

# **Blending the social-constructivist with the instructivist approach to teaching English as a foreign language at the department of English Language and Literature at Damascus University**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to examine quality enhancement of teaching English at the department of English language and literature at Damascus University in the light of the new pedagogical developments of the third millennium. To highlight the teaching/learning constraints and challenges, the study was carried out first by investigating the current teaching model used by faculty members and second by surveying the coping strategies used by top students to support their learning. In a department that hosts over 11,000 undergraduate students, numbers may seem to be the biggest challenge, yet with the paradigm shift in pedagogical theories and the advent of new technologies and multimedia, numbers may cease to be a hindrance and may be turned into an asset. Evidence from this research reinforced the view that the current model of education at the department of English language and Literature at Damascus University is purely instructivist. Evidence also showed that the collaborative spirit prevails amongst learners in this mass educational context. To be able to meet the requirements of education in the third millennium, there is no doubt that we need to reconsider our philosophy of learning to accommodate new

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approaches using technological developments and multimedia. A socio-constructivist approach to teaching and learning blended with the current instructivist approach is thus recommended. These recommendations will be the first step towards turning masses of students into a learning tool. This will help transform the current prevailing collaborative spirit amongst learners into a more powerful tool; a tool for social-constructivist learning that will blend into and complement the current instructivist approach.

***1. Higher education in the third millennium: new standards to meet today's complex society demands***

In the third millennium, the tide of learning theory has been shifting from an instructivist to a constructivist perspective. This evolution has changed educational assumptions worldwide and has called into question the methods of traditional education. According to Felix (2005:85), the predominant features of educational institutions of the third millennium are "flexibility, inclusiveness, collaboration, authenticity, relevance and extended institutional boundaries". These features demand a change in the roles of both students and teachers which in turn will change educational goals significantly to include "lifelong learning, global interaction, the acquisition of meta-cognitive knowledge and skills" (Felix, 2005: 85).

More specifically, the goals of education in the third millennium are oriented towards preparing self-regulated and autonomous learners. To help learners keep pace with the ever advancing knowledge, education in the digital age also needs to enable scholars to become life-long learners. Education is also expected to empower learners with the skills needed by today's job market such as problem-solution skills, communication skills, collaboration, adaptability, organization, tech and media literacy, team

work, analytical and critical thinking etc... Rather than rote memorization of facts and information, education today also needs to train learners on how to construct their own understanding of concepts individually and in groups. All in all, it is a demanding package that seems to lead educationalists to what Felix (2005:85) calls the “social constructivist paradigm for learning and teaching”; an approach that has gained momentum as the third millennium pedagogical paradigm.

The advent of the electronic revolution too has had a great impact on education. Felix (2005:86) contends that "education has changed tremendously over the past few decades, not least as a result of easier access to networked information and communication technologies". Technology, a cost effective resource tool has come to the service of education at a time when the demand for higher education is constantly increasing. Technology holds a lot of answers to the challenges faced by today's educational institutes and can help meet the socio-constructivist goals of education in the third millennium.

## ***2. Review of related literature***

### ***2.1. Instructivism, constructivism and social constructivism***

According to Diaz (2000), "instructivism" is a traditional, teacher-centered, learning theory that reinforces the view that knowledge is attained passively by information transfer from a knowledgeable authority figure (teacher) to the learner. While this method has been the basis of education for centuries, it does have its drawbacks. In the instructivist learning theory, knowledge exists independently and external to the learner, and is transferred to the student by the teacher who controls the learning process. As a teacher-centered model, the instructivist view leads naturally to the dispensing of information to the passive student through the lecture format, ‘a black and white’ view of

knowledge and a passive learning perspective (Gardiner 1998). This approach clearly places the emphasis for learning on the method of dispensing information rather than on facilitating learning through matching learning activities to student learning preferences.

Constructivism, on the other hand, is a view of learning based on the belief that knowledge isn't a thing that can be simply given by the teacher at the front of the room to students in their desks. Rather, learners are the ones who make meaning and knowledge is constructed by learners through an active, mental process of development; learners are the builders and creators of meaning and knowledge. In the constructivist learning theory, learners are interactive and construct new knowledge through a process of analyzing new information and comparing it to previous knowledge. Student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, the constructivist theory is best exemplified by instructors who facilitate the process of learning and provide guidance, rather than spoon feeding knowledge to the student in the lecture hall. The teacher provides students with experiences that allow them to hypothesize, predict, pose questions, research, investigate, imagine, and invent. Hence, constructivist teaching fosters critical thinking and creates active, motivated and independent learners. The teacher's role is to facilitate this process. The student is in control of whether or not he or she learns, not the instructor, and students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous.

Felix (2005:86) states that the plethora of learning theories have been so varied that they do not fall into the two categories of instructivism versus constructivism, (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Goodyear, 2002) but into many others. In fact, constructivism itself falls into several different conceptual and philosophical paradigms, with the two major schools representing *cognitive constructivism* on one hand and *social constructivism* on the other. The former focuses on the individual in the

group, “believing that cognition occurs in the head of the individual and that learners make intellectual sense of the materials on their own” whereas the latter emphasizes “the socially and culturally situated context of cognition, in which knowledge is constructed in shared endeavours” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996). Felix (2005) further explains that the former school is usually referred to in the literature as the ‘constructivist’ and is largely associated with Piaget and the latter known as the ‘socio-cultural’ is associated mainly with Vygotsky. However, Felix (2005) goes on to say that recently there has been a move towards a synthesis of the two with advocates proclaiming that knowledge is constructed individually but mediated socially (see Windschitl, 2002). Proponents of this view are called the socio-constructivists.

In 1999, Townsend, Clarke and Ainscow, presented a comprehensive comparison between education thinking in the second and third millenniums and put forward important recommendations for education in the third millennium (see Figure 1). These recommendations echo the socio-constructivists theory of learning which, as mentioned above, is a model based on the assumption that social interaction has an important role to play in the development of learners’ cognition which is fundamental for learning to take place. According to Vygotsky (1978:57) it is through the interaction with teachers or peers that students advance. This socio-cultural approach benefited from technology supported learning environments because the technology facilitated interaction with peers and teachers, through which learners can develop understanding even when they are physically distant. Technology-enhanced environments based on the constructivist models are in harmony with a student-centred approach too, because they provide learners with opportunities to create their own learning (Mergel, 1998).

