

## **Academic Success in Terms of Distance Education, Middle Georgia State University Example: Does More Lecturer-Involvement Mean a Higher Academic Success Level?**

**Sevim Güneş, Dicle University**

**Abstract:** The history of online learning in English goes back to the 1960's. However, while it's been around a long time, not all online learning is created equal: some manifestations are more successful than others. The reason that some online learning is more successful seems to have to do with the degree of instructor-student interaction and the level of in-process formative assessment. These two factors lead to, and are by-products of, greater engagement between the instructor and student, which seems to correlate with better learner outcomes.

**KEYWORDS:** English language teaching, technology, collaboration, distance education, academic success, asynchronous distance learning, formative assessment.

### **Introduction**

The history of using computers for language education goes back to 1960s; a project related to English language teaching was implemented by Atkinson and Suppes in 1967 (Atkinson 1972). After starting to use computers for language instruction, some other projects, namely, The Computer-Assisted Learning Exercises for French (CLEF), The Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations (PLATO) and Time-Shared Interactive, and Computer-Controlled Information Television (TICCIT) were built for the same purpose (Tafazoli and Golshan 2014).

In our day, computers are used for language instruction in a wider way. It is known that the main purpose of using technology for education is to increase the effectiveness of teaching processes in different ways. By means of technology, the learners may reach the information in a faster and easier way, learning materials can be used in a more practical way and the collaboration between the students and the instructor and also among the students may be made easier through technology. Distance education, which is widely implemented all around the world, is a way of instruction that is provided through technology and presents the educational opportunities to the

learners without place and/or time limitation. Being able to reach the information and having education without place and/or time limitation is an advantage for the learners' side; also, being able to implement a teaching process for a big population at the same time is seen as advantageous and practical for the instructors. Distance education can be implemented as a single way of an educational process or it can be used to support traditional instruction, but what is important in terms of distance education is to be able to implement it in an effective way. There are various studies which aim to reveal the effectiveness of distance education in terms of academic success. As a result of the meta-analysis of 232 empirical studies Bernard et al. (2004) state that there are some studies showing that distance education is more effective than face-to-face instruction and there are some other studies which reach the opposite result. It is surely beyond doubt that there are some challenging factors affecting the effectiveness of a distance education process. Bower (2001) indicates those factors as institutional support, the change in interpersonal relations, and quality. As the effectiveness of a teaching processes can be evaluated in terms of students' achievement levels, the current study aims to reveal the academic success level of the students who study at Middle Georgia State University and take the English Composition I class in summer school.

### **The Background of the Study**

The onset of the current study is based on the results of Güneş (2018), which compares asynchronous distance learning (ADL) and blended learning (BL) in terms of learner autonomy, motivation and academic success. Güneş (2018) was conducted at a state university in Turkey. In that university, English is taught through ADL for the freshmen of most of the faculties except for Medicine, Law and Dentistry, and the curriculum is mostly based on grammar. In the ADL process, the instructors prepare videos related to the grammatical subjects stated in the curriculum and course materials which may be helpful for students' self-study and exam preparation. The videos and all of the course materials—which include grammar tests and reading and listening exercises—are uploaded on an online system. At the beginning of the academic year, the instructors give information to the students about the online system in a face-to-face environment. From that time on, the students watch the videos and study the course materials as they wish; the instructors do not check whether the students watch the videos or not; they do not give assignments. The

responsibility of running the learning process is given to the students. They have a mid-term exam in the middle of the term and a final exam at the end of the term. All of the students have to attend the exams in a face-to-face classroom environment. Percentages of 40% from the midterm exam and 60% from the final exam are used to determine the students' final grades which indicate their achievement or failure. 60/100 is accepted as the passing criteria. The results of Güneş (2018) revealed a very low level of academic success for the freshman students taught English through ADL; only 15.8% of the 114 students were accepted as successful at the end of the term. This result directed the researcher to observe and analyze a different model of asynchronous distance education, because it is revealed through research studies that distance education may be more effective than or as effective as face-to-face instruction (Bernard et al., 2004).

