

# **The Quantity versus Quality Dilemma in Syrian Higher Education Today: a study to enhance the quality of teaching and learning at the department of English at Damascus University**

**Dr. Hala Dalbani\***

## **Abstract**

Very large public universities, an inadequately developed public sector, and a rapid growth in the number of students seeking higher education are some of the challenges facing higher education in Syria today. The government's 'open admission policy' has committed itself to securing 'free access' to higher education to every secondary school graduate. For this policy to continue and be successful and for the country and students to benefit, significant changes are needed, or else, the quality of teaching and learning in such massive contexts where minimal resources are available will continue to recede. Such circumstances besides the technological developments in the world today also make it imperative that the concept of education should be moving towards helping learners acquire the skills of self-directed learning and develop the attitude that learning is a life-long process.

This study shall attempt to look for potential answers to quality education at the department of English language and literature at Damascus University where the number of EFL (English as a foreign language) undergraduate students in 2009 was around 13,000 with a student-lecturer ratio of around 500:1. The answer to quality education in such massive departments might simply lie in approaches to teaching that promote

---

\* Department of English- Faculty of Letters and Humanities- Damascus University

autonomy. Non-conventional modes of learning might also hold a lot of the answers to this dilemma. However, in a culture where teachers themselves have not been exposed to the concept of 'autonomization' and in a context with a traditional organization of classrooms, implementing such approaches to teaching may not be that simple. The changes needed mainly depend on training the current faculty to adopt non-conventional means of teaching and to hand over some of their responsibilities and focus instead on enhancing the learning process by developing their learners' cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective skills.

## ***1. Introduction***

The challenge in Syria today is not merely an increased demand for higher education, but the major shift in pedagogic theories and educational methods and practices that has taken place worldwide, particularly in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. The move towards more autonomy, self-access and self-directedness in foreign language learning according to Gremmo and Riley (1995) came as a result of a number of influences. Amongst educationalists, there has been a convergence on the notion of learner-centredness which emphasizes the importance of the learners' role and participation in the educational process. The linguists' influence was also reflected in the social and pragmatic vision of language viewed mainly as "a tool for communication". This view of language provided the rationale for the "Communicative Approach" to language learning and teaching, with its emphasis on communicative functions, individual needs, social norms and autonomy. Hence, autonomy came as a logical result of the communicative approach. The psychologists' influence materialized in their emphasis on learning as a 'process'; something that learners do, rather than being done to them. Hence learning becomes interactive, that is; social which provides further support for both the methodology and aims of the communicative approach. The influence of the developments in technology too made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-learning. Gremmo and Riley (1995) go on to say that with the increased demand for foreign language learning and the increase in the number of language learners, the adoption of more flexible learning programmes with varying degrees of learner-centredness and self-direction became crucial. Such technology mediated non-conventional programmes offered less rigid alternatives to traditional approaches to teaching and learning and provided a number of solutions to the quantity and quality concerns in education "By allowing students to choose when, where and what to study and by distinguishing those who have already attained a satisfactory level from those who still have far to go, such approaches go at least part of the way towards resolving the ambiguity between qualitative and quantitative objectives in education." (Gremmo and Riley, 1995:154)

These changes in approaches and pedagogies were accompanied by a global change in the role of universities. There has been a shift in importance away from the universities' role as a simple provider of knowledge to their role in generating and applying knowledge. Hence, they have become the engines of economic growth. This has been reflected in educational policies which required a move away from the passive lecture room and courses that are packaged into well-defined degree programs towards more interactive and collaborative learning experiences that are provided when and where the student needs the knowledge and skills. Hence, learning is no more restricted within the walls and the time of the lecture but goes far beyond in place and time to become an ongoing life-long process.

## ***2. Background to the study***

Very large public universities, an inadequately developed public sector, and a rapid growth in the number of students seeking higher education are some of the challenges facing higher education in Syria today. The government's 'open admission policy' has committed itself to securing 'free access' to higher education to every secondary school graduate. But, with minimal resources and insufficient student support systems the quality of teaching and learning in such massive contexts is on the decline. The department of English Language and Literature at Damascus University is an example of such a context. Statistics from the Planning Department at the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education show that the number of undergraduate students in the department of English in 2003 topped 10,000 students and exceeded 14,000 students in 2007 (see fig.1). It is worth mentioning here that the number of undergraduate students in this single department exceeds number of students in entire universities in many developed countries.

Another problem that faces the English department at Damascus University is staff shortage. According to a study carried out by the Studies and Research Section at Damascus University Presidency, the ratio of students to lecturers at the department of English in 2007 stood at 675:1. The number of undergraduate students in 2009 was around 13,000 with a student-lecturer ratio of approximately 500:1. In spite of all efforts to reduce these numbers, the figures are still massive which

undoubtedly has had its impact on the quality of support offered to students and consequently on the quality of teaching and learning.

EFL Syrian students, who are native speakers of Arabic, come to the department of English Language and Literature straight from secondary school with a relatively low proficiency in the foreign language. There is hardly any form of induction on offer and the support that students get during their four year study at the department is minimal. Basically, the lectures are the main form of support whereby lecturers impart knowledge and students listen passively. In a faculty of around 40,000 students, space is limited too. The English department's share of space is just a couple of auditoriums and classrooms. Hence there is no chance of dividing classes into smaller sections like what used to be done in the past when the number of students was much smaller and there were more lecture rooms allocated to the department. In such circumstances many students prefer not to attend as the lecture theatres are often too crowded and seats need to be booked ahead of time if students want to get a front seat where they can see and hear the lecturer well. The total number of lectures given during a single term is between 10-14 lectures as terms are growing shorter and exam time is growing longer due to the increase in number of students. Hence, class contact time is minimal and the majority of students rely on themselves, past exam questions and the poor-quality lecture notes sold out on the market.

