

Let's Give Ear to the University Students Attending and Not Attending Synchronous Online Lessons!

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ABSTRACT

Seeing that an overwhelming number of the students enrolled in the courses she offered did not attend the synchronous online lessons, the researcher felt the need for carrying out this qualitative case study to investigate the reasons behind it from the perspective of not only the non-attending but also attending students. Two qualitative surveys were conducted to collect the data. One was prepared for the students ($n = 20$) regularly attending the online lessons and the other was developed for the students ($n = 20$) who did not attend the lessons. The findings showed that low levels of student motivation, absence of compulsory attendance, and technical problems were reasons for the low level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons.

KEYWORDS

Attending University Students, Non-Attending University Students, Synchronous Online Lessons, University Students, University Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The delivery mode of teaching has drastically changed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic for it has mandated online teaching at all levels of education including university level education. That has brought along considerable challenges to university teachers as the ones who have not experienced online teaching before have been caught unprepared for it. In the face of the pandemic, university teachers have offered their courses through teaching a/synchronously, giving assignments and/or having students carry out projects. As well as university teachers, university students, used to receiving face-to-face teaching, have experienced difficulties in getting accustomed to online teaching.

The necessity of adapting to online education has come along with attending online lessons on the part of university students. Even if it could be alleged online lessons would lead to more student attendance due to joining them in the comfort of their rooms, it might not be the case in several contexts, one of which is that of the present study. The researcher realized that there was a low level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons she taught, and therefore, she decided to probe

DOI: 10.4018/IJAET.315775

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the reasons behind it from the standpoint of the students who did not attend them, and that of the students who joined them regularly. The absence of research on what this research aims to investigate indicates the significance of this study and the findings to be presented could be taken into account by university teachers teaching in diverse contexts in the process of designing of their online lessons and encourage them to explore why there is low level of student attendance to synchronous online lessons and how to increase it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Teaching and Student Engagement

Online teaching, having gained unprecedented popularity as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic among students, teachers, parents, administrators and researchers, is the teaching conducted in virtual environments by the use of digital tools. The shift in the mode of teaching and, contingent with that, in the mode of learning has marked the closure of an era and the start of another one notably for the university teachers and students who have had no direct experience of online teaching and learning before. The transition to online environments to teach might prompt disparate emotions in higher education teachers, depending on the toughness or goodness of particular online teaching experiences. For instance, Naylor and Nyanjom (2020) reported that the higher education teachers transitioning to online teaching felt diverse emotions, rooted in the amount of support provided by the institutions they worked for. The level of online teacher motivation is a crucial parameter to enable student engagement in online classes. Drawing the attention to the growing prominence of the term student engagement in higher education, Baron and Corbin (2012) suggested the need for exploring university students' views about their disengagement. The study by Chiu (2021) showed that employing digital support strategies could help increase the level of student engagement in emergency situations.

According to Gourlay (2015), student engagement means “practices which are observable, verbal, communal and indicative of participation...” (p. 410). Student engagement is perceived to be important in attaining knowledge (James, 2017) and improving the quality of learning (Frost, 2008; Papastergiou et al., 2011) and teaching (Leach, 2016). Such an essential construct could be activated by the learning activities promoting it (James, 2018), the use of online flipped classes (Jia et al., 2021), devolving responsibility to students for their own learning (McMullen, 2014) and incorporating creativity into coursework (Miller, 2018). The teaching techniques such as problem-based learning and small class discussions generally applied in small-size classes are found to be effective in large classes and to result in the increase in student engagement (Exeter et al., 2010). Because students engaged with their studies are more prone to attain success in them (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), a wide range of studies examining student engagement in higher education have been undertaken (Kahu, 2013). For example, forum-based online teaching was demonstrated to enhance university student engagement and motivation (Kang & Zhang, 2020). The use of social media positively influences the college student engagement (Dragseth, 2020; Kunka, 2020). Teachers and their online instructional practices are of high significance in enabling active student participation. To exemplify, Almarghani and Mijatovic's study (2017) suggested student engagement could be encouraged by the efforts of teachers employing active learning techniques. It was reported in Boonstra et al.'s (2020) study that teacher behaviors in highly engaging lessons were different from the ones in less engaging ones. In highly engaging lessons, teachers initiated their lessons with enthusiasm and scaffolded their students as they work on the activities, whilst in the poorly engaging lessons, the way teachers started their lessons were demotivating. Online technology and pedagogy offer online teachers the chance to better scaffold students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement (Harris et al., 2020). To illustrate, the research conducted by Hernández et al. (2021) revealed that interactive communication tools and the online instructor played important roles in student engagement.

