



Pre-Service English Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Competence and Attitudes Towards E-Learning During the Covid-19 Era

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Abstract

Due to the global threat of covid-19, modifications in education have been made and the implementation of online education was underway. Foreign language teachers and learners have been most affected by this new training system. On this basis, this study aims to assess pre-service English language teachers' attitudes toward distance education and their perceptions of professional competence, which will provide insights and directions for future online teaching implementations. 42 teacher candidates, 27 females, and 15 males participated in the study. Participants were from the English Language Teaching Department of a university situated in the black sea region in Turkey. Two different scales were used to measure the participants' distance education attitudes and professional competence perceptions. The first is the distance education attitude scale developed by Kışla (2005), while the second is the Ohio State sense of efficacy scale prepared by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the SPSS program. According to the findings, the pre-service English teachers' views toward distance education and e-learning were negative, and their opinions of their professional competence were at a moderate level. Based on the results of the study, it is concluded that their negative feelings toward distance education result from the fact that the majority of English language teachers lack the knowledge and abilities essential to conduct online lessons. Therefore, it is suggested that practical approaches regarding online instruction should be introduced into teacher training programs and that current instructors should get in-service training on online education.

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Introduction

The deadly and contagious virus COVID-19 (coronavirus), which has affected the whole world, caused a new era worldwide. This virus, which dramatically affects human life, also has significant effects on education. The sudden transition from face-to-face education to online education has brought many challenges due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Sadeghi, 2019). According to World Bank Education and UNESCO, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced 1.5 million students and 63 million educators worldwide to suddenly change their face-to-face academic practices (Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2020). Because of the danger of COVID-19, the distance education method began to be applied in Turkey, and teachers continued the teaching process by preparing suitable learning environments for students through various digital platforms. Maintaining education in online environments has increased the need for technology, so teachers and students have sought ways to increase their teaching efficiency by using various online materials.

One of the issues that has received a lot of attention in this process is the question of how productive it is to keep pupils isolated from the atmosphere of the classroom (Zhao, Sintonen & Kyanäsälahti, 2015).. It is a fact that the setting of conventional education is very dynamic, offering students the opportunity to engage in face-to-face instruction in real-time. In addition, teachers can provide instant feedback to students in face-to-face education. While distance education slows down learning because teacher-student interaction occurs only through a screen, and students get a limited number of questions and answers (Salcedo, 2010). In addition, another disadvantage of distance education and e-learning is the limited access to the internet. Although the e-learning method is preferred in many countries around the world, the rate of internet access is meager in some countries. Valverde-Berrocoso et al. (2020) state that 84% of the citizens of the European Union member states had access to the internet in 2018, while this rate was 66% in Latin America and 18% in the least developed countries. It is clear that not every student can receive the same quality of education, and this causes inequality of opportunity among students.

On the other hand, teachers' views about their competencies have a significant role in both improving students' learning and increasing their success in terms of their teaching practices in the classroom (Orazbayeva, 2016). Because perception of efficiency has important effects on learning, success, and motivation. Self-efficacy can be described as the self-contained judgment that a person has in terms of controlling and employing one's abilities and capacity to achieve the best result in a given context. In other words, self-efficacy is the individual's belief in his competence and judgment on whether he can cope with the problems encountered in achieving the determined goal. In this context, self-efficacy is confidence in the ability to effectively organize specific actions required to solve a problem or complete a task (Selvi, 2010).

However, teacher efficacy affects many factors in the teaching process and is directly or indirectly affected by many factors in the process. In this context, the teacher's university education and teaching practice during these years have important effects on teacher competence, which is one of the main predictors of a teacher's success in teaching because the education that pre-service teachers receive plays a vital role in the development and shaping of their efficacy beliefs.

Pre-service teacher education is vital to the efficiency of the entire education system in terms of successfully implementing the country's education policies and training teachers in the appropriate profile to achieve the goals in the curriculum. For this reason, investigating the perceptions and beliefs of teachers about their competencies during the pre-service education years, which is the last stop before they are involved in the active teaching process, will shed light on decision-makers, program designers, and of course, teachers in increasing the quality of in-service training, which has an important place in the education system.

Within this framework, the purpose of this study is to investigate the attitudes of pre-service teachers, who receive education through distance education during the COVID-19 process, towards e-learning and to examine their professional competence perceptions. In this respect, this study has two questions to address. They are as follows:

1. What are the attitudes of pre-service English teachers toward e-learning?
2. What is the professional competency perception level of pre-service English teachers as a result of the distance education they receive?

