



A PARADOX IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Dr. Nazime Tuncay
Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports,
Nicosia, NORTH CYPRUS
nazime.tuncay@gmail.com

Abstract

Distance Learners with different backgrounds may have different perceptions about distance education. Prior experience, pre-existing attitudes and beliefs all may play a role in determining whether a student will be successful in distance education or not. Does distance learning work better for some students as opposed to than others? Is this due to their distance learning skills/abilities or something else? These questions are the driving force of this survey.

Responses of 495 distant learners from Turkey and Cyprus differed according to their sex. It was found that there is a curious paradox in distance education in regards to the following statements: *e-confidence results in e-success; e-anxiety is an obstacle for e-course capability; reasons of 'not choosing' distance education courses are not same as the reasons of 'drooping' it.* Does this all mean resistance to distance education? Discussions all about these are given.

Key Words: Distance Education, Students, Paradox, E-Attitude, Internet Connection, E-Anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Distance Education Challenges

Distance education offers an opportunity to students with high e-confidence and less e-anxiety. However, limited face to face interaction is discouraging students during online courses. Students have different perceptions about distance education. There may be several issues effecting learners' perceptions. *Instructor, website, computer skills, pedagogical issues* and *Language* are just a few of these issues. Perceptions may also be differing among visual learners, auditory learners and tactile learners. If learners are not satisfied with the design of the course website, they may have also negative perceptions towards their distant courses. *Technological problems* and *pedagogical issues* make learners get frustrated with the online courses (Hara and Kling, 2003).

The issues such as instructional support, faculty motivation and enthusiasm, and technology problems have been raised as problems in developing online instruction in many institutions for a long time (Barr and Tag, 1995). If learners are not satisfied with the design of the course website, they may also have negative perceptions towards their distant courses. *Technological problems* and *pedagogical issues* make learners get frustrated with the online courses (Hara and Kling, 2003). According to Rashid & Rashid (2011), the issues in distance education may bring problems such as:

- Maintenance of academic standards,
- Financing problems,
- Organizational problems,
- Postal services,
- Communication,
- Problems related to the study centers,
- Students assignments related problem,
- Misuse of technology and
- Trust to the evaluation system and adequate feedback (Altan & Seferoğlu, 2009).

In addition to the above issues. E-attitude, E-confidence, E-anxiety and E-dropouts may also bring problems in distance education. **Anxiety** is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty that typically appears when an individual perceives an event as being a threat to the ego or self-esteem (Sarason, 1988). Although there are not much studies about these in distance education area, it is really important to prevent students being anxious and being unsuccessful due to this anxiousness.

E-anxiety is the learners fear and uncertainty that appears when learners decide to start to an e-learning course or a distance education course. This may be due to several reasons. It may be students lack of e-confidence or lack of the technological prerequisites or lack of money.

E-confidence is the feeling of being capable to learn by using electronic devices. Confidence brings trust and motivates learners. It generates greater interest, perseverance, and general feelings of self-worth while completing academic assignments (Pajares, 2003). E-confidence is important for learners success in a course. If learners are e-confident than they are motivated.

E-drop-out is leaving an e-learning course or a distant course. There may be several reasons of leaving a course. Learners may have run out of motivation, they may have no source of support or encouragement in school or at home; they may lose their e-confidence, they may have e-anxiety; all these may result in their dropping out course.

