Support for distance language learners at the Syrian Virtual University

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Abstract

There has been a vast growth in Syria in the number of learners seeking higher education and, consequently, in the corresponding channels of providing it. Due to the constraints of the traditional educational sector, distance learning is providing Syrians with an alternative means of education. One such example is the Syrian Virtual University (SVU), which offers students the opportunity to gain education through an online learning environment based on the latest technology. Since Syria is a country where English has become an important educational requirement, the teaching of English has therefore entered the arena of distance learning. Though studying at a distance offers learners flexibility, it puts a great deal of demands on them too; hence the importance of efficient support systems.

The objective of this paper is to make a first-hand evaluation of how successful has the SVU's support system been in laying the ground for effective distant English language teaching and learning. It draws on students' perceptions in order to evaluate the efficacy of the existing support system in helping learners achieve successful learning outcomes.

Within a conceptual framework that has been built upon models of teaching and learning at-a-distance, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used for data collection and analysis. Although the major forms of support provided were found to be relevant to students, the study highlights the need to improve the current level of student satisfaction. This can be achieved by taking a number of steps: increasing the technological infrastructure and services to match the rapid growth of this young university, maximizing autonomy through teaching learning skills side by side with language skills, introducing a radical change of tutors' perspective and practice in teaching to incorporate constructivists' approaches, and exploiting the multimedia to enhance students networking and group learning.

I. Introduction

1. The Syrian Virtual University (SVU)

Inaugurated in 2002, the Syrian Virtual University (SVU), the first online university in the Arab region, is a public institution fully accredited and endorsed by the Ministry of Higher Education.

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The benefits that this university promised to offer were a greater access to learning, a greater flexibility of learning, cost savings, learning that is more effective and lifelong learning in the age of globalization and technological revolution.
The SVU offers its students the opportunity to gain education through an online learning environment based on the latest technology. With its logo "Education anytime anywhere", the SVU's flexibility helps to meet the aims and ambitions of many young Arab high school graduates who otherwise, due to high entry requirements at state universities, will be unable to pursue higher education.
Since Syria is a country where English has become an important educational requirement, the teaching of English has therefore entered the arena of distance learning. With the growth of this university from around 200 students in 2003 to around 7000 in 2009, the number of students enrolled on its English language courses grew steadily to around 1000 students in the academic year 2008- 2009.

2. Learner support and autonomy

Murphy (2008) contends that there is more to distance learning than just the flexibility in time, pace and place of studying, 'Distance learners may be assumed to be learning autonomously because they control a number of aspects of their learning. These may include the time, the pace, what to study and when to study, but this does not necessarily mean they take responsibility for setting goals, planning or evaluating learning.'
Learning a second language is generally perceived by learners to be 'different from learning other subjects, and to involve more time, more practice and different mental processes' (Victori, 1992, cited in Cotterall, 1995). Sussex (1991, cited in White, 1994) maintains that learning languages at a distance is more challenging than learning other subjects due to the complex combination of skills and information needed for mastering the language.
According to Hurd (2000), 'those learning at a distance do not have the standard university infrastructure to call upon when in difficulty: teachers or language advisors on site, classes to go to, ready access to other students to compare notes or to ask for advice.' Hence, the importance of learner support systems. Tait (2000) defined student support as 'the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL [open and distance learning]'. Services such as tutoring, counseling, organization of study centres, interactive teaching, mentioned by Tait (2000), are crucial in the context of distance education systems both in developed and developing countries.
As to the value of support systems, Dillon et al. (1992) maintain that 'One important means of analyzing the effectiveness of the teaching learning experience in a distance education system is through the analysis of the learner support system.' Hodgson (1986) posits that ‹Support systems contribute to the «process» of a course as do the learning materials› and when support systems are developed in recognition of student needs, they help the distance learner become competent and self-confident in learning, social interactions and self-evaluation (Rae, 1989).
At the SVU, several collaboration support systems are used for teaching and learning mainly the asynchronous and the synchronous tools. Whilst most international online learning projects concentrate on asynchronous tools, the Syrian Virtual University (SVU) added the synchronous tools to create a classroom based ambiance. However, the challenge lies here, as it might be quite possible that the traditional classroom practices are indirectly being carried into the virtual environment and are thus turning the virtual classroom into a traditional one that is merely

employing techniques formally associated with non-conventional modes of learning. A similar observation was made by Keegan (1993) and also by White (2005) who states that the 'problem of replicating traditional classroom models in distance education is not new, nor is it unique to the Web as a technology used in distance education. Traditional tenets of teaching tend to be transferred to distance education, creating the same discontinuities in distance education that are present in traditional learning environments'. Thus, 'If higher levels of learning are to be achieved in Web-based distance education, there is a need to expand our perspectives of teaching and learning beyond what occurs in traditional classrooms.' (White, 2005)

This leads to the conclusion that e-tutors and e-management should be aware that the culture of self-learning or independent education need to be cultivated and sustained regardless of the mode of instruction. Besides, in higher education today, autonomy is seen as a 'marker of graduateness' (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).