Literature Review

E-learning or distance education is among the topics on which many discussions have been made over the past years. However, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused face-to-face education to be suspended in many parts of the world (Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Therefore, the intense interest in technology and e-learning has recently resurfaced. Within this regard, Naah (2020) examined in-service teachers' attitudes towards online education and learning during the COVID-19 process and examined how preservice teachers mastered content knowledge, their attitudes towards distance education, and their relations with the tutors. As a result of the research, it was concluded that most of the pre-service teachers know the course content and their attitude toward distance education is good. Additionally, it is seen that the preservice teachers had good relations with their tutors and that the tutors evaluated their students through quizzes. One of the most critical points stated in the study is that although preservice teachers think that online education is effective despite some difficulties, it is revealed that almost all participants get more efficiency from face-to-face education compared to distance education.

According to another study conducted on students' academic achievement of synchronous education practices, Leshea (2013) concludes that social communication in synchronous education has a positive effect on students' academic achievement. In another study comparing online education and traditional education, students' exam scores in face-to-face education were slightly higher than their grades in online education (Kirtman & Kirtman, 2009). However, it was revealed that students' attitudes towards e-learning were very positive, and students did not see any difference between online and traditional education. (Kirtman & Kirtman, 2009)

In their study Gilbert, John & College (2015) stated that online education is an opportunity for individuals with learning difficulties in traditional educational environments and it offers students the opportunity to plan their learning. Furthermore, it was claimed that the opportunities of online learning are just as rich as that of traditional learning settings (Gilbert, John & College, 2015). On the other hand, Rovai, Wighting, and Liu (2005) found that classroom and school communities in online learning has proven that students who receive online education have a weaker sense of belonging and engagement than face-to-face education.

The concept of professional competence, is defined as having the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values related to a specific field. According to Bandura, teachers' perceptions of professionalism and self-efficacy determine teachers' general orientations in the education-teaching process and teachers' perceptions of competence, which have an essential effect on creating a positive learning environment to develop students' competencies. Teachers with a high perception of professionalism and self-efficacy prefer contemporary teaching methods and effective classroom management techniques. In addition, these teachers monitor students' progress in the classroom and direct their students to an inquisitive understanding.

Arslan (2019) investigates the effect of teacher candidates' self- efficacy sources on their teaching self-efficacy and attitudes towards the teaching profession, three main factors that affect teachers' perceptions of self and professional competence were found consisting of emotional states, experiences, and verbal persuasion. Especially in the stuto consistency was stated as one of the main factors negatively affecting pre-service teachers' perceptions of self and professional competence. The anxiety of teacher candidates about not having a profession decreases their perception of competence. On the contrary, it was stated in the study that prospective teachers' successful experiences such as micro-teaching and community-based service-learning applications have a positive effect on their self-efficacy and professional competence perceptions. Finally, the study emphasized that teacher candidates' efficacy perceptions were influenced by the persuasive words they heard from the people around them. The positive feedback or persuasive words that the teacher candidates receive from their surroundings positively affect their perception of competence, and in the opposite cases, negative results occur.

Melby (1995) investigated whether high and low-level teachers developed qualitatively different emotional responses, control styles, and ideologies when faced with a disciplinary problem in the classroom. As a result of the study, it was found that teachers with low proficiency were angry and stressed when they were faced with disciplinary problems and also used restrictive and punitive methods. Conversely, it has been proven that teachers with a high perception of efficacy are optimistic and confident when faced with disciplinary problems and use persuasive rather than authoritarian methods.

According to another study by Rahman (2014) examining the effects of teachers' pedagogical and professional competencies on their teaching performance, it has been proven that vocational and pedagogical competencies

positively affect teacher performance. Rahman (2014) suggests that several things should be done to improve teachers' professional and pedagogical competence. Some of these are preparing textbooks, doing action research, participating in the teachers' forum, etc.

Following the results of another study conducted by (Sunarti & Rummyani, 2018), which investigated the effect of teacher professional competence and learning facility on students' learning motivation, it was determined that teacher competencies have positive and significant effects on students' learning motivation. In other words, students' learning motivation increases the teacher's professional competence. There are some responsibilities and competencies teachers must take to achieve this. For example, teachers must have sufficient mastery of teaching materials, use attractive and effective methods, and create motivating learning environments. In addition, reading activities should be increased so that students can form their views and benefit from their abilities. (Sunarti & Rummyani, 2018)

Significance of the Study

To be able to do a job, a person must have the appropriate knowledge, attitude, and skills. Professional competence is a picture of a person's knowledge of how to do activities and behaviors that are necessary for the profession (Rahayu et al., 2018). In order to perform a profession ideally, it is necessary to have the necessary competencies, and within this, that person must discover his professional perceptions of that profession.

