

Autonomy in Distance English Language Learning

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Abstract

Open and distance learning is experiencing a rapid growth throughout the world and Syria is no exception. With the turn of the new millennium, Syria launched two state institutes for distance learning: The Open Learning Centre (opened in 2001) and the Syrian Virtual University (opened in 2002). The Syrian Virtual University (SVU), one of its kind in the whole Arab region, offers students the opportunity to gain education through an online learning environment based on the latest technology. Since Syria is a country where English has become an important educational requirement, the teaching of English as a foreign language has therefore entered the arena of distance learning.

There is an overwhelming consensus amongst language learning researchers today on the benefits of developing an autonomous approach to learning which has also been linked to successful language learning. In higher education today, autonomy is also seen as a 'marker of gradueness' as manifested in the British Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements on the outcomes of graduate study. Holec (1980) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning'. The case is that when learners come from a traditional educational environment where they have been dependent on the teacher into a context where autonomy is essential, they are likely to find this new medium rather challenging. This study attempts to investigate the degree of SVU language students' readiness to develop an autonomous approach to learning English. This is achieved first through examining students' perceptions of the qualities of the good distance language learner and of themselves as distance learners and second through an investigation of the support system offered by the SVU. This study also intends to shed light on the effect of the culture of this specific context on the efficacy of distance learning.

Keywords: the Syrian Virtual University (SVU), virtual learning; quality assurance (QA); autonomy; student support, learning strategies, metacognitive strategies, technology and distance language learning, EFL (English as a foreign language)

1. Introduction

1.1 SVU English language teaching and its associated problems

The Syrian Virtual University (SVU) has provided English language courses ever since its establishment in 2002. In fact, English – a university requirement - was the first course offered at this young university. The number of students enrolled at the

SVU grew steadily from less than a hundred students in 2003 to around 6000 students in 2008. With this increase, the number of students enrolled on the English language courses grew steadily too. Figures 1 and 2 show the growth in the total number of SVU students and the number of SVU English language students enrolled between 2006 and 2008 respectively.

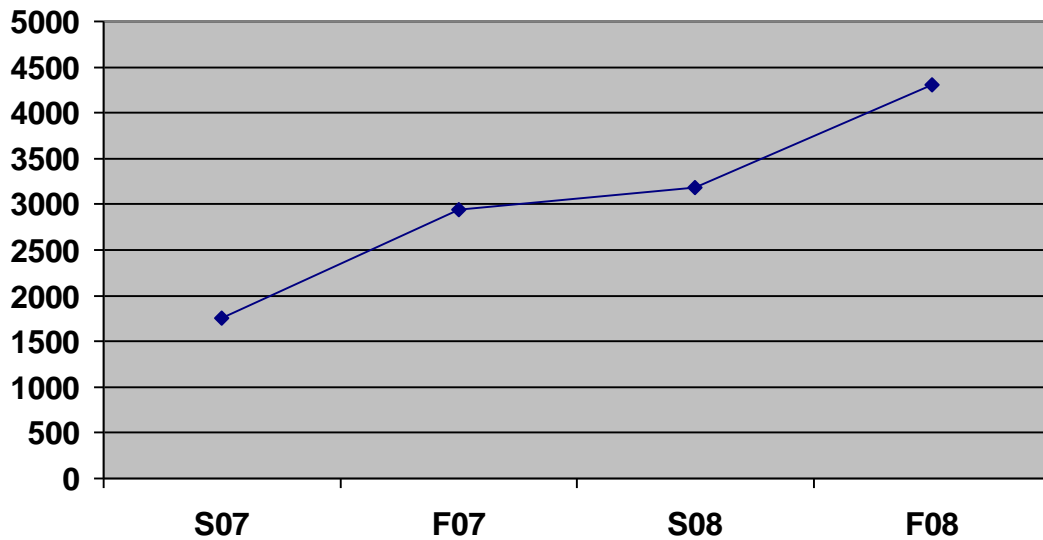


Figure 1. Number of students enrolled at the SVU in the academic years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008

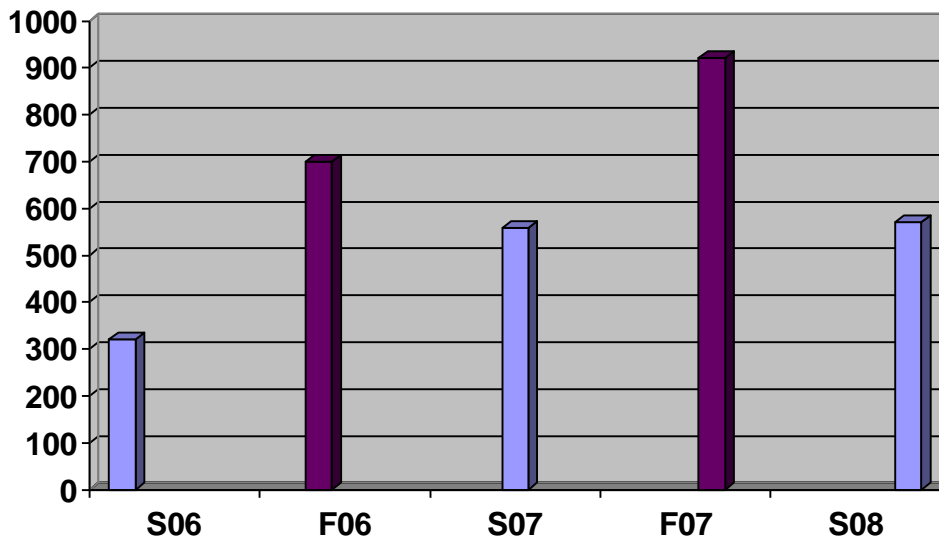


Figure 2. Number of SVU students enrolled on the English language courses between the academic years 2005-2006 and 2007-2008

The primary reason why distance learning gained popularity in Syria today is slightly different from the reasons why distance learning flourished in other parts of the world. Early distance learning institutes in most parts of the world targeted mainly mature learners who were off school or university age but were keen to pursue continued education to upgrade their skills (Hurd and Xiao: 2006). The literature points to the fact that distance education is viewed as a means of providing disadvantaged people with an equal opportunity and a second chance to access education and make up for lost opportunities. In Syria however, the case is different and distance education flourished as a means of providing higher education for the disadvantaged high school graduates who could not get a place at one of the conventional free of charge state universities. This was the result of the high entry requirements imposed by the tremendous demand on public universities. The SVU has therefore provided Syrian youth with an alternative means to access higher education.

A survey carried out by the SVU administration in Fall 2007 revealed that the typical SVU learner is in his twenties. 71% of the overall number of registered students at the SVU were aged between 18-25 years, 26% were between 26-35 and only 3% were 36 years and over (see figure no. 3). These figures contrast with the statistics carried on the UK Open University students where the typical distance language learner is between 35–50 years (Hurd & Xiao: 2006).

One more feature of this context is that learners who opt to study in this mode of learning are not the educationally elite. This was confirmed by the findings of a survey carried out on the SVU English language students in spring 08 which revealed that the average high school marks obtained by SVU entrants is around 65%. The survey also revealed that 48% of entrants come from secondary schools having passed their Baccalaureate exam, 41% come from intermediate institutes (vocational institutes) hoping to upgrade their two year Diploma with a Bachelor's degree, and 11% come with a Bachelor's degree seeking a Masters. It is worth mentioning here that students who end up in intermediate institutes are those whose high school marks were not high enough to secure them a place at a state university.

