TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' AWARENESS LEVEL OF THEIR ROLES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, a new education technique has been applied around the world which is called "Distance Education". As the education is provided by means of diverse pedagogical instruments and methods, the roles of both teachers and students change as well. The purpose of this study is to reveal the teachers' and the students' opinions about the roles in Distance Education. We will attempt to investigate the awareness level of both sides in terms of teachers and students. The study will be conducted at Atatürk University which has been giving Distance Education for two years and which is very new in this field. A qualitative research design will be applied and 15 lecturers and 15 students from Atatürk University will be interviewed. Given the lack of relevant literature on Distance Education in Turkish context, this study is expected to contribute to the field and inspire further studies in academic settings.

Key Words: Distance education, teacher and student roles, awareness.

INTRODUCTION

The World is living in such an age that technology has never been so integrated in our lives before, which is called "the age of technology". Students spend so much time on the net for many different purposes: surfing on the net, playing online games, following social media. The young generation especially high school and college students are the most users of this technology. As a result of this approved situation, many universities accept the need to integrate technology with the existing education program.

More than a hundred years ago, the term "Distance Education" was used as a type of education, in which the traditional way of education was gone beyond and new styles were implemented in (Bunker 1998). In previous research, many scholars defined Distance Education (DE) in different ways:

- DE describes the process of education undertaken when teacher(s) and students are separated by physical distance, with teaching and learning frequently mediated by technology or assigned learning material (Butcher&Wilson-Strydom 2013; cited in Asore 2014).
- A planned teaching or learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is assigned to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning (Greenberg 1998:36; cited in Srichanyachon 2014).
- Educational methods that provide communication and interaction between those who plan and implement educational studies and learners in different venues through specially designed instructional units, various mediums and instructional materials from a particular center in the absence of inability to carry out in class activities due to limitations in traditional teaching methods (METU 2014, Wikipedia 2014; cited in Gülşen 2014).
- A general term used to cover the broad range of teaching and learning events in which the student is separated (at a distance) from the instructor or other fellow learners (Hoyle, G 2007; cited in Al-Fahad 2010).
- Interactive, educational process between two people, student and teacher, separated by the physical distance (Harry et al 1993: 32; cited in Isman 2004).

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The common point of these definitions is that the separation of learner and the instructor. This separation became a necessity for the faculties. Because in the last 15 or 20 years, DE as a method had a significant effect on education in many different areas (Boyle 1995). The question of "Why DE?" was answered under these reasons.

- Technological advances may seem traditional systems as insufficient and the people try to find new ways for their needs. Furthermore, the increase in computer technology makes this result inevitable (Carillo 2008).
- As the years pass, the target student population increase and change. For example, in the past the number of students was low and they were generally single and young; but today the number is very high and the students are married, they have jıbs and most of them can not come to school because of geographical reasons (O'Malley 1999).
- The students especially who are physically disabled ones can learn and continue their education (Al-Fahad 2010).
- With the idea and application of DE, an adult learner has the power to control time, place and pace of his/her education (Galusha, 1998).

Because of these above mentioned reasons and in order to answer the demands of the people, many universities apply distance education in their educational program (Solak 2014). It is also becoming a popular way with the reasons for saving time and money for both students and instructors (Kilion 1997; cited in Srichanyachon 2014).

Turkey, as a developing country, has also adopted DE in the education process. In the 10th Development Plan, it was emphasized that DE should be given great importance and be supported in order to meet the requirements (TBMM 2013; cited in Gülşen 2014).

In many countries including Turkey, DE is an incomplete system of education as Dzokira and Idrus (2003) stated a same situation in Malaysia, the system is not thorough when we compare it to some countries such as UK, Australia and Canada. When the system is new, changing educational concepts takes time.

When we search the history of DE in Turkey, we find out that DE is slightly a new way of education when compared to other countries. In the world, the first DE started with "Stena Lessons" in Boston newspaper in 1728. In Turkey, Open Learning Faculty was opened in 1981 and in the last 3 years, the number of universities giving DE increased. Therefore, today nearly %80 of the universities gives DE (Wikipedia 2014).

One of the established universities in Turkey, Atatürk University started DE in 2009 in order to meet the needs of increasing number of students. Some mutual lessons through the campus are given via DE one of which is Foreign Language I, II English.

The system of DE in foreign language lesson is conducted in this way: in the beginning of the academic year, the consultant instructor sends an e-mail to the students giving information about the course, exams, book and other necessary subjects. The lessons are conducted with prerecorded videos and prestructured materials prepared by language teachers. Students meet the consultant lecturers in the lesson hours which are predetermined in their weekly schedule. Teachers and students have office hour's meetings once a week.

As DE exempts the students from being in a class set at a certain place and time, lesson videos are the primary materials. In addition to videos, printed materials such as books are also used and at the end of the period, the students take examinations (Al-Fahad, 2010).

