

# World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues

Volume 11, Issue 4, (2019) 230-237



## What are the perceptions of the students about asynchronous distance learning and blended learning?

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### Suggested Citation:

Gunes, S. (2019). What are the perceptions of the students about asynchronous distance learning and blended learning? *World Journal on Educational Technology: Current Issues*. 11(4), 230–237  
<https://doi.org/10.18844/wjet.v11i4.4274>

Received from; July 30 revised from; August 11 accepted from; October 02.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Servet Bayram, Yeditepe University, Turkey.

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### Abstract

This study aims to reveal the perceptions of the students about asynchronous distance learning (ADL) and blended learning (BL). Two groups of freshmen were included in the current study; the first group was taught English through ADL and the second group was taught English through BL which refers to the combination of face-to-face instruction and ADL process in the current study. In order to collect data, seven students were chosen from the ADL group and six students were chosen from the BL group. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 students one by one. The results showed that the students in the ADL group were not pleased with being taught at a distance. On the other hand, the BL process was favoured by all of the BL students included in the interviews.

**Keywords:** Perceptions, distance learning, blended learning.

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This article was accepted from the Ph.D. dissertation by Sevim Günes and supervised by Prof. Dr. Nuray Alagozlu, accepted on April 19, 2018, Hacettepe University, Division of English Language Teaching, Ankara Turkey. I owe my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Dr. Nuray Alagozlu for her invaluable supports.

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## **1. Introduction**

The ways of teaching English as a foreign or second language maintain its popularity in our day. New developments and methods are implemented for reaching the expected achievement in terms of English Language Education. Technology-enhanced language teaching is one of the most popular ways which are used to support and provide English education in our day even though it is named in different ways. What is important in terms of using technology for teaching English as a foreign or second language is to be able to use it in a correct and effective way. As technology is used to increase the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process, both the learners and the instructors should be pleased at the end of an educational process which is supported or provided through technology. Considering this issue, the current study aims to clarify the perceptions of the students who are taught English through asynchronous distance learning (ADL) or blended learning (BL).

## **2. Background of the study**

As stated above, this study aims to clarify what the students think about ADL and BL processes. It is important to clarify what ADL and BL refer to in the current study. Distance education is defined by Perraton (1998) as the 'the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time' (cited in Sherry, 1995). As can be inferred from the definition, it is implemented in two different ways which are named as asynchronous distance education and synchronous distance education. In synchronous distance education, the learners and the teacher are separate only in terms of place, not time; the instruction and communication are provided through technological tools. Asynchronous distance education refers to the separation of teacher and learners both in place and time (Beldarrain, 2006; Carswell & Venkatesh, 2002; Dede, 1996; Isman, 2011; King, Young, Drivere-Richmond & Schrader, 2001; Moller, 1998; Schlosser & Simonson, 2006). For the current study, distance education was implemented in an asynchronous way.

On the other hand, Smith (2001) defines BL which is the other focal point of the current study as combining distance education which is implemented through technology with traditional education or training (cited in Procter, 2003). In this study, BL refers to the combination of ADL and face-to-face instruction. To make it more clear, it can be said that the students of the ADL group were taught English only through asynchronous distance education, but the students in the BL group were taught English in a face-to-face environment which was supported by ADL process.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Setting and participants**

This research was conducted at Dicle University, Faculties of Civil Engineering, Agricultural Engineering and Veterinary. Totally 13 students were included in the study; seven from the ADL group and six from the BL group.

### **3.2. Procedure**

The distance education process has been implemented in an asynchronous way since 2013–2014 academic year at Dicle University. The School Foreign Languages converted the way of teaching from face-to-face instruction into distance education because of some problems such as overcrowded classrooms, mandatory attendance to the classes and the need for catching up with the curriculum in overcrowded classrooms... etc.

A term consists of 15 weeks in average at Dicle University and the English curriculum for the freshmen is based on grammar. For the usual distance education process, the instructors prepare videos related to the grammatical subjects of each week and prepare exercises and tests which may be helpful for the

students while studying for their English exams. All of the videos and exercises of 15 weeks are uploaded to an online system which the students have access whenever and wherever they wish. The instructors inform the students about the ADL process and how they can use the ADL system and give their contact details at the beginning of the term. Then the students take their own responsibility to follow the subjects, watch the videos and doing related exercises uploaded into the system in advance. From that time on, the instructors are responsible for doing exams and provide assistance if needed. The students have two examinations in order to pass the course; the first one is implemented in the middle of the term as a mid-term exam and the second one which is the final exam is implemented at the end of the term.