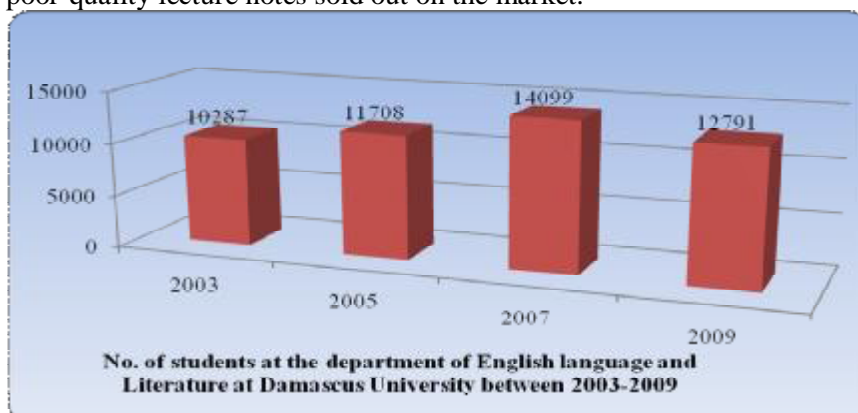


Figure 1. No. of students at the department of English language and literature between 2003 and 2009

(Statistics from the Planning Department at the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education 2009)

Another form of support given to learners in this context is the textbook. There is always a core textbook assigned for each course. Both lecturers and students depend on this reference book from which 80% of exam questions are expected to come. This policy is respected in order to be fair to all students – those who can attend and those who can't- as attendance at the department of English language and literature is no more a prerequisite due to the contextual constraints mentioned above. Nonetheless, being bound to a single core reference book confines learning within the two covers of that textbook.

The last form of support that students are offered in this context is the chance to consult the lecturer about any queries related to the course. This can be done during the two hour consultation period allocated weekly for each lecturer. This is the time when the learner can approach the lecturer to seek help and ask for guidance. However, due to the large number of students, impersonal relationships between lecturers and students prevail and consequently many students shy away from coming into direct contact with the lecturer and hence do not make use of this service. As a result, students end up doing most of the work on their own with little or no guidance.

### ***3. Statement of the problem***

Due to the above mentioned contextual constraints at the Department of English at Damascus University, the teacher-centred educational system prevails by necessity not by choice and students at the department of English have to rely on themselves for doing most of the learning. The teaching in the majority of the modules remains mainly focused on imparting knowledge and teaching about the 'form' of the foreign language. In such a context, there is no room for the teaching of language 'use'. Lynch (2000:32) states that in the language teaching profession there is the assumption that the teacher's task is to help language *learners* become actual or potential language *users*, in other words, to make a move from focus on *form* to focus on *meaning*. However, under the

circumstances, the move is not achieved and the outcome is a learner who knows about the form and the literature of the foreign language; yet is incapable, for most of time, of using the written and the spoken forms of the language authentically in lifelike realistic situations.

This research was prompted by the need to find a means for assisting English language learners at Damascus University in the course of their studies in the context of large classes at the department of English Language and Literature in achieving one of the most important intended learning outcomes of the program which is developing the learners' 'communicative competence'. According to their well-known framework, Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Swain, 1985 maintain that 'communicative competence' is made up of four sub-competencies: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. The first three involve knowledge of the language code, its sociocultural constraints, and the rules of discourse necessary to produce coherent and cohesive messages, respectively. Whereas, 'strategic competence' enables the foreign language learner to use problem-solving techniques to try and overcome communication problems resulting from lack of knowledge in any of the other sub-competencies. Tarone (1984: 129) stresses that a student who has not developed competence in any of the four mentioned components cannot be said to be "truly proficient in the foreign language". Similarly, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1991), Tarone (1984) and Willems (1987) contend that one of the objectives of L2 teaching should be the development of the student's use of communication strategies as a means to develop their communicative competence. A similar belief is expressed by Manchón (2000:19) who highlights the view that teaching the use of strategies will result in "an enhanced metacognitive awareness on the part of the learner that in turn favours the retention of strategy over time and the transferability of its use to new learning tasks." But since the classroom - by its very nature - is not the ideal place where the foreign language can be practiced 'naturally', hence the importance of training students on how to use communication strategies (Tarone: 1984; Willems: 1987).

Central to this research, therefore, is the belief that in a context with a large number of EFL (English as a foreign language) learners where there

is little or no room for practicing language use naturalistically, other options are open. Learners can be helped to develop their communicative competence through training them on the use of communication strategies. Under such restricting circumstances, this study is proposing accomplishing that by making the most of opportunities for learning beyond the lecture theatre, i.e through the use of technology mediated learning environments.

#### ***4. Technology and foreign language learning***

The proliferation of multimedia environments is providing some answers to better quality education worldwide especially under such restricting circumstances like those of the department of English at Damascus University. “Recent developments in technology have brought about the possibility of providing learners with a rich variety of language learning resources. Learners can now practise modern languages using language learning CD-ROMs, watching satellite TV, communicating with other students through e-mail, and using learning tools such as word processors or concordances; they also have the possibility of searching for language learning materials using numerous databases or the World Wide Web” (Serra, 2000; 95-96).