In distance education courses, since students and teachers are not at the same place physically, their attitudes and perceptions about the course differs according to their courses virtual classroom design. Thus the pedagogy and the strategy under developing the virtual classroom environment are very important for the delivery of distance education. The learners perceived the interactive course environment and frequent discussion as conducive to learning in online courses (Jiang, 1998). The virtual classrooms can be designed according to the learner characteristics. Knowles (1980), in explaining the advantages of knowing the learner, believes that learner behavior is influenced by a combination of the learner's needs plus the learner's situation and personal characteristics. Hence, knowing these personal characteristics is an important aspect of planning distance learning courseware and strategies. Jung (2005) stated that measurement and evaluation are seen as the last step distance education institutions and generally hasn't been given the necessary importance. Students should trust the measurement and evaluation system. Students' opinions about the process of assessment and evaluation have a great importance (Altan & Seferoğlu, 2009). Determining students' positive and negative opinions about the evaluation process helps reviewing assessment methods in distance education and students' contribution to the creation of more comfortable environments (Altan & Seferoğlu, 2009). The need for computers and internet access to administer exams, lack of security inherent in examination design, the possibility that the students may cheat, the inability to check if the student himself/herself took the exam personally, conditions, obstacles of communication, and lack of information and skills regarding online education (Kerka and Wonacot, 2000; Shuey, 2002; Benson, 2003; Tanyıldızlı and Semerci, 2005; McKombs and Vakili, 2005). May be having people who do not have much computer knowledge preparing exams will help a lot in distance education courses (Xu, 2007).

Not only the culture and the sex of the students have effects on their reflections of their attitudes, perceptions about the course but also the age is very important factor. Those students who were at the early stage of their course of study expressed overall satisfaction with distance courses and were more positive than were their counterparts, who were at the end of their program (Young, 2011).

Since distance education is new century's education system, students who have used to the old systems have difficulties in adoption. More than traditional students, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988). These insecurities are founded in personal and school related issues such as

- financial costs of study,
- disruption of family life,
- perceived irrelevance of their studies
- and lack of support from online teachers (Galusha, 2008).

Also, the ability of self-learning and planning (self-confidence) and the accreditation of the distance education courses can also be added to these as insecurities of students. Since distance education requires more self learning, these pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students (Sweet, 1986).

New strategies are necessary for having lower drop-out rates. Polloff and Pratt (2001) found that learners are most satisfied with courses in which the instructors facilitate frequent contact between themselves and learners, use active learning techniques, convey high expectations, emphasize of time spent on specific tasks, and provide prompt feedback.

Up until now, the studies that have looked at barriers to distance education implementation have tended to view them from the technical or the administrative side (Mitchell, 2007). Why there is a resistance to distance education? Or is there? While a growing body of research is seeking to address the issue (Parker, 1999, Diaz, 2002, Wang, et al 2003, Rossett and Schafer, 2003, Berge and Huang, 2004), little of this research considers the learner's experiences or point of view (Rossett and Schafer, 2003).

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to find out if there is any relevance between the students'-skills, e-attitude, e-confidence, e-anxiety and their drop outs?" The study aimed to draw attention of the researches to the paradox in distance education.

METHOD

Population

700 online questionnaires were distributed to university students' ages differing between 19 and 24, and in which have taken distant courses, in Cyprus and in Turkey. A total of 495 questionnaires were filled in 2 months (January 2011-March 2011). 52% of the participants were Male and 48% of them were Female. The distribution among countries was from Turkey 47% and from Cyprus 53% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Students according to Countries

	Turkey	Cyprus
Male	24%	28%
Female	23%	25%

The following expressions are used in the research study

- **Distance Learning Skills Good/Basic:** Students evaluated their distance learning skills. If their *overall distance learning skill score* is above 3 then they are accepted to have Good Skills. If their *overall distances learning skill average score* is below 3, then they are accepted to have Basic Skills.
- **Positive Attitude/ Negative Attitude:** According to distant learning attitude scale; the overall attitude score is above 3, they are grouped as "positive attitude learners", otherwise they are grouped as "negative attitude students"
- **E-skills:** skills which are necessary to carry out an e-learning, which are necessary for distance learning
- **E-knowledge:** knowledge which are necessary to carry out an e-learning, which are necessary for distance learning
- **E-confident:** The students which have high scores of e-skills and e-knowledge are defined as *e-confident*.
- **Internet Confidence:** The students who have high scores of skills related to receiving or sending e-mail, e-shopping
- **Success score:** Total score that students get at the end of the distant courses.