Another feature of the SVU context is that its learners come from an educational environment where they have been largely dependent on the teacher who is responsible for most of the planning, organizing, and delivery of learning materials. It is a context where pupils are used to conventional teaching methods with the core course book central to learning and the teacher seen as the holder of authority and the repository of knowledge. In short, students have not been trained on how to take charge of their own learning. Coming into a context where autonomy is essential to success, learners are likely to find this new environment rather challenging.

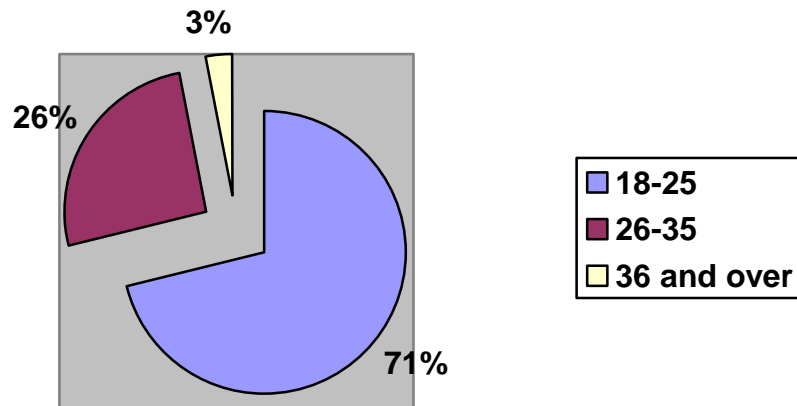


Figure 3. The age range of students enrolled on SVU programs

Though the majority of SVU students are young school leavers with little or no experience in autonomy or the learning skills that the more mature learners may possess, yet they are eager to earn a recognized qualification. This reflects a culture where a person with a university degree is more socially recognized and respected. 91% of the SVU students in the survey believe that a university degree will open for them better opportunities in life. 54% of the students said that they chose to study at the SVU because they were hoping to earn a ‘degree’. 33% were doing the degree in pursuit of a ‘better future’ (like traveling abroad, getting a better job or a job with a higher salary...) and only 9% of its students were seeking to find a ‘job’ (see figure no. 4). This should come as no surprise since the questionnaire carried out by the SVU administration revealed that 72% of its students were working students with 54% in full time jobs and 19% in part time ones. Thus, an added benefit of this mode of learning is the flexibility it offers since students can work and study at the same time especially that the SVU is a non-profit state university where students have to pay for their education. However, this feature may also have its bearings on the amount of time that SVU students can put into this mode of learning. The survey also revealed that only 4% of SVU entrants joined the SVU for ‘pleasure’ (see figure no. 4). Comparing these results with a similar research done on the United Kingdom’s ‘Open University’ language courses, we find that though in this university the mode of learning is slightly different from that of the SVU virtual learning, the majority of students in the UK’s Open University are learning languages because they are seeking to learn about the culture of other nations. 50% of whom chose to study on the programme just for ‘pleasure’, less than 30% of the UK Open University students were after the ‘degree’, and around 5% were taking the course to find a ‘job’. The difference in age between the Arab and the British cohorts which is the result of certain cultural and contextual constraints is probably the major factor behind this variation in the reasons why students choose distance learning. The age factor may

also have a bearing on how learners approach the learning experience too. Stern (1987) contends that ‘adult learners are active, task-oriented, and approach their language learning with certain assumptions and beliefs which have a bearing on the way they tackle new language.’

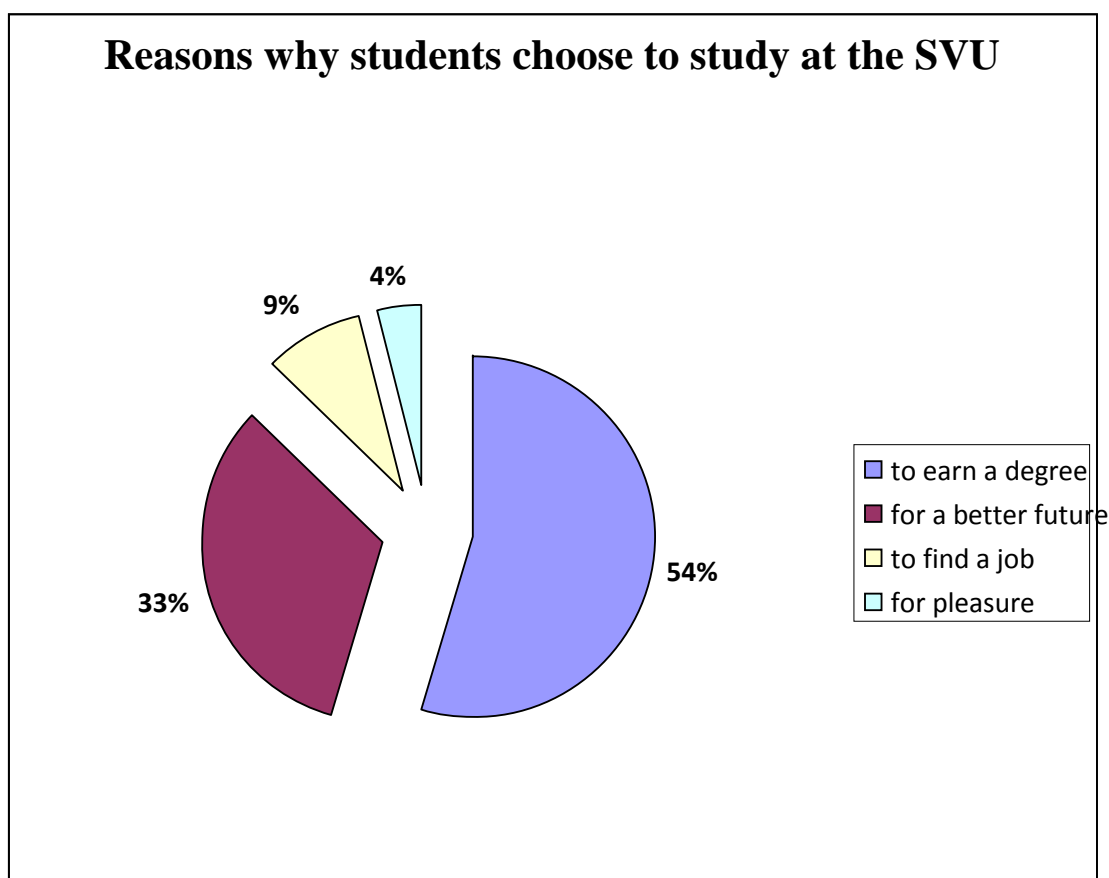


Figure no. 4. Reasons why students choose to study at the SVU

Thus, the SVU context is one where young school leavers choose distance learning out of necessity not convenience - mainly because their marks were not high enough to secure them a place at a state higher education institute. Besides, they are students who often need to work to pay their tuition fees. They are also learners who have come from an educational context where they have not been taught how to become autonomous learners. Left to their own devices, such learners will find that managing their own learning is not an easy task and constitutes a challenging experience.

