

Article

Sustainability in Lifelong Learning: Learners' Perceptions from a Turkish Distance Language Education Context

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Abstract: This descriptive study, which adopts a mixed-methods approach, investigates whether the language learning component of the distance education program at a vocational school of higher education contributes to the students' lifelong learning propensities, 21st-century skills and sustainability of their language education. A questionnaire eliciting answers from four standpoints were administered to students receiving English language instruction in the program. As for the qualitative side of the study, group interviews were held with volunteers. The quantitative data were analyzed by a statistical program while the interview data were subjected to content analysis. The findings reveal that although the students have a positive attitude toward language learning in a distance education program, they frequently refer to the need for the presence of a teacher for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, it appears that the requirements of the language component of the program contributed to the students' plans for sustainability of their education after graduation. The results further indicate a need for more interaction and collaboration to be incorporated in the activities and that the philosophy underpinning the program, curriculum and materials need to be reconsidered to equip the students to compete with the dynamics of the educational world.

Keywords: distance education; lifelong learning; sustainability in education; 21st-century skills

1. Introduction

Starting in the form of correspondence courses in Europe, followed by radio and television broadcasts, audiotapes and/or live videos [1] and reaching web-based and mobile learning systems today even through cloud platforms, distance education dates back to almost a hundred years ago.

As is everything in today's rapidly changing world, instructional approaches are going through a change and are becoming more learner-centered: "recursive and non-linear, engaging self-directed, and meaningful from the learner's perspective" [2]. Since there is not an end to learning and discovering new explanations to questions, now it is believed that illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn [3] and refresh their knowledge based on the developments witnessed. Accordingly, a pedagogical shift is visible toward constructivist, socio-cultural and metacognitive models for teaching [4] and language learning in distance education is not an exception for the situation.

With the increasing demand for education coming from a diversity of student profiles, the institutions have been in a position to adapt themselves to address a variety of student needs. University students, people who work and study, the workforce changing careers approximately in every ten years, people who are enrolled in job related training programs, others who prefer distance education largely because it allows them to balance their other commitments more easily [5] can be examples among others that may not have occurred to us. Taking the situation into account,

we see that we need a more embracing form for education, that is an education form that is adequate in responding to such variety, structured in accordance with today's trends. To sum up, complying with the dynamics of today's world, we now know that any kind of education, including language instruction, is now not limited to the school contexts and that learning does not come to an end with graduation as falsely supposed to be before but it is an ongoing process. Thus, on-line courses, e-learning or distance education programs, no matter in what form they are offered need to adapt themselves to the requirements of this challenge.

Contrary to the traditional teacher-centered concerns, today stakeholders are more involved in student-centered issues that would meet the needs of the students and enabling them to get the most out of the educational process in distance education programs. Regarding the student satisfaction for these programs, Alsabawy, Steel and Soar [6] write about how organizational, informatics and human inputs relate to the perceived usefulness of e-learning systems. From another perspective, Klopfer [7] (p. 295) emphasizes the importance of students' attitude toward the subject matter as well as inquiry, adoption of attitudes similar to the subject at hand, enjoyment of the learning experience, interest in the subject matter at hand and finally interest in the subject of study as a career for the online courses to be effective.

On the other side of the mirror, we find that the individuals also need to possess certain qualities, some of which can be taught to organize control and further their own learning. Two of these crucial qualities can be said to be important in learners' taking responsibility for their own learning. These are autonomy in Holec's words [8], and motivation, a kind of positive attitude toward learning, [9] seen as fundamental and individuals need to become convinced that learning is a lifelong process and that it should be sustained by their own effort. In addition, involving in higher-order thinking skills for the sustainability of their learning is a competitive necessity through this process [4].

As a matter of fact, all 21st-century skills definitions are relevant to aspects of contemporary life in a complex world. In order to catch up with the requirements of this new world, 21st-century skills should be introduced to and practiced with learners [10]. Some of the most emphasized skills are called "4 Cs", namely, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity require higher-order thinking skills and are placed on the upper levels in Bloom's taxonomy [11]. To attain these, Halah and McGuire [12] suggest using problem-based and cooperative learning approaches to provide students with opportunities for activities such as projects, problem-solving, designing and research-based learning to transferring their academic knowledge to real-world contexts. Thus, as they put it, integrating core academic knowledge, critical thinking, and social skills in teaching and learning contribute to the students' mastery of these multi-dimensional abilities. These skills can help students succeed in their future careers by supporting 21st-century learning systems to reach improved outcomes.

When we look deeper at the matter from the perspective of language teaching, we see that with globalization, today people throughout the world interact and collaborate with one another more than any other time. This attributes a new role and specific importance to language learning because to be able to communicate people need a common language or a "lingua franca" that is English in today's case [13]. In addition, similar to the changes realized in distance education programs, the way English is taught has been affected by the nature of the immense demand to learn this language coming from the contexts of inner, outer and expanding circles and from people with different native languages, varieties of these languages and cultures [14]. Consequently, distance education language programs in addition to face to face courses appear to attract the language learners' interest from all over the world. Today, we know that language is not just a subject in the sense of a package of knowledge or a set of information and insights but it is a fundamental part of being human [15]. Thus besides language teaching, English courses in all forms may be considered as a ground not only to create in the students an understanding of the world, awareness on differences of cultures, interest in and readiness for acceptance of these diversities and the like, but they should also help students to acquire the 21st century skills, and trigger sustainable global and educational development. In order to attain these

goals embedded in language teaching, either face to face or in distance education forms, language teaching programs should undertake the responsibility for a change to equip their learners with these skills and competences.

2. Method

In general terms, the study looks for answers to the question whether the students enrolled in the language component of the distance education program at a vocational school of higher education are prepared for this new world in the above mentioned way.

