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**Students' Beliefs about Learning English as a Foreign Language in Wartime:  
The Experience of Damascus University from 2017 to 2020**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education, Bath Spa University

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## **Abstract**

This research investigates the factors that have affected Damascus University students' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language and have, as a consequence, led to their poor English exam results during the war in Syria. Given that learners' attitudes towards and progress in language learning are directly associated with their beliefs about language learning, this research argues that learners' beliefs are contextually conditioned and responsive to the surrounding environment and can as a result affect their attitudes towards and success in the target language. To this end, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods methodology combining three approaches within the theoretical framework of Dewey's (1938, 1916) concept of experience was employed using a modified version of Horwitz's (2012) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI 2.0) survey and utilising semi-structured interviews.

The research has found that two major sets of factors, namely internal factors, including cognitive and affective constructs associated with the students, and external/objective factors relating to the learning context and the overall environment surrounding the students, have interacted with each other and contributed to creating contradictions in the students' language learning beliefs, which eventually influenced their attitudes and final exam results. The research has also found that some of the students' language learning beliefs were variable, responsive to context, and some others were stable, resisting change. Also, the students' motivation and strategy use were found to be context-driven.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of language learning beliefs in that it emphasises the role of context in constructing and shaping learners' beliefs and experiences, including the interplay between learners and their context. It is the first study to investigate learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in wartime. It also contributes to the scant studies investigating Arab learners' beliefs about language learning. Methodologically, this research utilises three approaches to

investigating language learning beliefs, normative, metacognitive and contextual, and is the first study to use the BALLI in the context of war. Findings from this research provide a basis for future studies, which can help in creating more student-centred foreign language classes and language programmes that take into account students' beliefs and context and help in adjusting their attitudes to enhance their autonomy, particularly in turbulent contexts. Also, findings from this research can help in designing English language teaching programmes that are not limited to the linguistic content but could prepare the students to engage actively with the world outside their classrooms.

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**To Syria and Palestine**

**To my late parents**

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# Chapter One

*"Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked" (Dewey, 1916/1963, p.176)*

## **Chapter One: introduction**

In this chapter, I introduce my research along with my research questions. Thus, section 1.1 presents the background of the study. Section 1.2 presents the statement of the problem this research is investigating. In section 1.3, the purpose of this research is illustrated and the overarching research question and sub-questions are presented. In section 1.4, the significance of this research is highlighted. Section 1.5 provides an overview of the entire thesis.

### **1.1 Background of the study**

While teaching general English to undergraduate students at Damascus University (DU) during the war in Syria, my colleagues and I have noticed some apathetic attitudes taken by the students towards their English classes and exams. For someone who has been teaching English at DU for many years, a quick glance at the pre-war years can provide enough evidence that the students' current achievement curve is taking a sharp downward trend. This unprecedented transformation has amassed tremendous attention from both the teaching staff and administration at DU.

On a personal level, this situation raised a lot of concern and thus, as a member of Damascus University teaching staff, I felt morally, ethically and professionally obligated to help the students and assist them in their learning. By so doing I would unquestionably be doing myself and my teaching career a favour given that the students' attitudes could have effects on my character/personality, my motivation to teach and my teaching approaches. Thus, as a teacher and as a researcher, I started to analyse their situation and search for an explanation that could help in addressing and dealing with their problem. Based on my lived experience and my teaching experience during the war, I sensed that the students were facing difficulties and therefore were struggling with their learning. Having casual chats with my colleagues teaching English at the different faculties and departments of DU revealed that they too were concerned about their students' performance and



attitudes. Moreover, the students' poor English exam results showed that there was some sort of a trend implying that they were not doing well. This trend was found to have been going on since almost the beginning of the war according to some statistics. I felt, as a result, that I should lend the students a helping hand in order to avoid further exacerbation and aggravation of their situation.

It is worth stressing that foreign language teaching/learning in Syria has always been a top priority for the Syrian Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education even during the war. English language teaching in particular has gone through a series of reforms, aiming at upgrading the educational level of students and equipping them with key life skills for their future careers (Khoja and Mohapatra, 2017). These reforms included all levels of instruction and involved continuous updating of the English language curricula as well as the teaching methods to meet the students' changing needs and cope with any arising challenges in the surrounding environment (Rajab, 2013). Teachers also received training in the new curricula as part of the Ministries' continuing professional development (CPD) schemes (Khoja and Mohapatra, 2017). Further details about the Ministries' plans and achievements in this respect are provided in the next chapter.

Therefore, given the significance the two Ministries attach to English language teaching/learning in Syria and given my personal interest in helping the students, it is important to find out about the reasons behind the students' current situation, noted above, seeing that, to the best of my knowledge, no study has yet been conducted to investigate this issue. Thus, I ought to probe and explore it as explained in the sections below.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

Based on annual and quarterly internal reports, including those before and during the war, obtained from DU Statistics Office (emails from Head of Department), the students' proficiency level in the English language seems to have fallen behind since

the war broke out in Syria in 2011-2012 as indicated by their final English exam results as well as their indifferent attitudes. For example, the students' success rate in the English language course during the war ranged from 4% to 9%, while prior to the war it was between 38% and 67%. According to the same source, this has been the case in most of, if not all, DU faculties and departments.

Generally speaking, this could be attributed to various reasons seeing that educational attainment is a complex process and is made up of several components, including, most importantly, learners and teachers as well as the teaching methods, teaching materials, administration and the education system as a whole (Clawson and Haskins, 2006). In this research, however, I am solely concerned with learners as I believe that their opinions and views are extremely important for they are an essential component without which the learning process will be stalled. In addition, I am keen on highlighting their learning experiences during the war in relation to their attitudes towards learning the target language.

Learners' attitudes towards foreign language learning and their language classes and the impact these attitudes may have on their progress and success in language learning have been investigated by previous scholarship and have been the focus of academic attention (for example, Gardner, 1985; Schibeci and Riley, 1986; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003; Veronica, 2008; Gömleksiz, 2010; Ghazvini and Khajehpour, 2011; Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011; Horwitz, 2012; Ellis, 2015; Zhao, 2015; Okura, 2016; Getie, 2020). Therefore, based on my own experience and professional judgment informed by literature and previous studies in the field of foreign language learning and supported by testimonies and anecdotes told by my colleagues, the students' current performance and exam results may have been influenced by their attitudes, notably since the beginning of the unrest in Syria.

Accordingly, DU students' current attitudes towards their English classes in addition to their poor English exam results can signify the existence of certain difficulties or obstacles that the students may be facing, as this research is set to explore. This calls

for thorough and attentive investigation in order to deal with this situation.

### **1.3 Purpose of the study and the research questions**

As mentioned above, there is a necessity to explore the reasons behind DU students' indifferent attitudes and unsuccessful English exam results. To this end, this research sets out to elicit the factors that have affected the students' attitudes towards their English classes, their progress and final exam results in the context of war in Syria. In order to investigate DU students' attitudes towards learning English, I intend to explore their beliefs about foreign language learning seeing that learners' attitudes can be inferred from their beliefs (Gardner, 1985; Pajares and Schunk, 2002; Gabillon, 2007b) since language learning beliefs can have "obvious relevance to the understanding of student expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with their language classes" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). Learners' beliefs about language learning were also found to have a cognitive as well as an affective dimension and thus should be studied in relation to other variables associated with language learning (Horwitz, 1995; Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, 2018). For example, learners' beliefs about foreign language learning can influence their attitudes and motivation for foreign language learning (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003; Gardner *et al.*, 2004; Csizér and Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015) in addition to their foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1995; Truitt, 1995) and their language learning strategies (Horwitz, 1995; Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Yang, 1999; Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015). Accordingly, together with DU students' language learning beliefs, I explore three other influential variables in foreign language learning, namely motivation, anxiety and language learning strategies, which are related to learners' beliefs and attitudes particularly for this research and its context.

Thus, given that learners' feelings about the target language together with its cultural values (attitudes) and their own reasons for learning that language (motivation) are related to their general learning success and experience in learning that language

(Gardner and Lambert, 1972, cited in Horwitz, 1995), I aim to explore DU students' motivation for foreign language learning in tandem with their beliefs, particularly in the context of war. This is because learners' beliefs have been found to influence their attitudes and motivation (Gabillon, 2007a; Cirocki and Caparoso, 2016). Also, attitudes, motivation and beliefs are considered among the determining factors that can affect learners' competence and efficiency in their language classrooms (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011).

Furthermore, taking into account that DU students are very likely to be experiencing feelings of anxiety and apprehension during the war, I aim to explore foreign language anxiety since it "results from learners' emotional responses to the learning conditions they experience in a specific situation ... and can be seen as an aspect of motivation as it impacts negatively on learners' motivation to learn" (Ellis, 2015, pp. 67-68). It is also included alongside motivation in most language models and thus could help in understanding and contextualising learners' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs (Wesely, 2012). Moreover, learners' attitudes towards learning the target language, their beliefs about language learning and their foreign language anxiety are considered the most critical components of foreign language learning (Horwitz, 1995).

Besides, seeing that beliefs about foreign language learning affect learners' choice and use of language learning strategies as well as language learning achievement (Wen and Johnson, 1997; Wenden, 1998; Horwitz, 1999), I intend to research language learning strategies in order to shed light on how DU students approach their foreign language learning and choose their learning strategies in relation to their beliefs, especially in light of lack of resources during the war, which might have affected their modes of study as well as exam preparations and results. This complex and intricate connection between these variables as well as the centrality of learners' beliefs among these is important to this current research undertaking. These constructs and the way they relate to each other in relation to this research and its

theoretical framework are explored in more detail in Chapters Three and Four.

Before proceeding to present the research questions, I would like to highlight the factors that led to their development. A combination of three important elements contributed to generating my research questions, namely my own observations including my lived experience during the war, discussions and conversations with colleagues and literature and previous studies. Initially, the research questions were associated with my own observations about and views on the students' behaviours and attitudes in my classes, which could be related to and affected by their language learning beliefs according to previous studies as briefly explained earlier. Taking the context of war into account, as highlighted above, I sensed that the students' motivation to learn English might also have been affected as a consequence, particularly those living in or near hot zones as they would be mainly concerned about their own safety and survival. That, consequently, made me wonder how those students could be motivated to come to class and learn a foreign language. Instead of being motivated, I would expect the students to be subjected to anxiety as a result of the surrounding environment which could contribute to their foreign language classroom anxieties, including test anxiety. Moreover, the damage befalling Damascus University might have also affected their language learning strategies and approaches due to lack of learning resources and lack of language practice and exposure. This also made me think about how they were able to manage and direct their learning.

My observations were in line with my colleagues' observations as well. They explained that their students showed indifferent attitudes towards their English classes. They also had similar comments regarding their students' motivation as well as their opinions and views on foreign language learning. Thus, I felt the need to investigate all of the above constructs in relation to their language learning beliefs taking into consideration the impact of war and the surrounding environment on the students and on their beliefs. These elements, consequently, led to the development

of my research questions. Therefore, research is undertaken to address the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

**What are the factors that influence students' attitudes towards and approaches to learning English as a foreign language at Damascus University in the context of war in Syria?**

In order to answer the overarching research question, I intend to investigate the above constructs, namely language learning beliefs, language learning strategies, motivation for foreign language learning and foreign language anxiety, as just noted, through breaking this research question (RQ) down into the following six research sub-questions:

- **RQ-i:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning, and what difficulties do they face while learning English at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-ii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics that successful foreign language learners should possess?
- **RQ-iii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general and at Damascus University in particular?
- **RQ-iv:** What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English, and how do they apply them at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-v:** What are the students' reasons for learning English in general, and what motivates them to learn English in the context of war?
- **RQ-vi:** Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally, and if so in what ways?

Thus, my own observations and personal interest in this research in the first place as

well as my colleagues' observations and views that are informed and supported by literature and previous studies led to the development of my research questions, which were refined further through the methodological approaches, explained in Chapter Five.

#### **1.4 Significance of this research and original contribution**

This research is an extension of previous studies investigating learners' beliefs about foreign language learning with a particular focus on the impact of the learning context and overall surrounding environment on their beliefs and learning experience, including their interaction with their context. Notwithstanding all the studies exploring learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in different contexts, studies dedicated to learners' beliefs about language learning in the Arab world are scant, not to mention the case in Syria, where, to date and to the best of my knowledge, no research has been conducted to explore Syrian learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of war in Syria. This research is the first to address this specific topic. Also, this research embraces a theoretical framework that is based on John Dewey's philosophy in investigating learners' beliefs and learning experience, which is another contribution to literature. In addition, this is the first time my specific well-known data collection instrument (the BALLI, explained in detail in Chapter Five) is used to explore learners' beliefs in the context of war as confirmed by Professor Elaine Horwitz, the creator of this instrument. Furthermore, this research employs three approaches, normative, metacognitive and contextual, to investigating learners' beliefs, explained in detail in Chapters Three and Five. As such, my study makes an original contribution theoretically and methodologically.

Thus, this research aims to fill a gap in research on learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in turbulent contexts, particularly in the Arab world, Syria in wartime. This research will have practical applications and impact for improving students' learning experience as it intends to add to research on learners' beliefs

about foreign language learning addressed increasingly by researchers in the field of education and psychology as well as applied linguistics. Also, this research is hoped to provide teachers with insights into how learners approach foreign language learning in warzones. This could help in designing programmes and developing teaching techniques that have the potential to translate into improvements in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in order to better deal with students' underachievement and poor performance, motivate them and meet their most urgent needs.

### **1.5 Thesis overview**

In this introductory chapter, I have presented the topic of this research which deals with learners' beliefs about foreign language learning and attitudes in wartime, in particular DU students during the war in Syria. The above sections have provided details on the problem under consideration, the purpose of this research, the overarching research question together with the research sub-questions and the significance of the study and its original contribution.

In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I set the scene for this research and provide a review of studies conducted on the impact of war on education. Thus, I offer a panoramic outlook of the wider context of this research, namely the Syrian Arab Republic together with its education system.

In Chapter Three, I present the theoretical framework and a review of literature on language learning beliefs. The literature review presents an overview of major theories on the construct of language learning beliefs.

In Chapter Four, I present a review of literature on three other relevant constructs, namely language learning strategies, motivation and anxiety.

In Chapter Five, I explain the philosophical assumptions undergirding this research and present the methodology, methods and research design employed in this study in



addition to its validity and reliability as well as ethical considerations.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I present the results and findings of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses respectively.

In Chapter Eight, I discuss the findings from both studies in this research. Finally, in Chapter Nine, I provide a conclusion for this research and discuss the contributions, implications, recommendations and its limitations.

# Chapter Two

*"It is one thing to have been engaged in war, to have shared its dangers and hardships; it is another thing to hear or read about it" (Dewey, 1916/1963, p. 232)*

## **Chapter Two: research context and education and war**

In the introductory chapter, Chapter One, I have presented the statement of the problem, the purpose of this research and the research questions and highlighted the significance of this research. In this chapter, I take one step further by providing descriptive background information on the context of this research. I also present a review of scholarly and grey literature (UN reports and other statistics, annuals, projects, etc.) on war and education. Thus, in section 2.1, background information on Syria is presented, including, among other things, location, area and demographics. Section 2.2 focuses on the use of English and popularity of learning English in Syria. Section 2.3 provides information on Syria's education system, as well as details on Damascus University in relation to foreign language learning. In section 2.4, I provide information on the actual research context and population. In section 2.5, the impact of war on education is highlighted, including its effects on infrastructure, staff and most importantly in this research on individual learners. Finally, section 2.6 provides a summary of this chapter.

### **2.1 The Syrian Arab Republic**

This section provides historical and background information on Syria, officially known as the Syrian Arab Republic. Syria is a Middle Eastern country, located on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, bordered by Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east and southeast, Jordan to the south, and Lebanon and Palestine to the southwest. It has an area of 185,180 square kilometres (71,498 square miles). Syria is a country of fertile plains, high mountains, and deserts. It is also home to diverse ethnic groups, including Syrian Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, Circassians and Turks. Damascus is the capital city; Aleppo is one of its major cities, and both cities have become the main destination of rural emigration within Syria (Encyclopaedia of the Nations, 2021). In its present and modern form, Syria was founded as a French mandate after the First World War. It gained its independence in 1946 and became a founding member of the United Nations. In 1958, together

with Egypt, Syria formed the United Arab Republic which lasted until 1961. In 1963, the Ba'ath political party came to power and has been in power since then (History World, 2013).

In 2011, when the war broke out, the Syrian population was estimated at 21,362,529 permanent inhabitants, including Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. Based on *Worldometer* elaboration of the latest United Nations data (2020), the current population of the Syrian Arab Republic is estimated at 17,686,381. According to reports from the Institute for Economics and Peace, Syria, due to the war, was ranked last on the Global Peace Index (2017) and was "the least peaceful country in the world", which made it the most violent country in the world. The same index for the year 2020 showed that Afghanistan replaced Syria as the least peaceful country, which suggests that the conditions and the overall context in Syria have not returned to normal yet. More information on Syria, particularly the importance and use of the English language is presented in the section below.

## **2.2 The English language in Syria**

In this section, I focus on the popularity and use of English in Syria. To begin with, Modern Standard Arabic, together with its multiple varieties, is the mother tongue and official language in Syria. Some non-Arab minorities living in Syria also use their mother tongues within their communities, such as Kurdish, Circassian and Armenian. However, they all have to learn Arabic since it is the official language in Syria. As for foreign language teaching and learning, English, introduced to Syria's education system in the 1950s, is the first foreign language, followed by French. Russian as a foreign language has recently been introduced to the curriculum. English is taught starting from the primary school, given its status as the language of science, IT, scholarship, commerce, media and communication, whereas French and Russian from the seventh grade upwards (Khoja and Mohapatra, 2017). From my own experience as a faculty member and as former Chair of the Teachers Syndicate Unit, at the Higher Language Institute, Damascus University, even during the war,

English has been one of the main requirements for government employment, academic and scholarly promotion at the Syrian universities, master and doctorate degrees admission and registration and university grants applications. The private sector in Syria as well requires its applicants to achieve a certain proficiency level in English. They even demand their current employees to take an English language test every year for their promotion and pay rise. Most of those exams are usually administered at the English Language Teaching Department, Damascus University (obtained from Damascus University/Higher Language Institute website).

Syria has recognised the significance of promoting multilingualism and recognised the necessity of teaching foreign languages, English in particular, at all stages of formal education. To this end, for example, the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education developed capacity-building programmes that offered scholarships to large numbers of English graduates to pursue their postgraduate studies in the field of English language teaching in English-speaking countries, such as the UK and the USA. I was one of those who were granted a scholarship to do an MA degree in education/TEFL in the UK within the framework of the capacity-building programmes. The plan aimed to equip the new generation of English language teachers and specialists with the latest knowledge and best teacher-training approaches and techniques in order to upgrade the English language teaching profession in the country as a whole and to motivate and encourage Syrian university students and the young generation to learn English and invest in it for their future careers (Yusuf, 2009).

In particular, the Ministry of Higher Education has been keen on promoting communicative language teaching (CLT) in the Syrian universities to phase out the use of the traditional grammar-translation method (GTM), which has been dominant in Syrian schools and universities for decades (Rajab, 2013). The Ministry of Education has expressed a similar interest. Thus, the two Ministries aimed at training English language teachers in modern language teaching approaches and methodologies, such as CLT. The Ministries, in addition, introduced new curricula

and textbooks that would match CLT (Mawed, 2016). It is important to point out that I do not aim to go into the subject of the communicative approach or grammar-translation method. Rather, I briefly describe their main underlying principles and features as these are related to DU students' language learning beliefs and attitudes towards foreign language learning.

