

A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN A STATE UNIVERSITY IN TÜRKİYE

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Abstract. Over the past three years Türkiye, as well as the whole world, has gone through hard times and this has created challenges in many spheres. Education is one of these spheres. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemics all throughout the world at the end of 2019, education in Türkiye had to become online at all levels. While primary, secondary, and high schools had an intermittent schedule over the period of the pandemics, the universities were completely online. Moreover, after the devastating earthquakes on the 6th of February in 2023 in Türkiye, ten major cities with the overall population of nearly 13 million have been harshly affected in terms of physical, social, psychological, and educational aspects. As a consequence of this catastrophe that the country felt and mourned in each region, the government has decided to continue its higher education online. Being experienced in online education after the pandemics, Türkiye managed to switch to it in a very short time. This study aims to introduce the Learning Management System (LMS) that was implemented in a state university in Türkiye as the major platform, on which higher education has taken its course. The main focus of the study is the field of foreign language education (FLE). The study will provide a general overview of the process of digitalisation of course management and Testing and Evaluation. The study will conclude that despite the fact that the world is going through an inevitable digitalisation process, education still needs face-to-face interaction. In short, this study will outline some of the main advantages and disadvantages of online education as a result of the implementation of this system in a state university.

Keywords: Learning Management System, online education, university education, foreign language education, education in Türkiye

Introduction. With the development of technology, nearly all the spheres in our lives have undergone a tremendous transformation. Education is one of these fields. It benefits largely from technological advances. Students have been introduced to smartboards in classes, they can trace the exercises through QR codes, and they can access libraries from homes. These are only a few examples; the list can go on and new techniques are added to the list each day. In other words, technology has become an inseparable part of educational approaches and methodologies all throughout the world. And as Milkevich and Ryabtsev state,

the professional abilities of a teacher should be adapted according to the advancing technology and its widespread use in education [1100].

The huge role of technology in every sphere of our lives is acknowledged by everybody. And it was confirmed during the pandemics that started in 2019 as a result of COVID-19 disease. Literally all the world has to be shut down because of the rapid spread of the disease. Obviously, education was one of the spheres that had to find new solutions for its application. And technology was the only way out for teachers, students, and parents. Millions of professors, teachers, students, and pupils throughout the world found themselves in front of the screen. Surely, computer screen education cannot be compared to a face-to-face educational system; yet, at least, it allowed the continuation of the flow of information from one end to the other. Moreover, the disasters that fell on Türkiye on February the 6th, 2023, wiped away nearly 50.000 people and left the rest in deep mourning. As a consequence, Turkish higher education had to come back to the online system once more. Because nearly 13 million people were affected by two devastating earthquakes in ten major cities in the country, the government had to accommodate this population in student dormitories all throughout the country. Thus, university students had to continue their education online, as they had to remain in their hometowns.

This study will introduce the Learning Management System (LMS) that was implemented and is still in use today in state universities in Türkiye as the major platform, on which higher education has taken its course. The main focus of the study is the field of foreign language education. The study will provide a general overview of the process of digitalisation of course management and Testing and Evaluation. The study will conclude that despite the fact that the world is going through an inevitable digitalisation process, education still needs face-to-face interaction. In short, this study will outline some of the main advantages and disadvantages of online education as a result of the implementation of this system in state universities.

An Overview of the Learning Management System. The Learning Management System (LMS) that has been developed to ease the process of education in universities in Türkiye is used by each university with its own characteristics. In other words, LMS is a general platform with its various features. Each university, even each department, can choose some of these features and implement them in accordance with its rules and regulations. Each university has its own unit that controls LMS and introduces the changes and adaptations needed for the course. It usually provides the instructors with one or two main online conference platforms through which students can listen to lectures. Some of these conference platforms upload the recorded lectures automatically to the course page. Yet, some of them require the instructor to download the recordings and then upload them to the course page.

The LMS unit at every university creates a course for a particular group of students and creates a page, on which these students are registered. Students are given a user name and a password, with which they can login on the page and check the updates. This page becomes their “classroom”. LMS has a messaging system through which students and instructors can interact with each other. This messaging system is usually directly linked with the students’ and instructors’ mail addresses. So if a student gets a message on LMS, he/she can see that message on his/her mail account. The LMS course page can be divided into weeks and each week the instructor is expected to upload the necessary materials, which students can download and study.

