

Opinions of Academic Staff about Distance Education for Common and Compulsory Courses

Pinar CANKAYA

Lect., Namık Kemal University, School of Foreign Languages, Tekirdag, TURKEY, pcankaya@nku.edu.tr

Mehmet Fatih BARIS

Assist. Prof. Dr., Namık Kemal University, Vocational School of Technical Sciences, Tekirdag, TURKEY,

mfbaris@nku.edu.tr

Abstract

Distance education is spreading rapidly day by day in line with the technological developments. Many public and private institutions, especially universities use distance education both for their students and staff training. Turkey's Higher Education Council (HEC), the Higher Education Procedures of the Distance Education and Principles, it is stated that "... only 30% (at most) of courses in formal education programs can be administered by distance learning". Accordingly, many universities use distance education for some curriculum courses, and in particular the Common Compulsory Courses (CCC). This choice brings about the debate. Consequently, while some of the teaching staff are content with it, some criticize the implementation process strictly.

At Namık Kemal University (NKU), Atatürk's Principles and History of Turkish Revolution, Turkish Language and Foreign Language courses as compulsory courses are administered by distance education. A total of 33 faculty members teach the CCC at NKU through distance education. Among these 33 people only 15 of them (45.45 %) has contributed to the study. The teaching staff who is currently using distance education has been preferred as the research group. In this regard, criterion sampling was selected as sampling model. In this study, the opinions of teaching staff about CCC through distance education were examined. In this sense, the questionnaire including both open-ended and close-ended questions prepared by the researchers and analyzed by experts, was sent to the participants via email that includes Google questionnaire form link and word document. The obtained qualitative data were analysed based on content analysis. The results of the study revealed that some of the participants were satisfied with the process, additionally some were found partly satisfied with the disadvantages in mind while some were totally opposed to the distance education for CCC..

Keywords

Distance education; common and compulsory courses; distance learning; teaching staff opinion.

Introduction

With the changing world, technology is showing up very fast and gaining a great interest among people not only for personal but also educational purposes. In this sense, ongoing developments in information and communication technologies have led to the emergence of new terms ranging from online learning to e-learning, distance learning, and web-based learning etc. (Adnan & Boz, 2015). As the world is going through an information age, technology is inevitable in all aspects of life offering great benefits and opportunities. For this reason, distance education is regarded as a promising innovation for higher education institutions as it provides a flexible learning environment (Allen et al., 2010). It is of crucial importance to note here that the responsibility rests on the universities to support their academic staff through in-service seminars and professional development programs in order to increase their motivation and skills (Adnan & Boz, 2015).

Concerning the distance education or learning, a definition was put forward by Gülbahar (2009) as an institutional education activity in which students, teachers and teaching materials in different places gather through communication technologies (Topu, et al., 2011). A comprehensive description was done by Kılıç and Seyis (2014) as rational, contemporary and innovative educational system in which learners and lecturers do not have to be on campus, by means of available computer technology in a completely virtual environment, live, visual, audio and interactive learning is implemented providing learners with opportunity to watch anytime anywhere.

Moore and Anderson (2003) point out that two stages take place in distance education as the pre-active phase for setting goals and designing the curriculum and instructional strategies for the learner. Interactive phase, on the other hand, provides face-to face meeting between the learner and lecturer (Chakanyuka, Chiome & Chabaya, 2008; Topu, et al., 2011). Low quality in education, lack of physical infrastructure, rapid population growth, cultural and economic reasons in some regions are among the reasons for distance education (İşman, 2011; Yalman & Kutluca, 2013). With the integration of new information technology into educational setting, students have chance to have a participatory environment, further to develop their creativity (Turan & Çolakoğlu, 2008).

Distance education offers many benefits for teachers and learners among which variety in the resources available, learning styles employed, self-discovery learning with large amounts of data, the flexibility in time and place, accessing information anytime and anywhere, come forefront (Chakanyuka, Chiome & Chabaya, 2008; Topu, et al., 2011; Kılıç & Seyis, 2014; Yalman & Kutluca, 2013). In short, supporting and facilitating the teaching and learning in general terms the contribution of distance education is summarized as follows: a wide range of materials and variety in learning styles employed in classrooms, a vast amount of course data, fun factor, improving computer literacy skill, various ways for giving feedback. Distance education lets learners learn at their own pace, and further they can control, plan and organize their own learning and goals as well. Additionally, they can self-evaluate themselves (Süer, et al., 2005).