Student Participation in Online Lessons

Student participation in online lessons may be espoused to be linked with teachers and students' expectations of each other and the responsibilities they assume. It was reported in Özkara and Çakır's (2018) study that interaction facilitated by collaborative learning and computer mediated communication tools was shown to influence college students' level of participation in an online environment alongside reducing drop-out rate. In addition, students' adopting the role of an e-tutor positively impacts on their active participation in online courses (Sansone et al., 2018). Student participation in an online learning environment can be fostered through self-regulation scaffolding (Song & Kim, 2020), and according to Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005), it can be affected by technology and interface characteristics, content area experience, student roles, instructional tasks and information overload. In Rocca's (2010) study, the factors affecting student participation were reported to be student confidence, the instructor, logistics, supportive classroom environment and sex. Low level of online participation may negatively impinge impact on online student success. To illustrate, in Rubio et al.'s research (2018), it was revealed to adversely affect student grade on the course.

Seeing that there was a low level of student attendance (In this research, student attendance means joining synchronous online lessons) to the synchronous online courses she offered in the spring term of 2020/2021 academic year, the researcher arrived at the decision to uncover the reasons the non-attending students have for not joining the lessons to make the necessary tailoring in her teaching, and in return, to increase the number of students joining her lessons. To gain deeper insights into why the majority of the students did not attend to the online lessons, the views of the students regularly attending to the online lessons on the issue were explored as well. In light of the purposes of this research, two research questions were produced:

1. Why did the majority of the students not attend the synchronous online lessons?
2. What advantages did the few students regularly attending the synchronous online lessons gain from them?

METHODOLOGY

The Study and Context

This qualitative case study was conducted to investigate the reasons behind the low-level of university student attendance to the synchronous online lessons. As is stated by Creswell (2012), "the researcher seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of the case" (p. 465), and gaining an in-depth understanding of why there was a low level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons is what is sought in this study.

The researcher taught four courses in the department of English Language Teaching of a state university in Turkey in the spring term (lasting for 15 weeks) of the academic year 2020/2021. The objectives of the courses she offered and the teaching techniques she applied are displayed in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the researcher, the lecturer of the courses, followed a student-centered teaching rather than lecture-based teaching as conducting the lessons. The university in which this study was carried out informed the lecturers at the beginning of the term that at least 50% of the lessons in each course had to be taught synchronously by using the university's learning management system or ZOOM whereas the other 50% could be offered through teaching asynchronously, meaning by uploading videos of the recorded lessons to the system of the university, and assigning homework and/or project-work to students. The lecturer preferred to offer the four courses completely synchronously on ZOOM as it was more practical than the learning management system of the university, and the learning management system did not have a component enabling group work like the one in ZOOM, breakout rooms. The taught lessons were recorded on videos and uploaded to the distance education system of the university for the students who did not attend the lessons. The university in which this

