VOCATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF A NEWLY IMPLEMENTED ONLINE COURSE OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the student satisfaction with the Online English Language courses piloted for the first time at a Vocational College in a remote town located in the north-west of Turkey in 2014-2015 educational year. These courses were designed with a format of face-to-face testing and online delivery of course materials. Data were collected from students both quantitatively and qualitatively using a survey which included seven likert scale attitude questions and two open-ended questions where they had to express their opinions about either face-to-face or online courses of which they thought was more advantageous and relevant for them. Twenty three female and a hundred and eighty four male students attending ten different departments, aged mostly eighteen and nineteen years participated in our study. Quantitative data from the students indicate that while 52% of the whole participants thought that online teaching of English as a foreign language was not useful for them at all, just 6% of the students declared that the online teaching system was very useful. To the question whether they preferred online or face-to-face learning, quite surprisingly, 82% of the participants declared that they preferred face-to-face learning. As to why they preferred the particular kind of teaching; the online course proponents cited mostly "comfortness" and "no-attendance obligation"; on the other hand, the face-to-face advocates mostly cited "effectiveness of learning from a live instructor" and "possibility of asking questions when something is not clear" and "lacking of technical equipment "or "internet access".

Key Words: Online courses, teaching English as a foreign language, online learning, face-to-face learning, learners' perspectives.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Simonson (2003) defined Distance Education as institutional-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors.

The advent of the Internet has significantly contributed to the boom in educational technology and rapid growth of online education in recent years (Carnevale, 2004). Godwin-Jones (2003) claims that the Internet has enabled delivery of language instruction with lower cost, thus providing more opportunities for educational institutions to deliver courses online.

Studies on distance learning

Allen, Bourhis, Burrell and Mabry (2002) *From University of Wisconsin conducted a study* comparing student satisfaction with distance education to traditional classrooms in higher education. They came to the conclusion that distance education does not diminish the level of student satisfaction when compared to traditional face-to-face methods of instruction. The learners had a positive attitude towards distance learning.

Murday , Ushida & Chenoweth (2008) from Indiana University conducted a research on learners' perspectives on language online. Quantitative data from students indicates a trend of increasing satisfaction with the online courses compared with traditional courses.

Kim, Liu , Bonk (2005) from Indiana University investigated online MBA students' perceptions of online learning. Students exhibited positive attitudes towards their learning in the online MBA program. The students responded that they were highly satisfied with the program.

Song, Singleton, Hill, Koh (2004) from University of Georgia conducted a study with a title of «Improving online learning: Student perceptions of useful and challenging characteristics». Results of the study indicated that most learners agreed that course design, learner motivation, time management, and comfortableness with online technologies impact the success of an online learning experience. Participants who were less satisfied with online learning felt that a lack of community (71%) within the online environment was a challenge in online courses and 50 % indicated technical problems as a barrier.

In this empirical study the main purpose was
    (1) to investigate learners' attitude towards English Language,
    (2) to find out learners' perceptions about online learning,
    (3) to learn their preference of the kind of learning, whether online or in-class environment, and
    (4) to find out reasons behind their choice of online or class environment learning.

Research Questions:

1. What are the attitudes of Vocational College students towards learning English?

2. What are the perceptions of Vocational College students about learning English online?

3. What are the perceived reasons of learners' online education or traditional education preferences?

2. METHODOLOGY

Setting:
Vocational College, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University

Participants:

Age, gender and departments of the participants are revealed in the tables below. As it is seen from the tables majority of the participants are under twenty years old. 89% of the participating learners are male. While the participants are from ten different departments, most of them are from Mechatronics.

Age	Frequency	Percent (%)
18	112	54
19	50	24
20	22	11
21	14	7
22	6	3
23	3	1

Table1: Age of the participants

Gender	Frequency	Percent(%)
Female	23	11
Male	184	89

Table2: Gender of the Participants

Departments	Frequency	Percent (%)
Mechatronics	50	24
Electrical Transmission	44	21
Power Plants	27	13
Electronic	20	10
Medical	16	8
Biomedical	15	7
Accounting and Tax	14	7
Mining Technology	11	5
Logistics	9	4
Metal Technology	1	1
Total	207	100,0

Table3: Departments of the participants

Instruments:
A survey with four likert scale attitude questions and two open-ended items which ask the learners to give the reasons of their choice; whether online course or face-to-face course was utilised.

The learners were asked to enumerate the reasons beyond their choice.
The reason why an open-ended questionnaire is administered is that the data collected would not be influenced by any pre-determined categories (Williams et al., 2004). The learners would be free to share their thoughts.

Data Analysis:
The collected quantitative data was analyzed by using SPSS software programme.
The qualitatively collected data through open-ended questions were categorised, counted, and tabulated.

3. FINDINGS

The data collected quantitatively and qualitatively will be depicted in the tables below.