Moved by the above discussions that appear to be compatible with the distance learning contexts, research questions for the study were formed on the basis of the propositions in the related literature. The rationale for the questions are displayed in parentheses as the following:

- (1) What are the vocational school students' attitudes toward language learning through a distance education program? (Klopfer [7]—positive attitude bears the priority for success in distance education programs).
- (2) Do they appear to possess the qualities to be able to take responsibility for their own learning on their shoulders and sustain their lifelong language learning? (Holec [8], Dickens [9]—motivation and sustainability of one's own learning are two crucial qualities for those who wish to further their learning).
- (3) Do they think that program specifically contributed to their 21st-century skills in macro and lifelong language learning propensities in micro terms? (Saavedra and Opfer [10]—all 21st-century skills definitions are relevant to aspects of contemporary life in a complex world and to catch up with the requirements of this new world, thus, these should be introduced to and practiced with learners).
- (4) Do they think that the program has changed their view of learning? (Lambert and McCombs [2]—instructional approaches . . . are becoming more learner-centered . . . engaging, self-directed, and meaningful from the learner's perspective).
- (5) How in the students' opinion this program may become more productive to equip them with qualities to maintain the sustainability of their education and lifelong learning?

2.1. The Context of the Study

The study was conducted at the vocational school of higher education at a Turkish university. In this school, both face-to-face and distance education are offered for the students of 15 different departments such as textile, tourism, accountancy, food processing, computer technology, child development, hair design, and electronic communication. While some students of these departments receive face to face instruction, some are enrolled directly in distance education programs. However, English which is a required course for all students is offered only in the form of distance education. The students receive two hours of language instruction each week. Lessons are offered synchronously and stored in archives enabling them to reach the content in their time and as many times as possible in an asynchronous manner. In addition, the required sources and materials for the course are open to students' use online. During the lessons, students can interact with their teachers and peers and initiate and respond to questions online. In addition, a message board is available for those who want to interact with their peers and teachers at times other than during class hours. Students are required to have two online mid-term exams and a face to face final exam for which they come together and sit at school.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study were selected by means of a convenience sampling method. That is, the students who were easily accessible were selected as participants after getting their consent. In order to represent the larger population accurately, both females (96) and males (47) took part in the study [16]. The age range of the participants respectively varied between 20 and below to 30 and

above. To elaborate, %51.7 of the students were 21–25 years old, %39.2 were 20 and below, %6.3 were 30 and above, and finally %2.8 were between 26 and 29. Of the participants, %74.9 had been actively using computers, tablets and/or mobile phones between five to ten years and above, every day (%51.7) for fun and social media (%44.8) and for lessons (%23.1) among others. The students were coming from different departments such as child development, electronic communication, accountancy and computer technology. However, the common ground they shared was that they were all receiving English language instruction via the distance education component of the program.

2.3. Data Collection

For some studies, a mixed-method is superior to single method and is essential to get optimum results [17]. In addition, mixed-method research offers researchers the advantage of being able to choose from the full repertoire of methodological options, producing many different kinds of creative mixes [18]. In line with these propositions, a mixed-method research design was adopted in this study. That is, data were collected by both quantitative and qualitative means. By means of the quantitative side it was made possible to reach a larger population to collect more data for the study while the qualitative side helped to gather data in an in-depth manner for the questions under investigation. As for the quantitative side of the study, a questionnaire consisting of four sections to elicit answers from four standpoints were administered to 143 students of the aforementioned program.

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of six multiple-choice questions to elicit demographic data from the participants. For the rest of the questionnaire, in order to ease the students' decision making three options were provided for the answers to each question, "yes, not sure, and no." Eleven questions in the second section aimed to find out the students' attitudes toward distance learning based on the assumption that positive attitude has long been supposed to bear the priority for success in distance education programs [7]. Students' probable qualities towards responsibility-taking and sustainability of their language education were investigated by means of twenty-two questions in the third section. In a similar manner, the last part of the questionnaire interrogated whether the program contributed to students' 21st-century skills in macro and sustainability of their lifelong language learning in micro terms. This part consisted of 16 questions. That is, the participants answered totally 55 questions in the questionnaire.

In order to ensure the validity of the questionnaire, similar to Lawshe [19], five experts were asked to read the questionnaire items and on the basis of their comments changes were realized in two items. In addition, the questionnaire was piloted with 15 non-participants. The procedure aimed to avoid any probable ambiguity by administering the questionnaire to a group of students with similar characteristics with the study sample. They did not report any problems. In addition, Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was calculated as 0.79 ensuring the internal consistency of the items.

To shed more light on the study by qualitative means, semi-structured group interviews were held with participants. The students formed their own interview groups on a voluntary basis according to their wish and ended up with six groups of different sizes consisting of four to seven students (totally 31 students). During the interviews, the students' views on autonomy and sustainability of their language education, their lifelong learning tendencies and finally, their probable gains from the program as they perceived were questioned. The duration of each interview session was determined by the participants' aspirations to say more on the research topic. The interviews were recorded and consequently, it was calculated that there were (15, 17, 18, 23, 24, 35) 132 min of interview recordings in total. These recordings were then transcribed.