Table 1. Information on the courses taught by the researcher

Course	Course Objectives	Teaching techniques
Reading Skills II (First-year course; two hours per week)	This course is designed to help pre-service English teachers develop their skills in drawing logical inferences through deductive and inductive reasoning, reading between lines, and comprehending literal and figurative meaning. This course, additionally, aims at supporting pre-service English teachers in developing their ability to express their opinions regarding the reading either orally or in written form.	Whole class and group discussions on the selected texts through using breakout rooms
Pragmatics and English Language Teaching (Second-year course; two hours per week)	This course is designed to aid pre-service English teachers in learning the core concepts of pragmatics, in learning to apply politeness theory to English language teaching, and in learning to prepare materials to teach context-bound utterances to English language learners.	Lectures on the concepts of pragmatics elaborated by questions & answers on the excerpts, exemplifying the concepts, and student presentations on the lesson plans they designed for the teaching of the speech act they selected.
Teaching English to Young Learners II (Third-year course; three hours per week)	This course targets helping pre-service English teachers learn and practice how to teach language skills, grammar and vocabulary to young learners. Another aim of this course is to equip pre-service English teachers with the skills of managing young learner classes effectively.	Whole class and group discussions carried out in breakout rooms on the assigned readings on teaching language skills and systems to young learners, and student microteaching.
Assessment and Evaluation in English Language Teaching (Fourth-year course; three hours per week)	This course is designed to assist pre-service English teachers in learning about how to assess language skills of English language learners of different ages by covering language assessment approaches. In addition, this course will be a platform for pre-service English teachers to broaden their knowledge of the question formats used to assess English language learners' learning, the techniques for test/exam preparation and the criteria for scoring and grading.	Whole class and group discussions on language assessment concepts carried out by breakout rooms, discussions on the appropriateness of the chosen language tests to measure language learner abilities, and group presentations the achievement tests they prepared.

research was carried out did not require attendance to the synchronous online lessons; therefore, attendance to them was not compulsory. The students who did not attend the synchronous online lessons checked the distance education system and watched the uploaded videos when they wished. The communication tools used by the lecturer to contact the students during the term were e-mails, Whatsapp messages, announcements and messages through the distance education system and phone calls. One midterm exam and final exam were administered for each course to measure how much students learned. Aside from the impact of students' midterm and final exam scores on their final grade, second-year students' performance on their presentations, third-year students' performance on their microteaching and fourth-year students' performance on the achievement tests they prepared constituted 20% of their final exam score.

There was a low level of attendance to all the courses, showing almost no change in the students attending and not attending the lessons during the term. Table 2 demonstrates the number of students who joined the lessons and that of the students who did not attend the lessons.

Table 2 shows that the level of attendance to the courses was truly low. Of a total of 67 students enrolled in the course of Reading Skills II, only 11 first-year students joined the synchronous online lessons, out of 103 second-year students recruited in the course of Pragmatics and English Language Teaching, 27 students regularly joined the online lessons. Of a total of 71 third-year students enrolled in the course of Teaching English to Young Learners II, 12 students attended the lessons and 15 of the 75 fourth-year students enrolled in Assessment and Evaluation in English Language Teaching course regularly joined the lessons.

Table 2. The number of attending and non-attending students

Course	Number of attending students		Number of non-attending students		Total number of students enrolled in the course (n)
	Female (n)	Male (n)	Female (n)	Male (n)	
Reading Skills II	8	3	41	15	67
Pragmatics and English Language Teaching	20	7	49	27	103
Teaching English to Young Learners II	8	4	41	18	71
Assessment and Evaluation in English Language Teaching	14	1	38	22	75

Before the start of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Board of the university in which this research was conducted. In the last week of the spring term, the qualitative survey for the non-attending students was e-mailed to randomly selected 20 non-attending students (five non-attending students for each course) who were given one week to fill it out and email it back to the researcher. In the email, the participants were encouraged to state their real opinions about the questions and it was pointed out that their answers would affect their final grade on the course neither positively nor negatively. The qualitative survey for the attending students was emailed to randomly chosen five students for each course who regularly attended the online lessons, meaning that it was emailed to 20 attending students in total. The attending students were also informed about the fact that their responses would exercise no effect on their final grade. The participants were notified in the e-mails that their filling out the survey would indicate their consent to take part in the study. All the 40 students who were emailed the surveys responded to them and sent them back to the researcher. In this research, peer debriefing was used to increase the credibility of the study by requesting an English language teacher educator to review all the stages of this research from the production of the survey questions to the analysis of the gathered data.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis

Qualitative Survey for the Non-Attending Students

A qualitative survey was developed by the researcher to unpack the non-attending students' views on why they did not join the synchronous online lessons and what could be done to have them attend the lessons. The survey questions along with the research questions were emailed to the teacher educator to make sure they served for finding answers to the research questions. Following the rephrasing made in the survey questions in accord with their comments, they were finalized. Below are the questions in the qualitative survey.