However, the main concern here is to reach a full understanding of how to apply distance education effectively. This issue rests mostly on the teachers, instructors or the ones who applies it. In this context, teacher attitudes towards distance education are accepted one of the most significant

predictor for effective implementation (Ibrahim & Silong, 1997; Berge & Collins, 1995). Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in turning technology into a functional tool as facilitator for learning and teaching as a whole.

As Willis (1996) supports the idea that distance education only succeeds via its academic staffs' efforts. Because whatever technological tool is used, it is the lecturer/tutor who plans the program, develops learning materials, manages and evaluates the program (Chakanyuka, Chiome & Chabaya, 2008; Topu, et al., 2011).

As claimed by Beaudoin (1990) teachers need to develop new skills to achieve all these roles mentioned above such as designing instructional materials and planning the process. For this reason, it is significant to organize training and regular in-service seminars for lecturers to help them acquire technological competence (Chakanyuka, Chiome & Chabaya, 2008; Topu, et al., 2011).

Research investigating distance education vary in many aspects even though the main framework is focused on the effective implementation of it. Therefore, many studies have been conducted for very differing purposes while some of them focus on identifying the teachers and learners' attitudes towards distance learning (Chakanyuka, Chiome & Chabaya, 2008; Topu, et al., 2011; Çetin, Çalışkan & Menzi, 2013; Yalman & Kutluca, 2013; İnan, 2013; İşman, et al, 2004) other studies have been conducted for examining the concerns and problems during implementing process (Özköse, Arı & Çakır, 2013; Geray, 2007 ; Gülbahar, 2009).

Bawane and Spector (2009) carried out their study on the roles of the lecturers in distance education in which they found out that domain expert, evaluator, technologist, counsellor and researcher came forefront as roles. Additionally, Egan & Akdere (2005) claimed that the most significant role was found as guide for learning (Topu, et al., 2011). In aforementioned studies, the problems faced during distance education were demonstrated and discussed (Berigel, Kokoç & Karal, 2012). To this end, the academic staff at Namık Kemal University have been the focus of this research. In this sense, it is initially aimed to explore the opinions of the participants towards teaching CCC through distance education.

Method

Participants

The distribution of academic staff at NKU were explained in terms of gender, work experience, the institution they work in Table 1. A total of 33 faculty members teach the CCC at NKU through distance education. Out of 33 academic staff, 15 of them (45,45 %) have contributed to the study whose ages ranged from 22-29 and 60-over. 46.66 % of the participants (n= 7) were female while male participants consisted of 8 participants (%53,34). The teaching experience of the participants ranked from 1-5 years to 21-over. In terms of the institution they work, 6 of the participants work at vocational school while 5 reported to work at faculties. The teaching staff who is currently using distance education has been preferred as the research group. The primary reason for this sampling is to reach individuals who have a background knowledge and experience on distance education. In this regard, criterion sampling was preferred as sampling model based on voluntary participation.

Table 1. The distribution of gender, experience, academic title of participants

		Number of the Participants
Gender	Female	7
	Male	8
The institution	Vocational school	6
	Faculty	5
	Rectorate	4
Teaching Experience	1-5 years	2
	6-10 years	4
	16-20 years	4
	21 – over	5

Data Collection Tools

The data were collected via two-part questionnaire during the 2014-2015 academic term. The first part included some demographical information such as gender, academic title and the teaching experience of the participants. The second part used in the instrument was developed by the researchers based on the relevant literature and similar studies (Süer, et al. 2005; Adnan & Boz, 2015; İşman, et al. 2004; Çetin, Çalışkan & Menzi, 2013). It consists of 2 close-ended and 5 open-ended questions to find out the way the participants think about teaching CCC through distance education. An expert was consulted for the content validity of the questionnaire and accordingly it was modified with necessary alterations. Based on the expert's views, the questionnaire took its final form.

Collection of Data

To obtain the data, some of the academic staff were given the questionnaire and the detailed instructions to complete it within sufficient time. It was stated that their participation was entirely voluntary; their answers would be used only for academic purposes and kept confidential as anonymous. Eleven of them filled out an on-line version of the questionnaire prepared by google forms which were delivered by e-mail while four of the participants completed questionnaire on paper. The questionnaires were collected in the same time period and under the same circumstances.