Gousie (1998: 55) states that the fast-moving 1990’s brought foreign language instructors a variety of new multimedia tools that were unheard of just a few years ago: “No longer were we swept by a wave of methodology; we were swamped by a tidal wave of computer-assisted technologies. Suddenly the capability of incorporating laserdiscs, hypertext cards, CDs, CD-ROMs and the Internet into our syllabi became a reality.”

Talking about the value of technology to education in general, İşman (2002; cited in Yaratana and Kural, 2010:163), posits that “technology contributes to education by fostering faster distribution of information, providing individual learning situations, promoting permanent learning, representing a ground for project works and giving opportunity for global education.”



Dudeny and Hockly (2007) point out several reasons that make the use of technology in learning English today increasingly important, foremost of which comes Internet accessibility which has made possible exposure to authentic tasks and materials as well as accessibility to a wealth of ready-made ELT (English language teaching) materials. It has also provided learners with excellent opportunities for collaboration and communication even when they are geographically dispersed. Technology has also introduced novel ways for practising language and developing language skills and assessing performance. Besides, the learners of today are growing up with technology and thus it has become a natural and an integrated part of their lives. Technology has also become increasingly mobile and can be used not only in the classroom, lecture hall, computer room or self-access centre; it can also be used at home, on the way to university, and in internet cafes. Another reason given by Dudeny and Hockly (2007) regarding the importance of technology to English language learning today is that the English language itself is used in these technologically mediated contexts.

The impact of technology on language learning has been a subject for research for quite some time now but with contradictory findings. Still, many research findings testify to the value of technology to language learners and to the development of their language skills. A number of studies, for example, revealed the positive effects of web-based learning on the written linguistic proficiency of language learners. Al-Jarf (2004) cites a number of such studies like those of Allen and Thompson, 1994; Beyer, 1992; Chambless and Chambless, 1994; Davis and Mahoney, 1999; Hart, 1992; Hood, 1994; Jackiewicz, 1995; Jones, 1994; Shaver, 1986; Snyder, 1993; and Zoni, 1992 (see Al-Jarf, 2004) which demonstrate that word processing, telecommunication technology, electronic mail, participation in a project using a personal computer in the classroom to teach the writing process, using the Writing-Aid and Author's Helper (WANDAH) computer writing system, and using a computer assisted collaborative writing software by school and college students increased the quantity of writing instruction and the amount of student writing more than traditional instruction. Besides, the quality of students' writing and their attitudes towards writing on the computer improved too. In EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, similar

findings were reported. Pennington (1993), Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Braine (1997) and Liou (1997) found that the writing skills of EFL students who used word-processing, a computer-mediated networked environment, and web-based materials improved significantly.

In a study that was carried out on Saudi EFL female students, Al-Jarf (2004) also demonstrated that Web-based writing instruction used as a supplement to traditional in-class writing instruction proved to be an important factor in enhancing the writing quality of low-ability English as a foreign language (EFL) students. In another study carried out by Hertel (2003) where intercultural email exchange took place between U.S. college students in a beginning level Spanish class and Mexican college students in an intermediate English as a Second Language class, findings showed that such a practice helped change cultural attitudes, increase knowledge and awareness of other cultures, foster language acquisition, as well as boost student interest and motivation in language and cultural studies. Other studies carried out by Pérez-Prado and Thirunarayanan 2002; Cooper 2001; Smith, Ferguson and Caris 2001 also point out how students benefited from the technology-enhanced collaborative learning methods and interactive learning process.

As far as technology-mediated communication is concerned, Warschauer (1997: 472) argued that it increases the chances for interaction with other human beings because there are no time or place constraints as in normal face-to-face communication. Besides, he maintained that the World Wide Web represents an optimally efficient system for the publication and distribution of multimedia documents (hypermedia). This increased level of interaction and these different types of interaction have important implications for second language learning because CMC (computer mediated communication) "creates the opportunity for a group to construct knowledge together, thus linking reflection and interaction" (Warschauer 1997: 473). Hence, the use of technology will also help reinforce the learners' socio-affective learning strategies which are as important to learning as the other cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Driscoll (2000), maintains that collaborate technologies are now finding their way into instruction to support learning of students engaged in a learning task as members of a group whereby they can

communicate to others within and outside the immediate learning community. Similarly, Lee (2001) posits that telecollaboration seems to support social constructivists' learning environment. She asserts Vygotsky's self regulated learning approach which according to her can be used for teaching and assessing analytical, creative, and practical thinking via e-mail projects. According to Vygotsky's social constructivist view, students construct knowledge through their involvement in social contexts such as interacting with peers, teachers, experts, and classmates. "In a telecollaborative learning environment, students can have an opportunity to build their own knowledge through the interaction going on between their peers and teachers. That seems to be a representation of Vygotsky's social constructivist learning environment" (Acikalin & Duru, 2005: 23).

In an example from Venezuela, Mayora (2006) stresses that multimedia technology used in English language classes results in motivating and productive lessons. However, to move into a more learner-centred approach and to enhance quality education, both students and teachers need to be capable of using the technology more efficiently and both of their roles need to be redefined as using the technology means more learner autonomy. Gremmo & Riley (1995) maintain that using technology mediated resources besides the growth in the number of foreign language learners, has contributed to the emergence- especially in higher education— of new approaches to language learning programmes which include forms of self-access learning. Hence the "developments in technology have made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy and self-success." (Gremmo & Riley, 1995: 153). This highlights a key concept central to this research and that is the benefit of using technology to promote learner autonomy.