This kind of education process may not be suitable for everyone. As Schmidt and Gallegas (2001) (cited in Srichanyachon 2014) stated that DE is not an appropriate way to teach people who are unable to study on their own and who are not self-motivated and self-controlled. Traditional education where there is a kind of teacher-student interaction is more suitable for these students for a better effective education.

As we compare these two kinds of education: on one hand, some researchers say that there is almost no difference between traditional and distance education. For example; Clark (1983) and Russel (1999) (cited in Berge 2005) state that a well-designed online learning and traditional learning have slightly the same effect on students. But on the other hand, many researchers say traditional and distance education are slightly different. For example, Proctor (2002) (cited in Solak 2014) compared these two kinds in terms of classroom discussions, learning process, subject matter, emphases in the learning process, motivation, teacher's role, location of learning and lesson structure; and showed that the situations under these headings are different in both types of education.

As DE is a different method from long-used traditional education, researchers agree that it also requires different roles for both teachers and students from traditional education (Aydın 2005). In order to explain the roles in general, we can say that the learners are responsible for their own learning and teachers are resources and facilitators in the practice (Dzakira et al, 2003). The main goal of the teacher is being a guide to the students. Motte (2013) emphasized that students should have an idea about when, where and how to conduct the teacher and generally the most appropriate way to communicate between teacher and the students is via e-mail. Therefore, it is necessary for the teachers to check and reply the e-mails. Isman (2004) suggested that students have to be self-controlled, motivated and autonomous. In other words, students must have the ability or the motivation to direct their way of learning and evaluate themselves.

The quality of a DE lesson is affected by several factors from both teachers' and students' sides.
First of all, both teachers and students should be aware of what they are doing and what their roles are within the procedure. Because of the physical distance between teachers and students, students may be unaware of their responsibilities. On the other hand, teachers are the ones who must work very hard to keep the students involved in the lessons. Therefore, one can assume that the best part of the responsibility is left for the teachers (Srichanyachon 2014).

Secondly, instructor issues and learner motivation are other factors. Berge (2005) researched about the factors affecting the lesson quality and found that the most important factors according to students are instructor issues, time and support for studies and learner motivation. These factors again direct the way to the factor of awareness of the roles. Because when teachers are aware, they give sufficient advice and feedback to the students, they also control the students and support them to be motivated for the courses.

Thirdly, student characteristics are another important factor. Because, as we mentioned above, the main role of the student is to be an autonomous learner and control his/her own learning by means of following the syllabus, getting the lesson materials and studying them.

In the light of all above mentioned situations, we can say that there is a change in the education technique and changes do not come easily. In a developing country such as Turkey, it is necessary to see how they applied DE. Because, Turkish teachers and students are accustomed to traditional kind of education in which the teacher lectures and students take notes in a typical classroom environment. In the relevant literature, the awareness about the roles of both teachers and the students has not been well researched in Turkish context.

The purpose of this study is to see the teachers' and the students' awareness level of their roles in this new method. It is important to see the awareness level because their acceptance of DE directly affects the quality of the course.

As a result, this study attempts to answer these research questions:
1. What are the teachers' and the students' general perceptions about DE in ELT?
2. Do the students and the teachers know their roles in DE process?
3. Do they fulfil these roles?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Plenty of research has been conducted to define the perceptions of both students and teachers about DE; however, there appears very rare research about their awareness of their roles. Gülşen (2014) suggested that getting the ideas of the students is important to develop the program and reduce the existing and potential problems. Furthermore, Siociwena (1989) suggested that teachers' perceptions are important because the quality of a lesson is widely affected by their acceptance and attitudes about DE.

In the previous research in the relevant literature, the common results of the previous studies from the students' side are listed below:

Solak (2014) conducted a research to get the ideas of students about DE in two Vocational Higher Schools and concluded that successful students found DE satisfying and they had positive attitudes towards DE.

Prennon, Kennedy and Pisarski (2005) (cited in Thapliyal 2014) conducted a research on 250 students about their perceptions about DE and found that autonomous and positively motivated learners were satisfied and successful in DE.

Fahad (2010) conducted a survey research on female students taking e-learning courses in Saudi Arabia and concluded that students' attitudes are positive towards DE and they accept DE as a beneficial way of learning.

Song (2004) surveyed 76 graduate students to obtain their perceptions about DE and found that majority of the participant students agreed on the fact that motivation and management of the learners affect the success of their learning situation. This result emphasizes the importance of being aware of their roles. The participants determined the factor of designing the course as the most important factor affecting their success and this result signifies the roles of the teachers in DE.

O'Malley (1999) conducted a research on college students at a medium sized state university about the attitudes towards DE and concluded that the students see DE as an ineffective, unsuccessful way of learning.