Language learning was originally viewed as a cognitive process only, utilising memorisation; however, it was later considered to be a socio-cognitive process, relying on social interaction and communication (Littlewood, 1981), with learners being encouraged to talk about their personal experiences with others and integrate their experiences into their language learning environment using the target language (Nunan, 1991). As such, communicative language teaching is at the heart of the process of communication (Krashen, 1982). This approach stresses the importance of interaction and communication as the means and the goal of study (Savignon, 1987). It helps learners to acquire communicative competence in the target language (Santos, 2020). This is because it moved away from traditional language teaching methods, centred mainly on the teaching of grammar and the use of controlled activities involving memorisation of rules and dialogues, towards the integration of different language skills and the use of group and pair work activities, role play and group projects (Richards, 2006). Students in communicative language classes play the role of negotiators within their groups in the classroom (Mahlobo, 1999). Furthermore, within this approach, learner autonomy is encouraged and promoted through offering learners the chance to be in charge of their own learning and to use the strategies they believe to be effective. Also, given that it is a learner-centred approach, it requires small classes (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, 1989; Jacobs and Farrell, 2003).

As for the grammar-translation method, it emphasises the importance of grammatical competence in foreign language teaching/learning (Bax, 2003). It is also viewed as a teacher-centred language teaching approach with the translation of

texts, usually done by teachers, and the study of grammar rules taken as its main activities (Khan and Mansoor, 2016). Within this approach, students are taught in their mother tongue with little or no use of the target language and are required to memorise lists of vocabulary words and grammar structures with detailed explanations of grammar rules (Brown, 2007). Consequently, this makes students less autonomous and less motivated, and they may not be able to communicate effectively in the target language (Olcer, 2014). Moreover, this approach does not help students to improve their abilities to communicate in the target language (Brown, 2007). Rather, it limits "interaction and spontaneous creativity" (Sapargul and Sartor, 2010, p. 27).

It is worth clarifying that this research does not aim to promote or criticise the use of either of the two methods as both methods have their own advantages and disadvantages. Nonetheless, it only reflects the views of both Ministries in this respect and relates these views to literature and previous studies on learners' beliefs with regard to these two methods. Information on Syria's education system is provided in the section below.

### **2.3 Syria's education system**

The Syrian government supervises all stages of education relying principally on the Ministry of Education, overseeing primary and secondary education, and the Ministry of Higher Education, together with the Council for Higher Education, responsible for university education (Mualla, 2002; Nuffic Foundation, 2015). The Syrian government has granted free education to everyone at all levels to promote the principle of equal opportunities. According to the Third National MDGs Progress Report of 2010, Syria was on track to reach the target of achieving universal primary education by 2015 and was one of the few Arab countries which had surpassed all the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN News, 2014), allocating 5.1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) to education (WES, 2016). With regard to higher education in particular, the Ministry of Higher

Education has been in charge of all public universities since 1984 (Mawed, 2016). These are Damascus University, University of Aleppo, Tishreen University, Al-Baath University, Al-Furat University, University of Hama, University of Tartous and the Syrian Virtual University (Ministry of Higher Education website). Private universities in Syria, also supervised by the Quality Assurance Office at the Ministry of Higher Education, have been given the chance to contribute to upgrading the level and quality of higher education since 2001 (Ministry of Higher Education document, 2001).

The main entry requirement for university in Syria is the successful completion of the national Baccalaureate exams (General Secondary Education Certificate, GSEC) in the final year of secondary education (Dalbani, 1992; Ministry of Higher Education document, 2004; Nuffic Foundation, 2015). By law, anyone who holds a GSEC can continue on to higher education almost free of charge. Nonetheless, admission to higher education is highly competitive seeing that the choice of the university, faculty or department to which a student is admitted relies on the scores they receive on their national Baccalaureate exam (Al Hessian, Bengtsson and Kohlenberger, 2016, WES, 2016). Principally, students who have chosen the science subject cluster at secondary school can apply for admission to any faculty or department based on their final exam scores. However, those who have chosen the arts subject cluster at secondary school can only apply for degree programmes in literature, art, humanities and law, also based on their final exam results. Admission to the faculties of medicine, dentistry and pharmacy requires high scores on the final exams for the GSEC in the science cluster. The exam scores required for admission to university vary each year and are decided centrally by the University Admissions Committee at the Council for Higher Education. Also, some faculties and departments set additional entry requirements, such as having certain scores in a specialised subject (Nuffic Foundation, 2015).

Students do not apply directly to their intended study programmes and universities.



Rather, their applications should go through a two-phase admission screening process, called *Mofadala*, which sets the minimum marks required for enrolment in the various faculties and departments. The first phase usually takes place one month following the announcements of their national Baccalaureate results. Students can apply by listing several potential subject areas and/or departments based on the required marks and personal preference. The second phase is usually carried out a month later, during which the required admission marks are always higher than those in the first phase reflecting the capacities of the Syrian universities and the needs of the government in that very year. Thus, the second phase determines which university, faculty, department and field that a student is granted admission to (Al Hessian, Bengtsson and Kohlenberger, 2016). From personal perspective, the students' preferences and choices are mostly affected and sometimes decided by their parents and families' opinions and recommendations as well as what their society decides as high value.

As far as the male-to-female student ratio in higher education is concerned, it varies across specialisations and subject areas. During the war and as a result of the militarisation of young men, however, the female students have made up the majority of university students in Syria, particularly in the Arts and Humanities (Dillabough *et al.*, 2018). At times, for example, in some of my classes of more than 200 students, only 15 male students would attend.

It is important to note that since the beginning of the war in 2011, according to a *Refworld* report (2018), educational institutions in Syria, including schools and universities, have sustained varying degrees of damage, which is worth investigating. However, given my lived experience during the war and my familiarity with and knowledge of Damascus University, as a student and then as a teacher, I have chosen Damascus University to be the setting of this research and its students to be my sample. The section below provides information on Damascus University.

### **2.3-1 Damascus University and foreign language learning**

Damascus University, established in 1903, is the oldest and largest Syrian university (with more than 260,000 registered undergraduate and postgraduate students according to DU Office of Student Affairs for the academic year 2020/21). It consists of 24 faculties encompassing 121 departments located in Damascus, as well as Daraa, Quneitera and Sweida (three other major Syrian cities), 5 higher institutes, 8 technical institutes, 8 university hospitals and an open learning centre with a wide range of specialisations. Damascus University is famous for its 5 huge campuses located in different parts of the city of Damascus. The faculties at Damascus University broadly fall into two categories based on their teaching orientations. There are those teaching literature and humanities, such as the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Education, and those with scientific oriented studies, such as the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Pharmacy (Mawed, 2016; also more information and details are available on Damascus University website). Damascus University welcomes annually all eligible applicants who have passed their Baccalaureate exams, taken in the last year at secondary school, and have met the necessary University admission requirements (Dalbani, 1992).

English at Damascus University is taught as a foreign language (EFL) with four to six contact hours per week. First and second year students in all departments study general English (the intermediate level, i.e., B1-B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), while in the following years English is taught for specific purposes based on the students' different subject areas. In order to stress the importance of foreign language learning and teaching, the Higher Language Institute (HLI), established in 1995 as a language centre affiliated with the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, was assigned the mission of offering language courses to Damascus University students and to the public. Particularly, in 2006, HLI became an independent faculty for teaching languages,

encompassing four main departments: the English Language Teaching Department, which is different from the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, the Arabic Language Teaching Department, teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages, the French Language Teaching Department and the Language Department, teaching other foreign languages such as Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, Persian, Hebrew, Armenian and Aramaic to name but a few (the High Language Institute website).

HLI aims to provide students with the best and most updated academic tools through the teaching of foreign languages and to trigger and enhance their critical thinking skills and abilities (Makhluf, 2011; Mawed, 2016). It offers a multitude of programmes and language courses that are run throughout the academic year. These include Master's (both academic and professional) and PhD programmes in foreign language teaching, English language teacher-training courses, TOEFL and IELTS preparation courses, ESP courses and general English courses for the academic staff at Damascus University and for the public (Temmu, 2011). Besides, as briefly mentioned earlier, HLI is in charge of all English language tests required for academic promotion at Damascus University, employment in the government, registration in Master's and PhD programmes of all specialisations at the different and various departments of Damascus University. It is also responsible for the whole process of English language teaching at the different departments and faculties of the university, which includes selecting contracting English language teachers, selecting course books and teaching materials and supervising first and second year English language exams. All of the permanent academic staff members of the English Language Teaching Department at HLI hold postgraduate degrees from the UK or USA. Other contracting staff members are either MA or BA holders who graduated from Damascus University or the other Syrian universities and are usually hired after being trained and qualified (Makhluf, 2011).

In addition, HLI used to hold an international TESOL/TEFL conference annually,

the last of which was held in October 2010 right before the war broke out in Syria in 2011. Also, in an attempt to promote the communicative language approach and provide DU students with as much exposure to English outside their language classes as possible, HLI, the English Language Teaching Department in particular, launched the English Club, an extracurricular programme including various student activities. The English Club brought students from the different faculties and departments of Damascus University together. Its activities included a film club, drama club, debate and public speaking club, writing club and book club and involved meetings with native speakers of English, which all focused on encouraging students to communicate in the target language and speak English in public. For example, students from the drama club in particular courageously took on performing masterpieces of English drama as part of the TEFL conference side events. Unfortunately, the English Club was suspended during the war due to insecurity issues and the damage befalling some of the university buildings and also as a precautionary measure to avoid any conflicts that might arise between the students as a result of their differing political views.

Also, prior to the war, Damascus University in cooperation with the Syria Trust for Development, an NGO, launched the Business Clinics project. It aimed at equipping undergraduate students with the needed skills to invest in their subject areas so as to be ready to engage with the labour market after graduation (obtained from Damascus University website). The students would attend workshops delivered in English also in an attempt to encourage them to use English in a functional mode, where they had to negotiate and discuss issues related to their different disciplines and the world of business in English. I was a member of the piloting-phase team of this project. The above examples shed light on how Damascus University was keen on promoting the teaching of the English language. The section below presents the actual research context and population.

## **2.4 Research context and population**

The setting of this research is the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, consisting of 15 departments. More specifically, students from Department A and Department B, which were anonymised to protect and maintain the students' confidentiality, are my research sample. This research has not introduced any subject disciplinary differences since students from both departments come from the same background, i.e., human sciences, so they are similar enough. Also, it is important to note that investigating two departments in this research is desirable in order to guarantee that enough participants are available and willing to participate in this research taking into account power cuts and lack of reliable and stable internet connection in Syria due to the war, discussed further in the methodology chapter. Each of the two departments offers their students three 2-hour general English classes a week in each term. Attendance at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Damascus University, is mandatory although at present the minimum attendance requirements are not fully met due to the war. Students are required to take one final Multiple-Choice Questions (MCQ) exam each term. The final English exam consists of two parts only, vocabulary and grammar; it contains no listening, speaking or essay writing components. The section below highlights the effects of war on education.

## **2.5 Effects of war on education**

Before this section proceeds to highlight the impact of war on education, it briefly sheds light on the importance of education in the development of societies and nations at various levels. Education is seen as a channel of socialisation and identity development through transmitting knowledge, values and manners across generations; it is also considered as an effective means to develop the economic and social skills needed to empower future generations (Smith, 2010). This intensifies the significant role education plays in social life all around the globe seeing that "the primary ineluctable facts of the birth and death of each one of the constituent members in a social group determine the necessity of education", and that any

society can survive and eventually thrive through educational development (Dewey, 1916/1963, p.3). Its significance also lies in the fact that it can guide students' abilities and energies into positive and active channels to learn new skills and acquire more knowledge that can be utilised in building their future and enhancing economic and social development (Milton, 2013).

Education, moreover, as identified by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development, is considered as a significant element that is needed for human sustainable development and the elimination of poverty (Smith and Vaux, 2003). It is also viewed as the fourth pillar of humanitarian aid, together with food and water, shelter and health care (UNESCO Strategy, 2003), which advocates and reflects Dewey's assertion above that education plays a key role in social continuity and human survival. Education, besides, prepares young people or provides them with the skills necessary to attain a sustainable livelihood (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2011). It is also acknowledged to be an efficient means that can help in avoiding future wars (Cervantes-Duarte and Fernández-Cano, 2016) and one of the essential building blocks of human development particularly in conflict-affected contexts (Johnson and van Kalmthout, 2006) as well as a crucial factor in attaining stability in war-torn countries (Justino, 2014). Education is also associated with coping strategies and resilience that are viewed as a necessity during wars as concluded by Kostelny and Wessells (2010) in their study on Palestinian students during the Israeli attacks on Gaza. Accordingly, education can help students to adjust themselves in order to be able to interact with their surroundings and survive.

As the situation in Syria has gone from bad to worse, O'Keeffe and Pásztor (2017, p.5) contend that "while various military and diplomatic solutions are put forward regularly to try to solve the Syrian crisis, no solution gets to the heart of the matter more than increasing access to quality education for the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Syrian children and young people who are excluded from formal

education as the crisis rages on." That also echoes Dewey's stance during the Second World War as he concluded that education is a crucial factor in wartime (Cohan and Howlett, 2017). That said, the educational sector, among others, is very prone to be affected by wars, which can shake the very foundations of the educational structures of any country.

It is important to point out that contemporary wars have many aspects in common; for example, they break out within a nation state claiming the lives of innocent civilians and comprising "armed conflict, displacement of a large number of people, the collapse of an economy and a disruption of or decline in basic services" (Kagawa, 2005, p.491). According to the UNHCR's 2014 report, almost 51.2 million people were displaced by the end of 2013 as a result of intensified conflicts all over the world. The way wars influence life is seen as "development in reverse" (Collier, 2007, p.27). This is because they may have long-term effects manifested in weakening or undermining a country's critical infrastructure, including the education system. As a result, war-ridden countries become unable to provide education due to the destruction besetting infrastructure and services required to keep the education system functioning efficiently (Justino, 2014) and also since educational funds continue to diminish due to the increasing military expenditures (Lai and Thyne, 2007). For example, since 2011, Syria has been plagued by war that has influenced all fields of life and public services, including education of which no aspect has been untouched (Unicef report on Syria, 2016). Thus, wars can affect access to education (Rury and Darby, 2016) and can "disrupt or reverse education gains over many years" (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2011, p.134). However, because wars and political disparities would usually attract the most attention in the media and among scholars, the impact of war on education was insufficiently researched (Blair, Miller and Tieken, 2009; Paanakker, 2009; McCulloch and Brewis, 2016). It was not until the 1990s that the negative effects of war on education were viewed as real obstacles to teaching and learning and ultimately gained academic interest (Milton, 2013).

When the education system in war-affected contexts is run by the state, the situation becomes extremely difficult as schools and universities, staff and students become the target of the opposing party or parties (Smith and Vaux, 2003). As a result, attaining education in conflict zones can be risky as educational institutions, including schools and universities, teachers and students are constantly under fire and are targeted by shelling, bombing, murder, abduction and torture (Justino, 2010). Thus, wars may inflict damage on the following components and aspects of education and the educational process, namely education infrastructure, the management of educational institutions, staff and individual learners.

To begin with, damage befalling infrastructure includes the destruction of school and university buildings. Even when the buildings are not completely destroyed, they still lack facilities and equipment, such as functioning toilets, electricity, water, desks, chairs, doors and teaching resources and materials (O'Malley, 2010). Other issues include cuts or withdrawal of educational funds which can affect the ongoing maintenance of the buildings and their facilities (Cervantes-Duarte and Fernández-Cano, 2016). For example, two in five public schools in Syria, almost 5000 schools, were damaged or destroyed or converted into shelters for displaced families according to a Unicef report (2019). The remaining schools struggled to accommodate almost three million out-of-school children/students (Teschendorff, 2015). According to a *Refworld* report on Syria, published in January 2018, bombs falling on Damascus University buildings rendered some of these buildings dysfunctional and unsuitable for teaching or any educational activities. Mahlobo (1999) explained that due to lack of teaching media and resources, which facilitate the learning process, learning a foreign language becomes a difficult task for students.

It is also argued that even though in some war-ravaged contexts education is spared from any physical damage or casualties, wars still affect the space where education functions which may ultimately result in unfavourable consequences (Milton, 2013).



It could, therefore, be concluded that when/if education infrastructure is damaged, students will be affected, particularly the way they approach their learning as they may not be able to find the necessary resources or space to develop their skills and progress in their learning. This may, consequently, make them adjust and readjust the way they learn in order to cope with their continually changing and challenging context.

As for the management of education, it is evident that wars have huge influence on the mode of managing and running the education system (Paanakker, 2009), manifested in many aspects. These include allocating resources to rehabilitation and repair works instead of investing in educational development, in addition to reduced capacity of spending funds on these works due to contractors' fears of sudden reprisal after the completion of these works (O'Malley, 2010). For example, the situation at Damascus University worsened further during the war as the other Syrian universities were also subjected to grave damage forcing most of them to close down and relocate their students temporarily to Damascus University, adding more pressures on DU management and limited and exhausted resources (Milton, 2019). As a result, the classes at Damascus University became jam-packed and less interactive. Large class sizes can have discouraging effects, particularly in language classrooms, as interactive language classrooms and communicative language teaching approaches require smaller classes; otherwise, they turn into one-way lectures (Bahanshal, 2013).

Other aspects include the reduced capability of the management to carry out managerial tasks as a result of the damage and destruction of education records and information systems as well as examinations and accreditation (IRIN, 2010). Moreover, the managements of educational institutions normally confront mounting challenges as they have to make decisions on whether or not to keep schools and universities open and functioning without closing or suspending any of their programmes in the face of dangers and insecurity and threats of attack targeting

these institutions (IRIN, 2008). It can be argued that the state of dysfunctionality and uncertainty on the part of the management may be sensed by and/or transmitted to students, who consequently might feel undecided on whether to persist or surrender to that reality and might consequently become unmotivated.

With regard to the teaching staff, attacks targeting schools and universities may drive teachers, professors and employees to flee the country. For example, in southern Thailand, teachers were shot in front of their classes; consequently, teachers were afraid of being assassinated on their way to school or university and thus dedicated less time for preparing for their classes and developing new teaching materials (O'Malley, 2010). Also, as a result of the longstanding war in Syria, a large number of the most highly qualified teachers and professors either fled the country or went missing leading to acute teacher shortages. According to official sources, by 2015 Syria had lost almost one-third of its teachers and professors (Abdo, 2015). In addition, according to statistics from 2017 (obtained from Damascus University website), the number of Damascus University professors and students who were killed on university campus due to the war and falling mortar bombs amounted to 150 although the city of Damascus is considered a relatively less dangerous zone compared with other areas and cities. These disruptions can lead to loss of the academic community, loss of teaching skills and shortages of qualified teachers, who are replaced by unqualified ones resulting in the lowering of the teaching quality (Cervantes-Duarte and Fernández-Cano, 2016). Mahlobo (1999, p. 50) points out that competent and well-qualified teachers are required to use teaching resources "to effectively structure learning experiences and to choose and use effective instructional methods to achieve the specified outcomes."

From my personal experience as a member of the Teacher Selection and Hiring Committee at the Department of English Language Teaching, Damascus University, in order to compensate for teacher shortages, the Department had to hire new teachers, most of whom were fresh graduates with little or no teaching experience or

training. Due to that, most of the new teachers started to adopt the grammar-translation method (Fareh, 2012). Even experienced teachers faced difficulties trying to apply communicative teaching approaches to their classes and had sometimes to readopt the grammar-translation method amid this chaos. Barcelos and Kalaja (2013) explained that teachers' beliefs about language learning/teaching may not be consonant with their teaching practices as a result of issues associated with the context, such as large class sizes, low student motivation, ineffective course books and/or administrative obstacles. It can be concluded that poor quality education coupled with threatening surroundings to teachers and staff may be perceived by students as a discouraging and dispiriting environment, in which case they may change the way they approach their learning in order to cope with the situation or may decide to give up learning altogether.

