



Evaluating Attitudes towards METU-Online: a Study of Undergraduate Students of FLE Department

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed the rapid expansion of technology into the social branches of life and education is not an exception. From primary schools to universities, computer technologies are frequently employed not only during formal training or school time but also off-school time, enabling instructors to share the documents necessary for the courses, promoting communication between teachers and students, etc. (Lonn & Teasley, 2009). As a result, Learning Management Systems (LMS) which are "integrated computer systems" have ever-increasingly been employed and adapted for the purpose of teaching and learning at universities (Coates, James & Baldwin, 2005: pg 19). METU, one of the forerunners of higher education institutions in Turkey, established its own learning management system, METU-Online, about 17 years ago in order to address the e-learning needs of METU students and academicians. The fact that METU-Online has been frequently used since then requires researchers to seek out the challenges and benefits of using METU-Online, the degree it functions. Therefore, this paper reports on a study conducting qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine to what extent METU-Online is used in the Department of Foreign Language Education (FLE), and to investigate the attitudes of students toward it. One questionnaire was administered as a data collection tool to 198 undergraduate students. The findings gathered from the open ended questions of the survey reveal that students come up with twenty two suggestions on how to improve METU-Online for teaching and learning purposes in the FLE department. In addition, it is found out from the statistical analysis of the four point likert scale type questions that the students both believe in the necessity of METU-Online and the efficiency of using METU-Online actively. However, they believe that some progress should be made considering the responses they gave, for METU-Online to be more practical, user-friendly, applicable and interactive. The researchers believe the results obtained from this study to be beneficial in terms of seeing the needs of the students in the use of an LMS based upon their responses. Therefore, the current study can help METU and the other education institutions which have been using a learning management system or thinking of employing one to develop perspectives.

1. Introduction and review of literature

Instructional technology is one of the topics of hot-debates not only in Turkey but also all around the world. People are asking questions about to what extent technology should be fused with education, whether students should use all the facilities technology offers, or to what extent students should be engaged with technology off-school time etc. While millions of questions are being asked about the role of technology in education, each and every day a new implementation takes place. Web-based learning is one of the candidates to the final phase of technology integration into the educational settings.

It is well-known that the internet and information technologies are being extensively used in educational environments (Liaw, Huang& Chen, 2007). Additively, the online learning course websites are getting more popular (Chang & Tung, 2008). In the field of learning and teaching, with the immediate advancement of instructional technology, Learning Management Systems (LMS) have gained a reputation in its extensive usage for the purpose of delivering education. Learning Management systems are "integrated computer systems" (Coates, James&Baldwin, 2005:pg. 19) and "one of the major technological innovations to support e-learning programs" (Coşkunçay& Özkan, 2013: pg. 13). Lonn and Teasley (2009: pg. 686) define LMSs as "web-based systems that allow instructors and/or students to share materials, submit and return assignments, and communicate online". Thanks to LMSs, instructors could save time and energy to process the classwork in a fruitful way by uploading class materials, reading handouts, assessing papers (Pittinsky, 2004). LMSs are "enterprise-wide and internet-based systems, such as WebCT and Blackboard that integrate a wide range of pedagogical and course administration



tools" (Coates, et al., 2005: pg. 19). Coates, et al. (2005) adds a further point by stating that systems like LMSs could be used to build virtual learning environments in a campus, even to form whole virtual universities creating a new perspective not just for universities with updated systems but also for traditional campus-based universities. Pituch and Lee (2006) argued that being motivated and willing enough to make use of web-based learning systems carries utmost significance to avoid the hindrances that would prevent the practical and effective usage of LMS. For this reason, it is critical to reveal the factors that influence instructors and learners' ways for adoption of web-based learning systems in higher education in terms of facilitating their use.

METU-Online is an educational tool which was designed to satisfy learners' and instructors' e-learning needs. METU-Online website can be visited for further information about NET-ClassR (https://online.metu.edu.tr/help/help_english/Help.html). NET-ClassR is the learning management system of METU. It was introduced in 1997 by METU Informatics Institute and has been frequently used since then. In the spring term of the academic year, 2012-2013, nearly 25000 students and 1500 instructors are registered to it. (<https://online.metu.edu.tr/netclassR/viewTermInfo.do>). NET-ClassR enables students and instructors to communicate synchronously and asynchronously in an educational environment. NET-ClassR offers various tools which help learners and instructors follow and manage their courses: Lecture Notes, Syllabus, Schedule, Forum, Online Exam, Announcements, Tips, Links, Contact, Assignments, and Gradebook.