2. Challenges to the SVU English language learner

2.1 Technology and distance language learning

Technology has changed the face of distance language learning. ‘Access to the Internet is already changing the face of language teaching and learning and offers distinct advantages to distance language learners, specifically for interactive speaking practice and for mutual support’ (Hurd: 2001). ‘The potential of the Internet to facilitate exchanges among learners in the foreign language is increasingly recognized

and exploited in universities in the UK. Sophisticated software and growing expertise in the use of CMC (computer mediated communication) for language learning make it possible today for language learners to communicate not just with one other person asynchronously through e-mail, but with groups of other learners either asynchronously or synchronously, through bulletin boards, text chat, audio-video conferencing or Multi-user Object-oriented domains (MOOs), as part of a virtual community' (Hurd: 2005). Murphy (2008) also maintains that 'the rapid development of communications technology has greatly enhanced the potential for interaction and collaboration between learners and tutors and among groups of learners.' Besides, in an online environment, Hurd (2005) asserts that there are other advantages: learners feel less inhibited because they are out of the spotlight, and peer support can have a positive impact on attitudes towards learning. There is also evidence in the literature to indicate that levels of participation are found to be much greater and more equal in online as opposed to face-to-face discussion (Hudson, & Bruckman: 2002; Warschauer: 1997). Hurd (2005) also believes that for distance learners, online communication 'can provide a sense of "presence"' and Shield (2002) posits that generally speaking, CMC (computer mediated communication) offers learners the opportunity to communicate and socialize with other learners. Warschauer (1997) also asserts that the advantages of CMC are in both the cognitive and affective domains because students working asynchronously have time to attend to grammar and develop their linguistic accuracy and thus this text-based mode allows learners to pause and reflect while interacting, thus creating a 'special relationship between interaction and reflection' (Warschauer: 1997). And when the text based CMC is accompanied by voice-based chats as happens in online tutorials, there is room for practicing several skills at a time- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These advantages are highlighted by Hampel (2003) who feels that a choice between the text and the voice mode will help teachers suit the task at hand as well as cater for the different individual learning styles.

However in a medium where the World Wide Web provides an abundance of information online, Sheerin (1991) warns against the danger of "presenting the unguided learner with masses of information" because "the mere multiplication of learning alternatives and materials is not synonymous with autonomous learning, although it might give the illusion of independence" (Sheerin: 1991). Hurd (2005) also cautions that although this mode of learning reduces social isolation for geographically dispersed or shy learners and can be motivating and confidence boosting, yet it may result in reverse effects if not properly guided. 'student work may become unfocused, unbalanced and trivial' (Schwienhorst: 1998). Similarly, Barnett (1993) contends that 'even if input is mostly comprehensible, this does not mean that learners will be able to make their way through it efficiently: being surrounded with resources is not the same as being resourceful.'

Besides the danger of information overload, Hurd (2005) also warns against the danger of the absence of paralinguistic elements and the level of technical expertise required from learners in this technologically supported mode of learning. Added to that there may be a lack in the human dimension where some students and teachers 'simply find the medium depersonalizing, fragmentary and lacking the humanity and intimacy that the face-to-face environment affords' (Hurd: 2005).

2.2 Autonomy and distance language learning

Autonomy is increasingly linked to successful learning (Little: 1991, 2001, 2003; Wenden: 1991; Benson: 2001, 2002) and is seen to be particularly relevant to the distance language-learning environment (Hurd *et al.*: 2001; C. White, 2003). Wenden (1991) states that “successful or expert or intelligent learners have learned how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are autonomous”. Hurd *et al.* (2001) maintains that in order to complete successfully a distance learning programme, learners need to develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually. Little (2003) lists three major benefits of learner autonomy in distance learning. The first is that if learners are reflectively engaged in their own learning, their learning is likely to become more efficient and effective because it is personal and focused. Secondly, when learners are proactively engaged in their learning, the problem of motivation will be solved because though they may not always be entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, autonomous learners will have developed the attitudinal and reflective resources to overcome motivational setbacks. Thirdly, and in language learning specifically, learners who enjoy a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment will find it easier to master the full range of discourse roles in communication developed only through language in use.

Autonomy is, therefore, a prerequisite to success in this mode of learning. In higher education today, autonomy is seen as a ‘marker of gradueness’ (Railton and Watson: 2005) as manifested in the British Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmark statements on the outcomes of graduate study. The QAA requires from UK students of languages and related studies a degree of learner autonomy and responsibility for the development of language competence through independent study (QAA 2002). But what is autonomy? A widely used definition of autonomy is Holec’s (1980) ‘ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. However Little (1991) argues that ‘autonomy is not synonymous with self instruction’. Barnett (1993) reiterates by saying that ‘working alone is not what autonomy is all about; it entails a proposed and accepted set of responsibilities, which, if not present, simply imply continued dependence’. These responsibilities have been identified by Little (2003) in his description of the autonomous learner as one who understands the purpose of the learning programme, explicitly accepts responsibility for learning, shares in the setting of the learning goals, takes initiative in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly reviews learning and evaluates its effectiveness. To achieve this Little (2003), states that ‘the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others’. This holistic view of the learner, Little (2003) adds, requires us to engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimension of language learning. Hurd (2005) maintains that for distance language learners, this is just the starting point. ‘Capacity’ and ‘readiness’ need to become actualized rapidly as ‘abilities’ and ‘skills’. Murphy (2008) posits that the concept of autonomy ‘knowing how to learn’ involves the key role capacity of ‘critical reflection’, which from a cognitive perspective is the key to a number of metacognitive strategies: goal-setting, planning, implementing, self-assessment and self-evaluation. The answer to which Murphy (2008) adds lies in the quality of course

materials which ‘apart from developing communicative proficiency, course materials have a major role in enhancing learners’ capacity for critical reflection and autonomy by developing metacognitive strategies and involving learners in choices about their learning’.

2.3 Learner support and autonomy

According to Hurd (2000), ‘those learning at a distance do not have the standard university infrastructure to call upon when in difficulty: teachers or language advisors on site, classes to go to, ready access to other students to compare notes or to ask for advice.’ Hence, the importance of learner support systems. Tait (2000) defined student support as ‘the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL [open and distance learning]’. Services such as tutoring, counselling, organisation of study centres, interactive teaching, mentioned by Tait (2000), are crucial in the context of distance education systems both in developed and developing countries.

As to the value of support systems, Dillon *et al.* (1992) maintain that ‘One important means of analyzing the effectiveness of the teaching learning experience in a distance education system is through the analysis of the learner support system.’ Hodgson (1986) posits that ‘Support systems contribute to the "process" of a course as do the learning materials’ and when support systems are developed in recognition of student needs, they help the distance learner become competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation (Rae: 1989).

According to Garrison and Baynton (1987), the learner support system comprises two types of resources; resources that the learner can access in order to carry out the learning process and resources that relate to the mediation of the communication process. The resources of the learning process include the availability of and access to courses, teachers or facilitators, learning materials, library facilities, media equipment and community experts. Among these resources ‘The role of the teacher/facilitator is of primary importance in the issue of support’ . The need for resources associated with the mediation process results from the geographic distance between the teacher and the learner, and requires some type of mechanical or electronic transfer of information to carry out the two-way communication in the learning process.

At the SVU, several collaboration support systems are used for teaching and learning mainly the asynchronous and the synchronous tools. Asynchronous tools are the ‘anytime-anywhere’ ones that take place through electronic mail, recorded sessions, notice boards, etc. The synchronous tools are the ‘same time-anywhere’ that take place through chat boards and virtual classrooms (tutorials). Whilst most international online learning projects concentrate on asynchronous tools, the Syrian Virtual University (SVU) added the synchronous tools to create a classroom based ambiance. However, the challenge lies here, as it might be quite possible that the traditional classroom practices are indirectly being carried into the virtual environment and are thus turning the virtual classroom into a traditional one that is merely employing techniques formally associated with non-conventional modes of learning. A similar observation was made by Keegan (1993) and also by White (2005) who states that the ‘problem of replicating traditional classroom models in distance education is not new,

nor is it unique to the Web as a technology used in distance education. Traditional tenets of teaching tend to be transferred to distance education, creating the same discontinuities in distance education that are present in traditional learning environments'. Thus, 'If higher levels of learning are to be achieved in Web-based distance education, there is a need to expand our perspectives of teaching and learning beyond what occurs in traditional classrooms' (White: 2005).

