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Students' Readiness Levels towards Online English Courses in Higher Education[*)]

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Abstract: *The aim of this study is to investigate students' readiness level towards online English courses given in higher education. A Likert type questionnaire was used to explore whether students were ready to take English courses online. The data was descriptively analysed with the statisticalprogramme, SPSS 20. Results showed that most of the students have enough computer and smartphone skills to follow courses online. Despite their skills, most students do not know how to use Learning Management System (LMS) effectively. Moreover, their attitudes towards teaching and learning English online is quite diverse. While some learners favour online instruction, others do not as they think it is ineffective. A great majority of students place a high value on learning English, but they do not know how to design a study plan. Being an autonomous learner is a prerequisite for success in higher education, and the study found that many students at tertiary level lack that trait.*

Keywords: *online courses, distance education, learner autonomy, web-based instruction, e-learning*

Yüksek Öğretimdeki Çevrimiçi İngilizce Derslere Öğrencilerin Hazırbulunuşluk Düzeyleri

Öz: *Bu çalışmanın amacı üniversite öğrencilerin yüksek öğretimde verilen çevrimiçi İngilizce derslerini almaya ne kadar hazır olduklarını ölçmektir. Çevrimiçi İngilizce dersleri almada öğrencilerin hazır olup olmadıklarını ölçmek için Likert tipi anket uygulanmıştır. Veriler SPSS 20 programı ile analiz edilmiştir. Sonuçlar öğrencilerin çoğunun dersleri takip edebilmek için yeterli bilgisayar ve akıllı telefon kullanma becerilerine sahip olduklarını göstermiştir. Bu becerilere sahip olmalarına ragmen birçok öğrencinin Öğrenci Yönetim Sistemi (LMS) hakkında yeterli bilgiye sahip olmadığı ve sistemi verimli kullanadığı saptanmıştır. İngilizce 'nin çevrimiçi öğrenilmesi ve eğitilmesi konusuna öğrencilerin farklı yaklaşımları vardır. Bazı öğrenciler çevrimiçi eğitimi savunurken, bazıları verimsiz olduğunu düşünerek karşı çıkmaktadır. Öğrencilerin büyük bir çoğunluğu İngilizce öğrenmeye büyük önem vermektedir fakat nasıl bir çalışma programı tasarlayacaklarını bilmemektedirler. Yüksek öğretimde başarlılı olmanın ön koşullarından biri öğrenci özerkliğine sahip olmaktır ve üniversite düzeyindeki birçok öğrencide bu özelliğin olmadığı saptanmıştır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *çevrimiçi dersler, uzaktan eğitim, öğrenen özerkliği, web tabanlı eğitim, elektronik öğrenme.*

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I. Introduction

Since there is an exponential increase in the number students and costs of education, a great majority of the universities have started adding web-based courses to their systems. At Atatürk University, which is one of the largest universities in Turkey, for instance, four different courses are given via distance education: Basic English, Turkish Language, Basic Elements of Law, and Atatürk's Principles and Reforms. In addition to course materials provided online, these courses are given live through web-based live instruction system of the university. Therefore, both synchronous and asynchronous e-learning environments are available for students. Course videos and other materials are available on the LMS system for student access throughout the term.

Giving online courses is a relatively new trend in education; it saves time, money, and it brings equal learning opportunities for every student. However, there obviously occurs one significant concern: how ready are the Turkish students at tertiary level for live English courses given online? This study will mainly discuss whether students are ready to take English courses given online at Atatürk University, Turkey. The discussion will be carried out through students' technology literacy, previous learning experience with online instruction, and their learner autonomy levels.