The implications of the socio-constructivist approach on education as listed by Townsend *et al* (1999) (Figure 1) point out a number of key pedagogical issues. According to them, people can learn from different

learning facilities not just formal ones and students need not learn a 'core' content but need to learn basic learning skills. Learning also need not be controlled by a professional but by the learner himself. Education and learning are not individual activities, but they are based on how well learners learn as individuals and in groups. Moreover, Townsend *et al* (1999) believe that education should not only prepare people for life but also prepare them for life-long learning and formal education should provide learners with opportunities to feel what the real career world would look like. It is not just the qualification that learners have that determines how successful they will be but rather the amount of capability, skills and abilities that they have.

Second Millennium Thinking	Third Millennium Thinking
Important learning can only occur in formal learning facilities.	People can learn things from many sources.
Everyone must learn a common 'core' of content	Everyone must understand the learning process and have basic learning skills.
The learning process is controlled by the teacher. What is to be taught, when it should be taught and how it should be taught should all be determined by a professional person.	The learning process is controlled by the learner. What is to be taught, when it should be taught and how it should be taught will all be determined by the learner.
Education and learning are individual activities.	Success is based on how well learners learn as individuals.
Education and learning are highly interactive activities.	Success is based on how well learners work together as a team.
Formal education prepares people for life.	Formal education is the basis for lifelong learning.
The terms 'education' and 'school' mean almost the same thing.	'School' is only one of a multitude of steps in the education journey.
Once you leave formal education, you enter the 'real world'.	Formal education provides a range of interactions between learners and the world of business, commerce and politics.
The more formal qualifications you have the more successful you will be.	The more capability and adaptability you have the more successful you will be.

**Figure 1. Adapted from Townsend *et al*'s (1999) comparison between education thinking in the second and the third millenniums**

In short, instructivism, constructivism, and social-constructivism are all educational theories that have shaped current teaching and learning practices with educational curricula and teaching methods evolving to meet the requirements of the third millennium. One major component of the current curricula redevelopment is the shift of focus of instruction from the transmission curriculum to a transactional one (Gray, 1997). In a traditional transmission curriculum, a teacher transmits information to students who passively listen and acquire facts. In a transactional curriculum, students are actively involved in reflection, discovering meaning and reaching new understandings. The impact of the latter approach on education in general has been considerable. The following section shall focus on revealing the impact of the socio-constructivist approach on the teaching of ELT (English language teaching).

## ***2.2. Constructivism, Technology and ELT***

The past few decades welcomed many rapid changes in foreign language teaching theories and technological developments have had their impact on these changes and on recent ELT (English language teaching) theories. With the development of language teaching approaches from the traditional grammar-based approach to the communicative approach and more recently to the constructivists approach, language teachers have become more than ever in need of tools that will expose their learners to authentic language learning environments. Similarly, technological tools have been developing rapidly and consequently "... technological innovations have significantly changed the scene where foreign language instruction takes place" (Salaberry, 2001:1). Brown (1990:5) believes that in ELT "The shift in emphasis from the old methodology where the foreign language was the message, to the new one where it is the medium for understanding the message is evident. A foreign language is a means,

not an end in itself: you learn it to do something with it, and by doing something with it, you learn more.” Brown (1990) continues to say that when technology is involved in language use, then communication and information become inextricably linked and medium and message become mutually dependent. Wang (2005) maintains that the integration of technology in foreign language teaching demonstrates the shift in educational paradigms from the behavioural to the constructivist approach to learning. Language is a living thing and the best way to learn it is in authentic interactive environments and computer technologies and the Internet offer powerful tools that assist these approaches to language learning (Wang, 2005). Nanjappa and Grant (2003:1) argue that even though constructivism is not a theory coupled with using technology, “a complementary relationship exists between technology and constructivism, the implementation of each one benefiting the other”, because learning in a constructivist approach takes place in contexts, while technology provides the designs and environments that engage learners. Similarly, Brown (1997) and Wolffe (1997) stress that although the constructivist theory to learning is not a theory about using technology, yet constructivists’ assumptions constitute guidelines for developing a vision for integrating technology into the language curriculum. Those constructivists’ assumptions highlight the fact that learning is an active process whereby technology integration will help shift the roles of students and teachers. The role of the teacher will shift from "sage on the stage" to "guider on the side," and the role of the student will become to actively search for and explore answers instead of receiving standard interpretations (Brown, 1997 and Wolffe, 1997). Another constructivists’ assumption is that problem-solving has become the focus in education and the Internet together with other simulation software provide learners with a stage for the real world where they can observe, think, question, organize and test their ideas (Brown, 1997 and Wolffe, 1997). A further assumption from Brown (1997) and Wolffe (1997) is that learning is a collaborative process. In line with the latter



assumption, Anderson and Speck (2001) too maintain that students prefer working on computer activities with a partner rather than working alone. Hence, collaborative technology plays an important role in education for it enhances and facilitates students' collaborative learning. Such views to language education theory are in line with Krashen's (1981) notion that language learners require comprehensible input in order to make sense of new knowledge in the target language.

Dwyer, Barbieri & Doerr (1995) identified the benefits that students gain from the integration of web-based technology with course materials. Such practices would allow student-to-student and faculty-to-student communication, enabling student-centred teaching approaches. It also provides 24 hours-a-day accessibility to course materials and offer learners just-in-time means of assessment of their progress. Technology also facilitates communication amongst geographically dispersed learners in social networks which enable learners to form learning communities and to give support to one another and learn collaboratively. It also helps change the instructors' ego-centric philosophy of learning to move from instructor-centred curricula towards more learner-centred ones. In other words, it shifts the focus of the learning process from the mere transferring of knowledge from teacher to student to a process whereby the learner takes on a more active role. Consequently, the focus shifts from the learning of content and rote memorization to the learning of skills that will enable the individual learner to become autonomous and consequently a life-long learner.

This leads to the conclusion that the constructivists' (cognitive and social) theories to learning supported by the use of educational technology have a lot to offer the area of teaching English as a foreign language. The objective of this study is to take a closer look at the dilemma associated with traditional teaching in large classes in the context of the department of English language and literature at Damascus

University and to build on these theories of learning to provide practical solutions for enhancing quality education.