Data Analysis

In examining the data obtained in the research study, content analysis one of the qualitative data analysis method was used. The main purpose of content analysis is to uncover the actual facts of the collected data. In this sense, listing the similar themes under particular categories and interpreting them in a reader-friendly way are among the basic steps in content analysis (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2011). At the first place, the researchers scanned the data obtained from open-ended questions in the questionnaire on their own. For each question, common themes were identified. Additionally, these themes were compared to determine the ones which are not suitable and valid. Validity and reliability are accepted as the most important criteria to ensure (or increase) the credibility of the research results (Saban, 2008). In this research study, two researchers and an expert made critical assessments on the validity and reliability of questionnaire and their views were compared. In qualitative studies, if the rate of compliance between experts and researchers' views is 90% and above, a desired level of reliability is achieved (Saban, 2008). The reliability of data is computed as 90% according to the formula put forward by Miles and Huberman (1994) that is to say "Consensus / (Consensus + Dissidence) * 100 , (p) = 27 / (27 + 3) x 100". Moreover, quotations are placed to reflect

the point of views of the participants who were coded with the letter "P" and numbers in the study (P1, P2, P3,..).

Findings

In this part of the study, the research questions were answered in the light of the findings through open and close-ended questions.

For the first question "Have you ever had any experience on distance education (as a learner or teacher)?" nine of the participants reported to have, while six of them did not have any experience.

For the second close-ended question which is "Do you have any kind of knowledge about distance education?" 'I have little knowledge' was rated the most frequently reported (n=9) while five of the participants reported to have enough knowledge.

The participants were asked five open-ended questions and the most frequent answers were listed by the researchers and reported here.

Q3. *Which courses can be taught through distance education according to you?*

Table 2. Participants' most and least reported themes (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Theoretical courses	5
Verbal courses	4
All courses	3
Common compulsory courses	2
Postgraduate courses	1

As demonstrated by Table 2, it was found that the research subjects generally regarded theoretical courses suitable for distance learning. Within this scope, they opposed that practice-based courses should not be implemented through distance learning. Second idea put forward by four participants was verbal courses which do not require any practice. Only one participant thought post graduate courses were suitable for distance learning.

Q4. *Do you find appropriate teaching CCC through distance education?*

This question was answered by the participants in the following way:

Table 3. Participants' most and least reported themes (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Appropriate	7
Partly appropriate	1
Strongly inappropriate	6

As shown in Table 3, most of the participants reported to find distance education appropriate for CCC. However, 6 of them strongly were against distance learning as it was claimed to prevent communication and performance particularly in English courses along with compulsory school attendance.

Q5. *What are the advantages of distance education for Common Compulsory Courses?*

Mostly reported advantages were listed in Table 4 both for teachers and students.

Table 4. Participants' most and least reported advantages for teaching staff (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Time-place independent (anywhere-anytime)	7
Time saving	3
Class management	1
Work load decrease	1

Anywhere- anytime was mostly found an advantage for teaching staff while work load decrease was regarded an advantage by only one participant. On the other hand, three participants stated there were no advantages (Table 4).

Concerning the advantages of distance education for CCC for teaching staff and learners, P11 stated her opinions as follows:

P11: *"For teacher, anywhere- anytime, not having a communication problem which is mostly observed in crowded classrooms, and work load decrease as a consequence of combined groups. In terms of students, there are no absenteeism problem and transportation costs in addition to the opportunity to find various learning materials."*

In terms of student, the advantages were listed as follows in Table 5:

Table 5. Participants' most and least reported advantages for students (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Time-place independent (anywhere-anytime)	7
Time saving	3
Opportunity for review	2
Easiness of accessing the information (content)	2
Autonomy for their own learning	2

Anywhere- anytime advantage which provides learners and teachers with freedom for attending the distance learning was the most frequent one reported by seven participants. 'Autonomy for their own learning', 'Easiness of reaching the information (content)', 'Opportunity for review' were the other advantages supported by the participants.

Q6. *What are the disadvantages of distance education for Common Compulsory Courses?*

Mostly reported disadvantages were listed in Table 6 both for teachers and students.

Table 6. Participants' most and least reported disadvantages for teachers and students (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Lack of communication	6
Decrease in motivation	4
Lack of technological equipment	4
Lack of readiness level of students	2
Lack of effective courses	2
Lack of feedback	1

As demonstrated by Table 6, 'Lack of communication' was the most reported disadvantage for distance education for CCC. Additionally, 'Decrease in Motivation' and 'Lack of Technological Equipment' were reported as disadvantages by four participants. Notwithstanding, 'Lack of feedback' was reported as disadvantage by only one participant.

With regard to the disadvantages of distance education for CCC in terms of teaching staff and learners, some views are as follows:

P2: *"Lack of student active participation to the courses, lack of the development of practical skills, particularly for foreign language course there is no opportunity to produce language through speaking and writing."*

P3: *"It causes a decrease in learner-teacher interaction and the responsibilities of students. Additionally, as every document was recorded in the system including pdf, ppt and video materials the attendance of learners to online courses is very low which is as expected."*

P14: *"Through face to face education, we can have a closer relationship with our learners, but now it decreased sharply. They do not attend the classrooms, moreover they do not study e-course materials."*

Q7. *Have you ever had any unfavourable situations or difficulties while applying distance education for Common Compulsory Courses?*

Mostly reported unfavourable situations or difficulties were listed in Table 7 by participants.