2.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed by a statistical program while qualitative data gained through the interviews were subjected to content analysis. Downe and Wambolt [20] (p. 314) define content analysis as a research method that provides systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal or written, visual or written data in order to

describe and quantify specific phenomena [20] (pp. 8–14). In a similar vein, content analysis is described as an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent. Reducing the volume of the text collected, groups and categories are identified together and some understanding is sought out of the data. For the analysis to be trustworthy, researchers need to stay true to the text to achieve trustworthiness [21]. Weber [22] cites Krippendorff [21] (pp. 130–154), who writes about types of reliability that are pertinent to content analysis. As he puts it, these are stability, reproducibility, and accuracy. Stability namely, the codes and categories are invariant over time. This can be achieved by coding the same content several times by the same coder. If inconsistencies are observed reliability cannot be said to have been reached. As a matter of fact, stability, as coding is done by only one coder, is the weakest form for reliability. Reproducibility, on the other hand, is to do with inter-coder reliability. The extent to which codes and categories are produced in the same way when the same text is coded by more than one coder determines the reliability of the content analysis. Similarly, Neuendorf [23] emphasizes the importance of consistency of results and suggests that two coders may contribute to the reliability of the results when classifications are made by human coders rather than computers. Finally, accuracy which is the strongest but least frequently maintained form of reliability, as Krippendorff [21] claims, is the extent to which the classification of text corresponds to a predetermined standard on which coders have already been trained.

To achieve trustworthiness in the present study, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. In line with Elo and Kyngas [24], the analysis started with open coding procedures. To go in more detail, the transcription was read through several times and then labels were attributed to the emerging categories and records for these were kept. Then, the categories went through a labelling and relabeling process and the codes that were supposed to fall under the emergent categories were identified as in axial coding. In other words, the analysis was not realized by searching for predetermined concepts within the interview data but rather concepts were derived from the data as in inductive content analysis.

In order not to stumble into study findings that are merely subjective inferences of the researcher/coder, in this study, reproducibility was attempted to be maintained by means of two coders. Having come to terms on the analysis procedure, both coders followed the same steps explained above individually and the codes and categories were labelled and relabeled until a final consensus was reached between the coders. Next, the frequencies were calculated and the results were displayed.

3. Findings

In this study, we tried to find answers to five research questions. These are the vocational school students' attitudes toward language learning through a distance education program, their potential responsibility to sustain their language learning, whether the program contributed to the students' 21st-century skills and lifelong language learning propensities and whether the program changed the students' view of learning. The study finally investigated the students' opinions on how this program could be improved to equip them with qualities to maintain the sustainability of their education and lifelong learning. To remind, the research questions were formed as the following:

- (1) What are the vocational school students' attitudes toward language learning through a distance education program?
- (2) Do they appear to possess the qualities to be able to take responsibility for their own learning on their shoulders and sustain their lifelong language learning?
- (3) Do they think that program specifically contributed to their 21st-century skills in macro and lifelong language learning propensities in micro terms?
- (4) Do they think that the program has changed their view of learning?
- (5) How in the students' opinion this program may become more productive to equip them with qualities to maintain the sustainability of their education and lifelong learning?

In this section of the paper, the study findings will be presented in the order of research questions of the study.

3.1. Student's Attitudes Toward Language Learning at a Distance Education Program

The first inquiry was related to the students' attitudes toward distance language learning. When we look at the results of the study, we observe that students appear to have a more positive attitude toward learning languages at a distance education program rather than a negative one.

The analysis reveals that a total of 143 students made 827 positive and 671 undecided and negative choices in this part of the questionnaire. As displayed in the Figure 1 the majority of students believe that they can learn vocabulary (101 students) and grammar (84 students) in this program. They appear sure that they can listen and understand (104 students) and read and understand (88 students) texts in English. However, when it comes to writing skill, they state that they cannot write in various genres (98 students). As they believe, they can learn to speak (76 students) but cannot interact properly in English (95 students). Although the students hold positive views about learning some skills in English, learning English proficiently in a distance education program does not seem to be an attainable goal to them. The number of students who are not sure or hold negative beliefs regarding this item (88 students) outweighs the number of students who believe that they can manage language learning in this program. Half of the participant population believe that they can transfer their knowledge of English to other areas (71 students) while almost an equal number of students doubt that they can achieve this (72 students). Some say that the program contributed to their language learning for now (76 students), as well as for their potential future language learning activities (74 students).

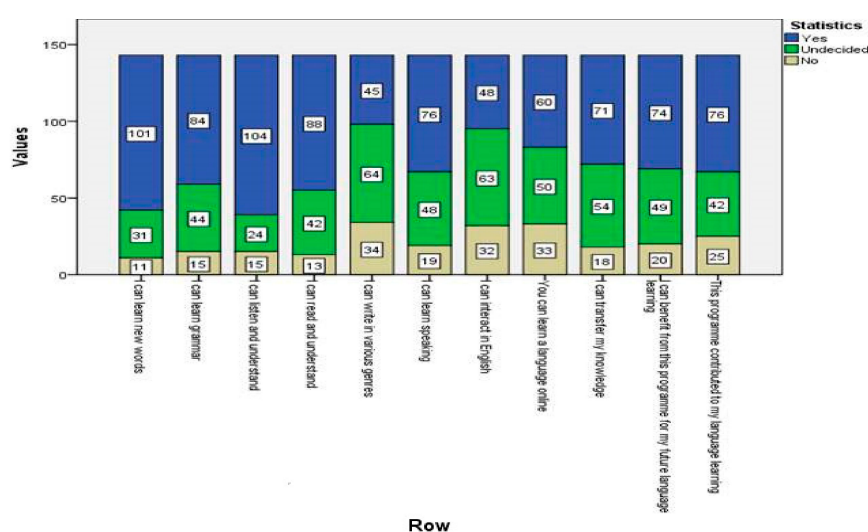


Figure 1. Students' attitudes toward language learning at a distance education program.

Regarding the results gained in this part, we may conclude that students are motivated toward learning English through distance education. However, they do not believe that they can become fully proficient in productive skills like writing and spoken interaction in this program.