LMS provides a rich variety of online facilities. Instructors can upload a file, where students can submit their homework, projects, papers, or exams. The file is controlled by the instructor and it allows the instructor to put some limits on submissions. For example, time can be arranged. The instructor can ask students to submit homework by a particular day and hour, after which the system does not allow any submissions. The system also allows several document types to be uploaded; it depends on the instructor. The system even allows users to

submit audio and video recordings. The instructor can download the submissions or evaluate them online. Feedback can be given online and the students can see it by logging in their accounts.

One of the most important features of LMS, which goes in accordance with the Personal Data Protection Law in Türkiye, is its being sensitive in terms of students' personal information. Students cannot see each other's grades or submissions. Although the course page is common for all students in a group, each student interacts with the instructor separately. The instructor provides personal feedback. All the messages are personal. This has become a very important issue during the digitalisation process in Türkiye. Everything that relates to an individual has become individualized: student numbers, instructors' information, grades, messages, submitted work, schedule, active working hours. If a list of a group has to be announced on a common web page, some letters in names and surnames are coloured or blurred.

The Process of Digitalisation of the Course Management. Courses that are done on LMS fall under the category of online classes as they are implemented on a platform designed for virtual conferences. An instructor creates a class on LMS, assigns time and participants. They all meet in that class and have a class. An instructor can use the screen like a whiteboard, write on it or project the materials. Students can be followed on one side of the screen, where the instructor can see their presence (if cameras are turned off). Some of the online conference platforms provide a detailed report of student participation and instructors can download that report in order to have a document for absenteeism.

During the pandemics, major publishing companies provided the instructors with digital access to some of their coursebooks. In this way, instructors could use these coursebooks in their online classes. During the online classes, learning a foreign language requires group work and peer interaction. Some online conference platforms allow users to divide participants into several groups. Thus, instructors can encourage students to interact and have an authentic

atmosphere. The classes are usually recorded and uploaded on the LMS for students to watch when they need revision. Normally, all students and instructors are expected to turn on their cameras and microphones. If there are some technical problems, they should be solved so that everybody is ready to attend the classes in terms of technical aspects.

The Process of Digitalisation of Testing and Evaluation. After a brief introduction of LMS and the course management, we can go on with the testing part. As it was mentioned above, this study focuses on the field of Foreign Language Education (FLE). In this part, we will discuss the process of preparing online exams, the upload of those exams on LMS, and the implementation of the exams. To begin with, in order to go on with the description of the exams in an online system, it is better to be acquainted with the Testing and Evaluation System in FLE in Türkiye. FLE in Türkiye is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is “an international standard for describing language ability”. It has a scale starting from A1 to C2 (A1 is the lower level) (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/cefr/>). Each level has its own goals and objectives and the exams in each level are organized according to these objectives and goals. CEFR and FLE, in general, approach foreign language education on a communicative basis. And this, in turn, allows and even necessitates the division of a foreign language into four main skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. While reading and listening are receptive skills, writing and speaking are productive skills. While in reading and listening students get information from a text, in speaking and writing, they produce information. Obviously, the productive skills are more challenging and deserve more attention. Exams in FLE field in Türkiye are usually written and implemented according to this skills division.

In the departments or schools, where foreign languages are taught in Türkiye, the System of Testing and Evaluation is usually based on several tools. Students get grades from written papers that test their written skills. Usually they

write 2-4 papers in one level, which mostly lasts 8 weeks. The topics and the structure of the papers depend on the writing skill objectives in each level. Students also get quizzes, in which their reading and listening skills are tested. These quizzes can also include grammar and vocabulary parts. In reading tests, they are given one or more texts after which they have several questions, which they have to answer according to the texts. In a listening quiz, students listen to a text, which can be a dialogue or a monologue, and answer the questions according to what they hear. As regards their speaking skills, students have a speaking project or a speaking exam, where they have a conversation, dialogue, or a monologue. They are asked to speak, to produce speech. At the end of the course, students get a general exam, where they are tested in all four skills. And at the end of the preparatory year, during which they study a foreign language for usually four periods, students sit a proficiency exam. Proficiency exam is also based on four skills, which are separated from each other in tasks. While each institution implements its own testing system, the frame of it is basically the same.

