

ONLINE COURSE SUPPORT IN DISTANCE LEARNING: Student Evaluation of English Language Teaching Bachelor of Arts Program

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ABSTRACT

Hereby in this study; the opinions of the senior students, who took course support through web based asynchronous communication methods in the academic year 2007–2008 at the Open Education Faculty, English Language Teaching Bachelor of Arts Program (OEF ELT BA) at Anadolu University, about the general online courses are presented. According to the results of the study favorable and unfavorable aspects of online courses for OEF ELT BA students are defined and amendatory precautions are proposed. ELT BA began accepting student enrollments in 2000–2001 academic years. Aforesaid program is a Bachelor of Arts Program which is identical to the program offered by English Language Teaching Departments of faculties providing formal (face to face) education. In this program web based asynchronous courses have been provided for junior and senior students since the academic year 2003–2004. Online courses are given by instructors from Faculty of Education ELT Department of Anadolu University. Data of the study were acquired from the questionnaires filled by 504 senior students enrolled in the academic year 2007–2008. These students were chosen among 1586 students who lived in Eskişehir during their study. The results show that 58,2% of students have computer and internet connection in their houses. Students generally attend online courses once or twice a week. Attendance to online courses increases during examination terms. Students, who don't believe in the contribution of online courses don't attend those courses.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Web-based Distance Learning, Distance English Language Teaching Program (BA)

INTRODUCTION

The opportunities of information and communication technology have developed the course programs of distance education in the field of higher education as well. As the usage of computer and internet has spread so fast; it would be behind the times to insist on performing distance education without current technologies. Today it is thought that web-based education is widely used. As well known; web-based distance education applications can be carried out as both 'synchronously' and 'asynchronously'. No matter which of these two methods is used; studies show that web-based distance education has become an increasingly preferred model.

One of the reasons of this situation is that a well-designed web-based course can be more effective on a student's success than a course conducted in the classroom (Tucker, 2000).

Another reason is the important role of higher education in a country's development as the World Bank states. The increase in national productivity and catching up with the international competition depend on providing higher education.

On the other hand, throughout the world only 17 percent of population who has the qualities to get higher education find the chance to perform it (Van Hook, 2005). Therefore; web-based distance education is seen as a solution to education problems. It is accepted that distance education is the future of education systems (Duderstadt, 1997) and most of the universities provide distance education in numerous fields in the world.

For instance; a research carried out in the USA proved that 3.5 million students had taken at least one online course during 2006 fall semester. In other words, 20 percent of total higher education students in the USA took at least one online course during 2006 fall semester (Sloan-C Report, 2007). In this study, the importance of web-based education in distance education will be discussed first; then web-based education provided by Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty ELT BA will be introduced. Finally the results of the evaluation made by senior students of aforesaid program who took web-based courses will be stated.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Distance education is not a new phenomenon. It is an education system which has survived since the first quarter of 19th century. Especially in the last two decades distance education evolved thanks to the increasing usage of computer and internet in the field of education. It has become a more preferred system. It has been more than a century since the concept of distance education defined. Since then the concept of distance education has changed a lot in accordance with the developing technology and increasing education needs. Without any doubts; using web-based online courses via internet has made inevitable contributions. In this context; distance education is defined as "a system which provides education by connecting students and teachers, who don't share the same time and place (Koohang & Durante, 2003), through technology (Erkunt, 2002). Pennsylvania State University is one of the first institutions begun performing distance education and now so many universities have been accompanying it. It can be said that distance education is more preferred in postgraduate studies. For example; Allen and Seaman (2006) made a research in the USA and found out that institutions giving doctorate programs offer more than 80 percent of their curriculum or sometimes all of their doctorate programs as online courses. Similar researches made on this subject (Koohang&Durante,2003; Newman,2003) indicate that distance education is a system performed with computer-internet-web trilogy. In other words; distance education has become an education system that actualizes student-teacher and course meeting with web-based applications. Without doubt the basic elements stated below are among the reasons which make web-based education more preferable in distance education (Alessi&Trollip, 2001):

- The Web as a Network Standard,
- The Web as a Platform,
- The Web as a Delivery Medium,
- The Web as a Communication Medium (e-mail, listservs, bulletin boards, chat rooms, audio teleconferencing, video teleconferencing),
- The Web as a Methodology for learning,
- The Web as an Integrating Medium,

Online courses are a part of web based learning. Thanks to this type of learning, students can coact with their teachers and virtual classmates.