Instruments

A *questionnaire*, consisting of 40 items is distributed online on SurveyMonkey.com (see Figure 1), in two countries (Turkey and Cyprus), in Turkish. All the experts' evaluations and suggestions are taken over in the

draft form of the questionnaire and afterwards the necessary corrections were made; the questionnaire was given to the students to fill it in, using a five point Likert scale.

Some of the measured subjects in the questionnaire were: Skill of using visual tools; skill of using a laptop or a PC; skill of using Web 2.0 tools; ability to join video-conferences through internet; ability to communicate via Web 2.0 tools. Teachers were asked to choose the suitable scales for themselves, in each item of the questionnaire. The scales were arranged as: *"Needs to be improved"*, *"basic"*, *"good"*, *"very good"* and *"excellent"*.

Second part of the questionnaire consisted of question for measuring teachers' e-attitude: Teachers were asked to choose the suitable scales for themselves, in each item of the questionnaire. The scales were arranged as: *"Unuseful"*, *"useful"*, *"neither useful nor unuseful"*, *"useful"* and *"very useful"*.

The second part of the questionnaire contained questions like; *"What are your reasons for choosing a distance education course instead of a traditional course?"*, *"What are your reasons for dropping your course?"*

In order to evaluate the items in the questionnaires, experts evaluation ($n = 17$) was required. Experts group from education technologist and education psychologists evaluated the data gathering scale both individually and collaboratively. Under the suggestions of experts, the necessary corrections were done to the draft form of the questionnaire. Hence, the content validity was maintained by the help of the educational technologist experts.

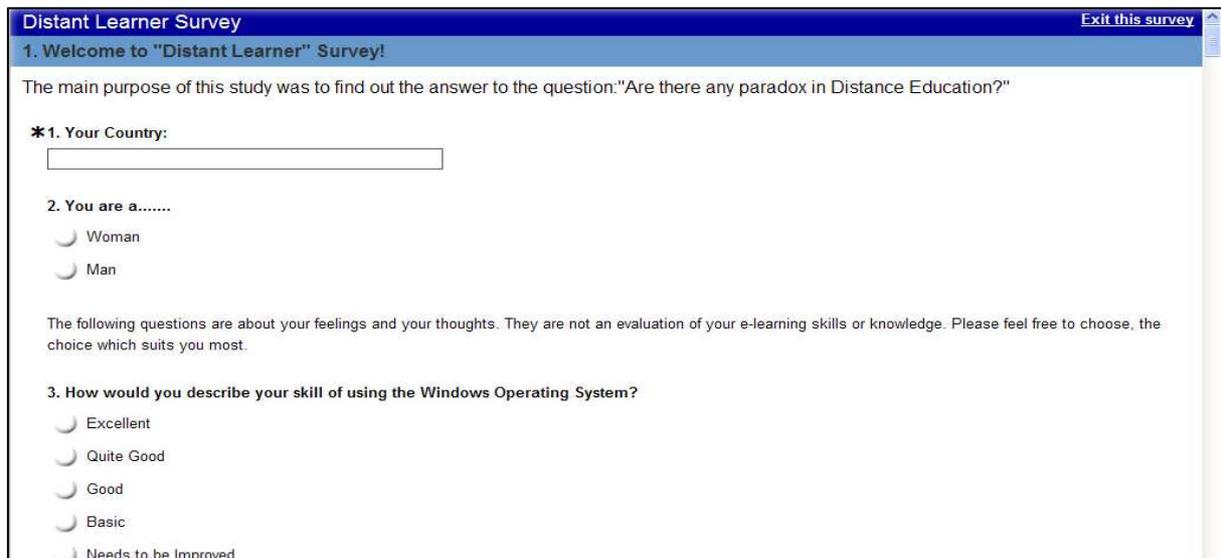


Figure 1: Online Survey on SurveyMonkey.com

Process of data collection

The distribution of the questionnaire has been a real challenge and it implied lots of explanations. However, all of this had been overcome successfully. The researcher explained the questionnaire items one by one to the students and gave the necessary feedback they needed to analyse their own skills or knowledge as excellent, very good, good, and basic and needs to be improved.