II. Literatüre Review

The greatest impact of technology is arguably on the transfer of information. Language teaching which involves transferring of information does not remain indifferent to the developments in technology. Shyamlee and Phil (2012) claim that the advances in technology especially over the past two decades have created new mediums to learn languages from such as TV, radio, computers, electronic dictionaries, internet, emails, cassettes, videos, and blogs, which have changed the traditional way of learning immensely. Zainuddin and Halili (2015) argue that there has been a shift from conventional education to technology-based education. Peacock (2013) claims that the concept of classroom in language teaching cannot exist in the future as a result of the advantages of the digital revolution.

Ram and Chaudhuri (2012) state that the traditional way of teaching in a classroom has begun to be affected or even replaced by the new mediums of distance education. Computer- assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile assisted language learning (MALL) are two ways to practice distance education. Pacheco (2005) claims that CALL is obtaining the highest position in the field of both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign (EFL) language. Mehta (2012) favours MALL in that it involves the learning practices outside classrooms, exciting learning atmosphere that boosts the morale and motivation of the learners, and less dependence on using personal computers for digital documents. However, not all the scholars favour such learning environment. Distance learning is often criticized in that it minimises interaction between learners. However, as Sarre (2011) notes, growing use of information and communication technology (ICT) enables learners to interact with each other through e-mails, video calls, discussion boards, chatting and talking over the internet. Hubbard (2009) has some

doubts as technology-based learning can be an exciting or a disappointing experience. Using computers and mobile devices require additional competence and skills.

The transformation from traditional to technology-based learning is appreciated by many educators. As stated by Ismail, Almekhlafi, and Al-mekhlafy (2010), irresistible influence of technology can boost the learning process of the students and teachers should be encouraged to integrate technology into classes. Moreover, Viatonu and Kayode (2012) claim that teachers and learners must be familiar with the integration of Information and Communication Technologies available for English language teaching. Shawcross (2004) also claims that technology assisted language teaching encourages the lifelong learning process. 'Lifelong learning' is probably the key phrase in all learning activities. To prevent the things learned in classrooms from remaining only in the classrooms is the ultimate goal of higher education institutions. However, Shawcross (2004) warns the users that Information Technology (IT) should not be considered as a method but as a tool.

Web-based courses are criticised by some language instructors in that success depends too much on the attitude of learners. However, as Kenny (1993) notes, without learner autonomy, any type of education cannot yield desired outcomes. The importance of being an independent learner is more evident in the era of multimedia production. Enfield (2013) notes that the continuous change in the technology requires learners to improve their skills to be able to keep up with the latest developments. So, what is learner autonomy? Little (2007) and many other language practitioners favour the universally acknowledged definition of learner autonomy formulated by Holec in 1981: 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. The importance of being an autonomous learner is more evident in higher education in that learners are often left alone to improve their skills. As Balçıkanlı (2008) emphasizes, learner autonomy is a prerequisite for success in higher education.

Debela (2004) indicates that despite some limitations, web based courses provide many benefits to the learners. Their convenience, flexibility and financial advantages make web based courses popular especially among busy people and people in remote places. One common way to provide web-based courses is video conferencing. Mouhadjer (2013) stresses the practicality of video-conferencing. Students do not need to travel for mutual interaction in learning. Two-way audio and video technology allow users to communicate, to see each other's visual appearance and mimics and to form relationships. Thanks to video conferencing, the most traditional classroom like environment in which participants interact with sound and visual can be created. Obviously these benefits draw the attention of universities in Turkey. More and more universities are offering web-based courses.

III. Methodology

A. Participants

Participants of the study are composed of 80 respondents, 42 of whom are male and 35 of whom are female, while 3 of whom avoid sharing what their gender is. The frequencies of gender are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies of Gender

Gender	Number of Participants
Male	42
Female	35
Missing	3
Total	80

Although participants study at various departments and vocational schoolsa Atatürk University in Turkey, they take the same 'Basic English 1' lesson with almost equal English language competence.