They can communicate synchronously or asynchronously. But this communication is not limited with the online exercises or forums. It is far more extensive. Students ask questions and receive answers. They make research through this communication net and make analysis of the results gathered from the research. They develop their skills of problem solving and critical thinking. (Şimşek, Alper, Balta 2007).

DISTANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM (BA) at ANADOLU UNIVERSITY

Anadolu University Open Education Faculty ELT BA is a Bachelor of Arts Program put in force in 2000–2001 academic year in accordance with the protocol signed between Anadolu University and Ministry of Education. The aim of this protocol was to eliminate the deficiencies of the English teachers in primary and secondary schools. This program is equal to conventional English Language Teaching (ELT) programs offered in education faculties in Turkey (Altunay & Mutlu). There are 33 formal education (face to face) programs for ELT in Turkish higher education system. But the Open Education Faculty ELT BA is the only one providing distance education.

As of 2008 and 2009 academic year, 5152 students enrolled in the OEF ELT BA (534 of them are new enrollments and 4618 of them are re-enrollments). In the freshman and sophomore classes students have partially formal (face to face) education in 8 cities which are Adana, Ankara, Balıkesir, Edirne, Erzurum, Eskişehir, Konya and İzmir. In junior and senior classes they get distance education and they join in the program to take online courses.

Anadolu University OEF ELT BA made a pilot project in 2002–2003 academic year. According to this project; consultancy service was provided for only two of the junior class courses (Introduction to Linguistic and Language Acquisition) through the Web-Ct. One of the reasons for realizing this project was to motivate students that began taking distance education for the first time in junior class and encourage their feelings about belonging to a group (Şakar & Oruç, 2002). Based on this pilot project; English courses for junior and senior classes have been available as asynchronous online courses since 2003 and 2004 academic year. Taking these online courses is optional. Web-based online courses serve as a guide for students to study on their own.

They also serve as both an asynchronous academic consultant who can be useful through forums and a technical support based on synchronous webcast.

These three features are the three main components of web-based online courses (Yavuz & Mutlu, 2006). In the academic year 2007–2008; the rate of participation to online courses was 71,47 percent (see Table1).

Table: 1
Number of Students Participating Online Courses
in 2007– 2008 Academic Year

Class	Number of Students Took Online Courses At Least Once	Total Number of Students	Rate	Rate
3	1537	2034	75,57	71,47
4	1927	2813	68,50	

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In this study; the evaluation of senior students about online courses given by Open Education Faculty ELT BA introduced. In other words; the satisfactory and unsatisfactory parts of courses for senior students were defined and unsatisfactory parts were described. In addition taking corrective measures was aimed in order to provide more effective online courses. Within this study, the questions stated below were answered:

- Do these courses help students comprehend the courses better?
- Do these courses meet the consultancy need?
- Are there any deficient and faulty sides of the system? If yes, what kind of solutions can be proposed?

Web-based asynchronous online courses for junior and senior students given by OEF ELT have important effects on contributing to students' comprehension of subjects, meeting consultancy needs and motivating students psychologically. It is only possible to develop online courses by taking feedback from students and evaluating them. From this point of view, this study gains importance.

METHODOLOGY

The Content and Sample of the Study

The content of the study consisted of all senior students (1586 students) from OEF ELT BA in the academic year 2007–2008. The sample of the study was formed by 504 senior students dwelled in Eskişehir. One of the reasons for choosing students who dwelled in Eskişehir was that they compromised 32 percent of total students and it was easy to reach them in order to handle questionnaires.

Data Collection Procedure

In accordance with the study, a questionnaire consisting of two parts was used. In the first part, it was aimed to evaluate the demographic features of the students and their internet availability while in the second part, it was intended to evaluate contributions of online courses to the comprehension skills of students, their need for consultancy, their motivations and their state of belonging to a Bachelor of Arts Program.

Also in the second part it was aimed to compare the contribution of web-based courses and face to face courses to the comprehension skills of students.

In the first part, multiple choice questions were used while in the second part questions prepared in accordance with Five-point Likert Scale were used. 504 students were given questionnaires and 422 of them were collected back.

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined by defining Cronbach Alpha (reliability coefficient) value.

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was determined to be 0.91. Data gathered through the questionnaire was analysed by SPSS package program. As it was a descriptive study, frequency distribution tables were used in analysing the data.