Data analysis

For data analysis, SPSS 17.0 was used. The frequencies, percentages were used for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research study had lots of different conflicting results; in which most important results in a curious paradox.

Does Positive Attitude results in Good Distance Learning Skills?

Students attitude towards distance education (positive/negative), their internet connection (fast/slow), their own evaluations to their distance learning skills (good/basic) were contradicting with each other. The percentages and the frequencies are as given Table 2.

Table 2: Attitude and Skills

Distance Skills	Learning	Internet Speed	Connection	Positive Attitude	Negative Attitude
				Towards Distance Education Courses	Towards Distance Education Courses
Good		Fast		83 (17%)	32 (%7)
		Slow		92 (19%)	61 (%12)
Basic		Fast		55 (11%)	72 (%15)
		Slow		68 (14%)	32 (%7)

We can summarize the results of the survey as:

- 268 students described their distance learning skills as **good**, 227 students described their distance learning skills as **basic**.
- 298 students had **positive** attitude towards distance education courses and 197 students had **negative** attitude.
- 242 students have **fast** internet connection speed and 254 students have **slow** internet connection speed.
- 83 (17%) of them who have positive attitude have also fast internet connection, and 92(19%) have slow internet connection. 32(%7) of them have negative attitude also have good internet connection, and 61(%12) have slow internet connection.
- *In this research study students attitudes towards distance education does not differ according to their sex or country.*

This may be interpreted as; having the technology does not always mean "willing to use it". What is important is; students who are willing to use the technology, also belonging it.

Table 3: Attitude and Skills

Control Variables			Distance Learning Skills	Distance Education Attitude
Internet Connection Speed	Distance Learning Skills	Correlation	1,000	,114
		Significance (2-tailed)	.	,011
		df	0	492
Distance Education Attitude	Distance Learning Skills	Correlation	,114	1,000
		Significance (2-tailed)	,011	.
		df	492	0

Partial Correlation of all *distance learning skills* and *distance education attitude* is calculated, by controlling “internet connection speed” (See Table 3). Correlations among distance learning skills and internet connection [r=0.11; p<0.01]; *internet connection* and *distance education attitude*[r=0.11; p<0.01] were calculated by using SPSS 17.0. A low correlation among distance education attitude and distance learning skills is found. The paradox here is students having positive attitude towards distance education does not necessarily have good distance learning skills.

Do e-confidence results in Success, in Distance Learning?

There is a common belief that if a student is e-confident or e-talented then s/he can get higher results; however the current studies results differ according to students’ sex. **Male students were more confident than females**, about using computers as a learning tool (Ring, 1991; North and Noyes, 2002; Liaw, 2002), while other researchers found that gender did not differentiate between men and females in their attitudes toward computers (Popovich et al. 2008; Kesici, Sahin and Akturk, 2009).

Despite the overall positive attitude however the data showed important difference between the reactions of male and female students. The e-confident female is less successful than e-confident male which may also be defined as a curious paradox (see Figure 2).

