

## Original Paper

# EFL Students' Views on Distance English Language Learning in a Public University in Turkey

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigated first year Turkish EFL students' views about learning English through distance education. The participants were on-campus students in a public university in Turkey who took compulsory English language courses through distance education. A total of 62 students from different majors were involved in the study. Data was collected through an 18-item online Likert-Scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire revealed that students did not have clear views about distance English language learning and that they preferred face-to-face instructional setting to learn English. Interviews revealed that students were happy with distance language learning setting because they liked flexibility of time and place, but they suffered from lack of equipment and technical problems. The study also revealed that students had problems with English language learning in general. New studies should be carried out with distance EFL learners on issues such as autonomy, motivation, academic procrastination, and technical and pedagogical support.*

### **Keywords**

*EFL, English, Distance English Language Learning, Online Language learning*

## **1. Introduction**

In today's world, instructional settings for language learning can be classified as traditional in-class setting or distance learning setting. In addition to open and distance teaching universities, some on-campus universities offer English Language courses through distance education. In Turkey, some universities offer English Language courses, which are compulsory for first year students regardless of their majors, in distance education setting.

There are many reasons for the preference of distance education setting for language learning and teaching. Thanks to distance education, learners who are not able to take language instruction in

face-to-face settings for different reasons such as financial reasons, work load, or different responsibilities have the chance to take language instruction. People who cannot learn a language in traditional settings for these reasons or the ones who cannot go abroad to learn a language can learn a language through distance education. Distance education eliminates barriers and gives language learners the opportunity to learn a language without time and place constraints. Distance education students have the chance to learn or improve a foreign language through distance education because they can participate in virtual classes at any place through computers or mobile tools. Thanks to virtual classes or online materials, learners can be involved in interactive activities, they can be exposed to authentic language, and interact with tutors and other learners. They can watch the recorded classes or videos if they miss a class or if they want to watch the class again in order to revise the contents. As for the teachers, once they prepare the original materials, they can update them easily. They can follow students' improvement through online records.

In spite of these advantages, there may be some problems in distance learning settings. These problems are lack of continuous Internet access, lack of technical equipment such as computers, mobile tools, camera, etc., technical problems, students' or teachers' lack of technological skills, computer anxiety, students' or teachers' negative beliefs about distance education particularly for distance language learning and teaching, transferring some habits from traditional setting to online setting, lack of orientation sessions or training, lack of continuous technical or administrative support for the teachers or students, students' reliance on the teacher rather than being autonomous learners. In addition, problems regarding pedagogical support and human-computer interaction features of the software hinder learning in distance education setting (Prebianca, Vieira, & Finardi, 2014).

## **2. Literature Review**

Literature shows that there are many factors which affect students' views regarding distance language learning. Smart and Cappel's (2006) study showed that students in an elective course rated online classes positively whereas those in a required course rated the online classes negatively. This shows that students' self-discipline or motivation for the course may affect students' ratings. Smart and Cappel (2006) state that students' technological experience is also a factor for preferring online classes. They state that students having more technological experience may have more positive attitude towards online class than those who do not have such experience. Students' computer anxiety (Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen, & Yeh, 2008) and personality may affect students' attitudes or views. Smidt, Bunk, McGrory, Li and Gatenby (2014) argue that personality differences such as extroversion may affect students' views about distance language learning in that extrovert students may prefer face-to-face interaction because they like direct interaction with the teacher and their peers. There is also evidence in the literature that students liked studying the course through mobile device and that they thought it was motivating. This showed that students preferred personalized learning (Mockus et al., 2011). Literature shows that students' degree of course satisfaction is related to their perception of support (Gilbert, Morton, &