FINDINGS

Demographic Evidences

The rate of participation to questionnaires was 84 percent. The age, gender, living place, employment situation and monthly income of students were among the demographic evidences of the study. It was found out that 35,3 percent of 422 students was in the age group of 22 (Table2). This result showed that students enrolled in this program were in the normal age group when considered the age of higher education among the youth.

Table: 2
Age

		Frequen cy	Perce nt	Valid Percen t	Cumulat ive Percent
Valid	21	31	7,3	7,7	7,7
	22	142	33,6	35,3	43,0
	23	126	29,9	31,3	74,4
	24	58	13,7	14,4	88,8
	25	25	5,9	6,2	95,0
	26	13	3,1	3,2	98,3
	27	4	,9	1,0	99,3
	28	2	,5	,5	99,8
	32	1	,2	,2	100,0
	Total	402	95,3	100,0	
Missin g	Syste m	20	4,7		
	Total	422	100,0		

It was found that 72,4 percent of the students participated in the questionnaire was female and 27,6 percent of them was male students (Table: 3). This result showed that the program was highly preferred by the female students.

Table:3 Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	304	72,0	72,4	72,4
	Male	116	27,5	27,6	100,0
	Total	420	99,5	100,0	
Missing	System	2	,5		
Total		422	100,0		

When the living places of the students were analysed, it was seen that 74,5 percent of them lived in cities; on the other hand 5,8 percent of them lived in districts (Table: 4). This result showed that the program was less preferable in the rural areas. Another result of the study revealed that 91,4 percent of the students didn't work in any establishment during the education period.

Table: 4 Living place

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	City	309	73,2	74,5	74,5
	District	75	17,8	18,1	92,5
	Subdistrict	7	1,7	1,7	94,2
	Village	24	5,7	5,8	100,0
	Total	415	98,3	100,0	
Missing	System	7	1,7		
Total		422	100,0		

Evidences About Computer Ownership and Internet Availability

Students were asked questions about their computer skills, computer ownership and internet availability, the places for connecting online courses and the frequency of connecting online courses. There were quite interesting inferences gathered from the answers. 72,6 percent of the students participated in the study had an average computer skill (Table: 5), 58,2 percent of them had both computer and internet connection at home (Table 6); on the other hand 47,7 percent of them connected to online courses only once or twice a week (Table: 7).

According to these results; there could be a relationship between the low percentages of computer ownership and low percentages of online connections to the courses.

**Table: 5
Computer skills**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Unskilled	19	4,5	4,6	4,6
	Beginner	39	9,2	9,4	13,9
	Intermediate	302	71,6	72,6	86,5
	Expert	56	13,3	13,5	100,0
	Total	416	98,6	100,0	
Missing	System	6	1,4		
Total		422	100,0		

**Table: 6
Computer and internet connection at home**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	both computer and internet connection	244	57,8	58,2	58,2
	Just computer connection	57	13,5	13,6	71,8
	neither computer nor internet connection	118	28,0	28,2	100,0
	Total	419	99,3	100,0	
Missing	System	3	,7		
Total		422	100,0		

**Table:7
Frequency of participation to online courses**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1 or 2 days	198	46,9	47,7	47,7
	3 or 4 days	64	15,2	15,4	63,1
	5 or 6 days	21	5,0	5,1	68,2
	Everyday	14	3,3	3,4	71,6
	None	118	28,0	28,4	100,0
	Total	415	98,3	100,0	
Missing	System	7	1,7		
Total		422	100,0		

Another result of the study showed that 58,2 percent of the students had both computer and internet connection at home. But despite this fact, it was seen that frequency of participation to online courses was quite low. This situation revealed the question about their computer skills. Could it be possible that however they had necessary equipments, they were insufficient in terms of computer skills? In order to examine this situation chi-square test was used. By using chi-square test, it was examined whether there was any relation between "the gender and computer skills" (Table: 8) and between "the computer skills and participation to online courses" (Table: 9). As seen in Table: 8 and Table: 9, the significance level of chi-square Pearson value was less than 0.05; so it was found out that there was a meaningful relation between above stated conditions.