Virtual education has a short history in Syria and little research, if any, has been carried out on the teaching of languages online. The present paper reports on a study that aimed to examine the quality of support services provided by the SVU as part of the university's QA procedures and the extent to which these services meet the needs of English language students and promote learner autonomy. This is based on the premise that an evaluation of this kind can lead to enhancing the quality of English language teaching offered at the SVU.

II. Research design and methodology

The study used both quantitative and qualitative evaluation approaches. A survey questionnaire, administered in two parts, was used to:

- Elicit the specific difficulties that SVU students identify regarding online distance language learning.
- Elicit students' impressions of the course and the usefulness of the various course support components.

The first part of the questionnaire was administered in Arabic and online on the SVU's website on the Intelligent Student Information System (ISIS) during August of the term spring 2008. The questionnaire constituted multiple-choice Likert five scale type of questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Some sections of the questionnaire were based on a study carried out by Hurd (2000). 317 SVU English language students enrolled on different programmes took part in this survey. The system automatically worked out the percentages of students' replies and presented them in bar charts.

The second part of the questionnaire was dispatched in October 2008, towards the end of spring 2008 term. It was administered at the class level through emails. Tutors of each English language class were given the questionnaire and were asked to explain its content to their students during online class sessions before requesting them to fill it in. Feedback was received through the electronic mail. The number of students who took part in this section of the questionnaire was 177, which is less than those who took part in the first section and that is because the latter elicited feedback from students who were attending the live sessions at the time the questionnaire was dispatched. This part of the questionnaire constituted multiple-choice Likert five scale type of questions (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) and open-ended questions too.

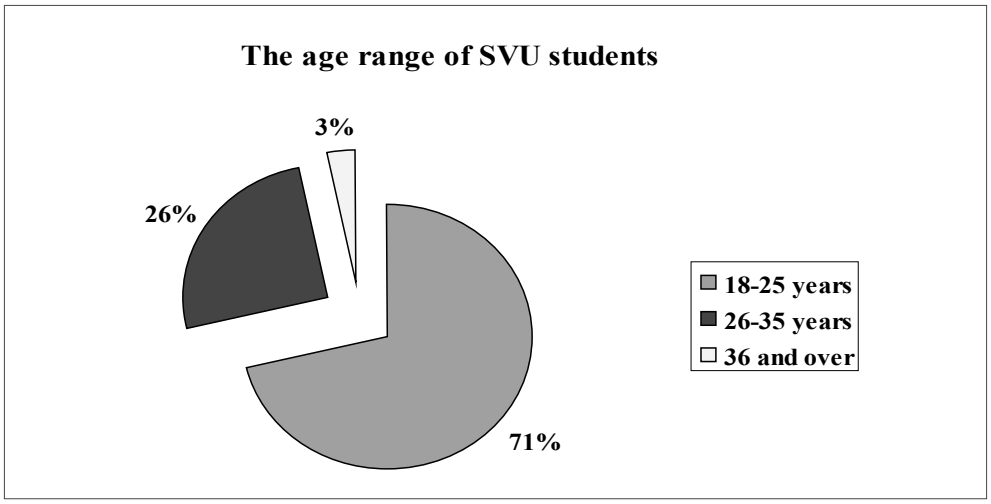
Another source of information used in this study was a survey carried out online in fall 2007 by the SVU administration on 390 students enrolled on all of its programs.
The last source of information was the researcher herself who has been acting as the QA supervisor for the English language department at the SVU since 2005.

III. Research findings and discussion

1. SVU student profile

The survey carried out by the SVU administration in fall 2007 on 390 students revealed that the typical Syrian virtual learner is in his twenties. 71% of the overall number of registered students at the SVU are aged between 18 -25 years, 26% are between 26 - 35 and only 3% are 36 years and over (see Figure 1). The survey also revealed that around ninety percent (89%) of its students chose the program because they were seeking a bachelor's degree: 48% of whom came from high school, 41% came from intermediate institutes (vocational Institutes) and only 11% came with a Bachelor's degree seeking a Masters. It is worth mentioning here that in Syria, intermediate institutes offer a two-year vocational training in different specializations for students whose Baccalaureate exam marks are not high enough to secure them a place at one of the state universities. The average Baccalaureate exam marks obtained by a random sample of 177 SVU entrants was around 65%, which means that the majority of learners who opt to study at the SVU are average students. Another survey carried out on 317 students revealed that 72% of SVU students are working students with 54% in full-time jobs and 19% in part-time ones. Nonetheless, 91% of the 390 SVU students in the survey believe that a university degree will open for them better opportunities in life.
Another characteristic of SVU learners is that they come from an educational environment where they have been largely dependent on the teacher who is responsible for most of the planning, organizing, and delivery of learning materials. Students have not been trained on how to take charge of their own learning. Coming into a context where autonomy is essential to success, learners are likely to find this new environment rather challenging.