As it has done in other parts of the world where the use of technology has helped shape teaching and learning, curriculum design and assessment besides encouraging collaborative working practices, likewise, it can play a key role at the department of English language and literature at Damascus University. This study is calling for the use of technology to give Syrian learners opportunities for authentic interactions in the target language, collaborative group work, participation in open-ended tasks,

exploration of social and personal learning goals, self-production of tasks and materials, and other activities encouraging greater learner control over the educational process. Thus, with the help of resources offered through the use of technology and multimedia, learners at the department of English can exploit authentic communicative experiences in English as Lynch (2000:33) puts it: to *derive learning from use*. If learning materials are prepared and designed to help Damascus University learners maximise their learning opportunities, away from the sheltered familiarity of the lecture theatre, then learners' communicative strategies will be enhanced and they will simply discover the rules of the language through its use. Through exposing learners to well-designed authentic language learning materials and tasks, learning will take place both ways: students will be learning about the 'form' and the 'meaning' of the target language. In this way, learners will be moving away from merely learning about the language to learning about its authentic use, that is, they will make the shift from 'pre-communicative work' to 'authentic communication' in Lynch's (2000) diagram (fig. 2). Nevertheless, to achieve this, a move towards more learner autonomy is needed.

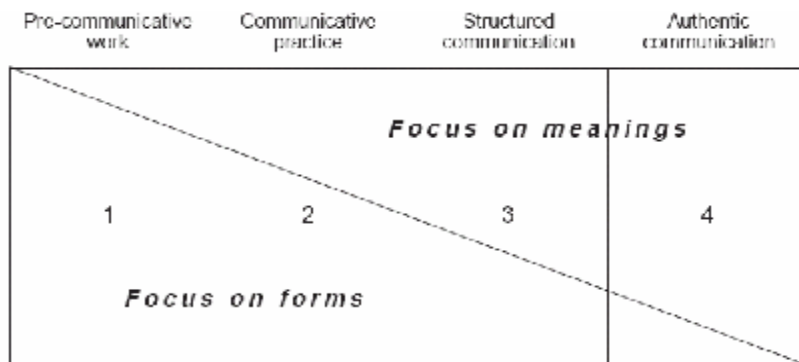


Figure 2. Language use and language learning (from Lynch, 2000:33)

## 5. Autonomy and language learning

Introducing technology without introducing the relevant pedagogies will not make learning any more autonomous than it currently is. This idea is reiterated by Gremmo and Riley (1995:153) who maintain that

“experience shows that the price of autonomy is eternal vigilance: there is a strong and repeated tendency for the introduction of some new technology by enthusiastic "technicians" to be accompanied by a retrograde and unreflecting pedagogy. A grammar drill on a computer is still a grammar drill and if learners are given little choice (or no training, which comes to the same thing) then it is a travesty to call their programmes "self-directed".” This, therefore, highlights the importance of autonomy and its significance to language 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, section 2.5, p.3). Hence, autonomy is a prerequisite to success in learning.

The positive effects of learner autonomy are far reaching. They do not only benefit students in the course of their studies but go far beyond to affect their future roles in life. Esch, 1994; Little, 1991; Holec, 1988; Dickinson, 1987; and Rogers, 1969 propose an educational argument whereby they see the advantages of more autonomy in learning as a vital component for the future effective performance of the graduate in society, and hence the need for more varied, open and flexible structures to support this.

The notion of learner autonomy came as a direct consequence of educationalists’ interest in learner-centered approaches to teaching and learning. Johnson & Johnson (1998: 306-7) define learner autonomy as “one of a number of closely related concepts within the general paradigm of learner-centred education. It underpins the individualization of instruction, the development of patterns of self-directed learning and of methodology of self-access, as well as implying some degree of learner training.” A widely used definition of autonomy is Holec’s (1980) “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. Autonomy is also increasingly linked to successful learning (Little, 1991, 2001, 2002;

Wenden, 1991; Benson, 2001, 2002). Wenden (1991:15) 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”. According to Serra (2000) being autonomous means taking active responsibility for one’s own learning which implies, learners’ defining their own learning objectives, identifying their own progress in language learning, selecting and implementing their own learning strategies, identifying the learning styles that do not seem to work for them and trying others, monitoring their learning, etc. However, many scholars cautioned against equating autonomy with self-instruction or with merely working alone. Little (1991) argues that autonomy is not synonymous with self instruction. Barnett (1993:296) 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 (2002) 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. This means that autonomy requires us to engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimension of language learning (Little: 2002). 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 according to Murphy (2008) lies in the quality of course materials which apart from developing communicative proficiency, have a major role in enhancing learners’ capacity for critical reflection and autonomy through developing their metacognitive strategies and involving them in choices about their learning. Similarly, White (2003) suggests 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. However, promoting, managing, and supporting independent learning though crucial for quality education, are all subject to teachers' readiness to change their current pedagogical views and roles.

