A Comparison of Online Courses with Traditional Face-To-Face Courses in the English Language Teaching Ph.D Program regarding the Students' Point of View

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ABSTRACT

As the number of online courses at the level of master's and Ph.D. is increasing all over the world, more studies are being conducted to find out whether these courses are as efficient as face-to-face courses by focusing on their strengths and weaknesses and offering suggestions to improve the overall experience of online learning. Motivated by the related literature, the current study aims to research the experience of learners and their readiness level for online Ph.D. courses in the Turkish context. To accomplish the aim of enriching the literature with detailed explanations of what is actually going on in an online course, what the students' perspectives and satisfaction factors of online courses are in comparison to traditional face-to-face courses, five Ph.D. classmates were contacted. These students had to attend all of the courses at the English Language Teaching Program in Çukurova University from other cities, apart from one online course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their experiences during the process of studying the online course, to compare it with the rest of face-to-face courses, and to research its impact on their lives. Transcribed interview data were processed with in-depth content analysis and recurring themes were grouped under similar categories. The findings of the current research revealed the participants were satisfied with the online course, thought online learning offers a rich and flexible setting of learning, and the outcomes of online learning and the face-to face learning are almost the same. However, the quality of the online course could be increased by advanced technological tools that enable a lively, authentic discussion. Also, students may be offered orientation to gain the qualifications necessary for the foundation of a doctoral program. More suggestions to improve the experience of online courses at Ph.D. level have been offered in the discussion part of the study. The study is important in term of contributing to the discussion on accomplishments of online courses at Ph.D. level

Key Words: Online Ph.D. courses, learners' perspectives, suggestions for improvement.

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1. Introduction

Being schooled does not only mean being in an actual classroom and taught about something. With the development of technological devices and tools, alternative learning methods such as homeschooling, self-education, independent schools, distance learning have emerged. The quality of face-to-face education, online schooling, and home schooling has all improved due to the increased use of technological facilities such as the virtual classroom, social media, videoconferencing, and learning management systems. Educators in countries such as Japan, Canada, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands are discussing how to include these alternatives in their education policies. These countries have started programs in instructional technology or educational technologies with master's or PhD options that will stimulate further developments and research in the areas of planning, implementing, and evaluating technology-based instruction.

Some studies have showed that doing online PhD could provide some benefits that traditional way of teaching would not offer. Sells, Tan, and Brogan (2011) have found that doing online PhD could enable the students to live and study in their own countries while doing their PhD program with students from all over the world. This experience helps the student develop a global perspective and be a world citizen. In addition, these students do not have to travel, which reduces their expenses. Similarly, the study done by Slihbegovic and Ribic (2008) shows that dissertation could be delivered online from abroad without any problems. The student in the study did not have to travel a long way and spend lots of money.

On the other hand, there are other studies that have found doing PhD online could lead to some problems. To begin with, the students could feel isolated (Martini, 2008) and without any help. Another study (Martz, 2007) similarly found that students need technological skill since it is a context where students are supposed to combine learning and technology. Online learning is a learning ground where the impact of technology is not known and there is less trust (Shepherd, Alpert, & Koeller, 2008). Finally, Cleeton and Cleeton (2006) has found that time management and procrastination are the most common problems students experienced doing their online graduate programs.

The studies done on online graduate programs have analyzed the problems of online and come with some suggestions. In their study, Paliktzoglou and Suhonen (2010) mentioned that motivation to follow online courses would fluctuate. Students hence should not be discoursed. Furthermore, satisfaction of the students could be enhanced with more individual feedback from the professor (Shepherd et al., 2008). The medium of delivering information or interaction would be one of the factors that influence the efficacy of online programs. In the same way, software programs such as blackboard that is solely designed for purpose of education would be better. However, another study (Anthony, 2000) showed that students should be encouraged to explore on their own on the internet as the programs may not be as useful.

2. Literature Review

Online learning has been driven from the earliest correspondence courses and videoconferencing. Since then, online learning has changed enormously thanks to emerging technological tools such as multimedia, web based applications and new collaboration technologies (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). Moreover, it has become more common around the world, and a lot of studies

have been done in order to firstly test various types of online learning, then to compare it with traditional face-to-face learning and finally to come up with suggestions to improve online experience.

