DETERMINING THE ENGLISH PREPARATORY SCHOOL STUDENTS' READINESS FOR ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate students ' readiness for online learning at the Near East University English Preparatory School and to provide suggestions on how they can be further supported to strengthen their online learning. 202 adult students participated in the study were fall semester students of the 2019-2020 Academic year. As the data collection tool, Online Learning Readiness Scale (OLRS) by Hung et al. (2010) was used. The dimensions of the scale are; self-directed learning, motivation, learner control, computer-Internet self-efficacy, and online communication self-efficacy. The data obtained showed that the participants were ready in all dimensions with some variations within the dimensions. In the self-directed learning dimension, the participants were observed to lack the ability to manage time in their studies however they were willing to ask for help when they need help. Although the scores were above the average, Computer / Internet self-efficacy was found to have the lowest scores compared to the other dimensions. Participants stated that they were distracted by other online applications while studying for their online course. Results for computer / internet self-efficacy dimension showed that participants did not have a very high readiness in using basic Microsoft Office Programs, reaching information easily via online search and using online applications. Motivation and Online Communication self-efficacy dimensions were found to be the dimensions where all the items received a high score.

Keywords: Online learning, online learning readines, english preparatory school.

1. Introduction

Unstoppable progress in information and communication technologies has been reflected in education and revolutionary changes in the field of education have taken place. The most obvious one of these changes is the shift towards online or internet -based learning. Traditional or in-class training has become to be perceived as 'incomplete or boring' if they are no longer supported by technology tools or online tools.

With the rapid increase in the possibilities and tools offered to learn through online or internet -based training, traditional education and learning have changed, leading educational institutions to focus on different models of e-learning. E-learning is presented in different modes as blended, flipped, or fully online. As the demand increased, efforts to increase the efficiency of the programs to be offered to participants have been escalated and research towards this end has also gained popularity (2020; Bicen & Demir, Adnan & Boz-Yaman, 2017; Cigdem & Ozturk, 2016; Chinaza et al., 2015; Doe et al., 2017).

Due to its being convenient, flexible and financially more affordable, many universities today are trying to increase the facilities/programs for online education (mixed or fully online)

to meet the growing demand. According to the 2004 report from the Higher Education Accreditation Authority, The British Council (2003) has pointed out that 90% of universities in the UK has designed distance education courses in various fields and levels. According to another report (Allen & Seaman, 2013). 6.7 million students in the United States as of the fall 2012 semester are attending to least one online lesson. When this huge of demand for online learning is considered, the online program that institutions provide or plan to provide must be effective, satisfactory and convenient.

In addition to what the online programs have to offer, tracking retention levels should be an important component of the programs. Croxton in her article (2004), cited from Carr (2000), Chen and Jang (2010), Jun (2005), and Rochester and Pradel (2008), noting that retention in online lessons is much lower than face-to-face lessons. In order to find out why the participants are dropping out of online programs where the demand to join is so high, it is utmost important to explore what factors are interfering. Various variables have been examined in various studies to date such as students' age (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005), students' perceptions and expectations (Ilgaz & Gulbahar, 2015) motivation and self-directed learning skills for online learning (Beaten, Kyndt, Struyven & Dochy, 2010), perceptions of skills in using computer and internet (DeTure, 2004; Joo, Bong & Choi, 2000) and students' readiness for online learning levels (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2013). Among them, the readiness for online learning was given a priority as the variable that directly affects success in online learning (Artino, 2009; Galy, Downey & Johnson, 2011; Kruger-Rose and Waters, 2013).

1.1. Online Learning, Online Learning Readiness and Assessing Online Learning Readiness

Various definitions have been made for online learning so far. Online learning has been described by Caliskan (2002) as 'a learning process in which students engage in learning by reaching a variety of learning sources in a different environment than a traditional learning-teaching environment, and in most cases more an environment that involves more interaction than the traditional classroom environment'. Aoki (2010) described e-learning as 'transforming the teaching and learning process using information and communication technologies and student-centered approaches'.

