

## EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF TURKISH-SPEAKING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KOSOVO DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

KOSOVA'DAKİ TÜRKÇE KONUŞAN LİSE ÖĞRENCİLERİNİN COVID-19 PANDEMİSİ SIRASINDAKİ EĞİTİMSEL ZORLUKLARI

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the educational challenges encountered by Turkish-speaking high school students in Prizren, Kosovo during the Covid-19 pandemic, within the broader context of a multilingual and structurally fragmented education system. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 students selected from four high schools using purposive and criterion sampling techniques during the 2020–2021 academic year. The research aimed to understand students' experiences with both online and group-based in-person education, which were implemented in response to pandemic conditions. In the early stages of the pandemic, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MASHTI) adopted a centralized online education model for primary and lower secondary levels through national television channels (RTK 1 and RTK 4), the official e-learning platform (emesimi.rks-gov.net), and open-access digital resources. However, for upper secondary education, a decentralized model was introduced, where individual schools and teachers were responsible for organizing distance learning, often through applications like Zoom, Google Meet, and Facebook groups. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that students faced significant challenges, including limited access to technological devices, lack of internet connectivity, reduced instructional time (e.g., shortened 30-minute lessons), and inconsistency in the quality of instruction across staggered student groups. Particularly among students in vocational and medical high schools, the absence of hands-on, practical sessions severely hindered learning outcomes. Furthermore, students expressed dissatisfaction with the instructional effectiveness of teachers during both online and hybrid instruction, citing fatigue, repetition of lessons across groups, and reduced engagement. These findings indicate that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing educational inequalities, particularly for Turkish-speaking minorities. The study concludes that urgent structural reforms are needed to enhance educational access, technological readiness, and pedagogical responsiveness in Kosovo's minority-language education systems, both during crises and in long-term planning.

**Keywords:** Turkish-language education, Kosovo, Covid-19, distance learning, minority education, vocational high schools, educational inequality

## ÖZET

Bu çalışma, çok dilli ve yapısal olarak parçalı bir eğitim sistemi bağlamında, Kosova'nın Prizren şehrinde yaşayan Türkçe konuşan lise öğrencilerinin Covid-19 pandemisi sürecinde karşılaştıkları eğitimsel zorlukları incelemektedir. Nitel bir araştırma deseni kullanılarak yürütülen çalışmada, 2020–2021 eğitim-öğretim yılında amaçlı ve ölçüt örnekleme teknikleriyle seçilen dört liseden 15 öğrenciyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın amacı, pandemi koşulları nedeniyle uygulamaya konulan çevrim içi ve grup temelli yüz yüze eğitim süreçlerinde öğrencilerin deneyimlerini anlamaktır. Pandeminin ilk dönemlerinde Kosova Eğitim, Bilim, Teknoloji ve Yenilik Bakanlığı (MASHTI), ilköğretim ve alt ortaöğretim düzeylerinde merkezi bir çevrim içi eğitim modeli benimseyerek, ulusal televizyon kanalları (RTK 1 ve RTK 4), resmi e-öğrenme platformu (emesimi.rks-gov.net) ve açık erişimli dijital kaynaklar aracılığıyla ders içeriklerini sunmuştur. Ancak, üst ortaöğretim düzeyinde ise daha çok okullara ve öğretmenlere bırakılan, Zoom, Google Meet ve Facebook grupları gibi platformlar üzerinden yürütülen merkezi olmayan bir uzaktan eğitim modeli uygulanmıştır. Görüşme verilerinin tematik analizi sonucunda, öğrencilerin çeşitli zorluklarla karşı karşıya kaldığı tespit edilmiştir. Bunlar arasında teknolojik cihaz eksikliği, internet bağlantı yetersizliği, ders sürelerinin kısalması (örneğin 30 dakikalık dersler) ve öğrenci grupları arasında ders kalitesinde tutarsızlıklar öne çıkmaktadır. Özellikle meslek ve sağlık liselerinde öğrenim gören öğrenciler, uygulamalı derslerin yapılmamasının öğrenme çıktıları üzerinde ciddi olumsuz etkileri olduğunu belirtmiştir. Ayrıca öğrenciler, hem çevrim içi hem de karma eğitim süreçlerinde öğretmenlerin ders anlatımından memnun olmadıklarını, yorgunluk, derslerin farklı gruplarda tekrar edilmesi ve düşük etkileşim gibi nedenlerle öğretimin verimsiz olduğunu ifade etmişlerdir. Bu bulgular, pandeminin özellikle Türkçe konuşan azınlıklar açısından mevcut eğitim eşitsizliklerini derinleştirdiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma, kriz dönemlerinde ve uzun vadeli planlamalarda Kosova'daki azınlık dillerindeki eğitim sistemlerinde erişim, teknolojik donanım ve pedagojik yaklaşımlar açısından acil yapısal reformlara ihtiyaç olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkçe eğitim, Kosova, Covid-19, uzaktan eğitim, azınlık eğitimi, meslek liseleri, eğitim eşitsizliği