The starting point of the current study involved the questions 'What is done differently in terms of distance education?' and 'How does it affect students' academic success levels?' The current study was conducted at Middle Georgia State University (MGA), which is a public university with five different campuses in the state of Georgia, United States of America. Having different campuses is one of the reasons lying behind the popularity of distance education. MGA also offers online certificate programs. The distance education model of MGA was observed by the researchers. In order to clarify the differences between two universities, one in Turkey and one in the United States, information was obtained by meeting the lecturers and observing their ways of asynchronous distance education. As a result of the observations and meeting with the lecturers, the most outstanding differences were seen as the involvement of the lecturers in the ADL process at a much higher level, more interaction between instructor and students and formative assessment. The communication between the lecturer and his/her students who were taught at a distance was at least once a week, but often more frequent, even daily. Additionally, all of the instructors indicated their use of formative assessment for determining students' achievement.

## **Methodology**

### *1. Setting*

This study was conducted at Middle Georgia State University, the United States of America.

## 2. *Participants*

The participants of the current study were 118 students who were included in English Composition I through distance education in 2019 Summer School. English Composition I is one of the core classes which is taken by the students of different majors at MGA and, for the summer term, it is given almost exclusively online.

## 3. *Instruments and procedure*

In advance of the data collection, required permissions and approval for the research were obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Middle Georgia State University. At MGA, formative assessment is used in order to reveal the academic success level of the students; this means the instructors assess the students' learning while the learning process is taking place. The students need to take quizzes, join to the discussion posts related to the unit and do the assignments. For the current study, the grades of the students (obtained by means of graded discussion posts, writing assignments, quizzes and a final exam) were used. In each semester, the students have two cumulative grades, which are 'midterm' and 'final.' The midterm and final grades represent overall averages at different points in the semester. The midterm grade is calculated at the midway point of the semester based on students' performance on the assignments that have been completed by that date. The final grade is the calculated average of all graded assignments from the course (including the final exam). A student could potentially be passing at midterm, but end up failing the course if he or she does poorly on graded assignments after the midterm. On the other hand, a student could be failing at midterm, but go on to pass the course by earning excellent marks on all remaining assignments. The only grade that really matters to the students is the final grade because that represents their overall average for the course at the end of the semester.

## **Results**

As stated above, for the academic success level analysis of MGA students, midterm and final grades of 118 students who were included in the online English Composition I class were used. A categorical analysis was implemented by using Jamovi (Version 1.0.1) because letter grades are used as the grading system at MGA.

Table 1. Midterm and final grades of the participants.

		<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Midterm Grade</b>	A (90-100)	61	51.7
	B (80-89)	32	27.1
	C (70-79)	15	12.7
	D (60-69)	8	6.8
	F (0-59)	2	1.7
<b>Final Grade</b>	A (90-100)	53	44.9
	B (80-89)	30	25.4
	C (70-79)	15	12.7
	D (60-69)	9	7.6
	F (0-59)	11	9.3

As seen in the Table 1, in the midterm exam, 61 students out of 118 received an A (90-100), 32 students got B's (80-89), 15 of them had C's (70-79) and 8 students got D's (60-69). Only 2 of 118 students received F's (0-59). When the total percentages of the academic success level of the students is looked at, it is seen that 98.3% of the students who took English Composition I through distance education were accepted as successful as they fulfilled all of the requirements such as writing short essays, joining discussion posts, doing assignments and taking quizzes. When the percentage of unsuccessful students is considered, it is seen that only 1.7% of the students had F as a grade and they were accepted as unsuccessful.