As mentioned above, online learning has increased accessibility to educational activities and has also provided benefits such as convenience and flexibility. However, being an e-learning literate does not only include being able to reach the ICT (Information and Communication Technology) tools but also being ready to use them, which leads us to readiness for online learning (Yurdugül & Sırakaya,2013). Since 1998, various definitions have been made and many scales have been developed, including different dimensions, to measure readiness for online learning. While Warner, Christie and Choy (1998) define readiness for online learning in 3 steps: 1) students' ability to manage their learning in an online learning environment 2) being preferred to face-to-face learning and 3) student's ability to use computer and internet. A description stated in The Yurdugül and Sırakaya's article belongs to Borotis and Poulymenakou: 'being mentally and physically prepared for some online learning experience and actions'.

The readiness to learn online has been studied in many different dimensions and has been measured with a variety of scales. In 2000 and 2001, McVay designed a scale which included self-directed learning, interpersonal communication skills, academic, control and basic technology skills to measure students' readiness for online learning, and later stated that this scale had a 2-factor structure as "Comfort in an Online Learning Environment".

Watkins (2003) first linked readiness for online learning to having access to technology, the ability to use technology, internet literacy and later in 2004 as a result of a second study (Watkins, Leigh, & Triner) they concluded that the scale should have 6 dimensions as motivation, importance of success, relationships in online learning environments, discussion forums, online groups and videos/sounds in online learning environments. However, the article external stated that external validity could not be analyzed due to technical problems.

Then, *in* 2007, Pillay, Irving and Tones, noted that their scale for measuring "Online Learning Readiness Scale for higher education *students"* was based on 5 different scale studies which were listed as: Osborn (2001) and Muse (2003) – surveys measuring students' absence (name unspecified), Roblyer and Marshall (2002,2003) – The Scale of Predicting Success in Education (ESPI), Smith et al. (2003) and Smith (2005) – Online Learning Readiness Scale and Watkins et et g. (2004) – Readiness for online learning self-Assessment Scale. The finalised version of Pillay, Irving and Tones included 4 dimensions as technical skills, computer self-efficacy, learner preferences and attitudes towards the computer.

This study has used the Turkish version of Hung, Chou, Chen and Own's (2010) 'Online Learning Readiness Scale', which was adapted to Turkish by Yurdugül and Sırakaya in 2013. The scale includes 5 dimensions as self-directed learning (managing your own learning, self-assessing, choosing own learning strategies), motivation for learning (especially intrinsic motivation), learner control (personalizing learning), computer and internet self-efficacy and online communication self-efficacy (Skype, forums, e-mail... etc.).

1.2. Self-directed Learning

A definition that we frequently encounter in studies for self-directed learning was made by Knowles (1975): a process in which the individual evaluates his/her own learning outcomes by choosing and applying appropriate learning strategies, and by choosing human or material resources additionally setting their own learning needs and objectives. As this definition suggests, self-directed learning requires the individual to know his/her needs and strengths, and identifying appropriate methods and strategies to meet his/her needs and/or use them to further support his/her strengths.

1.3. Learner Motivation

Motivation is 'must' element for learning to take place. It is an element that gives the learners the strength to achieve their goals, make more effort. Khan (2009) emphasized that motivation is as important in online learning as it is in in-class learning.

In some studies (Bilgic, Dogan & Seferoğlu, 2011) it has been stated that motivation and success are related and that learning is realized due to interaction between motivational factors and cognitive factors (Pintrich&Schunk,2002; Stefanu & Salisbury-Glennon). Learner motivation supports the performance of the learner in achieving their goals, reinforces learning, makes it easier to recall and store information (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010).

1.4. Learner Control

In-class environments are the environments that require the student to learn in an orderly fashion. Web-based environments provide the student with flexibility and freedom in terms of following the materials (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010). This flexibility and freedom gives the learners the opportunity to proceed at their own speed, making their own choices in terms of material selection.

As noted in Merrill (1984), Hung, Chou, Chen and Own's (2010) studies, learners should be given the control of educational materials, so that learners can discover how they learn as a result of their decisions on the selection and use of materials. It is important to examine whether the learners have 'learner control' since the selection of materials might affect the performance

1.5. Computer-Internet Self-Efficacy

As Hung, Chou, Chen and Own (2010) noted, Compeau and Higgins (1995) developed a 10-point scale and mentioning the impact of computer self-efficacy on computer use results, attitudes towards computer use and the ability to use the computer. They also claimed that computer self-efficacy is not being skilled in using computer functions, but the perception of the individual's ability of how well he/she uses a computer to perform any work that needs to be done with the computer. Çelen, Celik and Seferoğlu (2011) concluded the students with a high level of computer self-efficacy is a significant factor in being successful in online learning environments. Relevantly, internet self-efficacy is about the self-belief of how skilled one is in online environments rather than having the skill to complete actions (Yurdugül & Sırakaya, 2013).