B. Data Collection and Analysis

The information about the readiness of learners towards online courses was gathered through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was prepared over Google Docs, a web-based office suite provided by Google. The university students were not asked to give their real names so that they would feel comfortable in answering the questions frankly. In the data analysis process, the scale items were ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) and the reversed items of the scale were transformed for calculating means. Then, the data was descriptively analysed with the statistical programme, SPSS 20. While higher scores mean that students agree with the items, lower ones express that students do not agree with the items. During the data presentation process, the descriptive including mean, standard deviation, percentages related to the scale items were given.

C. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher by using Google Docs web-based office suite. The link of the questionnaire was available on the website of Distance Education Application and Research Centre, Atatürk University for 40 days between the dates of March, 13th to May, 22nd , 2014. Students were informed through SMS and the questionnaire link was sent to their E-mails.

The survey questions were created in accordance with student and instructor feedbacks gathered throughout the 2013-2014 Academic Year. The questionnaire conducted is composed of three main sections. The first part of the questionnaire is qualitative and it deals with what the students like and dislike most about the courses given online over Web TV. The second part of the questionnaire aims at gathering personal details of the respondents such as their gender, faculty or vocational school, and percentage of attendance to the courses given over Web TV. The third part of the questionnaire, which is quantitative, involves 44 questions to evaluate the effectiveness

of English courses given over Web TV at Atatürk University. The quantitative part of the questionnaire has eight sections that focus on technology literacy previous learning experience of learners with video-based courses, learner autonomy, effectiveness of the program, practicality of the program, review of the instructor and exam questions, review of the course materials, and some other questions that explore students' opinions on how to improve such online instruction. The sections that provide insights into the readiness of learners toward web-based live English courses are technology literacy, previous learning experience of with video-based courses, and learner autonomy. The questionnaire manages to provide detailed information about whether learners are ready to take web-based live courses. The questionnaire can be obtained from the Appendixes.

IV. Results And Discussion

The readiness of learners towards web-based live English courses are explored in terms of their technology literacy, previous learning experience with video-based courses, and learner autonomy.

A. Technology Literacy

Web-based live English courses require some technology competence. In this part of the questionnaire, technology literacy of the respondents are explored. Learners' overall mean in the technology literacy dimension is 2.58 *(SD* = 0.65). This value means that the learners generally agree with the items of technology use. Percentages related to each item of the technology use dimension and their interpretation are shown below.

Table 2. Technology Literacy among Learners

Questions on Technology Use	**Strongly Agree (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Not Sure (%)**	**Disagree (%)**	**Strongly Disagree (%)**
It is fun to gather information by using technology.	28	21	24	1 5	1 2
	(n21)	(n 1 6)	(n18)	(n11)	(n9)
I have got an e-mail address that I use actively.	37	32	7	1 6	9
	(n28)	(n24)	(n5)	(n12)	(n7)
I can easily access and download nation I need over the internet. I can save the files into the folder I created.	38	42	9	3	8
	(n29)	(n32)	(n7)	(n2)	(n6)

I can download the course from the system and e- mail them to my friends.	22 (n16)	29 (n21)	1 5 (n11)	1 8 (n13)	1 6 (n12)
I am quite good at using s.	25 (n19)	43 (n33)	1 4 (n11)	9 (n7)	8 (n6)
I can easily access the course ailable on the system.	26 (n20)	32 (n24)	2 1 (n16)	1 1 (n8)	1 1 (n8)
I have difficulty in watching deos on electronic devices.	11 (n8)	18 (n13)	2 1 (n15)	2 5 (n18)	2 6 (n19)
I face problems related to internet	11 (n8)	17 (13)	1 5 (n11)	2 1 (n16)	3 6 (n27)
I can easily give up as I cannot ology well.	11 (n8)	24 (n 1 8)	2 4 (n18)	2 3 (n17)	1 8 (n13)
I need assistance in computer use.	11 (n8)	22 (n 1 6)	1 9 (n14)	2 2 (n16)	2 7 (n20)