Table 7. Participants' most and least reported unfavourable situations or difficulties (N= 15)

Theme	Number
Technological problems	7
Problems related with the software system	2
Non participation of students	5
Lack of interest in online courses	2

As reported by the participants, the most frequently faced difficulty was related with technological problems along with Learning Management System (LMS). Secondly, the non-participation of students to online courses were rated as other unfavorable situation. Similarly, two of the participants complained about students' lack of interest in online courses.

In terms of the opinions of participants on the unfavourable situations or difficulties while applying distance education for CCC, some participants reported that:

P1: *"System and problems stemming from technological infrastructure hindered the online courses. The lack of attendance of the students to online courses (as no obligation for attendance), the worst of all to teach at in empty classroom."*

P3: *"Technological breakdowns, lack of participation in online courses, no control for absenteeism."*

P6: *"I've had technological problems including the use of camera, microphone, learning management system (LMS) and so on. I encountered many problems during the online course platform."*

P11: *"Technical problems like file loading during online lessons."*

Conclusion and Suggestions

As stated in 2547 Higher Education Act 5 (i), "In higher education institutions, Atatürk's Principles and History, Turkish language, Foreign language are compulsory courses. In addition, physical

education or one of the courses in fine arts is taught non-compulsorily. All these courses are scheduled and applied at least two semesters." In this sense, these courses are taught in all departments of every university within Turkey.

Because of the expansion of distance education in our universities and the determination of the principles and procedures related to distance education in higher education institutions, CCC has been taught through distance education. Teaching CCC through distance education has brought some controversy. While some instructors oppose the idea of teaching CCC through distance education, the way of lecturing, course content and the implementation of online class are the other issues discussed.

In this study, the opinions of academic staff about teaching CCC through distance education were investigated. Almost all of the academic staff took place in the research study reported that they had little or adequate knowledge about distance education. In addition, 9 participants (60%) stated that had previously experienced distance education either as lecturer as or student. The fact that the participants have some kind of knowledge or experience about distance education has enabled the views emerged in the questionnaire to be reliable.

The question "Which courses can be taught through distance education?" was answered by the participants as verbal or theoretical courses. Moreover, 8 participants reported to find appropriate teaching CCC through distance education while 6 of them were found against. These two responses suggest that participants generally approve distance education for theoretical courses. Likewise previous studies (Özköse, Arı & Çakır, 2013), distance education was not found appropriate for practice-based and interaction-based courses in this study.

For the question of "What are advantages of teaching CCC through distance education in terms of lecturer and student?", remarkable answers were given by the participants among which are time and place independence (anywhere-anytime), time saving, decrease in work load in terms of lecturers. A similar result was observed in Kılıç and Seyis's (2014) study and time-place independence was shown among the reasons for distance education. On the other hand, in terms of students; time-place independence, time saving, review opportunity, easiness of accessing information, self-learning were listed as benefits.

The issues can be listed as follows for the question "What are disadvantages of teaching CCC through distance education": lack of communication, motivation problems, lack of technological equipment, low level of students' readiness, lack of effective lectures and weak feedback. Lack of interaction, physical and technical infrastructure problems stand out as problems in previous studies as well (Özköse, Arı & Çakır, 2013). In this study, academic staff emphasized motivation problem, however Topu et al (2011)'s study showed that some of the academic staff expressed themselves as motivated as they took part in a new learning environment.

The academic staff took place in this study are already teaching CCC through distance education. As it is the case, they were asked whether they faced any difficulties or challenges during distance education process. Accordingly, technological difficulties were most frequently encountered problems, also LMS and problems regarding online class were expressed. In addition, nonattendance of students to online classes and their low level of interest were the most frequent concerns of participants, too.

According to the findings, it was concluded that it would be better to develop software and hardware skills of academic staff for teaching CCC through distance education. In this context, implementing a training session of LMS and online class usage for both learners and lecturers before

the academic term can lessen the problems. One of the key components that affect the motivation of the teaching staff is regarding attendance of the students to online classes. In this sense, a certain percentage of compulsory attendance must be applied as a preventive measure. Universities should provide necessary personnel, hardware and software infrastructures before teaching CCC through distance education.

For further research studies, it is strongly suggested that each course such as Turkish Language and Foreign Language can be investigated separately. Additionally, the success of learners in distance education can be also investigated in future research studies.

Note

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