After this short overview of a testing system in foreign language education, we can discuss the digitalisation process of this system on LMS. Before we go on with the presentation of the system, it should be noted that students see the sample exams on their LMS pages several days before the real exam takes place. They try the exams and experience it in the same way as the real ones are implemented. In this way, the risk of their failure in terms of technical or infrastructure problems decreases. The presentation of the online testing system can be divided according to skills. Firstly, let's start with receptive skills. Reading exams are usually implemented in the form of multiple choice questions. Some reading exams may include short answers or matching. Choice of question types heavily depends on the level of language proficiency. While lower levels can have matching and multiple choice question types, higher levels usually have multiple choice and short answers. Yet, it should be noted that while in multiple

choice and matching question types the answers are strictly limited, in short answers question type, the answers may vary. So it is sometimes difficult to standardize the evaluation. On LMS, it is easier to have multiple choice and matching question types because the answers are provided beforehand and the grades are given automatically by the system. Thus, instructors do not have a role of markers in these types of questions, which strengthens the reliability of the exam.

The questions appear one after the other on the screen. They can appear all on one page, or they can appear on several pages. It depends on the instructor. If it is a multiple choice question type, students can use their mouses to choose the correct option and click on it. If it is a matching question type, students move a particular item on the screen and place it in the correct gap. If it is a short answer question type, students are provided with a space where they write their answers using the keyboard. This type of interface is common on LMS for multiple choice, matching, and short answer question types in reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary exams.

Similar to the reading skill exams, listening exams can have multiple choice, matching, and short answer question types. Listening skill exams at higher levels of proficiency can also have a note-taking part, in which students take notes while they listen to a text. Then, according to their notes, they answer the questions. Questions, in such an exam, appear after the audio stops, so students answer them according to their notes. The notes that students take are not graded. The audio of the text is uploaded on the LMS system and students listen to it individually, each student hears the audio on his/her computer. The LMS system has an option for the instructors to upload the audio. The audio can be controlled by the students; in other words, students can click on the "play" button and start listening to it when they are ready. However, here they should be aware that a particular time period is given for the completion of the exam. If students stop the audio to answer the questions, or rewind it to listen to it again, they may

not have time to listen to the whole text. This, in turn, may cause the loss of the last questions because the system shuts down the exam page automatically when the arranged time comes. Or the audio can play automatically when the exam page is opened on students' screens. In this option, students cannot control the audio. Such uploading features are chosen according to the institution's rules and regulations.

For writing skill, students are usually asked to write a short paragraph or an essay, which is chosen according to their levels. They may be asked to write the task on a sheet of paper with a pen/pencil after they see the task on a web page. After they finish writing a task, they take a photo of the paper and upload it on the system. Or they are asked to write a task on a computer screen by using the keyboard. For a speaking task, students and instructors meet on a conference platform and students speak for several minutes (this depends on the level of proficiency). Two invigilators are usually present for the speaking exam and the exam is recorded.

Uploading of the exams to LMS is usually done by the testing unit members with the help of Information Technology (IT) unit members. During the uploading of the exams on LMS, students cannot see the exam questions because the process is done in an "unseen mood". Either one testing unit member is responsible for the uploading, or each member uploads his/her exam. Usually each item is entered separately and the options are provided with the correct answer at the same time. Feedback can also be entered beforehand so that students can see the correct answer just after they complete and submit the exam to the system. This is valid for the multiple-choice and matching question types. During the uploading of the exam, testers can prefer to shuffle the options and even the questions. Yet, for the reading and the listening exams, shuffling of the questions is not advised because the order of the questions goes according to the order of the information in the text. Yet, the options in each question should be

shuffled to decrease the risk of cheating. Such exams like grammar or vocabulary, on the other hand, may have a shuffled order of questions.

For the reliability of the exams, universities use the Safe Exam Browser (SEB) system that freezes students' screen only on the LMS page. They cannot open a new tab or a new page on their browsers. In this way, SEB prevents students from cheating. Surely, students are invigilated during the exam by one or two instructors. Students are asked to place a camera from one side so that invigilators can see students' face profiles, their screens and their hands using the keyboards. In other words, during online exams students are asked to have two devices. One of them is for the camera and the other is for the exam. Students enter the LMS from both devices; LMS allows it. Invigilation is done in the same way as the course is done. On their main page students have a link to the conference platform at a particular hour. They enter that platform and turn on their cameras and microphones. Invigilators should see and hear the students during the exam for the reliability of the test. Yet, during a listening test, students can turn off their speakers in order not to be disturbed by the sound coming from other users. In this case, students and the invigilators communicate through a chat-box. Although such a supervision system is not the best one, it shows that there is somebody to watch the students. Yet, in a more developed sense, it is observed that artificial intelligence (AI) can observe students' behavior during an exam. AI devices are inserted into students' devices and they report any unusual moves [Paredes, Jesus Jasso Peña, and La Fuente Alcazar, 204]. Surely, such AI devices have their own disadvantages; for example, some students may object to being observed in detail in their own houses.

