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THE DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

SANAL ORTAMDA YABANCI DİL DERSLERİNDE KARŞILAŞILAN GÜÇLÜKLER

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ABSTRACT

Educational objectives of virtual environments include creating collaborative educational environments, increasing social interaction among students, ensuring learner autonomy and improving the quality of education. Social interaction and foreign language learning opportunities have been improved by enabling individuals to communicate with users with internet access from all over the world through wide electronic networks. However, some difficulties have emerged along with these opportunities. In the study we tried to determine the difficulties encountered in Foreign Language courses in virtual environment. We used qualitative research method to obtain necessary data and interviewed with 10 language instructors in three different universities. We determined that the students could not make up the points that they had missed in the courses before, they failed to ask questions in time and to collaborate with the teacher and other students. We have the conclusion that language courses in virtual environment are not so efficient and useful for learners as face-to-face courses due to the lack of collaboration, group study, student interaction and speaking practices in the courses, which are inevitable points in language education.

Key Words: Distance education, Virtual environment, Language teaching, Educational technologies.

ÖZ

Sanal ortamların eğitimsel amaçları arasında işbirlikçi eğitim ortamları oluşturulması, öğrenciler arasında sosyal etkileşimin artırılması, öğrencinin özerkliğinin sağlanması ve eğitim kalitesinin iyileştirilmesi yer almaktadır. Sosyal etkileşim ve yabancı dil öğrenme fırsatları, bireylerin dünyanın her yerinden geniş elektronik ağlar üzerinden internet erişimi olan kullanıcılarla iletişim kurmasını sağlayarak geliştirilmiştir. Ancak, bu fırsatlarla birlikte bazı zorluklar ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmada, yabancı dil derslerinde sanal ortamda karşılaşılan zorluklar belirlenmeye çalışılmıştır. Gerekli verileri elde etmek için nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanıldı ve üç farklı üniversiteden 10 yabancı dil öğreticisi ile yüz yüze görüşmeler yapıldı. Öğrencilerin daha önce derslerde kaçırdıkları noktaları belirleyemedikleri, zamanında soru sormadıkları, öğretmen ve diğer öğrencilerle işbirliği yapamadıkları belirlenmiştir. Dilde gerekli olan konulardaki işbirliği eksikliği, grup çalışması, öğrenci etkileşimi ve derslerde konuşma pratikleri nedeniyle sanal ortamdaki dil derslerinin yüz yüze yapılan dersler kadar verimli ve kullanışlı olmadığı sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Uzaktan eğitim, Sanal ortam, Dil öğretimi, Eğitim teknolojileri.

1. INTRODUCTION

We can see the direct reflection of the recent incredible progress in the field of information and communication technologies in education. One of the most important of these reflections is the effective use of distance education in teaching. Distance education is one of the most popular trends in recent years. It is an education system that eliminates time and space boundaries in teaching and learning, uses technology as an effective tool and aims to increase learner autonomy (Yaman, 2015; Kayalar and Kayalar 2018; King, Young, Drivere-Richmond, Schrader, and Kelly, (2001); Kiryakova, 2009).

Distance education applications, which have many opportunities, are increasing day by day. It is a form of learning in which students attend classes at home instead of school. It is estimated that nearly 8 million people are participating in distance education programs in the United States. And this number is increasing day by day. Nearly 3.3 million quotas for undergraduate programs and 800,000 quotas for high schools in Turkey are allocated to distance education, and the both quotas are increasing day by day. Distance learning may be the right choice for many students; however the academic expectations have not yet been fulfilled (Kırık, 2014).

Distance education, the system in which the teacher and the student are physically separated in the broadest sense, can be defined as the activities carried out with the use of integrity of specially prepared written materials, mass communication programs and short-term face-to-face education, regardless of the age, time, place, methods, objectives and limitations of the traditional educational activities. Thus, students will be able to benefit from educational activities whenever they want.