3.2. Students' Tendencies for Responsibility Taking and Sustainability of Their Language Learning

Results concerning the second research question, namely the students' tendencies for responsibility-taking and sustainability of their language learning reveal a fluctuating pattern. In other words, it appears that they have not yet settled views in their minds regarding the issue. For example, the students say that in order to learn something they need their teachers to teach them (81 students), they need someone's help to learn (69 students), they need a teacher for assessment (92 students), and to answer their questions (111 students). However, at the same time they state that they may not always need a teacher to learn (71 students), learning is their own responsibility (111 students),

they can make their own learning decisions (119 students), and sustain their education on their own (118 students) (Figure 2).

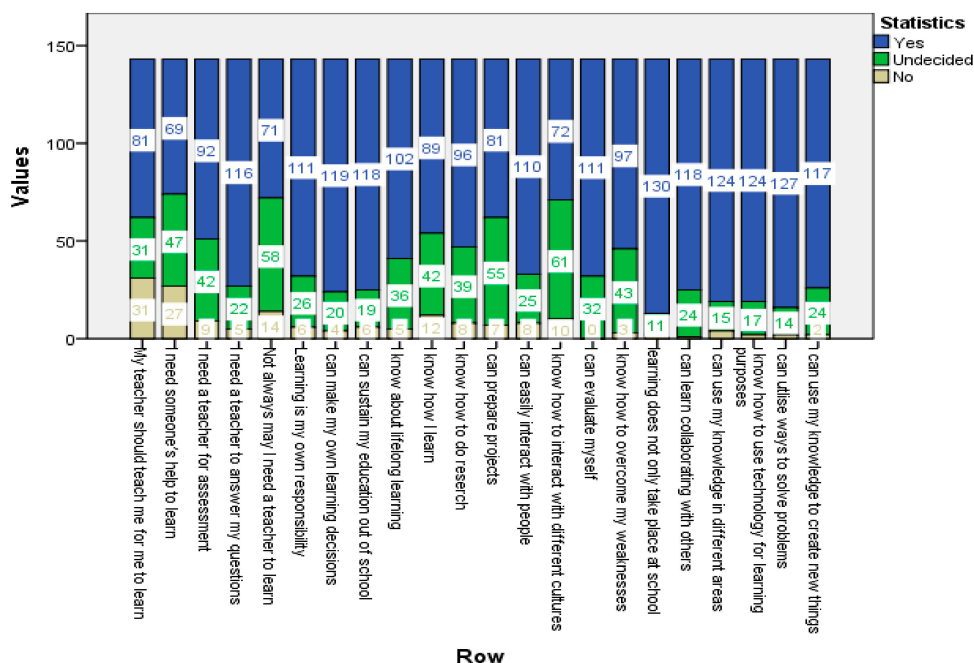


Figure 2. Students' responsibility-taking and sustainability of their language learning.

On the other side of the coin, we understand that the students believe that they are informed about lifelong learning (102 students), know how to learn (89 students), conduct research (96 students), and are able to prepare projects without help (81 students). The participants display confidence in themselves in intra and interpersonal qualities as well as technology and metacognitive skills. For instance, they say that they are able to communicate with others easily (110 students), they are aware of the ways to interact with people from other cultures (72 students), they can evaluate themselves objectively (111 students), and are informed about ways to improve themselves (97 students).

Contrary to what they say regarding their need for help preferably from a teacher, they exhibit awareness on the phenomenon that learning does not necessarily have to take place in a school setting (130 students) and, probably unknowingly, they display a social constructivist approach and argue that people can learn through cooperation and collaboration with others (113 students). Moreover, they appear to possess self-confidence in utilizing ways to sustain their learning. To elaborate, almost all the participants claim that they can use their knowledge in other fields when they need (124 students), benefit from technology for educational purposes (124 students), create novel ways to solve problems (127 students) and finally use their existing knowledge to create new things (117 students). To sum up, in spite of some hesitations the students experience regarding the unavailability of a teacher in their probable future learning contexts we may still suggest that the students seem to possess the courage and skills to sustain their own learning.

Results echoing the above findings emerged in the analysis of the group interviews as well. According to these, students bear self-oriented and external assumptions on the issue. In the following Table 1, these assumptions are displayed on the basis of their frequency of citation. As is seen, the students put forward various reasons for taking responsibility on their own shoulders. As they believe, they can only learn by themselves (52 citations), learning cannot occur without taking the responsibility of their own learning on their shoulders (36 citations), and they can improve themselves on their own (30 citations) as displayed below.

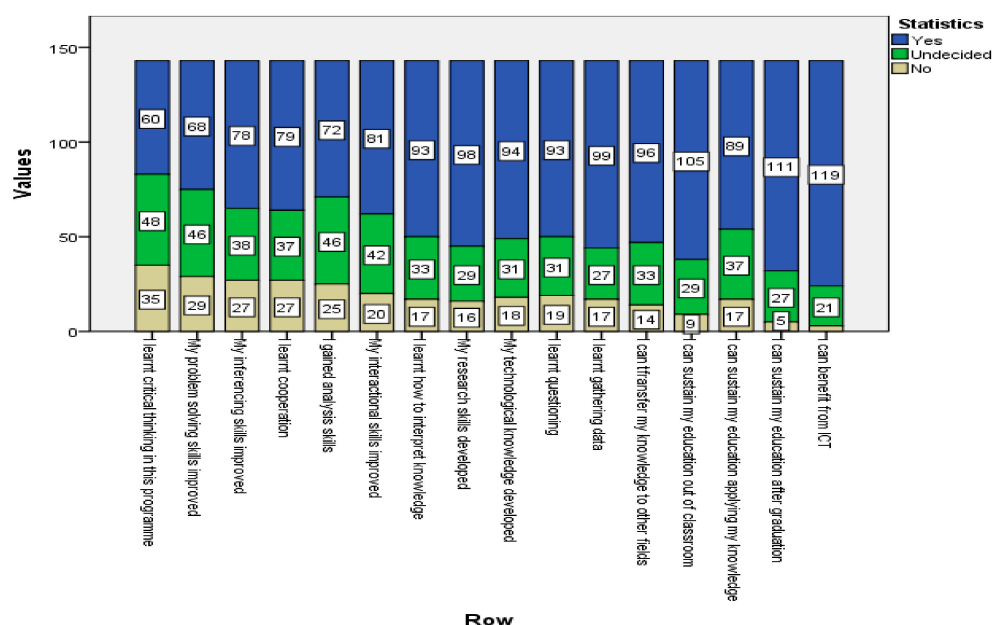
Table 1. Taking responsibility for one's own learning.