When the final grade (which indicates a student's achievement or failure at the end of the semester) is considered, it is seen that 53 students out of 118 had A's (90-100), 30 students had B's (80-89), 15 students had C's (70-79) and 9 students had D's (60-69). So, those students were accepted as successful, because the passing criterion is accepted as 60 at MGA. On the other hand, there are 11 students who had F's (0-59) and were accepted as unsuccessful. When the percentages of achievement and failure are considered, it is seen that 90,6% of the participants were successful in terms of the English Composition I class and had a grade over 59, and 9,3% of the total participants were unsuccessful in terms of the final grade.

In Table 2 given below, the dispersion of the final grades in accordance with the midterm grades is presented.

Table 2. The dispersion of the final grades in accordance with the midterm grades.

Final Grade		Midterm Grade									
		A (90-100)		B (80-89)		C (70-79)		D (60-69)		F (0-59)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
A (90-100)		42	68,9	9	28,1	1	6,7	0	0,0	1	50,0
B (80-89)		10	16,4	15	46,9	5	33,3	0	0,0	0	0,0
C (70-79)		8	13,1	4	12,5	3	20,0	0	0,0	0	0,0
D (60-69)		1	1,6	2	6,3	2	13,3	4	50,0	0	0,0
F (0-59)		0	0,0	2	6,3	4	26,7	4	50,0	1	50,0
<b>Total</b>		<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100</b>

- When the students who had A's (90-100) at the midterm (n=61) are considered, it is seen that:  
42 of those students had A's as the final grade again. 10 students had B's (80-89), 8 students had C's (70-79) and 1 student had a D (60-69) as the final grade. It can be inferred from this result that 19 students had a decrease after the midterm grade.
- When the students who had B's (80-89) at the midterm (n=32) are considered, it is seen that:  
9 students increased from B (80-89) to A (90-100). 15 of them had a B (80-89) again, 4 students had C's (70-79) and 2 of them had D's (60-69). Additionally, 2 students who had a B (80-89) at midterm had an F (0-59) as the final grade and became unsuccessful. These results show that 9 students out of 32 had higher grades and 8 students had lower grades for the final grade when it is compared with the midterm.
- When the students who had C's (70-79) at the midterm (n=15) are considered, it is seen that:  
1 student out of 15 students increased his/her grade from C (70-79) to A (90-100), and 5 students from C (70-79) to B (80-89); additionally, 3 students had C's (70-79) again as the final grade. On the other hand, 2 students who had a C (70-79) as the midterm grade

decreased their grades and had a D at the final. Additionally, 4 students received F's (0-59).

- When the students who had D's (60-69) at the midterm (n=8) are considered, it is seen that: 4 of 8 students had D's (60-69) again as the final grade, but 4 of them decreased their grades from D (60-69) to F (0-59) and were accepted as unsuccessful.
- When the students who had F (0-59) at the midterm (n=2) are considered, it is seen that: One of two students increased his/her grade from F (0-59) to A (90-100) and the other student had an F (0-59) again and became unsuccessful at the end of the semester.

The results showed that the grades of 37 students decreased in the final and 16 students increased their grades and 65 had the same grade.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The current study was conducted based on Güneş (2018) which compares distance learning and blended learning in terms of learner autonomy, motivation and academic success. The attracting results especially in terms of the low academic success level of the students who were taught English through asynchronous distance learning was the onset of the current study. As the next step, the asynchronous distance learning model of MGA was analyzed in terms of students' academic success level. The results revealed the only 1.7% of 118 MGA students were unsuccessful in terms of midterm grade; additionally, the percentage of the students who were unsuccessful in terms of final grade was 9.7%. This means that 90.3% of MGA students who were taught through asynchronous distance education were successful in terms of the final grade which determined students' passing or failure at the end of the term. Numerically, 107 of 118 students were able to pass the class at the end of term.

When the results are investigated in detail, it is seen that 44.9% (n=53) of the students had A's (90-100) and 25.4% (n=30) had B's as the final grade which indicates students' achievement or

failure. When these rates are considered, 70.3% (83 out of 118 students) of the students had a score between 80-100 which may be accepted as a big achievement.