The number of online courses for K-12, certificates, master's courses, PhD and post-doc programs is increasing all over the world. To illustrate, in the USA 1.6 million students studied at least one online program in the 2002 fall semester. This number climbed to 5.4 million in the 2012 fall semester, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (as cited in Allen & Seaman, 2003). With regards to higher education, 80.1 percent of institutions offered at least one fully online or blended program (Allen & Seaman, 2003). These institutions and schools that have offered online learning have gone into competition with each other. Recently, the US News has revealed a ranking list for students who want to know which universities are considered to be among the best online learning. According to this list, for bachelor programs the best thought to be Pennsylvania State University, while for a MBA program the best is Indiana University.

Defining how an online course functions in a university program is highly difficult since it is flexible and is usually adapted according to course requirements and students' needs and educators' goals. Means et al., (2009) claim that online learning experience could be categorized into three ways, which they term as: expository learning, active learning and interactive learning. These types of learning could be synchronous or asynchronous. To illustrate, one-way webcast of online lecture course with limited learner control may be an example of synchronous expository learning. On the other hand, professional development for science teachers through threaded discussion and message boards on topics identified by participants could be said to be an example for asynchronous interactive learning.

On the other hand, Allen and Seaman (2003) defined online learning by percentage of technology use. If 1 or 29 % of information is delivered online, it is called web-facilitated type of learning. On the other hand, if 30 to 79 % of information is delivered online, then it is called online or hybrid learning. Finally, if 80 % or more information is delivered online, it is called online learning. Another definition of online learning is stated by the United States Learning Associations as follows: "(an) education program whereby students may complete all or part of an educational program in a geographical location apart from the institution hosting the program; the final award given is equivalent in standard and content to an award program completed on campus."

There have been some studies revealing some details about how online learning is actually working with different programs and students. One study (Curtis & Lawson, 2001) was done in Bachelor of Education in Adult Education and Graduate Diploma in Adult and Further Education with 24 students who enrolled on an Internet and Education online course. In order to pass the course students needed to complete 3 significant pieces of coursework. As an example, one of the assignments was that students researched about a topic and reported it on the email discussion to get feedback. For online interactions, the students used mails, discussion boards, file loads and some other individual ways. The participation of the students in discussions was high.

Another study (Larcombe & McCosker, 2005) was done in 2004 with first year PhD students who come from different cultural and educational backgrounds. The online learning course, called Language and Academic Skills, aimed to help the students with their academic and professional development, literature reviewing, network building, interaction and community building. The course was aimed at those students who could not be physically at the campus and enjoy the seminars, workshops, skill development programs due to their work or family commitment. The course offered

quite rich resources and various way of delivering the content. Owing to the fact that students had not taken an online course before, the course started with orienting the students about communication and online strategies. To begin with, the online course was supported with experts from the School of Graduate Studies, learning skill advisers, postgraduate consultants, experienced academic supervisors and representatives from the post-graduate association. For the purpose of the course, interactive learning activities, forums, authentic resources, videos, quizzes, animated literature searches were used. Then authentic task examples were prepared considering students from different disciplines with a student-centered approach.

One more study (Sells, Tan, Brogan, Dahlen, & Stupart, 2012) was done with PhD students at the school of psychology and counseling. The study aimed to understand the experience of 5 international counselor educators who did their PhD in the USA through online learning from their hometown. The online CES PhD program which was accredited by CACREP was structured to be finished over a four-year period with 66 credit-hours. The students were from 19 countries and 20 percent of them lived outside of the USA. The students were supposed to be present in the classroom for 8-10 days at the beginning of the semester. It was believed that during this time the students would have a chance to develop relationships, trust each other and themselves more and learn technological skills which would be essential to succeed in the rest of the program. The participants in the study noted that doing their PhD through the online program helped them establish a global perspective.