Table: 8
Gender * What is your computer skills level? Crosstabulation

		What is your computer skills level?					
		Unskilled	Beginner	Intermediate	Expert	Total	
Gender	Female	Count	15	29	225	30	299
		% within Gender	5,0	9,7	75,3	10,0	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	78,9	74,4	74,8	53,6%	72,0
Male	Count	4	10	76	26	116	
		% within Gender	3,4	8,6	65,5	22,4	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	21,1	25,6	25,2	46,4	28,0
Total	Count	19	39	301	56	415	
		% within Gender	4,6	9,4	72,5	13,5%	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		Monte Carlo Sig. (1-sided)			
				Sig.	99% Confidence Interval		4	99% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		Sig.	Lower Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	11,13	3	,011	,011	,010	,012			
Likelihood Ratio	10,303	3	,016	,018	,017	,019			
Fisher's Exact Test	10,274			,016	,015	,017			
Linear-by-Linear Association	5,608	1	,018	,021	,020	,022	,010	,009	,011
N of Valid Cases	415								

Table: 9
How often do you connect online courses?
*** What is your computer skills level?**
Crosstabulation

			What is your computer skills level?				
			Unskilled	Beginner	Intermediate	Expert	Total
How often do you connect online courses?	1 or 2 days	Count	9	17	150	21	197
		% within How often do you connect online courses?	4,6	8,6	76,1	10,7	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	50,0	43,6	50,3	37,5	47,9
	3 or 4 days	Count	1	3	40	17	61
		% within How often do you connect online courses?	1,6%	4,9	65,6	27,9	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	5,6	7,7	13,4	30,4	14,8
	5 or 6 days	Count	1	6	12	2	21
		% within How often do you connect online courses?	4,8	28,6	57,1	9,5	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	5,6	15,4	4,0	3,6	5,1
	Everyday	Count	0	0	7	7	14
		% within How often do you connect online courses?	,0	,0	50,0	50,0	100,0
		% within What is your computer skills level?	,0	,0	2,3	12,5	3,4
None	Count	7	13	89	9	118	
	% within How often do you connect online courses?	5,9%	11,0	75,4	7,6	100,0	
	% within What is your computer skills level?	38,9%	33,3	29,9	16,1	28,7	
Total	Count	18	39	298	56	411	
	% within How often do you connect online courses?	4,4	9,5	72,5	13,6	100,0	
	% within What is your computer skills level?	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		Monte Carlo Sig. (1-sided)			
				Sig.	99% Confidence Interval		4	99% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		Sig.	Lower Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	43,394	12	,000	,000	,000	,000			
Likelihood Ratio	36,238	12	,000	,000	,000	,000			
Fisher's Exact Test	33,542			,000	,000	,000			
Linear-by-Linear Association	1,011	1	,315	,324	,320	,328	,162	,159	,165
N of Valid Cases	411								

Evidences About Online Courses

The students who took place in this study were asked to make an evaluation about the content, apprehensibility, exercises, confirming previous subject, contribution to exam preparataions, level of guidance, user easiness, communication with lecture consultants, interest and motivation of the online courses by using Five-point Likert Scale (Table10).

Table :
10 The evaluation of online courses

	Very good		good		medium		bad		very bad	
	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %	Count	Row N %
Their content	30	9,1	171	52,1	94	28,7	25	7,6	8	2,4
Their apprehensibility	28	8,6	164	50,6	99	30,6	24	7,4	9	2,8
Their exercises	21	6,5	114	35,1	148	45,5	32	9,8	10	3,1
Confirming previous subject	21	6,6	115	36,2	130	40,9	40	12,6	12	3,8
Their contribution to exam preparations	25	7,7	107	33,1	138	42,7	40	12,4	13	4,0
Level of guidance	19	5,9	91	28,1	123	38,0	67	20,7	24	7,4
Usage easiness	37	11,5	135	41,8	99	30,7	36	11,1	16	5,0
Communication with lecture consultants	21	6,5	76	23,5	116	35,9	74	22,9	36	11,1
Interest	21	6,5	94	28,9	121	37,2	61	18,8	28	8,6
Motivation	18	5,5	92	28,3	120	36,9	65	20,0	30	9,2

As seen in the Table; the expectations of students from the online courses were in the middle level when interpreted according to the measurement criterias stated in the Table. In other words; the expectations of students hasn't been fully covered yet. The students were also asked how they could comprehend the courses if they were given online but synchronous (Table 11). According to the results only 21,9 percent of the students stated that they could learn better in that case. This result can be interpreted as students had doubts about learning via online courses.

