

## A GROUP OF ON-CAMPUS EFL LEARNERS' READINESS FOR INTERNET-BASED DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the learner beliefs of a group of on-campus students about Internet-based language learning and the language learning activities that they do on the Internet in order to determine their readiness for a potential distance language learning course. The participants of the study are 62 first year EFL students in a public university in Turkey. A 5-point Likert scale-based questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in Turkish. The participants of the study think that use of the Internet is effective in language learning. Yet, half of the participants favor the traditional classroom environment to learn English. Among the other half, the number of undecided participants is higher than the ones who favour the Internet-based language learning environments. The study shows that the participants use the Internet mostly for translation and learning vocabulary, but they do not use it for interaction and as a knowledge-sharing platform.

**Keywords:** Internet-based language learning, EFL, learner beliefs, learner activities, distance language learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Today, Internet has been widely used in different areas of education. One of these areas is the field of language learning and teaching. Internet contains a large number of free materials at different levels which can be used by language learners or teachers. Internet makes learning more learner-centered (Means and Olson, 1997) and thanks to the Internet, learners have the chance to help learners use language in real communication situations (Wiburg and Butker-Pasceo, 2002). Multimedia facilities and interactive resources make the Internet appealing for learning and teaching (Li and Hart, 1996). Language teachers use a large variety of Web 2.0 applications such as discussion lists, blogs, wikis, social networking, chat rooms, virtual worlds, podcasting, and there are many tools that allow learners or teachers to download audio recordings from the web (Walker et al., 2011). Videos in the Internet and podcasts give the learners the chance to hear authentic language and to be exposed to different dialects. Similarly, learners have the chance to find and read authentic materials and hence to see the use of the varieties of the target language. Using social media allows learners to be involved in genuine communicative activities with native speakers or other learners. Environments such as wikipedia or blogs allow learners to act as the creators of content and to collaboratively construct knowledge. Internet provides a collaborative learning environment and advantages for the learners who cannot be successful in traditional classrooms (Joyce, et al., 1992).

### Aim of the Study

The study aims to investigate the learner beliefs of a group of on-campus Turkish EFL learners about Internet-based language learning and to find out their Internet-based language learning activities in order to determine learner readiness for a potential Internet-based distance language learning environment.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature shows that Internet has many advantages in the field of language learning and teaching. In addition, Internet provides an environment for teaching and learning culture (Cononelos and Olivia, 1993; Singhal, 1997). Kötter (2001) states that CMC (computer-mediated communication) allows quick feedback, storing information, and more opportunity to participate. White (2003) states that CMC allows independent learning supported by interaction. Aydin's (2007) study which was carried out with 115 EFL learners shows that Turkish EFL learners in general have positive attitudes towards the Internet. Coniam and Wong's (2004) study which was carried out with EFL learners in Hong Kong shows that using Internet Relay Chat results in more complexity in the written production of the learners. Sa'd's (2014) study demonstrates that Iranian EFL learners think that accessing a large number of examples in grammar, vocabulary items and so on which may not be available in their textbooks and making traditional classes more motivating are some of the advantages of the Internet. Srichanyachon's (2013) study which was carried out with students at Bangkok university shows that learners have a moderate level of attitude toward using the Internet as a learning tool. Internet use for learning English in general is also moderate. Heirati's (2015) study demonstrates that most of the Iranian teachers and learners have positive attitudes towards using the Internet for language learning.

### METHOD

#### Research Questions

**Participants:** The participants of the study were 62 first year students in the faculty of science and letters in Mustafa Kemal University in Turkey. Their majors were archaeology (17 students), anthropology (16 students), chemistry (1 student), biology (4 students) and mathematics (24 students). The students were taking a face-to-face beginner level English course 2 hours per week when the study was conducted. When the study was carried out, there was a possibility for teaching English courses through Internet-based distance education in the coming years.

**Material:** A 5-point Likert scale-based questionnaire was used to collect data. The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in Turkish. Findings of the Altunay&Mutlu's (2010a) study and other findings in the literature were used while preparing the items. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A included demographic questions such as the majors of the participants and a question on their regular access to the Internet. Section B aimed to investigate the learner beliefs. It included items on participants' level of agreement to the statements about language learning on the Internet. Section C consisted of participants' level of involvement in Internet-based language learning activities. Section D involved an open-ended question.

**Data collection:** The questionnaire was distributed to the participants on their final exam day to obtain maximum participation. The questionnaire was distributed to the participants together with the exam papers. The participants were asked to fill in and submit the questionnaire just after finishing their exams.

**Data analysis:** The number, percentage and mean scores of the answers given by the participants to each item were calculated.