Some studies concluded that online learning could offer some advantages that face-to-face learning would not offer. Online learning gives opportunities for students from different countries and culture to work together, exchange ideas and expand their way of thinking (Sells et al., 2012). Furthermore, online learning can decrease the cost and burden of having to travel to another country to get education (Salihbegovic & Ribic, 2008). Furthermore, the onerous task of applying for study visas could be avoided by online learning. Another point worth mentioning is the flexibility it offered. Many PhD students have got responsibilities such as working a full or part time job, and having a family (Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011; Martin & Woods, 2008). These students could benefit from the flexibility of time and place for online learning. Online learning is also beneficial for overcoming those feelings of isolation encountered during a PhD program with the support from groups, and communities online (Brooks, Fyffe, Atkinson, McBeath, Jonas-Dwyer, & Phillips, 2005). PhD. Students are mostly satisfied with online learning and one of the most important factors for satisfaction is individual feedback the students were able to get from their professors (Martz & Shepherd, 2007).

Although the studies have showed that online learning has some unique advantages over traditional face-to-face courses, it is far from being perfect. Some studies have showed that online learning is not better than traditional ways of learning (Scoville & Buskirk, 2007; Beile & Boote, 2002; Gaddis, Napierkowski, Guzman, & Muth, 2000). The studies done by Shih (2007) and Kerfoot (2008) (as cited in Means et al., 2009) found no significant statistical difference between delivery platforms. Delivering information through a web-based environment, e-mail or mobile phone did not make much difference. Similarly, another study by Stanley (2006) concluded that making quizzes and simulation part of the online learning led only to a slight improvement with grades. From the studies, it could be concluded that delivering information with the best technological tools do not ensure a good result of learning (Curtis and Lawson, 2001). The students still need guidance. Hence, facilitators, guest lecturers, guides and supporters need to be provided in online learning. Another point worth mentioning here with online learning is the need for highly trained instructors. Since instructors are

still very important, they ought to take internationally accredited training courses such as online teaching certificates, take part in professional discussion groups, and visit blogs (McAllister, unpublished).

Salihbegovic and Ribic (2008) similarly researched the students who defended their thesis over the internet. The researchers agreed that students did not have to travel a long distance for dissertation since they could successfully present their study on a videoconference meeting. Nevertheless, they warned about the possible challenges, obstacles it had and gave advice about what could be done. To start off, the internet could fail during the defense meeting. For this, a direct telephone line with loud speakers could be kept ready. Then if a problem occurred with the Vocalize server, the best solution for that would be to use Skype as peer-to-peer network. In fact, the researchers did not suggest Skype as the best option for dissertation since changing PowerPoint manually could be tiring for the committee and using power points like that would decrease the quality of sound.

Another similar study (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013) done with PhD students using Skype for interviewing revealed valuable details and explanation for other researchers who wanted to benefit in the same way. In their study, they summarized that the interviewee could choose to turn on the video depending on how intimate they wanted to be during the interviewing. On the other hand, the video might have to be turned off although the interviewee chose not to since video sometimes might decrease the quality of sound. Another point the researchers mentioned about was the issue of ethics. The interviewee could leave the meeting whenever they wished with a click. On the other hand, videoing or recoding the meeting should be discussed due to ethical reasons. It could be concluded that using Skype for education or research needs a lot of considerations in term of recruitment, logistical and technological requirements, ethics, or rapport for calculating the benefits and drawbacks of it.

One last issue to be discussed about online learning is the cost. Tucker and Neely (2010) emphasized that online learning had been considered as a way of cutting costs, but true and full cost of online courses should be calculated to understand that. In their study, they developed a framework for calculating unboundedly faculty costs including factors such as the cost of instructional technologist, faculty co-workers or curriculum developers. The researchers suggested that it was challenging to find out the full cost of higher online learning and factors such as time spent for course developments, or delivery of information should be tracked for finding the real cost of online learning in further studies.