Educational objectives of virtual environments include creating collaborative educational environments, increasing social interaction among students, ensuring learner autonomy and improving the quality of education. Social interaction and foreign language learning opportunities have been improved by enabling individuals to communicate with users with internet access from all over the world through wide electronic networks. However, some difficulties have emerged along with these opportunities (Gikas and Grant,2013; Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler, 2005).

1.1. The History of Distance Education in Turkey

Distance education is the most suitable term for open education. When the history of distance education, which started in the form of letter teaching, is examined, it can be seen that many countries have benefited from this practice since 1940. Especially the Open University, which was launched in the UK, is an important example of this practice. This practice was initiated in Germany in 1856, at the Swedish high school level in 1898, at the Australian university level in 1910, at the university level in Spain in 1972, and in New Zealand in 1972, followed by many countries.

The first steps towards distance education in Turkey have been taken in 1927. In particular, the physical deficiencies of educational institutions have led to the development of distance education. In time, this system has been used actively in primary, secondary, high school and higher education degrees.

On 2nd of June 1927, the Minister of Education, Undersecretary of National Education, Members of the National Board of Education, and Ministry of Education officials met and they discussed the basic problems of education in Turkey. At this meeting, the education systems of developed countries have been examined, and it was agreed that Letter Education would be the best system for the solution of the problems of education in Turkey (Arar, 1999). Since the adoption of the Latin Alphabet in 1928, intensive efforts have been made to increase the literacy rate. In 1950s, the Ministry of National Education and private institutions encouraged vocational education and distance learning in foreign languages and increased investment rates.

The first distance education in Turkey started in 1956 at Research Institute of Banking and Commercial Law, Faculty of Law, Ankara University. Following the success of this project, which aims to provide training to employees and get certificates, the Ministry of National Education established a Letter Education Centre. Courses were started to be given to those who wanted to complete their education from outside by letter.

The great development in the name of distance education in Turkey has been experienced in 1974 with the establishment of a higher education centre by letter. In 1981, the Open Education Faculty was established within the scope of the Law on Higher Education.

Distance education by letter, deterioration of equality among students, and the problems due to the delays or losses in postal transportation directly affected the education of the students. For this reason, with the technological developments, education was gradually replaced with other tools by letter. At the same time, the group works that could be done with the current technological facilities could not be provided in the distance education system by letter.

With technological advances, distance education by letter has become a major part of education through radio and television (Alkan,1996; Gökçe, 2008). Using visual and auditory elements for educational purposes, regardless of location or time, is a revolution for distance education. Even today, these tools are still widely used for distance education. When it first appeared, radio and television could of course appeal to masses above a certain level of economic income. This prevented the masses from receiving education and certificates through this system. Today, radio and television have become the means of mass communication accessible to people at all income levels. In this way, even if an online program using computer is not available, certificates programs can be provided to large audiences through radio and television broadcast.

Finally, in the distance education model, virtual classrooms can be created through the internet, and interactive interaction of teachers and students can be ensured. Students can be provided with the opportunity to participate in the courses live or to follow the courses at any time. When we compare the distance education with letter and the education provided by radio and television, we see that the distance education system has developed with technological developments.

1.2. Foreign Language Courses through Distance Education

The tendency to offer Foreign Language Courses through distance education has emerged in recent years, and each year more and more universities are putting this option on the agenda. However, there are differences in practice regarding the inclusion of Foreign Language courses in the distance education system. As for distance education, the first thing to appear in mind is that it will bring benefits in terms of time, transportation and material dimension. In this respect, it makes sense to give English courses in vocational schools far from University campus through distance education instead of face-to-face courses. Because sending instructors to the Vocational High Schools and other institutions far from university campus presents disadvantages in terms of transportation and monetary aspects. For this reason, most of the universities that initiated the distance education application first started this practice in vocational schools and then spread it to all units (Yaman, 2015).