1.6. Online Communication Self-efficacy

Because online learning environments do not include continuous face-to-face interaction as traditional learning environments, learners are required to communicate using tools such as chat rooms, email, messaging apps that are integrated into learning platforms.   Using these tools helps the learners to maintain communication and ask questions, while ensuring retention and keeping motivation high (Hung, Chou, Chen & Own, 2010).

2. Method and Data Collection Tool

The study was designed as a quantitative study in which the Turkish version (adapted by Yurdugül and Sırakaya, 2013) of *Online Learning Readiness Scale* developed by Hung, Chou, Chen and Own (2010), was administered. The validity and reliability studies were also done by Yurdugül and Sırakaya, 2013. The scale is grouped into a total of 5 factors (Self-directed Learning, Motivation, Learner Control, Computer-Internet Self-efficacy, and Online Communication Self-efficacy) that consists of 18 items. Of the two parts, demographic variables are included in the first part and the scale itself comprises the second part. The scale is a 5-likert scale in which the options range from 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree' for each item. The scale was administered by the researchers and it took about 10 minutes for the students to fill-in the scale.

2.1. Purpose and Sub-Goals

The aim of this study is to determine the readiness of English preparatory school students for online learning. Sub-purposes for this purpose;

- What is the distribution of the students' rate of taking courses in an online environment before?
- What is the general statistical distribution of the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness scale to the specific learning dimension?

- How is the overall statistical distribution of the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness scale based on the learning motivation dimension?
- How is the overall statistical distribution of the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness scale based on the learner control dimension?
- What is the general statistical distribution of the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness scale according to the computer-internet adequacy dimension?
- How is the overall statistical distribution of the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness scale based on the online communication self-efficacy dimension?

2.2. Participants

Turkish students, whose face-to-face learning was supported by e-learning tools, at the Near East University English Preparatory School, during the fall semester of the 2019-2020 Academic Year were the participants of this study. Those students who were in their classes at the time of the administration of the scale were included in the study. The group of students who participated in the study consisted of 104 girls and 98 male students who were going to study in various departments of the university.

3. Analysis of Data and Findings

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) 20.0 program. The 5-Likert scale used anchors that ranged from "I strongly disagree"(1) to "I strongly agree"(5). In addition, while interpreting the averages, intervals were determined for each anchor according to Ezin, Bilen Aslan & Altundag's study. Thus each anchor was given these interval values: 'I strongly disagree': 1-1, 80, 'I disagree': 1.81-2.60, 'Not sure': 2.61-3.40, 'I agree': 3, 20.41-4.20, 'I strongly agree': 4, 21-5. As suggested by Aydın and Taşçı (2005) the minimum required average was taken as 3.4.

Table1. Distribution of participants according to gender

	F
Male	98
Woman	104
Total	202

A total of 202 students, including 104 female (51.5), and 98 (48.5) male students, participated in the study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Distribution of participants according to age

	F
18-22	191
22-28	7
28 and above	4
Total	202

When Table 2 is examined, it is observed that the age range of students participating in the study is mostly between 18 and 22 (94.6).

Table 3. Distribution of participants according to their departments

	F
Faculty of Education	19
Faculty of Pharmacy	30
Faculty of Dentistry	2
Faculty of Arts and Sciences	38
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences	33
Faculty of Architecture	8
Faculty of Engineering	37
Faculty of Health Sciences	10
Faculty of Medicine	2
School of Tourism and Hotel Management	2
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine	21
Total	202

When table 3 is examined, it is observed that it is the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (18.8), which makes up the majority of students studying at the preparatory school and participating in the study. Other faculties following this are the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (16.3) and Faculty of Pharmacy (14.9).

Table 4. Distribution of students who have or have not previously taken any online courses

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Have you ever taken any online lessons before?	202	1,00	2,00	1.90
Valid N (listwise)	202			

When Table 4 is examined, it appears that most of the participants have never taken any online lessons before (1.90).

