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A new look at distance Turkish learning: Survival guide

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Abstract

The main aim for the study is to design a distance Turkish learning program for the Erasmus Exchange students who will study for one semester in Turkey and provide them with a chance to be able to practice beginning Turkish for daily communication through authentic visual and auditory language materials. Another aim is to develop a Turkish language learning model for the orientation of Erasmus exchange students in which the scripts deliberately employed convey cultural clues for the foreign Turkish learners.

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1. Definition of Distance Education

Much attention has been paid to distance education in recent years due to the changing needs of the society. In almost all academic circles this way of presenting the service of education has been resorted to. This growing demand for such education has brought about the necessity to develop more efficient programs for distance education.

A brief look at the definitions made in the literature may reveal the directions in the distance education. Focuses on the different definitions as follows (Keegan, 1986):

1. The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner through-out the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)
2. The influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programs).
3. The use of technical media-print, audio, video or computer to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course.

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4. The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)
5. The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

Distance education is prevalent in all disciplines and language teaching is no exception. Due to the increasing pace of globalization, the need for being able to speak another language became indispensable and the institutions providing language courses realized this demand. Therefore, the relation between language education and distance educations were mostly incorporated. On the other hand, to learn languages from native speakers seems more impressive for the learners.

2. Language Education in distance education

Language education, as well as that of many other courses such as mathematics, history, and science is carried out in the model where learners and teachers are present in a certain place. However, within the distance context, language teaching and learning have changed greatly. This change puts some limitations on learning experience resulting from the absence of some indispensable elements of teaching and learning. According to White, these limitations include reduced opportunities for immediate support, guidance, interactivity, feedback and incidental learning as well as the stress caused by the need for the learners to manage themselves and the learning context. (White, 2003)

The Open University UK (OUUK) is one of the few known providers of distance language education. The OUUK started to provide language courses in 1995 – particularly in French. The education in language is maintained by the delivery system in which educational materials such as books, audio documentaries, video cassettes, audio activity books, etc. However, a new trend in open education has started to be developed in a way that will make it possible to access to the service of e-learning.

3. Use of Educational Technologies in Language Education

For the technology to be integrated into the language education is called computer assisted language learning (CALL). This has brought with it many facilities in terms of educational benefits along with the psychological problems for technologic devices, which is called “computer anxiety” (Cambre,1985 and Torkzadeh,1992). In the integration of computers or technologies into the education should also consider this. The advantages that can be obtained from technological educational facilities are many in number if it can be designed successfully. According to Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg, there are many attributes of a successful technology-enhanced language learning environment. These include (Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg, 2002):

1. Providing interaction, communicative activities, and real audience
2. Supplying comprehensible input
3. Supporting development of cognitive abilities
4. Utilizing task-based and problem-solving activities
5. Providing sheltering techniques to support language and academic development
6. Being student-centered and promoting autonomy
7. Facilitating focused development of English language skills
8. Using multiple modalities to support various learning styles and strategies
9. Supporting collaborative learning
10. Meeting affective needs of students
11. Fostering understanding and appreciation of the target and native cultures

12. Providing appropriate feedback and assessment

Among the items above, the interesting identification is that target cultures should be taken into consideration to enhance the quality of the educational material. In this study, this aspect of learning context will be focused on.

One of the important issues is to provide the exchange Erasmus students with an opportunity to perceive the cultural tendencies of the target country. There are many reasons for demonstrating visual aids that contain cultural signs of the host countries. Among them is that these students may have difficulties in finding sources that will help them understand the target culture. Another reason might be to break down the possible prejudices for the host countries that might have occupied the minds of the Erasmus candidates.

4. Literature in Online Language Education and Turkish applications

Language education and parallel to developments in technology lead to the construction of distance language education courses and programs. This is carried out in a way of communication. A learner does not have to attend an educational institution in order to learn a language, so the location and time separately derive the environment to virtual environment. Video technology, in this sense, assists students in acquiring language skills by acting a major motivator and stimuli for language development. The other two major benefits of technology especially for the second language learners are the exposure to a large amount of comprehensible speech and access to friendly learning environment (Butler-Pascoe and Wiburg, 2002). To integrate computers into education allows instructors to add multisensory elements, such as text, sound, picture, video and animation.

Picture or video is described as the three dimensional text. This means that such a multidimensional text will bring together many different perceptions for the students, which will probably facilitate the understanding of the linguistic context and cultural elements pertaining to the target community, which in turn, consolidate the learning process.

In Turkey, there is a good example for this; University of Ankara TÖMER introduced an internet site “www.turkish-center.com” in collaboration with Mobilsoft in order for Turkish language and Turkish culture to be accessible. This makes it possible for anyone to learn Turkish anywhere and anytime through the distance Turkish learning center. In this program, the learner can organize the course time and can learn at his/her own pace. In addition, the learner can enhance learning through other facilities such as e-mails and chat rooms or by establishing contact with other students or teachers.

Another online Turkish learning program is certificate of Turkish program provided by University of Anadolu. The facilities such as course books, television, books, and exercises as well as educational consultancy can be found in this program. In addition to synchronic consultancy service for each individual, visual-auditory educational materials are considerably employed.