As for the direct impact of war on students, they could be subjected to physical damage, resulting from increasing insecurity and threats and attacks targeting schools and universities, which may jeopardise their lives and cause their deaths (Buckland, 2005). As these factors persist over long periods of time, students may be forced to abandon their schools and universities and refuse to return to education (Cervantes-Duarte and Fernández-Cano, 2016), which results in lower education returns, falling levels of achievement and poor performance (Mansour, 2012). Students may also suffer from psychological damage which can be immediate or long-term damage. The immediate effects include anxiety about attacks on their schools and universities, which makes it hard for them to concentrate in their classes. Other effects include loss of interest, mistrust, inactivity and apathy (O'Malley, 2010). For example, due to the war, Syria has lost more than three decades in human development and years of educational achievement, and thus it will be face to face with the "prospect of a lost generation in terms of education" (Al Hessian, Bengtsson and Kohlenberger, 2016, pp.2-3).

The long-term effects on students may last for a long period of time even after the

conflicts are over. These may include post-war traumas, anger, illness and anguish, which haunt students during the post-war era (Murthy and Lakshminarayana, 2006). For example, Akbulut-Yuksel (2009) emphasises the long-term impact of the destruction and damage caused by the Second World War on education and students. Justino (2010) points out that recent research on the impact of wars has demonstrated that the negative and devastating effects of wars on learners linger on for decades after the war. "Even after resettlement, learning can continue to be impeded due to the after-effects of torture and trauma" (Nelson and Appleby, 2015, p.321). Students may become subjected to a whole host of alienating feelings conjured up by previous or potential political persecution, imprisonment, torture and the horrors of war that "can leave [them] much more than a refugee in body; they can become refugees in mind ... [suffering from] deep anger, illness, and even mental anguish" (MacPherson, 2005, pp.596-597). Also, according to the findings of a study conducted by Kostelny and Wessells (2010) on education in Gaza after the Israeli invasion of 2008-2009, Palestinian students suffered from serious psychological problems, including stress, fear, daily distress, drug abuse and anxiety, which affected them and their ability to learn and do well in their exams.

Thus, faced with feelings of fear, horror, apprehension, failure, insecurity and uncertainty, students, I would like to point out, may experience change in their motivation to learn, which may entail change in their attitudes towards learning and going to school or university. They might, as a consequence, start to weigh their choices and rethink their priorities as to whether they should adjust themselves and carry on regardless of the inevitable dangers and risks or they should quit and run for their lives. This may relate very closely to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in his (1943) paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". Accordingly, students may have to decide whether they should pursue their physiological and safety needs as going to school or university is not their top priority any longer or they should satisfy their self-actualisation needs if they are motivated enough to do so.

### **2.5-1 English language learning in war zones**

In this section, I shed light on the impact of war on English language teaching/learning in particular since this research investigates learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in wartime. Some of the challenges that are specific to English language teaching and learning in war zones have to do with a number of issues related to three aspects: organisational, pedagogical and psychological. Given that foreign publishing agents would usually flee countries undergoing unrest, the organisational challenges would include the outdated textbooks, lack of proper training for teachers, lack of or damage to facilities and no use of technology (Teevno, 2011). For example, due to international sanctions, English language teaching companies and agents are prevented from offering their services in Syria (Nott, 2020).

At the pedagogical level, absence of English language acquisition and limited classroom opportunities for learners to practise the target language are considered major challenges for language teaching and learning (Seefa, 2017; Anyiendah, 2017). English as a language is meant to be acquired, which requires language exposure and practice inside and outside the classroom (Khan, 2011; Teevno, 2011; Raja and Selvi, 2011). Nonetheless, overcrowded classrooms resulting from an influx of learners due to displacements and due to shortages of teachers during the war will be a hurdle in the face of providing students with enough language exposure in class (Anyiendah, 2017). Eventually, as a result, English at school or university in war zones is "taught as a subject not as a language" (Teevno, 2011, p. 31). For example, despite the fact that the English language curricula in Syrian schools and universities are based on communicative language teaching, they are being delivered through the traditional grammar-translation method relying chiefly on vocabulary words and grammar rules (Khoja and Mohapatra, 2017). Also, students may have little opportunity to practise the target language outside their classes due to lack of activities and venues for that purpose.

At the psychological level, anxious learners would be more inclined to quit foreign language learning if they do not perceive its importance (Almurshed and Aljuaythin, 2019). For example, recurring challenges, according to Munter, McKinley and Sarabia (2012, p.52), are associated with how war-related violence impedes the learning process of the students or "current/recent witnesses to armed conflict". Munter, McKinley and Sarabia quoted an English teacher, working on the US-Mexico border, as saying that his students do not get good marks in their English exam "because they worry about so many things [...] because they don't understand, because they're frustrated, because their mom was kidnapped, because their dad died on the weekend". This testimony demonstrates that those students are being subjected to pressure resulting from a prevalent state of unrest and anxiety that affects their abilities to handle their class requirements or perform well.

Accordingly, there is a need for a solid research base that can provide English language teachers and educators with the appropriate guidance needed to deal with students in or near conflict zones during wartime and its aftermath (Nelson and Appleby, 2015). This thesis goes some way in shedding light on students' experiences, on which future support and guidance can be based.

## **2.6 Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the context of this research. This has included the actual setting, i.e., Damascus University and the damage it has sustained. The chapter also, through examining the impact of war on education, as presented in existing literature and reflections informed by personal experiences, has identified a number of areas, including damage affecting infrastructure, management and teachers and most importantly the current and long-term effects of war on the individual learners. Thus, this chapter has set out the context of this research. The next step, in Chapter Three, involves providing a theoretical background that presents a detailed review of previous studies and research on theories of foreign language learning.

# Chapter Three

*"The belief that all genuine education comes through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25)*

### **Chapter Three: theoretical framework and literature review**

In the previous chapter, I have introduced the context of this research and shed light on the theme of education and war and the effects of war on learners. This has shown how learners and their learning might be affected in wartime. In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework adopted in this research and a review of literature on learners' beliefs about language learning. I will go into greater depth about three other variables that are associated with learners' beliefs, experiences and attitudes in Chapter Four. As such, the theoretical framework, explained in section 3.1, presents John Dewey's concept of experience and his pragmatic stance on the epistemological dichotomy as shaping my philosophical worldview underpinning this research. A review of literature provided in section 3.2 presents a theoretical background on literature discussing different theories on learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to their attitudes towards learning the target language. Section 3.3 provides a summary of the chapter.

#### **3.1 The theoretical framework**

In this section, I briefly discuss the importance of adopting a theoretical framework in research inquiry and then proceed to present the theoretical framework embraced in this research. Conducting research requires the identification and use of a theoretical framework that constitutes the basis of any research project (Crotty, 1998; Migiro and Magangi, 2011). The rationale for adopting a theoretical lens (also known as a philosophical underpinning or paradigm) stems from the fact that researchers by no means can detach themselves from their ontological or epistemological basis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is because a theoretical framework serves as the "blueprint" (Grant and Osanloo, 2014, p.12) and/or the "footings" of a house which form the foundations of the entire building (Grix, 2010, p.57).

Still, researchers have reached little or no consensus on the definition of a paradigm



in social science research (Bryman, 2006; Mertens, 2012; Shannon-Baker, 2015). For example, Kuhn (1970) contends that a paradigm is an accepted model that gives guidance to research efforts and organises the structure of the research in which it establishes itself and excludes other paradigms. Morgan (2007), on the other hand, provides four different terms for paradigm, namely "worldviews" (p. 50), "epistemological stances" (p. 52), "shared beliefs among members of a specialty area" (p. 53) and "model examples of research" (p. 53). He assumes that the second definition is the most widely embraced definition by researchers in social science research even though the third definition is the closest to Kuhn's definition (Hall, 2013). Another definition coined by Willis (2007, p.8) explains that a paradigm is "a comprehensive belief system, world view, or framework that guides research and practice in a field." Contending that paradigms should be used as "tools" to help in the research process, Biesta (2010) stresses that they should not be "exclusionary". Others, however, have proposed that a "stance" should be used instead of a paradigm (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010; Shannon-Baker, 2015). Some other researchers have called them epistemologies (for example, Crotty, 1998).

In spite of their seeming differences, the said definitions as well as others, to a certain degree, are in agreement that paradigms provide a general standpoint that directs the decision-making process in research inquiry, which ensures the production of a consistent and well-thought-out research plan. However, it can be noticed that some of the definitions emphasise that a paradigm should be exclusionary, while others stress quite the opposite. This research adopts both Willis' (2007) definition of paradigm as a philosophy and a belief system and Biesta's (2010) utilisation of paradigms as "tools" and means that, most importantly, do not exclude other paradigms. This is consistent with my beliefs and experiences as a researcher and given that my research questions require effective tools and instruments that may be associated with different worldviews.

My research questions are in need of a worldview that does not exclude other

worldviews as they investigate learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in a specific context, i.e., the war in Syria. Therefore, dealing with learners' beliefs in the context of war requires a flexible approach that takes into account all (unexpected or sudden) changes that might occur in the environment surrounding learners, which could affect their beliefs, attitudes, progress and outcomes as well as their learning experience as a whole.

To this end, I have decided on a two-fold theoretical framework that is informed by John Dewey's philosophy: 1) his concept of experience and 2) his pragmatic view on the philosophical dichotomy between nature and experience, i.e., positivism/objectivity vs. constructivism/subjectivity. As for the former, discussed in this chapter, it is employed in this research to highlight the students' beliefs about language learning along with their experiences that may take different forms in the context of war. It focuses on how their experiences are affected by and affect their context, influencing and contributing to the shaping of their language learning beliefs. This concept also takes into account the factors that could influence their experiences and behaviour whether those within learners or those surrounding them, which aligns with the overarching research question. With regard to the latter, explained in Chapter Five, it concerns the methodology in this research, i.e., used as an underpinning philosophy for combining different methods to investigate my problem. Therefore, the theoretical framework in this research is shaped by Dewey's philosophy.

Choosing Dewey and his concept of experience to be the theoretical framework in this research was the result of my search for an underpinning philosophy that is consonant with my own beliefs and experiences and that can essentially cater to the needs of my research questions. Aiming to highlight DU students' experiences during the war and the effects of these experiences on their language learning beliefs and attitudes towards the target language, I have found in Dewey's philosophy, his concept of experience in particular, my holy grail. Experience is considered a

fundamental concept in Dewey's philosophy seeing that he dealt with it in most of his major publications, including *Democracy and Education* (1916), *Experience and Nature* (1929), *Art as Experience* (1934), *Experience and Education* (1938) and others (Muhit, 2013). Moreover, his views on education, his lived experience during both world wars and the fact that he changed his perspective on the war and concluded that making peace was the work of education not politics (Cohan and Howlett, 2017) are all factors that have contributed to my decision of adopting his concept of experience as my theoretical framework.

Another reason that has also affected my decision in this respect is the recent revival of his philosophy in the works of contemporary philosophers such as Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein and others (Quirk, 2000) and more importantly for this research in the works of contemporary researchers in the field of foreign language learning, like Ana Maria Barcelos and Carol Hosenfeld. For example, Barcelos (2000, 2003b) introduced a Deweyan approach to research exploring language learning beliefs with a special focus on the paradoxical nature of beliefs as part of experience. As for Hosenfeld (2003), she relied on Bakhtinian and Deweyan thinking in investigating the emergence of certain beliefs about language learning and in discussing the learning experience. Moreover, Jarvis, Holdford and Griffin (2003) emphasised the significance of Dewey's contribution to education and the impact of his concept of experience on other concepts and notions. Other contemporary researchers embracing and shedding light on Dewey's concept of experience in other disciplines and fields include Aedo (2002), Muhit (2013) and Acampado (2019), among others.

The importance of the concept of experience stems from the fact that context, according to Dewey (1938), is the setting and ground of every experience, with which this research concurs in that it stresses the significance of learners' context in shaping their beliefs and affecting their motivation and lived experiences while they are interacting with their context. For Dewey (1938), experience is not something that goes on inside people's brains; rather, it is their interaction and way of coping

with their surrounding environment (it is worth noting that the word context in this research is used interchangeably with the word environment). Therefore, he emphasises that experience involves interdependence and reciprocal influence between living organisms and their physical and social surroundings. He (1916/1963, p.139) explained that understanding the nature of experience is dependent on realising that it has an active and a passive element. The active element is manifested in "trying", i.e., experimenting; while the passive component is represented in "undergoing". He explained that when individuals experience something, they act on it, they do something with it. They, consequently, endure or undergo the results. This idea in particular could be associated with the context of war where individuals might have both painful and joyful experiences together with feelings of uncertainty engulfing them as they strive to stay alive. What matters for Dewey in this respect is "trying" regardless of how modest an experience is; thus, he went on to say:

*"An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory" (1916/1963, p. 144).*

Moreover, the construction of experience, according to Dewey, relies on two essential principles, namely the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction (Barcelos, 2003b). Dewey (1938, p. 44) pointed out that these two principles are not separate from one another; on the contrary, "they intercept and unite." They also determine the quality of educational experience making up the "longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience". By means of these two principles, the educative value and importance of an experience can be measured (Aedo, 2002). This research emphasises the importance of the students' learning experiences in the context of war and how these experiences could influence their language learning beliefs and consequently their attitudes towards the target language.

As for the principle of continuity, it refers to the link between past experiences and future ones as the experiences that individuals go through are affected by the past and also affect future experiences (Dewey, 1938). Dewey pointed out that there is continuity in any incident seeing that every experience affects attitudes either positively or negatively, which can help in planning for future experiences. According to him, previous experiences leave residues that affect future ones since individuals develop various habits relying on past experiences which can influence later ones, meaning that every experience has continuity. He (1916/1963) stressed that in order to learn from experience, it is also essential to make a connection between past and future. This connection with the future is a crucial tenet in Dewey's philosophy given that experiences require a forward look focusing on what could be done to adjust to the surrounding environment (Muhit, 2013). Thus, as individuals engage with the environment, there would never be a single but continuous engagement since the environment continuously provides new settings or challenges where individuals endeavour to be in control (Acampado, 2019). This suggests that the context or environment is not static, and therefore individuals should be prepared for continuous changes in their context, especially a context which might already be in turmoil.

Furthermore, Dewey (1938, p. 87) argued that teaching and learning can be viewed as "a continuous process of reconstruction of experience." Thus, learning is seen as a manifestation of the continuities constructed by individuals within experience, which gives meaning to what they experience and makes connections to what may come in the future (Barcelos, 2000). Accordingly, teaching should be designed so that individual learners could efficiently rely on what they already know (Aedo, 2002).

With regard to interaction, it lies at the heart of Dewey's concept of experience, occurring between a living organism and its environment, where "an organism does not live *in* an environment; it lives *by* means of an environment" (Dewey, 1925-1953, cited in Dreon, 2014, p. 6). This "implies a relational structure of being, but of

a sort which leaves room for the individual seen as the ultimate source of what is unpredictable" (Muhit, 2013, p. 17). Dewey (1938, p.43) contended that "the conceptions of *situation* and of *interaction* are inseparable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation." Dewey explained further that environment could be any conditions or circumstances and, most important of all, the total cultural and social set-up of the situations, which interact with an individual's needs, goals, wishes, objectives and abilities so as to take part in creating the experience they have. This is because people are not detached from nature since they react to and interact with the environment and their life is connected with their interplay with their social and physical environment (Kaminsky, 1957). Therefore, according to Dewey, experience changes all the time since there will constantly be new interaction between an organism and the environment, which also keep changing and both are modified through experience (Acampado, 2019). Kaminsky (1957, p. 817) emphasises that living "consists in a series of adjustments." This is interesting for my research as interaction could take different forms, such as challenges, difficulties, obstacles or opportunities brought about by the surrounding context.

In addition, interaction, according to Dewey (1938), interprets "experience in its educational function and force" (p. 42). Hence, for him, a learner's experience is impacted by two sets of factors that are equally important, namely internal factors related to him/her and objective factors associated with the environment. The learner's responses and reactions to the objective factors are affected by their beliefs, attitudes, feelings and previous experiences and knowledge (Aedo, 2002). Consequently, any experience involves interaction between these two sets of factors, between individual and environment, between individual and objects and between individual and other individuals (Dewey, 1938), which stresses the significance of

the dialogue and communication underlying learning (Aedo, 2002). This sheds light on the active character of the individual in Dewey's philosophy, where being active means having the ability to respond, resist, strive, change, adapt to and cope with the surrounding environment and with others (Barcelos, 2000). Accordingly, having to deal with factors that are not under their control, including the environment/context, individuals have to keep adjusting themselves to these factors which are also changing continuously.

To sum up, experience is "a moving force in influencing what future experiences will be" as Dewey (1938, p. 87) described it, which is associated with the continuous adaptation of our actions as we interact with the surrounding environment in our attempt to survive in that environment. We are the products of our connected experiences, past, present and future ones as well as our interaction with our surroundings. Experience, thus, affects and contributes to the formation and shaping of our beliefs and attitudes in a reciprocal fashion. We, individuals, learn from each and every experience we go through, be it positive or negative. The lessons we learn from those experiences could take different forms and may as a result entail different responses. For Dewey, learning is firmly attached to the emotional moments when an individual interacts with environment; learning is a state of reconciliation between an individual and his/her surrounding context, and it occurs as individuals try to explore their environment with purpose (Fishman and McCarthy, 1998). Thus, it could be argued that the quality and value of our past experiences play a key role in how we plan for and react to future ones. Consequently, this could take part in shaping who we are and what we believe in and how we behave. However, due to our continuous interaction with our surroundings as living organisms, our experiences are not fixed because we keep negotiating with an ever-changing context. This may indicate that we should be alert all the time and be prepared to make adjustments.

Therefore, in order to answer the overarching research question and sub-questions,

this research adopts and employs Dewey's concept of experience as an umbrella concept that encompasses different learning experiences. In particular, I have borrowed the following principles from his philosophy: the active and passive elements of experience, the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction along with its two sets of factors. As for the active and passive elements, these could be applied to DU students' positive and negative learning attitudes, facilitative and debilitating beliefs, successful and unsuccessful learning experiences and the ups and downs they go through during the war. These elements reflect their attempts to interact with their context and the consequences of those attempts. With regard to both principles, i.e., continuity and interaction, they are not used in this research as criteria to measure the value of the students' experiences per se. Rather, they are intended to expose and highlight the students' experiences and the interplay between them and their environment. Accordingly, continuity is employed in this research to stress the importance of the students' past language learning experiences, whether formal or informal, in shaping and guiding their present and future learning experiences together with their beliefs and attitudes, especially in the context of war. It is about how past experiences can influence their choices of present and future behaviour and action pertaining to their language learning. The interaction principle, on the other hand, is adopted to focus on the students' relationship with their learning context and the overall environment, i.e., the war. It can help in highlighting how the context may influence and be influenced by the students and how that could as a result affect their beliefs and conceptions.

Finally, seeing that the overarching research question is aimed at identifying the factors that have affected DU students' language learning attitudes and final exam results, the two sets of factors subsumed under Dewey's principle of interaction of experience, namely the internal factors and objective factors, would be utilised in this research. These two sets could explain how the interaction between the internal and external factors contributed to forming and shaping the students' beliefs and experiences and consequently their attitudes. The sections below present the



literature review in this chapter.

### **3.2 Literature review**

As stated briefly in Chapter One and earlier in this chapter, the overarching research question aims to identify the factors that have affected DU students' attitudes towards learning English and their final English exam, particularly in the context of war. To this end, I rely on theories of foreign language learning to probe this question. It is important to point out that learners' attitudes are associated with their prior learning experiences, preconceptions about language learning, values and background and context (Zhao, 2015), which is consistent with the theoretical framework in this research, i.e., Dewey's (1938) concept of experience. Learners' attitudes are also viewed as one of the most significant sets of variables for predicting learners' competence and achievement (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011; Ahmed, 2015; Todor and Dégi, 2016; Kovac and Zdilar, 2017). In order to investigate learners' attitudes, Conti (2015) contends, their beliefs should be investigated first as beliefs are at the heart of attitudes and are considered "the single most important construct in educational research" (Pajares, 1992, p. 329). Researchers and scholars have also acknowledged the key role learners' beliefs about language learning play in determining how learners approach learning the target language (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013). Beliefs are also a core component of learners' construction of their learning experience (Dewey, 1938; Kalaja, 1995; Barcelos, 2000; Hosenfeld, 2003) as beliefs spark experiences and at the same time are triggered by experiences (Yang, 1992). Following Dewey's (1916/1963) recommendation that the first step to help students deal with any external pressures caused by their environment is to free them from the "internal chains of false beliefs" (p.92), I explore DU students' beliefs about language learning in wartime. Thus, in this review of literature, I discuss learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to my problem and my research questions.