### ***3. Context of the study***

Education in Syria is a state responsibility and the state budget is the primary source of financing education. This implies free education for all and at all levels. According to Kabbani and Salloum (2009) one significant merit that characterizes Syrian public education is being free of charge at all stages with the state budget as the main source for financing education. The no-cost feature of the educational system in Syria has undoubtedly given equal opportunities and accessibility to education at all levels, but unfortunately this has come at the expense of investment in better equipment and more developed teaching tools (Kabbani and Salloum; 2009). Institutions of Syria's tertiary education are already stretched to maximum capacity by adolescents, as Syria's population is extremely young. The demand for higher education by young adults is strong and will probably increase in the future but financing higher education has not kept pace with the rapid increase in enrollment rates (Central Bureau of Statistics, Syria 2008, World Development Indicators 2008).

The main challenge facing Syrian higher education therefore is the dramatic increase in student enrolment unaccompanied by sufficient resources and quality assurance procedures. This has led to mass higher education in Syrian public universities, especially in social sciences and humanities which was not met by adequate staff and capital expansion. Besides, the inefficiency of the current learner support system in such massive contexts lead to a high number of drop outs and failing students which in consequence increased government financial burden. The department of English language and literature at Damascus University is

an example of such a context where the number of undergraduate students in the academic year 2007-2008 topped 13,000 students. Efforts are being made to expand horizontally by opening new branches of the university in neighbouring towns but still the number of students in the single department of English is massive with the biggest number of students pooling in the third and fourth years of the Bachelor's program. (see Table 1)

Academic year	No of students in the first year	No of students in the second year	No of students in the third year	No of students in the fourth year	Total
2007-2008	2988	3197	3401	3800	13386
2008-2009	1879	2953	3398	4510	12740
2009-2010	1640	1970	3176	4536	11322

**Table 1. Statistics of the faculty of humanities and social sciences at Damascus University (2010)**

The objective of this study is to show that it is possible to empower the current prevalent traditional model of higher education at the department of English language and literature at Damascus University through the use of new educational models facilitated by educational technology. Abouchedid and Eid (2004) recommended the implementation of e-learning in 'traditionally' demarcated higher educational systems in countries in the Arab world where there are overwhelmingly traditional delivery systems.

#### ***4. Current pedagogy at the department of English at Damascus University***

An analysis of this specific model of higher education in Syria reveals that the prominent features characterizing the department of English at Damascus University are the large number of students and a shortage in

staff members. Currently, there are over 11,000 students with around 30 faculty members and the lecturer student ratio stands around 1:500 students. Lack of teaching space in a faculty that hosts over 45,000 students is another difficulty that adds to the problem as it cuts down on the possibility of dividing students into smaller sections. It also affects students' motivation to come to university and attend lectures.

The field study was carried out on two stages. The first aimed at eliciting information concerning the teaching model used by professors and the second elicited information concerning the top learners' coping strategies in such a context.

#### ***4.1. The faculty's approach to teaching***

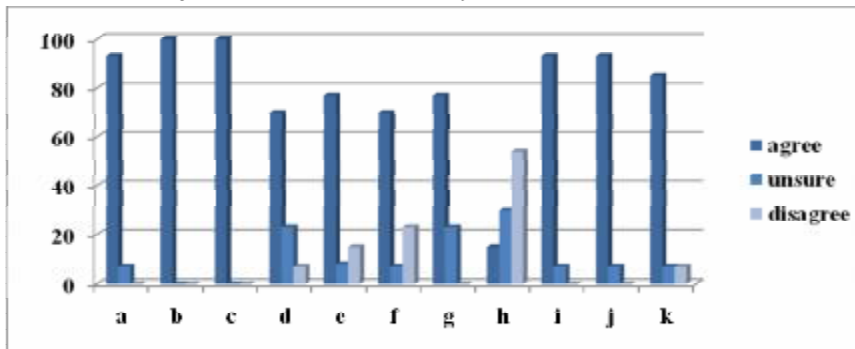
To validate assumptions concerning the current traditional model of delivery at the department of English, a questionnaire was emailed to all faculty members in December 2010. The questionnaire consisted of 15 statements. 11 were Likert scale questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and 4 gave free options for the informants to choose from. The statements of the questionnaire aimed at investigating the current model of teaching at the department. 15 out of the current 30 staff members took part in the survey which gives a response rate of 50%. The fact that the researcher is a graduate of this department and is currently a senior lecturer at this department also contributed to an insightful analysis of the context. For a detailed view of the findings of the professors' questionnaire, please refer to Table 2 and Figure 2.

The questionnaire findings reaffirmed Abouchdid and Eid's (2004) view on the prevalence of a traditional delivery system. Due to contextual constraints, the instructivist model of teaching appears to be widespread amongst professors whose main focus seems to be on transmitting pre-defined information. The approach to teaching is teacher-centred and the

main form of instructional strategy is direct instruction through pure lecturing and explicit teaching where the professor is the one who speaks for most of the lecture time and students passively receive information. The survey revealed that 60% of the professors said that they speak for around 50-70% of the lecture time, 25% speak for around 70-90% of the time and 15% speak for 90-100% of the time. Even when learners are given the chance to speak, it is mainly for questioning to ensure that they can recall facts. This doesn't mean that lecturing is not an effective means of teaching. Some lecturers are so knowledgeable, perceptive, motivating and engaging which helps learners engage in reflective thinking and inquiry. However, time and space in such a context are so limited that they leave little or no room for interaction and give learners a minimal role. Gardiner (1998:76) contends that "... involving students in discussion fosters retention of information, application of knowledge to new situations, and development of higher-order thinking skills --- and discussions do this much better than lectures do." Besides, the concentration span of learners is limited and hence some may lose concentration or forget information easily or may find it hard to assimilate lecture content. Such findings will be revisited in the learners' questionnaire where we find that top students, even when they had attended lectures, insisted on buying the transcribed lecture notes sold in bookshops merely because they wanted some kind of confirmation that they have understood exactly what the lecturer meant.

