PERSPECTIVES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS TOWARDS DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

It is common that even though distance education is of lots of advantages, it may also have many disadvantages when it is not planned appropriately. The condition that the integration of the foreign students into the system of distance education and their success levels is one of these disadvantages. The students with a certain level of Turkish knowledge face many challenges such as understanding course contents, communicating with their fellows and lecturers, using course automation system; therefore, most of the time, they prefer face-to-face education.

The current study explores the effects of the distance education of two courses, Turkish Language and Atatürk's Principles and History of Turkish Revolution, on the foreign students enrolled at Hitit University in Spring term in 2014-2015 academic year. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and various significant findings were defined. Thanks to the collected data, it has been determined what issues should be emphasized more and what kinds of assistanceship should be provided for the students while distance education system is set up for the users. Obviously, the current study will contribute positively for such potential future distance education programs founded by the institutions.

Key Words: Distance education, foreign student, blended-learning.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is an educational process that has got a history dating back to the time when the need for education increased and, on the other hand, the expenses appeared as inevitable necessity that should be decreased (Horzum, 2003). It is actually an educational model which has many applications without any limit of time and place for the learners and teachers. The applications allow them to use course materials in order to manage the courses collectively by means of communication tools. The most determining difference between distance and face-to-face education is that the learners and teachers could collaborate without any time and place limitations. The missions of distance education can be mentioned as the follows: a) it enables all individuals to benefit from educational facilities for their lifelong, b) it contributes to the education of individuals and society, c) it reaches educational facilities to the large masses via the technological mediums without any borders, d) it provides leveling the playing fields in education for everyone and decreases the high expenses of traditional educational models (Sakar, 1997). Kaya (2002) has already summarized the advantages and disadvantages of distance education in the following list.

Table 1: Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education (Kaya, 2002).

Advantages	Disadvantages
- Provides various educational models for people. - Minimizes the opportunity gap. - Eases mass education. - Describes standards in educational programs. - Decreases the expenses in education. - Increases quality in education. - Provides independence/autonomy for the learners. - Furnish the learners with useful learning environments. - Does not force the learners spend all time for learning inside classroom/school settings . - Helps people to learn individually. - Supports learners to learn independently. - Puts responsibilities for learners. - Provides information from the prior sources. - Lets many more learners to get into contact with the experts. - Ensures that the success is actualized under the same conditions. - Supplies both mass and individual education. - Removes the obligation of being present in a certain time and place.	- Not easy face-to-face communicating. - Stops students' socialization process. - Does not provide adequate support for those learners without self-learning habits. - Takes time of the learners who are working for a position. - Not get enough contributions from the applied courses. - Not efficient on actualizing behaviors for skill and attitudes based conditions. - Depends on the access to Internet and communication tools.

According to Ateş and Altun (2008), current traditional educational institutions are very limited in providing quality training services to the huge amount of individuals with various learning styles by regarding appropriate training expenses. On the other hand, current fast advances in information technologies and communication tools in the last decades have make a range of learning and teaching facilities visible. Technology integrated learning environments necessitate different course designs and requirements from the traditional training models (Valenta, Therriault, Dieter and Mrtek, 2001). From that perspective, distance education and training including technology integrated learning appear as leading notions.

Distance and face-to-face education should particularly be highlighted when they are compared in terms of education. The advantages mentioned above are valid in case the distance education system are efficiently applied. The core points of any distance education system are correct planning and determining of the needs of the learners. A successful distance education program strictly depends on cooperation between faculty members, assistants, systems developers and managers. Besides, it is a significant must that the learners and educators have got basic knowledge and skills about the technologies used. When such requirements and needs are not met, distance education may come up with challenging disadvantages (Alkan et.all., 2003).