### **3.2-1 Theoretical background on beliefs about language learning**

The importance of researching learners' beliefs about language learning lies in the fact that it raises teachers, researchers and educators' awareness of foreign language learning from learners' perspectives (Shah *et al.*, 2007). Learners' beliefs about language learning have been found to shape their perceptions of language learning, influence the learning process and experience (Horwitz, 1988; Young, 1991; Wen and Johnson, 1997; Ellis, 2009; Yonesaka and Tanaka, 2013) and affect their behaviours and learning outcomes (Barcelos, 2000). Knowledge of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning has been found to be useful in determining course content and teaching methods and in creating a form of instruction that can accommodate to learners' needs and preferences (Benson and Lor, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; Sakui and Gaies, 1999). Consequently, this knowledge may boost the efficiency of the learning process and help students to accomplish successful results, understanding and proficiency (Kuntz, 1997a, 1997b) through reinforcing their "beliefs that are facilitative to language learning and challenging those that are debilitating" (Kassem, 2013, p.403). Accordingly, in this section, I briefly provide some background information on theories of learners' beliefs about language learning. Then, I discuss the definition of language learning beliefs and present different approaches to investigating learners' beliefs taking into consideration the research questions and the theoretical framework.

Early research on language learners' beliefs dates back to the 1970s as part of Gardner's and his associates' motivational research studies, which were based on Gardner's socio-educational model. Their empirical studies viewed learners' beliefs about language learning as a social psychological phenomenon and dealt with it indirectly within the framework of learners' foreign language motivation research studies. They did not, however, propose any approaches to addressing language learning beliefs from the learner's point of view (Gabillon, 2005). Genuine interest in looking into language learning beliefs from learners' perspectives and opinions has,

however, been triggered by other theoretical approaches, including, most importantly for this research, the cognitive approach, borrowed from cognitive psychology (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013), and the socio-cultural approach to foreign/second language learning.

With regard to the cognitive approach, interest in exploring language learning beliefs was sparked along with developments in cognitive psychology (Alanen, 2003). The cognitive approach in foreign/second language learning relies heavily on cognitive psychology in investigating and examining the internal processes involved in the learning/acquisition of the target language (Ellis, 2015). The cognitive approach, whether in psychology or foreign/second language learning, firmly stresses the "*static or unchanging* nature of mental knowledge" (Dufva, 2003, p. 131), which is extended to the construct of language learning beliefs. Under the influence of this approach, research on language learning beliefs was marked with a shift in focus to learners and their contributions to language learning and how they could utilise their cognition. Thus, language learners are viewed within this approach as active participants in the learning process, who are responsible for their own learning and have their own experiences, using different strategies to deal with the task of learning the target language, which is all related to the characteristics of good language learners (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2003; Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, 2018). Serious research investigating learners' beliefs about language learning within this approach began with Elaine Horwitz (1987, 1988) and Anita Wenden (1987) reporting on their significant studies, referred to as *the Classics* (Kalaja *et al.*, 2016). Horwitz, in particular, is considered one of the pioneers in the field of language learning beliefs (Kalaja, 1995) and is credited with starting important research on learners' beliefs about language learning (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

Studies influenced by cognitive psychology have very much depended on quantitative methods of data collection and analysis, such as Likert-type questionnaires and descriptive data analysis (Yang and Kim, 2011). The Beliefs

About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), designed by Horwitz in the 1980s, is considered the most widely used questionnaire to measure learners' beliefs about language learning (Barcelos, 2003a). It "marked the beginning of systematic research on student beliefs about language learning" (Kuntz, 1996, p. 1). Notably, the term beliefs appeared for the first time in applied linguistics in 1985 together with the introduction of the BALLI (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013). Further details on the BALLI are provided in Chapter Five. Qualitative methods are also employed to investigate learners' beliefs within the cognitive approach, such as interviews and focus groups (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005).

The mainstream cognitive approach, however, has been the subject of criticism since it views beliefs as static and individual mental representations of experience with little or no mention of the external environment and the context which play a key role in shaping learners' beliefs (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2003; Yang and Kim, 2011). Thus, this approach gives prominence to the learner's agency in the learning process but overlooks their learning context. It is important to note that stressing learners' agency is in line with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on the active role of the individual while interacting with their context. Nonetheless, ignoring the role of context or environment in shaping learners' beliefs within the cognitive approach may not be consonant with Dewey's principle of interaction, which emphasises the interplay between individuals and their environment.

As for the socio-cultural approach, it is based on Vygotsky's notion that the development of human activity is mediated and appropriated through the social and cultural environment of daily practices (Li, 2013). For Vygotsky, the relationship between individuals and the social context relies on interaction which is seen as reciprocal in nature, where individuals affect and are affected by their context (Yang and Kim, 2011). As such, learning, according to this approach, occurs not *through* interaction but *in* interaction (Ellis, 2000), emphasising that interaction is not only a medium; it is, rather, an essential component and a result of learning. Learners,

therefore, are viewed as active meaning-makers in the learning process while interacting with their teachers, other learners and tasks (Fahim and Haghani, 2012).

Socio-cultural theorists (for example, Lantolf, 2007; Thorne, 2005) have applied the socio-cultural approach to foreign/second language learning (Li, 2013). From this perspective, foreign/second language learning and social interaction are seen as interdependent and thus language learning cannot be divorced from the context where it takes place (Schinke-llano, 1995, cited in Gabillon, 2007a). Therefore, many studies of foreign/second language learning have encouraged researchers to pay special attention to the significance of the social context and environment where a foreign/second language is being taught and learned and to learners' relationships with other learners and their different forms of participation. Accordingly, foreign/second language learning is more and more seen as a situated activity in a specific socio-political and cultural context (Haneda, 1997). Säljö (2018, cited in Marklund, 2020) points out that individuals can acquire experiences and knowledge through participating in and contributing to social communities, indicating that language becomes a fundamental aspect of human learning seeing that language mediates the world for individuals. Language, thus, becomes a tool for thinking and for social interaction. Therefore, Vygotskian researchers in the field of foreign/second language learning began to investigate the dialogic and social nature of foreign/second language learning (Haneda, 1997).

It is important within the framework of the socio-cultural theory to shed light on the concept of community of practice, which is rooted in this theory and which draws on Vygotsky's works (Vaughan and Dornan, 2014). The concept of community of practice started with Lave and Wenger's (1991) ethnographic study. This concept emphasises that learning is a social process which is situated in the historical and cultural context (Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner, 2016). That is, learning is viewed as a form of participation in the social world and as "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 31).

According to this concept, people come together with various ideas and interests but have a common understanding of the meaning and the purposes of their activities and work together to implement a practice (Wenger, 2011; Nagao, 2018). Through participating in a community of practice, all those involved can acquire knowledge and skills, and through interaction with other members they transform their identities (Sugihara, 2006, cited in Nagao, 2018). The concept of community of practice in foreign/second language learning can "be best understood as applying to students who are simultaneously members of multiple communities, ranging from the classroom-bound community of teacher with students to broader professional and recreational communities that include fluent speakers of the target language" (Haneda, 1997, p. 14). Additionally, some researchers have embraced the socio-cultural approach along with the concept of community of practice in their studies. Toohey (1996), for instance, used both approaches as a theoretical framework in her ethnographic study.

Furthermore, the socio-cultural approach focuses on how beliefs are formed, shaped, (co)constructed, appropriated and mediated by means of social transactions (Gabillon, 2007a). The Vygotskian-based approach in particular also emphasises the role played by significant others and artefacts in belief-formation (Alanen, 2003; Dufva, 2003). This aspect aligns with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction between an individual and his/her environment. However, according to cognitive researchers (for example, Kasper, 1997; Mitchell and Myles, 1998), the socio-cultural approach has not succeeded in offering a detailed outlook of language learning and has little to say about foreign language learning (Li, 2013). Moreover, the heavy emphasis of the socio-cultural approach on the context, which can represent Dewey's (1938) objective factors under his principle of interaction, could divert attention from the important role of learners' cognitive abilities, including their beliefs and metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998). Researchers also warn against the other extreme, i.e., the cognitive approach, paying too much attention to the learner's agency and ignoring the context (Li, 2013) as noted above.

As a result, research into language learners' beliefs is generally divided into studies embracing the mainstream cognitive approach (e.g., Wenden, 1987; Horwitz, 1988) and those adopting its alternatives, particularly the socio-cultural approach (Dufva, 2003). Consequently, numerous studies have been conducted to gain a better understanding of the nature and role of beliefs in foreign language learning, chiefly adopting cognitive or socio-cultural approaches (Hosseini and Pourmandnia, 2013). Ostensibly, these two approaches are "forming extremes on a continuum of orientations" (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013, p. 5), as demonstrated in Table 3.1 below, adapted from Alanen (2003, p.67) (the right column) and Gabillon (2007a, p. 34) (the left column):

<b>Cognitive approach</b> ←	<b>Socio-cultural approach</b> →
<b>Learners' beliefs:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are viewed as autonomous, personal</li> <li>• Occur in the mind</li> <li>• Are representations or schemata stored in the mind</li> <li>• Stable</li> <li>• Context-free</li> </ul>	<b>Learners' beliefs:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are personal and social</li> <li>• Occur on mental and social planes</li> <li>• Are negotiated and expressed in communication with others (through scaffolding)</li> <li>• Stable and changeable</li> <li>• Context-dependent</li> </ul>
<b>Important questions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What beliefs do learners possess?</li> <li>• How do beliefs influence learning?</li> <li>• How do beliefs regulate leaning?</li> </ul>	<b>Important questions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the nature of beliefs?</li> <li>• How are beliefs (co)constructed?</li> <li>• How do beliefs influence learners' behaviours?</li> <li>• How do beliefs regulate learning?</li> </ul>

Table 3.1: the cognitive approach vs. the socio-cultural approach

Despite the seeming incommensurability between the positivist cognitive approach and the socio-cultural approach (Zuengler and Miller, 2006), both approaches are not fully incompatible with each other; on the contrary, the cognitive approach is increasingly adopting from the social aspects (Alanen, 2003). Thus, there has recently been a growing interest within the field of foreign/second language learning in integrating the two extremes, suggesting that differences between them could be seen as "healthy and stimulating" signs for the field of foreign/second language

learning (Zuengler and Miller 2006, p. 35). Therefore, given that this research is interested in emphasising the influence of learners' beliefs and mental processes on their behaviour and attitudes as well as the influence of their context on their language learning beliefs and experiences and the interplay between individual and environment, I adopt both views under the umbrella of Dewey's concept of experience in order to answer my research questions. Both individual and environment, i.e., the learner and context, are assigned "equal rights" and significance in this research as recommended by Dewey (1938, p. 42).

Thus, integrating both views can offer me the opportunity to find out more about DU students' beliefs and learning experiences during the war together with their interaction with their environment. Accordingly, based on Wesely's (2012) categorisation of scholarly works on learners' language learning beliefs, this research combines two orientations. The first is concerned with learners' beliefs and attitudes as influenced by their learning context, and the other with the interplay between learners and their environment focusing on the dynamic and negotiated nature of learners' beliefs. Moreover, Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro (2018) point out that research is still needed to explore learners' beliefs in a variety of language learning contexts and environments where learners are seen as "whole persons with their histories and experiences, imbedded in specific contexts" (p. 231). This suggests that there is a gap in literature with regard to learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to context. This research investigating learners' beliefs in and interaction with the context of war is aimed to contribute to addressing this gap. The following section presents the working definition of beliefs adopted in this research.

### **3.2-1-1 Definition of beliefs**

Researchers working in the field of language learning beliefs tend to agree that learners' beliefs about language learning affect the way they approach learning the target language. However, no unified definition, it seems, has been bestowed upon beliefs (Abdolahzadeh and Nia, 2014) either because the term is understood



instinctively or because it is too complicated to be expressed (Vibulphol, 2004). Pajares (1992) even described beliefs as a "messy construct". He argues that "defining beliefs is at best a game of player's choice" that takes a variety of meanings which can be traced in the literature, including "attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding, and social strategy" (p. 307), to name but a few. This reflects a certain degree of difficulty in producing a precise and unified definition of the term, which can also be attributed to the confusion in relation to the distinction between beliefs and knowledge as Pajares contended.

It is important to make clear that within what is known as the normative approach knowledge and beliefs are considered as two different constructs, while they are treated as descending from the same grouping according to the metacognitive approach (Zheng, 2009), discussed in section 3.2-1-2. Pajares (1992) pointed out that most studies usually conclude implicitly that beliefs are "based on evaluation and judgment", while knowledge is "based on objective fact" (p. 313). Thus, the assumption is that knowledge has an epistemological assurance, whereas beliefs do not (Barcelos, 2003b). Due to this blurry boundary between knowledge and beliefs about language learning in literature on foreign/second language learning, both terms tend to be used interchangeably (Wenden, 1987; Horwitz, 1988; Verloop, Driel and Meijer, 2001). Therefore, in this section, I present a number of definitions by noted scholars and researchers. The purpose is to demonstrate how diverse defining the term beliefs is and also to clarify and conceptualise the nature and essential components of language learning beliefs. I then proceed to shed light on the most common elements of these definitions in order to construct my own definition of beliefs about language learning. Subsequently, I use it as the working definition in this study.

- **A plethora of definitions**

According to Dewey (1933), beliefs cover "all the matters of which we have no sure knowledge and yet which we are sufficiently confident of to act upon and also the matters that we now accept as certainly true, as knowledge, but which nevertheless may be questioned in the future" (p. 6). Dewey's definition highlights the contextual nature of beliefs and points out that beliefs are both cognitive and social constructs that result from an individual's experience (Barcelos, 2003a). For Dewey, beliefs are viewed as part of an individual's subjective experience, which means that they can either facilitate or impede learning as they are "not based on evidence but on opinions, traditions, and customs" (Barcelos, 2000, p.31), and as a result they become obstacles and promoters of knowledge at the same time (Dewey, 1938). According to him, the obstacles and problems imposed by beliefs can help in starting reflective thinking and inquiry. It could be concluded that when beliefs promote knowledge, they represent the active element of the learning experience; however, when they hinder learning, they reflect its passive element.

Kalaja (1995) concluded that, within studies she described as the current approach, beliefs could be defined as "cognitive entities to be found inside the minds of language learners" (p. 192), which could be associated with the cognitive approach explained above. Liskin-Gasparro (1998), based on Kalaja's explanation, commented that this approach, i.e., the current approach, does not consider the possibility that beliefs may change over time or may vary from context to another. On the other hand, Kalaja (1995) found that, according to other studies she classified as the alternative approach, or the discursive approach as it has come to be known (Kalaja, 2003), beliefs are "socially constructed, emerging from interaction with others, and therefore they would basically be non-cognitive and social in nature" (p. 196), where the focus is on what learners would say about learning the target language. The following definitions can be considered examples from both approaches:

Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988, 1989) utilised different terms to refer to beliefs, such as

"preconceptions", "preconceived notions" and "preconceived ideas about the language-learning process" (1989, p.62). Horwitz in that sense emphasises the importance of students' pre-existing notions and ideas about the learning approaches and methods, which stresses the cognitive nature of beliefs according to her. Kuntz (1997a, p.1) defines beliefs as "notions about language learning that students have acquired", which highlights the learner's previous language learning experiences. Moreover, Cui (2014, p.10) contends that learners' beliefs about language learning are "preconceived notions about learning a second/foreign language" which are likely to affect the learners' performance and behaviours.

Referring to beliefs as metacognitive knowledge, Victori and Lockhart (1995, p.224) define beliefs about foreign language learning as related to "the general assumptions that learners hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language teaching". Wenden (1986, p. 197) also defined beliefs as "metacognitive knowledge".

Richardson (1996, P. 3) defines language learning beliefs as "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". Also, Benson and Lor (1999, p. 464) conclude that beliefs "are concerned with what the learner holds to be true about [the] objects and processes [of learning] given a certain conception of what they are." Both Richardson's and Benson and Lor's definitions clearly state that learners believe that their ideas and perceptions are true and as a result they act upon them, which is in agreement with the same point emphasised in Dewey's (1933) definition above.

Other definitions underline the contextual and the social and cultural aspect of beliefs, which is considered one of the most significant and most influential aspects that can affect the way learners view their own learning (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996). For example, Riley (1989) contends that some learners' beliefs about foreign language learning are culture-specific, which renders understanding their world important so as to understand their beliefs. Benson and Lor (1999) have also

highlighted the connection between language learning beliefs and context contending that beliefs can also be "understood as relational and responsive to context" (p. 464).

It is worth noting that the abovementioned plethora of terms should not be viewed as a negative sign as Barcelos (2003a, p.8) concludes quoting Freeman (1991, p.32) who points out that "the issue is not the pluralism of labels, but the recognition of the phenomenon itself". The fact that numerous terms are used to describe and define learners' beliefs about language learning suggests that studies on beliefs are gaining ground in the field of educational and applied linguistics research, and that progress is being made. For the purpose of this research and taking into account the most recurrent elements in the definitions above, three major elements are identified:

- The first element is personal preconceived notions or ideas, adopted from Horwitz's (1988) view on beliefs.
- The second is students' previous language learning experiences.
- The third is learners' cultural and social background, learning context and overall environment.

These three elements combined correspond to the integration employed in this research between the cognitive approach and the socio-cultural approach, as explained in section 3.2-1 above. They are also consistent with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience, together with its two main principles, namely, continuity and interaction. Thus, they cover past, present and future experiences and stress how past experiences, including beliefs, opinions and lived experiences, may affect learners' future experiences, decisions and behaviour. They also emphasise the individual's relationship with his/her environment. In addition, learners' cognitive knowledge is imbedded in their preconceived ideas. In other words, and as the working definition for this research, I view beliefs about foreign language learning as:

*Preconceived notions and ideas, which are believed to be true by the learner to act*

*upon and which are influenced by their past language learning experiences and their interaction with their environment and social and cultural context.*

I would like to clarify that I have chosen to have my own definition of beliefs in this research since none of the definitions above could serve the purpose of this research as intended, and since definitions of language learning beliefs can influence "how beliefs are studied [and can have] a bearing on what the design and aims of a given study are" (Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, 2018, p. 222). Accordingly, the three elements are needed in order to deal with the different angles of learners' beliefs together with the various factors, external and internal, affecting their experiences in the context of war. The three following sub-sections, thus, delve into the three elements identified in my working definition so as to explain how these elements take part in shaping and affecting learners' beliefs and perceptions about language learning, particularly in a specific context.

- **Beliefs as preconceived notions or ideas**

When learners' beliefs are viewed as preconceived notions that learners bring along to their classes, they are said to have a certain degree of influence on their approaches to learning the target language and their learning behaviours in the classroom (Cotterall, 1995) and thus play a key role in their success or failure in learning that language (Rifkin, 2000). The way learners interact with new information is affected by their preconceived notions about language learning (Horwitz, 1987; White, 1999; Puchta, 1999, cited in Vibulphol, 2004), which may pose a threat to students' achievement and performance when/if those ideas are erroneous. Mistaken beliefs held by students about language learning were found to have detrimental effects on language learning as they feed into the student's dissatisfaction (Peacock, 1999, 2001; Brown, 2009, cited in Cui, 2014). These beliefs could, moreover, "contribute to student frustration, anxiety, lack of motivation, and in some cases, ending of foreign language study" (Kern, 1995, p.71). This connection between learners' beliefs, anxiety and motivation is consistent

with the link established in this research, particularly in relation to their experiences in the context of war.