Figure 2 reveals an interesting finding too and that is that 100% of the professors who took part in the survey encouraged their learners to attend, yet 77% discouraged them from recording lectures. This reflects how keen instructors are on traditional practices where learners have to be there in person and not just listen to a recording. But in any case, recording does take place as lectures are secretly recorded and then transcribed by students who are recruited by private money making businesses who in turn sell these lecture notes in private bookshops. The

professors here do not seem to be aware of the importance of using other means like technology in support of the learning process. If students are going to buy the transcribed versions of those lectures anyway (which often contain a lot of mistakes), why not give permission to students to record lectures or even upload the recordings for them on the universities' Website? This finding was further validated with another finding in the survey where 100% of the professors in the survey stated that they 'discouraged their students from buying the transcribed lecture notes sold out in bookshops (see Table 2 and Figure 2). The reason behind this might be the instructors' concern about the quality of these transcriptions as those who supervise the whole process are merely business people whose main objective is to make money.



**Figure 2. Findings from the professors' questionnaire (refer to Table 2 below)**

Statement	agree	unsure	disagree
a. My lectures are focused on making my students understand course content material	93%	7%	0
b. I encourage my students to attend their lectures regularly	100%	0	0
c. I discourage my students from buying transcribed lecture notes sold out in private bookshops	100%	0	0
d. My students can help one another understand difficult course materials	70%	23%	7%

e. I discourage my students from recording my lectures	77%	8%	15%
f. I advise students who need help to do extra language courses at private language institutes	70%	7%	23%
g. The exam should not be allotted 100% of the mark	77%	23%	0
h. Students can learn from one another as much as they can learn from their professor	15%	30%	55%
i. The professor should not be restricted by fixed core textbooks	93%	7%	0
j. There should be a variety of exam questions (subjective and objective)	93%	7%	0
k. The support I am giving my learners is sufficient to help them pass the course	85%	7%	8%

**Table 2. Findings from the professors' questionnaire**

Survey findings also revealed that 93% of professors believed that 'making students understand content' was their main objective behind lecturing and 85% were confident that 'the support they were giving their learners was sufficient to help them pass the course'. This again highlights the fact that professors see themselves as dispensers of knowledge and see the role of the student merely as a recipient who has to attend, listen and take notes.

Another feature of this context is that the student-teacher relationship is highly formal and students are given the opportunity to ask mainly at certain points in time preferably after the lecture or during consultation hours. According to the survey, 70% of professors said that their students preferred to ask questions right after the lecture compared to only 23% whose students preferred asking during the lecture and only 7% said that their students asked them during consultation hours. This practice, though helps keep the lecture hall under control, cuts down on the possibility of having dialogues or discussions where learners can take on a more active role to further develop their conceptual understanding of course content. Instructors believe that in such a lecture hall where there are hundreds of

students there is little room for such practices and student-student interaction must be kept to a minimum so as not to interrupt the flow of information from the professor to the rest of the passive recipients.

Regarding student-student relationships and its role in the learning process, one out of every two professors (55%) disagreed with the statement that 'learners can learn from each other as much as they can learn from their professors', 30% were unsure and only 15% agreed. This significant rate of disagreement and uncertainty confirms the general mood where faculty members feel that teaching is strictly their responsibility. Nonetheless, 70% agreed that students can help each other understand content. Faculty, therefore, seem to be aware of the positive impact of learners on each other's learning, but only in as far as explaining is concerned, not teaching.

As concerns induction, 70% of the professors in the survey encouraged their learners 'to do extra language courses at private institutes to help them improve their language proficiency'. This may be an indicator that instructors feel that their students need more support but cannot provide it themselves. This finding is further evidence that faculty members are not aware of the potential of non-conventional tools like the Internet in providing their learners with supplementary learning resources that may help develop their linguistic proficiency.

The main teaching aid used in this context is still the blackboard where 85% of professors use it for further explanation. Instructors do not seem to be aware that they could hand over some of their responsibilities to their learners by guiding them to Web links where they can access extra materials and clarifications by themselves. Neither are they encouraging them to use the Web to look for extra explanatory materials themselves. Another major constraint facing professors in this context is the poorly resourced library. The survey revealed that for preparing their lectures,



85% of professors relied on their own reference books and only 15% used the university library resources. Findings also point to the fact that faculty are aware of the potential of the Web in providing them with extra materials, but they use it only at the personal level. 77% of instructors in the survey said that they relied on Web resources in preparing their own lecture notes. However, this is rarely reflected in lectures and students are rarely guided to these Websites or links. Although 93% of the professors agreed that they should not be restricted by core textbooks and should be free to choose materials they think useful to deliver the learning objectives, still university regulations demand that there should be a core textbook as not all students can attend. This demonstrates that even when faculty members are open to change; contextual constraints stand in their way.

As regards the assessment of thousands of students every term, there is little room for authentic assessment. Exams are the sole means of assessment and they are mainly designed to test the students' ability to recall information and content of core textbooks. Exams are also allocated 100% of the mark, although 77% of professors in the survey were against that, but ongoing assessment is hard to apply in such a context. Similarly, 93% of instructors stated that having both subjective and objective exam questions is important; however they are reluctant to implement it due to the impracticality of marking hundreds, if not thousands, of exam papers every term.

All these contextual constraints have resulted in a highly instructive mode of teaching with the instructor in control of the educational process and focus mainly on teaching pre-defined content. Lectures, lecture notes (sold out in private bookshops) and core textbooks remain the main source of support for learners. The whole educational process as mentioned by Darling-Hammond (1996) does not go beyond dispensing information, giving a test, and giving a grade. To look into how learners

deal with such a highly conventional learning context, the following section shall concern itself with investigating how students, in spite of all constraints, manage their learning and excel.

#### **4.2. Students' approach to learning**

It is quite evident that learners at the department of English at Damascus University are getting minimal support. Hence, they find themselves obliged to resort to some coping strategies. In order to identify these strategies, a corresponding survey was carried out on the MA students at the department of English. They are fresh graduates who have recently been through the 4 year undergraduate program. The reason why these particular students were chosen was because they were the top graduate students and their use of coping strategies may have been exaggerated in order to excel. One of the prerequisites for enrolling on Masters Degree programs at Damascus University is to have a general average of no less than 60% (good rating). Since the number of applicants for this MA program is much higher than the number of places on offer, the competition is rather high and students who normally get accepted are those whose averages are around 70% (very good rating) or more. It is worth mentioning here that the highest average obtained by students of the department of English is around 80% (excellent rating).