Self-Oriented Assumptions	Fr.	External	Fr.
We can learn only by ourselves	52	Others may not know how I learn	7
One cannot learn without taking responsibility for his own learning	36		
We can improve ourselves only on our own	30		
We will not always have someone to teach us throughout our lives	19		
Otherwise, I cannot sustain my education	12		
Responsibility develops our self-confidence	9		
Each individual has a unique learning style	9		

Once again, the students refer to the inexistence of a more knowledgeable other [25] and underline that in future distance education and lifelong learning contexts, they may not always have somebody to teach them (19 citations) which probably connotes their need for a teacher. In addition, they believe that they cannot sustain their education in the future without taking responsibility (12 citations). The students also make comments uncovering their personal theories in somewhat a scientific tone. For example, they claim that responsibility develops self-confidence (9 citations), each individual has a unique learning style (9 citations), and it is them who knows best about their own learning styles (7 citations).

3.3. Contribution of Program to Students' 21st Century Skills and Lifelong Language Learning Propensities

As the third inquiry, the study questioned the probable contribution of the program to students' 21st-century skills and lifelong language learning propensities as they perceived. In the following Figure 3, we see the students' views regarding the contribution of the program to these issues.

**Figure 3.** Contribution of the program to students' 21st-century skills and lifelong language learning propensities.

In the questionnaire, students also answered questions regarding the contribution of the distance learning program to their 21st-century skills and lifelong language learning propensities. When we examine the results related to 21st-century skills, we observe that the majority estimates that the program did not have a formative effect on their critical thinking skills (83 students). Neither do they think that their problem-solving skills improved (75 students). On the other hand, students' skills for

inferencing (78 students), cooperation (79 students), analysis (72 students), and interaction (81 students) have developed. In the same vein, the students expressed that during this program they learnt how to interpret knowledge (93 students), and became aware of ways to conduct research (98 students). In addition, the program enhanced their knowledge of technology (94 students), they learnt to question (93 students), and now they feel able to transfer their knowledge to other fields (99 students).

Concerning the sustainability of their learning, we come up with similar results and see that students believe that they can sustain their learning out of the classroom (105 students), sustain their language education (89 students), even after graduation (111 students), and finally, they can benefit from interaction and communication technologies (119 students). Thus, we may briefly say that from the students' perspective, the program contributed to the students' 21st-century skills and lifelong language learning propensities. The only negative outcome revealed was related to critical thinking skills. The students stated that the program did not add to their critical thinking skills.

3.4. Students' View of Learning

The fourth research question aimed at uncovering the students' opinions on the probable contribution of the program on their view of learning. Contrary to the positive citations above, when their view of learning is concerned we find that students' views showed stability and remained unchanged. To elaborate, although they think that distance learning is highly advantageous for those who work and study (13 citations), learning is not restricted to school buildings (10 citations) and does not necessarily have to be face to face all the time (9 citations) some students appear to bear fixed beliefs and are not open to change. They claim that learning without an actual existence of a teacher is not an effective way to learn things (39 citations) and distance learning forms lack hands-on learning experience (8 citations) and thus what they learn remains at surface level and cannot be put into practice. The findings echo in Bruderermann, Aschemann, Füllsack and Posch [26] where they report that online courses did not receive high importance ratings, even held the "lanterne rouge" at the University of Graz, and some students viewed interactive courses more important and preferred actual classroom experience. Finally, in this study we find that a group of students declare that they see no difference between face to face and distance learning (7 citations) and it is for this reason they do not feel a particular effect of the program on the probable change of their view of learning. These are summarized below (Table 2).

Table 2. Probable contribution of the program on students' view of learning.

Newly Emerged Positive Views	Fr.	Negative Views	Fr.
Distance learning is advantageous for those who work and study	13	Learning without a teacher is not effective	39
Learning is not restricted to school buildings	10	Distance learning program lacks hands-on learning experience	8
Learning does not necessarily have to be face to face	9	F2f and distance learning do not differ so it did not have a special effect on me	7

Although the students' views of learning remained the same, their self-evaluation went through a change in the distance education program. Namely, students learnt how to achieve some academic qualities which made them feel stronger than they were before they attended this program. As university students coming from departments such as child development, electronic communication, accountancy and computer technology they admit that were not able to reach the content they needed on the internet before they started this program (10 citations). These students come from different departments of vocational high schools and it seems that they were not involved in technological and research-related issues as learners in their high school years which, in the 21st century, may be considered as a deficiency on behalf of their teachers, programs and themselves as learners. Some now find themselves more responsible in academic terms (9 citations) and capable of organizing his/her own learning (9 citations)

and study schedule (7 citations). They feel more facultative (6 citations) probably because they attend all the lessons with their own will as they say (6 citations) in spite of the fact that they are not obliged to attend the classes as distant learners (Table 3).