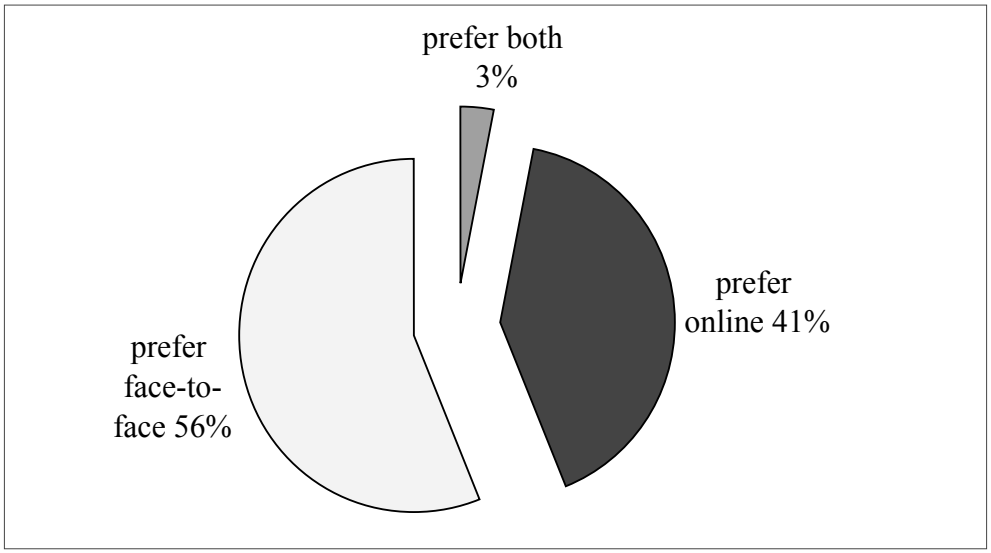
Figure 1. The age range of students enrolled on SVU programs



2. SVU students' perceptions

As part of a QA practice to obtain students' feedback regarding different aspects of teaching and learning, a survey carried out in fall 2007 by the SVU administration on 390 students, revealed that only 37% of SVU students felt satisfied with the English language courses, 37% were uncertain, and 26% were dissatisfied. This relatively high degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction was a reason for concern. In the survey carried out on 177 students in spring 2008 exclusively on the SVU English language learners investigating which mode of learning students would prefer (see Figure 2), only 41% of the informants chose learning English online, some with reservations: only if students have good IT skills, enough time and are devoted to learning. 56% said that they would still prefer the face-to-face language classroom. The remaining 3% did not mind either. However, when asked whether they would recommend online study programmes to friends, 73% said they would recommend them and 27% said they would not. If students were keen on recommending online programmes, what were, therefore, the problems with the language courses? What were the reasons that were causing this high level of uncertainty and dissatisfaction amongst virtual English language learners?

Figure 2. SVU language students' preferences



The open-ended section of the survey revealed the main reasons why students would still prefer face-to-face language courses. Learners' main concern was the absence of 'real communication' as put by one of the students. Others commented by saying: "*learning a foreign language means communication*" and "*language is life and conversation*". Technical problems were also another reason for concern: "*in online meeting there is a lot of connections errors*." The absence of the human factor was also a reason for anxiety: "*I think the e-learning will kill the human relationship soon*.", "*I like to make a real conversation with teacher and to learn from real book to have ability to return to it and study from real book not from screen*." The lack of feeling of 'obligation' to study was also expressed by some of the informants: "*Face to face is more powerful from online course. I feel obliged to study*", and finally some students felt that online learning was rather more time consuming.

On the other hand, the reasons given by those students in the survey who preferred online language learning were mainly its flexibility in time and place for it allows students to study and work at the same time: "*I can study and work*.", some could even "*study from work*." It also provided recorded sessions that could be listened to for as many times as the student needs "*in this way of learning recorded sessions are available any time I want to study. I can hear it more than one time*." Informants also felt that it was an economical and convenient way to earn a degree. It was more resourceful with more tasks to practice: "*when you learn English online you can find many sources on the internet that can help you with your study*." Besides it was novel and more fun "*Because of the good way in teaching*.", "*Online learning follows new methods in English learning by entertainment, technology, smart quizzes and lastly online learning does not depend on place, time specified*.", "*Learning English online is very interesting, but face to face course would be more efficiency*." Learners online also suffered no embarrassments and were more relaxed and tutors spent less time on class management and focused on individual learners: "*I can ask about important things privately with the tutor if I have any question*." "*I prefer online because I can contact my teacher with out annoying my friends and I feel that I can communicate with my teacher by email*.", "*The tutor will take care of each one of us and will know exactly our level whereas in a face-to-face course, the tutor could be busy to calm down the students*." Some students also felt that online learning helped them develop study skills and engaged them in independent learning: "*It makes me learn by myself*." , "*Learning online is more effective because it is depending on listening, reading and writing without any supporting gestures*.", "*Because it develops my ability in listening and improves my skills in focusing (concentration)*." One student also commented by saying: "*Language is a self development procedure*."