Table 5. Distribution of responses given for the 'self-directed learning' dimension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
I carry out my study plan	202	1,00	5,00	3.52
I seek assistance when facing learning problems	202	1,00	5,00	3.88

I manage time well	202	1,00	5,00	3.36
I set up my learning goals	202	1,00	5,00	3.78
I have higher expectations for my learning performance	202	1,00	5,00	3.73
Valid N (listwise)	202			3.65

Table 5 shows the answers given by participants to questions posed in the self-directed learning dimension of the Online Learning Readiness Scale. When table 5 is examined, it is observed that participants were able to implement their own study plan (3.52), they could ask for support and assistance when faced with problems (3.88), could set their own learning goals (3.78) and had high expectations for their learning (3.73). However, the average of 3, 36 indicates that they had some troubles in managing their time.

Table 6. Distribution of responses given for the 'motivation' dimension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
I'm open to new ideas	202	1,00	5,00	4.16
I have motivation to learn	202	1,00	5,00	3.67
I improve from my mistakes	202	1,00	5,00	3.66
I like to share my ideas with others	202	1,00	5,00	3.80
Valid N (listwise)	202			3.82

According to the averages obtained, participants are motivated to learn in online learning environment while at the same time willing to share ideas, accept differences in ideas and learn from their mistakes.

Table7. Distribution of responses given for the 'learner control' dimension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
I can direct my own learning process online	202	1,00	5,00	3.26
I'm not distracted by other online activities (instant messaging, browsing the internet) when learning online	202	1,00	5,00	2.90
I repeated online teaching materials according to my needs	202	1,00	5,00	3.06
Valid N (listwise)	202			3.07

Table 7 shows that participants are not fully sure that they can plan their own learning process online (3.26), they get distracted because of other online activities while following online lessons (2.90), and they are not likely to repeat online teaching materials on their own (3.06).

Table 8. Distribution of responses given for the 'computer and internet self-efficacy' dimension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
I feel confident with the basic functions of Microsoft Office Programs (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint)	202	1,00	5,00	3.45
I feel confident in my knowledge and skills of how to manage software online	202	1,00	5,00	3.06
I'm confident in using the internet to find or gather information for online learning	202	1,00	5,00	3.58
Valid N (listwise)	202			3.36

When Table 8 is examined, it appears that participants are confident in using Microsoft Office programs (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint) and using the internet to search for information, but are unsure of their knowledge and skills in managing software in online learning environments.

Table 9. Distribution of responses given for the 'online communication self-efficacy' dimension

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
I'm confident in using online tools(e-mail, discussion) to communicate effectively with others	202	1,00	5,00	3.73
I trust myself in expressing myself in written communication (emotions and humor)	202	1,00	5,00	3.85
I'm confident in asking questions in online discussions	202	1,00	5,00	3.75
Valid N (listwise)	202			3.77

When Table 9 is examined, it is observed that students are confident in using online tools to communicate effectively (3.73), that they do not have difficulty expressing themselves in written communication (3.85) and are not low on their confidence in asking questions in online discussion environments (3.75).

Table10. Overview of all dimensions in Online Learning Readiness Scale

Dimensions	Mean
Self-directed Learning	3.65
Learner Motivation	3.82
Learner Control	3.07

Computer-Internet Self-efficacy	3.36
Online Communication Self-efficacy	3.77
Total	3.53

Table10 has an overall average of dimensions for the responses given to the Online Learning Readiness Scale. When these averages are examined, it is observed that the highest average belongs to the learner motivation (3.82). The lowest average belongs to the learner control (3.07).

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study is to reveal the level at which students studying at The English Preparatory School during the Fall semester of the 2019-2020 Academic Year at Near East University are prepared to learn online.

The study was designed as a quantitative study which used the "Online Learning Readiness Scale" developed by Hung, Chou, Chen and Own (2010). The scale was adapted to Turkish by Yurdugül and Sırakaya (2013) and reliability and validity of the scale were ensured by the same researchers. The scale consists of a total of 5 dimensions as self-directed learning, learner motivation, learner control, computer-internet self-efficacy, and online communication self-efficacy.

As a result of the question of whether they had taken previous online courses in the demographic part of the study, it is concluded that the students had not taken any online courses before. Their failure to take online courses could significantly affect the student's readiness. Therefore, the fact that students have not taken courses online before eliminated the likelihood that their previous online experience would affect the results of the study.