Table 3. Students' self-evaluations after the program.

Positive	Fr.	Negative	Fr.
I can reach the content I need on the net	10	Program has no effect on me	11
I feel more responsible	9	It is hard to take responsibility	4
I organize my own learning	9	I am already strong	4
I organize my own schedule	7		
I am more facultative	6		
I attended all sessions with my own will	6		

In contrast with these promising remarks, during the interview sessions, 11 students declared that the program did not at all have an effect on them as regards to how they viewed themselves. Some others stated that it was hard to bear responsibility (4 citations) and other students stated that they had always felt strong and this could not be attributed to the program (4 citations).

In the interviews, the students were asked whether or not they had plans to sustain their language education in the form of distance education. At the end of the analysis, we find that 31 interviewees made 178 citations for their future educational plans. Those who plan to sustain their education in distance education programs (74 citations) make such a plan because they believe that learning is a lifelong process (12 citations) and they find such programs advantageous in terms of time management (10 citations). On the other hand, we encounter more future plans in face to face contexts (104 citations) and find that at least some of the students have a negative view for distance learning programs (21 citations). Some intend to take the vertical transfer exam and continue their education at a faculty department (17 citations). Some other students do not plan to sustain their education in distance learning programs because they find these programs unsatisfactory by all means (15 citations) and as for language learning, they think it is hard to learn languages online (12 citations) (Table 4).

Table 4. Students' plans to sustain their language education.

Positive	Fr.	Negative	Fr.
I will sustain my language education online	27	Distance learning is not an effective way to learn.	21
I will attend other distance education programs	25	I will take the vertical transfer exam and have f2f education	17
Learning is a lifelong process	12	Distance learning is unsatisfactory	15
Because of the time advantage, I will	10	It is hard to learn languages online	12
		I will improve myself in an academic field	12
		I need a teacher and a real classroom	11
		I want to attend f2f seminars	9
		I will start work and learn by doing	7

The results reveal that the students somehow plan to further their education after graduation. However, we see that their plans are not related to language learning but rather concerned with their major at the vocational school of higher education and in face to face contexts. Some desire to become academicians (12 citations), others plan to improve themselves professionally through seminars and conferences (9 citations). We also find students who are persuaded that they learn best by doing and plan to start work to have a twofold positive outcome, improving themselves professionally and earning money (7). In this part of the findings, as is throughout the study, the students emphasize their need for a teacher and face to face interaction in a real classroom setting and make their future plans accordingly.

3.5. Students' Suggestions for the Program

The fifth and the final investigation of this study was concerned with ways how students thought that this program can be made more productive to equip them with qualities to maintain the sustainability of their education and lifelong learning. The analysis revealed three categories. These are interaction with teachers and peers, teacher guidance and additional content and activities.

3.5.1. Interaction with Teachers and Peers

When we look for more detail in the citations under the first category, we find that all suggestions coming from the students refer to face to face interaction rather than through distance education forms. The most frequently cited suggestion appears to reveal the need for face to face instruction for important courses, as they perceive, such as English (22 citations). Although these students are enrolled in a distance education program, they still call for face to face summary of courses to consolidate their learning on a weekly basis (18 citations). Especially when it comes to English, they attribute significance to this course, thus suggest that small groups should be formed for the those who wish or are able to attend additional sessions to be offered face to face (17 citations). The participants complain that they do not have the opportunity to actually practice what they learn at the courses and that relevant face to face courses should be offered to fill this gap (17 citations). As distance learners, those who are not able to attend the synchronous classes due to various reasons do not have the chance to communicate and interact with peers and teachers which is possible during the class hours. Evaluating this as a drawback of the program itself, they wish to have face to face activities with teachers and students at suitable times for more collaboration and interaction (13 citations). As we see, some students make their suggestions in a way to shape the program according to their personal schedule rather than accommodating themselves to the requirements of the program.

These participants take a sit-down final exam and the ones who live out of town come to school for the exams from other cities. As they suggest, this exam period should be extended and before they sit down for the final exams, organizations for face to face classes may be made. In addition, they wish the lessons to be designed in a more interactive way (8 citations) (Table 5).

Table 5. Students' suggestions: Category 1.

Interaction with Teachers and Peers	Fr.
Important courses as English should be f2f	22
Lessons should be summarized f2f once a week to consolidate learning	18
Small groups with teachers should be formed for additional f2f language instruction	17
F2f practical courses should be offered for those who wish	17
F2f activities with teachers and students should be organized for more collaboration and interaction	13
Lessons should be designed more interactively	8

3.5.2. Teacher Guidance

In the second category, contrary to the confidence students exhibited in their survey responses regarding motivation, responsibility-taking and sustainability of their own learning, we observe that the students still report that they need the actual existence and guidance of a teacher. The most frequent citation under this category is that there should be a model to guide the students to get the most out of the program (19 citations). Similarly, although the system allows all the students to reach and correspond with the teachers and peers through a message board the students once again appear to seek more interaction and guidance of a teacher (11 citations). Some even suggest that the teachers should teach them what to do to learn a language (8 citations). Last but not least, they want collaboration and cooperation with teachers and peers and learn from each other (5 citations) (Table 6).

Table 6. Students' suggestions: Category 2.

