the new reality. This new reality has posed a common problem by creating a group of disadvantaged schools and students by multiplying the existing income inequality (Bonacini et al., 2021; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). This substantial change in the modes of teaching delivery and socio-economic levels has brought many research topics to the attention of researchers in the field of English-language teaching as well as in other fields. The questions of whether distance learning will be as effective as learning in a classroom setting and whether face-to-face instruction will maintain its dominant position in content delivery are only two of the widely discussed topics recently (Bonk, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, the present study deals with the question of how EFL learners are coping in virtual classrooms at a public university in Turkey. There were already a number of stressors for language learners at universities before the pandemic. Poor motivation and poor English proficiency levels of Turkish students when they start their university education were only two pressing problems as reported by a recent project (British Council/TEPAV, 2015).

Particularly in the past two decades, foreign-language motivation has been a topic of growing interest amongst researchers across the

world (Boo et al., 2015; Bower, 2019). A vast array of studies indicated that students with high motivation and who use learning strategies effectively are more likely to have good academic performance (Lamb, 2017; Lasagabaster, 2011; Soodmand Afshar et al., 2014; Sung, 2013). However, carrying out research on motivation is complicated and multifaceted by nature (Bower, 2019) and given the current circumstances, very little is yet known about the effect of emergency remote teaching (ERT) on language learners' academic motivation and their grades (Hernández & Flórez, 2020; Rinekso & Muslim, 2020). Moreover, studies focusing on the development of the four principal language skills in relation to students' motivation changes within a period of one academic term during a pandemic are rare. The purpose of this study is therefore to examine the impact of EFL learners' learning experiences in a virtual classroom on their academic motivation and achievement as well as to explore the reasons for their motivation changes and their perspectives of learning a foreign language online at a state university in Turkey. More specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ₁: Is motivation a significant predictor of academic achievement amongst EFL learners in a digital language classroom?

RQ₂: Does motivation change over time amongst EFL learners in a digital language classroom?

RQ₃: Does academic achievement change over time amongst EFL learners in a digital language classroom?

RQ₄: What reasons do EFL learners in a digital language classroom give for their motivation changes over time?

Literature Review

The extant literature includes a large number of studies conducted in different contexts and at every education level, but to enable a practical coverage of the selected studies, they are presented in three subsections. After motivation sets a general background to the current study, previous studies in the literature will be summarised under online teaching and academic achievement.

2.1 Motivation

Because it is one of the main triggers for human beings in all their actions, motivation has always succeeded in receiving attention from researchers in various fields. After early studies in the subject set out with a social psychological approach built on Gardner's motivation theory (Lambert, 1972 as cited in Dörnyei, 1994), Dörnyei (1994) argued that Gardner's motivation theory lacked an educational dimension in the field of foreign-language teaching. Finding that Gardner's theory did not cover the foreign language aspect correctly, Dörnyei extended it to apply it to the second-language learning field in an attempt to connect it with practising educators. He conceptualised a three-level framework of L2 motivation: "the *Language Level*, the *Learner Level* and the *Learning Situation Level*" (1994, p. 279, emphasis in the original). Referring to the context-specific nature of language motivation, Dörnyei (1994) stated that "To put it simply, the exact nature of the social and pragmatic dimensions of L2 motivation is always dependent on *who* learns *what* languages *where*." (p. 275, emphasis in the original).

Whether it occurs before or during a pandemic, studies on motivation in language learning are far from scarce. Among the most widely investigated variables related to motivation are gender, age, the starting age of learning a language and distance versus face-to-face education. In their comprehensive review of journal articles and book chapters (n= 416) on L2 motivation, Boo et al. (2015) identified three phases in L2 motivation research between 2005 and 2014. An initial phase in the early 1990s with a social psychological perspective was followed by a second phase in the later 1990s during which a move from social psychological origins to contemporary cognitive and educational psychology was observed. The final phase in the twenty-first century is a period in which more contextual and dynamic aspects of learner motivation have attracted interest from researchers across the globe.

