



Possible Problems in Online Foreign Language Teaching at a University Context

Erkan Yüce ^{a *},

^a Dr., Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Nevşehir, 50300, Turkey

Abstract

Online language teaching and learning contexts yield both merits and drawbacks for professionals and learners. Within this scope, this study investigated the views of instructors on possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to language skills, language areas, and classroom management. A questionnaire consisting of 19 items was developed and implemented by the researcher. The study involved 30 language instructors selected purposefully at a state university context in Turkey, and they took part in the process voluntarily. They had varying educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) were used in analyzing the data. The results were reported descriptively at the end. The results demonstrated that the participants supported online foreign language teaching with regard to language skills and language areas while they considered some aspects problematic in relation to classroom management. Finally, limitations of the inquiry and implications for future studies were discussed based on the results.

© 2017 IJCI & the Authors. Published by *International Journal of Curriculum and Instruction (IJCI)*. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY-NC-ND) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Keywords: online; foreign language teaching; problems

1. Introduction

Our age has been under profound transformations in terms of technology and its reflections in human life. Traditional language teaching and learning environments have witnessed many innovative ways of teaching and learning recently. Nowadays, conventional language classes, where a language teacher conducts his/her classes face-to-face with a group of learners, can easily be carried into online language classes. Computer technologies enable language learners to reach desired language classes although they are in different cities, countries, and even in other continents. Films, radios, televisions, laboratories, audios, and videotapes can be exemplified among the

* Corresponding author name. Tel.: 0 (384) 228 10 00
E-mail address: erkanyuce@nevsehir.edu.tr

earliest forms of technology tools used in language education contexts, and these were followed by computer applications and interactive tools (Cunningham, 1998; Iandoli, 1990). Understanding potentials of a computer may pave new ways to use its applications in teaching and learning. Multimedia, the Internet, and other distance learning tools are extensively benefited by both language learners and teachers to promote efficiency in language learning (Liu, Moore, Graham & Lee, 2002). Today, learners can easily reach computer technologies wherever they are; and, Tanyeli (2009) states that higher education institutions are the ones, which are more occupied by online language teaching programs than the other institutions. Economic reasons are among the most effective ones contributing to the online delivery. There is an increasing demand in online and blended courses as financial pressure forces universities to adapt their traditional instructional methods into the Web-based education environments. The demand for online programs and courses has increased in three quarters of the institutions due to economic reasons (Allan & Seamen, 2014). At this point, it becomes crucial to relate the technology-based tools implemented in educational settings to pedagogical bases in order to benefit from them. For this reason, a deep analysis of the Web-based instruments has become very important in language teaching and learning to avoid their deficiencies (Felix, 2003).

Technological evolutions have brought several disadvantages into question in its brief history along with their benefits as well. Prosperous potentials of computer-based language classes may cause fear among some language teachers (Bax, 2003). Additionally, leaving class practices conducted in real classroom environments for online meeting points to cover lessons may not be pedagogically productive (Anderson, 2008). Furthermore, online language learning and teaching materials may become burdens for the professionals, who are not informed appropriately on technical issues. Also, face-to-face learning contexts can provide more nonverbal aids together with visual and auditory ones for language learners (Axtell, Fleck & Turner, 2004). Forming and facilitating trust among members of learner groups might be problematic due to insufficient face-to-face interaction deficiency (Peñarroja, Orengo, Zornoza & Hernández, 2013; Meskill & Anthony, 2014). Not only language teachers but also language learners may fail in efficient efforts regarding language learning due to the different underlying principles of online language learning environments. Language professionals who want to touch upon mental state of a language learner need to highlight a point for that learner (Tomasello, Carpenter & Liszkowski, 2007). Similarly, learners' attentions may become another problematic issue in online language learning environments since mutual interaction may not cover other features of communication such as gestures and mimics. Likewise, technical problems closely connected with deficiencies of computers or the Internet itself comprise a large part of the disadvantages in implementation of online language classes, which can cause crucial learning problems (Jolliffe, Ritter & Stevens, 2001).

Online teaching has become very common for the departments which are located outside main campus areas. Online classes seem very practical for these departments, which need to be carried out with the same syllabus especially for the first grade students, when there are time and instructor restrictions. The efficiency of online foreign language classes becomes a prominent issue for both departments and university students in order to keep up with the standard education. This study can be regarded as an important one because it investigated the foreign language (FL) instructors' views on possible problems of online foreign language teaching at a university context. Accordingly, three research questions of the study are:

1. What do language instructors think on possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to language skills?
2. What do language instructors think on possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to language areas?
3. What do language instructors think on possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to classroom management?