Such factors like age, cultural background, past experience, interest and level of education should be taken into consideration in order to get in the needs of distant learners. It should be counted that to what extent such learners can take advantage of the courses over distance education system by regarding their familiarity with teaching methods and operating systems. If it is the case that the classroom is composed of large groups and different sub-groups of learners, this condition should also be considered. If it is possible, it could be effective and beneficial that the teacher visits the campuses and organizes both individual and group meetings with the learners. Such activities are useful in terms of proving that the teacher is not a notion without name. The design of teaching is a significant part of distance education. Analysis of teaching activity is meaningful in terms of the learners and quality of teaching methods employed. The analysis of education includes several bases such as task analysis, determining the content of the courses with certain levels, sequence of the topics, terms and conditions to take the courses. Actually, all these bases respond the following potential questions: a) what type of learning is required, b) in what sequence learning will be realized, c) what types of learning skills and

knowledge the learners should have before beginning such an education. Educational purposes and tools should be defined by considering the needs of the learners and characters (Antalyalı, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The demographic factors like gender, age, occupation, marital status and work experience are frequent leading issues for researchers studying in the literature (Thompson, 1997). In the past it was not that possible to see the research on potential psychological and sociological factors excluding demographic ones (Cookson, 1989), but nowadays the literature regarding these issues have been multiplied (Antalyalı, 2004).

There are lots of scientific studies on the attitudes and beliefs of both learners and teachers towards distance education abroad. Dick, Case and Burns (2001) have explored the attitudes of graduates and undergraduates (n=270) towards distance education in the USA and Australia. According to the data, it was cleared that the attitudes of learners are so close to instable and they take distance education as a second preference (Ates and Altun, 2008).

Computer skills of university students and their attitudes towards Internet based education were analyzed in a two-fold study by Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2005). The attitudes of these learners have were identified as neutral or medium-level. However, those student who already used Internet have got more positive attitudes. The changes in computer skills and attitudes towards Internet based education were investigated in the second phase of the research. Findings from the research showed that the skills and attitudes of the learners positively processed from time to time in four-years time. Furthermore, the undergraduates preferred Internet based courses more when 1999 and 2003 statistics were compared.

Perspectives of the learners to distance education were surveyed in another study on 254 students learning over distance education at Boise State University by Belcheir and Cucek (2002). As a result of that research, participants underlined positive side of distance education as independence of time and place, and negative side as its time-taking procedures and existing of a lot of learning errors when compared to traditional training models. Additionally, it was seen that the participants were happy with the distance education.

Erdoğan, Erkoç and Göktimur (2006) studied on the attitudes of the students towards distance education at open high school, open education faculty and some formal university education programs in İstanbul. Findings from the research proved that such issues as demographic particularities of the target population, determination of their attitudes and interest to distance education and designation of the system according to needs of the users should carefully be taken into consideration in order to have adequate and efficient outcomes from the distance education programs.

In a study by Drennan, Kennedy and Pisarski (2005), students (n=248) who took blended-learning, in which distance education was also supported by face-to-face courses, mentioned their perspectives towards the system. They listed their ideas about the distance education system as follows: a) they could easily reach and use the course materials by means of technological tools, b) they could adopt autonomous and independent learning as learning styles and focus on self-disciplined conditions.

Also, those students with advanced level of computer knowledge could simply integrate into these courses and come up with positive perspectives when they could come over the potential technical problems.
Chang and Tung (2008) focused on variations like extension of innovations, technology acceptance model with perceived system quality and computer self-efficacy, and conducted research on tendency of the learners about the use of distance education environments. Accordingly, perceptions of students' computer self-efficacy, compatibility of the course web-sites for their preferences, usefulness and quality were significant factors on their preference to distance educational platforms.

Similarly, Venkatesh and Davies (1996) argued that accessibility of such platforms is determining on the perceptions of the learners in case they take these sites as useful (Ates and Altun, 2008).

Ağır, Gür and Okçu (2008) investigated attitudes of primary school teachers (n=238) towards distance education. They used an "inventory of attitudes towards distance education" as data collection material. The results from the research indicated that the teachers had positive attitudes and their attitudes did not significantly change according to gender, institutions they worked for but the condition of having knowledge on distance education affected their attitudes towards distance education.