This research, which aims to measure preservice teachers' perceptions of professional competence and their attitudes towards distance education, not only will provide data for decision-makers and curriculum designers in order to increase the standards of pre-service education of teachers as well as online teaching practices. In addition, during the pandemic, the attitudes of preservice teachers towards the practicum and education through distance education will provide important information about whether distance education contributes to preservice teachers.

Although there are many studies in the literature on e-learning and distance education, the deadly virus COVID-19 has changed the perspective of many people on education and the world. Therefore, this study will gather important data on the reflections of the education in the pandemic process by combining preservice English teachers' attitudes towards e-learning and their perceptions of professional competence.

Methodology

Research Design

The current study aims to examine the attitudes of pre-service English teachers towards e-learning and their professional competence perceptions. For this purpose, the distance education attitude scale developed by Kışla (2005) was used to collect data. Additionally, the scale developed by Tschannen- Moran and Hoy (2001) and generally called as "Ohio State sense of efficacy scale" was used to measure the professional competence of pre-service teachers. The long form of the scale consists of 24 items and the short form consists of 12 items. In this study, the long form was preferred.

Participants

The participants in this study are 42 pre-service English language teachers who study at the foreign language department at Ondokuz Mayıs University and Trabzon University including 27 females, 15 males. The ages of the participants vary between 21-29.

Procedure

In order to carry out this study, scales serving the research questions were determined and a questionnaire was prepared via Google Form. From the questionnaires sent to the participants through online platforms, data on the distance education attitudes and professional competence perceptions of the participants were collected. The data collection process took about 3 weeks.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires answered online by the participants were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS was chosen in this study as it is one of the most reliable programs for analysing quantitative data.

Findings

According to the demographic information obtained from the research, there are 42 participants, 27 of whom are female and 15 of them male. The age ranges of the participants vary from 21-29. In order to give more reliable and valid data, the research was applied in two different universities named Ondokuz Mayıs University and Trabzon University. 27 of the participants are students of Trabzon University, 15 of them are students of Ondokuz Mayıs University and all the participants are from the last year of students in foreign languages education department.

Since one of the most important deficiencies of online education is the problem of internet access and not having a computer, the participants were asked two basic questions regarding their internet access and whether they have a computer. According to the data obtained, while 90% of pre-service English teachers have internet access, the rate of having a computer is 78%. This means that pre-service English teachers did not experience serious problems with internet access and computer ownership during the distance education process that continued throughout the pandemic process.

Table 1.

Percentage of pre-service English teachers accessing the internet

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	38	90,5	90,5	90,5
Sometimes	4	9,5	9,5	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0	

Table 2

Percentage of preservice English teachers having a computer

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	33	78,6	78,6	78,6
Sometimes	9	21,4	21,4	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0	

After the demographic questions, a five-point Likert scale was used in the attitude scale of distance education. The participants were asked to score between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree) about the questions. The first item of the questionnaire aims to find out whether the participants want to receive distance education or not. According to the data, 70% of the participants do not want to receive distance education. This item actually expresses a general opinion about the attitudes of pre-service English teachers towards distance education.

Table 3

I want to take distance education courses.

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	7	16,7	16,7	16,7
Disagree	23	54,8	54,8	71,4
Neutral	5	11,9	11,9	83,3
Agree	5	11,9	11,9	95,2
strongly agree	2	4,8	4,8	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0	

The data of other items in the questionnaire also show that pre-service English teachers have a negative attitude towards distance education. 73% of pre-service English teachers have a common opinion that many courses cannot be taught by distance education. The reason why the participants defend this opinion may result from the fact that it hinders the interaction, especially in the practicum, when conducted on online platforms during the pandemic.

Table 4

Many lessons can't be offered through distance education

Frequency		Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	1	2,4	2,4	2,4
Disagree	5	11,9	11,9	14,3
Neutral	5	11,9	11,9	26,2
Agree	18	42,9	42,9	69,0
strongly agree	13	31,0	31,0	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0	

56% of pre-service English teachers think that distance education makes people lazy. It is undeniable that today's technology delivers information to people with a single click. For some, this is an innovation that facilitates people's lives, while for others it is a factor that drives people to laziness. According to the data in this study, more than half of the pre-service teachers support the second opinion.