3. The study

Whilst distance online education has been a subject of research in many parts of the world, not much research in this area has been carried out in Syria. To date no research has been undertaken to examine the degree of SVU virtual language learners' readiness for autonomy.

The objective of this research is to assess the SVU English language learners' degree of readiness for autonomy. This is achieved by examining the following:

- the SVU learners' perceptions of the good distance language learner and of themselves as distance learners. This is based on Cotterall (1995) contention that an investigation of learner beliefs should enable teachers assess their learners "readiness" for autonomy.

- an analysis of the quality of support services provided by the SVU and the extent to which these services meet the needs of its language students and promote learner autonomy. Analyzing support systems is one way of looking at the efficacy of educational systems as put forward by Dillon *et al.* (1992) who maintain that 'One important means of analyzing the effectiveness of the teaching learning experience in a distance education system is through the analysis of the learner support system.'

This research is based on the premise that such an evaluation may help assure and enhance the quality of English language learning at the SVU.

3.1 Research questions and methods

The objective of this paper is to make a preliminary assessment of the degree of SVU students' readiness for autonomy by analyzing:

(a) Students' perceptions of the factors necessary for successful distance English language learning and of themselves as language learners.

(b) The influence of the SVU learners' cultural background on online language learning and its implications for the teaching and learning process.

(c) The efficiency of the current SVU support system: the IT support services, the Lab centres, the tutorials (synchronous and asynchronous), the course materials, and peer administrative support.

The main research tool used to gather information for the study was a questionnaire administered on 317 SVU students learning English during the term of spring 2008 and who were enrolled on different SVU programmes. The questionnaire consisted of

multiple-choice and Likert five scale type of questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). With the help of the IT support team at the SVU, the questionnaire was dispatched online to students enrolled on the English language courses in August 2008. It was administered in Arabic to exclude the possibility of any misunderstanding on the part of the students. The questionnaire was based on the research carried out by Hurd (2000) and Hurd and Xiao (2006). The author revised and adapted the questionnaires in order to correspond more closely with the virtual learning context and the research questions.

Another source of information that was used in this study was a survey carried out online by the SVU administration on a random sample of 390 students enrolled on all of its programs during the term of fall 2007.

4. Findings and discussion

The data from the survey was then analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage using exploratory-interpretative methods. The analysis took into account the features characteristic to the Syrian educational context, which is likely to have affected learner aspirations and approaches to studying online. The findings will be presented in two parts. The first will deal with the students' perceptions of factors important to successful online language learning and to themselves as distance language learners and the second will examine the current SVU support system.

4.1 Learner perceptions of factors important to successful online language learning and to themselves as distance language learners

In this section, learners were presented with a list of nine characteristics adapted from Hurd and Xiao (2006) and were asked to determine (on a Lickert scale) how important was each of those characteristics for 'the good distance language learner' in general and for themselves as 'distance language learners' in particular. The results were then analyzed to check if SVU students' perceptions of what it takes to be a good distance language learner matched with how they perceived themselves as distance language learners.

Findings displayed in Table no. 1 reveal that over 90% of SVU subjects considered 'enthusiasm/motivation', 'persistence' and 'ability to prioritize' as important qualities of the 'good distance language learner'. 89% believed that a good learner should be 'willing to accept constructive criticism'. 88% acknowledged that a distance learner should be able 'to assess his own strengths and weaknesses'. 87% thought that the good distance learner should be 'good at taking initiative'. 84% said that the good distance learner should be 'well organized'. 74% believed in the importance of 'self-confidence' and only 66% believed in the importance of being 'self-aware and reflective'. These relatively high percentages indicate that SVU Distance learners were relatively aware of what it takes to be a 'good distance learner'.

In the second part of the survey when subjects described themselves as distance learners, there were not much differences from how they perceived the 'good distance learner'. The metacognitive strategy of 'ability to prioritize' was more or less the same in their views of a good distance learner and in how they viewed themselves. 89% thought that they had the ability to prioritize very close to the 91% who thought

that the ability to prioritize was important to successful distance language learning. Of the nine characteristics suggested in the survey as important for successful distance language learning, SVU learners rated their ability to prioritize and their ‘ability to accept constructive criticism’ (89%) as most important. With a good number of SVU students (72%) committed to full-time or part-time jobs, they seem to appreciate the value of the metacognitive skill of prioritizing. However, the question remains as to which they are putting first, their learning or their jobs? As most students have to pay for their education, their jobs seem to come first. Students’ common complaints regarding shortage of time and inability to meet assignment deadlines testify to the presence of this limitation.

Characteristic	<i>(1) A good distance language Learner (%)</i>	<i>(2) yourself as a distance language learner (%)</i>
Enthusiasm/motivation	92 (1)	81 (5)
Persistence	92 (1)	71 (7)
Ability to prioritize	91 (3)	89 (1)
Willingness to accept constructive criticism	89 (4)	89 (1)
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses	88 (5)	85 (3)
Being good at taking the initiative	87 (6)	83 (4)
Being well organized	84 (7)	61 (9)
Self-confidence	74 (8)	80 (6)
Being self-aware and reflective	66 (9)	68 (8)

Table 1. SVU students’ perceptions of successful distance language learning in response to the question: ‘Which characteristics would you say describe (1) a good distance language learner, (2) yourself as a distance language learner?’
(Data in parentheses represent the rank order of the responses)

The fact that SVU students rated the quality of ‘accepting constructive criticism’ (89%) rather high with no difference with regard to this characteristic between their perceptions of the ‘good distance learner’ and themselves as distance learners is justifiable in a culture where the opinion of the teacher is highly valued and respect to the teacher - the repository of knowledge - is unquestionable.

Third on their list of characteristics of the good distance language learner came the metacognitive ability of ‘assessing ones own strengths and weaknesses’ with 85% of students choosing it. Thus, SVU students seem quite aware of the importance of self-evaluation. This quality was followed by ‘the ability to take initiative’ (83%) which meant that SVU informants believe that they are good at ‘taking initiative’; a key skill which rated fourth after their ability ‘to prioritize’, ability ‘to accept constructive criticism’, and ability ‘to assess their strengths and weaknesses’. The reason behind this finding may be due to the fact that in online learning, students attending live tutorials find participating, commenting and initiating dialogue central to the learning process.

However, there was a notable difference in the factor concerning ‘persistence’ which came in seventh place where learners showed considerably much lower levels of ‘persistence’ (71%) when they applied this to themselves as compared with the 92% who chose it as an essential quality of the successful distance language learner. Thus students though aware of its importance to distance learning, are unable to apply it to themselves. This finding may point to the fact that students, possibly due to a lack of autonomy, may be facing motivation setbacks. This observation was made by Little (2003) who states that autonomous learners have learnt how to cope with motivation setbacks.

The characteristic where the biggest disparity was found was in the characteristic of ‘organization’ which came in the ninth place (last) on the list of characteristics that SVU students thought they had. 84% of SVU students believed that being well organized is an important factor to a good distance language learner; nevertheless, only 61% felt that they themselves were organized. The reason may be because SVU students come from an educational culture where much of the planning and organizing rests on the teacher. Besides, the teaching materials are themselves organized so students need not worry about planning and organizing.

As concerns ‘self-confidence’, findings were varied here. Learners felt that self-confidence is of a lesser importance and rated it in sixth place. They thought that they were slightly more confident than needed for distance learning. This may be due to the very nature of online distance language learning where less confident students find in this mode a safe haven where they feel less threatened and more relaxed to communicate with peers and tutors. This finding indicates a misconception on the part of SVU learners, for although an online distance learner may feel more secure in an isolated medium with minimal face to face contact, yet self-confidence is an asset to learners working most of the time on their own for they need to have confidence in their own abilities to achieve.