For the current study, some changes were done in terms of implementing the ADL process. As indicated above, different instructors record videos for the subjects stated in the curriculum; but for this study, the researcher herself recorded all of the videos for 15 weeks in order to get rid of the negative effects of teacher factor. Additionally, a package consisting of a CD which includes all of the videos of 15 weeks, a course map and hard copies for the exercises prepared for the students was delivered to the students who were included in ADL and BL processes. The reason lying behind this was related to a lack of Internet connection or computers for some students. The ADL group followed the classes by means of the videos and exercises; on the other hand, the BL group had 1-hour face-to-face instruction in addition to the ADL process. Both groups had two face-to-face exams as mid-term and final exams.

Indeed, there were 114 students who were included in the ADL process and 31 students in the BL process. Before choosing students from each group to clarify their perceptions about their own learning processes, the autonomy and motivation levels of the students were revealed by means of a questionnaire. In order to reveal what the ADL students think about the ADL process; semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven students chosen from the ADL group and six students chosen from the BL group according to their motivation and autonomy scores. Mixed interview group was organised by choosing students who had low or high motivation and autonomy scores. The reason was to be able to access and voice different opinions. In order to reveal the perceptions of the students, semi-structured interviews were implemented to 13 students at the end of the term.

#### **4. Data analysis and results**

The data were gathered by means of interviews carried out with 13 students; the data were analysed in a qualitative way as following. The students were asked to indicate their personal reflections of their learning processes. The interviews were conducted in a silent environment, and the students were taken to the interview room one by one. All of the interviews were recorded, and the recordings of the interviews were later transcribed by the researcher of the current study. In order to start the content analysis, the transcription of all recordings was read several times to understand clearly what the interviewees wanted to tell. Then, the statements of the students were assigned codes. That is, the same statements articulated by interviewees were given the same codes. For the reduction of the codes, the similar topics were brought together and considered as a whole. There were five main questions asked in the interviews; each question was considered as a data document and the answers of interviewees were analysed separately for each of the main questions. The questions asked in the interviews and the results of the content analysis are as following.

##### **4.1. What are the perceptions of ADL students about the ADL process?**

The students chosen from the ADL group were asked the following questions:

- Do you think that the ADL process is effective when learning English?
- What do you think about the advantages of the ADL process?
- What do you think about the disadvantages of the ADL process?
- Do you want to go on your English education through ADL in the future?
- Do you have any recommendations to have a better ADL process?

The results derived from interviews are presented henceforth. First of all, the students were asked whether the ADL process is effective when learning English or not. Only two of the students indicated a positive perspective on the subject. The students who thought that the ADL process was effective when learning English stated the following reason(s):

- Being able to reach to the instruction videos with no time and place limitations, and On the other hand, five of the interviewees stated that the ADL process was not effective for learning English. Their reasoning behind such a perspective is stated below:
- Preferring face-to-face instruction,
- not being able to learn through technology and
- not willing to learn English due to the presence of ADL in their programme.

In terms of the advantages of the ADL process, the following reasons were stated by the participants:

- The biggest advantage was seen as being able to reach to the lectures wherever and whenever they wished,
- Being able to listen to the lecture again when they did not understand a part,
- Having the comfort of learning at home without experiencing anxiety,
- Having all of the videos of the subjects related to the English curriculum on one platform.

In terms of the disadvantages of ADL process, the following reasons were stated:

- Not having face-to-face instruction.
- Not being able to ask questions when they did not understand the subject. To clarify their reasoning, they were further asked why they refrained from contacting the instructor through e-mail or telephone. They stated that being taught at a distance decreased their willingness and motivation to ask.
- Not having guidance and not being monitored regularly and
- Not possessing a computer to watch the videos.

When the students were asked whether they wished to carry on their English education through ADL in the future, two of the students indicated their opinion as 'yes'. On the other hand, the others did not want to go on with ADL. They also stated that they could receive English education through ADL if face-to-face instruction is integrated into the ADL process.