Online teaching

Whilst motivation was already an intriguing topic with its multifaceted nature and layered dimensions, each of which deserves to be studied on their own even in simpler times, it has become even more complicated with the outbreak of COVID-19 affecting education systems along with many other aspects of life. A new research path has emerged with language learning being moved to online platforms as language

learner motivation now has to be investigated within the added dimension of compulsory online learning. Undoubtedly there were studies on distance education and its effects on students and/or teachers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and these studies will be discussed below. However, with the impact of the novel coronavirus, terms such as 'distance education', 'online teaching' and 'e-learning' have started to be used interchangeably even though there are specific differences between them. Yet another term, 'emergency remote teaching' has gained popularity during this time of crisis. Hodges et al. (2020) defined ERT as "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances" (p. 7). Differentiating between distance education and ERT, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) also explained that "Apparently, while distance education has always been an alternative and flexible option for learners, emergency remote teaching is an obligation, which means that we have to use different strategies and approach the case with different priorities" (p. 2). Bearing these differences in the terminology of the distance education literature in mind, this study will use 'online teaching' as an umbrella term to refer to educational activities during the pandemic. The physical separation of teachers and students from their school environment is operational for this study.

In a relatively early example of pre-pandemic online learning studies, Mohammadi et al. (2011) compared face-to-face and online language learning and summarised that the main advantage of e-learning is the increased engagement, attendance and motivation of students. Even if it has its setbacks, such as decreased social relations and interaction between students and teachers as well as technical limitations, distance education can reduce both costs and time. With a greater focus on learner motivation, Zhao and Mei (2016) compared 162 American and 210 Chinese college students' motivation differences in an online learning environment and identified significant learning motivation differences between the two groups. Motivation was affected by characteristics such as gender, employment status and marital status. The American students showed significantly higher overall motivation scores than the Chinese students, showing that cultural orientation also had distinct effects on learner motivation. From a psychological perspective, Cakir et al. (2018) explored the levels of motivation during distance education of 183 Turkish university students and their satisfaction from online learning. Three motivation levels –low, medium

and high– were identified, showing a significant relationship between motivation levels and satisfaction, whilst content analysis showed various themes with both positive and negative sentiments. With a focus on online learning strategies used by EFL learners, Laachir (2019) investigated the use of strategy of 95 undergraduate English major students and their online learning experiences. He found that e-learning helped them to develop language skills including communication skills and problem solving skills as well as the four key language skills. On the whole, the students found that e-learning saved time and money and provided them with flexibility of time and place and the possibility of revisiting the lessons. In addition, students thought that e-learning was an enjoyable way of learning and they preferred it to traditional learning.

The studies that have been presented so far were all pre-pandemic. While they analysed learner motivation with various foci, the studies that will be presented below did so during the pandemic. Therefore, the focus of these studies regarding motivation may have slightly shifted as there is now obligatory circumstances.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, Pastor (2020) explored synchronous online delivery of instruction in the Philippines to gauge students' sentiments. The results showed that the majority of the students were not yet ready to accept a synchronous mode of delivery and 66.55% had a negative view of synchronous instructional delivery. The students highlighted technical problems and limited internet access as issues which would prevent them from maintaining their studies. In another attempt to gain insights into the impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning through English during the initial times of the pandemic, Cicillini and Giacosa (2020) analysed English-medium instruction lecturers' and students' perceptions of the transition from in-person teaching to ERT by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from 100 students and 49 lecturers at 14 universities in Italy. The findings showed that both the students and the lecturers were less satisfied with online classes and preferred face-to-face classes as online classes lacked particular elements such as interaction, discussions and campus life. Additionally, Rinekso and Muslim (2020) interviewed five master's students in an English education study programme to identify their perceptions of and challenges in synchronous online discussions. Both positive and negative responses were obtained from the students in

terms of their motivation towards the use of synchronous online discussions.