Fun factor increases the motivation of learners. 28% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 21 % 'agreed' and 12% strongly disagreed that they enjoyed gathering information by using technology. (These findings show that though some can be frustrated, the motivation of the majority of the learners can be increased by the use of technology. A great majority of learners (37% 'strongly agreed' and 32% 'agreed') stated they had an e-mail address they often used. 38% of the learners 'strongly agreed' and 42% 'agreed' that they could easily access and download an information they needed over the internet and they could save the files into the folder they created. These findings indicate that the vast majority of the respondents can obtain and store information with ease. The following question provided similar results in terms of technology literacy. Learners were asked whether they could download course materials from the system and email them to their friends. 22% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 29% 'agreed' that they could perform these tasks. 25% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 43% 'agreed' that they were very good at using computers. Another question explores whether the learners could easily access the course videos available on the system. 26% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 32% 'agreed' that accessing course videos was not a very demanding issue. Whether the students had difficulty in watching course videos on their electronic devices was also explored. 26% of the respondents 'strongly disagreed' and 25% 'disagreed' that they have difficulty in watching course videos on their

electronic devices. That is, the majority of the students did not face problems in terms of playing videos on their electronic devices. 36% of the respondents 'strongly disagreed' and 21% 'disagreed' that they faced problems related to internet access. These findings showed that the majority of the learners did not face problems related to internet access. 23% of the respondents 'disagreed' and 18% 'strongly disagreed' that they could get frustrated due to lack of technological skills. The last question explored whether the respondents needed assistance in computer use. 27% of the respondents 'strongly disagreed' and 22% 'disagreed' that they needed assistance.

The overall findings show that most of the students have sufficient technology literacy to follow web-based live English courses. A great majority of the learners have fun gathering information over the internet, they can easily access, download and save information they need. They do not get frustrated when they face technological problems. Most of them are competent in using computers, they are able to download course videos and other materials. However, almost one third of the learners do not know how to use the LMS system efficiently. Although majority of the learners have necessary skills to use technology to take web-based live English courses, it should also be noted that there are also some students who need assistance as they may get lost during the instruction due to their lack of knowledge.

B.Previous learning experience with video-based courses

In this part of the questionnaire, the attitudes of the learners towards video-based English courses were analysed and their previous learning experiences with video-based learning were determined. This part of the questionnaire is of great importance in finding how ready the students are for web-based courses. Learners' overall mean in the learning experience with video-based course dimension is 2.81 *(SD* = 1.13). This value means that the learners generally moderately agree with the items of their learning experiences. Percentages related to each item of the learning experience dimension and their interpretation are shown below.

Table 3. Previous Learning Experience with Video-Based Courses

Questions on Previous Learning Experience	**Strongly Agree (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Not Sure (%)**	**Disagree (%)**	**Strongly Disagree (%)**
I possess an electronic device such as a computer, tablet computer or smart phone to	32 (n24)	37 (n28)	9 (n7)	11 (n8)	12 (n9)
I can learn foreign languages through courses based on videos.	17 (n13)	28 (n28)	17 (n13)	12 (n9)	26 (n20)

It is a good idea to teach English via videos.	28 (n21)	26 (n20)	9 (n7)	18 (n14)	18 (n14)
I had watched video-based courses on some video- sharing websites such as YouTube prior	20 (n14)	32 (n23)	10 (n7)	18 (n13)	20 (n14)

Students need electronic devices such as computers, tablet computers, and smartphones to follow the courses. In this part of the questionnaire, whether the students possess a medium thanks to which they can follow web-based courses was explored. With percentages of 32 'strongly agree' and 37 'agree', the majority of the respondents stated that they had a necessary medium to watch video-based courses. The percentage of students who claimed that they could learn foreign languages through courses based on videos are quite close. 28% of the respondents 'agreed' and 26% 'strongly disagreed' that they could learn foreign languages through videos. 28% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 26% 'agreed', which is the majority, that teaching English via videos was a good idea. The last question of this part of the survey aimed to discover the previous experiences of learners in language learning through videos from some video sharing websites such as YouTube. 32% of the respondents 'agreed' that they had watched language learning videos prior to the courses given at Atatürk University.

