

Designing and Implementing WebCT-Based Courses Online: Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTT) Model

Abstract: Many undergraduate and graduate courses in Open Education Faculty (OEF) of Anadolu University in Turkey have been delivered for over the two decades. Most of distance programs have been distributed via traditional distance education approaches and philosophy, such as TV and radio programs, printed materials, etc. Today, however, OEF has been switching the Internet, World Wide Web (WWW) and their related technologies as a new understanding and approach in distance education. Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTT) is a new interactive distance learning model for Preservice English Teacher Program in OEF. The pilot study has been conducted to integrate courses into the curriculum. For that reason, *Introduction to Linguistics* and *Language Acquisition* courses in the DELTT Project were chosen to deliver via WebCT during the pilot project. This is an action research which has two main purposes: 1) to introduce the curriculum, instruction, learning materials and self-testing system of the two WebCT-based courses, and 2) to analyze and describe the online workers' (administrative faculties, technology support staff and online instructional designers) experiences, perspectives and feelings toward WebCT-based distance online education in the DELTT Project.

Introduction

Anadolu University Open Education Faculty (OEF) was established in 1983 in Turkey. Not only the numbers of students and expert human resource, but also the numbers of distance education programs have been enormously growing in this Faculty since then. OEF has over 700.000 distance students today. Thousand experts from different areas such as content areas, computer sciences, instructional design etc. design and deliver distance courses for Turkish students in Turkey and in Europe as well as in Turkic States.

Various undergraduate and graduate courses in OEF have been delivered for over the two decades. Most of distance programs have been distributed via traditional distance education approaches and philosophy, such as TV and radio programs, printed materials, etc. Today, however, OEF has been switching the Internet, World Wide Web (WWW) and their related technologies as a new understanding and approach in distance education. Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTT) is one of these new distance programs in OEF. This program provides an open, flexible and two-way interactive distance online learning model for Preservice English Teacher Programs in Turkey.

Anadolu University collaborated with Turkish Ministry of National Education to start a four-year degree program in English Language Preservice Teacher Education. Consequently, this project was begun in the 2000-2001 school year. DELTT has also an additional capacity to train Preservice English Language Teachers with a low cost in a short time. This project is in its third year with its well-organized and successful organization, and gradually growing the number of the learners (Ozkul and Durmusoglu-Kose, 2002). The DELTT project provides a great opportunity to learners who cannot attend regular traditional classrooms in English Language Education. This project also improves both the quality of English Education Programs in Turkey and the number of people who would like to speak English. The DELTT project provides a successful distance education model which is a flexible, open and distributed system to train professional ELT teachers in Turkish Education System. The learners in this project attend their first two-year courses at the distance education centers of Anadolu University in each city and collaborate with English professional staff who has a contract with Anadolu University in these cities. At the third and fourth year of this project, the learners take their courses via traditional distance education. The main focus of the DELTT Project, however, is to distribute all classes in this project via online in the near future.

Purpose

This is an ongoing action research which has also two main purposes: 1) to introduce the curriculum, instruction, learning materials and self-testing system of the two WebCT-based courses, and 2) to analyze and describe the online workers' (administrative faculties, technology support staff and online instructional designers) experiences, perspectives and feelings toward WebCT-based distance online education in the DELTT Project. Firstly, the researcher gives information in detail about the designing and implementing processes of these two WebCT-based distance online courses, *Introduction to Linguistics* and *Language Acquisition*, in the DELTT Project. The researcher also shares her insights with the distance online design society of this project. Secondly, the researcher briefly explains the action research portion of this research. She will write and publish her action research report at the end of the Spring Semester 2003 to share the findings with the stakeholders in this research.

The Study

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework serves a philosophical basis for WebCT-based courses in the DELTT project which faculty and staff come together as an online society to investigate and analyze the goals of the project and the nature of virtual learning and teaching for achieving worthwhile educational goals. Virtual learning is an active process of obtaining, evaluating and producing knowledge whereas online teaching a dynamic, social activity and goal-oriented process in the DELTT Project. As one of online designers in this project, I espouse the exposition of new forms of online learning and teaching through experimenting with a virtual milieu by collaborating with each WebCT team in the DELTT Project. We are all practitioner and work together to embrace the constructivist perspective to design, deliver and evaluate the two WebCT-based courses.