Teacher Guidance	Fr.
There should be a model to guide the students to get the most out of this program	19
We should be able to reach the teachers whenever we need	11
Teachers should teach us what to do to learn a language	8
We should learn from each other	5

3.5.3. Additional Content and Activities

The details for the last category that emerged in the analysis are shown in the Table 7 below. As is seen, students appear to be effectively diagnosing their weaknesses and putting forth some suggestions to overcome these. The majority of the students hold the belief that they need more class hours for English, a course they view as "highly important" (26 citations) as well as more sources to study and learn from (19 citations). They emphasize that there should be project work, presentations, and opportunities for practical experiences should be provided, for example, such work may be given as assignments to the students (14 citations). Parallel to the ideas quoted above, in this category too, we see that the students call for teachers' scaffolding to benefit more from the program. As they put it, teachers should teach them study skills, learning techniques, and note-taking together with the lesson content (11 citations). Evaluating themselves poorly also in other areas, they suggest that courses should trigger the students' personal development (10 citations) and prepare them for life after school (9 citations). In addition, some other courses such as history, geography, culture relevant to the daily needs of today should be offered in the form of elective courses (8 citations). Finally, according to them, the program should be made more active (5 citations) and redesigned in a way to add to their world knowledge (5 citations) may be by means of online seminars (2 citations).

Table 7. Students' suggestions: Category 3.

Additional Content and Activities	Fr.
Class hours for important courses as English should be increased	26
More sources for students may be provided	19
Project work, presentations, practical experiences should be given as assignments	14
Teachers should teach us study skills	11
Courses should also trigger the students' personal development	10
Courses should also prepare us for life after school	9
Elective courses for history, geography, other cultures relevant to daily needs of today should be offered	8
Program should be made more active	5
Program should support our world knowledge	5
Online seminars can be given	2

4. Results Conclusions and Recommendations

Similar to the way the findings were presented above, in this section as well, conclusions are displayed in the order of the research questions. This study was conducted at a vocational school of higher education at a Turkish university. The students' attitudes toward learning English by means of the distance education component of the program was the first inquiry of the study. We find that students attribute importance to language learning and have a positive attitude toward the issue. In their opinion, they can learn language skills in this program but when productive skills as spoken interaction and writing in various genres are concerned they believe that they cannot achieve these without the existence of a teacher explicitly teaching in a face to face context. Similar contradictory findings are visible in all the aspects of this study. For example, for the second question although the students say that they have the potential to take the responsibility of their learning on their shoulders

and sustain their learning in a lifelong manner, still they call for the need for a teacher to teach, guide, help and assess their performances as students and answer their questions whenever they need.

When it comes to the second question, that is the sustainability of their education and their plans to achieve this, we encounter not many plans to do with language learning. Students appear to be aware of 21st-century skills and lifelong learning issues and give a highly keen picture of sustaining their education after graduation. However, their focus is not on language learning but rather in areas connected to their majors. In addition, their future plans are all visualized in traditional educational contexts except for a few and the students once again underline their view that for education to be productive, it has to be face to face.

The results reached for the third research question revealed that the distance education program in our study context does not seem to have an effect on how the students view learning. Sticking to the belief that face to face instruction is superior to distance education, the students frequently emphasize that a distance education program can be effective only if certain criteria are met. According to them, the lessons should be summarized in a traditional classroom context, retold face to face and strategies for learning new things should directly be taught to them all by a teacher prior to the courses. As a matter of fact, students exhibit three significant characteristics throughout. self-confidence when responding to almost all the queries of this study, conversely an evidently observable desire for existence of a teacher and scaffolding by a real teacher rather than a virtual one for a broad array of needs and finally propensity for more education and development. Karan, Çebi, and Turgut [27] write about parallel findings. In their study, although some students viewed the distance of a teacher positively, some others negatively commented on the situation. As they complained, if they had been in a real classroom setting with the presence of a teacher, they would not have been distracted by the factors in their own environment but merely concentrate on the lesson. In addition, demonstrating their need for the existence of a teacher, students suggested that synchronous distance education courses should be conducted in question and answer sequences guaranteeing interaction among the members of the distance learning community.

In the present study, a response to the fourth research question, the students reported that although they believed that the program did not change the way they viewed learning, the way they viewed themselves changed after they started the distance education program. They believe that they have gained a lot of skills and evaluate themselves as more motivated and stronger in academic terms than before. This belief derived from the fact that some students regularly attended the lesson although they did not have an obligation to do so due to the nature of the program. The students also tried to fulfil the requirements of the courses and this developed a sense of satisfaction and self-confidence in them.

According to their understanding, students made suggestions to improve their program toward a more productive one which was the final inquiry of the study. Among these, three categories emerged: interaction with teachers and peers, more teacher guidance and additional content and practical activities to be embedded within the curriculum. Similar findings as summarized above stand out under this category as well.

The results of the study reveal a mismatch in the way the distance education program is constructed and how the students of this program view learning. Although we find that they are motivated toward learning a language in the language component of the program, they are aware of lifelong learning issues and keen on sustaining their education after their graduation, and believe that the program somehow contributed to their 21st-century skills to achieve their plans, they need some adaptations and organizations to feel fully content with their education. With resembling findings at hand, Beldarrain [28] discusses that the 21st-century learner requires educational opportunities that are not bound by time or place, yet that allow interaction with the instructor and peers. In order to maintain these, he recommends various means such as voice and videoconferencing, whiteboards, live presentation tools, application sharing, chats, and emails to be used for interaction and collaboration. Furthermore, blogs, wikis, and podcasts, may also serve to the feeling of connectedness between the members of the distance learning community. We encounter similar findings in Menchaca and

Teklu [29], where they discuss that a variety of tools should be provided in the distance education programs to address as many students with different learning styles as possible, create a more flexible learning context, and to accommodate collaboration and reflection within the program for more participant satisfaction.