## INTRODUCTION

Since the end of 2019 the world has been grappling with the Covid- 19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted various sectors such as health and economy, as well as the field of education (UNESCO, 2020). In response to the global health crisis, countries have had to adapt and implement new educational practices, forcing students to continue their studies through a hybrid model, combining face- to face education an online learning via platforms like Zoom during 2020-2021 academic year (OECD, 2020).

According to research conducted during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, 55% of schools worldwide remained fully open for in- person education, while 28% operated partially, with some school resorted to intermittent breaks, while %11 switched entirely to online education (UNICEF, 2020). This study focuses on the challenges faced by high school students in Prizren, Kosovo where there is a significant Turkish- speaking population, and where Turkish language education is provided in nearly every high school. Following the suspension of classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MASHTI) began implementing distance learning for grades 1 through 9.

This instruction was organized in a centralized manner due to the age of the students and the geographical spread of primary and lower secondary schools, including those in the most remote areas (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The teaching is conducted by selected teachers in accordance with the official curriculum and is delivered to students through:

- RTK 1 and RTK 4,
- The platform [emesimi.rks-gov.net](https://emesimi.rks-gov.net), which is also available on YouTube,
- and independent platforms as open-source materials for free use.

At the upper secondary education level – grades 10 to 12 (both in general high schools and vocational schools) – learning began only in some private high schools and in a few public schools, conducted by individual teachers. Additionally, some municipal directors of education have requested the initiation of online classes in their respective secondary schools.

After reviewing various possibilities regarding distance learning for upper secondary education, MASHTI requests that the Municipal Directorates of Education (DKAs) begin preparations and encourage schools to implement distance learning with students in a decentralized manner-at the school level and by teachers at the class level.

The Municipal Directorates of Education and the respective schools are requested to begin preparations for the implementation of online learning starting from March 30, 2020, with the possibility that the first three days serve as an orientation period for teachers and school staff.

This method is safer for teachers, as it eliminates the risk of breaking quarantine or social distancing conditions-even in cases where they might individually present from schools.

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Technological requirements: For this, familiarity with applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams is required. Teachers or schools may also opt for other applications such as Facebook, Google Meet, Google Classroom, and others.

All upper secondary school teachers in Kosovo are licensed by the Government of Kosovo, specifically by the Agency for Information Society (ASHI). On the other hand, most Facebook users-including teachers—are either part of a closed Facebook group or have created such groups themselves. Teachers will be expected to create such groups with their students and work on implementing online learning through them (Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2020).