1. Why did you not join the online lessons? Please explain.
2. Did you regularly watch the uploaded videos of the conducted online lessons? If no, why?
3. If you regularly watched the uploaded videos of the conducted online lessons, why did you not join them?
4. What changes do you think I could make in my online lessons to increase student attendance to them?

The data was analyzed by subjecting it to thematic analysis through observing the phases proposed by Creswell (2012):

1. Participants' responses were read to get a sense of the whole.

2. The process of coding commenced and the list of codes was prepared.
3. The responses were reread not to ignore any code.
4. The number of codes in the list of the codes was reduced via merging the overlapping ones.
5. Themes were created from the codes and excerpts from the participants' responses were selected to corroborate the themes.

Qualitative Survey for the Attending Students

A qualitative survey was developed by the researcher to learn about what advantages the attending students gained from regularly attending the synchronous online lessons and to seek their conceptions of what could be done in the online lessons to increase the level of student attendance to them. The survey questions, finalized in light of the comments of the teacher educator, are as follows:

1. What advantages have you gained from joining the synchronous online lessons?
2. Why do you think the majority of students did not attend the online lessons?
3. What changes do you think I could make in my online lessons to increase student attendance to them?

The analysis of the collected data from the survey was performed adopting the stages the same as the ones mentioned in the preceding subsection.

FINDINGS

The Reasons the Non-Attending Students Had Not to Join the Synchronous Online Lessons

First-Year Students Taking the Course of Reading Skills II

The answers given by the first-year students to the question of why they did not attend the synchronous online lessons led to the development of the themes of technical problems and motivation-related problems. The codes leading to the production of the theme of technological problems are lack of internet connection, bad internet connection and not having a laptop. For instance, participant 2 stated:

There were problems with the internet infrastructure, and because of that, my internet speed is very low. So, when I attended the classes, sounds and images froze and I could not understand the lesson. I could just watch the uploaded videos and read documents when the internet got better.

The codes producing the theme of motivation-related problems were family responsibilities, not feeling like a student and unwillingness to attend online lessons. The response of participant 4 could concretize the opinions of the other students as to the reasons for not attending the online lessons, contributing to the production of the theme motivation-related problems: "I didn't feel like a university student. The room where I had prepared for the university exam and the room where I was supposed to attend the lessons is the same. That's why I did not join the lessons".

Given that investigating the attending students' views on why most participants did not join online lessons could enable a better understanding of the research question, the second question was added to the qualitative survey for the attending students. The responses of the attending students produced the themes of absence of compulsory participation and low level of student motivation. Participant 6 noted: "I believe most students join face-to-face lessons because attendance is compulsory but attendance to the online lessons was not compulsory. Therefore, they did not join them". First-year students who regularly attended the online lessons also pointed to the low level of student motivation by addressing students' preference to sleep all day rather than attending the lessons and referring to

their reluctance to take part in collaborative activities. Participant 9 claimed: “I think most of the students were not motivated. Only 6 or 8 students took part in the discussions and the others remained silent, and then, they decided to not join the lessons”.

First-year non-attending students were requested to provide information on if they had watched the uploaded videos regularly. They wrote down that they did not watch the uploaded videos regularly but watched them the week before the exam week to prepare for the exam. It was considered that more students could be attracted to the online lessons by making amendments in the way they were taught; for this reason, the attending and non-attending participants were demanded to state their ideas as to what changes could have been made to make the online lessons more appealing to the students. The non-attending students did not come up with any suggestion concerning what could have been done as they claimed that there was nothing that could be done to improve the quality of the online lessons. To them, the online lessons were of high-quality. The content analysis of the data collected from the attending students resulted in the themes of rescheduling the online lessons and compulsory attendance to online lessons. Reading skills II course was offered at 10:00 a.m., and it was suggested that if the lesson had been offered in the evenings, more students would have participated in the lessons. The attending students noted that the attendance policy applied to face-to-face teaching at the university had to be extended to synchronous online teaching. Participant 7 noted: “The only thing you can do is making the attendance obligatory”.