To sum up, the overall findings gathered in this part of the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the respondents (32% strongly agreed; 20% agreed) were familiar with and ready for video-based language teaching courses when it started. Although some students (12% strongly disagree; 11% disagreed) lack the electronic devices for language learning and do not favour video-based courses, the majority of them (28% agreed, 17% strongly agreed) think that they can learn English through video-based instruction.

C. Learner Autonomy

It is quite clear that learner autonomy is a prerequisite for success in distance education. In this part of the questionnaire, how good self-learners the respondents were explored. The videos and other course materials are always available on LMS, but programmed study and self-determination are required for this type of language learning as learners are mostly alone in learning. Learners' overall mean in the self-learning skills is 2.72 (SD = 0.97). This value means that the learners generally moderately agree with the items of self-learning. Percentages related to each item of the self-learning dimension and their interpretation are shown below.

Table 4. Learner Autonomy

Questions on Learner Autonomy	**Strongly Agree (%)**	**Agree (%)**	**Not Sure (%)**	**Disagree (%)**	**Strongly Disagree (%)**
Learning a foreign language is very important for me.	57 (n43)	20 (n15)	14 (n11)	0 (n0)	9 (n7)
I think that I can learn a foreign language by myself.	11 (n8)	31 (n23)	19 (n14)	15 (n11)	24 (n18)
I can learn by myself through the learning plan I create.	15 (n11)	19 (n14)	29 (n22)	13 (n10)	24 (n18)
I follow a study plan.	22 (n16)	3 1 (n22)	28 (n20)	1 0 (n7)	1 0 (n7)
I think I can learn English outside the classroom.	19 (n14)	19 (n14)	20 (n15)	21 (n16)	2 1 (n16)
I prefer studying for the exams alone.	26 (n19)	3 9 (n29)	1 5 (n11)	7 (n5)	1 4 (n10)

One of the most key factors for language learning development is the importance of the target language for learners. 57% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 20% 'agreed' that learning a foreign language was very important for them. With percentages of 31 (agreed) and 11 (strongly agreed), the majority of the respondents thought that they could learn a foreign language by themselves. Although the percentages are quite close, 29% of the respondents were 'not sure' and 24% 'strongly disagreed' that they could learn English by themselves through the learning plan they created. These findings showed that the majority of the learners were not competent in creating their own learning plan. Despite their lack of skills in creating a learning plan, 31% of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 21% 'agreed' that they followed a study plan. This finding highlights the importance of encouragement by language instructors. When whether the students think that they can learn a foreign language outside the class was explored, almost identical results were received. As seen in Table 4, the percentages of the responses range from 19 to 21. Based upon these findings, it can be concluded that the learner types are very diverse. There is almost equal number of students who think that they can or can't learn a foreign language outside the classroom. The last question of this part of the survey aimed to provide information about exam preparation. 39% of the respondents 'strongly' claimed that they got ready for the exams alone. 26% of them also 'agreed' that studying for the exam alone was better. Based on these findings, it can

be concluded that the great majority of the respondents favour studying on their own for the exams.

To sum up, this part of the questionnaire evaluated whether students are autonomous leaners. Since being an autonomous learner is essential in online education, this part of the questionnaire provided very significant results. The overall results show that learner types are very diverse. Although a great majority of students give a high value to learning a foreign language, there are many students who think they cannot learn a foreign language by themselves. A great many of them do not think that they can learn English outside the classroom. Most of them favour studying alone and following a study plan, but there are many students who do not think they can learn themselves through the learning plan they create.