In the same vein, Guri-Rosenblit [30] suggests that the new electronic media may enhance communication among the involved parties during the education period in distance education programs. In fact, he writes about the need for a change and potential changes the new world will witness in the forthcoming years in the area of distance education. Hereunder, he foreshadows that the status of the mega distance teaching universities will remain stable. However, the profile of the students and their reasons for attending distance education will take a newer shape. As he puts it, students will be studying towards various diplomas and continuing education courses, rather than towards full degree programs. This means that in the future, in the distance education programs there will be more international students most of whom will probably be still working but aim to improve themselves in various fields. These students will replace those of today who study for a full degree. New leading models of distance education will be provided by mixed-mode institutions and consortia-type ventures. The mixed-mode will enable students to study concurrently on-campus and through distance education which was one of the most frequently cited innovation by the students in our study. These mixed-mode institutions and consortia offering distance teaching courses will utilize the communication capabilities of the new interactive media. According to what he writes, new electronic media applications will be used as add-ons to the core curricula that will continue to be based on printed self-study materials and mass media. The findings of this study similarly signal the need for such reformist changes as mixed-mode institutions and more collaborative activities.

The results reached at the end of this study provoke thoughts on the need for all the involved parties as administrators, organizers and teachers of the distance education program to hold discussions on the reconsideration of the philosophy and approach underpinning the language program, as well as the curriculum and materials used in order to more powerfully equip the students to compete with the soaring dynamics of the continually transforming new world.

The findings of the study need to be interpreted considering the context from which the participants came. In Turkey, high schools accept students on the basis of the results of a central governmental exam (High School Entrance Exam). Students who score high points in this exam are placed in more prestigious schools while others who do not succeed or prefer not to take the exam are assigned in any one of the neighboring high schools or vocational schools. Consequently, students with a relatively lower academic profile happen to be accepted to vocational schools. Unfortunately, these schools appear to fall behind their institutional aims to fulfil the need for intermediate members in various fields in the last few decades. For this reason, these schools have been criticized from a number of standpoints. These are the quality of teachers, the unsatisfactory outcomes that emerge out of the training period, and equipment which is not compatible with the latest developments in the industrial sector [31]. Thus, these students may need more than what is written on the curricula of the distance learning programs. In order to thoroughly identify the current needs of these students, they have to be included in a decision-making process on what else needs to be included in the course contents. The vocational schools of higher education need to adapt for themselves a more student-centered approach, organize more contact with companies for voluntary work and thus provide students with opportunities for practical experience and potentially a more fruitful training period. This will leave more room for interaction and collaboration with both peers and more knowledgeable others. In addition, visits to companies and visitors from companies can be incorporated within the program. We suggest that sustainability of education and lifelong learning issues in this context be discussed on a more realistic basis only by taking all these discussions into consideration.

Learning a foreign language is not only to do with learning the lesson content as in some other courses but is multi-faceted and involves learners in real-life issues. Thus, in this regard, we may argue that even learning a language alone contributes to a person in multiple ways and these courses can

be used as an aid for students' global sustainability as well. For example, within the framework of their project on environmental issues, Horst and Pearce [32] used language instruction as a means for global sustainable development. In their study, students were allowed to establish connections between disciplines, establish contact with German-speaking communities outside the university and were encouraged to make cultural and linguistic comparisons. On the web site [Appropedia.org](https://www.appropedia.org), the students actively made changes on the content as they improved their language as well as their knowledge in the other targeted issues of the project.

Therefore, we may suggest that as a part of one of the most established universities in Turkey, the vocational school for higher education may take a more active role on the basis of the above discussions and contribute to the students' global and language sustainability. These can easily be achieved by scheduling native and non-native visitors either online or face-to-face forms to provide the students with interaction and collaboration they stated their need for. Moreover, activities can be organized in collaboration with visiting Erasmus students of the university for language practice and cultural exchange adding to the students' world knowledge. Regarding self-study mode, additional forms of sources and study materials and activities that require more interaction via a variety of new technology tools may be utilized for the students. This may also add to the students' confidence and self-worth. On the other hand, the language teachers of the program may enhance their situation for their students to more easily keep up and even compete with peers from more developed educational contexts. That is, the teachers may try to identify problems specific to their own environment in collaboration and cooperation with their students, involve the students in the decision making processes, plan their further teaching on the basis of the students' needs, establish more student-centered language classes, conduct more interactive lessons and make themselves more familiar with the latest technological developments. Action research and classroom research seem to serve as a sound means for this purpose. Similarly, Edwards and Burns [33] (p. 6) write that action research is increasingly becoming popular in language classes and they list the positive impacts of action research. According to them, by means of such studies teachers feel more confident and connected to their students and they suggest that a balance of top-down institutional support and individual teacher motivation is essential in ensuring sustainability of this impact over time.

In the vocational school of higher education which was the context of this study, we reached results on the students' views on language learning and distance education, and their plans to sustain their language learning in a lifelong manner. Besides, the participants made evaluations of themselves taking into account the impact of language learning program and proposed some changes for the program to be improved in a way to globally contribute to them. When we look at the matter from this aspect, language courses which were offered in the form of distance education appear to have an implicit impact on many of the areas which the students declared their need for the sustainability of their development. As a matter of fact, one of the most salient findings of this study was the students' repeatedly stated demand for the presence of an actual teacher. However, we may discuss that if the language classes had been given face to face and in the way the students wished them to be, most probably because, in our opinion, the students would have most of the time relied on their teachers, they would not have developed themselves up to the point which they now place themselves in their evaluations.

Finally, the findings of this study are limited to the context in which it is conducted and thus cannot be generalized. Different results can be reached when conducted in different contexts. In addition, as the study context was a distance education program, reaching the whole population, administering a questionnaire and holding interviews with the students might have been problematic. In this respect, the selection of the participants was realized by convenience sampling. The study findings are bound to this specific research sample and change of the research population might have revealed other findings.

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