The truth of the matter is that the majority of lecturers at the department of English at Damascus University come from traditional educational backgrounds where they themselves have not experienced 'autonomization' in their own learning. Hence, one has to question their awareness of the value and impact of autonomous learning on their own students. "Learner autonomy remains a minority pursuit, perhaps because all forms of 'autonomization' threaten the power structures of educational cultures" (Little, 2002). At present, the teachers' role at Damascus University is mainly to interpret and pump in information and the students' role is to memorize and reproduce information. These practices 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 on the internet, they need to change to the constructivist-learning paradigm that according to Lin (1999a in Hung et al. 2006) includes two principles of learning: active learning and group learning. 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 learners 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. On the other hand, Littlewood's (2001) large scale survey which examined attitudes to classroom language learning in relation to learner readiness for autonomy in eleven different European and Asian countries concluded that, regardless of

country of origin, most students in all countries question the traditional authority-based, transmission mode of learning. They wish to participate actively in exploring knowledge and have positive attitudes towards working purposefully, in groups, towards common goals. Contrary to previous cross-cultural research, Littlewood's (2001) study offers support to the view that learners generally have interest in taking an active role in their own learning management.

Therefore, in order to achieve autonomy in a technology mediated learning environment, learners who are willing to take on more responsibility for their own learning need to be equipped with the necessary learning strategies. 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 (Hung et al. 2006).

## **6. *Learning to learn***

The solution for the quality versus quantity dilemma at the department of English at Damascus University then lies in "encouraging and supporting greater student independence in the learning process and taking advantage of technology to do so [...] Students will learn how to find and use learning materials that meet their own individual learning needs, abilities, preferences, and interests; they will learn how to learn" (Twigg 1995: 25). And rather than focus on *teaching* students, the focus will be on the development of abilities and strategies whereby the students are able to *learn* by themselves. But to achieve that, learners need to be trained on how to use 'learning strategies' effectively. One way of achieving this is through establishing self-access centres that provide learners with reference material of various kinds mainly aimed at giving learners opportunities to practise different language and self-learning skills. In a suggestion proposed by Serra (2000:100), he maintains that "teachers need to shift their focus and, apart from teaching linguistic knowledge, they need to promote autonomous learning through the use of self-access resources." He considers self-access resources and a self-access approach as one way of promoting autonomous language learning. Earlier Sheerin (1989: 3) highlighted the role of self-access resources as



facilities that "... enable learning to take place independently of teaching. Students are able to choose and use self-access materials on their own and the material gives them the ability to correct or assess their own performance. By using such a self-access facility, students are able to direct their own learning." A similar view was expressed by Gremmo and Abé (1985: 239), where they state that the role of the teacher has to move "...from knowing everything and explaining everything to showing where the information can be found and how to obtain it: he is no longer the sole linguistic model; he is a guide to different types of discourse". However, Serra (2000) cautions against believing that self-access resources automatically make learners autonomous as they may be used in an autocratic way that does not give the learner the chance to take part in making decisions. At the end of the day, "[it] is the way teachers and learners *use* self-access facilities which determines whether independent learning takes place" (Sheerin, 1997: 54).

Therefore, to use these self-access centres efficiently, 'strategy training' is a must for it helps learners learn how to learn. Chamot & O'Malley (1994: 387-8) affirm that the objective of instructing second language learners in the use of strategies is "to develop self-regulated learners who can approach new learning tasks with confidence and select the most appropriate strategies for completing the task" which according to Ellis & Sinclair (1989) and Manchón (1998) imply that the focus of strategy training will be on showing learners *how* to learn rather than *what* to learn. Similarly, 'learner training' according to Manchón (2000:14) is a "type of instructional intervention whose basic aim is to help learners become better language learners/users." Learner training known also as 'strategy training' or 'strategy instruction' is briefly summarized by Cohen (1998:70) in the following: "The strategy training movement is predicated on the assumption that if learners are conscious about and become responsible for the selection, use, and evaluation of their learning strategies, they will become more successful language learners by [...] taking more responsibility for their own language learning, and enhancing their use of the target language out of class. In other words, the ultimate goal of strategy training is to empower students by allowing them to take control of the language learning process."

According to Dickinson (1992, 1993) autonomous learners are characterized by their ability to use the following strategies: (i) to identify what has been taught; (ii) to set their own learning objectives; (iii) to select and implement appropriate strategies; (iv) to monitor the use of strategies by themselves; and (v) to take decisions as to continue or give up the use of strategies depending on whether or not they are working for them. Manchón (2000:17) briefly reiterates that “autonomous learners have developed knowledge about strategies and control over their use” (see also Chamot, 1994; Chamot & O’Malley, 1994; Cohen, 1998; Wenden, 1991). Accordingly, strategy instruction should include both components: knowledge of strategies and control over their use. Strategy instruction, according to the literature should be carried out on a number of stages starting with an assessment of the strategies currently used by learners, then moving to raising students’ awareness to the value and benefits of strategy use, to the practice stage, and finally the evaluation and the demonstration of how to transfer strategy use to other contexts (see Cohen, 1998; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford et al., 1990; Wenden, 1991)

## ***7. Training lecturers and learners***

This study is proposing the establishment of a self-access resource centre at the department of English and literature at Damascus University. This approach will not constitute a major change for teachers and learners if it is designed in a practical way that works within the current learning structure. This has been recommended by Gremmo and Riley (1995) who assert that self-directed learning systems and resource centres have to be planned locally. They need to take into account the specific institutional requirements and expectations, the particular characteristics of the learners and staff, and the sociocultural constraints on learning practices.