In conclusion, technology is increasingly offering new and advanced tools for students, educators, and administrators to experience and think about. It is impossible to ignore the advantages of technology which ink and papers could not offer. On the other hand, studies showed that technological tools on their own were not as beneficial. Good and experienced teachers who could guide and facilitate online learning are needed. Finally, online learning is still a huge area to be researched. Even using the simplest technological tools such as Skype could be challenging when factors such as sound quality, practicality or ethics are considered. It could be said that online learning offers a rich and flexible setting of learning we still need to explore.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Purpose of the Study

While there are many studies that show the effectiveness of online learning and how they could be implemented better all over the world, the numbers of the online graduate programs are also

increasing in the USA and European countries. On the other hand, Turkey has recently started such programs and there are not many studies about graduate online programs in Turkey. The success and challenge of online graduate programs could be country or culture specific so what makes a graduate online program successful in Turkey may be different from those abroad. Hence, Turkey needs to implement its own study to start discussion about the efficiency and satisfaction of online PhD courses. Hence, this study aims to enrich the literature with detailed explanations of what is actually going on in an online course, what the students' perspectives and satisfaction factors of online courses are in comparison to traditional face-to-face courses. Furthermore, this study aims to provide educators who wish to start online PhD online courses with suggestions about what may fail in an online learning and about what can be done to increase the quality of online courses.

1) What is the student experience with online courses compared to face-to-face in class courses at Ph. D level?

3.2. The Context of the Study

While Çukurova University Social Sciences Institute offers face-to-face ELT PhD program. The program requires the students to take at least 8 different courses and then the students have to pass a proficiency exam. After the proficiency exam, the students can start doing their thesis to complement their PhD program. The students travel from different cities of Turkey to Çukurova campus to attend the weekly courses since attendance is part of the requirement of the program. However, the program started to offer SLA research course online in 2014 since the professor who gives the course could not be present on the campus physically. The professor continued to teach courses such as SLA research and psycholinguistics in 2015 as well. While the students have to attend other courses face-to-face, they could take these online courses from wherever they want to fulfill the requirement of Ph.D. program. It is reported that there are at least sixty students that take online courses

The name of the course is Second Language Acquisition Research for Language Teaching. The course is 3 course credits and the first online PhD course in the ELT program. The goal of the course is to teach the students the content of the course with studies that are implemented in a theoretical and empirical way. The number of the students in the course varies from 4 to 20 students. Every student has to give one or two presentations online during the year. The presentations are about a topic in SLA and additionally, they have to present an article about the topic. The rest of the students are supposed to comment on the presentations.

3.3. Participants

Purposeful and convenience sampling methods were used in choosing the participants. Five Ph.D. students that were classmates and took online Second Language Acquisition Research for Language Teaching were contacted for the purpose of the study. After being informed of the current study's purpose and design components, all participants granted their written consent prior to data collection. They were also informed that their identities and information would be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of the current study. Lastly, the participants were reassured that they could withdraw from the study at any time and were each given a nickname by the researcher to refer to them in the study.

All of the participants are working as English instructors at a university in Turkey. They are all living in cities other than Adana, which is the location of the program. They have never taken an online

course before and their computer skill is medium. Further details about the participants are shown below, in Table 1.

Table 1. Details about Participants

Nickname	Osman	Vahide	Yahya	Yasemin	Micheal
Age	29	30	28	28	35
Nationality	Turkish	Turkish	Turkish	Turkish	German
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Marital Status	Single	Married	Single	Married	Married
Number of Children (If Applicable)	0	0	0	1	2

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

For data collection procedure, semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2016. Four of the interviews were done face-to-face while the other one was done on Gmail Hangout due to physical distance between the researcher and the participants. Great attention was paid to establish a comfortable interview atmosphere so the participants would express their ideas freely and without any interference from outside. The interview guideline was comprised of half structured questions which were prepared by the researcher to collect data considering the overall experience with the online course, the weaknesses and strengths of the course in comparison with face-to-face courses and finally suggestions to improve the course.

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed carefully for analysis. Since the aim of the study was to understand the participants' views, a priori categories were not determined when trying to find recurring and salient themes in the raw data. The researcher included the opinions of the participants under several themes such as the weakness of online or suggestions. To have an eye from outside and ensure inter-reliability, a second researcher revised the raw data, the coding and the results. Finally, the overall results of this study were presented in the discussion part.