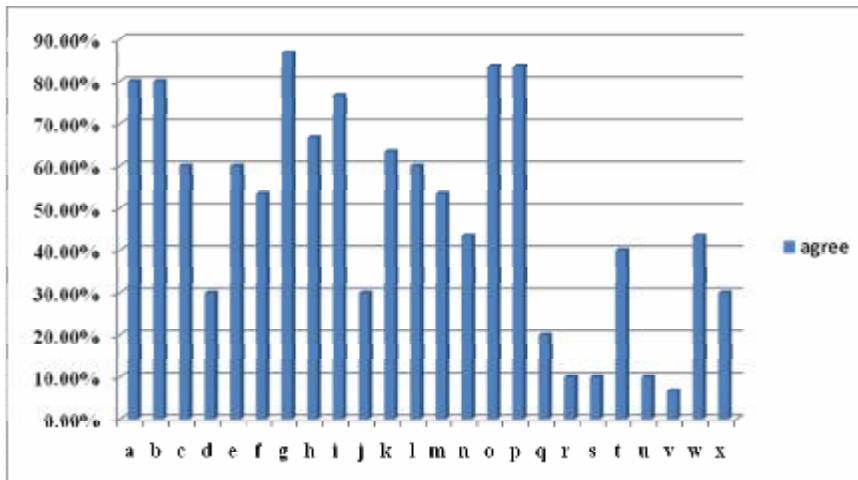
<b>Coping strategies used by students</b>	<b>agree</b>	<b>unsure</b>	<b>disagree</b>
a) Trying to attend every lecture	80.00%	10.00%	10.00%
b) Taking notes during lectures	80.00%	10.00%	10.00%
c) Recording lectures or borrowing recorded lectures from friends	60.00%	23.33%	16.67%
d) Borrowing lecture notes from friends who attend regularly	30.00%	40.00%	30.00%
e) Sitting in front seats to see and hear the lecturer better	60.00%	20.00%	20.00%
f) Doing extra English language courses at private language institutes	53.33%	26.67%	20.00%

g) Discuss with classmates issues that are not easy to comprehend	86.67%	13.33%	0.00%
h) Studying the transcribed lecture-notes sold by private bookshops	66.67%	16.67%	16.67%
i) Explaining lectures to friends	76.67%	20.00%	3.33%
j) Studying with friends	30.00%	33.33%	36.67%
k) Asking the professor about things I do not understand	63.33%	26.67%	10.00%
l) Asking friends about things I do not understand	60.00%	23.33%	16.67%
m) Searching the web for explanations and extra material	53.33%	36.67%	10.00%
n) Reading extra books and references	43.33%	46.67%	10.00%
o) Solving past exam questions	83.33%	6.67%	10.00%
p) Studying the core course books thoroughly	83.33%	16.67%	0.00%
q) Borrowing graduate students' lecture notes	20.00%	20.00%	60.00%
r) Reading the translated versions of the novels/plays etc	10.00%	16.67%	73.33%
s) Taking private lessons with a private tutor	10.00%	16.67%	73.33%
t) Reading core textbooks during holidays before term time to save on precious time	40.00%	36.67%	23.33%
u) Avoid sitting for first time exams to see the type of questions the lecturer will give	10.00%	40.00%	50.00%
v) Hide useful material from colleagues to get better marks	6.67%	10.00%	83.33%
w) Take turns in attending and circulating lecture notes to friends	43.33%	36.67%	20.00%
x) Take turns in booking seats to help friends save time	30.00%	50.00%	20.00%

**Table 3. Findings on the coping strategies that undergraduate students believed to be important for their success at the department of English**

In order to excel in their studies in this highly instructivist context, learners must be highly motivated and must resort to some form of self-regulated learning strategies. This exploratory study was carried out through a questionnaire that was distributed to all Masters' students during the year 2010. 29 out of 30 students took part in the questionnaire. This gives a response rate of around 97%. The average mark obtained by the sample of students who took part in the study was 74.50%. The questionnaire constituted 24 Likert Scale questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and three open ended questions. The objective behind the open ended questions was to illicit more in-depth information about the strategies used and to leave room for students to unfold any strategies that they were using and were overlooked by the questionnaire.

For a detailed view of the coping strategies used by students, please refer to Tables 3 and 4. The latter presents a ranking of the coping strategies used. Figure 3 presents the same findings in a bar chart. A closer look at Table 4 shows that the most common coping strategy used by around 87% of top students at the department of English at Damascus University was 'discussing with friends course materials that were difficult to understand'. This indicates that the collaborative spirit prevails as students find support for their learning through discussing with one another concepts and issues that are not easy to comprehend on their own. One might think that in such big classes, the impersonal medium prevails, but findings are contrary to that. There seems to be no barriers amongst students and they tend to rely on each other for further support.



**Figure 3. Percentage of students who agreed to the importance of the coping strategies (For strategies used, refer to Tables 3 & 4)**

In second place and not unexpectedly, the strategies used by around 83% of students were ‘attempting past exam papers’ and ‘studying the prescribed textbooks’. The ‘washback’ effect of testing is clear here especially that the exam is allotted 100% of the mark. Students know that the majority of questions (80%) have to come from the core textbook (as this is a university regulation to help students who cannot attend) and they also know that with multiple choice exam questions, many questions are likely to be repeated. They also know that exam questions cannot come from outside core textbooks or lectures. Gates (1995:101) defines the ‘washback’ effect as the “influence of testing on teaching and learning.” This is quite evident here. According to the professors, the students’ most commonly asked questions are "will this come in the exam?" "Is this section included in the exam?" "If this is to come in the exam, in what form will it be?". Teaching as is clear from the professors' questionnaire findings is mainly focused on the teaching of content and giving exams to check if this content has been memorized. That is why students’ learning is driven by studying this content and attempting past

exam papers, both of which are distinctive characteristics of the instructivist approach.