A first hand evaluation of these comments points to the fact that learners seem to be aware that this medium of instruction has a great potential for supporting learning. The reasons given in favor of online learning far exceed those given against it. Besides, the drawbacks mentioned by students are mainly related to their lack of competence in the strategies of self-learning and to the inefficiency of the technology; the very same infrastructure that is supposed to support the whole learning process.

3. SVU language learner difficulties

317 SVU English language students attempted the questionnaire whereby they were presented with a list of statements adapted from Hurd (2000) and were asked to give feedback concerning the elements of distance learning that were a source of difficulty. Responses were in the form of a multiple choice Likert five scale answers (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Difficulties with virtual language learning

Statement	Agree (%)
1. Takes more time than anticipated	83 (1)
2. Find it hard to remember new vocabulary	67 (2)
3. Few opportunities for practice with others	65 (3)
4. Find it hard to assess my own progress	59 (4)
5. Feel overwhelmed by all the material	59 (5)

6. Get easily de-motivated if I don't understand something or if I get a bad mark or if I face a technical problem	47 (6)
7. Requires too much self-discipline	41 (7)
8. Find it hard to concentrate on my own/get easily distracted	37 (8)
9. Access to a PC at the university's telecentres is difficult	36 (9)
10. Feel that I make progress less rapidly than others	32 (10)
11. Don't like to ask for help	20 (11)

(Data in parentheses represent the rank order of the responses)

The time factor seemed to be the SVU students' greatest worry. 83% of SVU English language students said that learning online takes more time than anticipated. This finding should not come as a surprise as 72% of SVU learners are working students. Thus, time seems to be the SVU learners' greatest enemy. This is also reflected in their eternal problem of not being able to meet their assignment deadlines. This calls for more induction to prospective students through training them on 'time management' before they embark on their distance courses.

The second difficulty pointed out by SVU students was 'find it hard to remember new vocabulary' chosen by 67% of the informants. As Arabic is a language that belongs to origins that are different from English, this might explain the learners' difficulty here. However, learners are probably not guided enough to use strategies like mind maps, mnemonics, etc …that can help them retain the new vocabulary; hence the need to guide students on how to use some learning strategies.

Finding 'few opportunities for practice' was the third difficulty pointed out by SVU students with 65% of informants choosing it. The reason may be that during online tutorials, and due to the pressure on the net, SVU students are for most of the time listeners rather than speakers. They mainly communicate with their tutor or peers online through written messages but they rarely speak. This worry was also expressed in the open-ended questions where students complained about their inability to converse with tutors and peers. This problem is related to the quality of internet and IT services provided and it varies a lot depending on the access point from which the end-user is logged on. In addition, over one third of the informants (36%) found it hard to find a PC to work on at telecenters. This shortage in resources is due to the fast growth of the university with resources not increasing at the same rate of increase in the number of students. The university needs to take that into consideration in its strategic plan.

The fourth difficulty faced by SVU English language learners was 'hard to assess my own progress' (59%). This indicates that almost 60% of learners have not yet developed the metacognitive skills of self-evaluation. Autonomy in learning is usually signaled by learners' ability to plan, evaluate and monitor their own progress. If learners are facing difficulties here then they are most likely metacognitively immature. One explanation may be the fact that SVU learners come from an educational culture where assessment lies totally in the hands of the instructor and where they have rarely been requested to perform any form of evaluation of themselves or their peers. Similarly, over one third of the SVU students (32%) felt that their 'progress was less rapid than that of their peers'. This again may be due to the same reason mentioned above and that learners have not been trained to self-reflect and assess themselves. This calls for the need to give distant learners more opportunities to self-reflect and learn how to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. This may help them become more independent learners.

The fifth source of difficulty to SVU learners was their being 'overwhelmed by the huge amount

of materials' with 59% of students choosing it. With online web materials and links given out as resources with almost every session, SVU students are probably finding it hard to cope. Coming from a culture where the core course book is the main source of reference may be one of the reasons behind this problem. Another reason may be the feeling of loss that the World Wide Web resources invite if learners are not properly guided. This calls for more individualistic learning where students are adequately guided and given the choice to pace themselves to do as much extra materials as needed depending on their own learning styles, needs and personal preferences.