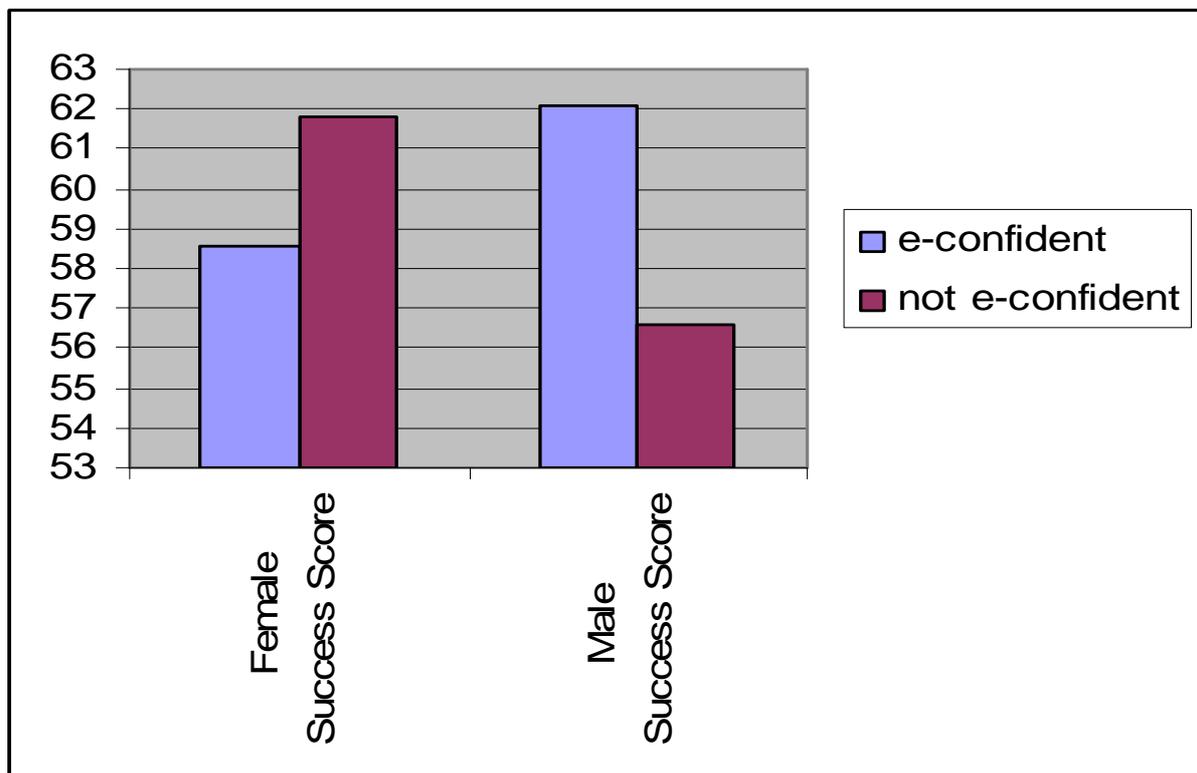


Figure 2: “Confidency” versus “Success”

Does E-anxiety play an important role in distant courses?

Distance Education students are found to have various anxieties like; technology anxiety, test anxiety, social anxiety and language anxiety (Tuncay& Uzunboylu, 2010). E-anxiety is feeling oneself not confident with the course. Which skills of female and male effect e-anxiety? Does

- Skills related to usage of E-tools
- Skills related to Internet Usage

- Skills related to Attaining a E-Course play important role in distance education. According to the results of the current study, the usage of E-tools like E-TV and E-Radio and e-anxiety plays a curious paradox in distant courses.

Although the students' e-anxiety does not differ much according to their e-anxiety, male has lower internet confidence than female. On the other hand *e-anxious male* and *not e-anxious male* has same e-course (joining to course, sharing resources, consulting e-help) skills. However, not e-anxious males claim that they have better usage of e-tools like E-TV, E-Radio; Internet Confidence (searching through internet, receiving or sending e-mail, e-shopping); e-course (joining to course, sharing resources, consulting e-help) than not e-anxious females. Now thus this mean male student are more confident, less anxious and more successful? However closes look at the figure 3 shows that e-anxious males and not e-anxious males' e-course skill scores are same. Since their e-course skill scores are same, can we say that more male students has positive attitude towards distance education? However section 3.2 shows claims that attitudes towards distance education do not differ among male and female. These all show that there is another paradox in this area that waits to be found out. Other factors in these results need to be investigated. There must some other issues affecting students' attitude, anxiety or confidence other than the ones investigated in this research study. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