Answers to another item of the questionnaire showed that graduates who receive education through e-learning are not likely to find a job. According to the data obtained from the pre-service teachers, it is seen that there is an indecision about this issue. When analyzed in detail, 40% of the participants are neutral on this issue, while approximately 33% support the view that distance education graduates will find jobs. The remaining 27% do not agree with this view and think that graduates can find a job. When these data are interpreted, it is seen that the participants are undecided about the efficiency of the lessons learned through e-learning.

Table 5

Distance education graduates are unlikely to find a job.

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly disagree	5	11,9	11,9
Disagree	6	14,3	26,2
Neutral	17	40,5	66,7
Agree	11	26,2	92,9
strongly agree	3	7,1	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0

According to the results of a similar study by Naah (2020), it was concluded that pre-service teachers who took lessons through distance education during the covid-19 process had positive attitudes towards e-learning and distance education. These two studies, based on similar issues, reached different results in terms of attitudes towards distance education. In this research, since each item in the distance education attitude scale is related to each other, it was determined from the data obtained that pre-service English teachers preferred face-to-face education to distance education, they did not benefit enough from distance education, and practical courses were not suitable for distance education.

Table 6

Teachers' perceptions of professional competence

EL1	42	2,3333	1,05152
EL2	42	2,3333	,87420
EL3	42	3,8810	1,06387
EL4	42	2,5238	,91700
EL5	42	2,3810	1,12515
EL6	42	3,2619	1,28897
EL7	42	3,5952	1,16994
EL8	42	2,9524	1,16770
EL9	42	2,2857	1,06578
EL10	42	3,3333	1,37338
EL11	42	2,8810	,99271
EL12	42	3,0238	1,09295
EL13	42	3,0000	1,03594
EL14	42	2,4286	1,15067
EL15	42	3,3571	1,05510
Valid N (listwise)	42		

The last part of the questionnaire applied to the participants is based on measuring pre-service English teachers' perceptions of professional competence. Ohio State sense of efficacy scale was used to measure the professional competence of pre-service teachers. (Tschannen- Moran & Hoy, 2001) According to the data obtained from the survey results, it was determined that pre-service English teachers' perceptions of professional competence are at a medium level. However, the opinions of the participants vary on some items.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics

PC1	42	3,2381	,95788
PC2	42	3,5000	,91731
PC3	42	3,4762	,89000
PC4	42	3,5476	,91605
PC5	42	3,8810	,86115
PC6	42	3,7857	,71689
PC7	42	3,5238	,89000
PC8	42	3,5000	,99388
PC9	42	3,8333	,88115
PC10	42	3,6429	,72655
PC11	42	3,7857	,60630
PC12	42	3,6429	,79084
PC13	42	3,7143	,70834
PC14	42	3,5476	,77152
PC15	42	3,1905	,89000
PC16	42	3,3095	,84068
PC17	42	3,4286	,96633
PC18	42	3,5000	,89033
PC19	42	3,5476	,80251
PC20	42	3,9048	,82075
PC21	42	3,4524	,83235
PC22	42	3,2381	1,24567
PC23	42	3,6905	,84068
PC24	42	3,6667	,92833
Valid N (listwise)	42		

Taking the table above into consideration, in the survey study using the 5-point Likert scale, the answers given by pre-service English teachers are generally in the range of 3-4. The mean values in the table correspond to "some influence" in the survey. This means that pre-service English teachers' perceptions of professional competence are not at a high level and there are problems in some subjects. Pre-service English teachers' perceptions of

professional competence may result from their negative attitudes towards distance education and the fact that practical courses were taken through e-learning which has some problems.

However, when the items of the questionnaire are examined one by one, it is seen that pre-service English teachers are confident in some issues and their self-efficacy is high. More than half of pre-service English teachers are confident in motivating their students. Although it is not easy to motivate students in both distance education and face-to-face education, and although pre-service English teachers take their practicum courses online, it is important for their professional competence to trust themselves. In addition, pre-service English teachers also believe in their skills to develop their students' creative and critical thinking skills.