At present, learning resources at the department of English are undersupplied and there is no existence of any digital resources. But “In an input-poor environment learners will thus tend to be more dependent on the teacher, both as a source of input and as a guide in goal-setting” (Tudor, 1992:39). Hence, the importance of a self-access resource centre

that provides learners with authentic language learning materials. A practical solution in this context of large classes will be the establishment of a virtual self-access centre that will give learners the flexibility to access it anytime anywhere. It will also be a more feasible solution since its physical establishment at the university will take much longer and needs more institutional measures and funding. Since technology has become accessible to the majority of lecturers and students -even though at the personal level- lecturers at Damascus University can take an active role in building this repository through creating new materials be it language, linguistics, translation or literature. These materials can be distributed on CD ROMs to students with limited Internet access and can also be uploaded on the department's share of the university's website. Lecturers will then provide learners with links between the lecture and the virtual self-access centre.

The smooth implementation of this learner-centered approach which also involves the active participation of learners can only succeed if both instructors and learners are willing to accept the goals and the methodology of such an approach. Culturally determined attitudes to teaching and learning and preconceptions regarding the roles of teachers and learners play a key role here. Tudor (1992) argues that approaches to learning that promote active learner participation are more difficult to implement in contexts where learners are more teacher dependent and find it hard to assume more self-directive roles. Due to the influence of their past experiences, learners in such contexts may find it hard to take on more active and contributory roles to learning. This view is supported by an argument posited by Riley (1988) who maintains that learner groups from a culture that is open to individual initiative and self-direction are more likely to respond positively to a learner-centred approach than learners from an authority-oriented culture. The latter being the case at Damascus University, means that more time and a more supportive and guided approach is needed at the department of English. In such a context where the lecturer is viewed as a repository of knowledge whose main task is to impart knowledge and direct learning, it is not easy to convince learners to change roles and take on more responsibility for their learning. Such an approach might make students feel that the teacher is renouncing his responsibilities and consequently

result in confused and less committed learners. Similarly, a lecturer who is handing over some of his responsibilities to his learners might feel as if he is abandoning his duties and losing his authority and status.

Thus, the major issue here is preparing lecturers to take on the new role of that of the facilitator. It may not be easy on Damascus University faculty to take on the new role as implementing the new approach requires them to acquire the new expertise that facilitating learning requires. This concern has been expressed by Beeching's (1996:93), in his finding on the implementation of a self-study system where he states that "Tutors were variously suspicious, sceptical or uncommitted to the principle of self-study. They did not have previous experience of what is involved in preparing students to set objectives, select materials and evaluate their own progress within the objectives they have set for themselves." The result was that "many continued to regard themselves as teachers, not as facilitators of learning, and resented time spent on developing autonomy in learners." This highlights the fact that the key to the successful implementation of this approach lies in the faculty's preparation and training.

Careful consideration also must be given to the cultural preparedness of the target learner population before the actual implementation of this approach (Tudor: 1992). Similarly, Malcolm (2010) stresses the fact that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, and that teachers who are willing to promote greater learner autonomy need to "start with themselves". They first need to reflect on their own beliefs, practices, experiences and expectations of the teaching/learning situation (Little, 1995; Smith, 2000). To be able to facilitate a learner-centered approach, teachers need to develop their own skills first. Tudor (1992) classifies the knowledge and skills which a learner-centred approach demands from teachers into three main types. *Specialist skills* which require teachers to be familiar with the procedures of needs analysis and course planning skills. They also require them to be familiar with the teaching materials, methods and techniques to be able to guide learners to their learning needs. *Educational skills* are the second type of skills and they require teachers to have the knowledge of key cultural, psychological, and cognitive variables that are important to gear the level

of learner-directness to learner abilities. Besides, teachers need to have the interpersonal skills that help them act as learning counsellors. Finally, there comes the teacher's *personal qualities*. These require them to be open to a shift in role relationships both horizontally with their learners and vertically within the educational hierarchy. Flexibility is also another important personal quality for teachers because it enables them to cope with the lack of clarity resulting from the lack of clear vision of course structure because in such an approach the course direction or plan is dependent on the learner-direction. Tudor (1992) goes on to say that to develop all of these skills takes a lot of training but first this has to start with an evaluation of the degree of teachers' preparedness through an assessment of their openness to innovation, their professional motivation and self-esteem and their readiness to go through the training. And what a better way to start than with workshops and seminars that raise teachers' awareness to this new approach and how best to implement it! The next stage will be to start running workshops to train teachers on the development of these skills. It would be unwise to try and impose autonomy on a teaching body whose past experiences have lead them to expect a different type of teacher-student roles or to set goals that may not be realistically achieved within the limitations of the target learning environment. Class size, for example, is a major issue worth considering. The bigger the size of the group, the more demanding it is going to be for the teacher as he has to be able to guide a bigger range of learners to their different needs and preferences. The answer to this lies in greater creativity and flexibility on the part of the teacher (Tudor: 1992).

## 8. Conclusion

Given the limitations of the large number of EFL learners and those of the curriculum at the Department of English language and literature at Damascus University, this study proposes the introduction of technology mediated learning environments to resolve the quantity versus quality dilemma. The use of technology and multimedia will complement face to face tuition and help reinforce learning so that learners will become 'communicatively competent' in the foreign language. The establishment of a virtual self-access learning centre is fundamental here as it will enable learners to draw upon the extra resources on the web to

accomplish their independent-learning and to develop autonomous work as a supplement to conventional group class work. Besides, using technology will help provide the flexibility needed to build on team work and group projects to help Syrian EFL learners reinforce their learning anytime anywhere through the use of the socio-affective learning strategies.