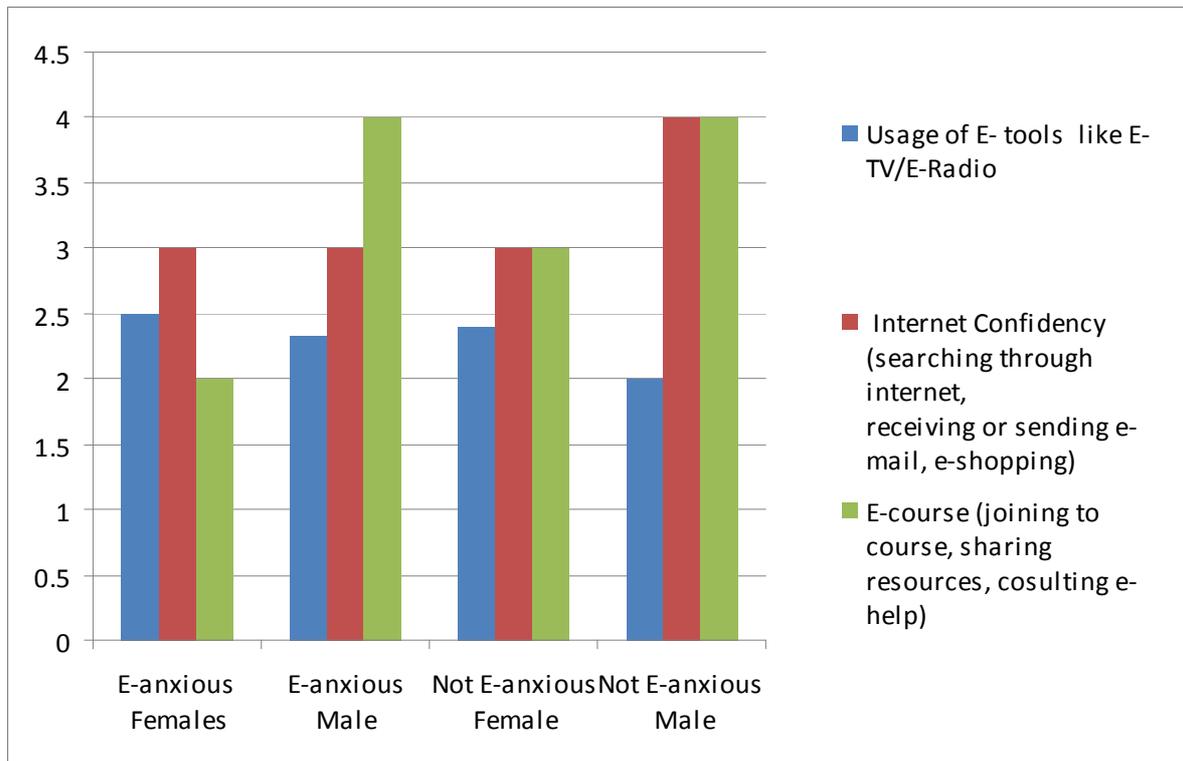


Figure 3: E-anxiety, Confidence, Skills and Sex

Are reasons of 'not choosing' same with the reasons of 'dropouts'?

The students gave several reasons for not choosing a distance learning course. Some of these are: They are "not face-to face"; there is "not always immediate response", these are "not always synchronous", "not in a specific physical place", distance education is "not as effective" as traditional education; courses are "not easy", they have "no time" for distance courses, they are very busy: "not available" and distance education courses are "not as social" as traditional courses (see Table 3).