Erroneous beliefs might make learners resist learning new information (Cotterall, 1995), which may lead them to view learning the target language as a difficult task. Considering the target language as a difficult language was found to be key to learners' language learning development and achievement (Vibulphol, 2004) given that their views can influence their expectations about and commitment to learning that language (Horwitz, 1987). If learners overrate the difficulty level of the target language, this may create a cognitive and a psychological barrier leading to frustration and impeding their progress (Maslamani, 2007, cited in Lababidi, 2015), which could represent Dewey's (1916/1963) passive aspect of learners' learning experience. Horwitz (1989) and Truitt (1995) also contend that beliefs about the difficulty of learning a foreign language are linked to language learning anxiety, discussed in Chapter Four. According to their findings, learners who consider the target language relatively difficult to learn are found to suffer from higher levels of anxiety than those who perceive that language as a language of average difficulty.

In addition, problems in the classroom resulting from mistaken misconceptions that the students enter their foreign language classes with have been the justification for a great body of research on learners' beliefs about language learning (Riley, 2006). Having been concerned about the injurious effects which beliefs may inflict on learners, Horwitz (1988, p. 283) and Altan (2006, p.46), drawing on Holec (1981, p.27), conclude that foreign language learners should undergo some kind of cognitive purging or "deconditioning" in an attempt to get rid of all preconceived notions about language learning which may influence the language learning process. This research agrees with the necessity of disposing of or at least altering those mistaken preconceived ideas; however, the question remains how and in what fashion. This, nonetheless, is out of the scope of this research but could be suggested for future research. These preconceived or pre-existing notions could be the product

of learners' past experiences of foreign language learning and teaching and/or their interaction with their context as the following two sections explain. This is in agreement with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience seeing that learners' preconceived notions might have resulted from an accumulation and continuity of experiences in learning the target language which have their influence on their present and future experiences.

- **Beliefs and previous language learning experiences (and language aptitude)**

Previous studies have shown that students can develop beliefs about language learning gradually as a result of their own previous language learning experiences (Horwitz, 1987; Young, 1991; Huang, 1997, cited in Vibulphol, 2004; Wang, 2005; Abdolazadeh and Nia, 2014). White (1999) contends that learners' beliefs, affected by their prior experiences and expectations, can assist learners in the way they view foreign language learning and impact on the way they approach the target language in the future. Thus, learners can direct their language activities based on their previous language learning experiences and needs (Woods, 2003, cited in Al-Osaimi and Wedell, 2014). The threat arising from the influence of past learning experiences, nonetheless, lies in the fact that some of these experiences might have been unsuccessful or bad ones leading students to lose confidence in their competence (Ellis, 2015). As a result, students may start to believe that they "lack some capacity necessary to language learning [and they will] probably doubt their own ability as language learners and expect to do poorly in language study" (Horwitz, 1988, p.288). They may also develop a sense of unwillingness to learn the target language ascribing this to some factors that they cannot control (Mori, 1999), which could be linked to the objective factors mentioned earlier in relation to Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction.

Consequently, students may start to believe in the existence of foreign language aptitude, i.e., the belief that some people have a special talent and ability to learn a

foreign language. They, as a result, run the risk of viewing language leaning ability as an inborn quality, i.e., as an "uncontrollable" or "fixed" capacity, and thus they may no longer wish to exert more effort to learn the target language and are likely to perform more poorly in language learning (Mori, 1999). Foreign language aptitude "raises questions about the importance of general ability (intelligence) in learning an FL [foreign language] and about the role of basic aptitude for learning FLs" (Ganschow and Sparks, 2001, p. 80), particularly for learners who confront difficulties in foreign language learning. Furthermore, students who believe in foreign language aptitude and that they do not possess it are those suffering from a high level of anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Horwitz, 1989; Truitt, 1995; Kassem, 2013; Shi, 2016 ), which can have negative influence on their future language learning experiences, and hence they may become unsuccessful language learners (Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mori, 1999; Peacock, 1999, 2001; Yang, 1999; Vibulphol, 2004; Al-Osaimi and Wedell, 2014). This also can suggest that exploring foreign language anxiety in relation to the students' beliefs is important to this research.

Thus, for learners who believe in the existence of foreign language aptitude and that it is an innate trait that they do not possess, language learning abilities, supposed to be part of their internal factors, may become part of the objective factors of their learning experience, which they cannot get hold of, which provides evidence that beliefs are not static.

#### - **Beliefs and context**

In this research, the context or environment where learners have their language learning experiences is considered an essential factor in shaping their beliefs and experiences and consequently their attitudes. Learners may develop negative beliefs about foreign language learning under the influence of their past language learning experiences and their context and society's overall perspective on foreign language learning (Kassem, 2013). Their beliefs and insights into language learning are seen



as socially and culturally bound as these beliefs are associated with the context to which they belong and in which they are developed (Sakui and Gaies, 1999; Piquemal and Renaud, 2006). Tumposky (1991, p.62, cited in Kuntz, 1996, p.12) argues that context and culture "contribute to the belief system of foreign language learners in ways which may relate to motivation and strategy selection." What Tumposky is suggesting here is that students' reasons for learning a foreign language and the approaches and strategies they choose for that purpose are partly determined by what their context and social surrounding recommend or allow. Accordingly, learners' context can have effects on their motivation and the approaches they choose in order to learn the target language, which is why it is important to discuss DU students' motivation and language learning strategies along with their beliefs in this research given its context, discussed in the next chapter. This could be seen as one aspect of learners' ongoing interaction and dialogue with their context, which might involve making adjustments to their actions with regard to how, what and why they choose to learn in a certain environment relying on previous experiences.

Therefore, to better understand learners' beliefs about foreign language learning and what motivates their language learning, approaches must be centred, in addition to their internal characteristics, on their interaction with their social context and culture as well as external environment (Norton and Toohey, 2001), which also relates to Dewey's (1938) internal and objective factors, mentioned earlier.

Thus, as stated earlier, the three elements together correspond to the theoretical framework in this research.

It is important to reiterate that interest in the role of individual learners and their beliefs in language learning in the field of education, foreign language learning and acquisition and applied linguistics has grown in popularity (Barcelos, 2003a; Diab, 2006; Wang, 2005; Mokhtari, 2007; Barcelos and Kalaja, 2011; Abdolazadeh and Nia, 2014). Consequently, this increasing interest in research into language learning beliefs and the significant surge in the number of studies exploring this phenomenon

have invited some researchers to group these studies into categories based on how these studies define beliefs and what methodologies they employ in investigating this construct in addition to other considerations. In the next section, I proceed to discuss one of those groupings, which sheds light on the approaches that different studies utilise in investigating learners' beliefs about foreign language learning.

### **3.2-1-2 Approaches to investigating beliefs about language learning**

As I seek to uncover how the dynamics of learners' beliefs about language learning function in sensitive contexts, there is a need for effective approaches in order to deal with the intricacies of the current situation of the context of this research. In this section, taking into account the theoretical framework in this research, I present and discuss Barcelos' (2000, 2003a) classification of studies investigating language learning beliefs in relation to my research and in light of integrating the cognitive approach with the socio-cultural approach in this research explained earlier. Taking into account how beliefs are defined, which methodologies are adopted and the connection between beliefs and action in these studies, Barcelos categorised these studies under three approaches, namely the normative, metacognitive and contextual. It is important to note that this classification has recently been subjected to a slight modification by Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2016). They grouped studies on language learning beliefs under two approaches, namely the traditional approach, which encompasses both the normative and metacognitive approaches, and the contextual approach (or approaches). Both groupings are integrated in this research given that the content of each approach is intact and the same regardless of the terminology used.

#### **1- The traditional approach**

It is an umbrella category encompassing both the normative and metacognitive approaches:

- **The normative approach**

The normative approach highlights the cognitive aspect of learners' beliefs and stresses the *etic* perspective and objective nature of viewing learners' beliefs (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013). Elaine Horwitz, together with her Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), is generally considered the initiator of significant research into learners' and teachers' beliefs (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005), as mentioned earlier. According to this approach, and based on Horwitz (1987, 1988), beliefs are viewed as "synonyms for preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions" (Barcelos, 2003a, p. 11). As such, learners' beliefs and opinions are seen as erroneous and counterproductive (Barcelos, 2000). Within the scope of this approach, beliefs about foreign language learning are viewed as the opposite of knowledge (Zheng, 2009) and as determinants of future actions and indicators of learners' autonomy (Noori, 2010). This approach studies beliefs out of context and tends to view beliefs as stable entities and hence examines them in a quantitative manner employing questionnaire surveys (Barcelos, 2003a). In particular, this approach is marked with the use of Likert-scale questionnaires in researching learners' beliefs, such as the BALLI or other questionnaires (e.g., Cotterall, 1999; Kuntz, 1996; Sakui and Gaies, 1999).

The quantitative research methods used in this approach offer clarity and precision by means of surveys and descriptive analysis which can investigate beliefs with large samples and ensure their anonymity (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). They also help in identifying major themes and patterns of beliefs from large quantities of data. Hence, the normative approach can be used as the base for identifying themes that can be studied and investigated in detail through employing another tool (Noori, 2010). However, this approach has some limitations as it transforms the rich and dynamic construct of beliefs into rigid numbers that limit the scope of responses which are predominated and identified by the researcher rather than learners themselves (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). It also makes it difficult to understand

the *emic* implications (Noori, 2010), where things are viewed "through the eyes of members of the culture being studied" (Willis, 2007, p. 100).

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the normative approach is informed by and in line with the cognitive approach, integrated with the socio-cultural approach in this research mentioned earlier. This research aims at making the most of the normative approach by focusing on its advantages, particularly the ability to use a large sample size which can offer me the opportunity to gain a general understanding of the overall students' language learning belief system and to generalise my findings to a certain degree. The disadvantages of this approach can be compensated for through employing another approach, which can also help in covering the three elements identified in the working definition of beliefs in this research.

- **The metacognitive approach**

The metacognitive approach defines beliefs about language learning as metacognitive knowledge (Barcelos, 2003a). The term metacognitive knowledge, originating from Flavell's (1979) metacognitive theory, is used to refer to an individual's knowledge about their own knowledge or others' knowledge, i.e., cognitive processes (Gabillon, 2005). This term has been in use in the field of foreign/second language learning since the 1980s (for example, Wenden, 1986). As such, the metacognitive approach perceives beliefs as "stable, stable although sometimes incorrect knowledge that learners have acquired about language, learning and the language learning process" as Wenden (1987, p. 163) contends. Thus, beliefs are viewed as knowledge or concepts about language learning or learner beliefs (Wenden, 2001, cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005, p.5). According to this approach, beliefs are subsumed under metacognitive knowledge (Barcelos, 2000), which is considered "factual, objective information, acquired through formal learning" (Alexander and Dochy, 1995, p.517). Learners' knowledge about learning impacts their "approach to learning and the expectations they hold about the outcomes of their efforts" (Wenden, 1998, p.515).

Learners' metacognitive knowledge is also seen as a key component of their self-directed language learning, language learning strategies and autonomy (Wenden, 1986, 1998). In particular, learner autonomy is a common thread in the cognitive and affective variables investigated in this research since this research focuses on the language learning process from the learner's perspective. Victori and Lockhart (1995) defined learner autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning and to be responsible for all the decisions related to all aspects of language learning; nevertheless, this ability "is not innate in individuals" (p.223). Also, given the interactive and social aspects of foreign language learning, learner autonomy has come to be seen as a learner's ability and readiness to work independently and in cooperation with other learners as a social responsible individual (Dam *et al.*, 1990, cited in Najeeb, 2013). Little (1991) explains that autonomous learners have the ability to talk about their own learning through knowledge about learning, accept responsibility for their own learning, evaluate the teaching methods and their effectiveness, evaluate their own levels of proficiency and progress and are ready to learn in cooperation with other learners. Little also added that learner autonomy requires a positive attitude, willingness to be proactive in self-directed learning and in interaction with others and the environment. Accordingly, learner autonomy is considered part of learners' learning experiences, particularly the active element of those experiences, according to Dewey's (1938) concept of experience. Therefore, autonomy constitutes an essential part of learners' metacognitive knowledge.

Within this approach, beliefs are normally studied through employing semi-structured interviews, focus groups or self-report as well as content analysis, which allows the interviewees to talk about and elaborate on their learning experiences and provide information on how they direct their own learning (Barcelos, 2000). This approach, however, has limitations manifested in its use of learners' responses and statements as the sole source of data, which ignores their context and its effects on their beliefs about language learning (Barcelos, 2003a).

Despite the problems associated with the metacognitive approach, this approach is in agreement with the cognitive approach, adopted along with the socio-cultural approach in this research. The metacognitive approach can provide this research with a closer look at how DU students view language learning and how they go about it since this approach highlights learners' knowledge about how language is or should be learned and taught. It also emphasises learner autonomy and self-directed language learning, which are important elements in this research particularly in light of lack of resources during the war. As for the shortcomings, these can be dealt with by means of employing another approach so as to cover the elements of the working definition of beliefs in this research.

## **2- The contextual approach (or approaches)**

The two approaches above treat beliefs about foreign language learning as a mental quality only, which renders the definition of beliefs about language learning incomplete as the contextual and cultural aspects of beliefs are excluded (according to the working definition of beliefs adopted in this research). On the contrary, the contextual approach considers beliefs as entrenched in the learner's socio-cultural background and context, which is not a static concept (Barcelos, 2003a). This approach embraces an *emic* perspective and stresses the subjective nature of language learning beliefs (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013). It also attempts to form a comprehensive understanding of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning taking the context into account. This approach takes a holistic stance in dealing with and evaluating learners' beliefs as these beliefs are rooted in learners' contexts (Barcelos, 2000). It also perceives learners' beliefs about language learning as a "dynamic, socially-situated construct" (Navarro and Thornton, 2011, pp.290-291). According to this approach, learners' beliefs cannot be studied in isolation from their environment. And, therefore, they are currently approached as a social construct that has a mediating role in other variables such as learner autonomy (Zheng *et al.*, 2016). Barcelos (2000) points out that this approach also offers researchers the

opportunity to view the paradoxes and contradictions in learners' beliefs about language learning.

Research studies adopting this approach employ qualitative research methods relying on interpretive analysis and use a variety of methodologies, including discussions, classroom observations, discourse and metaphor analysis, case studies, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires and diaries (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005; Kalaja *et al.*, 2016; Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, 2018). Despite the fact that this approach attempts to explore learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in tandem with their actions and context, it is used with small samples and thus does not aim at generalising findings about foreign language learning, which is a limitation to this approach (Barcelos, 2003a).

Irrespective of its limitations, the contextual approach is in agreement with the socio-cultural approach, integrated with the cognitive approach in this research as mentioned earlier. Its focus on the influence of context on learners' beliefs and the significance of interaction between learners and their environment in addition to helping researchers to identify any inconsistencies in learners' beliefs can help this research in highlighting the impact of war in Syria on the students and their language learning beliefs and on how that may affect their progress and achievement in language learning. The shortcomings associated with this approach can be addressed through using another approach in addition to this one.

Finally, it can be concluded that even though the three approaches above define and explore language learning beliefs differently, they agree that beliefs can have effects on the way learners approach foreign language learning. For this research, based on my research questions and the theoretical framework and given the context of war in Syria, as well as the complex and unobservable nature of beliefs, a variety of methods should be embraced so as to capture the different angles of learners' beliefs as proposed by Barcelos and Kalaja (2003). Therefore, the three approaches are employed in this research (which can help in compensating for their limitations) in

order to investigate DU students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language in the context of war. Thus, a more inclusive approach is embraced in this research utilising the three approaches, normative, metacognitive and contextual, by means of a mixed-methods methodology involving the adaptation of the three approaches to meet this research needs and limitations, discussed in detail in the methodology chapter.

### **3.3 Summary**

This chapter has presented the theoretical framework of this research as well as a theoretical background of two schools of thought about language learning beliefs, namely the cognitive approach and the socio-cultural approach. The working definition of language learning beliefs has been presented. Three different approaches to investigating language learning beliefs have been discussed, and a more inclusive approach has been explained in detail in Chapter Five. In the next chapter, a literature review is presented, focusing on three constructs that are influential in foreign language learning in relation to learners' beliefs and experiences and the overall theoretical framework in this research. These are language learning strategies, motivation for foreign language learning and foreign language anxiety.



# Chapter Four

*"The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning"*  
(Dewey, 1938, p. 38)

## **Chapter Four: literature on language learning strategies, motivation and anxiety**

In the previous chapter, I have presented the theoretical framework in this research and a review of literature on language learning beliefs. In this chapter, as noted in Chapters One and Three, I present a literature review on three other influential foreign language learning variables associated with learners' beliefs, experiences and attitudes in this research. Thus, in section 4.1-1, I discuss language learning strategies. In section 4.1-2, I shed light on learners' motivation for foreign language learning. In section 4.1-3, I discuss foreign language anxiety. Section 4.2 provides a summary of this chapter and the previous two chapters.

### **4.1 Significant variables in language learning**

As pointed out in Chapter One, different foreign language learning approaches and theoretical understandings highlight the significance of language learning beliefs to other "aspects of language learning and the language learner, such as anxiety, strategies, and motivation to mention just the most common" (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013, p. 5). It is worth reiterating that these three constructs in particular, namely strategies, motivation and anxiety, are viewed in this research as parts of DU students' language learning experience in the context of war, and thus they relate to the research sub-questions as well as the overarching research question. Accordingly, given the importance of learning about how students learn and direct their learning, which may affect their progress and success in language learning, I discuss language learning strategies in relation to DU students' language learning beliefs and learning experience in this chapter. Learners' beliefs are known to influence and be influenced by learners' selection and use of learning strategies which could affect the learning process and their progress (Yang, 1992). Studying DU students' language learning strategies in this research can help shed light on their metacognitive knowledge, self-directed language learning and autonomy reflected in their resilience and reliance on limited resources while learning English during the

war. This as well demonstrates how the students would experiment with certain strategies to learn English, which stresses the active element of their learning experience as Dewey (1916) explained. Referring back to the theoretical framework set out in the previous chapter, the limited options that the students could choose from to learn English could be viewed, according to Dewey (1938), as the tools they use to interact with their learning environment. Also, in their own right, the learning strategies could be considered as a learning environment that students can interact with during their learning. It is important to note that this research does not aim to evaluate DU students' language learning strategies, but only to shed light on their choice and use of strategies in relation to their context, which may be lacking in resources due to the war.

In addition, DU students' unsuccessful and disappointing final English exam results give some indications that the students might have lacked motivation during the war and as a result were facing difficulties in learning the target language. Therefore, I proceed to shed light on learners' motivation for language learning in this chapter as there is a direct link between beliefs and motivation in that "beliefs determine expectations and value judgments, leading either to motivation or demotivation" (Lima, 2005, p. 64, cited in Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, learners' beliefs about language learning and attitudes can influence and be understood through their motivation (Dörnyei and Otto, 1998), since motivation provides "one parsimonious way of accounting for individual differences in second language acquisition" (Gardner, 2005, p. 21). Also, having high motivation to learn a foreign language could represent the active aspect of the students' learning experience in wartime, which is in agreement with Dewey's (1916) positive element of experience. Besides, learners' context and cultural background can have strong effects on their motivation for foreign language learning (Dörnyei, 2005).

Finally, I discuss foreign language anxiety, which might represent the passive element of students' learning experience, given that anxiety and motivation are

generally related to one another in a negative relationship, where high motivation for language learning may lead to low levels of foreign language anxiety and vice versa (Liu and Chen, 2015). Foreign language anxiety is also linked to learners' misconceptions and mistaken beliefs about language leaning and their belief in foreign language aptitude as pointed out in the previous chapter. In addition, learners' attitudes and fears about the language classes could be associated with their anxiety and consequently with their performance in the classroom (Aida, 1994). This anxiety has typically been described as situation-specific anxiety, which is associated with the context that learners are in (Horwitz, 2010). Moreover, language anxiety can result from negative past language learning experiences (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a). The students might also have experienced a whole host of negative feelings during the war, including anxiety, stress, apprehension, nervousness, panic and fearfulness, to name a few. In this research, nonetheless, these feelings are all subsumed under anxiety so as to be consistent with the established notion of foreign language anxiety.