### FINDINGS

Most of the participants stated that they had regular access to the Internet. The items used in the questionnaire and the findings on learner beliefs about Internet-based language learning are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Learner beliefs about Internet-based language learning

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1.It is possible to improve English on the Internet Environment	4	6	6	10	10	16	30	48	12	19
2. Internet is effective for foreign language learning	5	8	7	11	9	15	34	55	7	11
3.Language learning through the Internet is more effective than language learning in classroom	9	15	22	35	19	31	10	16	2	3
4.Language learning through the Internet is more enjoyable than learning in classroom	7	11	25	40	15	24	9	15	6	10
5.Learners can do an activity as much as they can on the Internet	3	5	8	13	10	16	28	45	13	21
6.Thanks to the Internet, learners can study at any time and at any place even if they do not have books	4	6	7	11	11	18	29	47	11	18
7.Finding authentic materials (News in English, online magazines, etc.) on the Internet supports language learning	2	3	9	15	12	19	28	45	11	18
8.Developing awareness towards the varieties of English in various countries (England, USA, Canada, etc.), and in different settings is easier on the Internet compared to classroom settings	4	6	13	21	14	23	21	34	9	15
9. Internet environment contains a large number of materials at any level which meets the needs of different learners	4	6	5	8	16	26	28	45	9	15

10.Studying on the Internet environment is less stressful than classrooms	3	5	10	16	14	23	24	39	11	18
11.Using the Internet to learn a language increases motivation	5	8	10	16	18	29	19	31	10	16
12.Among a large variety of materials on the Internet, it is difficult to choose the one which is suitable to my level and needs	1	2	17	27	18	29	23	37	3	5
13.Audio-visual English language learning platforms allow learners to practice English more often than face-to-face classrooms	1	2	8	13	23	37	22	35	8	13
14.Studying on the Internet means studying alone without getting support from anybody	3	5	14	23	18	29	22	35	5	8

Findings show that the most strongly disagreed item is item 3. Nine participants i.e, 15% of the participants state that they strongly disagree that language learning through the Internet is more effective than language learning in classroom. This shows that 15% of the participants certainly think that language learning in traditional classrooms is more effective than language learning through the Internet. Totally, 50% of the participants favour the traditional environment for language learning. %19 of them favour the Internet environment. 31% of the participants are undecided. The most disagreed item is item 4. Twenty-five participants i.e., 40% of the participants state that they disagree that language learning through the Internet is more enjoyable than learning in classroom. This means that those participants think that classroom-based learning is more fun than Internet-based learning. 39% of the participants state that studying on the Internet environment is less stressful than classrooms. The most undecided item is item 13. Twenty-three participants i.e., 37% of the participants are undecided about whether audio-visual English language learning platforms allow learners to practice English more often than face-to-face classrooms. The most agreed item is item 2. Thirty-four participants i.e., %55 of the participants agree that Internet is effective for foreign language learning. The study shows that the most strongly agreed item is item 5. Thirteen participants i.e., 21% of the participants strongly agree that learners can do an activity as much as they can on the Internet.

The rounded means for each item was found either 3 or 4. If mean is 3, this means in general the participants are undecided about the statement. If mean is 4, this means in general the the participants agree with the statement. The mean for each item is as follows:It is possible to improve English on the Internet Environment (M=4); Internet is effective for foreign language learning(M=4); Language learning through the Internet is more effective than language learning in classroom(M=3); Language learning through the Internet is more enjoyable than learning in classroom(M=3); Learners can do an activity as much as they can on the Internet(M=4); Thanks to the Internet learners can study at any time and at any place even if they do not have books (M=4); Finding authentic materials (News in English, online magazines, etc.) on the Internet supports language learning(M=4);Developing awareness toward varieties of English in various countries (England, USA, Canada, etc.) and in different settings is easier on the Internet compared to classroom settings(M=3); Internet environment contains a large number of materials at any level which meets the needs of different learners

(M=4); Studying on the Internet environment is less stressful than classrooms (M=4); Using the Internet to learn a language increases motivation(M=3); Among a large variety of materials on the Internet (M=3), it is difficult to choose the one which is suitable to my level and needs (M=3); Audio-visual English language learning platforms allow learners to practice English more often than face-to-face classrooms(M=3); Studying on the Internet means studying alone without getting support from anybody(M=3).

The items used in the questionnaire and the findings on Internet-based language learning activities are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Internet-based language learning activities

	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Always	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. I use the Internet to learn English without the encouragement of the teacher	6	10	11	18	32	52	11	18	2	3
2. I try to read the English websites to improve my English	3	5	18	29	27	44	13	21	1	2
3. I use the dictionaries on the Internet	4	6	12	19	21	34	16	26	9	15
4. I use the translation tools on the Internet such as Google translator	4	6	5	8	20	32	14	23	19	31
5. I find and watch videos teaching English on the Internet	8	13	10	16	33	53	8	13	3	5
6. I watch videos and films in English on the Internet	6	10	13	21	19	31	14	23	10	16
7. I watch song videos with subtitles	6	10	12	19	20	32	12	19	12	19
8. I use English learning platforms or teaching sites such as Babbel, Italki.com, LiveMocha	9	15	16	26	28	45	6	10	3	5
9. I practice English with other learners or speakers on the Internet	12	19	16	26	21	34	9	15	4	6
10. I share anything regarding learning English with my friends on the Internet	12	19	20	32	20	32	9	15	1	2