<b>Coping strategies used by students</b>	<b>agree</b>	<b>Ranking</b>
g) Discuss with classmates issues that are not easy to comprehend	86.67%	1
p) Studying the core course books thoroughly	83.33%	2
o) Solving past exam questions	83.33%	2
b) Taking notes during lectures	80.00%	3
a) Trying to attend every lecture	80.00%	3
i) Explaining lectures to friends	76.67%	4
h) Studying the transcribed lecture-notes sold by private bookshops	66.67%	5
k) Asking the professor about things I do not understand	63.33%	6
l) Asking friends about things I do not understand	60.00%	7
e) Sitting in front seats to see and hear the lecturer better	60.00%	7
c) Recording lectures or borrowing recorded lectures from friends	60.00%	7
m) Searching the web for explanations and extra material	53.33%	8
f) Doing extra English language courses at private language institutes	53.33%	8
w) Take turns in attending and circulating lecture notes to friends	43.33%	9
n) Reading extra books and references	43.33%	9
t) Reading core textbooks during holidays before term time to save on precious time	40.00%	10
x) Take turns in booking seats to help friends save time	30.00%	11
j) Studying with friends	30.00%	11
d) Borrowing lecture notes from friends who attend regularly	30.00%	11
q) Borrowing graduate students' lecture notes	20.00%	12
u) Avoid sitting for first time exams to see the type of questions the lecturer will give	10.00%	13
s) Taking private lessons with a private tutor	10.00%	13
r) Reading the translated versions of the novels/plays etc ...	10.00%	13
v) Hide useful material from colleagues to get better marks	6.67%	14

**Table 4. Ranking of the coping strategies believed by top students to be important for success at the department of English**

Other common coping strategies reported to have been used by 80% of students and ranked in third place were 'attending lectures' and 'taking notes'. This finding is in line with the finding from the professors' questionnaire where 100% of instructors encouraged their learners to attend. Successful students' effort seems to be focused on making sure that they attend every lecture so as not to miss out on anything said during those lectures. Taking notes is also important to them as this will guide them to what to focus on whilst revising. This will also help them grasp the main ideas which will be the subject matter from which exam questions will come. The open ended section of the questionnaire revealed too that successful students took notes in order to compare them with the lecture notes sold out in shops. That will serve as further reassurance that they have understood what the professor was trying to explain.

Another commonly used strategy which ranked fourth with around 77% of informants choosing it was 'explaining lecture course materials to friends'. Peer support does seem to be of great value to learners and successful learners seem to use this strategy to help them help others and at the same time reinforce their own learning. The collaborative spirit is quite high and students seem to be keen on guiding each other and explaining things to one another. Students have certainly found ways to support their learning by discussing difficult issues and explaining materials to one another. Surprisingly, this strategy rated before consulting their own professors which ranked in sixth place with around 64% of successful students using it. Hence, there seems to be a lot of trust amongst learners which is undoubtedly giving them support. One can conclude here that in spite of the large number of students and a traditional instructivist context, learners have managed to find ways of getting help, guidance and support (both academic and moral) from one another.

In fifth place, about two thirds of the students (67%) said that they 'relied on buying and studying from the lecture notes sold in private bookshops' (which are transcribed versions of the recordings of university lectures). Learners find these notes - the quality of which professors admit to be below standard- quite useful because they help those who cannot attend to keep track of what is being said in lectures and help those who do attend to double check their understanding of the lectures they have attended. The significance of this finding is that it points out how desperate those learners are for any form of support.

In seventh place, 60% of top students said that they relied on the strategies of 'sitting in front seats of lecture theatres' (to be able to hear the professor clearly), 'recording lectures', and 'asking friends about things they don't understand'. All these findings further illustrate the value of attendance and the value of the lecturer's explanation. This finding is again in line with the professors' questionnaire findings where 100% of instructors encouraged learners to attend which reinforces the traditional view that the main teaching/learning process takes place in the lecture room.

In eighth place, almost one out of every two outstanding students (around 54%) recognized their need to further improve their language proficiency to be able to cope with the course requirements. Such students resorted to doing remedial English language courses at private institutes. It is worth mentioning here that although 54% of students recognized their need for further language courses, only 10% resorted to private lessons. This may be due to the fact that the former costs less or it may be a sign of students' preference for group language learning. This finding is also in line with the instructors' questionnaires where 70% of the professors' recognized their students' need for further support and encouraged them to do extra language courses at private institutes. Professors do not seem to be aware of the potential of offering such kind of support themselves.



This could be achieved through guiding learners to the use of supplementary materials on the WWW especially that findings showed that the strategy 'searching the Web for further explanation and extra materials' came also in eighth place with 54% of students choosing it. This is an indicator that half of the students are aware of the value of the Web and the Internet to their learning and to further their understanding of course materials. Hence instructors can invest in that by guiding their learners to extra materials rather than encouraging them to do extra language courses at private institutes. 'Reading extra references' and 'taking turns in attending and circulating lecture notes' came in ninth place with around 44% of successful students choosing it. Unfortunately, the strategy 'reading extra references' ranked amongst the least used strategies and that is mainly because the chief focus of learners is on passing the exam and hence the core textbook and the lecturer's interpretation of that course book are of prime importance. The strategy of 'circulating lecture notes amongst learners' again supports earlier findings of the cooperative spirit that prevails amongst students where if one was unable to attend, others who attend were prepared to share with them their own lecture notes. But, that is only used as a backup strategy. Top students prefer attending and taking notes by themselves to make sure that they get the information from the authority.

In tenth place, 40% of successful learners resorted to 'reading core text books ahead of time' (mainly during holidays) to save on precious term time for attendance. This shows how some students have resorted to time management strategies to cut down on the pressure they face during term time. This, together with other strategies like taking extra language courses, recording lectures, double checking their own understanding of lectures with the transcribed versions etc., are all an indicator of how learners are turning into autonomy by teaching themselves how to manage their time and their learning through finding ways of helping

themselves achieve their ultimate objective which is to succeed with flying colours.

Amongst the least used strategies and in eleventh place with 30% of successful students choosing them were the strategies of 'borrowing lecture notes from friends who attend', 'booking seats for one another' and 'studying with one another'. These findings may point to the fact that students are self dependent and avoid relying on others. Although two thirds of the students in the questionnaire trusted the lecture notes sold in bookshops, less than one third trusted their peers'. The reason might simply be the fact that the latter is a word-for-word transcription of the lecture. As to 'studying with one another', few learners chose this strategy as this might constitute a waste of time once they discuss core concepts together. In twelfth place came the strategy of 'borrowing notes from alumni' with 20% of students choosing it. Not a very reliable strategy knowing that the focus of each module sometimes changes from one year to another especially when the professor changes too. In thirteenth place, 10% of students resorted to 'reading the translated versions of the plays and novels', 'taking private lessons with a private tutor' and 'sitting for retakes to get the chance of benefiting from repeated MCQ questions'. Learners at the department of English seem to be quite aware of the value of reading in English, so 90% declined from reading the translated versions of the literary works. They know very well that they need to improve their linguistic proficiency and that reading in English will contribute to that. Finally, and in fourteenth place, only 7% of informants said that they 'hid useful materials from their peers in order to get better marks'. This should come as no surprise as the strategy that ranked in first place was the one where the collaborative spirit was most apparent.