#### **4.1-1 Language learning strategies (LLS)**

In this section, I briefly deal with learners' language learning strategies in relation to their language learning beliefs. LLS have received growing attention with the emergence of the cognitive era (Zare, 2012; Mohammadi, Birjandi and Maftoon, 2015). As previously explained, the cognitive perspective of foreign language learning offers learners the possibility of becoming in charge of their own learning so as to become effective contributors to the learning process instead of being merely "mechanical translators" (Griffiths, 2003, p. 24). They, thus, transform from being passive recipients into active participants in the learning process, "using various mental strategies in order to sort out the system of the language to be learned" (Williams and Burden, 1997, p.13), which eventually puts greater responsibility on them (Griffiths, 2003). Accordingly, the language learner is the one who can make actual learning happen regardless of the quality of their teachers and

teaching methods as proposed by Nyikos and Oxford (1993). Therefore, the shift to more learner-centred approaches has gained ground in the field of language learning and teaching and has led learners towards independent and autonomous foreign language learning (Tamada, 1997). This shift has also taken part in directing attention from the products of foreign language learning/acquisition to the processes by means of which learning happens (Oxford, 1990). These processes, i.e., LLS, have come to be viewed not only as an essential element of different language proficiency theories but also as a tool to attain learners' autonomy in foreign language learning (Oxford, 1990; Rahimi, Riazi and Saif, 2008).

According to a language learning model developed by Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), LLS interact in an intricate fashion with other constructs, including beliefs and personal learning styles as well as motivation, aptitude, attitudes and anxiety. This model stresses the link between different cognitive and affective constructs, which this research aims to establish in relation to the students' experiences and surrounding context, i.e., the unrest in Syria. In particular, beliefs about foreign language learning were found to have a strong effect on how learners choose and use their LLS, which, as a result, influences the quality of their learning outcome (Kayaoğlu, 2013). For example, the findings of an empirical study conducted by Wen and Johnson in China (1997) concluded that learners' beliefs about foreign language learning affect strategy use as well as learners' success. Moreover, LLS were found to influence learners' beliefs in a reciprocal fashion (Yang, 1992). Therefore, exploring learners' beliefs about foreign language learning can lead to a better understanding of how learners utilise their LLS, as part of their learning experiences (Horwitz, 1988). In addition, LLS use was found to be context-specific indicating that strategy choices can differ in various learning contexts as concluded by previous studies (e.g., Wharton, 2000; Olivares-Cuhat, 2002; Rahimi, Riazi and Saif, 2008; Gerami and Baighlou, 2011; Boakye, 2011; Mohammadi, Birjandi and Maftoon, 2015; Nurmela, 2017). Thus, these tools, i.e., LLS, can help learners to become independent and active learners as they interact with, affect and are affected

by their learning context as part of their learning experiences, which is consistent with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience.

#### **4.1-1-1 Definition and classification of LLS**

Regarding the definition of LLS, a multitude of definitions were proposed by prominent researchers and scholars, which shows that defining LLS is not an easy task to accomplish (Ellis, 1994; O'Malley *et al.*, 1985). Researchers have reached no general consensus with regard to a unified definition of this term, and they have utilised differing terminologies, which makes it a "fuzzy" concept as suggested by Ellis (1994, p. 529). Some of these scholars include Rubin (1975), Politzer and McGroarty (1985), Wenden and Rubin (1987), O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998), among others.

In their definitions, the above scholars/researchers stressed the importance of learner autonomy as a key element in learners' choice and use of learning strategies and as part of learners' experiences with learning the target language. Their definitions, despite comprising different terms, almost agree on the purposes of utilising those strategies, which include the acquisition, storage, retrieval, comprehension, use and application of information. However, given the war context of this research which may not offer the students many options to choose from with regard to learning strategies and given the importance attached to the students' experiences in learning the target language particularly during the war, Oxford's (1990) definition of foreign language learning strategies is adopted in this research as its working definition. It is one of the most cited definitions due to its comprehensive and detailed nature and its focus on learners' situations and conditions (Pineda, 2010). Oxford views language learning strategies as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information" as well as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situation" (p. 8). Oxford also contends that LLS have a complex nature which may change in accordance with the learning task

as well as the learners themselves, which is in agreement with Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity as these strategies keep changing along with learners' changing learning needs and experiences.

As for the classification and taxonomy of LLS, there has been a controversy in this respect similar to that in relation to their definition. Several researchers and scholars in the field of language learning strategies have suggested various classifications, for example Rubin (1975), Wenden (1983), O'Malley *et al.* (1985), Oxford (1990) and Cohen (1998). As is the case with the definition of language learning strategies and for the purposes of this research, Oxford's taxonomy (1990) is adopted in this research since it is considered the most comprehensive and valid classification of LLS seeing that it includes all features of strategy use (Ellis, 1994).

Drawing on and developing other classifications, Oxford (1990) categorises LLS into:

- a) direct strategies, which are involved in conscious-mental processes: 1) memory (creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well and employing action), 2) cognitive (practising, receiving and sending messages, analysing and reasoning and creating structure for input and output) and 3) compensation (guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing);
- b) and indirect strategies, which are not applied in a conscious fashion: 4) metacognitive (centring your learning, arranging and planning your learning and evaluating your learning), 5) affective (lowering your anxiety, encouraging yourself and taking your emotional temperature) and 6) social (asking questions, cooperating with others and empathising with others).

This classification covers different dimensions, most importantly for this research, the cognitive/metacognitive, affective and social, which is in line with the theoretical framework embraced in this research. It is important to reiterate here that the

purpose of discussing language learning strategies in this research is meant to highlight the students' metacognitive knowledge and their self-directed language learning as well as autonomy in the context of war which may not offer them enough resources and opportunities to utilise many of these strategies.

#### **4.1-2 Motivation for foreign language learning**

This section briefly discusses learners' motivation for foreign language learning in relation to their language learning beliefs. As highlighted earlier, language learning beliefs can affect learners' motivation to succeed in learning the target language (Cotterall, 1995; Horwitz, 1995; Xiao and Hurd, 2010; Okura, 2016) and both can influence other constructs, cognitive and affective, and the quality of the learning experience in general (Cotterall, 1995; Xiao and Hurd, 2010). Therefore, theories of foreign/second language acquisition emphasise the significance of motivation since it is associated with learners' reasons for studying the target language (Al Rifai, 2010) and their aspiration and dedication so as to become proficient in that language (Gardner, 1985). Research in the field of foreign language learning suggests that motivation affects the language learning outcomes and can determine the success of learners because it can provide the impetus needed to trigger the foreign language learning process (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 2000; Bernard, 2010). It is even hard to picture anyone trying to learn a foreign language without a certain amount of motivation (Hall, 2011). That is, "without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough to ensure student achievement" (Dörnyei and Csizér, 1998, p.203; Dörnyei, 1998, p.117). Motivation also assists in making learners feel positive about their language learning experience at the different stages of the learning process (Galishnikova, 2014), which relates to Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity as the different stages of learning involve different experiences, where past experiences could affect future ones and as a result influence learners' motivation.



#### **4.1-2-1 Definition of motivation for foreign language learning**

Foreign language learning scholars have given different definitions to the construct of motivation. For example, Gardner (1985, p.10) contends that motivation for foreign language learning "refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes toward learning the language. [It refers] to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity." Gardner stresses the connection between the learner's desire to learn a foreign language and their conducive attitudes towards that language as well as the feeling of contentment resulting from that learning experience, which relates to the definition of integrative motivation, discussed in the section below. This definition is also in line with the active element of Dewey's (1938) concept of experience.

As for Dörnyei (2005, p.65), he points out that motivation in foreign language learning "provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process." His definition differs from Gardner's above in that Gardner emphasises the strong link between desire and positive attitudes, while Dörnyei focuses on the necessity of having enough energy and desire to keep the learning task going from beginning to end. Dörnyei (1998) explained that motivation changes all the time, suggesting that motivation for foreign language learning is like a process with different stages at different times as noted above. Williams and Burden (1997) also highlight the changing nature of motivation and therefore contend that it is not only concerned with arousing the desire to learn the target language but also about maintaining that desire till the end. Huitt (2011, cited in Awad, 2014, p. 98), in his definition, also concludes that motivation is "the arousal of certain behaviours directed towards the accomplishment of certain tasks and persisting in exerting efforts that target task achievement". This idea could suggest that motivation fluctuates and is not in a stable condition (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011).

The said terms have collectively highlighted a number of essential elements, including striving, desire, efforts and impetus. Those elements can function as a catalyst to generate motivation in one's self, which renders them necessary to motivate an individual. This, hence, can suggest that being a motivated learner is not an inborn quality in individuals as one "decides to be motivated by one thing or another" (Sternberg, 2006, p.89). A motivated learner, thus, is an individual who is ready and enthusiastic to exert effort in the learning activities and to develop themselves (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011). He/she "expends effort, is persistent and attentive to the task at hand, has goals, desires, and aspirations, enjoys the activity, makes attributions concerning success and/or failure, is aroused, and makes use of strategies to aid in achieving goals" (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003, p.173). This definition highlights the active side of learners and their willingness and eagerness to engage with their environment with a can-do attitude in order to have a satisfying learning experience, which is related to the active character as described by Dewey. Thus, motivated learners are driven by the desire to succeed and become high achievers in every task they undertake, while for those who are not motivated, success or failure may not concern them much (Veronica, 2008).

Dörnyei's (2005) definition is adopted in this research as its working definition. It is in agreement with Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity, where learners make efforts to stay motivated through relying on various (successful) past language learning experiences, which they try to extend to their present and future ones. It also points out that learners' motivation can fluctuate as they interact with their context till they reach their objective, which highlights the significance of learner's context since language learners' attitudes and motivation are influenced by their learning environment and their political and social context (Horwitz, 2012). The section below discusses the types of motivation.

#### **4.1-2-2 Integrative and instrumental motivations**

This section deals with the two major types of motivation adopted in this research:

integrative and instrumental. Learners can be motivated to learn a foreign language for various reasons that are linked to their own preferences and needs. These reasons can be either integrative or instrumental as Gardner and Lambert (1959) propose. They contend that integrative motivation is associated with learners' desire to integrate into the target language community. It refers to a student's desire to be bilingual and bicultural at the same time so as to use the target language with the native speakers of that language and integrate into them. As for instrumental motivation, it, as the name suggests, refers to learners' interest in learning a foreign language for pragmatic purposes or more functional reasons. It is described as a utilitarian drive aiming to achieve a certain goal such as meeting the requirements of university, job application, etc. (Al Rifai, 2010).

It has been argued that integrative motivation is considered more important than instrumental motivation as it is "found to sustain long-term success" in foreign language learning (Oroujlou and Vahedi, 2011, p.996). Nevertheless, studies in the 1980s concluded that integrative motivation may not be the most important predictor of foreign language learning (Al Rifai, 2010), which can be supported by the fact that students normally seem to opt for instrumental reasons more frequently than integrative reasons as they utilise foreign language learning as an instrument to pass their exams. On the other hand, according to Brown (2000, p. 163), both types of motivation "are not necessarily mutually exclusive", which suggests that motivation is not bound by either of these two types. Students may have integrative motivation or instrumental motivation or both while learning the target language as Cook (1991) contends. Also, students barely have one type of motivation while learning a foreign language; rather, they have a mixture of both types (Horwitz, 2012). Integrative and instrumental motivations may reflect learners' different experiences and their desire to interact with their learning environment for varied reasons, whether for a genuine interest or a functional goal.

Recently, however, most scholars and researchers in the field of foreign language

learning even contend that the level of motivation is more significant than the type of motivation (Horwitz, 2012), with which this research concurs. This relates to Dewey's concept of experience as learners' experience might not be enjoyable and successful all the time, indicating that they may sometimes have high levels of motivation and other times low levels during their interaction with their learning environment. Speaking of integrative and instrumental motivation leads this chapter to discuss another categorisation of motivation under one of the most important theories of motivation adopted in this research, namely self-determination theory.

#### **4.1-2-3 Self-determination theory (SDT)**

A number of theories are informing and framing this research as they sit well with it. The transition from the broad social psychological era to the cognitive-situated period brought into existence other models that deal with motivation for foreign language learning (Bernard, 2010). Cognitivists contend that how an individual thinks about their abilities, limitations and past experiences can affect their present and future motivation significantly (Dörnyei, 2005), which is consistent with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience, particularly its principle of continuity. One of the products of this period is self-determination theory, adopted in this research as it relates to the constructs this research is dealing with and to the integrative-instrumental classification discussed above.

This theory was introduced by Deci and Ryan (1985) as an extension of the intrinsic-extrinsic model. According to this theory, intrinsic motivation is "doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable" (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.233). It refers to actions performed for their own sake that are not linked to any clear external incentives (Dörnyei, 1998). Intrinsic motivation is made up of three basic human psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Awad, 2014). Autonomy, an important construct in this research, stems from the pleasure generated from the activity itself and represents the student's initiated action (Deci and Ryan, 2000). It is also associated with the active character that interacts and

cope with and affects and is affected by their context as described by Dewey. Second, competence represents the student's proficiency and cognitive abilities in the target content and plays a key role in motivated engagement, considered a cornerstone for self-efficacy, which can influence their motivation to learn (Veronica, 2008). Third, relatedness reflects the student's need to be accepted by the others (Busse and Walter, 2013), i.e., accepted by his/her environment through interaction according to Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction.

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is related to "doing something because it leads to a separable outcome" (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p.233), such as exams and assessment. It deals with behaviour performed in order to reach a certain goal and may lead to intrinsic motivation (Zhao, 2015). It is worth noting that the intrinsic-extrinsic motivation dichotomy is in line with Gardner and Lambert's (1959) integrative-instrumental categorisation although the two approaches are clearly not identical (Horwitz, 2012). In this research, both categorisations are used interchangeably. Finally, discussing motivation and the levels of motivation leads this chapter to shed light on the Affective Filter Hypothesis.

#### **4.1-2-4 Affective Filter Hypothesis**

The Affective Filter Hypothesis in foreign/second language learning/acquisition was developed by Stephen Krashen (1982), who explained that the "affective filter", as proposed by Dulay and Burt (1977), functions as a barrier between the learner and the target language, which prevents input from being utilised for language learning. He argues that learners with positive attitudes towards the target language are very likely to have low affective filters. According to this hypothesis, certain feelings and emotions, such as anxiety and self-doubt resulting from the surrounding environment can interfere with the foreign language process (Park *et al.*, 2014). Thus, those negative emotions impede the processing of language input (Krashen, 2003). Accordingly, following Dewey's (1916/1963) elements of experience, the active element of learners' experiences is usually coupled with low affective filters,

while the downside of their learning experiences is associated with high affective filters.

Most notable with regard to the Affective Filter Hypothesis is the fact that it focuses on the relationship between affective constructs and the process of foreign language learning as learners differ in terms of the level or intensity of the affective filters. Krashen (1982) contended that the affective constructs associated with success in language learning include three main constructs: 1) motivation (learners with high motivation usually perform well in foreign language learning; 2) self-confidence (learners with self-confidence do better in foreign language learning; and 3) anxiety, both personal and classroom anxiety (learners with low anxiety tend to do well in foreign language learning). Horwitz (2012) pointed out that learners with high anxiety, low motivation and negative attitudes towards the target language will have a high affective filter and will consequently be unlikely to seek more input, while those with high motivation, low anxiety and positive attitudes will be motivated to look for opportunity to obtain more input as they have a lower filter. This could imply that there is a negative relationship between two important affective variables, namely motivation and anxiety.

The section below discusses language learning anxiety, given its association with motivation within the Affective Filter Hypothesis as well as its importance to this research in relation to language learning beliefs and experiences, particularly in the context of war and the surrounding environment.

#### **4.1-3 Foreign language anxiety**

This section briefly discusses language learning anxiety in relation to DU students' beliefs about language learning and their overall learning experience as well as the other variables discussed in this research. Great efforts in the field of foreign language learning and research have been exerted to emphasise the role that affective factors play in the success or failure of learners (Salehi and Marefat, 2014).

Anxiety as an affective construct has been found to influence foreign language learning and is viewed as a special type of anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991a; Young, 1991; Aida, 1994; Wang, 2005; Choi, 2013; Horwitz, 2016). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) argued that "any performance in the L2 [i.e., the target language] is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p. 128), which may affect their learning experiences. Accordingly, foreign language anxiety is seen as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (p. 128). This definition highlights learners' interaction with their classroom environment, and the consequences of their interaction, which constitute part of learners' learning experience, and which might affect their progress and success.

Scovel (1978), attempting to address the inconsistencies found in early studies on language anxiety, drew a distinction between facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. He explained that "it is with facilitating and debilitating anxiety in the normal learner – each working in tandem, serving simultaneously to motivate and to warn, as the individual gropes to learn an ever-changing sequence of new facts about the environment" (p. 138)." As such, facilitating anxiety encourages the learner to "fight", i.e., interact with, the new learning activity as it prepares him/her emotionally for "approach behavior". Alpert and Haber (1960, cited in Aida, 1994) also viewed language anxiety as positive energy that can motivate learners. With regard to debilitating anxiety, it stimulates the learner to "flee" the new learning activity as it invites him/her emotionally to adopt "avoidance behavior" (p. 139). Thus, it can be noted that both types of anxiety affect learners' experiences with their changing environment, which is in agreement with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience. This may also imply that high levels of anxiety might turn into a motivating factor, depending on the surrounding environment and the difficulty level of the task as well as the amount of anxiety triggered. The following section

highlights the link between anxiety and beliefs about language learning.

#### **4.1-3-1 Language anxiety and beliefs about language learning**

Learners' beliefs about language learning have been found to ignite language anxiety in learners (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; Young, 1991; Truitt, 1995; Kuntz, 1997). In particular, learners who perceive the task of language learning as a difficult undertaking may experience anxiety (Horwitz, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Kuntz, 1997). As highlighted in the working definition of beliefs in this research, negative or erroneous beliefs may disrupt learners' efforts to learn the target language by raising their anxiety, which was also linked to self-confidence. Kuntz (1997) found that the more self-confidence the students have, the lower their anxiety is, which relates to the affective filter mentioned above. These constructs play a role in learners' experiences as they interact with their learning environment.

Therefore, highly anxious learners may hold beliefs about language learning that are different from those held by less anxious learners as previous studies suggest (e.g., Horwitz 1989, 1995; Truitt, 1995). For example, beliefs associated with accuracy and error correction were found to relate to high anxiety as anxious learners reported being afraid of making mistakes and being corrected in the language class (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). More specifically, Horwitz (1988) identified the most commonly held beliefs by language learners in relation to language anxiety, namely: (1) a belief that accuracy must be achieved before communicating in the foreign language; (2) the importance of speaking with good pronunciation and excellent native-like accent; (3) a belief that it is not acceptable to guess an unfamiliar second/foreign language word; (4) language learning is basically an act of translation; (5) a couple of years are sufficient in order to achieve fluency in the target language. Such 'erroneous' beliefs about language learning can contribute to the manifestation of language anxiety in students (Young, 1991; Ohata, 2005). Language anxiety can thus be associated with the passive element of students' language learning experiences as they had to endure the consequences of their



beliefs and choices according to Dewey (1916).