The high percentage of achievement in terms of teaching at a distance drew attention to the implication of the distance education process at MGA. As stated above, the most outstanding differences in terms of MGA's way of implementing distance education were more frequent involvement of the lecturers in the distance education process (which leads to more interaction between instructors and students) and a formative assessment process. It is seen that these factors have an important role in students' academic success level, positively. Indeed, Schlosser and Simonson (2006) outline the components of distance education as: institutionally-based situation, separation of teacher and students, and interactive telecommunications and sharing of data, voice, and video (learning experiences). Related to the focal point of the current study, the component which is 'interactive telecommunications' attracts the attention. As stated before, the interaction between the lecturer and students was at a low level in the distance education environment stated by Güneş (2018). In the current study, it is the lecturer involvement which leads to more interaction and formative assessment, and also, most probably, the high academic success level.

On the other hand, it should not be ignored that most of the instructors start teaching at a distance without special training (Fish and Wickersham 2009). As cited in Bower (2001), A National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1997 report states that 60 percent of the higher education institutions provide the faculty with a training and a preparation process for teaching at a distance; this means that 40 percent of higher education institutions do not present a preparation or orientation process for the faculty. Not having adequate training or knowledge in terms of using technology for teaching purposes may hinder the faculty from adequate involvement in the distance education process and this may lead to some deficiencies related to an effective distance teaching process. According to Fish and Wickersham (2009), a distance education process requires a type of knowledge which is different from that of traditional teaching.

Additionally, a distance education environment which has lecturer-involvement at a minimum level is not something favored by the students (Güneş 2019) because, even when the students are taught at a distance, they need to know there is an instructor who guides them. For an effective



teaching and learning process, course design, interaction among course participants and also instructor preparation and support should be considered (Crawford-Ferre and Wiest 2012). It is stated by Osman (2005) that the technology used for teaching at a distance should be appropriate for the varied students' needs (cited in Crawford-Ferre and Wiest 2012).

Finally, when the results of Güneş (2018) and the current study are considered, the following recommendations may be presented for the setting where Güneş (2018) was conducted. Firstly, the involvement of the lecturers into the teaching process should be provided at a much higher level. This may be possible with a training or orientation process for the lecturers. Additionally, by means of lecturer involvement, more interaction lecturer-to-students and students-to-students should be kept in the distance education process. As stated above, the attendance of students is not checked or chased in the distance education environment stated in Güneş (2018). Being aware of students' attendance to the distance classes may also be helpful for motivating and including them more into the learning process.

## References

- Atkinson, R. C. 1972. "Optimizing the Learning of a Second-Language Vocabulary." *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 96 (1): 124.
- Bernard, Robert M., Philip C. Abrami, Yiping Lou, Eugene Borokhovski, Anne Wade, Lon Wozney, Peter Wallet, Manon Fiset and Binru Huang. 2004. "How Does Distance Education Compare with Classroom Instruction? A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature." *Review of Educational Research* 74 (3): 379-439.
- Bower, B. L. 2001. "Distance Education: Facing the faculty challenge." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 4 (2): 1-6.
- Crawford-Ferre, H. G. and L. R. Wiest. 2012. "Effective Online Instruction in Higher Education." *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 13 (1): 11.
- Fish, W. W. and L. E. Wickersham. 2009. "Best Practices for Online Instructors: Reminders." *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 10 (3): 279.
- Güneş, S. 2018. "Asynchronous Distance Learning and Blended Learning in Terms of Learner Autonomy, Motivation and Academic Success in Teaching English" (PhD diss. Hacettepe University).

Güneş, 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.

Simonson, M. and L. A. Schlosser. 2006. *Distance Education: Definition and Glossary of Terms*. 2nd ed. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Tafazoli, D. and N. Golshan. 2014. "Review of Computer-Assisted Language Learning: History, Merits and Barriers." *International Journal of Language and Linguistics. Special Issue: Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language* 2 (4): 32-38.