However, using technology in learning does not in itself guarantee quality education. Learner autonomy, which implies empowering learners with the essential strategies that will complement ordinary face-to-face language instruction, is crucial here. This step requires explicitly teaching learners the use of self-study strategies which will shift focus from lecturers onto learners. It will also result in an enhanced metacognitive awareness on the part of the learner that in turn support the retention of strategy over time and the transferability of its use to new learning tasks (Manchón: 2000). But “Learner autonomy is not only about the development of a set of skills” it is rather about developing a certain set of mind “that sees learning as an active process of discovery” (Reinders, 2010 :52).

The implementation of this new approach depends mainly on teacher and learner training as new roles for both will be realised and a positive opportunity will be provided for learners to experience autonomous learning. The wider implications of power and control that undoubtedly pervade the autonomy movement are the biggest challenge to its implementation as it may raise concerns for lecturers about their role in an autonomy-promoting learning environment. Hence, the importance of raising the lecturers’ awareness to the benefits of this approach which, to succeed, needs also to be accompanied by institutional support as the lack of it will affect the credibility, funding and consequently the implementation of the whole endeavour.

### References

- Acikalin, M.; Duru E., 2005. The use of computer technologies in the social studies classroom. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology – TOJET*, 4 (2), 18-26.
- Al-Jarf. R., 2004. The Effects of Web-Based Learning on Struggling EFL College Writers. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37 (1), 46-56.
- Barnett L., 1993. Teacher off: computer technology, guidance and self-access. *System*, 21 (3), 295-304.
- Beeching, K., 1996. Evaluating a self-study system. In Broady, E.; Kenning, M. (eds.). *Promoting learner autonomy in University language teaching*, 81-104. London: Association for French Language Studies in association with CILT.
- Benson, P., 2001. *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning*. Harlow, Pearson Education Limited.
- Benson, P., 2002. *Learner autonomy 7: challenges to research and practice*. Dublin, Authentik.
- Braine, G., 1997. Beyond word-processing: Networked computers in ESL writing classes. *Computers and Composition*, 14 (1), 45-58.
- Canale, M., 1983. From communicative competence to language pedagogy. In Richards, J.; Schmidt, J. (eds.). *Language and communication*, 2-27. London: Longman.
- Canale, M.; Swain, M., 1980. "Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing". *Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1), 1-47.
- Chamot, A., 1994. Learning strategies and listening. In Mendelsohn, D.J.; Rubin, J. (eds.). *A guide to the teaching of listening comprehension*, 13-30. San Diego: Dominie Press.
- Chamot, A.U.; O'Malley J. M., 1994. Language learner and learning strategies. In Ellis, N. (ed.). *Implicit and explicit learning of languages*, 372-392. London: Academic Press.
- Cohen, A., 1998. *Strategies in learning and using a language*. New York: Longman.
- Cooper, L., 2001. A Comparison of Online and Traditional Computer Applications Classes. *T.H.E. Journal (Technological Horizons in Education Journal)*, 28 (8), 52-58.
- Dickinson, L., 1987. *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Dickinson, L., 1992. *Learner autonomy 2: learner training for language learning*. Dublin: Authentic Language Learning Resources Ltd.
- Dickinson, L., 1993. Aspects of autonomous learning. *ELT Journal*, 47 (4): 330-336.
- Dörnyei, Z.; Thurrell, S., 1991. Strategic competence and how to teach it. *ELT Journal*, 45 (1), 16-23.
- Driscoll, P. M., 2000. *Psychology of learning for instruction*. Needham Heights, MA: A Pearson Education Company, 373-395.
- Dudeney, G.; Hockly N., 2007. *How to teach English with technology*. Pearson Longman
- Ellis, G.; Sinclair B., 1989. *Learning to learn English: a course in learner training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Esch, E. (ed.), 1994. *Self-Access and the adult language learner*. London: Centre for Information on Language Teaching.
- Gousie, L. 1998. New methods and tools for teaching foreign languages. *T.H.E. Journal* 25(9), 54-56.
- Gremmo, M. J.; Abé D., 1985. Teaching learning: Redefining the teacher's role, in P. Riley (ed.): *Discourse and Learning*, 233-247. New York: Longman Inc.
- Gremmo, M.; Riley, P., 1995. Autonomy, self-direction and self-access in language teaching and learning: the history of an idea. *System*, 23 (2), 151-164.
- Hertel, T.J., 2003. Using an E-mail exchange to promote cultural learning. *Foreign Language Annals* 36 (3), 386-396.
- Holec, H., 1980. *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Holec, H., 1988. *Autonomy and self-directed learning: present fields of application*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Hung D., Chen D. T. & Wong, A. F.L., 2006. An overview of virtual learning environments in the Asia-Pacific: Provisos, Issues, and Tensions in Weiss, J. Nolan, J., Humsinger, J., Tifonas, P. (Eds.). *The International Handbook of Virtual learning Environments*, pp. 699-721. Springer Netherlands.
- Johnson, K.; Johnson, H., 1998. *Encyclopedic dictionary of applied linguistics: A handbook for language teaching*. Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.