Second-Year Students Taking the Course of Pragmatics and English Language Teaching

The theme that developed from the content analysis of the answers of the second-year non-attending students to the question of why they did not join the lessons is low-level of motivation. Second-year students noted they lost their concentration easily in the online lessons. For instance, participant 12 stated:

Online classes are really hard for the students that are easily distracted like me. Once you lose focus, you can't understand anything and therefore you feel more depressed. This makes me feel like I'm wasting my time even though I'm not doing anything better when I don't attend the class.

Similarly, participant 13 stated:

I don't join the online lessons because it makes me feel awkward to meet the teacher when I am in my comfortable home mood. I think taking lessons is a serious business and should be done seriously. I can't get in the “lesson mood” at home.

The responses of the attending students to the question of why most students did not join the online lessons produced the themes of low-level of motivation and the absence of compulsory participation. The theme of low-level of motivation was produced as the attending second-year participants noted the non-attending students preferred sleeping or spending time on social media to joining the lessons. They also argued the availability of the recorded lessons decreased the level of student motivation to attend the synchronous online lessons. One of the attending students drew the attention to the issue that the students could get high marks even if they did not join the lessons, which, according to them, decreased student motivation: “Though many students don't participate or watch the recorded lessons, they get high marks on exams because they have a chance to cheat.”

The non-attending participants claimed in the responses they gave to the third question in the survey that they watched the uploaded videos regularly. What is more, they stated that even though they watched each lesson on the day it was taught, due to the explanations they provided on why they did not attend the online lessons, they did not join them.

The responses of the attending students to the question of what could have been done in the online lessons to increase student attendance led to the theme of making attendance mandatory. The attending participants pinpointed that unless attendance was compulsory, nothing would change in the low-level of student attendance to the online lessons to be taught in the future. The second-year non-attending participants did not put forward any suggestion on what changes could have been made in the way the online teaching was conducted.

Third-Year Students Taking the Course of Teaching English to Young Learners II

The content analysis of the explanations of the non-attending students on why they did not attend the online lessons produced the theme of not feeling the need for attending the online lessons. The recorded lessons were the reason for not attending the online lessons for the non-attending participants in that they had the opportunity for watching the videos later on. Participant 24 noted: "I did not attend to the online lessons because I could watch the videos whenever I wanted". The non-attending students stated in the second question of the survey that they did not watch the uploaded videos regularly; rather, they watched them as the exam dates approached with the purpose of getting a score enough to pass the course.

Similar to the comments of the non-attending students, the attending participants stated that having the chance to watch the videos of the recorded lessons was the major reason behind the low-level of student attendance. Consistent with that, their suggestions on how to increase student attendance led to the development of the themes of compulsory participation and reinforcing student attendance. To exemplify, participant 28 stated: "If you can give extra points to the students attending to the online lessons, more students can join them". The responses of the non-attending students to the question of what could have been done to get more students to attend the lessons indicated the students had no suggestion as to what changes could be made in the way online teaching was conducted for they thought how the online lessons were taught was of high-quality.

Fourth-Year Students Taking the Course of Assessment and Evaluation in English Language Teaching

The analysis of the responses of the fourth-year non-attending participants to the first survey question led to the production of the theme of technical problems. Three of the participants stated bad internet connection did not let them attend the online lessons, and two of them highlighted they had limited internet quota, which hindered them from attending them. According to the non-attending students, they found the videos they watched effective and there was nothing to fine-tune how teaching was conducted. The responses of the fourth-year non-attending students to the question of whether they watched the lesson videos regularly was answered in no. They pointed to the technical problems they confronted to explicate why they did not watch them regularly.

The fourth-year attending students' statements on the reasons the students might have had to not join the online lessons was having the chance to watch the uploaded videos later on and their preference for preparing for the Public Personnel Selection Exam on which graduates are to get the minimum score to be allocated as a teacher. Participant 37 stated: "I guess attendance was limited because most of the students would rather study for PPSE". The attending participants suggested to not upload the recorded lessons to the distance education system to make more students attend the lessons. According to the non-attending students, the way online teaching was conducted was effective and there was nothing to be improved in how teaching was conducted.