METHODOLOGY

1. Participants and Data Collection
The data were collected by means of a questionnaire conducted for 32 first year foreign students out of 44 foreigners in Spring term in 2014-2015. Findings were attained from frequency distributions and proportional statistical tests.

There were three groups of questions (n=25) in the questionnaire; a) questions on demographic details, b) questions of their preference of distance education, c) fivefold likert scale questions as in Table-2.

Table 2: Choices for fivefold likert scale

Completely	Fairly	Moderately	Slightingly	None
5	4	3	2	1

The data from the questionnaire were uploaded into the computer and evaluated by the help of various statistical analyses like frequency and average.

2. Distances Education Courses at Hitit University
The courses, called compulsory shared courses, were designed as texts as in .pdf format with voiced materials as in .mp3 format by the lecturers. These courses were provided for the learners by means of distance education system. They followed asynchronous courses for a certain time in an academic term.

FINDINGS

1. Demographic Details of the Participants
Demographic details of the participants were listed below.

Table 3. Distribution of foreign students according to their origins

Rank	Nationality	Number
1	Afghanistan	1
2	Albania	1
3	Azerbaijan	5
4	Burkina Faso	1
5	Morocco	1
6	Palestine	1
7	Georgia	2
8	Kazakhstan	1
9	Kirghistan	2
10	Russia	1
11	Somalia	1
12	Syria	5
13	Turkmenistan	6
14	TC/Afghanistan	1
15	TC/Germany	1
16	TC/Holland	2
Total		**32**

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As in Table 3, age distributions of 32 foreign students from 16 different countries were given and their age ranges were between 18-23. The participants were mostly from Turkish countries. The distributions of foreign students according to their genders can seen in table 4 below.

Table 4: Distribution of foreign students according to their gender

Gender	Number
Female	6
Male	26
Total	**32**

2. Perspectives of Foreign Student to Distance Educational

The data from the questionnaire (n=25 questions) prepared according to the fivefold likert test were interpreted by means of frequency and mode statistics as in table 4 and 5. The responses from the participants and finding were evaluated and listed as follows.

1) It was observed that the participants had adequate knowledge and skill of use (4 and 5 points) for technological tools when the questions dealing with information technology and Internet were broadly evaluated. It was also mentioned that the participants could have opportunity to have access to Internet as moderate and advanced users. The participants had obviously got technological competency and quite easily connected and integrated into the distance education system in terms of these findings.

2) It was seen that the participants had positive responses more than moderate level (3 and above) when their responses to the questions on their prior knowledge and experience with distance education were evaluated. As a result, the participants were clearly interested and experienced in distance education.

3) When the responses for the satisfaction of the method of course delivery were assessed, it was found out that %59,4 of the participants (less satisfied) were not satisfied with the system. Consequently, it was evidently noticed that the participants had some challenges dealing with the distance education system and that's why they were not pleased with taking the courses in that way.

In addition, it was explicitly pointed out that %71,9 of the participants preferred blended learning methodology in the light of the data from the second group of questions on the methodology selection in distance education. It was frankly revealed that the foreign students did not wish to take the courses over merely distance education system since those students who wanted to take courses only on distance education system were limited to 2 students (which meant %6,3 of all students) in accordance with the results in table 5. Finally, both teaching methods (face-to-face and distance education system) were not separately preferred because face-to-face education was chosen by only %21,9 of all participants.

Table 5: Students' Preferences of the Method of Course Delivery

		Frequency	Ratio
Preference of Method	Face-to-face	7	21,9
	Distance Education	2	6,3
	Face-to-face + Distance Education	23	71,9
	Total	**32**	**100,0**

The findings and statistical analyses from the students' responses for the third group of questions were presented in the table 6 below.