5. The Essence of Distance Language Education for the work of Erasmus Project

Erasmus Project is a program for intercultural and international education in Europe. The aim of this program is to develop a better relationship and increase the quality of the Higher Education in European Countries. Rationally, the students who are in this program experience some difficulties when they decide to select the host university. This is mainly because of the candidates’ insufficient information on Turkey and the lack of Turkish language. Therefore, exchange students in Turkey in the questionnaire based on ten questions indicated that they need an orientation program before coming to Turkey.

Twelve students from one of the private university in Istanbul responded to the questionnaire. Ten of them were from Europe (Germany, Lithuania Bulgaria Netherland Slovakia, and Poland) and two of them were from USA and Canada but their opinion is worth to learn (Figure 2). Since two of them had an orientation program before they came to host country, which was about passport, health, and safety. In addition to that none of them had Turkish Language and cultural experience. According to the questionnaire the students adapt themselves to the new environment; and they regard language and culture as most necessary which mostly related to their reasons for being in Turkish Universities (Figure 1).

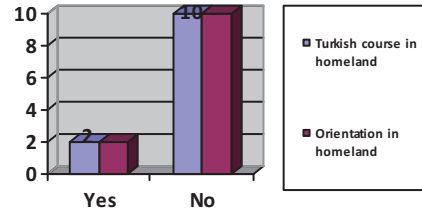
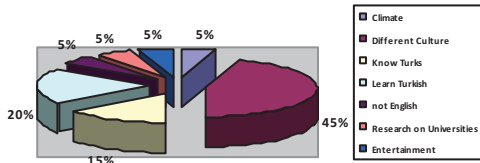


Figure 1: Reason for being in Turkish University

Figure 2: Course in homeland and Orientation course in homeland

6. Feature of the Distance Learning Model

The result of the need assessment provided some basics idea what should be include in distance Turkish Language Module. Therefore, the development scale of the material was considered to respond to these needs of Erasmus students in Turkey. The model of the distance course is as in Figure 3 which includes five module language and cultural contents for the Erasmus Program. However, in this study only the Speaking Module was employed because it is more applicable to show the language and cultural content together. On this matter, the speaking module provides daily life and cultural stories from Turkish movies, sitcoms, documentaries, news etc.

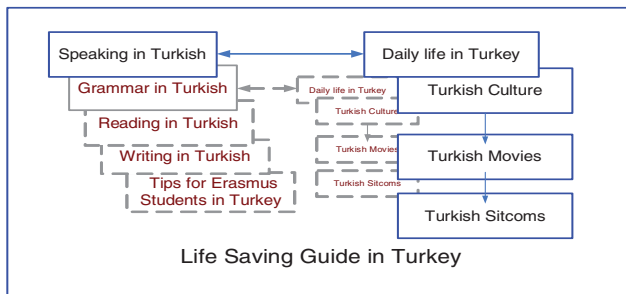


Figure 3: The Model of the Distance Turkish Learning Tools for Erasmus Students

In Figure 4, the four different pages of the tools are represent; home menu (A), movie menu (B), description of the film menu (C), and movie display menu (D).

The movies are embedded to the modules which are consisting of ten seconds to one minute long clips related to the topics of the language learning. The deliberately chosen excerpts from three popular Turkish films were selected to establish an authentic environment in terms of the use of cultural context: “İklimler”, “Uzak”, and “Bekleme Odası.”



Figure 4: Interface Design of the Learning Tool

Before each excerpt, the learner is provided with background information that describes what s/he will watch and which speech act will be shown in the clip (Figure 4,C). After watching the clip, the learner has the chance to watch the clip again and again and to do exercising to be able pronounce the phrases correctly and under which context the phrase can be uttered. Likewise, each phrase is repeated from different actors and actress to have common idea about how the phrases sound.

In addition, the films were so chosen that they represent Turkish Lingua Franca. They are clear and understandable and contain no jargon. Further, the contexts chosen from the films include not only basic dialogues as a linguistic survival guide but also cultural characteristics of Turkish society, which the Erasmus students may need on the first arrival in Turkey. Examples for some basic communication dialogues related to greetings,

introducing, ordering, leaving, requesting, apologizing etc. During the learning experience the learner explore the material through the navigation bar as shown in Figure 5 which enables them to track easily their learning.



Figure 5: Navigation bar of the Learning tool

The learning tool reveals that the foreign Erasmus Exchange students will learn about Turkish culture as well as basic Turkish Language. This may help them get used to Turkish traditions more readily and feel more secure as they have sufficient amount of Turkish language. This teaching and learning product can be delivered via CDs or designed on a website and made available to the Erasmus Exchange students or who are planning to come to Turkey.

Suggestion

The students coming to Turkey through Erasmus Exchange Programs will know more about the country where they will study. The exchange program will become more feasible through such a pre-language training and hence the language handicap will be sorted out. This sample learning material can be applied to all those not only coming to study but also planning to visit Turkey from different parts of the world. Sites on internet can be designed and in these sites, the students can find the materials that they can learn basic Turkish from. However, not all people can visit the countries whose language they will be learning, but they have another choice, which is to participate in the courses from the native teachers through technology and the facilities provided by the distance education.

The targeted aim of this learning tool is to help Erasmus students; the secondary aim of this tool is to introduce the countries cultural richness to abroad.

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