The Participants

There are four main teams in the DELTT Project to distribute the courses via WebCT: 1) online faculty, who are moving from the face-to-face traditional classes to the virtual teaching milieus, 2) distance online instructional designers, 3) computer and technical support staff, and 4) administrative faculties. There are totally 28 faculties from AOF and the Preparation School of Anadolu University in this research. Twenty of them are distance online instructors, two of them are distance online designers, two of them are computer and technical support staff, and finally the last four are administrative faculties. The well-qualified collaboration among these faculties and staff, and working synchronously together under this program are tremendously imperative to be successful. The researcher will also analyze and define the experiences, perspectives and feelings of the faculties in the DELTT Project. This can also help the faculty evaluate not only themselves, but also the WebCT-based courses to produce better distance online classes in the next coming years.

Research Instruments and Data Analysis

This research has been operated within an action research approach to analyze and define the experiences, perspectives and feelings of the WebCT faculty and staff in the DELTT Project towards the use and integration of WebCT into their curriculum. The analysis of the phenomenon has been ongoing process which was started at the Fall Semester-2002 through written the final report. The data analysis process in this study is analytic and recursive to inform further decisions on data collected. It also is pre-structured, flexible and open to the discussions with the stakeholders and reviews of related literature. The researcher of this study is one of the distance online designers in the DELTT Project. At the first meeting with the faculty and staff in the DELTT Project, the researcher explained the study and the research process in detail. Furthermore, to establish an appropriate relationship between the researcher and online faculty and staff, she let them know about her role as a researcher in this study.

The data in this study will be collected from three different sources: 1) Pre-survey and post-survey, 2) observations and 3) interviews. At the beginning of the project, the pre-survey scores will be analyzed to find out the phenomenon, the WebCT faculty in the DELTT project towards the use and integration of WebCT into their curriculum, and then used to identify and select the interview participants. To make precise statements about the data from the pre-survey, frequency distribution will be used in this study. To investigate the experiences,

perspectives and feelings of the WebCT faculty and staff in the DELTT Project towards the use and integration of WebCT into their curriculum, the researcher modified the pre-survey during the pilot studies. This survey is a paper-pencil survey. The pre-survey will also be given as a post-survey at the end of the Spring Semester-2003.

The purpose of collecting the observational data in this study is to describe the research setting. In other words, the value of these observational data in the study is to understand WebCT-based teaching and learning activities and interactions as well as collaborations. There are three main purposes to collect observational data: 1) to understand the context within its natural environment, 2) to obtain firsthand experience from the participants and 3) to provide detailed information on delivering via online milieus from the WebCT in this project.

The researcher will separately interview with each faculty in this program twice. The first interviews will be done at the end of the Fall Semester 2002 whereas the second interviews will be at the end of the Spring Semester 2003. All interviews will be taped-recorded. Also, the researchers will take paper-pencil notes consisting primarily of major points during both focusing group sessions. It is estimated that each session will last approximately 60 minutes. The researcher will taped-record each working group session as a focus group. Distance online teams in DELTT have been getting together twice each month to discuss what they have done so far and how they can solve the problems and pitfalls they have already met during the design and deliver the distance online courses.

Designing and Delivering Two Courses of DELTT Project via WebCT

Introduction to Linguistics and *Language Acquisition* courses in DELTT project had been chosen for the pilot project that these two courses have been distributed via WebCT. Each course has two course coordinators, four instructors and four assistances of each instructor. To design, implement and evaluate these two online courses, there is a huge collaborative effort between course owners and course designers and as well as online designers. The purpose of collaboration develops all materials associated with the courses, including all readings, self-tests for assessments, standardized bulletin board and chat sessions, educational guides for studying each chapter.