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Table 6: Frequency, Percentage and Mode Values of the Students' Responses for the Questionnaire

Questions	Frequency					Percentage (%)	Mode
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**		
1.I trust in my knowledge about using computer and Internet.			4	10	**18**	56,3	5
2.I have got a computer with Internet access.	1	3	7	**12**	9	37,5	4
3.My computer is a product of new technology with headphone, microphone and camera.			**12**	11	9	37,5	3
4.My computer is compatible with all necessary softwares and hardwares (web browser, media player, office programs, pdf reader and usb connections).		3	10	**13**	6	40,6	4
5.I have got basic competence in using Internet (searching, registering in a web site, etc.)		6	3	**15**	8	46,9	4
6.I can easily use communication tools on the Internet (e-mail, chat and forum, etc)			6	**14**	12	43,8	4
7.I can easily use social media (Facebook, Twitter, Blog, Wiki, etc.).	2	3	5	9	**13**	40,6	5
8.I know about distance education.	2	4	**16**	10		50,0	3
9.I know how to use information and communication tools in order to learn over distance education system.	2	3	**16**	9	2	50,0	3
10.I already benefited from a distance education system.	5	3	**18**	6		56,3	3
11.I can read Turkish course materials composed of more than one page.	2	3	**14**	11	2	43,8	3
12.I can easily understand a course material that I read.		2	10	**14**	6	43,8	4
13.I can easily get in instruction of questions and answers in the exams.		2	**21**	6	3	65,6	3
14.I think I can study alone even if I do not have any synchronous contact with the lecturer.		2	11	**16**	3	50,0	4
15.I think I can complete my studies on time even though working on-line is distracting.		6	7	**17**	2	53,1	4
16.I think I can complete my studies on time even though it is a lot distracting in my learning environment.		6	**15**	10	1	46,9	3
17.I think I can learn best by means of distance education.	1	2	**22**	7		68,8	3
18.It is very important to have instant interaction with the lecturer in terms of my success.		5	5	**21**	1	65,6	4
19.It is very important to have fast assistance for technical and administrative issues in terms of my success.		4	2	**23**	3	71,9	4
20.It is important to note frequent attendance in process of distance education in terms of my success.		2	4	**23**	3	71,9	4
21.I think my experience on Internet technologies will contribute to my success in in process of distance education.		3	6	**20**	3	62,5	4
22.I can better acquire the skills and competences that I should learn when I use auditory and visual materials		2	11	**18**	1	56,3	4
23.I can easily discuss about course topics with other fellows on the Internet.	1	2	8	**20**	1	62,5	4
24.I am satisfied with the method of course delivery in the distance education system.		**19**	6	7		59,4	2
25.Course content for a verbal course on the on-line environment (on if it is prepared appropriately) can be of same quality with the one in the face-to-face course (think of course presentation by moderate one of your lecturers).	1	5	9	**17**		53,1	4

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

%71,9 of the participants commented that blended learning can be more efficient instead of separate courses in both face-to-face and on-line over distance education system. Accordingly, they demanded to take blended learning because many reasons such as understandability of the courses, absence of interactions with their peers, having no course materials in their mother tongues, despite the fact that they got familiarity with information technologies and adequate competences in using computer technologies.

According to the findings of the research, the foreign students were not happy with taking the courses over distance education system and it was concluded that they needed assistance in understanding, evaluating course materials and passing the exams because of only Turkish language support. Such kind of students need more help, interest, assistance and guidance by the institutions since they have got challenges integration problems with the city, university and fellow in the host countries. Therefore, they do not exactly prefer distance education system to take the courses. However, they mention the courses can be delivered to a certain extent over distance education system because of its several advantages like increasing interest towards learning on-line.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are given to take such foreign students into accounts in the list below.

- It is thought that their success and self-confidence can be increased by means of supporting course materials in in-class activities in scheduled weeks. For example, the students can participate in face-to-face discussions between groups to contribute their understanding the courses and interacting with others.
- On-line course materials should also be prepared in foreign languages which will help foreign students a lot.
- The course contents should be supported by auditory and visual materials to create positive effects on their level of understanding and learning the courses.
- Course materials can be designed in a mutual language after checking out student profiles.
- Such experimental studies on the students from different countries can contribute a lot to the field of study.

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