Almost 50% of SVU students in the survey said that they 'get easily demotivated when they did not understand something or if they get a bad mark, or faced a technical problem'. Coming from an educational culture where students are passive recipients of knowledge and where the mark is an end in itself, this finding is not unexpected. This problem may also be related to students' lack of self-confidence or lack of know-how in the use of technology, and therefore is indirectly affecting their motivation. This points to the need for more tasks that stimulate learners' intrinsic motivation like learning through researching a topic rather than through memorizing and cramming.

In the seventh place came the difficulty 'requires too much self discipline' with 41% of students choosing it. This finding points again to a problem with the students' metacognitive skills of learning. Some SVU students are therefore finding it difficult to manage and control their own learning. Similarly, 37% of SVU students found it 'hard to concentrate on their own or got easily distracted'. Coming from an educational background where much of the learning takes place in the classroom where the teacher is in charge of managing and controlling the whole process may be the reason why students find it hard to concentrate whilst working on their own. Again, when learners are trained on how to use the strategies of self-learning and self-management, they will feel more in control of the learning process and will be able to discipline themselves better.

SVU students did not seem to have much of a problem 'seeking help', with only 20% declining to ask for help. This difficulty came last probably because in this mode of learning students are in contact with their tutors and peers either synchronously during live sessions or asynchronously through emails and thus can seek help whenever they run into any difficulty. Besides, the impersonal medium that is provided by the technology makes it easier on students to ask for help. This is evident in the flood of emails sent and received whereby students ask their tutors or their peers about issues concerning their studies and their assignments. This means of support is highly commendable as it provides learners with a lot of social and psychological support and helps them develop their socio-affective learning strategies. However, tutors can invest more in this tool to encourage networking and group learning.

Though in this technologically supported virtual learning medium the support system is supposedly offering students more help than in other forms of distance learning nonetheless, the percentage of SVU students facing problems is rather high on most of the difficulties listed by Hurd (2000). SVU students' problems are mostly related to the learning process and autonomy. These problems involve learners' self-discipline, self-assessment, concentration, time management, finding opportunities to practice the foreign language, and remembering vocabulary. A possible explanation to this is given in Hurd and Xiao (2006) where they posit that active participation and taking responsibility of ones own learning is fraught with difficulty and is a totally alien concept to learners who have not been brought up in systems or cultures that encourage active learning.

4. SVU Learner support systems

The quality of support offered to learners is a mark of the efficacy of the system in providing learners with the support needed to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

In this virtual environment, English language students get support from a number of sources which often intersect. In what follows, five categories of learner support systems will be investigated: IT support systems, lab centres (telecenters), tutorials, learning materials, and peer support.

a. IT support

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

Programs like the LMS (learning management system), the AMS (assessment management system), the Web Demo, etc … are also provided to facilitate learning and assessment, but the problem is that some students come with very little experience in the use of technology even in as far as performing some of the basic IT operations. Short optional IT training sessions are offered by the SVU support team to all students before the onset of each term. However, the fact that those training sessions are optional leaves many students without sufficient knowledge of how to access these programmes. Thus, they end up struggling to come to terms with all the technological requirements on top of having to cope with the course content. If induction is to be made a prerequisite to joining language courses, this will help learners approach their studies with more confidence and less anxiety.

b. Computer lab centres

Since its establishment, the SVU's original intention was to provide its tutors and learners all over Syria and in some Arab countries too with telecenters (computer labs) that are fully equipped with PCs, fast internet connection and an IT support team that help in sorting out technical problems. Until recently, this has been the case and such labs were available for students' use nationwide 12 hours daily. This generous gesture was hoped to enhance learning especially for those students who for social, economic or geographic reasons could not access this technologically supported form of education. SVU learners use the university's telecenter facilities for various reasons: to attend live or recorded sessions, to download learning materials and assignments, to upload written projects and assignments, to send and receive emails from tutors and peers, to check announcements, to sit for exams, to get exam results and to make petitions etc ….. These telecenters have an added advantage too. In many ways, they help break the walls of isolation that generally characterize distance learning. At those centres, students usually meet other learners and that will be the time to discuss their studies, assignments, exams, or any other worries or anxieties. It gives them the 'on campus' feel which helps them socially and psychologically, besides enhancing their socio-affective learning strategies.

With the growth in the number of students enrolled at the SVU, there has been an increased demand on telecenters. It is becoming increasingly difficult for tutors and students to find a PC to work on. That of course varies from one region to another; however, students nowadays are being advised to try to log on from outside the university. This is not what the university initially

planned, but its rapid growth coupled with an insufficient increase in resources is having its bite on this service which students, especially language learners, value so much.