The research aimed to assess the difficulties faced by students attending four school in the city 11 Mart Technical Vocational High School, Ymer Prizreni Economics High School, Luciano Motroni Medical High School and Gjon Buzuku School. Additionally the study sought to evaluate how well- prepared teachers were to transition to online education and to gather student opinions regarding teachers approaches to lesson delivery during this period. In line with the methodology, four students from each high school and three students from Ymer Prizreni High School were included in the study sample. The findings revealed that 10th-grade students expressed dissatisfaction with the group- based education format implemented during the pandemic. In Prizren, were organized into groups of ten and attended classes at different times throughout the day. This scheduling system contributed to students frustration, as it resulted in inconsistent learning experiences. Moreover, students reported difficulties

concentrating on online lessons, particularly during the full lockdown period between March 12 and June 2020. A common concern expressed by students was the insufficient access to technology (computers\ tablets\ and smartphones), which hindered their participation in online classes. Additionally students noted that, due to the nature of group- based teaching, instructors were unable to deliver the same quality of instruction of each group, as teachers were repeating lessons for different groups at staggered intervals.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of Group- Based (Staggered Face – to- Face) and Online Education

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only disrupted educational systems worldwide but has also created significant economic challenges for citizens, particular in Kosovo. Despite the governments financial support, including paying 50% of the rent for private companies and offering a social assistance package of 170 euros to workers, families in Kosovo have experienced a substantial decline in their living standards during the pandemic. This economic hardship has had a direct impact on student participation in education. Many students have reported being unable to attend lessons due to the lack of necessary technology or the inability of their families to pay for internet services. This highlights the significant number of students who do not have access to the required technology, a problem that is more widespread than initially assumed.

The challenges that have negatively affected education during this period can be summarized as follows:

- The implementation of group- based lessons
- The risk of virus transmission being overlooked during in- person education
- Insufficient access to technology
- Factors preventing students from attending classes

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From a global perspective, international student mobility has exhibited varying trends, especially in higher education. According to OECD analyses, while there were two million students studying abroad in 2000, this number had surpassed four million by 2013. This increasing trend reflects changes in global education patterns and highlights the growing role of international education in shaping the future workforce (OECD, 2012).

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to investigate the educational experiences of students receiving education in the Turkish language at high schools in Kosovo, particularly focusing on the four schools mentioned. The study aims to analyze the results derived from this investigation and address the following research questions:

- Is Turkish language education sufficient in Kosovo and what are students` opinions on the quality of their education?
- What are students` views on the impact of the Covid -19 pandemic on Turkish language education?
- What are the opinions of high school students learning Turkish regarding the measures taken at the national level to address education during the pandemic?
- How do students perceive the attitudes of teachers towards students during the Covid-19 education period?
- How do students view the impact of group- based facet- to – face education on their learning experience?

## Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. The research focuses not only on the global context of education but also investigates the educational shortcomings in Kosovo. Additionally, the study aims to provide a detailed understanding of the educational deficiencies and the challenges faced by students in the region. By focusing on specific cases, the study offers valuable insights and explanations that will help in understanding the issues students face.

As face-to-face education continues in groups in the country, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students from four high schools. In the interviews, open-ended questions were asked alongside general questions, while fixed-option responses were also included to gather more general information on the topic. The main subject of the study is the educational experiences of Turkish high school students in Prizren. Based on this the study aims to gather opinions, evaluate them, and develop recommendations to improve the situation.

## Study Group

The study group was determined using purposive sampling, specifically the criterion sampling method. The fundamental idea behind this sampling method is to focus on all cases that meet a pre-determined set of criteria. Currently, there are four high schools in Prizren offering education in Turkish students from these high schools were selected as the criterion for inclusion. The study included 15 Turkish students from four high schools in Prizren: School 1 Gjon Buzuku Science High School, School 2 Luciano Motroni Medical High School, School 3 Ymer Prizreni Economics High School and School 4 11 Mart Technical Vocational High School. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews, with the questionnaires administered to the students.

