

LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING; AND CORRESPONDING SUCCESS RATES

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ABSTRACT

Online teaching has long been a key area of interest recently in every field of education as well as English language teaching. Numerous hardware tools, such as, mp3 players, mobile devices, and so on; and software applications, such as, podcasts, wikis, learning management systems, and so on, have been used in distance and online instruction and they have proved to be useful in facilitating learning individually (Finger, Sun, & Jamieson-Proctor, 2010). Learning management systems (LMS) provide a virtual environment and various tools to support learning. The current institution where the researchers work deliver two 2-credit online English courses for a specific group of learners at a state university in south-eastern Turkey by using Modular Object Oriented Distance Learning Environment (MOODLE). Moodle is an open code LMS which provides teachers and course developers with numerous online tools to enhance distance learning/teaching environment.

The course has both a synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Synchronous and asynchronous instructions are associated with the delivery of content in campus-based environments; however, their role differs in off the campus environments as they solve the problems of distance learners. Universities, colleges, and other education institutions are integrating online learning into every aspect of higher education. Many teachers and faculty members at higher education institutions who already run face-to-face courses have a website to post lecture notes or slide presentations as well as other course material. There is no doubt that these are effective strategies to expand teaching efforts. Still, there are other educators who design and teach totally online classes. The main purpose of this paper is to evaluate learners' attitudes towards these online language courses, and there are two objectives of this research.

The first one is to discover learners' attitudes towards the online English course; and the second purpose is to evaluate and correlate learners' attitudes with their success determined with their end-of-the-year grades.

For the unique purpose of this study, an Online Language Learning Attitude Test (OLLAT) has been constructed and distributed to about 7000 learners who were invited to complete this task online. 3516 of these learners took the OLLAT voluntarily and 1783 were successfully completed the test and were included in this study. The findings showed that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between learners' OLLAT scores and their course success.

Keywords: Attitudes, online language learning, success

INTRODUCTION

An Overview of Distance and Online Learning

The notion in the late nineteenth and twentieth century that education is for all people without any restrictions gave rise to the idea and application of distance education. For the first time at university level, the University of Chicago started correspondence study courses in 1892 to meet the educational needs of American public, and since then, distance courses have gained more and more attention (Erdos, 1967). In the following decades, new foundations and institutions started correspondence study new developments tools of instruction were started to be used.

One of the new tools was the radio broadcasting. The use of radio broadcasts along with correspondence study expanded the opportunities for distance instruction. In the USA 202 educational institutions were granted radio broadcasting licenses by the federal government between 1918 and 1946 (The University of Florida Interactive Media Lab). Mail based correspondence courses proved to be the most popular distance education method throughout the World War I and II until 1960s. The need for education grew bigger with the fast increase in population and therefore those years brought the use of TV broadcast into the education world. In the 1970s, universities started to provide courses through e-mail and video conferencing and in 1984 the first online undergraduate course was delivered in the program called *Virtual Classroom* at New Jersey Institute of Technology (Harasim, 2000).

Advances in technology especially in data compression transfer gave way to developments in formerly humble video conferencing tools. Therefore, in 1990s and 2000s virtual learning environments, such as Moodle, WebCT and Blackboard made it possible for faculty and students to benefit from such tools as discussion boards, mail systems, and live chat, along with content including documents and web pages. Although many web pages were designed for online instruction prior to these virtual environments, they were not as successful basically because they did not include variety of tools to supplement instruction (Harasim, 2000). The brief history of distance education shows a parallel chronological development order with technological development. Consequently, the twenty-first century will probably bring more instructional tools so as to make current media easier to manage and integrate. The types of distance learning practices have been:

- Correspondence study courses,
- Videoconferencing,
- Blended courses (Enhancements to face-to-face courses)
- Online courses

In the following section, these practices will be elaborated upon.

Correspondence Study Courses

In a correspondence course, the students and teacher who are geographically remote from each other exchange teaching materials between them (Wallener, 2011). The course material including a textbook, lesson plans, lecture notes and problem sets are sent to the students by the education provider. After completing the tasks and assignments, students send them back to the instructor for grading. Lack of interaction among students is the main difference between an online course and a correspondence course.

Videoconferencing

High technology of the modern times made it possible for educators to meet distance students. Video conferencing is a technological tool "that integrates video and voice to connect remote users with each other as if they were in the same room" (Anissimov, 2011). Videoconferencing is a synchronous tool occurring in "real time" to facilitate learning. This method is advantageous to traditional face-to-face method in that there is no limit in location students and instructors are supposed to be. They can be anywhere so long as they have a computer, webcam, microphone, and broadband internet connection.