Advantages of Attending to the Online Lessons

The content analysis of the data obtained from the responses of the first-year attending students to the question of what advantages they got from joining the synchronous online lessons developed the theme of stimulating learning. The students highlighted that the online lessons enabled them to learn in comfortable learning environments, flexible learning and more opportunities for participation

during the lessons. One of the attending participants stated they were shy and since their camera was closed, they felt more comfortable. Three of them emphasized that because the number of students attending the online lessons was low, they felt comfortable, and accordingly, they participated in the lessons more, which was more productive for them. Participant 6 expressed: “Thanks to the online lessons few students joined, I participated in them more and talked more, too”. The common point touched upon by all the first-year attending students was flexible learning. Participant 8 highlighted they attended the online reading lessons and then went to work.

The content analysis of the advantages stated by the second-year attending students to be attained from regularly attending the online lessons developed the theme of facilitated learning. They noted they felt secure in the online lessons, which positively affected their learning. For example, participant 18 emphasized:

Since there was nobody around in the online lessons but myself, I felt more relaxed and I could speak as fluently as possible in the online lessons, yet in face-to-face lessons, though people around me are my friends, they make me feel a bit stressful.

In addition, it was underscored that it was possible to learn at their own pace in the online lessons, which boosted their learning and since the attendance level was low, it was possible to ask all the questions they had in their minds about the topics covered in the online lessons and to get the answers to them.

The content analysis of the third-year attending students’ expressions on what advantages they gained from the synchronous online lessons led to the production of the theme of promoting student learning. It was argued by participant 29 that the synchronous online lessons the researcher conducted resembled face-to-face teaching because they interacted with her and posed the questions they had in their minds, and the non-attending students were devoid of that. Therefore, they believed they learned better.

The analysis of the advantages of attending to the synchronous online lessons stated by the fourth-year attending students produced the theme of fostering learning. It was pointed out in the responses that they attended the online lessons at home, followed the lessons comfortably, and cooperated with the lecturer and their classmates in breakout rooms, which helped them enhance their learning.

DISCUSSION

The first research question to which answers were sought is why the majority of the students enrolled in the courses offered by the researcher did not join the synchronous online lessons. The findings obtained from the first question of the survey administered to first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year non-attending participants revealed that all of them had similar, if not the same, reasons for not joining the synchronous online lessons. Thematic analysis indicated that technical constraints were presented as handicaps the first- and fourth- year participants suffered from, which stopped them from attending the online lessons taught synchronously. Limited internet connectivity might stem from the location of students and/or their financial status, which should be surmounted to be able to provide equal opportunities to all students to benefit not only from face-to-face education but also online one. This finding confirms the results in Rocca’s (2010) research in that logistics was reported to be one of the factors impinging upon student participation. Another common issue stated by the first-, second, and third-year non-attending students was their low level of motivation. The participants noted that they were unmotivated to attend the online lessons as acting like a student was not realistic for them at home and they lost their concentration easily in front of the screen. As is alleged by James (2017), student engagement, which is closely linked to student motivation, performs a pivotal role in student success. With this in mind, it is suggested that online teachers’ instructional practices that are likely to increase student engagement (e.g., Almarghani & Mijatovic, 2017; James, 2018; Özkara & Çakır,

2018) should be put into practice. The findings also revealed that other than the second-year non-attending participants, the non-attending students did not watch the uploaded videos. The attending students proposed explanations as to why the majority of students did not attend the online lessons were different from the ones put forward by the non-attending ones aside from the low level of student motivation. All the attending participants asserted that the absence of compulsory attendance was the major reason for the low level of student attendance. Because students knew they would not fail due to absenteeism, they did not attend the online lessons. As well as the fact that students did not fail any course as a consequence of not joining the online lessons, the low level of student motivation and senior students' preparations for the Public Personnel Selection Exam were stated as the reasons behind the low level of student attendance.