Table 4: Reasons of not choosing

Reasons of "Not Choosing"	Frequency(n)
Not face-to-face	43
Not always immediate response	30
Not always synchronous	11
Not a specific physical place	21
Not as Effective as Traditional Education	33
Not easy	65
No time	68
Not available	75
Not as social	66

On the other hand, students' reasons for dropouts are: Instructor (n=77), Perceived irrelevance of their studies (n=75), Website (n=68), Computer Skills (n=65), Financial costs of study (n=63), Lack of support from employees (n=51), Disruption of Family Life (n=41), Pedagogical Issues (n=36), English Language (n=19). As it can be seen, the reasons of not choosing and reasons of dropouts are different. This is also another curious paradox (see Table 4).

Table 5: Reasons of dropouts

Reasons of Dropouts	Frequency (n)
English Language	19
Pedagogical Issues	36
Disruption of family life	41
Lack of support from employers.	51
Financial costs of study	63
Computer Skills	65
Website	68
Perceived irrelevance of their studies	75
Instructor	77

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this research study it is concluded that students having positive attitude towards distance education does not necessarily have good distance learning skills and the e-confident female is less successful than e-confident male. Also, "Distance Education students' anxieties showed differences among males and females. On the other hand it is concluded that issues effecting learners' 'not choosing' distant learning are different than their reasons for 'dropouts'. E-confidence does not always result in e-success. Good Distance learning skills and good internet access do not mean that students have positive attitude to distance education. These results were conflicting with each other and with the literature; which gave the idea that there is a paradox. The limitations of this study are restricted to the university students that researcher were able to contact and send an email to fill the questionnaires in two countries. The following topics were suggested for further research studies:

- Analyse the structure of a distance training framework for self-learning that can assist students in improving their necessary distance education skills and to overcome their e-anxieties establishing development paths, according to the needs identified as critical in their learning space. Another research study about relation of e-confidence and distant education success can be conducted.
- What global approach may be followed in order to fulfil these paradoxes?
- Does culture plays a role on distance learning, if so to what extend and to overcome this problems what should be done? Does this make a paradox?



To resolve mentioned curious paradoxes further researches are going to be conducted by the researcher. It shall extend the distribution of the questionnaire in other countries. The author shall consider both countries whose culture is similar to Turkish and Cypriot culture, and also countries that present a different cultural background. The study shall focus on the analysis of the use of metaphors in order to identify similarities and differences among students that belong to rather similar and quite different cultures and also on understanding the impact of globalization in this context.

WJEIS's Note: This article was presented at World Conference on Educational and Instructional Studies - WCEIS, 07- 09 November, 2012, Antalya-Turkey and was selected for publication for Volume 2 Number 4 of WJEIS 2012 by WJEIS Scientific Committee.

REFERENCES

- Altan, T., & Seferoğlu, S. S. (2009). *Uzaktan eğitimde değerlendirme süreci: Öğrenci görüşlerinin sistemin gelişimine katkıları*. 3. *International Computer & Instructional Technologies Symposium (ICITS 2009)*. Karadeniz Technical University Fatih Faculty of Education, Trabzon.
- Barr, R. B., & Tagg, J. (1995). From teaching to learning-a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change Magazine*, 27 (6), 12-25.
- Benson, A. (2003). Assessing participant learning in online environments. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 100, 69-78
- Berge, Z & Huang, Y. (2004). A Model for Sustainable Student Retention: A Holistic Perspective on the Student Dropout Problem with Special Attention to e-Learning. *DEOSNEWS*, 13 (5). Retrieved 30/10/2011, from http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deosnews/deosnews13_5.pdf
- Diaz, D.P. (2002). Online drop rates revisited. *The Technology Source*. Retrieved 10.01.2011, from http://technologysource.org/article/online_drop_rates_revisited/
- Galusha, J. (2008). Barriers to Learning in Distance Education. [Retrieved 02.10.2012](http://www.infrastructure.com/barriers.htm) from <http://www.infrastructure.com/barriers.htm>.
- Hara, N., Kling, R. (2003). Learners' Distress with a Web-based Distance Education Course: An Ethnographic Study of Participants' Experiences. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 4(2)
- Jiang, M. (1998). *Distance learning in a Web-based environment: An analysis of factors influencing learners' perceptions of online learning*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, State University of New York, Albany, New York.
- Jung, I. (2005). Innovation And Good Practices Of Open and Distance Learning In Asia and The Pasific. Apeid, Unesco Bangkok Occasional Paper Series. 3.
- Kesici, S., Sahin, I., & Akturk, A. O., (2009): Analysis of Cognitive Learning Strategies and Computer Attitudes, According To College Students' Gender and Locus of Control. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25: 529-534.
- Kerka, S., & Wonacot, M. (2000). Practitioner file: Assessing learners online. Columbus, OH: Clearinghouse for Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. Retrieved May 16, 2009, from: <http://ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>
- Knapper, C. (1988). Lifelong Learning and Distance Education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 2(1): 63-72.