Table: 11

If online courses (for 3rd and/or 4th classes) are given by instructors who can be called "perfect" according to your criterias and if these courses are given interactive and simultaneous; what will be your apprehension and learning level of the subject?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0=Nothing would change	19	4,5	4,8	4,8
	1	3	,7	,8	5,5
	2	3	,7	,8	6,3
	3	17	4,0	4,3	10,6
	4	32	7,6	8,1	18,6
	5	59	14,0	14,9	33,5
	6	50	11,8	12,6	46,1
	7	74	17,5	18,6	64,7
	8	53	12,6	13,4	78,1
	9=I would learn better	87	20,6	21,9	100,0
	Total	397	94,1	100,0	
Missing	System	25	5,9		
Total		422	100,0		

Within this study, the reasons that why other students did not participate to online courses were also discussed. As a result; 28 percent of them thought that online courses did not make any contribution to their success, 20,9 percent of them thought that it was not appropriate to study at an internet cafe and 13,5 percent of them did not have computer and internet connection at home.

CONCLUSION AND PROPOSITIONS

Today we live in an intense technology age and this situation affects not only our daily lives but also our basic social needs such as education. Especially in distance education, it has almost been an obligation to give web-based courses via internet which is one of the opportunities and maybe the most important one of communication and information technologies.

Most of the universities which prefer distance education in their higher education systems provide web-based synchronous and/or asynchronous courses. For instance in the USA, 65 universities are the members of a nonprofit organization called The American Distance Education Consortium (ADEC) and they provide web based postgraduate and doctorate programs (<http://www.adec.edu/admin/membership.html>).

The number of universities giving distance education has also been increasing in Turkish higher education system. Anadolu, Ankara, Beykent, Bilgi, Çukurova, Gazi, METU and Sakarya Universities are among the examples. OEF ELT BA has been providing blended learning program to train English teachers for eight years. This program last for 4 years and in the freshman and sophomore classes courses are partially given face to face in a traditional method. In these two years, courses given in English are taught in the classroom while the other courses offered in Turkish are given in accordance with distance education by providing published materials to the students. In the junior and senior classes education is totally based on distance education. English courses are given by published materials and online courses. On the other hand Turkish courses are only supported by published materials. The sample of the study was formed by 504 senior students lived in Eskişehir. 422 of them were collected back. Data gathered through the questionnaire was analysed by SPSS package program and frequency distribution tables.

This study was important in the sense that it revealed the student's opinions about online courses. Online courses weren't exclusively evaluated but handled in general. As a result of the study, it was seen that the rate of demand for the online courses was 85 percent. 54 percent of these students connected online courses in their accommodations. Even though it was not obligatory for students enrolling in this program to have a computer and internet connection; it was also seen that they possessed them in time. 47,7% percent of the students joined online courses 1 or 2 days a week but the rate decreased to 8,4% when it came to joining online courses 5 or six days a week. 25,8 percent of students joined online courses only before the exams and they mostly preferred published materials such as syllabus&material packs and course books while studying for exams.

Online courses ranked the third as a supporting material for the exams. Another result of the study showed that the satisfactory features of online courses were the content and comprehensibility of the courses and user conveniency. The unsatisfactory ones were lack of interest raising features, motivation and communication with course mentors. Online course mentors were chosen among instructors from Faculty of Education at Anadolu University. Since they also attended classes in their formal education system, this situation made it harder to meet all expectations of students taking online courses. The most effective solutions to this problem were to organize special academic consultancy groups that were only responsible for online courses. This would make system faster and increase motivation as students got answers from their mentors in a short period of time. The study showed that it was easy to ask questions to mentors; more than half of the students felt as if they belonged to a group, online courses supported course books and made them more apprehensible, they helped for exams and helped for communicating with other students.

On the other hand most of the students thought that online courses were helpful to the learning process but they were not enough to accomplish a complete learning process. Another interesting result of this study indicated that 82,3 percent of the students want to take traditional face to face courses despite the published materials and online courses. Here in this sense, asynchronous online courses could be very effective.

Evidence which supported this indication showed that more than half of the students (69 percent) think that they could learn better if the online courses were given synchronously. For synchronous courses Anadolu University is qualified enough in technical terms but the number of academic staff should be increased. It is possible to employ new instructors or take support from the lecturers of other universities.

Finally; another important result of the study revealed a truth about students that did not join online courses. Students stated that they didn't join online courses for three main reasons.

The first reason was their disbelief in contribution of online courses to their success. The second reason was that they did not have a computer and internet connection; therefore they had to go to an internet cafe which was not appropriate for studying. The third reason was that they did not have a computer and internet connection in the places where they lived.

As a result; online courses as an effective method of instruction constitutes the indispensable part of distance education. However it shouldn't be ignored that online courses become more effective as long as they are designed in accordance with the demands and needs of users.



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