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

Statement	Agree (%)
The IT support team is helpful.	52%
Internet connection is good for most of the time.	35%
Quality of recorded sessions is good.	52%
The AMS is efficient.	65%
The ISIS (Intelligent student information system) contains all the information that the student needs.	47%
The Web Demo is efficient.	53%
The PCs available at telecenters are sufficient.	26%

In the survey carried out on 317 informants, students' feedback on the degree of their satisfaction with the SVU technical support services revealed that students were facing technical problems (see Table 2). A common complaint made by tutors and learners concerns the repeated interruptions of the Internet connection and the disruption of live sessions. Only 35% of students thought that the Internet connection was good for most of the time. That, of course, depends on the area from which the student or tutor logs on. This problem often leads to frustration to both parties; tutors and learners. Shortage in the number of PC's available for students at telecenters is also another cause of concern to students. Only 26% thought that the PCs available are sufficient. That again depends on the area where the student logs on. As concerns the efficiency of the other programs used by students to access live and recorded sessions, exams and learning systems; student rating was around 50%. The reason why one out of every two students felt that the programs on the universities website were not so useful might be because students have not been well-prepared technically on how to access these programs. Similarly, around 50% of learners felt that the support team were not helpful enough. This all calls for the need to train students on the proper use of the technology besides updating and enhancing the university's IT infrastructure.

Thus, it is evident that the IT infrastructure at the SVU is becoming increasingly under pressure again due to the mass increase in the number of users. This of course is affecting the quality of teaching and learning. It is also a source of frustration to students and tutors on all courses especially on the English language courses because as students put it 'language is communication'. Bray et al (2007) posit that technology itself can provide a significant barrier to distance education efforts. "In a traditional classroom setting, if the technology does not work, alternatives exist. In the case of distance education, however, if the technology fails, the course stops with students and faculty cut off from one another ….. not only is delivery hampered, but students face isolation from the instructor and one another particularly in synchronous classes" (Bray et al:2007). Thus, reliable technology and IT support are crucial to this medium of instruction.

c. Tutorials

Another and perhaps one of the most important means of regular SVU learner support is the virtual language tutorial whereby tutors and learners meet three times every week in one and a

half hourly sessions (around 42 sessions per course, 60 hours per term). As to the quality of these tutorials, 317 students' feedback indicates that in such tutorials, tutors are highly supportive (see Table 3). This is evident in the tutors' efficient use of different means of communication (85%), their supplying learners with extra curricular activities to enforce learning (80%), their readiness to answer to any query (86%), their feedback on written assignments (72%), and their induction at the beginning of every term (70%). As concerns the tutors' degree of organization, 81% of informants thought that the tutors were well organized. This should come as no surprise since tutors are used to their traditional role as planners, organizers and deliverers of course materials and to achieve this in a tight calendar they need to be highly organized. However, around 40% of the student informants thought that the number of tutorials is insufficient. Though support on the part of tutors is a QA requirement, distance language tutors at the SVU do not seem to be involving their learners in the metacognitive strategies of planning their own learning; a strategy that can help learners on their way to more autonomous learning.

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

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

As concerns the language learners' rate of attendance, the survey on 317 informants revealed that only 6% language learners never attended any of the synchronous sessions, 18% attended from 1 - 10 sessions, 22% attended 10 - 20 sessions, 22% attended 20 - 30, and 31% attended from 30 - 40 sessions (see Figure 3). These figures are rather high considering that only 30% attendance (around 10 sessions) is a university requirement and that over 70% of students have a job on top of all the other modules that they have to attend (synchronously or asynchronously). Thus, attending tutorials seem to be important to SVU language learners. This may explain why only 62% of informants felt that the number of tutorials (42 per term) was sufficient. On the other hand, figures were lower for asynchronous sessions. 25% never attended any of the recorded sessions and 30% attended from 1 - 10 recorded sessions, 18% of students attended 10 - 20 of the recorded sessions, 12% attended 20 - 30 sessions and 18% only attended from 30-40 sessions (see Figure 4). These findings indicate too that students seem to prefer live sessions to recorded ones. The reason behind this may be the fact that synchronous sessions emulate

traditional face-to-face classrooms more or it may be the fact that the quality of some of the recorded sessions is not always that good. This is evident in students' feedback whereby 50% of SVU language learners thought that the quality of recorded sessions was not always that good. Again, the unreliable technology seems to be standing in the way of flexible learning.