2. Literature Review

Technology has enabled language professionals to transfer traditional classroom materials to online environments without taking into consideration the pedagogical requirements regarding effective teaching and learning, which may cause some obstacles for both learners and professionals. The researcher discussed some recent research studies to reflect the present situation of online language learning and teaching at this part.

Ushida (2005) investigated the context of an online language course in second language learning in connection to learners' motivation and attitudes. The participants were found to have high anxiety levels when compared to the learners of traditional environments at the beginning of the academic year. This may result from their insufficient familiarity with online language learning environment. Nonetheless, the learners' motivation and attitudes in terms of second language learning were found to be comparatively positive and stable within the online language classes. The results also showed that motivated language learners of online language classes studied systematically and productively in order to do their best to improve their foreign language skills. Similarly, Liu et al. (2002) noted that most studies provided enthusiastic and positive attitudes of language learners in terms of technology applications in second language learning area. Additionally, Coffin and McIntyre (1999) mentioned that the learners' perceptions on the Internet might contribute to their motivations to accomplish the Internet-based learning tasks. Also, the Internet self-efficient learners may accomplish the activities in a learning environment on the Web better than those who are

not efficient enough (Tsai & Tsai, 2003; Yang & Lin, 2010). Also, Ritter (1993) stated that most of the students (92%) were in favor of learning vocabulary items through a computer program instead of following traditional ways. Likewise, Sung and Yeh (2012) tried to explore university students' perceptions in Taiwan context with regard to technology application in learning foreign language. The results showed that the learners were satisfied with technology implementations in foreign language classes due to their practicality, availability when needed, and their adjustability to language levels. Hou (2015) investigated the perceptions of the student teachers on an online learning experience. The results demonstrated that participants recognized presence of others to support and transform their language learning through online communication. Online communication also provided multidimensional roles for the learners by paving way for a professional community.

However, several problems of online language teaching were reported in the literature as well. Negative results which stem from software problems in online language classes were reported. The application of word processing software may cause undesired consequences. As a result, language learners may turn to paper-based revisions instead of using computers (Hyland, 1993). There are also some negative results in relation to application of word processing programs in classrooms. For example, Hyland (1993) advocated that students tend to revise more with pencil and paper than on a computer. Likewise, Russel and Curtis (2013) indicated that the learners' online learning satisfactions were negatively affected in large classes. The interactions either student-student or student-instructor in terms of quantity and quality were quite limited as larger classes negatively affected the instructors in forming an efficient language learning environment with considerable numbers of participants. Additionally, Shaw (2013) recommended language programs designed for small group of learners in online forums both to encourage learners and to support student-student interactions to enhance performance in learning. To sum up, literature indicated both positive and negative sides of language teaching and learning in online classes. The present study investigated possible problems in online foreign language teaching with regard to language skills, language areas, and classroom management.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The instructors of a state university who had teaching experience on online language teaching were the participants of this study. They took part in the study voluntarily to share their experiences. There were 15 male participants and 15 female participants. 23 participants (76.6%) graduated from a department of English Language Teaching (ELT),

7 participants (23.3%) graduated from a department of English Language and Literature (ELL). 14 participants (46.7%) had a bachelor's degree, 15 participants (50%) had a master's degree, and 1 participant (3.3%) had a PhD. 11 participants (36.7%) were between the ages of 25-29, 16 participants (53.3%) were between the ages of 30-34, 2 participants (6.6%) were between the ages of 40-44, and 1 participant (3.3%) was 45 years old. The participants had also different profiles in terms of their professional experiences. 11 participants (36.6%) had teaching experience between 1 and 5 years, 16 participants (53.3%) had teaching experience between 6 and 10 years, 1 participant (3.3%) had teaching experience between 15 and 19 years, and 2 participants (6.6%) had teaching experience for more than 20 years. The following table (Table 1) summarizes demographic features of the participants:

Table 1. *Demographic Profiles of the Participants*

Features	Category	n	%
Sex	Female	15	50
	Male	15	50
	Total	30	100
Department	ELT	23	76.7
	ELL	7	23.3
	Total	30	100
Educational Background	Bachelor's D.	14	46.7
	Master's D.	15	50
	PhD.	1	3.3
	Total	30	100
Age	25-29	11	36.7
	30-34	16	53.3
	35-39	-	-
	40-44	2	6.6
	Total	30	100
Experience (Years)	1-5	11	36.7
	6-10	16	53.3
	15-19	1	3.3
	20-above	2	6.6
	Total	30	100

3.2. Data Collection Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of 19 items was designed to collect the data. Each item in the questionnaire included five options for the participants to choose from i.e. strongly agree (SA), agree (A), undecided (U), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). The questionnaire items focused on possible problems of online foreign language teaching in relation to language skills, language areas, and classroom management. Eight items (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8) investigated the views of foreign language instructors on possible problems of online foreign language teaching related to language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Three items (9, 10, and 11) investigated the views of foreign language instructors on possible problems of online foreign language teaching in connection to language areas (vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar). Last eight items (12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19) tried to find out the views of foreign language instructors on potential problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to classroom management (technical, interaction, concentration, insufficient experience, attention span, the Web tools, technological equipment).

3.3. Piloting and Data Analysis

Three experts in different branches of educational sciences were consulted in the designing process of the questionnaire items. Initial implementations of the questionnaire were regarded as pilot study. Additionally, a computer program was used to calculate internal consistency of the questionnaire items. The results yielded high level of internal consistency, 0,889 ($0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.9$). The researcher implemented descriptive statistics to analyze data obtained from the questionnaire. Frequencies (f) and percentages (%) were calculated through a computer program. The results were reviewed by another expert in the area. Finally, the results were reported.

4. Results

Possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to language skills were investigated in the first research question. The results obtained from the questionnaire items (1, 2, 3, 4) showed that most of the instructors were in favor of online foreign language teaching in terms of receptive language skills (reading and listening), and they disagreed with the idea that online foreign language teaching cause problems. 83.3 % (f=25) of the instructors did not think that online foreign language teaching is problematic for reading skill (1st item), and 73.3% (f=22) of the instructors did not think that online foreign language teaching is problematic for reading skill at ESP classes (2nd item). Furthermore, 90% (f=27) of the instructors did not think that it is difficult to improve students' listening skills through online foreign language classes (3rd and 4th items). However, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th items in the questionnaire showed that the

percentages, which support using online foreign language teaching in FL classes in terms of productive skills (speaking and writing), were lower than the percentages obtained for receptive skills. 63.4% (f=19) and 53.3% (f=16) of the instructors thought that it is possible to improve students' speaking skills through online foreign language classes (5th and 6th items) while 53.3% (f=16) and 56.7% (f=17) of the instructors thought that it is possible to improve students' writing skills (7th and 8th items). The following table (Table 2) summarizes the results as follows:

Table 2. *Possible Problems of Online Foreign Language Teaching with Regard to Language Skills*

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
	<i>f</i>					
1. It is difficult to improve students' FL reading skills through online language classes.	-	4	1	19	6	30
2. It is difficult to improve students' FL reading skills related to their subject areas (English for Specific Purposes/ESP) through online language classes.	-	7	1	16	6	30
3. It is difficult to improve students' FL listening skills through online language classes.	-	2	1	14	13	30
4. It is difficult to improve students' FL listening skills related to their subject areas (ESP) through online language classes.	-	2	1	14	13	30
5. It is difficult to improve students' FL speaking skills through online language classes.	3	6	2	14	5	30
6. It is difficult to improve students' FL speaking skills related to their subject areas (ESP) through online language classes.	3	8	3	10	6	30
7. It is difficult to improve students' FL writing skills through online language classes.	2	10	2	10	6	30
8. It is difficult to improve students' FL writing skills related to their subject areas (ESP) through online language classes.	2	10	1	12	5	30

Possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to language areas were investigated in the second research question. 80% (f=24) of the instructors did not think that online foreign language teaching cause problems in teaching vocabulary (9th

item). 70% (f=21) of the instructors did not think that online foreign language classes are problematic in teaching grammar (10th item), and 76.6% (f=23) of the instructors supported online foreign language classes in teaching pronunciation (11th item). The following table (Table 3) summarizes the results as follows:

Table 3. *Possible Problems of Online Foreign Language Teaching with Regard to Language Areas*