Considering the positive influence of student engagement on student learning, as was suggested by Frost (2008) and Papastergiou et al. (2011), it was postulated at the beginning of this research that there could be an interrelationship between student engagement increased by the way teaching is conducted and the level of student attendance. Therefore, the participants were asked to state their suggestions about what could have been done to increase the low level of student attendance. First-, second-, third-, and fourth-year non-attending students did not come up with suggestions to increase the level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons asserting that they were effective and of high-quality. The attending students alleged enforcing compulsory attendance could be a workable solution to the low-level of student attendance. Changing the starting time of the lessons was also recommended to increase the level of student attendance to the online lessons. According to them, if the lessons had begun in the afternoon, more students could have attended them. The attending and non-attending students stated there was no need to change how teaching was conducted. The lessons were taught in an interactive way and in collaboration with the students, which was found to be beneficial by the participants. However, even if it was not expressed by the students, there could be some students who did not attend the lessons because they are used to or prefer lecture-based teaching rather than the lessons in which students have responsibility as much as lecturers do. To increase the level of student attendance to synchronous online lessons, lecturers teaching online lessons synchronously could share the benefits of attending them with the students who do not attend them.

The findings obtained from the attending students' responses to the question of what advantages they gained from attending the synchronous online lessons revealed that although the participants were enrolled in different courses and at different years of study, they stated identical points with respect to the advantages of attending the synchronous online lessons. The attending participants pointed out their learning was fostered by joining the online lessons. Working together with the lecturer and other students, asking all the questions they had in their minds to the lecturer, giving feedback on others' performances and getting feedback from the lecturer and other students, and getting more chance to participate in the lessons were among the advantages noted by the attending students. It is obvious in the participants' responses that the way online teaching is conducted determines the advantages students could gain from it.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study explored why the majority of the participants taking the courses offered by the researcher did not attend the synchronous online lessons through the lens of the attending and non-attending students and the advantages of attending them from the perspective of the attending students. The findings showed that while the non-attending students put forward the low level of student motivation and technical problems as the reasons for their non-attendance, the attending students maintained the absence of obligatory attendance was the chief reason behind the low level of student attendance. The findings also indicated that the attending and non-attending students, regardless of the courses they were enrolled in and their year of study, stated how the online teaching was conducted was fruitful

and there was no need for improving it, yet the attending students suggested making attendance compulsory. In addition, all the attending students construed joining the online lessons facilitated student learning.

Low-level of university student attendance to synchronous online lessons is a problem likely to be seen in several contexts and the attempts to be made to increase the level of student attendance need to be guided by taking into consideration the voices of students not attending and attending synchronous online lessons. For this reason, further research is needed in different contexts. This research was carried out with 40 university students; therefore, future studies could be conducted with more participants. This study aimed to focus on university students' views, yet in upcoming studies, university teachers' views on low-level of student attendance to synchronous online lessons can be investigated. As well as exploring low-level of university student attendance from the standpoints of students, the effect of gender could be investigated in future studies. Furthermore, further research might be carried out to examine the reasons for low level of primary and secondary school student attendance to synchronous online lessons in the contexts confronting that problem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

In view of the expectations held about the emergence of pandemics other than the COVID-19 in the near future, higher education institutions, university teachers and students must stand ready for offering high quality online education and receiving it. Considering the positive correlation between effective online teaching and high level of university student attendance, university teachers need to be trained in how to teach effectively in online learning environments. Since university teachers have been teaching online for nearly one and half years, they have experienced what it means to teach online, and the advantages and disadvantages of it. Moreover, they have encountered enormous difficulties in online teaching, some of which they have surmounted, but there can still remain unresolved ones. Thus, the framework of future trainings could be determined in accord with them.

Bearing in mind the fact that teacher professional learning is an incessant process, it is obvious that university teachers learn from the hurdles they face. That is, the problems they encounter in online education may be contemplated to be the sources of their continuous professional learning. In the trainings, university teachers can be encouraged to form professional learning communities and/or be a part of existing ones to resort to their colleagues' recommendations, which they could use to overcome the faced problems. Synchronous online lessons might be preferred over asynchronous ones due to the availability of the live interaction between the university teacher and student unless the university teacher does not just lecture. The objective of conducting fruitful online lessons is promoting student learning, but as could be seen in the present study, the level of student attendance may be low. Therefore, university teachers need to teach students synchronously through negotiating with them and making the necessary changes in their synchronous online teaching in light of student appraisals of online lessons.

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