Table 8

How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Nothing	1	2,4	2,4
Very little	5	11,9	14,3
Some influence	10	23,8	38,1
Quite a bit	22	52,4	90,5
A great deal	4	9,5	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0

As stated above, the pre-service English teachers' perceptions of professional competence in 5-point Likert scale corresponds to 3. This means that although most teacher candidates are not overly confident in themselves, they do not see themselves as incompetent. Considering that they are still teacher candidates, the data obtained are considered to be normal. Compared to the other questions in the questionnaire, the point that teachers consider themselves less competent is how they can involve families in the teaching process. 28% of the pre-service English teachers stated that they see themselves as little competent in including families in the education process. A small portion of prospective teachers, such as 7%, do not find themselves competent in this regard at all.

Table 9

How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Nothing	3	7,1	7,1
Very little	12	28,6	35,7
Some influence	6	14,3	50,0
Quite a bit	14	33,3	83,3
A great deal	7	16,7	100,0
Total	42	100,0	100,0

It is normal for pre-service English teachers to worry about this issue and not see themselves competent because they are not currently exposed to any interviews or interactions with parents. When the values obtained regarding to what extent pre-service English teachers consider themselves competent in interfering with the students who ruin the flow of the lesson in the classroom, while approximately 35% of the teachers consider themselves to be

moderately competent, 45% of prospective teachers think that they can overcome such problems. It is natural that there are such differences in their opinions who are deprived of face-to-face internship training, because students in online internship are less likely to exhibit disturbing behaviors as they are not in a real classroom environment and are away from their friends. As the prospective teachers do not have any difficulties in online internships, they may consider themselves sufficient in this regard; Those who find themselves at a moderate level or not at all competent in this matter may have thought negatively about this issue as they could not obtain face-to-face internship opportunities.

Table 10

How well can you keep a few problem students from ruining an entire lesson?

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very little	4	9,5	9,5
Some influence	15	35,7	45,2
Quite a bit	19	45,2	90,5
A great deal	4	9,5	100,0
Total	42	100,0	
Very little	4	9,5	9,5

Finally, the point where pre-service English teachers consider themselves highly sufficient is the extent they can produce alternative solutions for students who have a lack of learning or are confused about a topic. While 60% of pre-service English teachers consider themselves competent in this regard, only 4% consider themselves less sufficient.

Table 11

To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very little	2	4,8	4,8
Some influence	10	23,8	28,6
Quite a bit	20	47,6	76,2
A great deal	10	23,8	100,0
Total	42	100,0	
Very little	2	4,8	4,8

In both face-to-face and online education, there are always students who lack learning or are confused about any subject, and the preservice English teachers see themselves as competent in this regard, showing that they are unlikely to have problems when starting face-to-face education.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate preservice English teachers' attitudes toward e-learning during the covid-19 process and examine their professional competence perceptions. The two basic concepts of the study, e-learning, and professional competence were measured using two different questionnaires. The first of these surveys was the distance education attitude scale developed by Kışla (2005), and the other was the Ohio State professional competence scale developed by Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2001). In order to give more reliable and valid study results, the questionnaires were applied to the senior-year students of both Trabzon University and Ondokuz Mayıs University. According to the data obtained from the questionnaires, it was concluded that preservice English teachers had negative attitudes towards e-learning and distance education and did not find distance education helpful.

The research results of the study implemented by Naah (2020) concluded that prospective teachers find e-learning and distance education good/engaging. The pre-service teachers stated that although they encounter some problems in distance education, teacher-student communication is high. In these aspects, it differs from the results of the present study because, in the present study, a more rigid and negative attitude towards distance education and e-learning was displayed. A similar result of these two studies is that participants preferred face-to-face to distance education. This shows that the training given to teacher candidates in the covid-19 process did not significantly contribute to them.

Regarding the professional competence perceptions of the teacher candidates, it has been determined that their professional competence perceptions are at a medium level. It has been found that preservice English teachers are confident in classroom management, answering tricky questions asked by students, and developing students' critical and creative thinking skills. However, they are less confident in involving parents in the education process and interfering with students who ruin the lesson order. According to the results of the research conducted by Melby (1995) in which preservice teachers participated, it was revealed that preservice teachers with low and high competencies gave different responses to discipline problems in the classroom and produced different solutions. Based on this result, preservice teachers with high competence in the present study are more likely to cope with discipline problems in the classroom. This study, which provides preservice English teachers with the opportunity to evaluate themselves, has given them a general view of their future teaching at the same time, their strengths and weaknesses.

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