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
	<i>f</i>					
9. It is difficult to teach new vocabulary items to students in FL through online language classes.	-	4	2	13	11	30
10. It is difficult to teach FL grammar through online language classes.	-	6	3	15	6	30
11. It is difficult to teach FL pronunciation through online language classes.	2	2	3	13	10	30

The last research question dealt with possible problems of online foreign language teaching with regard to classroom management. Firstly, 15th item (instructors' lack of experience, 83.4%, f=25) had the highest percentage among the other expected problems. Secondly, technical problems (12th item; 60%, f=18) stemming from insufficient technological equipment (19th item; 66.7%, f=19), which may lead students to be unable to concentrate on (14th item; 63.4%, f=18) activities in foreign language classes were considered very problematic by the instructors. Thirdly, the instructors thought that they may have problems in face-to-face interactions with students (13th item; 56.7%, f=17), and the face-to-face interactions among students (17th item; 56.7%, f=17). Lastly, they thought that they may have problems in using the Web tools (18th item; 56.7%, f=17); but, they did not think that they may have problems in paying attention to activities during classes (16th item; 46.2%, f=14). The following table (Table 4) summarizes the results as follows:

Table 4. *Possible Problems of Online Foreign Language Teaching with Regard to Classroom Management*

Questionnaire Items	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
	<i>f</i>					
12. I may come across some technical problems in an online foreign language classroom.	5	13	5	6	1	30
13. I may have problems in face-to-face interaction with my students in online foreign language teaching.	5	12	5	5	3	30

14. Students may have concentration problems in online foreign language learning.	5	14	5	4	2	30
15. Instructors' lack of experience can cause problems in terms of effective teaching in online foreign language classes.	11	14	3	1	1	30
16. I may not keep my attention longer in online foreign language classes.	4	6	6	10	4	30
17. Online foreign language classes decreases the interaction between teachers and students.	5	12	7	3	3	30
18. The Web tools can cause some problems in online foreign language learning and teaching.	-	17	6	5	2	30
19. Technological equipment is not sufficient in the classrooms for online foreign language classes.	8	12	2	4	4	30

5. Discussion and Conclusion

All in all, this study investigated the perceptions of foreign language instructors on the possible problems of online foreign language teaching at a university context in Turkey. Primarily, the study concluded that most of the participants did not think that online foreign language teaching may cause problems in terms of language skills. However, they were more in favor of teaching receptive skills (reading and listening) than teaching of productive skills (speaking and writing) when we compare the results. The results for language skills were in line with findings in the literature. For example, Liu et al. (2002) mentioned promising effects of computer-based applications on language learning. Secondly, most of the language instructors did not think that online foreign language teaching may cause problems in terms of language areas. This result supported the previous studies in terms of vocabulary acquisition (i.e. Ritter, 1993). Lastly, most of the language instructors thought that online foreign language teaching may cause classroom management problems in terms of technical issues, face-to-face interaction, concentration, efficiency of teaching, the Web tools, and technological equipment. The result approved previous results indicated in the literature on classroom management in terms of student-to-student interaction and instructor expertise (i.e. Russel & Curtis, 2013), technical expertise (i.e. Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007), interaction (i.e. Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Yang & Lin, 2010), the Web tools (i.e. Chacón-Beltrán, 2014; Yang & Chen, 2007), technological problems (i.e. Juhary, 2012), effective teaching (i.e. Zamari, Adnan, Idris & Yusof, 2012). In conclusion, after considering the results related to the possible problems of online foreign language

teaching in relation to language skills, language areas, and classroom management; the language instructors did not regard online foreign language teaching as problematic in teaching language skills and language areas while they regarded it as problematic in terms of classroom management in relation to some issues.

6. Limitations and Implications

This study was limited to a small number of participants who had teaching experiences on online foreign language teaching within a university context. Also, data collection tool of the study was a mere questionnaire designed and implemented by the researcher. Similarly, this study was carried out within the context at one of the public universities in Turkey. For further studies, large numbers of participants from different universities can be included in research inquiries by designing and implementing multiple data gathering instruments.

Classroom management problems which stem from technical problems may be handled by technologically well-equipped classrooms. Departments can provide training activities for language instructors to overcome unexpected simple technical problems. Choosing well-designed and pedagogically efficient tools on the Web which have interesting interfaces for learners can result in longer attention span. Furthermore, cooperative learning activities through innovative and user-friendly multimedia tools can promote collaboration among learners.