Figure 3: Percentage of synchronous attendance

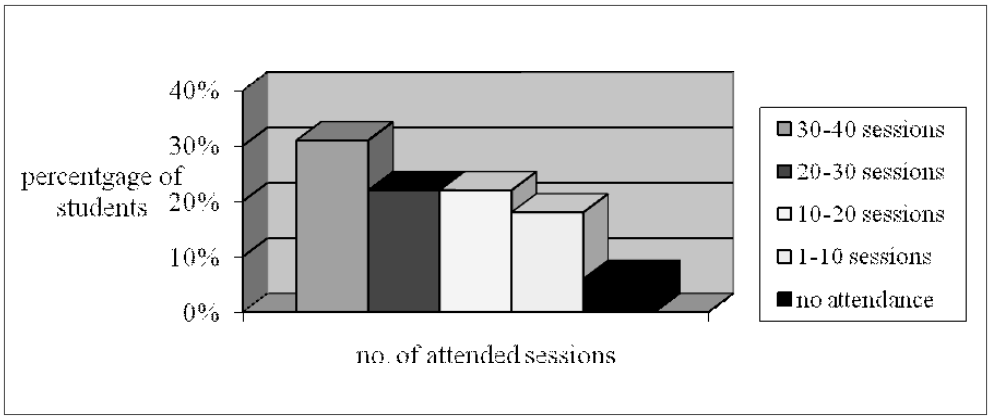
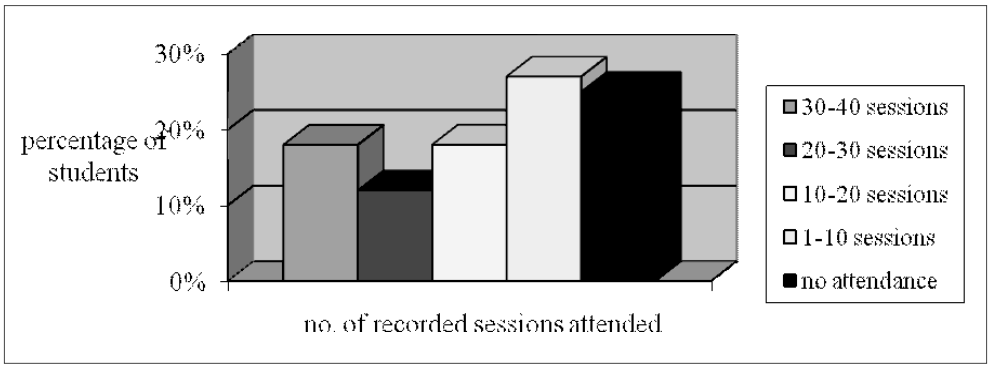


Figure 4: Percentage of asynchronous attendance



d. Course materials

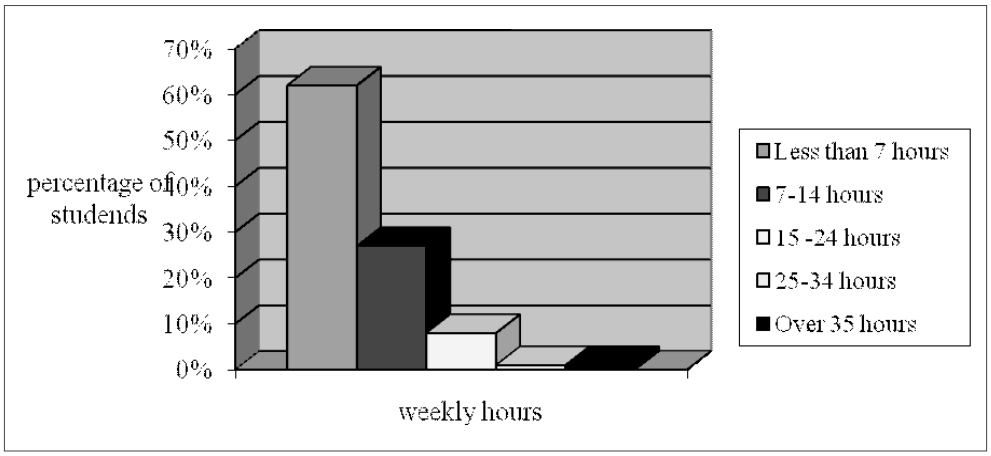
According to Hauck and Hurd (2005), materials in distance language learning play a central role as the teaching voice. They are the link between teachers and learners and are characterized by distinctive features. They are structured with explicit aims, objectives and learning outcomes. They include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

The SVU provides its general English language teaching materials through an online European program (Netlanguages) that has been designed specifically for distance language learning courses. The program is an interactive one that consists of five levels starting with the elementary and leading up to the advanced level. Each level consists of 10 units which have to be covered within a period of one term. For each of those levels, students get the chance to meet their tutors either synchronously or asynchronously for 60 hours per term (3 one and half-hour tutorials per week).