Virtual classes or groups for foreign languages can be created with the distance education system. Although the creation of virtual classes varies between relevant technological equipment, they have similar aspects in importance. Different classes are usually created within the same course in the distance learning application. Each class is given different passwords to participate in the trainings. With the password obtained from the system, the student can attend the courses.

Distance education is a great advantage for those who want to learn foreign language or for those who have to take compulsory foreign language course because of their busy working life. The certificate to be received from the distance education system is no different from the one received from any other training unit. Distance education is more economical and practical than formal education. Therefore, education and certification of large masses will increase the welfare level through distance education. However, some students have great difficulties in following virtual courses for some reasons, thus failing in the examinations. Similarly the instructors have difficulty in teaching foreign language effectively in virtual environment for some technical reasons.

1.3. Disadvantages of Virtual Education

Inadequate training of teachers and trainers on the use of web-based training tools, and inability of students to benefit from the advantages of online education impede the effectiveness of virtual education. As for technical aspects, connections may often be changed or not established for any reason, access to the internet from rural areas is still a problem, satellite and cable communications are not yet capable of responding to the need, communication and information-based connections are dependent on the communication facilities for any reason due to change or inefficiency in communication. As in the formal education system, some psychological and sociological elements such as cohesion, group consciousness development and cultural interaction among students cannot be provided.

The disadvantage of virtual education is that it is not suitable for people who do not have personal motivation for learning, that is, it can lead to passive watching as it is on television, despite the fact that active learning is supported.

2. METHOD

We used a qualitative research method to determine and evaluate the views of the instructors about the difficulties encountered in foreign language courses in virtual environment and the negative effects of virtual learning environments on the students' approach to learning. This kind of methodological approach was chosen as, according to O'Tool and Beckett (2010), it enables researchers to interpret and make judgement about immeasurable data. We preferred and used easy accessible sample technique in the research, as it increases the speed of collecting data and enables researchers to access the sample easily (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). We conducted this research with the views of the instructors in tertiary education in the Faculty of Education in Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University.

2.1. Problem Statement and Purpose

The aim of this study is to research into the difficulties encountered in foreign language courses in virtual environment and the negative effects of virtual learning environments on the students' approach to learning. We aimed to find out satisfying answers to our problem statement. To fulfil the purpose of the study we asked the instructors one open ended questions. "What kind of problems do you experience in virtual environment?"

2.2. Participants

We included 10 instructors in our study, who teach Foreign Language through online at different departments in university. We obtained the data from the instructors who admitted to be involved in the interview for the research. The participants were asked whether they were contented to answer to the questions, and then we applied the tool. The names of the instructors are coded with letters and numbers.

2.3. Research Instrument and Data Analysis

In the study, we used the tool with semi structured interview form to gather data from the instructors who teach Foreign Language through online in various departments in the University. We asked one open ended question to the participants. The question was designed in accordance with the main points of Virtual Learning Environments and its disadvantages. The question of the interview was formed by the final judgement of three experts in the field.

We obtained the data through one by one and face to face interview with the participants; the replies to the interview questions were abstracted and made into pure data.

3. FINDINGS

We carried out this study to research into the difficulties encountered in foreign language courses in virtual environment and the negative effects of virtual learning environments on the students' approach to learning. The instructors teaching foreign language in different departments expressed their views on virtual teaching as follows:

(A. Instructor, teaching English in the Faculty of Education) "... I am doing my best to teach English to the First Grade students. Many students have smart phones and they do their homework through their smart phones with instant homework sites instead of their own efforts to do the homework. This makes them lazy and impede their creativity skills...."

The smart mobile phone has greatly increased people's access to the Internet. In addition to the fact that smart mobile phone prices are getting cheaper, portability has a big effect. Thanks to smart mobile phones, the need for internet cafes has decreased. Today almost half of the world's population uses smartphones. In some countries, the smartphone market has reached saturation point, while in developing countries the difference is rapidly dissolving. In particular, almost all university students have their own smart phones and spend average 6 hours chatting, surfing in internet and social media. For educational purpose, they use their smart phones for searching and downloading necessary documents, and instant homework from related websites. This makes them lazy and impedes their creativity skills.