Rowley, 2007; Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011). In addition, lack of resources or updated materials negatively affect students' views regarding online learning. Sun's (2014) study results indicated six difficulties that online language learners faced. These difficulties were: following the schedule and studying regularly; getting hold of classmates and finding suitable time for working together; pairing/teaming up and working collaboratively; ensuring constant engagement with the class; keeping self-motivated and being a self-directed learner and socializing. Budiman (2015) conducted a study with Indonesian students in the English Department of an open university in Indonesia. The study showed that students had problem with grammar and vocabulary learning in this setting and they found different ways of improving them. They expected more direct interaction with their tutor. Based on their study with Thai university students enrolling in an online English course, Kuama and Intharaksa (2016) found that low English proficiency students lacked online learning skills and experiences in self-directed learning. Khabbaz and Najjar's (2015) examined students' language learning strategies in a Moodle-based language learning program and the study showed that new technology in language learning could hinder autonomous learning because of the challenges stemming from new technology. Different researchers conducted studies on distance English language learning with either Open Education Faculty students or with on-campus students who were taking the English language course through distance education in Turkey. One of those studies showed that e-class application in an Advanced Reading course decreased anxiety and that students felt more relaxed during e-classes as they became more familiar with the new learning setting (Yüzer, Aydın, & Kuru-Gönen, 2009). A study which was carried out with a group of Open Education Faculty students by Altunay and Mutlu (2010) revealed that students thought that virtual class was a good opportunity to practice during the lessons, but they were not happy with technical problems. Those students were happy with distance education because it allowed them to study without time and place constraints. Another study which was carried out with a group of adult first year Open Education Faculty students revealed that distance EFL learners did not demonstrate autonomous behavior for language learning. The same research showed that responsibilities stemming from adulthood, lack of skills to perform some types of activities, lack of awareness of some activities and their experience from secondary school are some of the reasons of the unautonomous behavior (Altunay, 2013). Emekçi (2015) conducted a study with a group of on-campus Turkish EFL students who were taking EFL courses through distance education. The study revealed that almost half of the students were not happy with the assignments and exams. In addition, the results showed that most of the students liked distance education course because they followed the lessons at the time and place that suited them. Altunay's research which was made with a group of on-campus EFL students revealed that students thought that traditional classroom was more effective than online environments to learn English (Altunay, 2016). Özüdoğru and Hişmanoğlu(2016) conducted research with 478 freshmen students. The study revealed that most of the students preferred face-to face instruction to distance education.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Aim of the Study

There are some studies carried out with Open Education Faculty EFL students in Turkish education context. However, there are not sufficient number of studies which investigated on-campus EFL students' views about distance English language learning in Turkey. Investigating on-campus EFL students' views is important because distance language learning is a new experience for them and they are different from open education EFL students in terms of learner profile. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate on-campus Turkish EFL students' views regarding learning English through distance education. A secondary aim of the study is to make suggestions for the improvement of English language teaching through distance education.

The research questions of the study are:

1. What are students' views regarding personal suitability of learning English through distance education?
2. What are students' views regarding effectiveness of learning English through distance education?
3. What are students' views regarding teachability of distance education for English language?
4. What are students' views regarding their study habits for learning English?

#### 3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 62 first year on-campus university students in Mustafa Kemal University, Turkey. Those students took the English language course in one of the 2015-2016, 2016-2017, 2017-2018 academic years or were still taking the course in the fall semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. At the beginning of the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 academic years, the students received face-to-face orientation training for distance learning. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years, the students did not receive any face-to-face training. Instead, PowerPoint presentations and written instructions were posted on the web page to give instructions for how to use the system and how to study. 33 male and 29 female Turkish EFL students participated in the study. The number of students on the basis of the majors are as follows: Antiochia Vocational School (N=27), Faculty of Sciences and Letters (N=18), Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (N=2), Faculty of Agricultural Studies (N=2), School of Social Sciences (N=8), School of Agricultural Sciences (N=2), School of Physical Education and Sports (N=3).

In the university where the current research was carried out, first year students take compulsory beginner level English Language courses (English I and English II) 2 hours per week through distance education. The course has three main components. The coursebook, the e-learning platform, and the online version of the coursebook. The e-learning platform includes the virtual class, videos and exercises prepared by the instructors and other tools which make the course interactive such as e-mail, announcements, etc. The virtual classes are recorded automatically so the ones who missed the class can watch the lesson or the ones who would like to repeat the topics can watch them again. For each unit in the coursebook, instructors load short videos and self-study materials such as worksheets into

the system. The book has an online version. The online version offers interactive activities and audio-visuials. Students are asked to do the online exercises as their homework. All students' activities in the e-platform of the university and also in the online version of the book are recorded so that the instructors and the technical staff can follow students' activities and progress.