Academic achievement

The academic achievement of language learners has also been studied as one of the factors that is thought to affect learners' motivation in their language learning processes. One such study investigated the relationship between the instrumental motivation, critical thinking, autonomy and academic achievement of 100 Iranian EFL learners (Soodmand Afshar et al., 2014). The findings showed positive relationships between critical thinking, instrumental motivation, autonomy and academic achievement in addition to the result that critical thinking was the significantly stronger predictor of academic achievement, with autonomy coming second and instrumental motivation third. It was also found that the learners with a high GPA were those who received a high score in instrumental motivation whereas those with a low GPA received a low score, which showed that academic achievement and motivation are related. In a Turkish context, Kılıç et al. (2020) studied motivation in the classroom to determine the factors affecting students' motivation. They created a four-dimensional model consisting of 'learning & teaching factor', 'factors during the lesson', 'the evaluation element' and 'educational environment & material' and tested it in a qualitative case study with 6 university students. The results showed that all four factors were effective on learners' motivation.

Methodology

This study used the explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design. The rationale for using this design was its advantage to researchers who are investigating a topic by collecting quantitative data and using qualitative data to explain or expand on the results from the first phase of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Participants

The Preparatory Year Foreign Language Programme (PYP) in which students were enrolled was designed to prepare students over two terms so that they could study their academic subjects through English.

Students who reached the target level of B2 successfully at the end of the eight-month programme could pass straight to their departmental courses. The development of all four language skills is central to instruction and assessment in the programme. Those who fail at the end of the year can take a repeat programme for another year.

The sample comprised 83 (57.6%) male and 61 (42.4%) female students with a mean age of 19.22 years (range = 18-47 SD = 2.99). Altogether, therefore, 144 students in a school of foreign languages at a state university in Turkey participated in this study. Over the course of data collection by online survey, criterion sampling was adopted and only those students who had been placed into pre-intermediate level groups at the beginning of the fall term were included. Semi-structured interviews were held with ten selected students in the last week of March 2021. For selecting the interviewees, maximum variation sampling was employed. The study team analysed the changes in students' motivation scores and purposefully selected five students whose motivation had decreased dramatically and five others with the highest motivational increase over the term.

Instruments

The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) is a self-report instrument developed to assess university students' motivational orientations for a course (Pintrich et al., 1993). There are two sections in the scale, a motivation measure and a learning strategies measure. The scale was adapted into Turkish by Büyüköztürk et al. (2004) in a sample of 852 university students. The motivation section comprises 31 items assessing learners' beliefs about the skills needed to be successful in a course as well as the anxiety which they feel about tests in the course. The motivation scale contains six sub-scales with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.52 to 0.86. Participants rate themselves on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 ('not at all true of me') to 7 ('very true of me'). Some of the items were worded negatively as they are in the original questionnaire. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha values showed good levels of reliability from pre- to post-tests, ranging from .87 to .84 (George & Mallery, 2019).

Students' language development in English was measured using their pre- and post-test scores on skill-based exams. Listening and speaking (LS) and reading and writing (RW) exams used to be face-to-face

in the preparatory school in which the study was conducted, but as a response to the ongoing pandemic, the exams as well as the teaching were moved online. The LS exams took place using a video-communication service in which students listen to and answer topic-based and impromptu questions and discuss a variety of topics taken partly from their course books with an interlocutor for about ten minutes. There was also an independent assessor in the virtual exam room. The RW exams, on the other hand, were carried out in real-time using free survey administration software and lasted for 90 minutes. This section included questions designed to test readings skills such as scanning for main ideas, understanding the author's attitude and skimming for details. It also comprised writing tasks which required students to respond to various situations by writing answers ranging from a couple of sentences to a whole paragraph. The LS and RW exam scores were merged to make one midterm (pre-test proficiency score) and one end-of-term exam score (post-test proficiency score).