*Information about the participating students is provided in Table 1.*

## Characteristics of the Students in the Study Group

Code	Age	Gender	Field	Department	Grade
S 1	16	Male	Electrical Tech	Mechatronics	10
S 2	16	Male	Electrical Tech	Mechatronics	10
S 3	17	Female	Architecture	Construction	11
S 4	17	Female	Architecture	Interior Architecture	11
S 5	18	Female	Medicine	Nursing	12
S 6	18	Male	Medicine	Nursing	12
S 7	17	Male	Economics	Accounting	11
S 8	17	Male	Economics	Informatics	11
S 9	18	Male	Medicine	Pharmacy	12
S 10	18	Male	Electrical Tech	Informatics	12
S 11	17	Female	Science	Social Science	11
S 12	18	Male	Science	Social Science	12
S 13	17	Female	Science	Science	11
S 14	16	Female	Science	Social Science	10
S 15	18	Female	Medicine	Pharmacy	12

As seen in the table above, efforts were made to ensure an equal distribution of students across the four high schools where interviews were conducted:

- School 1: 4 students
- School 2: 4 students
- School 3: 3 students
- School 4: 4 students
- **Age distribution:** Among the 15 students, 3 are 16 years old, 6 are 17 years old, and 6 are 18 years old.
- **Gender distribution:** 7 students are female, and 8 students are male.
- **Department distribution:** 2 students are studying Mechatronics, 2 students are studying Architecture, 2 students are studying Nursing, 2 students are studying Pharmacy, 3 students are studying Social Science, 1 student is studying Science, 1 student is studying Accounting, and 2 students are studying Informatics.
- **Grade distribution:** 3 students are in the 10th grade, 6 students are in the 11th grade, and 6 students are in the 12th grade.

## Data Collection

In this research, the primary data collection method utilized was face-to-face interviews. Additionally, expert opinions were consulted regarding data collection, and a literature review was conducted to support the research framework.

## Data Evaluation

The analysis of the content and data obtained from the semi-structured interview forms was carried out by organizing the analyses into sections. The findings were analyzed and interpreted in alignment with the research objectives. Relationships between the data and the emerging concepts were identified, and coding was applied. The codes were categorized, and within these categories, themes were developed.

## Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the research, the interview questions were reviewed by two faculty members specializing in educational sciences. For the reliability of the study, the consistency of participants' responses was assessed, and the surveys were conducted face-to-face at the schools. The responses were grouped under similar topics. The data collected were cross-verified by different researchers, and the categories were examined in relation to the literature.

## Findings

In multilingual Kosovo, the most significant issue is undoubtedly the language problem. Even today, Turkish has not achieved the status of an official language in many regions of Kosovo. With the addition of the Covid-19 pandemic, education in Kosovo, as in the rest of the world, has been disrupted since the end of 2019. During the Covid-19 pandemic, throughout 2020, education was conducted online via platforms such as Classroom and Zoom, especially from February to September. From September onwards, however,



education at all levels, from primary school to university, resumed in face-to-face group settings in schools across Kosovo.

The study conducted aimed to identify the challenges faced by high school students studying in Turkish during the Covid-19 pandemic. The following aspects were examined:

- “How satisfied students were with the education provided.”
- “How knowledgeable students felt about the topics.”
- “The advantages and disadvantages of online education.”
- “The adaptation of first-year high school students to schooling in groups.”
- “Students’ views on teachers’ performance during online education.”

The opinions of Turkish-speaking students in high schools were analyzed, and the findings were organized under the following five themes:

### **Students’ Views on Education During the Covid-19 Pandemic**

- What are the students’ views on the education that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The majority of the participants in this study, who were high school students, believe that the education conducted during the pandemic in Kosovo, in line with the measures taken, was insufficient. Specifically, first-year high school students felt that the group-based system of lessons was not very effective for their education. They pointed out that there were significant social restrictions, and that interacting with classmates was crucial. Therefore, they believe that the group-based education system in high schools offering Turkish language instruction was not sufficiently effective. Additionally, the inability to conduct practical lessons, particularly in vocational schools, due to the pandemic, was seen as a significant disadvantage for students’ education.