As a final question, the students were inquired to indicate their recommendations in terms of having a better ADL process. The statements declared were as following:

- Enriching the materials and content of the lectures,
- Having both video recordings of the lectures and face-to-face instruction and
- Being monitored and guided by an instructor.

The results showed that most of the students who received English education through ADL were not pleased with their learning process. They mostly preferred to have the traditional face-to-face instruction either as the only way of receiving education or as a part of the ADL process.

#### **4.2. What are the perceptions of BL students about the BL process?**

The second part of the current study was concerning the BL students' perceptions about their personal learning process. In order to reveal what the BL students think about this process; semi-structured interviews were carried out with six students chosen from the BL group according to their motivation and autonomy scores. This group consisted of students with low or high motivation and autonomy scores. These interviews were analysed in a qualitative way. The students were asked the following questions:

- Do you think that the BL process is effective when learning English?
- What do you think about the advantages of the BL process?
- What do you think about the disadvantages of the BL process?
- Do you want to go on your English education with the BL process in the future?
- Do you have any recommendations to have a better BL process?

The results derived from interviews are given hereafter. All of the six students participated in the interviews reflected that the BL process was effective in learning English. When they were asked why they found the BL process effective, they mostly stated that they both received instruction in a classroom with technological tools and were able to use distance education materials as well. As a result, they had the chance of listening to the subjects at their home, and this method reinforced what they had been taught in the classroom.

In terms of the advantages of the BL process, the following reasons were stated:

- The biggest advantage was seen as having two-sided education: classroom instruction and distance education.
- They stated that receiving immediate feedback on their mistakes or errors in the classroom became helpful to correct those mistakes or errors. The classroom instruction was seen as more effective for corrections, especially their pronunciation mistakes.
- During the lesson hours, they were able to ask their questions which they had thought of while they were studying at home.
- The wider interaction between instructor–learners and learners—learners was provided in the BL process, and according to the students, this affected their motivation in a positive way.
- Students' need a guide to lead them to find the right way in the process of learning English was fulfilled with face-to-face instruction better. It was also added that it could not be possible for them to learn English only through ADL without a teacher actively participating in the process.
- The BL students indicated that students' level of English could be detected by the instructor in a classroom environment, and therefore, the instructor could make an executive decision to follow different teaching paths in accordance with the level of the students in the classroom. In the ADL process, this might not be possible.
- Having instruction in a classroom environment was seen as motivating for the ADL process. It was expressed that with the classroom instruction, students became more willing to watch the videos related to the subjects taught in the classroom.
- Being taught in a classroom environment was seen as advantageous for getting rid of shyness by BL students.

In terms of the disadvantages of the BL process, although most of them stated that there were not many disadvantages of the BL process, the following drawbacks of the method were stated:

- The duration for the classroom time was not enough.
- The curriculum was grammar-based and the subjects dealt with in the classroom were simple.

When they were asked whether they were willing to go on their English education through BL in the future, all of them stated their opinion with 'certainly yes'.

Finally, the BL students were asked to indicate their recommendations for a better BL process.

- They mostly stated that longer classroom hours would be more effective for having activities more frequently and the number of different classroom activity types executed in the classroom could have been higher.
- They stated that different classrooms should be arranged in accordance with the level of the students.
- The BL students indicated that a longer time should have been allocated to practice English during class hours.

As listed above, all of the students in the BL group are pleased with the BL process and they also favoured to go on their English education via BL in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