In order to understand the reasons for any decrease or increase in students' motivation levels, ten semi-structured interviews were carried out using video-communication software. The researchers developed a set of five questions to acquire insights into the students' motivation changes in a digital language classroom. The questions were: (1) What is the source of your motivation change from the beginning of the term to the end of the term? (2) What do you think the effect of your motivation has been on your grades? (3) What would have contributed to your motivation if anything had been done differently in the fall term? (4) Retrospectively, what do you think the strengths and weaknesses of online learning are? and (5) If the school administration made a decision to move all classes to online permanently, what would your stance on the issue be?

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected at the beginning and end of the fall term of the 2020-2021 academic year. An email explaining the research aims, participants' rights and the storage of participants' data was sent to 244 students. The email also included a link to an online survey collecting students' motivation scores. Consent to take part in the study was obtained from 148 of the 244 students approached. The data of four students were subsequently excluded as those students did not sit some

of the exams. Data were therefore analysed only for 144 students who completed both surveys in their entirety and sat all the exams throughout the fall term. The data collected from the participants were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22. In order to run the appropriate statistical tests, all data were checked for normality of distribution. The effect size for each group was computed using Cohen's *d*.

In order to gain more insights into the changes in students' motivation, ten semi-structured interviews were administered using video-communication software in March 2021. The interviews each took between eight and eleven minutes to complete. All interviewees were asked the same questions in the same order. To systematise and interpret the qualitative data (Creswell, 2011), thematic analysis was used. The researchers identified the themes at the semantic level. First, each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researchers. To familiarise themselves with the data, the researchers read the data repeatedly and transcripts from each interview were analysed systematically to generate the initial codes. Next, the study team identified the themes. The researchers then reviewed and finalised the themes.

The study involved a number of ethical considerations. First, the necessary permission to use the Turkish version of the MSLQ was applied for and received by email. Second, ethical approval for this study was given on 4 November 2020 by the Research and Publication Committee on Ethics at the university where the study was conducted. Third, in addition to the online survey data, students' grades were also obtained from the school administration. Fourth, all the respondents and interviewees were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary. Finally, the participants were informed that they could terminate their participation without explanation at any time during the study.

Results

To understand the size of the correlation between the means on motivation scale and achievement scores, first the pre- and post-test scores for each variable were merged. A correlation matrix for the motivation and achievement variables showing the correlation coefficients is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Correlation matrix*

		Motivation	Achievement
Motivation	Pearson correlation	1	.318
	Sig. (2 tailed)		.000
	N	144	144
Achievement	Pearson correlation		1
	Sig. (2 tailed)		
	N		144

The Pearson's correlation coefficients showed a moderate positive correlation between motivation and academic achievement ($r = .318$, $p = .000$) (George & Mallery, 2019). The higher the motivation levels of students, the higher their grades were. Furthermore, to determine whether overall motivation was a significant predictor of students' grades, the data were subjected to a simple linear regression analysis.

Table 2*Regression results for academic motivation level on grades*

Variable	B	95% CI	β	t	p
Constant	46.296	8.224		5.629	.000
Overall motivation	6.215	1.556	.318	3.994	.000

Simple linear regression was carried out to examine the relationship between motivation and the EFL learners' grades. The analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables ($F(1, 142) = 15.950$, $p = .000 < .05$) and a positive increase in motivation level reflected a positive increase in the students' grades. The R^2 value was .101 so 10.1% of the variance in academic achievement scores can be explained by a model containing only the foreign-language motivation scores.

The study also sought to understand changes in motivation and academic achievement over the course of the fall term. Paired-sample t

tests were therefore conducted to compare the changes in the language learners' motivation levels and grades over the term.

Table 3

Changes in motivation and grades

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>
Pre-test motivation	144	5.33	.58	.049
Post-test motivation	144	5.18	.67	.056
Pre-test achievement	144	81.13	11.08	.92
Post-test achievement	144	76.77	13.13	1.09

As can be seen in Table 3, there was a significant difference between the pre- ($M = 5.33$, $SD = .58$) and post-test ($M = 5.18$, $SD = .67$) motivation scores [$t(143) = 3.47$, $p = .001$, $d = .29$]. Specifically, the results suggest that students' motivation to learn English decreased over time. As shown in Table 3, the results also indicated a significant difference [$t(143) = 5.42$, $p = .000$, $d = 0.45$] between pre-test ($M = 81.13$, $SD = 11.08$) and post-test grades ($M = 76.77$, $SD = 13.13$).