### *3.3 Materials*

Data was collected through an online likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Yıldırım, Yıldırım, Çelik & Karaman (2014) to investigate the views of distance learners about distance education. The questionnaire was adapted for distance EFL learners for the current study. The questionnaire was composed of 18 items. The items were related to Personal suitability (Items 1-6), Effectiveness (Items 7-11), Teachability (Items 12-15), and Study Habits (Items 16-18). The Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was 0,864. The points of the questionnaire were as follows: 1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Undecided, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree.

### *3.4 Procedure*

The study was piloted with a group of students in the Faculty of Sciences and Letters using a questionnaire created by the researcher. At the end of the pilot study, it was concluded that most items in the questionnaire were designed for course evaluation rather than identifying the general views of the students on distance English language learning. Therefore, the adapted version of the questionnaire prepared by Yıldırım et al. (2014) was used for the current study. Some findings of the pilot study worth sharing. For example, most students thought that course videos and virtual classrooms were useful. Students agreed that the course was useful for vocabulary learning and grammar learning, and they thought they improved their listening skills. They agreed with the idea that they liked flexibility of time and place. However, 33% of the students did not have any idea of the online activities of the coursebook and 18% of the students stated that they did not find those activities useful.

The data for the current study was collected in the 2018-2019 academic year fall semester. The questionnaire was prepared in Google Forms in Turkish. The course instructors were asked to post the questionnaire link on the virtual class platform. The questionnaire was also posted by the researcher in a social media platform which was particularly used to communicate the current and previous distance learners in the university. Participation to the questionnaire was voluntary. Students were asked not to write any information which indicated their identity such as name and surname on the questionnaire.

### *3.5 Data Analysis*

The analysis was done using SPSS 23.0. First, Descriptive Statistics were calculated and then, t-test was carried out to see if there was significant difference between genders. One-way ANOVA was used to see if the students' general views significantly differed depending on their majors and the academic year in which they took the course.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The questionnaire findings indicate that in general students are undecided about the items. In other words, they do not have clear views about distance language learning. The most striking results are related to the items 12-13-15. The results show that in general students agree with the items “Face-to-face interaction is necessary for best English learning”, “Communication in face-to-face English learning is more instant and clearer than in distance learning” and “ I need face-to-face communication to learn English”.

Descriptive statistics for each item are shown in the table below:

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

Items	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Undecided %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %	Mean (M)	Std.
1. It is convenient for me to learn English through distance education.	42	8	18	11	21	2,61	1,61
2. Learning English through distance education is suitable for my lifestyle.	37	13	18	13	20	2,64	1,55
3. Distance learning is a suitable alternative to obtain the English education I need.	37	8	26	8	21	2,67	1,55
4. Distance learning allows me to learn English without losing time.	37	11	19	11	21	2,67	1,57
5. I need the flexibility of participating the lesson without time and place constraints.	24	8	15	15	39	3,35	1,63
6. It is difficult for me to go to the university campus to study.	34	10	18	5	34	2,95	1,70
7. Distance learning makes the student more active in terms of learning English.	31	11	24	10	23	2,81	1,54
8. Distance education offers the opportunity to do various activities to learn English.	34	11	19	11	23	2,77	1,58
9. Distance education allows students to learn English at their own pace.	24	10	15	21	27	3,18	1,56
10. Those learned in English classes are internalized thanks to distance education.	32	16	21	10	19	2,67	1,51
11. Distance learning is more effective than traditional education.	36	15	21	7	19	2,58	1,53
12. Face-to-face interaction is necessary for best English learning.	15	8	19	10	45	3,65	1,50