Blended Courses

Traditional face-to-face courses are now incorporated with a distance learning tool, which is in most cases a web component. 75% of the courses at university level now include a web component to help students (Finger, Sun, & Jamieson-Proctor, 2010). The contents of these web sites might include only the course syllabus in some cases; however, some richer web-sites include PowerPoint study slides, useful links, additional readings, sample quizzes, flash illustrations, videos and many other study materials.

Online Courses

In an online course the course content is delivered on a course web site with typically no face-to-face meetings. In a survey conducted by Allen and Seaman (2009) it was discovered that online enrollments in higher education are growing at 17 percent, much faster than the 1.5 percent growth rate of higher education in general in 2008 (2009). Over 4.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2008 term, which meant more than one in four higher education students now take at least one course online in the USA (Allen & Seaman, 2009). In the same time period, the number of distance education students was 845,461 comprising about 27 % of the total number of students at higher education (Durman, 2007).

Online courses are structured in line with student-centered learning philosophy where the instructor acts as a facilitator and coach rather than a sage to disseminate information. The course web site which includes learning/teaching materials is published on a user-friendly virtual learning platform which could be named as Learning Management Systems (LMS), Local Area Networks (LAN), Learning Management Content Systems (LMCS), and Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Education institutions around the world, wishing to adopt the implications of technological developments, have introduced online courses on various learning platforms such as *Alphastudy*, *Moodle*, *Blackboard*, *Democrasoft*, *CyberExtension*, *BlackBoard* or *WebCT* (Finger, Sun, & Jamieson-Proctor, 2010).

Design of an Online Course

Course design in any field of education is the outcome of decisions dependent on a number of interacting factors including learning theories, teaching methods and the various stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process.

In language teaching, decisions about a course syllabus take account of, national agencies or overarching institutions, the philosophy of the institution, the students' needs and the path that will take learners to expected levels of language competence at the end of a given program (Garrido, 2005). These challenges are especially difficult to handle when teaching and learning languages at a distance.

Online education requires careful planning, and the resulting course design should be innovative and allow learners to interact with each other and the materials (Porter, 2004, p. 28). Hall et al. present a framework for web-based learning design, which consists of seven basic components: directionality, usability, consistency, interactivity, multimodality, adaptability, and accountability (2001). They propose that effective design begins with clear delineation of the intended audience, usage context, and learning goals and that all further design occurs within the context of these factors (i.e., directionality). The design factors themselves can be seen as representing the fundamental contrasting goals of simplicity (usability and consistency) and complexity (interactivity, multimodality, and adaptability). They also propose that effective design consists of the proper balance of simplicity and complexity. Finally, design should include an evaluation component (accountability), which should in turn impact design modification via feedback.

Attitudes Towards Language Learning

The history of study of learner attitudes in foreign language learning could be traced back as early as the beginning of the 1970s to the comprehensive studies of eminent researchers such as Gardner, Horwitz, and Dornyei. Careful study into the theoretical foundations and key concepts were conducted around 1970s (Wesely, 2012).

For a detailed review of history of language learner attitudes please refer to Wesely (2012). The learner outcomes in language learning have been proved to be improved with positive attitudes of learners; and also it has been confirmed that negative attitudes reduce learners' motivation and therefore hinder successful language learning (Oxford, 2001). Therefore, language teachers need to be aware of their students' attitudes towards language learning, and if the learners have an undesired negative attitude, they need to look for ways to motivate them and to help them build positive attitudes. Learner attitudes in literature have been investigated in relation with two concepts: learners' attitudes about learning situation and attitudes towards target community (Wesely, 2012). Language teachers and researchers are concerned about making their classes more motivating and making learners more eager in their language learning.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The use of online media in instruction has always been valued since it first emerged in 1970s mostly because it provides opportunities to support learners which were not previously available in both distance and campus-based environments (Macdonald, 2008, p. 11). Synchronous and asynchronous instructions are associated with the delivery of content in campus-based environments; however, their role differs in off the campus environments as they solve the problems of distance learners. Universities, colleges, and other education institutions are integrating online learning into every aspect of higher education. Many teachers and faculty members at higher education institutions who run face-to-face courses already have a website to post lecture notes or slide presentations as well as other course material. There is no doubt that these are effective strategies to expand teaching efforts. Still, there are other educators who design and teach totally online classes.