- Lee, K.S.Y., 2001. Using telecollaboration for self-regulated thinking skills: instruction with regular and gifted learners. *High Ability Studies*.12 (2), 235-248.
- Liou, H., 1997. The impact of WWW texts on EFL learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 10 (5), 455-478.
- Little, D., 1991. *Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik
- Little, D., 1995. Learning as dialogue: the dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, 23 (2), 175–182.
- Little, D., 2001. How independent can independent language learning really be?, in: J. Coleman, D. Ferney, D. Head & R. Rix (Eds.) *Language-learning futures: issues and strategies for modern languages provision in higher education* (London, Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research), 30–43.
- Little, D., 2002. Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning. Retrieved January 2010, from The guide to good practice for learning and teaching in languages, linguistics and area studies: <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/1409> (accessed September 2010)
- Littlewood, W., 2001. Students' attitudes to classroom English learning: A cross-cultural study. *Language Teaching Research*, 5 (1), pp. 3 - 28.
- Lynch, T., 2000. The thick end of the wedge: encouraging autonomous learning by advanced-level ESL university students. *Links & Letters* 7, 29-48.
- Malcolm, D., 2010. Should we promote Learner Autonomy as a Goal for Language Teaching and Learning? <http://ilearn.20m.com/research/promoteauto.htm> (accessed September 2010)
- Manchón, R. M., 1998. Broadening the concept of communication strategies in interlanguage communication. In Alcón Soler, E.; Codina Spurz, V. (eds.). *Current trends in English language methodology*, 101-118. Castelló: Servei de Publicacions Universitat Jaume I.
- Manchón, R. M., 2000. Fostering the autonomous use of communication strategies in the foreign language classroom. *Links & Letters* 7, 13-27.
- Mayora, C. A., 2006. Integrating multimedia technology in a high school EFL program. *English Language Teaching Forum*, 44 (3), 14-21.

- Murphy, L., 2008. Supporting learner autonomy: Developing practice through the production of course for distance learners of French, German and Spanish. *Language Teaching Research*, 12 (1), 83-102.
- O'Malley, J.M.; Chamot, A.U. 1990. *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R.; Crookall, D.; Cohen, A.; Lavine, R.; Nyikos, M. & Sutter, W., 1990. Strategy training for language learners: six situational case studies and a training model. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22 (3), 197-216.
- Pennington, M., 1993. Exploring the potential of word processing for non-native writers. *Computers and the Humanities*, 27 (3), 149-163.
- Pérez-Prado, A.; Thirunarayanan, M. 2002. A Qualitative Comparison of Online and Classroom-Based Sections of a Course: Exploring Student Perspectives. *Educational Media International*, 39 (2), 195-202.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2002. *Academic standards: Languages and related studies*. London: QAA.
- Railton, D.; Watson, P., 2005. Teaching autonomy: 'Reading groups' and the development of autonomous learning practices. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6(3), 182-193.
- Riley, P., 1988. The ethnography of autonomy. In Brookes, A. and Grundy, P. (eds), *Individualisation and Autonomy in Language Learning*, pp. 12-33. London: Modern English Publications.
- Reinders, H., 2010. Towards a classroom pedagogy for learner autonomy: a framework of independent language learning skills. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35 (5), 40-55.
- Rogers, C., 1969. *Freedom to learn for the 80's*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Serra, S.O., 2000. Integrating a self-access system in a language learning institution: a model for implementation. *Links & Letters* 7, 95-109.
- Sheerin, S., 1989. *Self-access*. Oxford University Press.
- Sheerin, S., 1997. An exploration of the relationship between self-access and independent learning. In Benson, P.; Voller, P. (eds.). *Autonomy & independence in language learning*, 54-65. London: Longman.
- Smith, R.C., 2000. Starting with ourselves: Teacher-learner autonomy in language learning. In B. Sinclair, I. McGrath & T. Lamb (Eds.). *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions* (pp. 89 - 99). Harlow, UK: Longman.

- Smith, G., D. Ferguson, & Caris M., 2001. Teaching College Courses Online vs. Face to Face. *T.H.E Journal (Technological Horizons in Education Journal)*, 28 (9), 18-26.
- Sullivan, N.; Pratt, E., 1996. A Comparative study of two ESL writing environment: A computer-assisted classroom and a traditional oral classroom. *System*, 24 (4), 491-501.
- Swain, M., 1985. "Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development". In Gass, S.; Madden, C. (eds.). *Input in second language acquisition*, 235-253. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Tarone, E., 1984. "Teaching strategic competence in the foreign-language classroom". In Savignon, S.J.; Berns, M. S. (eds.). *Initiatives in communicative language teaching*, 127-137. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Tudor, I. 1992. Learner-centredness in language teaching: finding the right balance. *System*, 20 (1), 31-44
- Twigg, C. A. 1995. The value of independent study. *Educom Review* 30 (4), 24-27.
- Warschauer, M., 1997. Computer-mediated collaborative learning: Theory and practice. *MLJ (Modern Language Journal)*, 81 (4), 470-481.
- Wenden, A., 1991. *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy: Planning and Implementing Learner Training for Language Learners*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- White, C. J., 2003. *Language learning in distance education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Willems, G.M., 1987. Communication strategies and their significance in foreign language teaching. *System*, 15 (3), 351-364.
- Yaran, H.; Kural C., 2010. Middle school English language teachers' perceptions of Instructional technology implementation in North Cyprus, *TOJET: The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 9 (2), 161-174.