To gain insights into the reasons behind students' motivation change and their learning experiences in a virtual language classroom, the interview data were transcribed and three broad themes were identified: motivation-related factors, negative attitudes towards online learning and the benefits of online learning. One key characteristic which all the themes had in common is that all the interviewees would prefer face-to-face learning if they had a choice and they believed that both in-class and out-of-class interaction was limited in online learning. The three themes are discussed next.

The theme of motivation-related factors included the positive effect of intrinsic motivation on grades, the positive effect of grades on motivation, motivation loss due to grades and motivation loss due to online learning. Some students reported that their intrinsic motivation helped them to improve their grades. Others explained that in addition to other factors, they were specifically demotivated by remote teaching. It was not only motivation that affected their grades, high and low grades also reportedly affected motivation. To represent each code, some example quotations are provided below:

The source of my motivation increase was that I did not get the scores I had expected, so I made promises to myself. I said to myself that I was not going to fail. (20-year-old male student with increased motivation)

At the beginning of the term, I was so eager to learn English. My motivation decreased in time, but later I realised that I had actually improved [my skills] and this strengthened my motivation to learn. (20-year-old male student with decreased motivation)

Over the course of the term, as topics got harder to learn, my motivation might have decreased. When things get harder for me, I start to feel under stress, I think I cannot do it. That's why my grades get worse. (20-year-old female student with decreased motivation)

In the morning I feel sleepy, I understand some 30% of the course [content], but if I were at school, I would be able to come to myself at least by drinking a cup of coffee. Honestly, I try to do so at home too, but it is not as it is in real life because of the computer. (19-year-old male student with increased motivation)

The negative attitude towards learning English was the second theme and it covered the feeling of loneliness due to limited interaction, an insufficient number of classes, distractions for students in the home environment, income inequality, technical issues and students' unwillingness to actively participate. Some excerpts are given below to represent each code:

I have been in online classes before, in my high school years. After some time, I feel too bored [in online classes]. [...] I am alone at home and studying English. I do not know if I am doing it right or wrong. Now I am talking, but I am quite shy in classes. Normally, I write my answers in my notebook [in face-to-face classes] and wait for my friends to answer. Here [in virtual classes] I cannot engage and this is why I am absent from classes, I guess. (19-year-old female student with decreased motivation)

Frankly, the number of classes is not sufficient for me. If I had more classes, I would have been able to practise what I had just learned in the class, If I got help from my teachers, I would be more successful. (18-year-old female student with increased motivation)

I get distracted very easily. I log in to the system and hear some TV noise from the next room. My mother comes in and [says] 'Son, the call is for you'. Honestly, distractions occur too often. [...] Corrupted internet connections sometimes [break]. (19-year-old male student with decreased motivation)

I came here with [a good knowledge of] English and I do not think people [students] who came here with no English [with no prior linguistic knowledge in English] will be able to make good progress [in a virtual classroom]. This is really not fair for them. They will have to receive extra tutoring [outside the normal school timetable]. (19-year-old female student with decreased motivation)

This process is new to us all! It has never been like this before. First of all, interrupted [internet] connection and electricity amongst others give us some trouble. (20-year-old female student with decreased motivation)

Students have the tendency to keep their cameras off and this negatively affects teachers' motivation. (20-year-old male student with decreased motivation)

The final theme was the benefit of online learning and included saving time and money, being less stressful and fewer negative influences by disruptive classmates. The interviews highlighted that online teaching creates some extra time for students and that self-conscious students can benefit from time management and self-paced learning. In an attempt to represent each code, some example quotations are provided below:

There is no problem as everyone mutes their microphones. You know, sometimes students whisper to each other [in physical classrooms], this does not happen here [in virtual classrooms]. Disruption in classroom [and] whispering

students can obstruct other students [in face-to-face classrooms]. Students who want to concentrate on their studies can do so [in digital classrooms]. (20-year-old male student with increased motivation)

When it [teaching] is virtual, students do not feel much of a pressure on them. (20-year-old male student with decreased motivation)

Considering timesaving, it takes two and sometimes two and a half hours to commute to school. Getting dressed, leaving home [and] so on. This is a very good thing in this respect. Face-to-face could have been better though. (20-year-old male student with decreased motivation)

I can say the one strength [of online learning] is that we have more time as we are generally at home. (20-year-old female student with decreased motivation)

Discussion

Approaches to learning and teaching never cease to change and schools have been put to the test in their activities in order to adapt to the new normal. Meanwhile, language classrooms have been struggling to maintain the quality of education which they provide because unlike some other domains, in foreign-language teaching and learning, maximising interaction is a fundamental component. Even though online teaching offers a variety of forms of interaction, benefitting from them may not be as simple as it sounds and a heavy responsibility lies with teachers in this regard. Rapanta et al. (2020) investigated possible ways to help university teachers with little online teaching experience to teach more effectively in digital classrooms. Their study emphasised the importance of interactive learning activities and self-paced tasks as well as the teacher's responsibility to mediate the use of digital resources.

When the quantitative results of the current study are evaluated in relation to those of the previous studies mentioned above, it is seen that the present study elicited results that are both in line with and different from those in the literature. First, in terms of the relationship between students' motivation and academic achievement, this study resulted in a moderate positive correlation. It can be deduced that the

higher motivation levels the students have, the higher grades they get. When associated with academic achievement, this result is in line with those of Soodmand Afshar et al. (2014) who also reported that learners with a high score in instrumental motivation had a high GPA whereas those with a low score had a low GPA. Kılıç et al. (2020) also found that students' success is affected by their motivation. In addition, Soodmand Afshar et al. (2014) showed that instrumental motivation was a significantly strong predictor of academic achievement, which is a parallel result to those of the current study. A key finding of the current study is that the motivation of students studying in an online-only environment predicted academic achievement, that is to say, a positive increase in motivation level was reflected in a positive increase in students' grades. This finding is in line with recent evidence on EFL learners' motivation during face-to-face learning reported by Lasagabaster (2011) and Soodmand Afshar et al. (2014). The present study also showed a significant tendency for the language learners' motivation and grades in a virtual classroom to decrease. It can therefore be inferred that students who lack self-direction and whose emerging needs during online learning are not readily responded to are less likely to maintain their interest in learning independently over the course of an academic term. A growing number of studies have stated that students are more successful in maintaining their motivation and academic success when technical issues are quickly resolved (Rinekso & Muslim, 2020) and effective academic advice is provided (Hu, 2020).

In terms of the qualitative results of the study, there are extensive commonalities with the literature. First, students' negative attitude towards online learning seems to outweigh positive outcomes in the present study as well as in the wider literature. Kılıç et al. (2020) referred to social rewards as spiritual motivations which help students to feel good, such as laughing and eye contact, which were reported as disadvantages by the participants of the current study as online classes lack such elements. Rinekso and Muslim (2020) referred to the same issue in line with the current findings. Their participants concluded that the lecturer's attitude and social interaction during the classes affected their overall motivation and that it is important when the lecturer makes the classes fun and attractive. Group cohesion as a concept mentioned by Dörnyei (1994) seemed to be proposed by the participants of the current study as well since they expressed their feelings of loneliness