- **Student 1:** “I do not find these educational measures to be effective. After enrolling in the first year of high school, we thought the pandemic would be over by now. We came from different schools and were eager to socialize and connect with our peers. The group-based lesson system is important for our health, but reducing class time to 30 minutes is not enough for us to fully understand the lessons. The lack of recesses and only having a five-minute mandatory break creates a lot of problems for our adaptation to the classes. Teachers try to reach all students by changing classes during the lesson, but this limits our ability to ask questions and participate actively in the lessons. This also reflects negatively on the teachers’ performance.”
- **Student 9:** “I am not satisfied with the education provided. As a senior, since my second year, I have not been able to attend practical lessons in person. I am now preparing for university and plan to continue my studies in the same field after graduation. Since the second year, the Covid-19 pandemic has been ongoing, and we have only been able to attend practical lessons in small groups during the last few weeks of our final year.”
- **How much information were students able to acquire during their education after the pandemic started?**
- **Student 7:** “When the Covid-19 pandemic started, I was in the first year, and I was able to learn about my field. But in the second year, we had more practical lessons, which should take place in hospitals or health centers. Unfortunately, it is prohibited

for us to go to those places, as only healthcare workers are allowed there. This year, we mostly had theoretical lessons about our field. We could only access the practical lessons through videos that our teachers sent us and shared in class. Of course, this was not very effective for our education.”

- **Student 11:** “It was not effective at all. I am in a vocational school, and there are areas in my field that need to be seen through field trips. I am in the second year, and since I started high school, I have not learned anything more than theoretical knowledge about my field. We are expecting face-to-face classes to start in September and for the educational system to return to normal.”

### **Students’ Views on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Education**

- **What are the students’ views on the advantages and disadvantages of online education?**
- **Student 5:** “The only advantage of online education was that we were safe with our families. However, I don’t think it provided any advantages for our education. First of all, we are separated from our friends, and for us to participate in a lesson, we have to sit separately. Yes, it’s great for our safety, but when we don’t understand something, we used to ask our friend and quickly grasp the topic. Now, we have to ask the teacher several times before we can catch up with the lesson. Secondly, we have a hybrid schedule where we attend school two days a week and have online lessons for the other two days. This directly decreases our engagement in lessons, as sometimes we have to repeat the same topic twice.”
- **Student 2:** “There is absolutely no advantage. Our only advantage is being healthy and staying with our family. I’m against the 30-minute lesson duration. It’s really difficult to adapt to the lesson with a group of 20 people in just 30 minutes, and most importantly, I am separated from my friends.”

### **Students’ Views on Group-based Lessons**

- **Student 14:** “When I started high school, I was really excited, but unfortunately, now I’m about to graduate from the first year, and I’m upset. The reason is that for 9 years, I shared the same desk with my friend, but now we are not in the same group. I get along very well with my other friends, but we enrolled with the hope that we would attend lessons together in this program. Now, due to the pandemic measures, our groups have been split, and my friend is in the second group based on the alphabetical order. This is really upsetting for me. Also, we attend school one week and have online classes the next, and when we are at home, it’s hard for us to follow the lessons properly.”
- **Student 13:** “It’s terrible. I love my field, and I want to specialize in this area for my university choice. Normally, we would spend about 6 hours at school, but now we only spend 3 hours. In my opinion, 30 minutes is not enough time for a student to fully understand the lesson.”

### **Students’ Views on the Performance of Teachers During the Pandemic**

- **Student 6:** “In my opinion, teachers struggle to manage a class of 20 students in just 30 minutes. After 30 minutes, they only change classrooms and try to give attention to all students. Sometimes they even have to teach multiple groups on the same day, so they get very tired, and their energy naturally decreases, especially in the last lessons. In my opinion, the teachers’ focus on these group works, and the pressure of dealing



with multiple groups, negatively affects their lesson preparation and the quality of teaching. As a result, I believe it's not very efficient."