The study found that participants were unable to provide very confident answers about implementing a study plan, but they were also found to be seeking support when they had learning problems in any way. Participants said they had trouble managing time well, but had high expectations in learning performance as they headed towards their learning goals. Based on the data obtained in this study and the results of Horzum & Kaymak's study (2013) named as "Readiness levels of students learning online, the relationship between the perceived structure and the interaction", it appears that self-directed learning is a factor that affects online learning readiness. Therefore, although there are no very high averages with two of the items within self-directed learning dimension, the fact that the general situation has yielded high results gives hope that the participants' self-directed learning skills can be developed with the correct guidance.

The study revealed that learner motivation had high averages for each item found in this dimension. Saade et al. (2007) noted that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation plays an important role in success in online learning. Likewise, in Hung et al. (2010) study, learner motivation was found to be high, and the researchers concluded that this result is promising since motivation is a key factor in encouraging students to continue learning. High motivation affects learners' attitude no matter what educational environment they are in and becomes a driving force in their progress towards their goals (Vasilevska et al, 2017). Therefore, we can see motivation as the primary factor in online learning readiness.

When the computer-Internet self-efficacy dimension of the Online Learning Readiness scale is examined, although the average for the readiness using Microsoft Office programs (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint)   is very close to the expected average, it cannot be regarded as high.

This leads to a conclusion that is very similar to the conclusion drawn by Tsai and Tsai (2003) that students with low internet self-efficacy might experience difficulties in online learning compared to students with high internet self-efficacy. In addition, participants have low confidence in their knowledge and skills on how to use online learning software. Having the necessary computer and internet use skills and having a corresponding self-confidence in using these is one of the determining factors of success in e-learning, as demonstrated in the work of Çelen, Çelik and Seferoğlu (2011). On the other hand, participants were found to be confident in searching for information using online resources.

Based on the results obtained for online communication self-efficacy of the online learning readiness scale, it is concluded that students are confident in using online tools (e-mail, discussion environments) to communicate effectively, expressing themselves in written communication and in asking questions in online discussion environments. Harris, et al. (2009) emphasized that receiving instant responses, exchanging opinions and involving in discussions are beneficial activities in online learning environments. Hence the results received for this dimension in this study is satisfying.

Lastly, participants' responses have shown that they found managing time for online learning challenging and get distracted by online activities such as instant messaging or browsing the internet. It was also revealed that participants should be guided on managing online learning materials. These results have similarities with the research conducted by Cakir and Horzum (2015) and Demir Kaymak & Horzum (2013). Cakir and Horzum (2015) in their work titled "Examining Teacher Candidates' Readiness to Learn Online in Terms of Various Variables", concluded that the motivation of teacher candidates for learning was significantly higher than the other dimensions and the level of learning control was low. Demir Kaymak & Horzum (2013) stated that learner control is crucial for learners since it leads learners to take responsibility for their own online learning and to manage their own learning process. Wang and Beasley's study (2002) further supports this claim. They found out that students' performance in the tasks given was fundamentally influenced by learner control.

4. Suggestions

When the dimensions are examined based on the data obtained from the study, it can be concluded that students are highly prepared in terms of motivation, online communication self-efficacy and self-directed learning dimensions respectively. Positive results have been achieved in the specific aspect of the study, but it is obvious that students need to receive support in managing time well and implementing a study plan. Additionally, the data obtained in the dimensions of learner control and computer/internet self-efficacy shows that the students' online readiness levels are low. Accordingly, students should be given training on how they can improve them to perform better in online learning activities and platforms. An important point here is these trainings should continue not only once but also throughout the program to keep the retention rates high. As Grow (1991) points out, the ability of a student to manage his learning is directly related to his expertise and familiarity in that field. In addition, Mager (1992) stated that performance improves or decreases depending on self-beliefs. Therefore, the experience and self-confidence to be given to students in the areas where they have weaknesses will lead to a more successful e-learning process.

Research has shown that blended learning yields more effective results than in-class education (Riffley & Sibley, 2004). Similarly, in 2016, Dere and Yalcinalp in their study

named as "Views of Primary Students on Edmodo, an educational online social learning environment" reported that half of the students (50%) said Edmodo (an online learning platform) improved their learning. Learning through a platform already excites and motivates the learners. Therefore, if they receive the necessary support for online learning, the excitement and motivation will result in success as well. Further researches such as this study are needed to reveal in which areas students should be supported to guide not only the student, but also the educators /educational institutions.

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