The characteristic ‘Being aware and reflective’ came just before last in the eighth place with 66% of the students choosing it as a quality of good distance language learning. SVU students even felt that they were more reflective than needed for online learning with (68%) choosing it. This finding may have an impact on the efficacy of learning and on learners’ ability to become autonomous, for according to Murphy (2008) being self-reflective is the key to a number of metacognitive strategies like goal setting, planning, implementing, self-assessment, and self-evaluation, which are closely tied with autonomous learning.

Overall, with the exception of the two qualities of ‘persistence’ and ‘self organization’, there were hardly any major disparities between the SVU students’ views of the characteristics of a good online distance language learner and of themselves as distance learners. Many SVU students, therefore, were relying on some of the metacognitive skills of learning; they were using some learning strategies like their ability to ‘prioritize’, their ability to ‘accept constructive feedback’, and their ability to ‘monitor themselves’, all of which are particularly relevant to the distance mode of learning. Yet, being working students, their concern with their jobs remains their priority. However, it is worth mentioning here too that the SVU students had underestimated the impact of self-organization, self-reflection and self-confidence on their own learning; such qualities are important because they tie in very well with autonomy.

Having looked into the SVU language students’ perceptions and its impact on their becoming autonomous, the next step is to look into the quality of the SVU support system to investigate the extent to which it is helping learners on their way to autonomy.

4.2. Students’ Attitudes towards the learner support system

Hurd (2000) posits that “Those who are used to total dependence on a teacher will find learning by this mode extremely difficult and are likely to drop out if the road to autonomy is too painful”. Though virtual learning is delivered at a slightly different mode from that Hurd (2000) is referring to in her study of difficulties faced by Open University distance language learners, still, in both modes, there is a lot of independent study involved and the support given to learners plays a major role in the learning process. Besides, the quality of learner support is a mark of the efficacy of the system in providing learners with the help and support needed to achieve the intended learning outcomes. This may be more so in a distance learning environment where in the absence of a face to talk to or a campus to go to, learners need all the guidance and support they can get to help them to become autonomous.

At the SVU’s virtual environment, EFL (English as a foreign language) students get support from a number of sources which often intersect. In what follows, six categories of learner support systems will be investigated: IT support services, lab centres (telecentres), tutorials, learning materials, peer and administrative support.

a. IT support services

With a learning medium dependent on technology, the IT support is vital. It offers both staff and learners the technology needed for teaching, learning and communication. One such form of support on offer at the SVU is the online information system known as the ISIS (Intelligent Student Information System). This system has been designed by local SVU IT experts to meet the needs of its students and staff: administrators and academics. Since its introduction in 2006, it has been considered an achievement and has actually helped to change the face of the SVU. It served as a window to the university from which tutors and students can access all they need like program and course information, announcements, term calendars, class

schedules, exam timetables, exam results and reports etc ..., besides it offers downloadable materials that demonstrate to learners:

How to access the Web Demo to attend live sessions,

How to access and download recorded sessions,

How to access the LMS (Learning management system),

How to access the EX-AMS (assessment management system),

How to save their online exams in case of a power failure,

How to download assignments on the AMS, EXAMS, or the Virtual File System, etc...

Though all those programs are designed to give learners the guidance needed during the period of their study, the problem is that some students come with very little experience in the use of technology even in as far as performing some basic IT operations. Short optional IT training sessions are offered by the SVU support team to all students before the onset of each term. However, the fact that those training sessions are optional leaves many students without sufficient knowledge of how to access these programmes. Thus, they end up struggling to come to terms with all the technological requirements on top of having to cope with the course content. This adds to the pressure put on the language learner. If induction is to be made a prerequisite to joining the language course, this will help learners approach their courses with more confidence and less worries.

Another major form of support system at the SVU is the EX-AMS (expert assessment management system). It is used for posting assignments, projects and exams. Likewise, this system has been prepared locally to replace an older imported version that was no more capable of catering for the needs of the growing university. This was hoped to liberate the SVU from the limitations of the multiple-choice questions which are believed by QA (quality assurance) personnel to stand in the way of quality learning. The new exam system will hopefully cater for all forms of assessment needed by the different programs. The limitations imposed by the old exam system has had its impact on the teaching/learning process. It has not enabled English language tutors to carry out essay type of questions and thus has affected the teaching of one of the most important skills needed by academics and that is the 'writing' skill. Similarly, it has not been able to support the practicing and testing of 'listening' skills, due to the large size of audio files. Thus two out of the four language skills have not been addressed sufficiently due to limitations imposed by the very technology used.

b. Computer lab centres

Since its establishment, the SVU's original intention was to provide its tutors and learners all over Syria and in some Arab countries too with telecentres (computer labs) that are fully equipped with PCs, fast internet connection and an IT support team that help in sorting out technical problems. Until recently, this has been the case and such labs were available for students' use nationwide 12 hours daily. This generous gesture was hoped to enhance learning especially for those students who for social, economic or geographic reasons could not access this technologically supported form of education. SVU learners use the university's telecentre facilities to attend live or

recorded sessions, to download learning materials and assignments, to upload written projects and assignments, to send and receive emails from tutors and peers, to check announcements, to sit for exams, to get exam results and to make petitions etc These telecentres have an added advantage too. In many ways, they help break the walls of isolation that generally characterize distance learning. At those centres, students usually meet other virtual learners and that will be the time to discuss their studies, assignments, exams, or any other worries or anxieties. It gives them the 'on campus' feel which helps them socially and psychologically besides enhancing their socio-affective learning strategies.

Thus, you find that most SVU students on language courses or other programs, if their time permits, like to attend classes live online from the SVU telecentres. With the growth of the number of students enrolled at the university and consequently the increased demand on telecentres, it is becoming increasingly difficult for tutors and students to find a PC to work on. That of course varies from one region to another; however, students nowadays are being advised to try to log on from outside the university telecentres. This is not what the university initially planned for but the fast growth of this university coupled with an insufficient increase in resources is having its bite on this service which students, especially language learners, value so much.

In the survey carried out, students' feedback on the degree of their satisfaction with the SVU technical support services revealed that students were facing technical problems (see table no. 2). A common complaint that is made by tutors and learners concerns the repeated interruptions of the Internet connection and the disruption of live sessions. Only 35% of students thought that the Internet connection was good for most of the time. That, of course, depends on the area from which the student or tutor logs on. This problem often leads to frustration to both parties; tutors and learners. Shortage in the number of PC's available for students at telecentres is also another cause for concern to students. Only 26% thought that the PCs available are sufficient. That again depends on the area where the student logs on. As concerns the efficiency of the other programmes used by the students to access live and recorded sessions, exams and learning systems like the web-demo, the AMS, the LMS, the ISIS etc ... , student rating was around 50%. The reason why one out of every two students felt that the programs on the universities website were not so efficient may be because students have not been well-prepared technically on how to access these programs. Similarly, around 50% of learners felt that the support team were not helpful enough. This calls for the need to train students on the proper use of the technology besides updating and enhancing the university's IT infrastructure.