Interest	Frequency	Percent
I'm intersted in English	57	28%
I'm not very much interested in English	150	72%

Gender	Interested	Not very much interseted	Total
Female	3 (13%)	20(87%)	23
Male	54 (29%)	130(71%)	184

Departments	Interested	Not very much Intersted	Total
Mechatronics	19 (38%)	62%	50
Accounting and Tax	5 (36%)	64%	14
Electronic	6 (30%)	70%	20
Mining Technology	3 (27%)	73%	11
Power Plants	7 (26%)	74%	27
Logistics	2 (22%)	78%	9
Electrical Transmission	9 (20%)	80%	44
Medicine	3 (19%)	81%	16
Biomedical	2 (13%)	87%	15
Total	57 (28%)	149(72)%	206

Tables4-5-6: Learners' "interest" in English

The three tables above reveal us how much the vocational college students are interested in learning English as a foreign language. Interest in learning English is depicted in three different tables: general interest rate, interest in terms of gender, and interest in terms of department. As it is shown in the tables 72% of the whole learners state that they are not very much interested in learning English. This rate is much higher with female learners. 82% of the female learners claim that they are not very much interested in learning English. With regard to departments the least interested learners are Biomedical students by 87%, and the most interested learners seem to be Mechatronics students by 38%.

Attitude	Frequency	Percent
Useful	33	16%
Not very useful	36	17%
Not useful at all	138	67%

Gender	Very useful	Not very useful	Not useful at all	Total
Female	3 (12%)	3 (13%)	17 (75%)	23
Male	30 (17%)	33 (18%)	121 (66%)	184
Total	33 (16%)	36 (18%)	138 (67%)	207

Tables7-8: Learners' Attitude towards «Online English Language Courses»

The tables 7 and 8 reveal the attitudes of learners towards Online English Language Courses. Table 7 shows the general attitude rate and table 8 reveals the attitude in terms of gender differences. Thus, 67% of the whole students declare that online English courses are not useful at all. This rate of being unsatisfied with online English courses goes higher with female learners by 75%. Just 16% of the whole participants state that online English courses are useful.

How would you like to take the English classes?		
	Frequency	Percent
Online	38	18%
In-Class Environment	169	82%

Table9: Learners' preference

As it is seen from the table 82% of the participants prefer in-class environment. Just 18% of the learners prefer online English courses.

The Reasons for Preferring in-Class English Courses	Frequency
It is easier to understand in an in-class environment/ face-to-face.	74
It is possible to ask questions to the instructor whenever needed.	42
Learning in a group is more effective.	22
I have no internet access.	17
I have no computer.	16
We have a chance to practice.	14
We can't watch the videos.	8
Presence of an instructor is good for the discipline.	7
We are used to learn in a class.	5
It's difficult to follow the classes online.	5

I give more importance when I learn in a class.	5
Obligatory attendance makes it serious.	4
Low English background makes it difficult to undertand.	4
It is easier to take notes in the class.	4
We have no computer lab at school.	4
We have difficulty in entering the system.	4
It is fun to have the classes face-to-face.	4
Real class is better than virtual class.	3
I can't concentrate when listening online.	2

Table10: The Reasons for Preferring in-Class English Courses

Table number 10 manifests that those learners who prefer in-class English courses give various reasons for their preference. The most cited reason is that "understanding in an in-class environment" is easier than it is in online courses. Second most mentioned reason for this preference is that "it is possible to ask questions to the instructor whenever needed". Another reason why students do not prefer online courses is about technology and internet access. A respectable number of students stated that they have no personal computers or internet access so it is almost impossible to attend online classes. Furthermore, one more intriguing result is that learners claimed that they are used to learn in an in-class environment so they feel more comfortable with face-to-face learning.

The Reasons for Preferring Online English Classes	Frequency
It is more comfortable.	9
I can listen to the classes whenever I want.	7
I can watch again.	4
It is good not to attend obligatory classes.	3
There is no waste of time.	2
I am a graduate, I have no chance to attend the classes.	1
Classes are crowded.	1
I can settle my own pace.	1
I understand better when I am on my own.	1

Table11: The Reasons for Preferring online English Courses

This table shows the reasons the learners give for their online course preference. Most of the online course advocates declared that "it is much more comfortable to take the courses online". Second most mentioned reason for preference is that "they can listen to the classes whenever they want". Being able to set their own pace and having the freedom of not attending obligatory, particularly, crowded classes are among the other reasons why some learners prefer online courses.

4. CONCLUSION

Quantitative data from the students indicate that while 52% of the whole participants thought that online teaching of English as a foreign language was not useful for them at all. Just 6% of the students declared that the online teaching system was very useful. These results are contrary to the findings of the studies mentioned in the literature review part of our study as in all of them the learners are quite content with the online learning system (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell and Mabry , 2002; Murday , Ushida & Chenoweth, 2008; Kim, Liu and Bonk, 2005; Song, Singleton, Hill and Koh, 2004).

To the question whether they preferred online or face-to-face learning, quite surprisingly, 82% of the participants declared that they preferred face-to-face learning. As to why they preferred the particular kind of teaching; the online course proponents cited mostly «comfortness» and «no-attendance obligation»; on the other hand, the face-to-face advocates mostly cited «effectiveness of learning from a live instructor» and «possibility of asking questions when something is not clear» and «lacking of technical equipment or internet access».

The reasons why our participants are displeased with online learning might be various. By analysing their reasons given in open-ended questionnaire we might come to the conclusion that: 1) this is a fairly new system and they need time to get acquainted, 2) they lack the necessary equipment , 3)their background of knowledge of English is quite low and they have lots of questions to ask each step and they need a live teacherat hand to ask, 4) they lack the necessary motivation and they get motivated in a class environment.

Implications
The current study offers several implications for practice and research. The results revealed that learners are not very content with online teaching. Thus the institution should take necessarry precautions like providing more computer and internet access, training learners about using the system.

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