The research from the teachers' side, to my best knowledge, is insufficient. In the relevant literature, Siaciwena (1989) used a questionnaire at the University of Zambia to obtain lecturers' perceptions about DE and found that most of the teachers see DE as an unenjoyable way of teaching. Furthermore, most of the teachers stated that the problems of the students do not seem to be solved and also they require assistance in DE.

Barron (2003) (cited in Motte 2013) stated that effective DE is challenging and if the teachers desire to be effective, they should work more than they do in traditional teaching because both ways of teaching are different. On the other hand, as Motte (2013) stated, some teachers perceive DE as an easy way of making money by sitting at home.

In the context of DE, within the above-mentioned common results of the studies, the awareness of both teachers and the students of their roles are mentioned very little. Therefore, the present study will contribute to the field by adding more information on general ideas of both teachers and students about DE and their awareness level of their roles in DE.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
In this study, we aimed to find out teachers' and students' attitude towards DE by seeing their awareness level of their roles. Therefore, we used a qualitative rather than a quantitative research method. The reason for using qualitative method was to understand the situation and the problem deeply, because; the aim of this study is not to generalize; it is only to see if both groups know and fulfill their roles and their general ideas on DE.

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Participants
The participants in this study are 10 English lecturers who are actively involved in DE in the lesson of Foreign Language I and II; and 15 students taking this lesson at Atatürk University. The samplings from the population of both teachers and the students were Turkish and they were determined in a random way. Both male and female lecturers and students who are actively involved in DE and students were chosen. The lecturers were chosen according to their teaching experience from most to the least, and the students were chosen randomly from the class lists.

Instruments
The study was conducted through two interviews applied to both the lecturers and the students to get a view on their awareness level of their roles and their attitudes towards DE. Both interviews consist of 10 open-ended questions. Students' interviews were in Turkish but the teachers decided the language of the interview in order to feel comfortable.

Data Analysis
In order to get a better understanding on the teachers' and the students' beliefs and attitudes, the interviews were transcribed. After that, important and specific phrases related to the research questions were taken from these transcripts. Then, these phrases were first coded and then categorized into themes.

RESULT

This study attempted to answer three questions:

1. What are the teachers' and the students' general perceptions about DE in ELT?
Results of the study indicate that the answers on both teachers and students' side are similar. The teachers say that teaching English through DE is ineffective and waste of time. English has always been troublesome for Turkish students in Turkey and for this reason the teachers claim that the students can not learn even through face-to-face education. They support this claim by saying that there is no classroom atmosphere and the students do not feel ready to learn. Also it requires technological competence which some of the students do not have. Therefore; the main idea that unites all the teachers in our research is that using DE in language teaching is ineffective.

The answers given by the students to this question are quite the same as the teachers. They all united around one single answer which is that they can not learn English via DE. They see DE as an ineffective way of teaching because it is different from what they have been used to so far.

2. Do the students and the teachers know their roles in DE process?
The teachers agree on the fact that the students in DE process must be autonomous. They are the ones who should be able to study and learn by themselves. The reason why DE is ineffective is that the students can not accept this fact. The teachers see themselves as supervisors in this process. They say that most teachers are aware of their roles but when the students are not, the process fails.

The students say that they do not know what to do in DE process. Because of the fact that it is a new method applied on them, they have not fully understood the system even though the teachers inform them.

3. Do they fulfill these roles?
The teachers and the students agree on the fact that awareness is required. Because when they know they fulfill their roles. The teachers mostly fulfill their roles as being a guide to the students. But most of our participants in this research say that in this process the one that does not do the duty is the student. Students are not aware of their responsibilities and what is going on in this DE process.

DISCUSSION

This study focused on both the teachers' and the learners' perceptions about DE process in ELT field through the fact of awareness of the roles. What our participants thought in this study is both similar to and different from what has been found in previous research. Awareness was a very important factor in this study to focus on in order to differentiate this study from the previous ones. Because, in the previous research, to my best knowledge, there is very little information about awareness.

In our research, we found out that the students think DE as an ineffective way of teaching. However, in Fahad's study which he conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2010, he found the opposite which is that the students have positive feelings towards DE. On the other hand, in O'Malley's study which was conducted at a college in 1999, the result is the same as our result which is DE is an ineffective method.

In our research, the teachers also accept DE as an ineffective way of teaching. Similarly, in Siaciwena's research which was conducted on teachers in 1989, the result is that the teachers see DE as an extra burden and waste of time.

There is an undeniable fact that DE is perceived as a useless method by both the teachers and the students. In order to overcome this situation, the faculties should inform the students about what facilities they have and remind them of their responsibilities in DE. Furthermore, before the students start taking this lesson, a meeting to inform them may be held.

CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to find out both the teachers' and the students' perceptions of DE program on the basis of their awareness of their roles. There is an undeniable fact that DE is perceived as a useless method by both the teachers and the students. In order to overcome this situation, the faculties should inform the students about what facilities they have and remind them of their responsibilities in DE. Furthermore, before the students start taking this lesson, a meeting to inform them may be held.

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