#### **4.1-3-2 Types of anxiety**

Anxiety has been classified by different scholars/researchers based on the cause and source of anxiety (for example, Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b). Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) introduced the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS, a 33-item Likert scale), which identifies and measures three types of anxiety, namely communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. As for communication apprehension, they contend, it is some sort of shyness marked with fear of communicating with others as well as anxiety about speaking to them, which could be associated with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction of experience. Regarding test anxiety, it is related to anxiety resulting from the fear of failure when students, having performed badly previously, are haunted by negative thoughts during their exams (Sarason, 1984, cited in Wang, 2005, p.18), which relates to Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity of experience. With regard to fear of negative evaluation, it is defined as "apprehension about others' evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively" (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986, p.128). This type relates to Dewey's concept of experience given that experience for Dewey is never seen as private but (partly) as a consequence of social interaction given that there is an important communal aspect in any experience that is embodied in communication (Acampado, 2019).

As for MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b, p.85), they have identified three types of anxiety, namely "trait, state and situation specific perspectives". Trait anxiety is a person's likelihood of getting anxious in any given situation. State anxiety is a mixture of both trait and situational anxieties. It is an unpleasant feeling experienced by learners at a particular time, for example, before taking a test (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1991b, p. 90). The third type is situation-specific anxiety which deals with anxiety reported in "a well-defined situation" such as writing exams and doing

mathematical problems. It can be seen as trait anxiety experienced in a specific situation. The three types of anxiety are of interest to this research, particularly the second and third types due to their emphasis on the significance of context and specific situations, which is in line with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction between an individual and their environment.

#### **4.1-3-3 Sources of anxiety**

Given the importance of the connection between learners' experiences and their beliefs and attitudes as established in this research, sources of anxiety should be highlighted. In this section, I summarise the main sources of language learning anxiety according to Young (1991, pp.427-429), who identifies six sources of language anxiety:

- a. "personal and interpersonal anxieties", encompassing competitiveness and low self-esteem as serious sources of language anxiety;
- b. "learner beliefs about language learning", considered as important factors causing language anxiety as noted above;
- c. "instructor beliefs about language teaching", seen as another source of language anxiety as teachers believe that their role is to correct their students' mistakes, and that they should do most of the talking and teaching in the classroom, hence leading to mismatches between students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning;
- d. "instructor-learner interactions", which are related to the way or manner teachers correct their students' mistakes;
- e. "classroom procedures", which involve speaking in the foreign language in front of the whole class causing the students to become anxious; and
- f. "language testing", which has to do with the types of exam questions.

The sources above are related to learners' experiences during their interaction with their learning context, which, according to Dewey's (1938) definition of

environment, could be the target language, teachers, other learners, classroom procedures and their own preconceived notions and conceptions about language learning. As all these sources relate to the environment, I must not discount how the war itself might be a source of anxiety, which is much broader than these sources. However, I will not go into detail about anxieties that are as a result of the war; rather, I focus on how the sources above are impacted by the war. Therefore, this research takes many of these sources into account as they address most of the variables that may lead learners to experience anxiety, particularly with respect to my context. Also, based on the brief description of the sources of language anxiety above and in accordance with MacIntyre and Gardner's (1991b) theory on foreign language anxiety, learners do not seem to undergo language anxiety from the start of their foreign language learning experience; rather, they begin to experience language anxiety when their attitudes and emotions about foreign language learning take shape. This may suggest that their past experiences accumulating together could affect their future experiences, which is in agreement with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience. Also, this may indicate that the problem of language anxiety does not lie fully with students; however, this research is solely concerned with students, which is one of the limitations in this research.

## **4.2 Summary**

In this chapter, a review of literature on three constructs that are influential in foreign language learning has been presented in relation to learners' beliefs and experiences and the overall theoretical framework in this research. These are language learning strategies, motivation for foreign language learning and foreign language anxiety. The three constructs are strongly associated with and affected by learners' beliefs and context as well as the interaction between learners and their context, particularly the context of war in this research. The next chapter is dedicated to the fieldwork investigation, i.e., the methodology, methods and research design.

# Chapter Five

*"[T]he function of knowledge is to make one experience freely available to other experiences" (Dewey, 1916, p. 339)*

## **Chapter Five: methodology and methods**

In the previous two chapters, I have presented the theoretical framework and literature review in this research. In this chapter, I present the methodological framing for this thesis and explain the methodology and methods adopted. Thus, in section 5.1, I present Dewey's pragmatic stance on the philosophical division of experience and nature, i.e., subjectivism vs. objectivism, used as an undergirding worldview for my mixed-methods methodology. I then explain the use of mixed methods in this research, taking into consideration the three approaches to investigating learner' beliefs about language leaning as briefly pointed out in Chapter Three. In section 5.2, I present the research design, including the research methods, data collection instruments, the research sample and the procedures followed in data collection and analyses. In section 5.3, I discuss the reliability and validity of this research. Section 5.4 explains how ethical issues were dealt with. Section 5.5 provides a summary of the chapter.

### **5.1 The methodological framing for this research**

As discussed in Chapter Three, section 3.1, the theoretical framework in this research is informed by Dewey's philosophy and approach to education, in particular his concept of experience and his pragmatic view on the philosophical dichotomy of positivism and constructivism. It is important to emphasise that his stance on the epistemological division is adopted in this research as a philosophical approach and as a tool to underpin the use of mixed methods. Dewey's pragmatism has been the centre of attention as it revolts against all forms of dualisms and dichotomies in philosophy, particularly the dualism between experience and nature, where the former is subjective and the latter is objective (Quirk, 2000). According to Dewey, if the interrelation between experience and nature is understood correctly, bringing both of them together should not be a philosophical problem (Muhit, 2013). He, as a result, disregarded the persistent divide between objectivism and subjectivism (Biesta, 2010; Morgan, 2014), which allowed researchers to mix and use different

methods in one study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Based on his view, mixed methods research can be utilised to inductively and deductively obtain the information required to understand a specific phenomenon through making use of different assumptions to address the problem under consideration (Greene and Hall, 2010). The pragmatic view, in addition, allows researchers to see reality as both "singular" and "multiple" (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011, p.41), to use the approach that serves their purposes without any philosophical restrictions by providing them with an adaptable theoretical framework for mixing different methods (Howe, 1988; Migiro and Magangi, 2011) and consequently to go beyond the limitations imposed by the "forced choice dichotomy" between positivism and constructivism (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007, p. 27).

As a researcher, I would like to assert that I embrace a pragmatic philosophical stand in this thesis, which is greatly formed and informed by ontological and epistemological assumptions from positivistic and constructivist approaches. Ontologically, I assume that reality can be both subjective and objective, where both experience, represented in an individual's internal factors according to Dewey's (1938) concept of experience, and nature, manifested in the objective factors surrounding them, can be reconciled and viewed as interacting with each other rather than competing against each other. At the epistemological level, I assume that an individual's attitudes and behaviours can be best understood through understanding their beliefs and social context and their interaction and overall experience with their environment, which takes part in shaping those beliefs. Accordingly, for me, a theory can be "contextual and generalizable" at the same time, which allows me to maintain both "subjectivity" and "objectivity" in my "reflections on research" and in "data collection and analysis" respectively (Shannon-Baker, 2015, p.325). Therefore, learners' beliefs and experiences are better investigated through a lens that allows researchers to make use of different methods to answer their research questions.

### **5.1-1 Mixed methods in this research**

As previously discussed in Chapter Three with regard to combining and employing the normative, metacognitive and contextual approaches in this research in order to investigate DU students' beliefs, I, in this section, explain and justify my decision for choosing mixed methods as my methodology through answering a valid question raised by McKim (2017, p. 202). He asked, "Is mixed methods going to add more value than a single method?" My answer to this question with reference to this research is yes, and this is because research methodology should adapt to the research questions and not the other way round (Salomon, 1991). Opting for mixed methods in this research has been triggered by my research questions, which address learners' beliefs about foreign/second language learning in a specific context, the context of war, as highlighted in the previous chapters. Therefore, it is necessary to stress that my decision to use mixed methods to address my research questions was led by my lived experience at Damascus University during the war and was also theoretically informed.

The overarching research question and sub-questions aim at uncovering the factors that have influenced DU students' attitudes towards learning English and at finding out if their beliefs about language learning have been affected by the war and consequently have affected their progress and success in their English classes and exams. Therefore, it is important to shed light on the students' overall mindset and behaviour in their language classrooms. Based on my personal experience as well as discussions held during meetings and seminars at Damascus University, I have developed my own understanding of Syrian university students. Thus, taking into account the working definition of language learning beliefs in this research, I can argue that DU students' preconceived notions and ideas, past language learning experiences and social surrounding and context are greatly influenced by the broader contemporary Arab culture. Gabillon (2005) maintained that learners' cultural beliefs, educational traditions and previous language learning experiences can

contribute to shaping their language learning beliefs. The modern Arab culture, from personal perspective, is infected with the tendency of overgeneralization, as evidenced in simple daily discourse about trivial and non-trivial matters. This situation might even have been exacerbated further as a result of the war in Syria.

For example, the students enter their classes with expectations, most likely affected by that culture as well as their previous language learning experiences, about how teaching and learning English should be and what should be taught. Learners' beliefs and insights into language learning are influenced by their society's overall perspective on foreign language learning (Piquemal and Renaud, 2006; Kassem, 2013). Therefore, "if beliefs about language learning are prevalent in the culture at-large, then foreign language teachers must consider that students bring these beliefs with them into the classroom" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 283). Based on personal experiences while I was teaching English at Damascus University during the war, some of the students' beliefs about and views on the nature of language learning were sometimes in stark contrast to my own and my colleagues' beliefs about language learning, which at times resulted in lack of self-confidence and dissatisfaction with their English language classes as well as distrust of their teachers. Their motivation for and attitudes towards learning English and towards their English classes may have been affected, thus contributing to their poor progress and achievement. This has triggered my interest in finding out about their language learning beliefs and whether their beliefs have affected their attitudes, progress and exam results during the war. However, this should not be seen as an indicator of their real language learning abilities.

I am, therefore, interested in looking into DU students' overall language learning belief system and/or any emerging belief patterns, i.e., gaining a macro perspective on their language learning beliefs. Together with this broad perspective, I am eager to explore their personal and individual experiences in relation to their beliefs and attitudes while they are interacting with their learning context and the general



surrounding environment. These reflect the main tenets of Dewey's (1938) concept of experience, namely continuity and interaction. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the students' interaction with their context could contribute to forming their beliefs and experiences, which could eventually affect their attitudes. Moreover, their learning experiences are ongoing, extending from past to present to future, and thus their experiences keep changing, which can influence their beliefs as well (Mercer, 2011).

Therefore, there is a need for a methodology that can take all of the above into account and cater to the requirements of this research. It has been argued that quantitative research allows researchers to reach a large sample size and makes generalisation of results possible. It also saves time and resources (Daniel, 2016). However, it is not capable of understanding the context and cannot capture the unheard voices of participants (Feilzer, 2010). Qualitative research is said to fill those gaps; nonetheless, it is stigmatised for its biases and the difficulty in generalising its findings and results to larger groups due to the small number of people taking part in a study (Rahman, 2017). Hence, mixing both can compensate for the weaknesses entrenched in each (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Accordingly, investigating learners' beliefs about language learning and capturing the unobservable and complex nature of these beliefs, as Barcelos (2003a) drawing on Dewey (1933) maintains, should involve a methodology that allows researchers to explore a) learners' experiences and actions, b) their interpretation of these experiences and c) the context that contributes to shaping these experiences given that it is essential to "look at the learning conditions in which learners find themselves" (Riley, 1997, p. 141). Considering the unpredictable and volatile nature of the current situation in Syria as well as lack of resources, answering my research questions requires the implementation of the three approaches to investigating learners' beliefs, discussed in Chapter Three, namely the normative, metacognitive and contextual, through using different methods and instruments to ensure that the required data are collected. Therefore, building on the theoretical framework

adopted in this research, I have opted for a combination of different methods in this research in order to answer my research questions.

## **5.2 Research design and methods**

In this section, I present the research design and methods. This research employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, explained in section 5.2-1, which involves a quantitative data collection and analysis phase followed by a qualitative phase building on the results of the quantitative analysis. In section 5.2-1-1, I present the quantitative phase. In section 5.2-1-2, I present the qualitative phase. In section 5.2-1-3, I briefly describe the mixed-methods phase, combining both types of data. Below are the overarching research question and sub-questions:

What are the factors that influence students' attitudes towards and approaches to learning English as a foreign language at Damascus University in the context of war in Syria?

- **RQ-i:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning, and what difficulties do they face while learning English at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-ii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics that successful foreign language learners should possess?
- **RQ-iii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general and at Damascus University in particular?
- **RQ-iv:** What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English, and how do they apply them at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-v:** What are the students' reasons for learning English in general, and what motivates them to learn English in the context of war?

- **RQ-vi:** Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally, and if so in what ways?

Before proceeding to explain the research design in detail, I would like to recapitulate that the above research questions, as noted in Chapter One, were the result of a combination of three important elements, namely my own observations including my lived experience during the war, discussions and conversations with colleagues and previous studies. In particular, the research sub-questions were refined further in relation to my methodology and research design. That is, one of the instruments that I utilised in this research to investigate DU students' language learning beliefs was Elaine Horwitz's BALLI survey. The BALLI themes and items, explained in detail below, shared lots in common with the original research sub-questions. Therefore, I decided to refine the sub-questions through incorporating them with the BALLI themes and items in order to find out more about the students' beliefs and attitudes as well as their struggle with their language learning during the war.

### **5.2-1 Explanatory sequential mixed methods design**

This research utilises an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative studies are conducted in two separate phases. During each phase, one type of data is collected (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). In this research, quantitative data collection and analysis were completed first, followed by the qualitative phase, which built on the quantitative results. Preliminary results from the quantitative phase helped in designing and refining the interview questions for the qualitative phase. After both phases were completed, the quantitative results and qualitative findings were brought together to answer the overarching research question, presented in Chapter Eight. To ensure the robustness of the quantitative results for building the qualitative study and in order to deal with the amount of time required to conduct both phases (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011; Creswell, 2014), I relied on early and thorough planning. I carried out each phase in a timely manner,

which allowed me to proactively engage with the quantitative results and determine how to proceed with the next step. For example, I preliminarily reviewed and reflected on the survey results in order to get a general sense of the areas that needed further investigation.

### **5.2-1-1 The quantitative phase**

In this section, I present the steps followed during the first phase of this research. Thus, in section (1), I discuss the BALLI survey in detail. In section (2), I discuss how the data were collected. In section (3), I explain the data analysis procedures.

#### **1. Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)**

In this section, I provide a detailed description of the BALLI survey, employed in this research, and explain my choice of selecting it for data collection. Before proceeding to introduce the BALLI, I would like to reiterate that one of the distinctive features of the normative approach to exploring learners' beliefs about language learning is the use of surveys and questionnaires as mentioned in Chapter Three, section 3.2-1-2. Despite some limitations associated with surveys, administering a survey in this research would allow me to deal with large numbers of respondents, develop an understanding at the macro level and consequently generalise my findings to a certain extent. Thus, the precision and clarity surveys provide regarding the percentages of students' beliefs would help me in deciding how prevalent and popular certain beliefs were among the students, which would eventually shed light on their overall language learning belief system(s).

However, designing a valid survey or questionnaire containing items that serve the purpose of obtaining the needed information from the participants of this research was not an available option for me due mainly to time constraints. Thus, using a reliable well-established instrument was the best option. In my search of such an instrument, I considered exploring other instruments in addition to the BALLI so as to use the right tool for the right job. These were the Kuntz-Rifkin Instrument (KRI)

developed by Kuntz (1996b), which was expanded from Horwitz's (1988) BALLI, Sakui and Gaies's (1999) 45-item questionnaire and Cotterall's (1999) 90-item questionnaire. All three surveys deal with learners' beliefs; however, they do not serve the intent of this research insofar as the BALLI does. The three questionnaires were mostly used by their authors only in their own studies mainly to validate the questionnaires themselves. Thus, they may not be as reliable as the BALLI, explained below.

As for the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) survey, despite being subjected to some criticisms, it is considered the most widely used questionnaire in investigating language learning beliefs (Barcelos, 2003a; Sugizaki, 2014; Dörnyei and Ryan, 2015; Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro, 2018). It was developed in the early 1980s by Elaine Horwitz at the University of Texas at Austin to identify beliefs about language learning. It has a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Horwitz (1985, 1987, 1988) utilised it in collecting data and information on the beliefs of students learning different languages in the USA, such as English as a second language, Spanish, French, German, etc. as well as beliefs of teachers of English as a second language and of other languages. Three BALLI surveys are in use today: one for second language learners (ESL), another for foreign language teachers and the last one for foreign language learners (EFL). Due to the adaptable nature of the BALLI and given that it measures a variety of individual learner beliefs and thus has no composite score, items could be modified, added or deleted based on the researcher's needs (Horwitz, 2012), which makes it a flexible and suitable instrument.

The BALLI used in this research is the EFL student second version (2012), which introduced 10 new items to the original 34-item EFL BALLI. Thus, it consists of 44 items subsumed under five major areas, which also contributed to my decision of opting for the BALLI in this research seeing that these areas are in line with my research sub-questions as explained earlier, which can help in answering the

research sub-questions and the overarching research question.

A great body of research has utilised the BALLI in exploring beliefs about foreign language learning. For more than three decades, an extensive number of studies have been carried out using the BALLI to assess learners' beliefs about foreign language learning (for example, Horwitz, 1985, 1987; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Truitt, 1995; Kuntz, 1996a; Yang, 1999; Wang, 2005; Diab, 2006; Hong, 2006; Nikitina and Furuoka, 2006; Shah *et al.*, 2007; Rieger, 2009; Turnovo, Stefanova and Shenkova, 2010; Daif-Allah, 2012; Al-Zubaidi and Sazalli, 2013; Kassem, 2013; Abdolazadeh and Nia, 2014; Cui, 2014; Tavassoli and Kasraeean, 2014; Lababidi, 2015; Akkaya and Ulum, 2018; Al-Malki and Javid, 2018). These studies have been applied in a number of different settings and contexts, such as Hungary, Taiwan, China, USA, Canada, Malaysia, Turkey, South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Lebanon. These studies and many others employing the BALLI suggest that the BALLI is regarded as a well-established and reliable research instrument by researchers investigating beliefs about language learning. Besides, to the best of my knowledge and as confirmed by Professor Elaine Horwitz, the creator of the BALLI, no study, to date, has employed the BALLI survey to look into learners' beliefs about language learning in the context of war. This makes this research unique as it is the first to do so, and thus it extends the scope of the field of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in relation to the surrounding context and environment.

It is also important to stress that I am not doing a replication of the BALLI in this research; rather, I am using it in a slightly different way, explained further below. Also, despite the fact that the BALLI five areas were designed in the 1980s to measure language learning beliefs, the descriptors proposed for these areas by Horwitz still hold true today as the majority, if not all, of the studies employing the BALLI, to date, embrace them with little or no modification. Therefore, I adopt Horwitz's (1988) descriptors of the BALLI areas in this research: 1) the area of the

difficulty of language learning dealing with the general difficulty of learning a foreign language, the specific difficulty of English, the relative difficulty of different language skills, and learners' expectations for success; 2) the area of foreign language aptitude addressing the general existence of specialised abilities for language learning and beliefs about the characteristics of successful/unsuccessful language learners and the issue of individual potential for achievement in language learning; 3) the area of the nature of language learning focusing on the role of cultural contact and language immersion in language achievement, whether the learner views language learning as different from other types of learning, the learner's conception of the focus of the language learning task and the students' perceptions of structural differences between their mother tongue and English; 4) the area of learning and communication strategies concerning learning and communication strategies that are probably the most directly related to a student's actual language learning practices; and 5) the area of motivation and expectations dealing with desires and opportunities the students associate with the learning of their target language.