VI. Conclusion

One way for universities to deal with the exponential increase in the number students and high teaching costs is to provide courses online. Providing courses online not only cuts some expenses but also provides equal learning opportunities for learners. Therefore, more and more universities are adding web-based courses to their systems. This shift in education raises one concern: are the students ready to take courses online? This study checked the readiness level of students that take web-based English courses at tertiary level. Technology literacy, previous similar learning experience, and learner autonomy of students were explored through a questionnaire to determine how ready the learners are for such English instruction.

The findings of the study showed that the majority of the students (37% strongly agreed, 32% agreed) have necessary electronic devices and enough computer skills to follow the courses online. Technological issues do not discourage them while gathering information. Most of them (22% strongly agreed, 29% agreed) have necessary skills to use LMS. They can view the course materials, download them and print them out for self-study. A great majority of them (38% strongly agreed, 42% agreed) are competent to use the internet for finding further information about the topics they think they do not understand well. The overall findings indicated that most of the students possess enough technology literacy to be able to follow the courses online. However, it should be noted that there are also some students who need assistance as they may get lost during the instruction due to lack of some computer skills. Being competent in using electronic devices does not guarantee an efficient use of LMS. Despite their skills, almost one third of the learners do not know how to use the LMS well. Some training on how to use the LMS efficiently could be offered to the students at the beginning of a term.

A great majority of the students are competent users of electronic devices such as computers and smartphones. Whether they used these devices for learning practice before was explored. The majority of the learners (20% strongly agreed, 32% agreed) had previous learning experience with videos. Even though majority of the students (28% strongly agreed, 26% agreed) think that teaching English via videos is a good idea and 28% of the students agreed that can improve their English through instructional videos, 26% of them strongly disagreed that they can learn English through such instruction.

These findings showed that language instruction via videos is not favoured by all students. If a higher institution is to provide instructional videos to students, there are some issues to be kept in mind. Basal (2015) notes that instructional videos should include animations, quizzes and other features that make learners more engaged and active. Monotonous videos that make learners passive listeners should be avoided. Therefore, how well the course materials are prepared on LMS is a key factor for success.

Computer and smartphone skills as well as students' previous learning experience with such devices contribute to their readiness level for online foreign language instruction. The most important factor that determines readiness level of students for distance education is arguably linked to learner autonomy. Learner autonomy, that is, 'the ability to take charge of one's learning', is considered to be a prerequisite for success in higher education (Bakçıkanlı, 2008). In distance education settings, learners are often left alone with course materials and expected to improve their skills. As a result, being an autonomous learner is probably more needed in online instruction than in traditional classroom instruction.

A great majority of the students (57% strongly agreed, 20% agreed) think that learning a foreign language is very important to them. They give high value to learning English, which contributes to their learner autonomy. However, while 31% of the students agreed that they could learn a foreign by themselves, 24% strongly disagreed. Most of the learners (29% were not sure, 24% strongly disagreed) do not think that they can learn through the learning plan they create. The number of students who think they could learn English outside the classroom and those who firmly believe they could not is relatively close. The overall results showed that learner attitudes towards learning English outside the classroom is diverse and majority of the students are not that autonomous learners when it comes to learning a foreign language.

To conclude, before altering the teaching format of a higher institution, it is worth checking whether students are ready to adopt to that new type of teaching. The inclination towards providing web-based courses are increasing in higher education. This study explored the readiness level of students towards web-based English courses in a higher institution. Results showed that most of the students are competent in using computers and smartphones to follow online courses. Despite their competence, they may need some basic training to use LMS of the university effectively. Almost one third of the students do not know how to use

LMS effectively. Even though a great majority of students place a high value on learning English, they have doubts whether English can be taught and learned online. Even though they are eager to follow one, most students fail to design a study program. Moreover, there are many students who are not autonomous learners, which is prerequisite for success especially in distance education. Each and every learner has different learning styles. Therefore, if a higher institution is implementing or planning to implement English teaching online, it would be wise to work meticulously on designing the content and interface of LMS, which will help students become more autonomous learners.

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