In an environment in which METU-ONLINE is excessively used, the researchers, also as the students of METU have recognized the need to reveal the learners' perceptions about the use of METU-Online in the department of Foreign Language Education (FLE) at METU.

Based on the urgent call for such a research, this study tried to find preliminary answers to these following questions:

- 1) To what extent is METU-Online utilized by the students in the department of FLE at METU?
- 2) What are the attitudes of the FLE students toward benefits and challenges of using METU-Online?
- 3) What are the suggestions of the FLE students about how to improve METU-Online for teaching and learning purposes in the department of FLE?

2. Methodology

In this study, the mixed methods research was used as it involves both quantitative and qualitative data since it provides an in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon which is the subject of the study and compensates for the drawbacks of the only one method to validate the findings (Sandelowski, 2003).

2.1. Participants

The number of the students who participated in this study is 198 in total, namely 46 freshmen, 49 sophomores, 43 juniors and 60 seniors. The age of the participants range between 18-29; 145 of them are female and 53 are male.

More than half of the participants ($n=109$) use computers between 5-10 years while almost half of the participants ($n=89$) have been using METU-Online between 2-4 years. In terms of the daily computer usage, more than half of the participants ($n=113$) make use of the computers between 2-4 hours. Additively, more than half of the participants ($n=128$) mentioned that they have not taken any formal training on computers. Almost half of the participants ($n=87$) mentioned that they make use of METU-Online between 1-3 times weekly.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

In this study, the data gathering tool is a questionnaire which enables the researchers to collect a huge number of data "in a systematic and disciplined way" from a large number of participants (Dörnyei, 2007: 101). The comprehensive questionnaire includes three sections: questions about students' demographics, statements on use/benefits/challenges of METU-Online, questions regarding how to improve METU-Online. The section on the use/benefits/challenges of METU-Online is designed via four-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1 to 4. The scorings for the statements were as follows: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1.



2.3. Data Analysis Methods

In this study both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analyzed. Qualitative data via open-ended questions were coded by the two researchers in order to increase the reliability of the analysis. The quantitative data collected from questionnaire were statistically analyzed using SPSS, version 17.0. Descriptive statistics were calculated. For the four-point Likert scale questions in the use, benefits and challenges part, frequency was computed.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The Reasons Why Participants Use METU-Online

The majority of the students stated that they are using METU-Online to learn about lecture notes. The least mentioned reason of METU-Online use is 'to contact with the instructors' since only two of the students mentioned it.

3.2. Frequency in the Use of METU-Online Tools

Among all the tools, 'lecture notes' (99,5%), 'assignments' (64,7%), and 'gradebook' (65,7%) are the ones used actively by the participants while 'syllabus' (36,9%), 'schedule' (23,7%), 'forum' (19,7%), 'online exam' (2,5%), 'tips' (3,5%), 'links' (13,6%) and 'contact' (15,6%) are the ones which were not used frequently by the participants.

The statistics clearly show that the number of the tools ($n=3$) that the students actively used is less than the number of the tools ($n=7$) that they did not use frequently.

3.3. Participant's responses to use/benefits/challenges of METU-Online

In order to explore students' attitudes toward METU-Online, the survey questionnaire which has four-point likert type questions is divided into three subheadings: 1) The extent METU-Online is utilized, 2) benefits of METU-Online, and 3) challenges of METU-Online.

3.4. The extent METU-Online is utilized

The responses of the participants mostly indicated that they used METU-Online actively for the lessons although they accepted that the extent of their METU-Online use depends on the factors such as the tool ($p=95, 9$), the instructor and the course content ($p=97,0$). Since the participants stated that they frequently used METU-Online, they agreed on the fact that METU-Online causes technical problems. It is clearly seen from the students' responses that the students kept using METU-Online for their courses although they were disturbed by the technical problems.

3.5. Benefits of METU-Online

The responses of the participants indicated that the students mostly believe METU-Online makes their life easier since it is easy to operate ($p=98, 0$), adapt ($p= 82, 3$) and upload materials ($p= 81, 3$), it saves time ($p=85, 4$), promotes autonomy ($p= 79, 3$), provides chances to the students to have access to the class materials at any time ($p=96, 5$) and have a better organized course content ($p= 89, 9$), and addresses the various needs of the instructors and students ($p= 85, 4$). However, students mostly did not believe that METU-Online is beneficial in terms of providing a chance to reach the instructors whenever they feel the need ($p= 61, 6$).