In Turkey, also, higher education institutions are designing and implementing online courses both in diploma programs at graduate and postgraduate levels; and Certificate programs.

The Higher Education Act issued in 1981 authorized Anatolian University to provide distance education at tertiary level. The Open Education Faculty of Anatolian University admits nearly 300.000 learners every year (Askar, 2009). Porter names advantages of online education and she suggests that one of the most important benefits of online education is "the possibility of working with more learners, teachers, and subject matter experts outside a student's limited geographic area" (2004, p. 14).

Every institution has to modify its organization for the rapidly-changing learning environment needs. In the institution where researchers work, all freshmen students have to take two 2-credit foreign language courses. At tertiary level, these language courses are among must courses which are mandated by 2547-Higher Education Act, Article 5 (i). Therefore, all university students have to take foreign language courses.

The number of learners in the institution the researchers teach has grown up so fast that there are not enough instructors to teach these courses. Therefore, there is a huge need for development of an online English course at the university where the researcher teaches. This need for more teaching staff was the starting point for the online course.

In this context, however, there are two basic problems;

- Physical setting of the institution is not enough to meet the needs of language learning. First, there are more than 7000 students taking this course and it is very hard to find appropriate physical classroom settings to hold such a lot of students. Considering the fact that the size of an ideal language class should not exceed 20 students; there has to be 350 classrooms; and 35 instructors just for this course.
- Even if the institution could provide classrooms, they will not be equipped with audio and video players to assist language learning.

However, a VLE could solve these problems. Online learning is flexible; learners and teachers could study without any time and place limitations. Students can access the course through their computers at home or via 500 computers in computer labs around university. Therefore, the problems stated above will be solved with an online course.

Although online graduate degree programs and undergraduate courses are becoming more common in various forms among Turkish universities, there are not any cases in which the mandatory foreign language course is delivered online. This unique aspect of this study, which aims at developing and delivering the mandatory foreign language course, will make the outcomes of the dissertation valuable for higher education in Turkey.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at this state university in south-eastern Turkey, which employs 82 EFL instructors, offers foreign languages courses to about 10.000 students. Students of Engineering, Medicine and Tourism faculty have to take a one-year English preparatory class as the medium of instruction at their departments is fully or partially English. There is a growing need for instructors to teach foreign languages as the number of students has more than doubled in the last 5 years at the institution where the researcher teaches. However, the number of instructors has not increased along with the student numbers. Preparatory class, where students are given one year intensive language training, is the core unit of the school.

About 1800 students attend the 24-hour/a week courses to acquire all language skills with the help of a wide range textbooks and supplementary materials in guidance of Turkish EFL and native English speaking instructors.

The students have internet access via wireless internet points and 100 computers at 3 laboratories at SFL.

All in all, we had to create these online courses for our 7000 students. The courses are two 2-credit language courses (YDBI100 and YDBI101) which are mandated by the Higher Education Act, Article 5 (i). The intended level of the course is A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The course material is also delivered to students in hard copy book format. In the online course, video recordings of each lesson along with many interactive materials were presented at weekly format. The course was asynchronous and each student had to complete tasks online and take two sit-down exams; 1 midterm and 1 final.

Aim of the Study

In relation to the problems mentioned in the previous section, the purpose of the study is to determine;

- the attitudes of learners toward this online English course,
- the relationship between learner attitudes and success,
- and differences between some demographics (i.e. gender, income) in terms their attitudes,

Research Questions

In the light of the theoretical background given and purpose explained, the present study will address the following research questions:

- What are attitudes of learners toward the online English course?
- How do students' attitudes relate to their foreign language learning in in the online English course?
- Do students with different demographic backgrounds differ in their attitudes (namely; gender, computer literacy, income)?

METHOD

This study employs a survey-based methodology to discover the attitudes of learners toward this online English course as well as the relationship between learner attitudes and their success in the online course and any differences between some demographics (i.e gender, income) in terms their attitudes towards the course.

The study is descriptive in design. There have been many researchers in educational technology field who have studied how to design and deliver online distance courses (Yang & Richardson, 2009). Yang and Richardson classified these studies into three categories:

- models and frameworks for online and distance course design;
- critical factors impacting students' online learning; and
- practical guidelines on how to design online and distance courses.

These models and guidelines will construct the basis of the instructional design of the online course along with descriptive studies about student needs; students' profile; and learning outcomes.