The data derived from the interviews were analysed in a qualitative way. As formerly stated, semi-structured interviews were implemented in order to reveal students' opinions on their own learning processes. As a result of the interviews, it was seen that because of not having an opportunity of face-to-face interaction and instruction, most of the ADL students were not pleased with the way they were taught English, which was at a distance. This result is consistent with the study of Altunay (2013) which concluded that most of the Open Education Faculty students did not want to receive instruction via distance education methods. Indeed, the displeasure of the students related to the ADL process study has been uttered by the students since 2014–2015 academic year when Dicle University started to give English classes via ADL. The reasons for converting English education from face-to-face instruction to an ADL method were over-crowded classes, mandatory attendance to English classes, having only 2-hour English classes weekly, trying to catch up with the English curriculum and instructors' not obtaining expected successful academic results from teaching process. All these problems influenced the Dicle University School of Foreign Languages to offer the English courses via distance education. In the first year of this shift, the instructors spent their class hours at the faculty that they had been appointed in case there might be students who wanted to contact with the instructor or ask questions related to English subjects placed in distance education system, but throughout that whole academic year, only a few students came to the faculty to seek the support of an English language instructor. As a result, the communication between the instructors and students started to be provided only through technology. Indeed, it may not be accurate to use the term 'distance education' for such a way of teaching, as it is not possible to mention about a complete physical separation of learners and teachers.

Qualitative analysis of interviews with ADL students also showed that most of the students wanted to have face-to-face instruction in addition to ADL, and this leads to building a BL environment. Additionally, ADL students stated that being taught through ADL only affected their motivation and willingness to follow the subjects adversely.

Hughes, McLeod, Brown, Maeda and Choi (2007) also investigated the perceptions of students about the distance learning process by comparing it with traditional instruction. The results revealed that students had more teacher support in distance learning. However, in the current study, most of the students indicated that being taught at a distance decreased their willingness to ask the instructor for support.

As the last step, BL students' perceptions of the BL process were clarified. Six students who were included in both face-to-face instruction and ADL process were included in semi-structured interviews. The results obtained from the qualitative analysis of interviews showed that all of the six students had positive attitudes towards learning English through BL. According to those students, the biggest advantages of the BL process were having the chance of reaching the videos and classroom materials out of the classroom. They added that in addition to face-to-face instruction, being able to receive immediate feedback from the instructor, having the opportunity of interacting with the instructor and other learners were positive outcomes of the method.

A way of teaching English, such as BL, may be what the students want to experience in order to learn a foreign language. They both have an allocated time for face-to-face instruction and guidance, and also a time to study on their own. Teaching and learning a foreign language is a process that should be supported with the formal education. This result is supported with the results obtained from the studies by Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2006), and Balci and Soran (2009). In both studies, the students indicated positive attitudes toward the BL process. It was indicated that students' having the opportunities of accessing both face-to-face instruction and computer-mediated instruction were favoured by BL students. In the study of Balci and Soran (2009), being able to reach the content and materials of the course out of the classroom was seen as a big advantage.

On the other hand, allocating short classroom time and offering grammar-based curriculum were seen as the drawbacks of the BL process. The students in the BL group were the volunteer students who were indeed taught via ADL, so there was not a previously determined classroom time for face-to-face instruction. The management of the faculties in which the BL students were studying declared a classroom time that was appropriate for the main lecture programme of the related faculty.

However, it is important to note that offering a grammar-based curriculum was not the choice of the researcher. It was the curriculum prepared by Dicle University School Foreign Languages to be implemented to all of the freshmen who were taught via ADL. As the tests used for the academic success analyses were implemented as mid-term and final exams, the researcher did not have the right of getting these tests out of the curriculum because of the content imposed by the curriculum as well.

## 6. Pedagogical implications

As indicated in the interviews, most of the students were not pleased to be taught via ADL and they lost their willingness and motivation. The ADL students are given too many responsibilities to cope with; there is not an additional system that can motivate students to watch the videos or check whether the ADL students follow the videos and do the exercises of the related videos weekly. In other words, the lack of instructor involvement in the ADL process affects the students in a negative way. All of these result in displeasure from the point of the ADL students regarding the system.

Considering these issues, the School of Foreign Languages should provide ADL students with more guidance and include more encouraging activities to be in the ADL process. Alternatively, as implemented for the current study, the freshmen may be supported with face-to-face instruction in addition to ADL. As can be understood from the qualitative analysis of interviews with BL students, a BL environment is what the students wish to experience. Also, without compulsory attendance, the students should be included in face-to-face instruction, which should also be supported by technology in addition to the ADL process.

In addition to the methods applied when teaching, the content of the curriculum implemented for all of the freshmen who are taught English via ADL should be revised and extended to cover more skills. In addition to grammar, more activities related to four main skills should be included in teaching contents, and this may be possible with longer classroom hours in a face-to-face classroom environment.

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