13. Communication in face-to-face English learning is more instant and clearer than in distance learning.	15	5	24	13	40	3,61	1,45
14. English education is offered better through traditional education compared to distance education.	21	5	26	10	36	3,35	1,54
15. I need face-to-face communication to learn English.	13	13	18	7	47	3,63	1,51
16. I have the habit of postponing to accomplish the given assignments or exercises.	37	16	24	7	13	2,40	1,40
17. Most of the time, I do not finish the homework or exercises given.	42	26	13	10	7	2,10	1,25
18. I wait until the last moment to do my homework or to study for the exams.	37	18	21	7	15	2,41	1,44

Results of the analysis for each research question are stated below:

1. What are students' views regarding personal suitability of learning English through distance education?

The findings show that male students' ( $M=2.81$ ,  $std=1.41$ ) and female students' views about distance English learning ( $M=2.74$ ,  $std=1.38$ ) is "Undecided", which means they do not have clear idea about it. The Independent Samples T-Test shows that there is no significant difference between male and female students' views regarding distance language learning in terms of suitability ( $P=0.831>0.05$ ). One-way ANOVA test reveals that there are no significant differences among the students' views regarding personal suitability on the basis of their majors ( $P=0.132>0.05$ ). Similarly, there are no significant differences among the students' views regarding personal suitability on the basis of the year they take the course ( $P=0.395>0.05$ ).

2. What are students' views regarding effectiveness of learning English through distance education?

The findings of the study reveal that both male students ( $M=2.83$ ,  $std=1.51$ ) and female students ( $M=2.53$ ,  $std=1.43$ ) do not have clear idea about the effectiveness of distance English language learning. The Independent Samples T-Test shows that there is no significant difference between male and female students' views regarding the effectiveness of learning English through distance education ( $P=0.430>0.05$ ). One-way ANOVA test indicated no significant differences among the students' views of the effectiveness on distance English learning on the basis of their majors ( $P=0.142>0.05$ ). Similarly, there are no significant differences among the students' views regarding the effectiveness on the basis of the year they take the course ( $P=0.606>0.05$ ).

3. What are students' views regarding teachability of distance education for English language?

The results reveal that both male students' views ( $M=3.46$ ,  $std=1.44$ ) and female students' views ( $M=3.82$ ,  $std=1.36$ ) on teachability indicate that they are undecided about the teachability of the distance English learning. Independent Samples T-Test shows that there is no significant difference between male and female students' views regarding the teachability ( $P=0.326>0.05$ ). One-way ANOVA test indicates no significant differences among the students' views of the teachability on the basis of the students' majors ( $P=0.421>0.05$ ). Similarly, the same test results show that there are no significant differences among the students' views regarding teachability on the basis of the year they take the course. ( $P=0.498>0.05$ ).

#### 4. What are students' views regarding their study habits for learning English?

Similar to the previous questions, the analysis shows that both male students ( $M=2.29$ ,  $std=1.31$ ) and female students ( $M=2.53$ ,  $std=1.38$ ) do not have clear idea about their views regarding their study habits for learning English ( $P=0.456>0.05$ ). One way ANOVA tests show that there are no significant differences among the students' study habits on the basis of their majors ( $P=0.999>0.05$ ) and on the basis of the year they take the course.

The results of questionnaire reveal that the general tendency for the students is that they do not have clear idea about suitability, effectiveness, teachability of distance education and their study habits. However, some striking findings are that in general students think that face-to-face interaction is necessary for best English learning, and communication in face-to-face English learning is more instant and clearer than in distance learning. Students think that they need face-to-face communication to learn English.

Semi-structured Interviews were conducted with a group of randomly selected students in the virtual environment to obtain more information about the findings and find out new problems about the issue which were not revealed by the questionnaire. The data obtained from the interviews was recorded automatically. The interviews were analyzed by the researcher and another colleague as a second-rater. The data was read and major themes were identified. General agreement was reached with the second-rater. The major questions asked in the interview were: "Is learning English through distance education suitable for you?", "Do you think learning English through distance education is effective?", "What do you think about the teachability of the distance language teaching environment?", "Do you or did you study English lessons regularly?". Additional questions were also asked to clarify the students' responses. Some example questions are as follows: "Do you have the habit of postponing doing assignments or studying for the exam?", "Don't you use the laboratories in your faculty?", "Why don't you have direct or instant interaction with your instructor?", "Don't you use an ear-phone or microphone?".