There are many studies that show the effectiveness of online learning and how they could be implemented well all over the world, the numbers of the online graduate programs are also increasing in the USA and European countries. On the other hand, Turkey has recently started such programs and there are not many studies about graduate online programs in Turkey. The success and challenge of online graduate programs could be country or culture specific so what makes a graduate online program successful in Turkey may be different from those abroad. Hence, Turkey needs to implement its own study to start discussion about the efficiency and satisfaction of online PhD courses. Hence, this study aims to enrich the literature with detailed explanations of what is actually going on in an online course, what the students' perspectives and satisfaction factors of online courses are in comparison to traditional face-to-face courses. Furthermore, this study aims to provide educators who wish to start online PhD online courses with suggestions about what may fail in an online learning and about what can be done to increase the quality of online courses.

4. Results

The participants' observations about their online course are congruent with each other. Three of them liked the experience and were content with the result. They thought that the online course was convenient, and practical in addition to being flexible in terms of time and place. However, none of

them liked the online course more than face-to face class and agreed with the idea that one day online course would be as beneficial as face-to-face.

The biggest problem with the online course is that the technological tools could not offer a natural human communication. The participants thought discussion in online course was artificial and very robot like. The tools used enables one person to talk at a time while the others listen and wait to comment or ask a question. Meanwhile, students could not see each other, make eye contact, or see others' gestures. Instead, they could only write to discuss a particular topic, which felt like talking to a wall or screen. It was not as satisfying or fun for the students as it would be redundant in a traditional face-to-face class.

> *There is no spontaneous interaction like there is in a face-to-face classroom. Students ask for the right to speak in turn. There is a mechanical atmosphere. Like a robot... It is very difficult to break the routine. I would like to look at the listeners' faces to see their reaction. Then it is important to say the right thing at the right time (Yahya).*

Another weakness of the online course is taking the course on a computer anywhere. This factor is a source of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The students liked the online course since it saved them the trouble of having to travel to another formal setting for the course. Then they could manage class time with their other responsibilities such as their full-time job or family. Nevertheless, it might not be easy for them to focus on the online course since they were not surrounded by a formal classroom setting. For instance, the doorbell or the cell phone could ring, a guest may show up, or someone in the house may stop by for something, which would distract them from going on online session. Also, the student may lose their concentration staring at a computer screen for more than two and half hours. These students have already been using their smart phones or iPods during the day for their work or personal needs so their eyes and brain may get tired. Lastly, the students would log on Facebook, read the news or get busy with other tasks while they seem logged on to course session. There is no instructor present at that time to observe or monitor them. Finally, the students could guess the structure of the course because it is planned strictly in order to cover the topic in the given time. Although online course and face-to-face course share this particular feature, this may lead to loss of interest and getting distracted from staring at a computer screen in an online course since the students know the next step very well and know nothing else will happen.

> *I have a few friends from the online course. Sometimes we talk about the session and I know some of them have trouble focusing. But I am strict and can say that I focus on the course ninety-nine percent. My phone is mute and my children know that I am busy so they do not disturb me (Michael).*

> *You can get distracted online. While your friends are talking, you can find yourself thinking or doing something else. You are not physically in the learning environment. You should be aware of that (Osman).*

The last weakness of the online course is with some students who are not adapted to an online learning environment. Three of the participants noted that students do not need advanced computer skills to be successful in the online course. However, some of the students still struggle with technical issues such as setting up the microphone while some others follow the course smoothly. It takes at least a few weeks for these students to figure out the systems and ceases to be a problem for any of the students in the course. Students should know that it is a new and different learning environment so they need to adjust their way of leaning. They should be aware that they have most of the

responsibility to be successful in an online course compared to a face-to-face classroom. They are on their own and they have control of their learning, so they should be independent, active and self-disciplined.

> *The essential thing to know about online learning is the significance of self-discipline and self-learning. The instructor could help you to a certain degree but you are the one who should be in charge and take responsibility to be interested. A PhD student should know that and regulate her/his way of learning to an online course (Yahya).*

The students also reported that face-to face and online courses share some similarities. First of all, both mediums aim to teach goals of the course. The students could get the same result from an online course. As in a traditional face-to-face course, the students must complete homework, read about the topic and study for presentations. However, there could be students who do not participate in the discussion, follow the professor's instructions or the presentations.