In this study, students who take the online course will be investigated in terms of their attitudes towards the course, their computer literacy skills, gender, and age. Moreover, the students' achievement level in terms of learning outcomes will be studied as well as their views on the course design and course delivery. Quantitative data collection tools were used to evaluate students' attitudes and to measure their course success.

Sampling and Participants

There are more than 7000 freshmen at this state university in south-eastern Turkey who have taken course in spring 2012. This number will be rather high for this study; therefore, various sampling strategies have been employed during the study. For the administration of the OLLAT survey, a voluntary sampling strategy has been used. Dowson suggests that this method is more practical when the goal of the study is description rather than prescription (Dowson, 2002). Therefore, groups of students from different departments have been included in the study based on their voluntary participation. The OLLAT questionnaire were administered online and it was open to all 7000 students; however, as we already expected not all of the students answered the OLLAT. 3516 students filled out the questionnaire but only 1783 of them were taken into consideration as the rest were not successfully completed.

Data Collection Tools

In order to collect reliable data for this study, two qualitative data collection tools were made use of:

The Online Language Learning Attitudes Questionnaire (OLLAT)

This questionnaire was constructed by the researchers. It contains 23 items. First 8 items are about learner demographics, such as age, income, perceived language success; and 15 questions are about learners' attitudes towards online language learning. The maximum total score of the OLLAT is 75. When interpreting the results, the attitudes of the students were labeled based on their total scores. Therefore, the students with the total score between 60 and 75 are labeled as students with a "very positive" attitude towards the course. The ones between 45 and 59 are labeled as "positive"; 15 and 29 are labeled as "negative"; and 0 and 14 are labeled as "very negative". The Alpha test ensured the reliability of the OLLAT ($r=.87$; $p=.001$).

Formal Assessment

The second tool to inform about learners was the formal assessments of the course, which consisted of paper-based two objective language tests.

RESULTS

The data collected through various data collection tools in the current study has revealed vast amount of information about learners taking the online English course and their attitudes along with their course success.

This part includes the results of statistical analysis regarding the reliability of the OTTAL and our research questions. The results of the data analyzed showed that The ATOL administrated proved to be a statistically reliable test ($r=.87$).

Results About Participant Demographics

As participation was on voluntary basis, about 3000 students took the online questionnaire; however, almost 1/3 did not complete it properly. Therefore, only 1783 fully completed entries were included in the study. The following table illustrates the findings about participants' demographics; i.e. age and gender.

Table: 1
Participants' gender and age distribution

| Variable | | N | % |
|-----------------|--------------|-------|-------|
| Gender | Female | 989 | 55.5 |
| | Male | 794 | 44.5 |
| Income Interval | 0-400 | 210 | 11.8 |
| | 401-700 | 380 | 21.3 |
| | 701-1000 | 547 | 30.7 |
| | 1001-1300 | 345 | 19.3 |
| | 1301-+ | 302 | 16.9 |
| Computer Skills | Advance | 86 | 20.57 |
| | Intermediate | 92 | 58.23 |
| | Basic | 32 | 21.20 |
| Mean Age | | 20.56 | |

The demographics of the participants are given in Table: 1 above. The table clearly illustrates that 1783 student took the questionnaire, 794 of whom were female and 989 were male students. Their monthly family income figures show that 701-1000 income group has been revealed as the most common income level with a 30.7 percentage. The mean age of the participants was calculated as 20.56 years.

Results about research questions

The first research question was constructed to investigate the attitudes of learners toward the study and learning in the online English course. The results of the OLLAT scores have revealed learners attitudes toward the online language course. The maximum total score of the OLLAT is 75. When interpreting the results, the attitudes of the students were labeled based on their total scores. The one between 60 and 75 are labeled as students with a "very positive" attitude towards the course. The ones between 45 and 59 are labeled as "positive"; 15 and 29 are labeled as "negative"; and 0 and 14 are labeled as "very negative. Table: 2 below presents these results.

Table: 2
Participants' OLLAT results

| | | N | % |
|-------------------|---------------|-----|-------|
| The OLLAT Results | Very Positive | 227 | 12.75 |
| | Positive | 694 | 38.90 |
| | Negative | 156 | 8.74 |
| | Very Negative | 44 | 2.46 |

The results in Table: 2 shows that majority of the students have a positive attitude towards the online language course (51.56%). However, more than one tenth of the students taking the course have a negative attitude towards learning English online (11.21%).