In short, top students in this instructivist context have resorted to coping strategies that enabled them to help one another and help themselves.

They have indirectly and unknowingly resorted to some of the practices of the socio-constructivist approach even when their professors were unsure that they are capable of learning from one another. The collaborative spirit does seem to prevail and does seem to contribute to the success of these learners in this specific context of mass education.

### ***5. Discussion of results***

The most important finding from the students' questionnaire is that in a context of mass instruction, there is a mutually supportive relationship amongst learners. Students have learnt to invest in the most abundant resource they have around and that is other learners like themselves on whom they can rely to get the support needed for their learning. They discuss with each other their own interpretation of concepts and make meaning together; they share experiences and benefit from the experiences of more senior students and graduates. Hence, amidst this instructivist model, learners are resorting to a 'socio-constructivists' approach to learning. However, it is the students themselves who supervise this informal support system without the instructors even being aware of its existence. This study seeks to open the eyes of faculty members to the recent developments in education theories in general and in ELT (English Language Teaching) in particular, where there has been a shift from instructor-controlled to learner-controlled learning. No claim is being made here that one approach is better than the other or that a paradigm shift is the best solution in this specific context. The instructivist approach has been around for a long time and has persisted and contributed to preparing excellent graduates. The constructivist too is giving learners more confidence in their conceptual abilities and in their abilities to think reflectively and critically and to discover meaning in groups. Mastering all these skills will enable graduates of the third millennium become better equipped to meet today's complex society demands.

The role and impact of new technology in foreign language teaching and the influence of computers in education have undoubtedly contributed to a change in curricula and in approaches to teaching and learning. From this assumption, it is argued that making use of educational technologies is a cost effective tool and a good strategy that can provide learners in this mass educational context with further support to promote their learning and to harmonize education with the rest of the world's information and communication revolutions. Yang & Yuen (2010) maintain that education has been dramatically influenced by information and communication technology such as multimedia on the internet, telecommunications, wireless applications, mobile devices, social network software, Web 2.0 etc which are radically redefining the way people obtain information and the way they learn. Investing in the mutually supportive collaborative spirit of learners holds a lot of answers to better quality education in this specific context. This can be achieved by integrating a socio-constructivist approach to learning with the current instructivist' one which would mean a blend between instructor-centric curricula and learner-centric ones. This can be injected with the use of technology which can provide access to different channels of resources from which learners can choose and explore. The use of multimedia will give students increased opportunities for genuine communication and authentic language use. It will also prompt learners to access a variety of sources of language input which will activate their language for output.

## ***6. Recommendations***

Ferdig (2005) made a number of suggestions that need to be taken into account whilst designing socio-constructivist tasks that integrate technology into education. According to Ferdig (2005), if good implementation of technology in education is to take place, then first the

innovation provided by technology should be authentic, interesting and challenging in order to engage learners in the subject matter. Secondly, the innovation should give learners the feeling that they are in charge because better learning will result when learners feel that they are in control of their learning. Thirdly, learners should be given the opportunity to collaborate and socially interact with others. This active role will enable them to construct knowledge and achieve more meaningful learning. Next, technology should enable learners find realistic solutions which will enable them see the practical aspects of the concepts they have learnt. Finally the technologies implemented in education should give learners the opportunity for publication, reflection and feedback because that will help learners produce their own work, reflect on it and get feedback from others. In the light of Ferdig's (2005) suggestions and taking into account the features specific to the context of the department of English at Damascus University, the following recommendations may constitute the stepping stone for implementing a socio-constructivists approach within the current instructivist teaching/learning context:

**a. Giving support for the masses by the masses**

Instructors can involve learners in collaborative learning across different years of the BA Program. Third and fourth year students, for example, can be involved in giving support to the learning of writing skills of first and second year students respectively. Similarly third and fourth year students can also play the role of mentors and guides to first and second year students respectively. As a matter of fact, this already exists informally as most students rely to a great extent on the experiences and guidance they get from other senior students or alumni. This form of support given by students to students can be organized and supervised by tutors. It can also count as part of the students' course-work or assessment to encourage learners to be involved in mentoring their peers. Many students would welcome the idea of being given such a

responsibility. This form of guidance can take place either online (through the use of emails/chat boards/discussion forums etc...) or it could be done face to face if students attend regularly or have difficulty accessing the Internet.

**b. Publishing a departmental literary magazine/newsletter**

Supervised by professors in the department, a committee made up from students from all four years of the program can be guided to get students (individuals or groups) to contribute to the publishing of regular issues of a local departmental literary magazine/ a newsletter. This exercise will generate a lot of writing, editing and reviewing and will involve a lot of exchanges amongst learners interested in contributing to the magazine. The exchange of information can be carried out mainly through using technology (email/ discussion forums/ mobile phones etc...). This again may count as part of their assessment. By contributing to this magazine whether in the editorial board or in publishing an article or an essay, individual students or groups of students may be given extra credit for their effort.

**c. Providing lecture notes, supplementary materials and learning resources**

To cut down on the possibility of private businesses making big profits out of the students' recording and transcribing of the professors' lecture notes, instructors themselves can upload on their Website/blog their *own* lecture notes, a recorded version of the lecture , and any supplementary materials or useful links. Learners can also be encouraged to be involved and to contribute by looking for useful materials online and uploading the links for such materials on the departmental Website. This will give learners confidence that they can contribute to the teaching/learning process. In this way too, lecturers will guarantee the quality of materials that students are using as references, since these materials and resources are supervised by a professional and not by private money making

businesses. All such materials can also be downloaded and copied onto a CD and circulated to students with limited Internet access. This will guarantee that all students are benefiting from this form of support.