In short, there is evidence to indicate that the IT infrastructure at the SVU is becoming increasingly under pressure again due to the mass increase in the number of users. There is an increased pressure on the server, bandwidth, IT support team, and consequently students and tutors are facing technical problems more often. This of course is affecting the quality of teaching and learning. It is also a source of frustration to students and tutors on all courses in particular the English language courses because as students put it 'language is communication'. Bray *et al* (2007) posit that technology itself can provide a significant barrier to distance education efforts. 'In a traditional classroom setting, if the technology does not work, alternatives exist. In the case of distance education, however, if the technology fails, the course stops with students and faculty cut off from one another not only is delivery hampered, but students face isolation from the instructor and one another

particularly in synchronous classes' (Bray et al: 2007). Thus, reliable technology and IT support are crucial to this medium of instruction.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>(%) of SVU students Who agreed to the statements</i>
The IT support team is helpful.	52%
Internet connection is good for most of the time.	35%
Quality of recorded sessions is good.	52%
The AMS is efficient.	65%
The ISIS (Intelligent student information system) contains all the information that the student needs.	47%
The Web Demo is efficient.	53%
The PCs available at telecentres are sufficient.	26%

Table 2. Students' feedback on the quality of the IT support system

c. Tutorials

Another and perhaps one of the most important means of regular SVU learner support and guidance is the virtual language tutorial whereby tutors and learners meet three times every week in one and a half hourly sessions (around 42 sessions per course, 60 hours per term). As to the quality of these tutorials, students' feedback indicates that in such tutorials, tutors are highly supportive (see Table no. 3). This is evident in their efficient use of the different means of communication (85%), their supplying learners with extra curricular activities to enforce learning (80%), their readiness to answer to any query (86%), their feedback on written assignments (72%), and their induction at the beginning of every term (70%). As concerns the tutors' degree of organization, 81% of informants thought that the tutors were well organized. This should come as no surprise since tutors are used to their traditional role as planners, organizers and deliverers of course materials especially when they need to achieve this in a tight calendar. However, around 40% of student informants thought that the number of tutorials is insufficient and would have liked to see more sessions. Though support on the part of tutors is a QA (quality assurance) requisite, a significant finding here indicates that distance language tutors at the SVU are not sufficiently guiding their

learners to the metacognitive strategy of planning; a strategy that can help learners on their way to more autonomous learning.

<i>Statement</i>	<i>(%) of SVU students Who agreed to the statements</i>
Tutors use the electronic mail and other modes of communication efficiently.	85%
After live sessions tutors send us extra files, documents and web links as supplementary material to help us reinforce the things we are learning.	80%
It is always possible to get back to the tutor to make an enquiry.	86%
I get enough support from the tutor to carry out my assignments and project.	72%
The tutor is well organized.	81%
The number of tutorials is sufficient.	62%
The course materials are highly organized.	59%
The induction at the beginning of the term was helpful.	70%
I communicate with my peers outside the live sessions through electronic mail, chat boards, etc ...	43%

Table 3. Students' feedback on the quality of tutorials and peer support

Though attendance of live sessions is not mandatory, faculty encourage learners on the language courses to attend a minimum number of live sessions because of its conviction that exposure to the foreign language is necessary. To that end, students are strongly advised by their tutors to participate in the synchronous sessions and 30% online synchronous attendance is a prerequisite for accepting the project which is allotted 10% of the total mark.

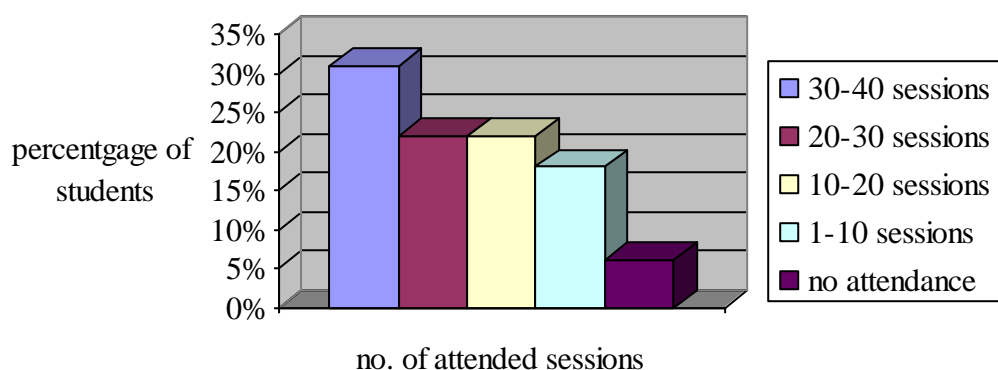


Figure no. 5: Percentage of synchronous attendance

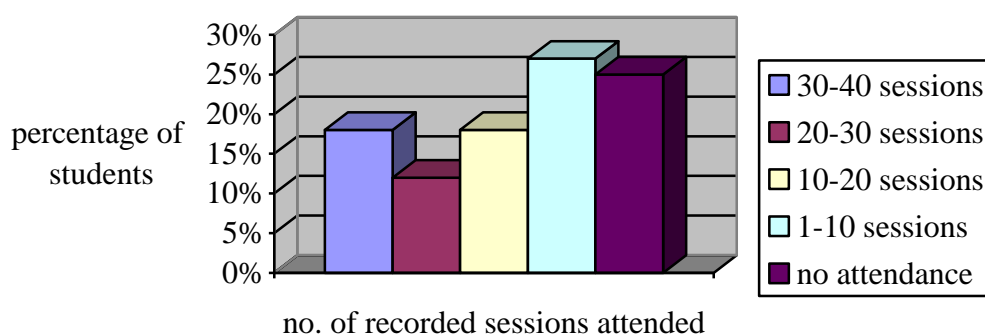


Figure no. 6: Percentage of asynchronous attendance

As concerns the rate of attendance, the survey revealed that, only 6% of language learners never attended any of the synchronous sessions, 18% attended from 1-10 sessions, 22% attended 10-20 sessions, 22% attended 20-30, and 31% attended from 30-40 sessions. (see figure no. 5). These figures are rather high considering that only 30% attendance (around 10 sessions) is a university requirement and that over 70% of students have a job on top of all the other modules that they have to attend (synchronously or asynchronously). Thus, attending tutorials seem to be important to SVU language learners. This may explain why only 62% of informants felt that the number of tutorials (42 per term) was sufficient. On the other hand, figures were lower for asynchronous sessions. 25% never attended any of the recorded sessions and 30% attended from 1-10 recorded sessions, 18% of students listened to 10-20 of the recorded sessions, 12% listened to 20-30 sessions and 18% only listened to 30-40

recorded sessions (see figure no. 6). These findings indicate too that students seem to prefer live sessions to recorded ones. The reason behind this may be twofold. The first is that live sessions emulate the traditional face-to-face classroom more and the second may be the poor voice quality of some of the recorded sessions. Evidence to the latter is apparent in the survey findings where around 50% of SVU language learners thought that the quality of recorded sessions was not that good. Again, the unreliable technology seems to be standing in the way of flexible learning.