Obviously, the majority of the students believed in the necessity of METU-Online for practical reasons although they made a note of the need for improvement in contact issues between the instructors and students.

3.6. Challenges of METU-Online

The responses of the participants illustrated that 89,4 % of the students feel competent and comfortable using the functions and services provided by METU-Online. Therefore, the students mostly thought that they do not need further technical assistance to use METU-Online ($p= 88, 3$). Most of the students disagreed on the fact that the technical, practical and physical issues cause problems and prevent them in fulfilling their purposes sufficiently. To give an example for each of these issues, the students did not think that METU-Online is not updated enough for their course purposes ($p= 63, 2$) and there is a navigation



problem among the tools ($p=68$, 6). Additively, in terms of the layout, the students did not support the idea that METU-Online is not attractive and motivating ($p=62$, 6). Nonetheless, a wish for an attractive and colorful design is one of the suggestions for improving METU-Online that students specified. Also, the students did not agree on the idea that METU-Online puts a physical distance between instructors and students ($p=79$, 3).

Obviously the use of METU-Online did not raise significant difficulties to more than half of the students; although the researchers were in an expectation that the number of the students who believe that METU-Online created challenges for their purposes would be higher.

3.7. Participant Suggestions for How to improve METU-Online

As for the results of the questions for how to improve METU-Online, the following paragraph includes the mostly-specified suggestions among the participants:

The participants stated that all the instructors should use METU-Online ($n=44$) and should have formal training on how to effectively use METU-Online ($n=16$). Also, METU-Online should assist in solving the technical problems which occur during the operations conducted in METU-Online ($n=12$) and should be much quicker in carrying out the operations ($n=44$). The participants ($n=54$) indicated that the system, METU-Online should disable the download of the course syllabus every time the students click on a course. This suggestion attracts the great deal of attention since it is the one mentioned by the highest number of participants. It is also suggested that METU-Online should be used more interactively or METU-Online should enable chat as an option so that the participants can share their ideas ($n=21$). Since some of the zipped files cannot be opened from time to time, this technical problem should be solved ($n=17$) and METU-Online should enable its users to upload videos ($n=51$). As this is one of the items mentioned by the significant number of participants and METU-Online already provides this option to its users, it is clear that the participants are still not knowledgeable enough to have a full control on METU-Online tools to make an effective use of it. Additively, METU-Online should not automatically log out ($n=23$) and it should either give more time to its users before it logs out or it should give permission to the participants to log out from the system by themselves. Also, in terms of layout METU-Online should have an attractive and colorful design ($n=46$). The participants should be notified by the system, METU-Online every time a new file is uploaded by the instructors so that the participants immediately know about the updates related to their courses ($n=32$). Lastly, the participants ($n=14$) would prefer all the exam results to be announced at METU-Online.

In a nutshell, the participants made suggestions which aimed at improving the system, METU-Online, improving the instructors' and their own usage of METU-Online.

4. Conclusion

The present study tries to investigate perceptions about the LMS of Middle East Technical University, namely METU-Online, at a departmental level, in the Department of Foreign Language Education, by including FLE undergraduate students. The answers to the following questions: to what extent METU-Online is utilized, what students think about using METU-Online, about challenges and benefits of its use were collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered to 198 students from each grade in total. The questionnaire was composed of four-point Likert scale items with which participants agreed or disagreed and open-ended questions which were formulated to gain participants' suggestions for how to improve METU-Online. The results indicated that while METU-Online is frequently used by the department of FLE students, its tools like online-exam, tips, contact and schedule were not used at all. In general, participants believed that it is quite beneficial although it has some challenges which need to be dealt with. As for suggestions on how to improve METU-Online, participants stated numerous proposals, varying from its design which can be more attractive and colorful to a demand for a notification system which will inform students when a new document is uploaded; from requests for teachers' training for effective use to more effective technical assistance.

Although the present study claims that it was carried out at the departmental level, there is a limitation which should be highlighted. Since this study was conducted at FLE department, to obtain more comprehensive input, further studies can be replicated in other departments in order to seek for their own needs and suggestions for METU-Online.



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