The courses preparation process has several steps. We use a five-stage process to facilitate the collaborative development of these two WebCT-based courses. These stages include: 1) Syllabus, 2) content (preview, guiding questions –before, while and after reading-, discussion questions, self-test), 3) communication tools (chat and structured bulletin board), 4) related links and 5) frequently asked questions. The course instructors as content providers get ready their text materials, and then email them to the online designers who work collaboratively and interactively to deliver courses via WebCT. One of the distance online designers is native speaker in English and his focusing area is English as Second Language (ESL) whereas the last one is Turkish and she is interested in integrating new technologies into curriculums.

Course delivery involves active collaboration and interaction between instructors and one or more learners to complete a course productively. To facilitate virtual communication, these two courses use a combination of reading materials, self-testing and mentored instruction which involves chat and structured bulletin board to promote collaboration not only between instructors and learners but also among learners. There are a number of well-known problems associated with distributing of these two WebCT-based courses. These problems have a three-folded: 1) Internet bandwidth issues, 2) level of engagement and motivation of online learners and 3) technology support.

Introduction to Linguistics and *Language Acquisition* online courses in DELTT project are only the supplement classes in the Fall Semester 2002-Spring Semester 2003, so that the attendance of these courses is not required as coursework. Before beginning of the first school year, the learners in these two virtual classes were informed that they could voluntarily attend the online courses in the DELTT Project, and when they got their IDs and passwords to access WebCT courses, the learners could register themselves into the classes. 432 learners out of 800 did register the WebCT-based courses. *Introduction to Linguistics* class had 210 whereas *Language Acquisition* course had 222 learners in the Fall Semester 2002. The learners in these two courses were shipped a WebCT guide booklet, a logon ID and password, and a course CD with their books. Learners can access the supplement course materials, attend chat sessions and visit discussion board through WebCT. They can also use their printed books and syllabus in order to read the materials and work their programs. By shipping CDs, the online learners were able to study offline and avoid bandwidth problems.

Introduction to Linguistics and *Language Acquisition* online courses in DELTT project were designed based on asynchronous distance education approach. Each of these two courses has totally 25 units during the Fall Semester 2002-Spring Semesters 2003. Online courses are delivered on a specific day, Sunday, each week. At the start of the first course, the instructor sent a welcome message and gave online course information in detail to the learners. Based on the questions asked in *discussion questions* section in WebCT, learners can post their own messages on the bulletin board. This provides every learner to interact with technology but also other learners from all Turkey. The online learners are also invited to attend real-time chat sessions at regular intervals in each weekday. The learners study their ways through the online course reading materials (syllabus, content, related links and frequently asked question) and self-test. When they complete a portion of the materials, they can either post their discussion topics on the bulletin board or join the chat session to share and exchange the knowledge with their online-mates and instructors.

The important feature to this online educational process is the use of mentoring throughout the virtual classes. Online mentor help the learners understand the course materials in depth and solve their course related problems via real-time chat sessions and the bulletin board postings. Email is not used in these two courses, because each course has a huge number of the learners, so that it is impossible for online instructors to answer each of them in a short time. Discussions boards are monitored daily by the instructors and their assistances to define possible and common learning problems and asked questions to establish the *frequently asked questions*. Chat sessions are held at two hours every day during the online courses. The main purpose of these chat sessions is to communicate with the learners and help them if they have an instant questions. Chat sessions are mostly effective in increasing the learner interests and help the learner share their experiences, perspectives and feelings with other virtual learners and their instructors. The instructors led both discussion board and chat sessions provide the learners with opportunities to think deeply and solve their course-related learning problems as well as understand and respect other learners' ideas on the same discussion topics. Consequently, the bulletin board and chat sessions are essential collaboration characteristics of these two online courses.

Conclusions

The two courses, *Introduction to Linguistics* and *Language Acquisition*, in the DELTT Project distributed via WebCT have resulted high-quality standards in the course delivery. The main problem in this pilot project is the digital divide: A few learners in these online courses have their own computer with a good Internet connection. The instructors and their assistances can access to the courses during the daytimes at the computer center of the project., because most of the instructors do not have their own computers at home. These instructors feel that they are very overloaded with their other duties, but they are very happy to be a participant in virtual milieu. Although there is no single solution that all of the problems associated with delivery of online courses, the administrative team are trying to find a good grant or money sources to help the instructors and learners get their own computers in a short time.

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