The English language tutors' responsibilities involve a number of tasks. Tutors are responsible for delivering the learning materials, choosing assignment and project topics, posting those assignment topics on the system, downloading students' assignment and marking them, uploading them again on the system with the necessary feedback, and finally designing exams and entering them on the assessment management system. Whilst doing all this they would still be constantly emailing their students to give further guidance and answer to their queries. They will also be regularly corresponding with the program director and programme coordinators to receive guidance and instructions concerning academic and administrative issues. The course content is all predetermined. The pace at which the course materials are delivered is also conditioned by the length of term, which is getting shorter with the growth of the university as exams are taking longer every term (exams take place in the same telecentres where students attend sessions, hence when there are exams running, no classes take place). The pacing of the course delivery, the mid and final exam times, the assignments and project submission deadlines are all fixed. Learners are left with little flexibility if any in a mode that claims to be flexible. Students have no say in planning their courses or choosing their learning materials let alone practicing some form of reflection, self or peer evaluation. Little (2003), defines autonomous learners as those learners who 'understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness'. However, this is all subject to the 'willingness of teachers to hand over their responsibilities' (Candy: 1991; Little: 1995). Barnett (1993) warns that 'Self-access in general, and computer applications in particular, can easily fall into the traps of either leaving learners too much alone, overwhelmed by information and resources, or directing them too much by transferring lockstep classroom methods to organization systems and programs.' The latter seems to be the case at the SVU where tutors are too directive besides transferring their classroom practices into the virtual environment. Barnett (1993) goes on to say that 'neither alternative is desirable, for learners cannot be autonomous unless they have the ability to make meaningful choices.' With the majority of SVU English language tutors coming from an educational background where they themselves have not experienced 'autonomization' in their own learning, one has to question their awareness of the value and impact of autonomous learning on their own students. Tutors may not be ready to support and develop their students' ability to make decisions and learn independently. White (2003) proposes that to achieve autonomy, approaches to learning must assist learners to take control through the explicit development of metacognitive strategies based on critical reflection, and involving learners in choosing and accessing learning opportunities which are personally meaningful (White: 2003). Learner autonomy therefore does not seem to be high up on the tutor's agenda and that may very well be because 'Learner autonomy remains a minority

pursuit, perhaps because all forms of ‘autonomization’ threaten the power structures of educational cultures’ (Little: 2003).

The truth of the matter is that both learners and tutors come from traditional educational contexts where the teachers’ role is mainly to interpret and pump in information and the students’ role is to memorize the teachers’ words. These practices are creeping into distance learning and can hardly be called the best preparation for self-managed, socio-constructivist learning. Researchers like Hung et al (2006) believe that when students are linked up with fast networks and broadband linkage on the internet, they need to change to the constructivist-learning paradigm that according to Lin (1999a in Hung et al.: 2006) include two principles of learning: active learning and group learning.(Lin: 1999a in Hung et al.: 2006). Active learning refers to the self-directed learning process, which is facilitated by the requirement of developing knowledge from authentic tasks presented in a realistic context (Edelson et al.: 1995; Lin: 1999b in Hung et al.: 2006). Group learning is to enable frequent interaction and collaboration among students toward a common goal. (Lin: 1999a in Hung et al.: 2006). However, Hung et al (2006) continue to say that such changes are radical in nature and deviate sharply from the usual practices. Reports indicate that teachers do not like such changes and students on the other hand may not like such changes either. Parr (1999 in Hung et al.: 2006) maintains that students seem to prefer more structured and directed activities than independent work. Woodrow et al. (1996 in Hung et al.: 2006) posit that learners often encounter difficulties when given more ownership and control over the pace of learning and prefer thus to be told what they ought to do. Hence, to achieve a socio-constructivist approach to learning, students need to be equipped with the necessary learning strategies. This is expressed by Hung et al. (2006) where they posit that in multimedia instruction, where students are challenged with the responsibility and accountability for controlling their own educational discovery process, skills of metacognition and reflection become increasingly important.

Another challenge to SVU tutors is that they come with little experience in teaching online. The SVU support team do run at the beginning of every term short training courses to faculty members, however these courses are mainly directed to guiding tutors as to how to use the appropriate tools and technology and have nothing to do with the pedagogy and teaching methodology. This in fact requires faculty to change their perspective and practice to activate and disseminate the new ideology ‘... neither technology nor other strategies are likely on their own to be sufficient to significantly re-shape the present transmission model. Without a radical and explicit change of perspective and practice, neither full-time nor associate lecturers have much chance of successfully mobilizing and disseminating an alternative educational ideology to the dominant one.’ (Peters: 2004)

One further challenge to SVU tutor support is that tutors come to the SVU from other educational institutes where they are overloaded with other responsibilities, so that leaves them with little time for self-development. Besides, and even after gaining some experience in the area of teaching online, they have no binding contracts with the SVU, and hence they move on whenever they get a better job opportunity elsewhere. This of course is affecting the quality of teaching too as new tutors come in and others leave almost every term. The SVU’s strategic plan should include a vision for future recruitment and binding contracts to formulate its own body of faculty and staff members.

d. Course materials

According to Hauck and Hurd (2005), materials in distance language learning play a central role as the teaching voice. They are the link between teacher and learner and are characterized by distinctive features. They are structured with explicit aims, objectives and learning outcomes. They include activities that give practice and encourage reflection. Such activities are carefully sequenced to provide steady progression and ensure variety in type, skill, grammatical/style focus. And to help students develop awareness of themselves and encourage an autonomous approach, learning strategy sections are embedded into the course materials and thus reflect an indirect and contextualized approach to strategy training. 'The aim is gradually to shift the locus of control from teacher to learner and build learners' confidence in taking an active part in their own learning' (Hauck and Hurd: 2005).

The SVU provides its general English language teaching materials through an online European program that has been designed specifically for distance language learning courses. The program is an interactive one that consists of five levels starting with the elementary and leading up to the advanced level. Each level consists of 10 units which have to be covered within a period of one term. For each of those levels, students get the chance to meet their tutors either synchronously or asynchronously for 60 hours per term (3 one and half-hour tutorials per week). The program is well structured and integrates all language skills within its activities and tutorials. Tasks complement each other in content and follow similar presentation formats designed to encourage some learner autonomy. The program also provides learners with a 'study room' that provides learners with a variety of reference books. It also has a 'discussion forum' and a 'café' that are intended to encourage collaborative learning. However, due to technical reasons, these last two are currently inactive. Thus, the program has been transformed merely into a tool through which language skills, grammatical and lexical information are pumped into the students. You often find learners online wanting the session to be a mirror of a face-to-face classroom and tutors in response to students' demands try to emulate the face-to-face session. This undoubtedly is having a negative impact on students' developing a sense of autonomy.

Another cause for concern is the abundance of course materials. On top of the main program's core course materials on general English, students have to cover other course materials on academic English and in the higher proficiency levels they have to do some business English too. These materials have been tailored to meet the specific needs of SVU students. However, learners may be finding this shift from general, to academic to business English at times rather patchy. That explains why 41% of student informants felt that course materials were not so organized (see table no. 3). This calls for a reconsideration of the amount of materials covered within every term for giving a lot of materials does not necessary mean that learners are learning how to learn. Murphy (2008) contends that overloading language learners with materials can encourage a focus on language skills rather than learning skills.

Virtual education promised to provide flexible learning where learners could proceed at their own pace. However, with the growth of the SVU and due to the current pressure on the resources available, this promise fell short of reality. The SVU cannot afford the flexibility it intended to offer because telecentres serve as exam centers too. Now that there is a bigger number of students, this means that exams take longer and telecentres are reserved for a month or so every term. Thus with more time

restrictions and stricter calendars, the flexibility is dying out and language students are finding themselves, whether they can afford the time or not, obliged to cover all of the different kinds of language materials within a tight schedule dictated by the SVU term calendar and not by their own schedules. The SVU needs to consider in its strategic plan the opening of more centres at a faster pace so as to cater for the rapid increase in the number of students. Reviewing its assessment policy and resorting to essay type of questions may also help ease the pressure on these telecentres.

Regarding the resources that learners rely on mostly in their studies, 54% of students in the survey said that they relied on all types of resources: the online tutorials, the recorded sessions and the course materials provided. 23% of the students relied mainly on live sessions. 10% relied mainly on the recorded sessions (those constitute mainly the students who rarely attend). 13% said that they relied mainly on the course materials (see figure no. 7). This indicates that neither the course materials on their own nor the tutorials are sufficient for learning and students feel that they need both. Around 40% of students felt that they would need more live sessions. This demonstrates how far from autonomy SVU learners are. They still feel that learning only takes place in class. We often hear students requesting tutors to go over every single task during the session. Even when tutors request learners to do a certain task on their own, students are reluctant to attempt it on their own particularly when it is not assessed.