According to the students, online courses could be quite successful depending on some factors. To start off, online course could be used for teaching courses that are selective or not very academic courses which require discussion, analysis and collaboration. Furthermore, PhD students could be orientated to use the necessary tools online and to know their self-learning styles online because students are supposed to be self-motivated, disciplined and interested. Finally, the online course works best with adults who have some educational background, could handle the isolation of online learning and can study on their own.

5. Discussion and Suggestions

The result of the current study shows that the students are overall satisfied with the online course since it is flexible in term of place. In addition, online learning helps the students save time, and it fits better with their schedules. This finding is similar to O'Malley and McCraw's findings (1999) who have found similar results. However, the students do not prefer online learning to conventional face-to-face classroom because of the lack of collaboration, isolation from the formal classroom setting and increasing responsibility of the students to be self-disciplined, and self-motivated. Furthermore, they do not find online courses as effective as face-to-face ones and they do not agree online courses will replace traditional face-to face courses in near future.

Just as in a traditional face-to-face classroom, learning theories should be applied in an online course. For example, according to the constructivist theory, learners acquire knowledge based on their experience and knowledge of their world. Therefore, they should have responsibility for learning and learners should work together while doing a task because they could have different skills and backgrounds.

Accordingly, the result of this study supports that an online learning with its artificial setting and available technological tools may not provide the opportunities for a natural communication among the students that is similar to the one in the face-to-face courses. The students ask for more than just the delivery of information online. In this sense, the current study agrees with the results of a previous study (McLoughlin & Lee, 2009) that suggests technological tools should be selected based on how well they enable a social, authentic exchange and dialogue. It could be said that the success of the online PhD course depends on how well the technological tools used can imitate a real face-to-face classroom.

Another weakness of online course is unfamiliarity with the technological tools and the new self in a new learning setting. The results showed that the quality of online course could be enhanced by orientations at the beginning of the semester. To begin with, the student should get suggestions about the best use of the available technological tools in order not to lose time during the online sessions although they are easy and practical for most students (Hong, 2002). Although the analysis showed that the students think they get the same result from the online course, it should not be confused with satisfaction with the process. The student may lose their motivation during the course or catch what has gone on the session later with frustration. According to White (2006) ecological approach should be taken into consideration in addition to technological approaches. She says that learning should be reconceptualized and the students' reaction to their affordances within the new environment should be researched. Moreover, students could be oriented or supported to know themselves and adapt their way of learning to this new learning medium (Sampson, 2003; Larcomber & McCoster, 2005).

In brief, this research aims to provide the literature with students' perspective on an online Ph.D. course. The results showed that the students are happy with the course although they do not think it is equal to or superior to face-to-face classes in term of quality. On the other hand, it is suggested that the quality of the course could be increased by advanced technological tools that enable a lively, real discussion and the student could be offered an orientation to change into their learning styles. Online courses could be used for extreme situations where the student or the professors cannot be physically present for some reasons. The outcomes of online learning and the face-to face learning are almost the same. However, the quality of online course could be increased with better technological tools, smaller number of students, and orientations. Based on these results, online courses should not be considered a cheap way of delivering information since they require a huge amount of planning and research.

6. Limitation and Further Studies

The first limitation of the current study is the number of the participants. Analysis of responses from three participants is not sufficient to generalize the findings.Another limitation of the study is the validity of the results. Online learning is a dynamic and complex way of learning. Consequently, it must be understood that the results of the current study could be invalid in a very short time due to the developing technological tools and the increasing number of students growing up using them. In his study, Picciano (2009) mentions six pedagogical objectives such as reflection, collaboration and social/emotions for his blended learning model. The study is important in term of understanding that no matter how decent the technological tools or the structure of the course are, the delivery of information online may not be as successful as expected since the learner is not emotionally and psychologically ready to get the knowledge from a computer instead of a classroom setting. The current characteristics and age of PhD students could be replaced by a new generation that is experienced with studying with technological means and consequently they may not consider lack of human contact to be a problem in the coming studies.

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