(B. Instructor, teaching English in the Faculty of Pharmacy) "... Smart phones are not so good for virtual learning, as they do not have full technical specifications as laptop computers. Another problem is that it is

very difficult to contact with the students at the time of presenting the course...On the other hand smart phones appeal students to cheat at the exams..”

It is clear that there are more advanced smartphones than some computers. But it is undeniable that computers are better in certain areas. For example, computers are the basic need to be in offices all over the world. People are unlikely to work in their offices using their smart phones. It is true that excel and presentation programs can be used and even e-mail can be used from phones, but for the reason of learning and teaching activities, computers offer a better platform for excel, PowerPoint, word documents than smartphones. In addition, most people prefer typing on a full keyboard. Also the screen size is perhaps the most basic area a computer smartphone can always beat.

(C. Instructor, teaching English in the Faculty of Engineering) *“... this is my fifth year in teaching and I had difficulty to get to know the students at my course in virtual environment. As I don't get to know them, I hardly teach them what they don't know or what they need to know...”*

In order to help the students effectively, it is necessary to know their characteristics and to know what they need. The information obtained from the student recognition activities gives direction to other guidance activities. Because, one of the criteria taken into consideration when preparing guidance program and plan is the characteristics and needs of students. In addition, as long as this information is passed on to the students, the students will have more information about themselves. Thus, the function of “self-recognition“ is fulfilled.

(D. Instructor, teaching English in the Faculty of Education) *“...My students follow the courses at the dormitory through the sharing computer with some students together. They say it is an old model and it has some connection problems with internet. The new one is expensive and they have to use it in one semester more... sometimes they come to the school to follow the courses. I am sure they would be more successful if the courses were through face to face...”*

In today's world, technological elements have become more widespread compared to the past and brought many innovations and convenience to our lives. Smart phones are one of these tools. While the purpose of the first mobile phones is the mobile service, which is realized only in voice and text, today's smartphones are quite comprehensive in terms of being accessible and having a wide range of functions besides being voice or text. Not all the students can afford to buy quality new version smart phones, which creates an inequality among the students, as new versions are compatible with distant education.

(E. Instructor, teaching English in the Faculty of Law) *“.... One of the main disadvantages of distance education is the loss of interaction with other students in the classroom. These interactions help develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students are trying to achieve this interaction through internet forums and chat rooms in many distance learning environments. There are very few people here. There are only one of us and several students, which is not an adequate alternative....”*

While the great convenience of smartphones makes them attractive, on the other hand, some harmful effects lead to their questioning. While people use these phones freely and almost unlimitedly, they have some problems. One of these problems is social problems. In fact, smart phones have significant effects on socialization. In particular, social media, and consequently, being able to communicate with many people at the same time, provides a serious interaction between individuals and society. However, considering the fact that the phone is not only social media and considering that social media is not life itself, the negative effects of smart phones might appear. In this respect, while creating a virtual social environment, smart phones can take individuals away from the real social environment. In particular, individuals with telephone addiction index their lives to the phone and cannot overcome it when they encounter any problems in real life (Yusufoğlu, 2017).

(E. Instructor, teaching History in the Faculty of Art and Sciences) *“.... My students increasingly use smart phones almost in every occasion. I concern about their health. Some of my students have already had eye problems. They suffer from sleep-based issues. Day by day I notice them leave behind the class and cannot catch the others...”*

Every day it is possible to see dozens of children in an area of life focused on the game on the phone or tablet, completely disconnected from what is happening around them. However, according to experts, this situation causes serious health and developmental problems in children. Due to tablet computers and smartphones, many discomforts, especially neck and lumbar disorders in children, are reported to increase dramatically. These devices cause serious damage to the spine of developing children due to intensive use.