- **Student 3:** "We love our teachers, but I don't think their performance is sufficient. Sometimes they have to work with 3 or 4 different groups on the same day, and when we are in the last group, their energy is already drained. I'm in my last year, and unfortunately, this year, the workload of our teachers has negatively affected their preparation for the lessons."

### Findings

- The research revealed that, according to the semi-structured interview form, 80% of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the group-based lesson method, while 20% stated that they were satisfied with this approach. Moreover, students, particularly those in vocational high schools, mentioned that due to the pandemic, they were unable to gain sufficient knowledge in their respective fields as the vocational application lessons could not be conducted in person at school.
- Additionally, students who continued their education online through Zoom for the entire second semester of 2020 reported that the majority felt their teachers were unable to perform effectively during online lessons.
- Furthermore, 30% of the participants stated that due to economic difficulties during the pandemic, they lacked the necessary technology to attend lessons via Zoom, which hindered their ability to follow the lessons effectively.

### Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted various sectors, including health, the economy, and education, with education being one of the most debated and sought-after solutions during this period. During the pandemic, Kosovo implemented a long-term quarantine, and students continued their lessons online through Classroom and Zoom from March to June 2020.

This study, which focuses on how online education affected students, reveals that the impact of online education on students was not very positive. After the quarantine period, in September 2020, the decision was made for face-to-face education to resume in Kosovo, with both Turkish and other students continuing their education in schools. In some high schools, lessons were held in groups, alternating every week, while others had two different groups on the same day or two days for one group and the other two days for the second group.

In this context, while there were some positive views from students, the majority expressed dissatisfaction. When Turkish high school students were asked about the overall quality of education in Kosovo and the discipline of the education system during the pandemic, many stated that they were not satisfied with their education. Particularly, students whose families were laid off during the pandemic faced difficulties in attending classes, and many students experienced problems with computers and internet access, highlighting the severity of the challenges they faced.

Compared to other countries, the lower quality of education in Kosovo, the inability to learn effectively, insufficient learning environments, and the transition to online exams were cited as major reasons for dissatisfaction.

To increase students' adaptation to lessons and improve their study methods, and to make Turkish students more active in their lessons, the following solutions are proposed:

- Teachers should be more willing to assign students more research tasks during group work.

- Problems faced by Turkish students in their education processes should be evaluated and addressed with practical solutions.
- Efforts should be made to enhance Turkish students' language skills, and then implement necessary application lessons based on the country's regulations and guidelines.
- Social activities should be organized to help Turkish students, especially 10th graders, connect and integrate better with their peers.
- Scholarships currently provided by the Turkish government to Turkish students up to the 2nd grade of elementary school should also be extended to Turkish-speaking high school students.
- These scholarships would significantly reduce the need for vocational high school students to work part-time in the private sector while continuing their studies, allowing them to focus better on their education and increasing their academic performance.

Turkish students in Prizren's high schools expressed that the education system under the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic was inadequate. They stated that they were unable to sufficiently develop their skills in their respective fields and areas of study during the pandemic. Students emphasized the importance of increasing lesson durations in their respective fields, which they believe would help them understand the content better.

Therefore, it is recommended that the education system revisit the measures taken during the pandemic, reduce restrictions, and adapt the educational process to better support students during the university preparation period. The issue of educational adequacy during the pandemic must be addressed promptly, and necessary improvements should be made to enhance the quality of education.

### Author Contributions

This study was designed and supervised by Dr. Gülay Krasniç. Data collection and analysis were primarily conducted by Vahid Shalqini, under the guidance of Dr. Krasniç. Dr. Enis Kervan contributed to the interpretation of findings and provided editorial support during the writing process. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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