during online classes and they missed feeling that they belonged to a group or class. Laachir (2019) also reported negative attitudes from his participants saying that traditional learning helped them to interact with their colleagues and teachers and to get feedback, which is a result which agrees with those of this study. Additionally, Mohammadi et al. (2011) also concluded that online learning decreases social relations among learners and between learners and the teacher. Cicillini and Giacosa (2020) reported similar results from their participants as they commented that they missed live classes, human contact and interaction with lecturers. The findings of Cakir et al. (2018) also concur with those of the current study in terms of various motivation level groups. Their low- and medium-level motivation participants reported a lack of interaction and negative perceptions and their dependence on conventional education, which was also found in the current study. Finally, dissatisfied students in Cakir et al.'s (2018) study also mentioned problems of internet access which again was found in the current study. The findings of Pastor (2020) and Rinekso and Muslim (2020) are also in line with those of the current study in terms of students' connectivity problems. Another setback which can be discussed in relation to the literature is the income inequality among students which was also an issue highlighted by one of the participants in this study. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) made a similar finding, commenting that "as shameful as it is, we see that the digital divide is still a threat and many still suffer from unavailable educational opportunities" (p. 3). Pastor (2020) and Bonacini et al. (2021) also reported financial issues of students in terms of being able to afford an internet connection.

On the other hand, it can be commented that even if the pandemic during March 2020 caused serious problems in terms of conducting educational practices and ERT was adopted as an immediate response to the lockdown restrictions, the passage from ERT to online learning in the academic year 2020-2021 has been managed in a better way as schools had more preparation time to adjust to online teaching methods and to reduce technological concerns prior to the academic year. This, in return, seems to have affected the students' approach to online classes, for positive outcomes also emerged from this study. Participants reported that online classes are better in terms of saving time and money, which is a finding parallel to those of Laachir (2019) and Mohammadi et al. (2011). Cakir et al. (2018) reported from their high

motivation level group that distance education is free from time and space and suitable for reviewing classes in addition to providing effective learning and meeting the requirements of this information age. These results seem to be in line with those of the current study in terms of online classes providing flexibility. One contradictory result was that the participants in the present study unanimously stated that given the chance, they would prefer face-to-face teaching to online classes, whereas the participants in Laachir's study (2019) favoured online over traditional learning.

Conclusions

The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature on motivation in foreign-language learning by reporting on the changes in EFL learners' motivation and grades in a virtual classroom over the course of an academic term. This study provides evidence that students' motivation in an online learning environment decreases over time. Furthermore, low motivation was found to be a significant predictor of poor academic performance. It has also been shown that all the interviewees reacted to a change in the mode of teaching delivery, that is to say, a transition from synchronous online teaching to face-to-face teaching. They also did not believe that a digital classroom can be as interactive as a traditional classroom. The present study concludes with some implications for research and practice.

One of the pedagogical implications is that students' worries can be eased if they are helped remotely to socialise with their friends because the students expressed their mounting concerns about the feeling of loneliness and having difficulty in overcoming obstacles without the help of their peers and teacher. Clearly, with no prior face-to-face meeting with their teachers and peers, the students had failed to form close bonds at school. Ultimately, this adversely affected their academic motivation and without strong motivation, it is highly unlikely to ensure high academic achievement regardless of whether students have remarkable abilities. Another important point is that the students seemed to be more in need of beneficial self-study habits in remote teaching settings. Considering that most students interact only when the class meets or maybe only during office hours, teachers should devote constant effort to mitigating these negative effects. Another major implication which emerged from the analysis of the quantitative and

qualitative data is that there is a strong association between good grades and high motivation. Therefore, especially the first exam results of students with relatively low scores should be analysed carefully and teachers should attempt to diagnose those students' needs, otherwise, students' decreasing motivation trend will be more difficult to reverse in the coming weeks.

Despite students' decreasing academic motivation and grades and their criticisms of remote teaching, online teaching seems very likely to continue in our schools in varying forms and modes. More studies are therefore required to gain insights into the weaknesses of online teaching in its current form and further experimental studies should be carried out on ways to promote student learning as well as to address students' concerns. Motivation can be quite context-specific, so additional studies are necessary with regard to traditional on-campus learning, learning at a distance and a combination of the two. Finally, cross-cultural studies are needed for a deeper understanding of language learners' motivation on the quality of their learning experience in blended and distance learning settings.

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