**d. Encouraging the compiling of anthologies**

As a form of further support and to help learners develop critical and reflective thinking, lecturers may encourage learners as individuals and in groups to locate and compile a variety of Websites on the works of literary figures like *Shakespeare*, *Milton*, *Wordsworth*, for example, and to analyze and comment on their usefulness and then upload that information on the departmental Website. Lecturers can also use their Blogs to guide learners to Websites where they can freely access good analyses and critiques of the literary works in their curricula. Such materials can then be downloaded and copied onto a CD and distributed to students with limited access to the Internet.

**e. Promoting E-tandem learning**

Further critical and reflective thinking can be encouraged by making individual and/or group learners share online response to a reading through exchanging with other learners at other Syrian, Arab or foreign universities their own interpretation, views, and understanding of literary works like *Hamlet*, for example. They can then upload their findings onto the departmental Website. (This can be done through blogs/emails/chat boards/discussion forums etc..)

Instead of encouraging learners to do extra language courses at private institutes, lecturers can also encourage their learners to use social networking sites like *Livemocha*, for example, to help e-tandem learning of languages where students engage with other language learners from other parts of the world in authentic language use.

**f. Facilitating group translation**

Since translation is a core module in every year of the program, professors can give their learners the opportunity to choose texts by themselves or assign them texts that need to be translated. Learners can then be prompted to work on the task of translation as individuals or as groups and upload their own different translated versions of the same text on the departmental Website. Learners can then be requested to give each other feedback and comment on the different versions of the same translated text. This will help learners develop a critical eye of the different types of translation and become capable of evaluating different versions of a translated text and in consequence become better translators themselves. Again this may count as part of the students' assessment.

Instructors can also encourage learners to use Websites like the *BBC* where they can find the same piece of news/article in Arabic and in English so that they can practice translation and compare their own version with that of an authority. Such materials can also be copied onto a CD and circulated to students with limited Internet access.

**g. Using cooperative writing tools**

Students' writing skills can be further developed through encouraging learners to use Web 2.0 tools. Individuals or groups of students can write and publish their own essays and articles on the net. The best group/individual's essay will be published on the departments' Website. Learners can also be encouraged to write online letters to publishers, editors, public figures, literary figures, authors, poets etc ... This would increase their motivation to write as they know that other audience, not only their teachers and peers, could read their work. Web 2.0 tools like Writeboard: <http://www.writeboard.com/> and Dekita: <http://dekita.org/> can be very useful. Students can also be guided by online writing labs and Websites like *Perdue Owl* which can help learners develop their



writing skills. Instructors can also prompt learners to carry out pen pal projects with native speakers of English in other parts of the world.

#### **h. Developing learners' speaking/listening skills**

Lecturers can invest in the learners' iPods or mobile phones to help develop their learners' listening and speaking skills. This can be achieved through encouraging learners to record themselves and listen to their recordings and to those of their colleagues and give each other feedback on how to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills. This can be done anywhere, not necessarily in the lecture hall. The best recordings can then be uploaded on the Website for other students to listen to and try to imitate.

Lecturers can also make learners listen to recited English poetry and songs on their iPods or mobile phones. These poems/songs can be uploaded on the departments' Website or they may be handed out to students on a CD or may be circulated during a lecture through the use of the Bluetooth. As part of their assessment, students have to listen to these recitations and try to imitate them by recording themselves and by giving peers feedback on their recordings. They can also be requested to work out by themselves the lyrics of the songs or the poems.

#### **i. Discouraging the reading of the translated versions of literary works**

For giving learners further support and helping them improve their reading and listening skills, lecturers can guide their learners to CD's, Websites and Web links where they can read and even listen to the prescribed plays/novels/poems/short stories... etc (in text and audio form) through the use of multimedia. This can take place at the learners' own leisure, as these audio and text files can be uploaded on the students' mobile phones, laptops, CD's, memory sticks, etc... to be listened to anytime: on the way to university, at home, waiting in between lectures, waiting for buses etc .... Students can also contribute to this Website and

upload Web links to relevant movies /songs/ poems/ useful lectures etc ...  
These materials can then be copied onto a CD and circulated to students.

**j. Guiding learners to online tools for extra language practice**

Numerous Websites can be used by individual students to help develop their language proficiency. Such Websites like *Elllo* (English Listening Language Lab Online) <http://www.elllo.org/> can help students develop their listening skills. *Escafe*: <http://www.escafe.com/> offers discussion forums, chat room, interactive exercises, online tutorials, and extensive help for learners and teachers of English. The English teaching lab *Chinswing*: <http://www.chinswing.com/> is also another useful Website that students and teachers can use to enhance learning English.

Lecturers can also guide learners to Websites like '*Second Life*' where they can go on 3D virtual tours to places like Modern England/ Victorian England/ Medieval England etc ... This will help learners understand better the setting of the literary work they are studying.

These recommendations are by no means exclusive. They are just a few examples as the potential for learning on the Internet and other online and offline supplementary materials is endless. An important note worthy of mentioning here is that collaboration amongst learners can be best implemented if preceded by collaboration amongst instructors. This requires a change of culture and a lot of training workshops for both lecturers and learners on how to use technology to enhance learning and to build a virtual repository of knowledge.

**7. Conclusion**

Evidence from this research reinforced the view that the current model of education at the department of English language and Literature at Damascus University is purely instructivist. Evidence also showed that the collaborative spirit prevails amongst learners in this mass educational

context. To be able to meet the requirements of education in the third millennium, there is no doubt that we need to reconsider our philosophy of learning to accommodate new approaches using technological developments and multimedia. A socio-constructivist approach to teaching and learning blended with the current instructivist approach is thus recommended. These recommendations will be the first step towards turning masses of students into an asset. This will help transform the current prevailing collaborative spirit amongst learners into a more powerful tool; a tool for social-constructivist learning that will blend into and complement the current instructivist approach. Hence learners will benefit from the strengths of each. However, the resolution to this challenge depends on what Darling-Hammond (1996:7) said where she argues that the major challenge of the next century will be “the advancement of teaching”. The resolution of that challenge, she says, “will depend on our ability to develop knowledge for a very different kind of teaching than what has been the norm for most of this century. If we want all students to actually learn in the way that new standards suggest and today’s complex society demands, we will need to develop teaching that goes far beyond dispensing information, giving a test, and giving a grade.”

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