From the statements of the instructors, we can argue that with the increase in the use of mobile devices such as smart phones, interest in mobile learning is increasing. What makes mobile-learning advantageous over e-learning is that mobile devices are widespread and sometimes provided by school management. Mobile learning is a distance learning model where learning is carried out by mobile tools. However, m-learning is a form of learning that enables access to content and communication with other learners, regardless of location.

Mobile learning environments have shown that training is possible without being in a fixed place with mobile devices. Mobile learning is similar to e-learning in terms of being independent of time and space, providing equal opportunities in education and being student-centered. However some mobile devices such as smart phones is not so good during the courses as face to face interaction. The worst thing is that the students cannot ask any questions on the point that they could not understand.

Occasional extracurricular activities are among the important elements of education in order to attract the attention of the students and enable them to study in a more motivated way. It is possible to benefit from the tablets they use in almost every field. Colouring books, games and other applications make it easier for students to enjoy themselves safely.

Interaction with mobile phones in social life starts from childhood in many parts of the world. As typical technologies that change the shape of social life, mobile phones eliminate social boundaries and existing forms. Since there is no time and space limitation, individuals can send messages via SMS. The use of e-mail among individuals is very common and both mobile communication facilities (SMS, mobile phone, etc.) and E-mail, everyone can communicate independently from time and place. The main difference between today's children and adults is that children start cell phone ownership at an early age and become accustomed to these technologies at an early age (Karaslan and Budak, 2012).

Most of the students believe that mobile phones affect daily life positively and think that it provides fast and easy communication. Most of the students consider being accessible at any time is a great comfort. In spite of all these positive thoughts, it is also noteworthy that the students have critical thoughts about the communication with mobile phones (Green and Singleton, 2009). The rate of students who stated that they miss the old communication media is 63.6%. Again, a significant number of students think that they are uncomfortable not to have their mobile phones turned off in public transport, cinemas or theatres, that the base stations threaten health, that even the use of mobile phones by young children is uncomfortable and that technologies make people dependent rather than liberating.

Despite all these considerations, the use of mobile phones by students at a rate of 100 percent, the presence of a large proportion of students who keep mobile phones open, the habit of changing mobile phones without aging, and the presence of a university youth that quickly carries technology to all living spaces draws attention.

4. CONCLUSION

While technological innovations make human life easier, the tools that come with these innovations are often addictive. One of them, smart phones, connects individuals more to itself with the attractive opportunities it provides for passing time. However, this situation creates discomfort both in the social environment and the individual itself.

Today, many universities in the world provide distance education services over the internet. Students enrolled in the programs offered by these universities continue their education without leaving their environment. With the help of distance education, students reach the university that provides service without having to visit the programs they are continuing with, and thus push the conventional boundaries of today's school institution and remove education from the international dimension and make it a virtual phenomenon (Aktay, 2002). However, distance learning participants form a virtual group that differs from the real group in which face-to-face relationships are experienced. Training with a virtual group is realized through communication technologies, so group interaction cannot be achieved. This is the reason for inadequacy in terms of success compared to face-to-face communication. Because group members do not interact, they develop different behaviours and thoughts. It is also difficult to direct the transfer of information according to the characteristics of the group. Because, individual attitudes cannot be understood by the trainer during distance education.

Technology can never do what an effective educator can do. Technology alone is not sufficient in distance education. What is really important is the use of technology in organizing and giving courses. Many

educators working in distance education do not organize their courses by taking advantage of technology. However, according to the research, the effectiveness of distance education depends on the preparation, the educator's knowledge of the student's needs and the recognition of the target audience (Yang and Vidovich, 2002; Gökçe, 2008). In addition, distance education with the Internet includes barriers related to culture, language, learning styles, technological literacy and economic opportunities.

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