Grading of multiple-choice and matching question types is done automatically by the system because the correct options are specified when the exam is uploaded on the system. Grading of the writing part of the exam can also be done on the system. Students usually write their responses on the screen and submit their papers to the system. Their writings are saved and can always be

accessed by the instructors on the system. Two instructors mark each paper and the average of both grades is taken and announced to the students. During the marking process, instructors can comment on the paper in the specified place and can write the grade there for students to see it.

Conclusion. Technology and its advances in our lives rapidly changed our perception of almost everything. We started to re-evaluate our existence and our values. Although some devices influence our social interaction in a negative way, they certainly ease our lives in some cases. During the pandemics, when it was difficult to go out to get the things we needed to survive, it was relatively easy to go on with our education. Surely, this type of education has its own drawbacks, and they are immense. Yet, nobody can deny technology's contribution to the solution of the problems that emerged when humanity was struggling against COVID-19. And, consequently, as Demirtaş, Ayyıldız, Ayyıldız, and Kuş state in their study, online systems should "continue to develop and evolve" [169] as we do not know what awaits us in the future.

LMS was used in Türkiye in almost every university. This study focuses on an example of a state university, but the general frame of LMS is usually common. We presented an overview of the system in terms of course management and exam implementation. Online system has its positive sides and many students like it. For example, in one of the studies on the digitalisation process, it is seen that students' online participation in some of school activities is higher than their face-to-face participation [Uzun and Guven-Yalcin, 253]. Having classes online in one's comfort zone seems to be something easy and cozy. Babaoglu and Kulac pointed to another advantage of distance education; although during the pandemics the countries closed their doors to each other, many people could reach education abroad thanks to online platforms and possibilities [422]. Yet, distance education has its own challenges. One of these challenges is the Internet infrastructure. Some people had trouble participating because the Internet was not enough to withstand the continuous flow of classes.

Financial side of the issue is, without doubt, huge because not everyone can afford to have a computer or a tablet to participate in classes. Although this number of students or instructors is not very high, it was a problem to be solved during the pandemics. The government provided some grants to such students. Another challenge was in terms of learning styles. There are students who learn in real classes, face-to-face with peers and instructors. They tend to drop out of classes, unfortunately, because they cannot catch up with the others. In their study on remote exams, Paredes, Jesus Jasso Peña, and La Fuente Alcazar touch on this point and claim that “transition has not been easy ... [because of] differences between students and their study patterns and attitudes [201]. In conventional classes these differences are easier to remove than it is in an online class environment. The third challenge is the ghost participation. Students seem to be in an online class, but they are not there. It is difficult for the instructors to encourage such students to participate as they do not know their characteristics, habits, likes or dislikes. In general, as Samuel, Gideon, Viswanath Reddy, and Uma have found in their study, students prefer a face-to-face environment [16] and we believe that in every country there is a certain amount of students who would prefer a conventional way of learning.

As regards the exam implementation, many students tend to cheat in order to get higher grades. Although LMS and the IT unit together with the school administration provide some tools and rules to prevent cheating, students can find new ways to help themselves pass the exams. And it is impossible to control them in online exams. Paredes, Jesus Jasso Peña, and La Fuente Alcazar call this cheating “academic dishonesty” and state that the implementation of online examinations allows more of this type of dishonesty than face-to-face exam implementation [202]. Moreover, the interaction that is very informative during the speaking exams, for example, is lost in online exams. The exams themselves are prepared in accordance with the LMS facilities. Testers cannot use a variety of question types because they cannot be uploaded to the system.

Despite the fact that technology and online education are the indispensable parts of our modern lives, foreign language education is done best in real classes, face-to-face. Language is a living thing. It becomes alive when people meet each other in a real atmosphere, when they socialize and feel each other. However, students at a higher level of proficiency can have their classes online if needed. They need a minimum of guidance in their process of language learning. In short, humanity needs technology when it is in trouble. We should adapt technological devices for our purposes, but we should not rely on it completely.

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