The second research question was intended to investigate how students' attitudes relate to their foreign language learning in the online English course. In order to find out about this relationship, a correlation study was conducted between the learners' OLLAT scores and their online language course grades. The correlation analysis exposed that there is a significant correlation between participants' OLLAT results and online course grades ($r=.106$, $p=.01$).

The third research question was to explore whether students with different demographic backgrounds differ in their attitudes, namely; gender, computer skills, and income. In order to study these demographics and their relationship with the OLLAT, three statistical tests were conducted.

First of all, a t-test analysis was conducted to see if attitudes of male and female students differ based on their OLLAT score. After the t-test analysis, it can be clearly stated that male and female participants' OLLAT scores did not differ significantly [$t(1631)=3.41$, $p<0.05$].

Secondly, in order to study the relationship between students' perception of their computer skills and their OLLAT scores, a one-way between subjects Anova test was done. The test results showed that ATOL results of the students proved that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean OLLAT scores of the students in advance, intermediate, and basic computer skill groups [$F(2,1615) = 4.92$, $p = 0.007$]. A comparison of the mean OLLAT scores of these groups clarified that learners in the advance group had higher OLLAT scores than intermediate and basic; and basic group students had the lowest OLLAT scores.

Finally, when a comparison based on their income level groups was conducted, the analysis of variance showed that the OLLAT scores of the learners are statistically different ($F(4,1613) = 2.708$, $p=0.029$). The post-hoc Benferroni test also showed that the OLLAT scores of the students in the lowest income group were different than the highest income group.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicated that students' attitude toward the online English course (YDBI100 & YDBI101) were relatively positive. More than 50% of the learners had positive attitudes and just 11% of them were found to have negative attitude towards the course.

Similarly, some other researchers studying the attitudes and motivation of learners in different foreign language teaching contexts also reported that learners had positive attitudes towards the online language learning and they were highly motivated (Hotho, 2000; Ushida, 2005).

Furthermore, students with higher OLLAT scores were observed to have done better throughout the course and therefore had better grades from the formal assessments of the course. This finding is also in line with the findings of many other researchers in the field (Finger, Sun, & Jamieson-Proctor, 2010; Ushida, 2005; Weller, 2002). As a result, we could easily conclude that positive attitude online language learning has a positive correlation between; however, it is required to be reminded that this does not refer to a causal relation between the two.

Another finding of this study is about the difference of male and female students in terms of their attitudes towards the online language course. The statistical analysis proved that boys and girls did not differ in their attitudes towards the course, which was disclosed by learners' scores from the OLLAT. Gender differences in the learner attitudes towards language learning have been closely investigated by many researchers in the field (Kobayashi, 2010).

This study empirically investigated the role of students' self-perception of their computer literacy skills. The results revealed that students who regarded themselves proficient computer users also had relatively higher positive attitudes toward the online language course and therefore have better grades from the assessment. This finding is in line with other studies in the field which also alleged that learners with higher level of computer literacy skills displayed more positive attitudes towards online learning (Ushida, 2005; Kobayashi, 2010).

A lot of research has found that male learners have higher level of self-perception of their computer skills than female students; and therefore have more positive attitudes towards online learning. In line with these studies; the results coming out of the current study have found a statistically significant difference between male and female students' computer skills. Although, these freshmen learners all have to take an information technologies course, in which they learn basics of computer and internet, males had better view of their computer skills.

Limitations And Recommendations For Further Research

One important limitation of the study is that the participants of this study will be students at a specific university in Turkey. Therefore, selection of the participants is naturally regionally and culturally biased. Moreover the findings of the may not be generalizable to speakers from nationalities other than Turkish since the participants in the target group will mostly consist of Turkish students.

Another limitation is that unfortunately not all the students are equally capable of computer and internet technology use. The knowledge of computers and internet technology use will be limited to that of the participants of the study.

Easy access to internet is another limitation of the study. It is a clear fact that not all the students have their own personal computers; therefore, most of these students depend on university sources. There are 5 computer laboratories at the university open to all students with about 450 computers equipped with headphones and microphones. One of these laboratories is situated at the school of foreign languages, and the remaining 4 are at the Informatics department.

This study was conducted at the last week of the online course. Further research might focus on the process by observing learners attitudes longitudinally throughout the term rather just looking at the end of the term. More research could be done with different body of participants before they have taken the information technologies course to see if there is a difference between male and female students perception of computer skills.

Authors' Note: Part of this study was presented at the 6th International Computer & Instructional Technologies Symposium on October 4-6, 2012, Gaziantep, Turkey.

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