11.I use the Internet to learn English grammar	12	19	11	18	31	50	7	11	1	2
12.I use the Internet to improve my listening skills	7	11	13	21	21	34	16	26	5	8
13.I use the Internet to improve my speaking skills	5	8	14	23	23	37	17	27	3	5
14.I use the Internet to improve my reading skills	7	11	10	16	22	35	18	29	5	8
15. I use the Internet to improve my writing skills	7	11	17	27	24	39	9	15	5	8
16.I use the Internet to learn vocabulary	4	6	10	16	21	34	19	31	8	13
17.I use the Internet to learn pronunciation	2	3	13	21	23	37	18	29	6	10

One of the activities that are not preferred by the participants is item 10, “I share anything regarding learning English with my friends”. %51 of the participants indicate that they rarely or never do this. This shows that learners do not use the Internet as a knowledge-sharing platform. The findings show that 45% of the participants never or rarely practice English with other learners or speakers on the Internet. 54% of the participants state that they use the translation tools on the Internet such as Google translator and 31% of the participants state that they always do this. The reason for this is that the participants’ proficiency level is low so they rely on the translation tools. 44% of the participants state that they use the Internet to learn vocabulary.

For the item ‘I use the translation tools on the Internet such as Google translator’, the rounded mean is 4. This shows that the participants do this activity often. The rounded mean for the other items is 3, which means that the mentioned activities are sometimes done by the participants.

The open-ended question was: Would you like to learn English through an Internet-based English language teaching program without a face-to-face classroom environment, which is prepared by experts and which makes self -study easy (e.g, an environment which includes videos in English, vocalizations, animations or summaries of grammar topics, etc.)? Write your answers and explain the reasons.

Examples from the participants’ answers are as follows:

Yes, I’d like to because I don’t feel motivated in classroom. I cannot follow the lesson because I talk to my friend who is sitting next to me.

Yes, I’d like to because of visuals. They make the topic easier to understand.

Yes, I’d like to learn vocabulary there and practice them in sentences.

No, I prefer face-to-face learning.

Yes, I want because in the Internet environment I can write without hesitation.

Yes, but we need a teacher to learn, at least to guide us.

Certainly, I think it will be more effective than traditional classrooms.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The participants of the study think that use of the Internet is effective in language learning. Half of the participants prefer traditional classrooms to Internet-based learning environments. When a comparison is made with Altunay&Mutlu's (2010a, 2010b) studies, which showed that the participants favoured traditional classrooms, it can be concluded that traditional classroom has been losing its popularity as time goes on.

The study shows that learners who prefer the Internet-based language learning environment favour it because of the following reasons: It allows a more individualized environment compared to traditional class, where students can work on their own and are not distracted by other students. Visuals makes learning effective and the Internet allows learners to learn more vocabulary . It also allows shy learners or learners having anxiety to produce more language in a relaxed environment. This finding supports Warschauer's (1996), Beauvois' (1997), Perez' (2003), Roed's (2003), and Altunay&Mutlu's (2010a) studies. Yet, the learners feel the need to be guided by a teacher. If Internet use become more widespread and learners use Internet-based language learning programs and see that they are effective, the number of learners who prefer the Internet-based language learning may increase. Yet, as the participants state, teacher guidance may be needed. As indicated before, 41% of the participants state that they rarely or never use English learning platforms or teaching sites. This finding is similar to the findings of Wang & Hemsley's (2008), Altunay & Mutlu's (2010a), and Altunay's (2013) studies. This may be because the learners are not aware of those sites or they use translation tools on the Internet rather than real language learning platforms. They look for practical ways of dealing with language problems through using the Internet for translation rather than to learn the language itself and to interact with others.

The study shows that the learners use the Internet mostly for translation and to learn vocabulary. Learners do not use the Internet as a knowledge-sharing platform. However, learners need an environment where they collaboratively construct knowledge and produce output through genuine interaction with each other. Therefore, teachers should encourage learners to use the Internet not only for translation and learning vocabulary but also to collaborate, interact with each other and share knowledge. Teachers can make suggestions about the ELT sites on the Internet where learners can interact with each other or native speakers, and they can create groups on social media and use them as learning platforms.

In conclusion, the participants believe that Internet is effective for language learning. However, when we ask their preferences half of them still favour traditional classrooms. 31% of the participants among the other half is undecided. The reason for this can be that learners did not have a regular and systematic use of the Internet. If they are involved in a systematic Internet-based course, those undecided participants may have more certain ideas about the effectiveness of the Internet-based language learning. Learners have some familiarity with using the Internet for language learning but the range of activities they perform seems limited. Therefore, if learners take an Internet-based distance language learning course, there must be platforms which include a wide range of activities and which allow interaction and knowledge sharing. It can be concluded that learners need orientation and teacher guidance to obtain maximum benefit from an Internet-based language course.

This study was carried out with learners who took the English language course face-to-face and who used the Internet for language learning with their own initiatives. In other words, the students did not have a systematic Internet-based language learning experience which was forced by the curriculum. Further studies could be carried out with learners who have taken both face-to-face and Internet-based distance language courses. Finally, technological factors such as learners' access to the Internet and the tools that they use to access the Internet should be investigated since they affect the effectiveness of the Internet-based learning.

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