Major findings of the interviews can be summarized as follows: Students think that distance education is suitable; Students think that face-to-face learning is more effective than distance setting for language learning; There are problems with the language education in general; Students do not study for English language courses regularly.

Students think that distance education is suitable because it gives them the flexibility of time and place



to study and students like that the classes are recorded. In this way, they can follow the lessons even if they do not actively participate in the lesson. The study complies with Altunay and Mutlu's (2010) and Emekçi's (2015) study in that students like distance education because it gives flexibility of time and place to study.

*I think distance education is useful. It is comfortable because we can participate in the course wherever we are. We can watch the lessons if we miss a class.*

Students think that face-to-face learning is more effective than distance setting. There are problems with distance language learning setting such as lack of face-to-face interaction and technical problems. Students do not like that they cannot see teachers' body language in distance education setting and they cannot make eye-contact. These problems make instant communication and interaction difficult. The current study shows similar results with the studies of Altunay (2016) and Özüdoğru and Hişmanoğlu (2016) in that students prefer face-to-face learning.

*Distance education may cause problems for the ones who do not have Internet access at home... I think eye contact in face-to-face classes makes the course more effective. I feel that I belong to the class in face-to-face classes. More friends participate in the lesson, so I think face-to-face education is more effective... Since other courses are more loaded, I spent more time on other courses. I am taking seven courses this semester... I have to follow the English courses using in the computers in the library. Some students are watching other things on the Internet and it is distracting. I have to take my own earphone and sometimes I forget it.*

*I do not think that our adaptation to this system is complete... I think particularly for language learning face-to-face communication makes learning better because body language and gestures have important role in communication...*

*I think everything is faster and simple in face-to-face classes. Our teacher can give us many different activities and exercises in face-to-face classes.*

When students are told that a large variety of activities are available in the online component of the coursebook and the course instructor offers different activities in virtual classes, the interview results reveal that students prefer human to human interaction rather than human to computer interaction. Similar to the argument of the Smidt et al. (2014), the current study shows that some students prefer direct interaction with their teachers or peers. In addition, students do not participate in oral activities in virtual classes because they participate in the lessons in the computers in the library or in Internet cafes, so they cannot comfortably speak there. This finding corroborates with a study carried out by Finardi, Prebianca, Schmitt and Andrade (2014) in that developing speaking skills is challenging in this setting. The interview reveals that many students do not regularly participate in virtual classes because they do not have a computer and they prefer watching the recorded versions of the virtual classes. One of the students thinks that there should be around one hour face-to-face conversation session to overcome this problem.

*In face-to-face classes, sometimes we can talk about a topic and we can make more oral practice.*

*Distance education is not bad, but some friends do not have a computer. Sometimes we participate in classes in the library or Internet cafes. We cannot speak there. Sometimes we use the computer labs in the faculty, but our other friends are studying there, so we do not speak in the lessons in order to be polite to others, not to disturb them. Maybe we can go to a face-to-face class altogether one hour per week to make oral practice.*

Another finding is that students think that the English language education is problematic in general both in the university and in their previous education years. Students think that the language course hours are not sufficient.

*The problem is that we did not learn everything properly beforehand. Maybe, the level of language education in the secondary school is low.*

*The importance of each course is not the same. The credit of English language courses is low... We need to take English courses every year systematically to learn it properly.*

*I think English language education is different from how it should be. As a student in the faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences I just took two English language courses and we always repeated the same things. I think we should take more English language courses in this department.*

Another finding revealed by the interviews is that students postpone studying the course and they do not study regularly.