The course content is all predetermined. The pace at which the course materials are delivered is also conditioned by the length of term, which is getting shorter with the growth of the university as exams are taking longer every term (exams take place in the same telecenters where students attend sessions, hence when there are exams running, no classes take place). The pacing of the course delivery, the mid and final exam times, the assignments and project submission deadlines are all fixed. Learners are left with little flexibility if any in a mode which claims to be flexible. Students have no say in planning their courses or choosing their learning materials let alone practicing some form of reflection, self or peer evaluation. Little (2002), defines autonomous learners as those learners who 'understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness'. However, this is all subject to the 'willingness of teachers to hand over their responsibilities' (Candy, 1991; Little, 1995). Barnett (1993) warns that 'Self-access in general, and computer applications in particular, can easily fall into the traps of either leaving learners too much alone, overwhelmed by information and resources, or directing them too much by transferring lockstep classroom methods to organization systems and programs.' The latter seems to be the case at the SVU where tutors are too directive besides transferring their classroom practices into the virtual environment. Barnett (1993) goes on to say that 'neither alternative is desirable, for learners cannot be autonomous unless they have the ability to make meaningful choices.' With the majority of SVU English language tutors coming from an educational background where they themselves have not experienced 'autonomization' in their own learning, one has to question their awareness of the value and impact of autonomous learning on their own students. Tutors may not be ready to support and develop their students' decision-making and independent learning. White (2003) proposes that to achieve autonomy, approaches to learning must assist learners to take control through the explicit development of metacognitive strategies based on critical reflection, and involving learners in choosing and accessing learning opportunities which are personally meaningful (White, 2003). Learner autonomy therefore does not seem to be high up on the tutor's agenda and that may very well be because 'all forms of 'autonomization' threaten the power structures of educational cultures' (Little, 2002). This in fact requires faculty to change their perspective and practice to activate and disseminate the new ideology '… neither technology nor other strategies are likely on their own to be sufficient to significantly re-shape the present transmission model. Without a radical and explicit change of perspective and practice, neither full-time nor associate lecturers have much chance of successfully mobilizing and disseminating an alternative educational ideology to the dominant one.' (Peters, 2004)

As regards the time spent by learners on the web self-learning, unfortunately, findings were not as expected (see Figure 5). Over 60% of the 317 informants spent less than 7 hours per week using the web for learning English. 27% spent between seven to fourteen weekly hours learning from the web and only 1% spent over 35 hours a week self-studying. This lack of incentive for self-study may indicate that students are overwhelmed by the amount of course work that is required from them on top of all of their other responsibilities. It may also indicate that learners are not well-guided on how to supplement their knowledge from useful web resources.

Figure 5. Percentage of weekly hours spent using the web for self-study



e. Peer support

The survey on 177 informants shows that only 7% of SVU English language students have no friends at all and on average, each SVU student has around 10 friends. 43% of the 317 students in the first part of the survey said that they communicated with their peers through electronic mail, chat boards and mobile phones (see Table 3). Thus, although students are geographically dispersed all over Syria and in many parts of the world, they still communicate with one another mainly electronically. The open-ended questions revealed that most of the contact between learners takes place when they are working on their assignments, projects or exams. This indicates that students offer each other moral and academic support. This is a positive feature that tutors can build on to improve the socio-affective learning strategies of their students. At present, group learning seems to be scarce, at least in the English language courses. According to the social constructivist approach, learning is considered an active, social process in which individuals actively construct knowledge within the social environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

IV. Conclusion

Analyzing support systems is one way of looking at the efficacy of educational systems. In this study, whilst linking theory with practice, the author has outlined students' perceptions and attitudes to the support systems available for English language learners at the Syrian Virtual University (SVU). Undeniably, the SVU offers its language learners varied forms of support to emulate face-to-face classes and give its learners the 'on campus' feel. These include the IT infrastructure and services, courses materials, tutorials, and peer support.

Whilst there is no doubt pertaining to the great potential for learning that the current support system is providing, care must be taken that in the strive to respond for more student intake, quality education does not suffer and neither does the flexibility which is the hallmark of distance education. Major findings indicate that learners are not being adequately guided to the learning of strategies that promote autonomy which has become a QAA mark of 'graduateness'. This calls for action at both the technological and the pedagogical level. Such recommendations can be extended to other Arab non-conventional and blended higher education institutes. At the technological level, learning can be enhanced by expanding the technological infrastructure and

services to match the rapid growth and needs of such growing universities. At the pedagogical level, there is a need for maximizing autonomy through teaching learning skills alongside language skills. This can be achieved by introducing a radical change to tutors' perspective and practice in teaching to incorporate social constructivists' approaches that utilize both active self-directed and group collaborative learning. Exploiting the multimedia in social networking and group learning would also enhance students' socio-affective learning strategies.

Acknowledgments

Many SVU students and staff members helped with this research. The author is grateful to the following individuals: All SVU English language students who completed the questionnaires; all English language tutors who encouraged their students to take part in the questionnaires; Dr Ramez Hajislam – the SVU deputy for academic affairs and the program director for the IT department - whose help enabled the online administration of the questionnaires besides the saving and analyzing of the data and findings; Mr Omar Dihneh -IT operation section manager- who kindly entered the questionnaires online and patiently helped in administering them.
The author also expresses her gratitude to the president of the Syrian Virtual University – Professor Riyad Daoudi whose guidance, vision and readiness to explore new grounds have made this research possible.

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