References

- Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2010). *Class differences: Online education in the United States*. Babson Survey Research Group Report. The Sloan Consortium. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529952.pdf>.
- Anderson, T. (2008). *Theory and practice of online learning*. Edmonton: Athabasca University Press.
- Axtell, C. M., Fleck, S. J., & Turner, N. (2004). Virtual teams: Collaborating across distance. In C. L. Cooper & I. T. Robertson (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology*, 19, 205–248. Chichester: Wiley&Sons.
- Bax, S. (2003). CALL—past, present and future. *System*, 31, 13–28.
- Coffin, R. J., & Macintyre, P. (1999). Motivational influences on computer-related affective states. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 15, 549-569.
- Chacón-Beltrán, R. (2014). Massive online open courses and language learning: The case for a beginners' English course. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 141, 242 – 246.
- Cunningham, D. (1998). 25 years of technology in language teaching: A personal experience. *Babel: Journal of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teacher/Associations*, 33(1), 4-7.
- Felix, U. (2003). An orchestrated vision of language learning online. In Felix, U. (Eds), *Language learning online. Towards best practice*. Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.

- Hampel, R., & Stickler, U. (2005). New skills for new classrooms: Training tutors to teach languages online. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 18(4), 311 – 326.
- Harrison, R., & Thomas, M. (2009). Identity in online communities: Social networking sites and language learning. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society*, 7(2), 109 – 124.
- Hou, H. (2015). What makes an online community of practice work? A situated study of Chinese student teachers' perceptions of online professional learning. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 46, 6-16.
- Hyland, K. (1993). ESL computer writers: What can we do to help? *System*, 21(1), 21-29.
- Iandoli, L. J. (1990). CALL and the profession: The current state. *French Review*, 64(2), 261-272.
- Jolliffe, A., Ritter, J., & Stevens, D. (2001). *The online learning handbook: Developing and using web-based learning*. UK: Kogan Page Limited.
- Juhary, J. (2012). Online comments for language learning: A pilot study. *Procedia Technology*, 1, 297-302.
- Liu, M., Moore, Z., Graham, L., & Lee, S. (2002). A Look at the research on computer-based technology use in second language learning. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 34(3), 250-273.
- Meskill, C., & Anthony, N. (2014). Managing synchronous polyfocality in new media/new learning: Online language educators' instructional strategies. *System*, 42, 177–188.
- Peñarroja, V., Orengo, V., Zornoza, A., & Hernández, A. (2013). The effects of virtuality level on task-related collaborative behaviors: The mediating role of team trust. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(3), 967–974.
- Rogerson-Revell, P. (2007). Directions in e-learning tools and technologies and their relevance to online distance language education. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 22(1), 57-74.
- Ritter, M. (1993). "That's us! A book about ourselves" An EFL project with intermediate learners, incorporating the computer as a tool. *CALICO Journal*, 10(4), 57-69.
- Russell, V., & Curtis, W. (2013). Comparing a large- and small-scale online language course: An examination of teacher and learner perceptions. *Internet and Higher Education*, 16, 1–13.
- Shaw, R. S. (2013). The relationships among group size, participation, and performance of programming language learning supported with online forums. *Computers & Education*, 62, 196–207.
- Sung, D., & Yeh, C. Y. (2012). Perceptions of using online technology in language education: An interview study with Taiwanese university students. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 51, 405–410.
- Tanyeli, N. (2009). The efficiency of online English language instruction on students' reading skills. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1, 564–567.
- Tomasello, M., Carpenter, M., & Liszkowski, U. (2007). A new look at infant pointing. *Journal of Child Development*, 78(3), 705–722.
- Tsai, M. J., & Tsai, C. C. (2003). Information searching strategies in web-based science learning: The role of internet self-efficacy. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 40(1), 43-50.
- Ushida, E. (2005). The role of students' attitudes and motivation in second language learning in online language courses. *CALICO Journal*, 23(1), 49-78.

- Yang, Y., & Lin, N. C. (2010). Internet perceptions, online participation and language learning in Moodle forums: A case study on nursing students in Taiwan. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2, 2647–2651.
- Yang, S. C., & Chen, Y. J. (2007). Technology-enhanced language learning: A case study. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 860–879.
- Zamari, Z. M., Adnan, A. H. M., Idris, S. L., & Yusof, J. (2012). Students' perception of using online language learning materials. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 67, 611 – 620.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the Journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (**CC BY-NC-ND**) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).