*When an assignment was given, I delayed completing it at least one week later than the deadline because other courses were too loaded. The system should force us to study English lessons.*

*Most students study this lesson just to pass the course. Personally, I could not participate the virtual classes regularly and I could not study the English language lessons regularly.*

Postponing responsibilities or doing them the last minute is called “academic procrastination” (Sepehrian & Jabari Lotf, 2011). Bekleyen’s (2017) study shows that procrastination level of English preparatory class students may differ depending on the students’ majors. For example, Bekleyen’s (2017) study reveals that students of English Literature and of English Language Teaching have lower level of procrastination than the students from other majors. Bekleyen (2017) states that this is not surprising because learning English is more crucial for the students of these two departments. Some students may work better when there is less time left to complete the task; In other words, time pressure is needed to encourage those students to complete the task (Ferrari, 2001). According to Smart and Cappel (2006), technological problems and students’ technological incompetency may influence their views regarding online learning and also causes academic procrastination. They state that those problems cause students to complete online tasks in a long time, which causes frustration. Even if technical problems and lack of Internet access or computers may cause procrastination, the current study shows that students do not have the habit of regular study. An important reason is that the credit of English courses and the course hours are lower than the subject area courses. In addition, English language courses are offered only in the first year. Except for some departments which offer ESP

courses in the coming years, most students do not take any English or ESP courses in the following years. Therefore, students prefer allocating more time to study subject area courses. They delay studying language courses because they have lower effect on their grade point average and they will not take a more advanced level language course in the following years. The results indicate that students are not autonomous learners and they do not have motivation. Autonomy is defined as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s learning (Holec, 1981). The study reveals similar results with Altunay’s (2013) study in that students do not show autonomous behavior. The results of the current study also support Sun’s (2014) in that students do not study regularly and they do not seem as autonomous learners. That students feel the need to be forced to study by the system and that they do not study regularly shows us that students do not have the ability to take charge of their learning. Autonomous learning enhances learning (Benson, 2010) and becoming an autonomous learner has particular importance in distance education setting. Therefore, students need to be encouraged to become autonomous learners. This can be achieved by emphasizing independent interaction with learning materials and educational technologies, offering strategy training, giving learners control over the planning and evaluation of learning (Benson, 2010). Students can be encouraged to study the units in the hardcopy of the coursebook if they do not have access to the online version, or they can download other course materials and exercises loaded by the instructors and then work on them. As stated before, the students think that the system should force them to study. This shows that students may have motivational problems. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) suggests three types of motivation as Intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation. Intrinsic motivation means performing a behavior for its own sake for pleasure or satisfying curiosity. Extrinsic motivation means to perform a behavior to achieve an aim such as receiving an extrinsic reward. Amotivation means lack of any kind of motivation. The current findings of the study indicate that students do not have intrinsic motivation for learning English because they study English only to pass the course and they need external factors to study. Studies specifically designed for the autonomy and motivation of those students should be carried out in the future.

## **5. Conclusion**

The study reveals that students like distance language learning because it gives them the flexibility of time and place to study. Students like that they have the chance to watch the recorded lessons if they miss a class. However, since most students do not have a personal computer, they participate in the virtual classes in the laboratories in the library or in Internet cafes, and for this reason, they cannot be involved in oral activities comfortably and they do not have instant interaction with the instructor or their peers. Therefore, students think that face-to-face learning is more effective than distance learning to learn English. More computer laboratories and technical equipments such as ear-phones should be provided to encourage more synchronous active participation in the campus since interaction promotes language learning. Students should be provided orientation programs at the beginning of the semesters,

and face-to-face course content support could be provided particularly for speaking activities and for better student-teacher interaction. The study reveals that there are some problems independent of the learning setting. The study shows that students have autonomy and motivation problem, and they postpone studying for the course. Therefore, students should be encouraged to become autonomous learners and they should be encouraged to study regularly. English language courses could be offered after the first year so that students can learn better. In this way, they may become more motivated because they will know that they will take an English course in the coming years. In addition, the advantages of learning English should be explained and students can take training for becoming better language learners. New studies should be carried out with on-campus students who are taking English language courses through distance education. Future studies should focus on academic procrastination, students' autonomy and motivation, *and technical and pedagogical support in order* to determine the students' profile, to identify their needs and to adapt the learning setting accordingly.

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