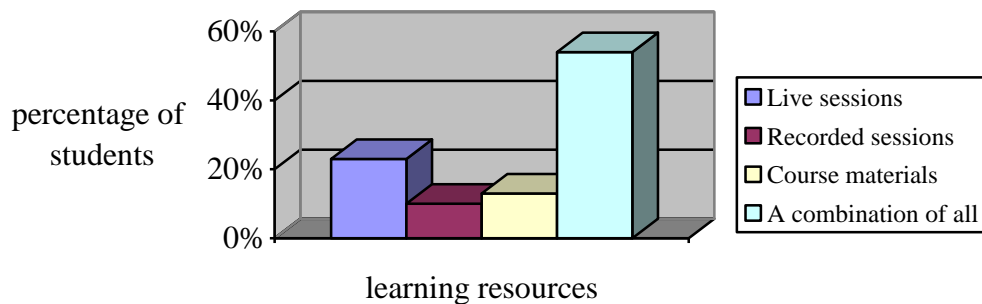


Figure 7. Resources that students rely on in their studies

As to the time spent by learners on the web self-learning, unfortunately, findings were not as expected (see figures no. 8 & 9). Over 60% of learners spent less than 7 hours per week using the web for learning English in contrast with 35% who spent the same amount of time using the web for entertainment. 27% of learners spent between seven to fourteen weekly hours learning from the web, similarly 27% spent the same amount of time on entertainment. Only 1% spent over 35 hours a week self-studying in contrast with 17% who spent over 35 hours a week surfing the web for entertainment. However, one can hardly consider time spent on entertainment as time spent on learning English. It is often the case that even during English language tutorials and in e-mail correspondence, students use Arabic in most of their communication with one

another and with their tutors. The apparent lack of incentive for self-study may indicate that students are overwhelmed by the amount of course work that is required from them on top of all of their other responsibilities. It may also indicate that they are not learning the skills of how to supplement their knowledge from web resources.

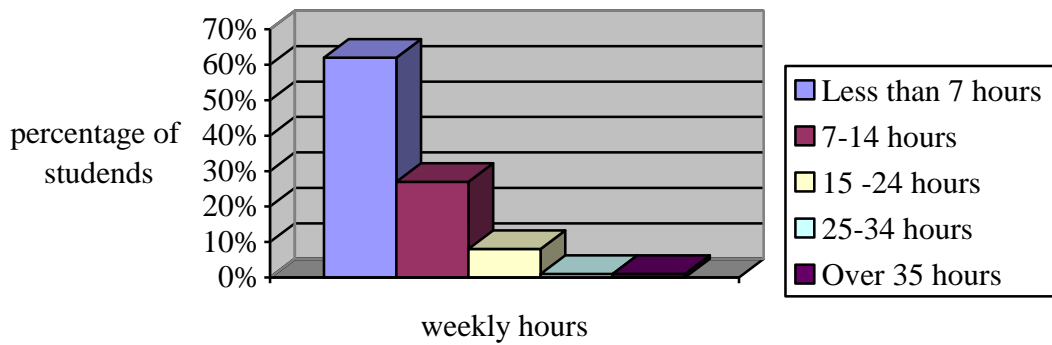


Figure no. 8. Percentage of weekly hours spent using the web for self-study

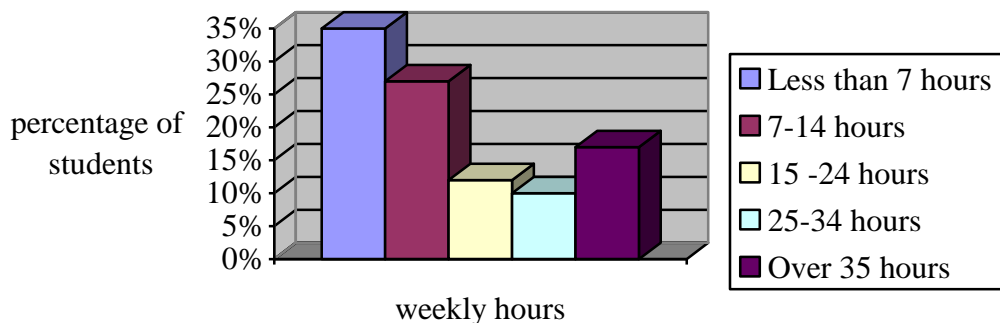


Figure no. 9. Percentage of weekly hours spent using the web for entertainment

e. Peer support

The survey shows that only 7% of SVU English language students have no friends at all and on average, each SVU student has around 10 friends. 43% of the students in the survey said that they communicated with their peers through electronic mail, chat boards and mobile phones (see Table no. 3). Thus, although students are geographically dispersed all over Syria and in other parts of the world, they still communicate with one another mainly electronically. The open ended questions revealed that most of the contact between learners takes place when they are working on their assignments, projects or exams. This indicates that students offer each other moral and academic support. Besides the majority of SVU students attend

synchronous sessions from the telecentres provided by the SVU. Thus, students find there the opportunity to meet other students. Even those students who never come to telecentres during the term and log on from work, home or internet cafés still need to come to telecentres during mid-term and final exams. That also will be the time to meet peers especially if they had been contacting virtually during the term. This is a positive feature that tutors can build on to improve the socio-affective learning strategies of their students. Group learning is almost non-existent, at least in the English language courses. According to the social constructivist approach, learning is considered an active, social process in which individuals actively construct knowledge within the social environment (Vygotsky: 1978). We do not learn in isolation, but through our interactions with others (Vygotsky: 1978).

f. Administrative support

The administration represented by two course coordinators, a program director and a QA supervisor offer learners support and answer to their queries and help out in case they run into any problem. Similarly, the student has the right to make an online petition regarding any problem that s/he encounters, which in turn will be forwarded to the staff concerned. The speed of the electronic mail makes handling such problems easy, fast and fairly efficient.

IV. Conclusion

Examining language learners' perceptions of themselves as distance learners and of what it takes to be a good distance language learner plus analyzing the efficacy of the support system available is one way of looking into the effectiveness of an educational system and the extent to which it prepares its learners for autonomy. In this study, whilst linking theory with practice, the author has outlined the Syrian Virtual University (SVU) English language students' perceptions of the qualities of the good distance language learner and of themselves as virtual language learners. Besides, it has examined the current SVU support system available for English language learners. Findings indicate that although SVU language learners seem to be well aware of some of the qualities needed by the good distance language learner, they are not being adequately guided to the learning of strategies that promote self-learning and autonomy. Findings also indicate that the SVU offers its language learners varied forms of support to emulate face-to-face classes and to give them the 'on campus' feel. Whilst there is no doubt pertaining to the great potential for learning that the current support system is providing, care must be taken that in the strive to respond for more student intake, quality education does not suffer and neither does the flexibility which is the hallmark of distance education. This calls for two major types of considerations: technological and pedagogical.

At the technological level, learning can be enhanced by developing the technological infrastructure and services to match the rapid growth and needs of this young university. At the pedagogical level, there is a need for raising both learners' and teachers' awareness of what it takes to be a good distance language learner. Besides there is a need for maximizing autonomy through teaching learning skills side by side with language skills, introducing a radical change of tutors' perspective and practice in teaching to incorporate social constructivists' approaches, and exploiting the

multimedia to enhance students' socio-affective learning strategies through networking and group learning.

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