- Knowles, M. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. Chicago: Follett Publishers.
- Liaw, S., (2002). An Internet survey for perceptions of computers and the World Wide Web: relationship, prediction, and difference. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18: 17–35.
- McCombs, B., & Vakili, D. (2005). A learner-centered framework for e-learning. *Teachers College Record*. 107(8), 1582-1600
- Mitchell, A., & Honore, S. (2007). Criteria for successful blended learning. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 39 (3): 143-148.
- North, A. S., & Noyes, J. M., (2002): Gender influences on children's computer attitudes and cognitions. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18: 135–150.
- Pajares, F. (2003). Self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, and achievement in writing: A review of the literature. *Reading & Writing Quarterly: Overcoming Learning Difficulties*, 19, 139-158.
- Parker, A. (1999). A study of variables that predict dropout from distance education. *International Journal of Educational Technology*, 1(2). Retrieved 12.10.2012, from: <http://www.outreachuiuc.edu/ijet/v1n2/parker/index.html>
- Polloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2001). *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Popovich, P. M., Gullekson, N., Morris, S., & Morse, B. (2008). Comparing attitudes towards computer usage by undergraduates from 1986 to 2005. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24: 986–992.
- Rashid, N. & Rashid, M. (2011). Issues and Problems in Distance Education, *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 13(1).
- Sarason, I. G. (1988). Anxiety, self-preoccupation, and attention. *Anxiety Research*, 1, 3-7.
- Young, A. E (2011). Pre-Service Students' Class Standings and Their Perceptions of Distance Education. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 12(1).
- Ring, G. (1991). Students' reactions to courseware: Gender Difference. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 22(3).
- Rossett et al., (2003). Strategies for Building Blended Learning. *Learning Circuits*. Retrieved 03.01.2012 from <http://www.learningcircuits.org/2003/jul2003/rossett.htm>
- Shuey, S. (2002). Assessing Online Learning in Higher Education. *Journal of Instruction Delivery Systems*, 16(2),13-18.
- Sweet, R. (1986). Student Drop-out in Distance Education: An Application of Tinto's Model. *Distance Education*, 7: 201-213.
- Tanyıldızlı, M., Semerci, Ç. (2005). The opinions of students and teaching staff about online education implementations. Retrieved May 22, 2009, from: http://www.tebd.gazi.edu.tr/arsiv/2005_cilt3/sayi_2/197-216.pdf
- Tuncay, N., Uzunboylu, H.(2010). Anxiety And Resistance in Distance Learning. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, 5 (2).



Wang, G, Foucar-Szocki, D & Griffen, O., O'Connor, C. and Sceiford, E.(2003). *Departure, Abandonment, and Dropout of E-learning: Dilemma and Solutions James Madison University*. Retrieved 25/10/2011, from: http://www.masie.com/researchgrants/2003/JMU_Final_Report.pdf)

Xu, Y., Iran-Nejad , A., & Thoma, S. J. (2007). Administering Defining Issues Test Online: Do Response Modes Matter?. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 6(1), 10-27.