- **Internal validity of the BALLI**

As seen above, the BALLI was determined to be the most widely used tool for measuring learners' language learning beliefs, and it, therefore, gained reliability through repeated administration (Rieger, 2009). Many researchers also examined the reliability of the BALLI, based on the internal consistency of its items (Cronbach's alpha coefficients) and reported overall satisfactory or acceptable reliability alphas, ranging from 0.59 to 0.71. According to Hong (2006), these alphas are not high compared to other instruments because of the nature of the BALLI. She explained that the BALLI items are interpreted individually based on the five-scales. Table 5.1 below provides examples of Cronbach's alphas for the BALLI in a number of previous studies.

Research	Cronbach's alpha
Kim-Yoon (2000)	0.71
Kunt (1997)	0.64
Truitt (1995)	0.61
Park (1995)	0.61
Yang (1992)	0.69

Table 5.1: Cronbach's alphas of previous studies

## 2. Data collection procedures

In this section, I explain the data collection procedures followed in this phase. To begin with, after permission was granted from Elaine Horwitz to modify and use her BALLI for this research (see Appendix A), four items were slightly modified to contextualise their meanings, which is the case in most, if not all, previous studies (for example, Vibulphol, 2004; Cui, 2014; Lababidi, 2015). Given the flexibility of the BALLI, as noted above, two more items were added and subsumed under a new survey area focusing on the impact of war on the students. The modified items are number 5, 32, 39 and 44. As for the added items, one is a Likert-scale item and the other is an open-ended question (see Appendix B). It is important to note that other researchers have also added open-ended questions to the BALLI to investigate their EFL/ESL learners' beliefs, such as Yang (1992) and Truitt (1995), among others. The procedures followed in analysing the open-ended question are explained in detail in section 5.2-1-2. The BALLI modifications are outlined in Table 5.2 below:

Original items	Modified items
5. <u>People from my country</u> are good at learning foreign languages.	5. <u>Syrians</u> are good at learning foreign languages.
32. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from <u>my native language</u> .	32. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from <u>Arabic</u> .
39. <u>People in my country</u> feel that it is important to speak English.	39. <u>Syrians</u> feel that it is important to speak English.
44. <u>State exit tests</u> are good tests of my English ability.	44. <u>Damascus University final English exams</u> are good tests of my English ability.
Added items	
45. The current circumstances in Syria have influenced my performance in the English classes and English exams at Damascus University.	



46. If your response to the above statement is A (strongly agree) or B (agree), could you please explain how in the box below?

Table 5.2: the modified and added survey items

After the modifications were made, I translated the survey into Arabic (see Appendix B). It is worth noting here that I hold a degree in translation/interpreting. In order to check that the translation was linguistically valid and completely meaningful to the respondents rather than being exact and literal translation of the original items, back translation, a method commonly used to ensure the validity of instruments (Tyupa, 2011), was employed. I also contacted one of my colleagues in Syria, who is a professional certified translator, to check my translation for cultural validation. He confirmed that the translated survey was valid and accurate translation and was true to the original English text. In order to pilot the survey, both the English and Arabic versions of the survey were tested with a group of sixteen DU students. The pilot study helped in testing the validity of the survey and the translation and in estimating the time required for data collection and analysis. Overall, their responses showed that the items in the modified BALLI functioned well as the respondents could interpret the statements in a way that was consistent with the intention of the survey. Allowing the students to complete either of the two versions was intended to ensure that they would not rely on guessing when/if encountering difficulties while filling out the English version of the survey. Consequently, this would ensure that the results from the survey were reliable.

In this research, I used Microsoft Forms, an online survey creator, to make the BALLI survey available online for the students to complete. The following steps explain how the survey respondents were contacted. First, permission was sought from and granted by the management team at Damascus University to post the final BALLI on the university's website and invite the students to complete it. By means of a concise introduction added to the survey, the respondents were briefly introduced to the purpose and nature of the research and were also assured that the survey was anonymous and their participation was voluntary, and that they could

refuse to take part without penalty. It was also stressed that the survey was not part of their assessment, and their responses would not affect their grades, and that they could withdraw their responses from the survey whenever they wished. In addition, the confidentiality and anonymity procedures were explained. Also, I provided my email address, so the respondents could contact me if they had any concerns about their participation and/or if they were interested in participating in the qualitative study. They were also invited, in addition to answering the open-ended question, to provide their email addresses in the same space allocated to the open-ended question (for the purpose of taking part in the second phase). The final English and Arabic versions were posted on the university website and students were invited to complete them by the management and their teachers.

- **The research sample**

The research sample consists of a cohort of first-year students from two departments at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Damascus University. I am specifically concerned with first-year students in this research given that their language learning beliefs together with their attitudes towards their English classes and exams might become entrenched in the subsequent years and thus they would do what they used to do in the previous years. Therefore, I aim to explore this problem early on because first-year experience in university is considered a significant transition phase for new students since it helps them to settle into university life and succeed in higher education (Morgan, 2013; Schreiber, Luescher and Moja, 2016) and plays an important role in shaping their attitudes (Tinto, 1993, cited in Hassel and Ridout, 2018; Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis, 2015). First-year experience, nonetheless, could cause significant distress and anxiety to many students and could be so stressful for them that their success would be affected (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000; Lowe and Cook, 2003; Soiferman, 2017; Hassel and Ridout, 2018; Lee, Ang and Dipolog-Ubanan, 2019). Accordingly, I have chosen first-year students to be my research sample. The names of the two departments were anonymised (Department

A and Department B) in order to protect the students' identities. The overall number of the students from both departments when data collection took place in late 2018 was 814 students (416 students enrolled at Department A and 398 enrolled at Department B). As pointed out in Chapter Two, I have not introduced any subject disciplinary differences since students from both departments come from the same background, i.e. human sciences, so they are similar enough. All the students from both departments were invited to complete the survey, which was posted in early December 2018 and closed in late-February 2019. Interestingly, there was a very high response: a total of 404 students completed the survey.

### 3. Data analysis procedures

This section presents the quantitative data analysis procedures followed in this research. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18.0 for Windows 7, was used for the descriptive analysis of the data from the BALLI survey. The first step was measuring the internal consistency of the BALLI in this research. Thus, the value of Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.75, which is more desirable as explained earlier with regard to previous studies employing the BALLI.

Next, basic demographic analysis was completed to provide information on the respondents on whom my findings were based. Thus, the majority of the respondents:

- were female students;
- aged 18-25;
- and did not achieve a pass mark in their final English exam in the previous semester.

Table 5.3 below presents detailed information on the survey respondents:

Result of final English exam				Age			
		Frequency	Percent			Frequency	Percent
<b>Valid</b>	Pass	112	27.7	<b>Valid</b>	18-25	262	64.9

					26-30	85	21.0
	Fail	292	72.3		31-35	28	6.9
					36-45	29	7.2
	Total	404	100.0		Total	404	100.0
<b>Gender</b>							
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>				
<b>Valid</b>	Male	134	33.2				
	Female	270	66.8				
	Total	404	100.0				

Table 5.3: information on the survey respondents

As for the descriptive analysis, overall frequency (%) on each BALLI area and item and the means and standard deviations were calculated in order to:

- (1) summarise the students' responses to the BALLI items;
- (2) present the distribution of their responses to the BALLI items;
- (3) gain a general understanding of their overall language learning belief system;
- (4) explore how the respondents differed in their beliefs about language learning;
- (5) and have an initial understanding of the respondents' view on the influence of war, if any, on their learning experience and success.

Below are the research sub-questions together with the BALLI survey items, aligned with each of them, followed by the importance of each of the sub-questions in relation to addressing the overarching research question and the data analysis procedures applied. The first five research sub-questions are based in part on and informed by Horwitz's (1988) five BALLI areas respectively. These are 1) the difficulty of language learning; 2) foreign language aptitude; 3) the nature of language learning; 4) learning and communication strategies; and 5) motivations and expectations. The BALLI areas relate closely to the variables this research is investigating along with DU students' beliefs about language learning, namely language learning strategies, motivation for foreign language learning and foreign language anxiety, discussed in Chapters Three and Four, which contributed to my

choice of the BALLI, as noted earlier.

<b>RQ-i</b>	What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning, and what difficulties do they face while learning English at Damascus University in the context of war?
<b>BALLI items</b>	<p><b>3.</b> Some languages are easier to learn than others.</p> <p><b>4.</b> English is: 1. a very difficult language. 2. a difficult language. 3. a language of medium difficulty. 4. an easy language. 5. a very easy language.</p> <p><b>6.</b> I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.</p> <p><b>15.</b> If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take for them to learn that language very well? A. less than a year. B. 1–2 years. C. 3–5 years. D. 5–10 years. E. You can't learn a language in one hour a day.</p> <p><b>27.</b> It is easier to speak than understand English.</p> <p><b>35.</b> It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.</p>

Table 5.4: BALLI items under RQ-i

- **Importance**

Learners' perception of the difficulty of the target language is important for their development given that their views can influence their expectations and commitment towards learning that language (Horwitz, 1988). If learners overestimate its difficulty level, this can create a cognitive and a psychological barrier impeding their progress and resulting in frustration (Maslamani, 2007, cited in Lababidi, 2015). On the other hand, believing that a language to be quite easy to learn can confuse students when their learning is at some point delayed (Horwitz, 1988). Thus, perceiving learning a foreign language as an easy or a difficult task can (positively or negatively) affect learners' attitudes towards this language and the way they approach it as explained in Chapter Three. Dealing with the area of the difficulty of language learning in this research is important as the students might be facing difficulties while learning the target language during the war. This can be associated with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience and its active and passive elements. Thus, rating the difficulty level of English can be seen as the *trying* aspect on the part of the students, while facing problems in learning English based on their rating can be viewed as the *undergoing* aspect of their learning experience.

- **Analysis**

RQ-i, a twofold research sub-question, is in line with the BALLI area of the difficulty of language learning. It is addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis of "What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning?" preconceived notions, adopted from Horwitz (1988) as explained in Chapter Three, are defined in this research as ideas and prejudices about learning the target language that learners have acquired and bring along to their classes, which could influence their language learning. For this sub-question, I am measuring 'preconceived notions' quantitatively by employing the BALLI items under the area of the difficulty of language learning. These items, used as descriptors in this research, measure the general difficulty of learning a foreign language (item 3), the specific difficulty of English (item 4), the relative difficulty of different language skills (items 27 and 35), and learners' expectations for success (item 6). Item 15 measures time requirement to master the English language. The quantitative data analysis procedures include descriptive analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to each BALLI item under this sub-question. This shows the difficulty of learning the target language during the war and strains on the students' learning.

<b>RQ-ii</b>	What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics that successful foreign language learners should possess?
<b>BALLI items</b>	<b>1.</b> It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language. <b>2.</b> Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages. <b>5.</b> Syrians are good at learning foreign languages. <b>10.</b> It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. <b>16.</b> I have a special ability for learning foreign languages. <b>24.</b> Women are better than men at learning foreign languages. <b>42.</b> Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.

	<p><b>41.</b> People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.</p> <p><b>38.</b> People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.</p>
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Table 5.5: BALLI items under RQ-ii

- **Importance**

Foreign language aptitude generally refers to certain talents associated with foreign language learning (Carroll, 1981) and is viewed as multiple sets of abilities that interact with learners' attitudes, motivation, learning styles and context (Wen, 2012). When foreign language learners believe that certain personal characteristics and talents should be in place as a prerequisite for foreign language learning, this can easily affect their attitudes towards this language and the way they approach it, especially if they think they do not possess any of these special characteristics as explained in Chapter Three. It is important to deal with foreign language aptitude to see whether DU students believe in its existence, which might lead them to view learning the target language as a difficult task, which relates to the negative element and the *undergoing* part of their experiences as explained above.

- **Analysis**

RQ-ii is in line with the BALLI area of foreign language aptitude. It is mainly addressed quantitatively. For the quantitative analysis of this sub-question, preconceived notions, adopted from Horwitz (1988) as discussed in Chapter Three, are defined in this research as ideas and prejudices about learning the target language that learners have acquired and bring along to their classes, which could influence their language learning. Foreign language aptitude is defined as the specialised characteristics and talents that successful foreign language learners should possess (Horwitz, 1988). For this sub-question, I am measuring 'preconceived notions' quantitatively by employing the BALLI items under the area of foreign language aptitude. These items, used as descriptors in this research, measure the concept of special abilities for language learning (items 2, 5, 10, 16 and 42) and the

characteristics of potentially successful language learners (items 1, 24, 38 and 41). The quantitative data analysis procedures include descriptive analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to each BALLI item under this sub-question. This shows how the students perceive and view their own and others' ability to learn English and what talents and abilities they believe they possess or lack.

<b>RQ-iii</b>	What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general and at Damascus University in particular?
<b>BALLI items</b>	<p><b>8.</b> It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.</p> <p><b>11.</b> It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.</p> <p><b>13.</b> In order to speak English, you have to think in English.</p> <p><b>17.</b> The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary words.</p> <p><b>19.</b> It is better to have teachers who are native-speakers of English.</p> <p><b>22.</b> The most important part of learning English is learning the grammar.</p> <p><b>32.</b> The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Arabic.</p> <p><b>30.</b> Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.</p> <p><b>29.</b> I can learn a lot from non-native English teachers.</p>

Table 5.6: BALLI items under RQ-iii

- **Importance**

The way learners believe that foreign language teaching and learning should occur, what elements are the most important in foreign language learning and which teaching/learning methods are most effective can influence their attitudes towards the target language and the way they approach it (Gabillon, 2005). These ideas contribute to shaping learners' perceptions of foreign language learning in addition to influencing their performance in the classroom (Barcelos, 2000). They also have the potential to affect their motivation to learn and their perceptions of the difficulty of the target language (Inozu, 2011). Consequently, learners' beliefs about the nature of language learning can affect their learning experience as well as the final product of learning. Therefore, dealing with the nature of language learning is important as it is at the heart of their beliefs and preconceived ideas about language learning, and it



reflects their learning experiences and their interaction with their learning context and general surroundings.

- **Analysis**

RQ-iii, a twofold research sub-question, is in line with the BALLI area of the nature of language learning. It is addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis of "What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general?" preconceived notions, adopted from Horwitz (1988) as discussed in Chapter Three, are defined in this research as ideas and prejudices about learning the target language that learners have acquired and bring along to their classes, which could influence their language learning. For this sub-question, I am measuring 'preconceived notions' quantitatively by employing the BALLI items under the area of the nature of language learning. These items, used as descriptors in this research, measure the role of cultural contact and language immersion in language achievement (items 8, 11, 13, 19 and 29), whether the learner views language learning as different from other types of learning (item 30) and the roles of vocabulary learning, grammar and translation in learning English (17, 22 and 32). The quantitative data analysis procedures include descriptive analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to each BALLI item under this sub-question. This shows whether the students hold any preconceived ideas about certain language learning elements or skills which could be facilitative or debilitating to language learning according to theories of foreign/second language learning.

<b>RQ-iv</b>	What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English, and how do they apply them at Damascus University in the context of war?
<b>BALLI items</b>	7. It is important to speak English with an excellent accent. 9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly. 12. I enjoy practicing English with the people I meet.

	<p><b>14.</b> It's ok to guess if you don't know a word in English.</p> <p><b>18.</b> It is a good idea to practice speaking with other people who are learning English.</p> <p><b>21.</b> If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.</p> <p><b>23.</b> It is important to practice with multi-media.</p> <p><b>26.</b> I can learn a lot of from group activities with other students in my English class.</p> <p><b>31.</b> It is possible to learn English on your own without a teacher or a class.</p> <p><b>33.</b> Students and teachers should only speak English during English classes.</p> <p><b>34.</b> I can find a lot of useful materials to practice English on the Internet.</p> <p><b>36.</b> I have to spend so much time preparing for big English tests, that I don't have time to actually learn English.</p> <p><b>37.</b> It is important to speak English like a native speaker.</p> <p><b>43.</b> I feel timid speaking English with other people.</p> <p><b>44.</b> Damascus University final exams are good tests of my English ability.</p>
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Table 5.7: BALLI items under RQ-iv

- **Importance**

The strategies and tactics that learners utilise in order to learn and communicate in the target language constitute a significant part of the approaches they adopt for that purpose. This is because language learning strategies were found to be interacting in an intricate fashion with other constructs, including both cognitive and affective constructs such as beliefs, personal styles motivation, aptitude, attitudes and anxiety (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993). Also, it is crucial to pay attention to language learning strategies in relation to learners' beliefs so as to better understand how learners approach their foreign language learning (Horwitz, 1999) and how they use their metacognitive knowledge highlighting their autonomy and experiences (Wenden, 1986, 1998). Therefore, dealing with learning strategies is important to this research, which sheds light on how DU students interact with their learning context using those strategies as tools during their learning experience in the context of war.

- **Analysis**

RQ-iv, a twofold research sub-question, is in line with the BALLI area of learning and communication strategies. It is addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

For the quantitative analysis of "What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English?" learning strategies are defined as "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information" and "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situation" (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). For this sub-question, I am measuring 'learning and communicating in English' quantitatively by employing the BALLI items under the area of the learning and communication strategies. These items, used as descriptors in this research, measure learning and communication strategies that are the most directly related to a student's actual language learning practices and experiences. Items 12, 18, 23, 26, 31, 34, 36 and 44 measure their learning strategies, while items 7, 9, 14, 21, 33, 37 and 43 measure their communication strategies. Therefore, the quantitative data analysis procedures include statistical analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to each BALLI item under this sub-question. This can help in revealing what techniques they employed while learning and communicating in English and what sources they relied on in their learning, which would shed light on their overall language learning experience during the war.

<b>RQ-v</b>	What are the students' reasons for learning English in general, and what motivates them to learn English in the context of war?
<b>BALLI items</b>	<p><b>20.</b> If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.</p> <p><b>25.</b> I want to speak English well.</p> <p><b>28.</b> I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers.</p> <p><b>40.</b> I would like to have English-speaking friends.</p> <p><b>39.</b> Syrians feel that it is important to speak English.</p>

Table 5.8: BALLI items under RQ-v

- **Importance**

Investigating learners' motivation and reasons for learning English is important to this research given that the students' English exam results as shown in Chapter One

were disappointing. DU students might have lacked the motivation and desire needed to learn English due to the war, which could have affected their achievement since attaining success in foreign language learning relies on learners' beliefs as well as other key individual differences, such as anxiety, language aptitude, self-esteem, creativity and motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). In particular, motivation is considered an important factor for success in language learning since motivated language learners are more likely to increase their learning and perform well (Gardner, 1985; Al-Ghamdi, 2014). Accordingly, whether learners are (intrinsically or extrinsically) motivated to learn a foreign language or not can have effects on their attitudes towards this language and the way they approach it as explained in Chapter Four. Therefore, it is important to shed light on DU students' motivation as high motivation could represent the positive and active element of their experiences, while low motivation, which might be accompanied with anxiety, could represent the opposite aspect of their experience.

#### - **Analysis**

RQ-v, a twofold research sub-question, is in line with the BALLI area of motivations and expectations. It is addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For the quantitative analysis of "What are the students' reasons for learning English in general?" these reasons include their integrative/intrinsic and instrumental/extrinsic motivations. For this sub-question, I am measuring 'the students' reasons for learning English' quantitatively by employing the BALLI items under the area of motivations and expectations. These items, used as descriptors in this research, measure, according to Horwitz (1988), the desires and opportunities the students associate with the learning of their target language. Thus, item 25 measures individual expectations about learning English, while item 39 measures the importance of English learning for Syrian people. Items 20, 28 and 40 measure individual motivation in learning English. Therefore, the quantitative data analysis procedures include descriptive analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency

and percentage of the respondents' answers to each BALLI item under this sub-question. This can help in revealing whether the students are motivated to learn English and the type of motivation they have, integrative or instrumental or both.

<b>RQ-vi</b>	Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally, and if so in what ways?
<b>BALLI items</b>	<p><b>45.</b> The current circumstances in Syria have influenced my performance in the English classes and English exams at Damascus University.</p> <p><b>46.</b> If your response to the above statement is A (Strongly agree) or B (Agree), could you please explain how in the box below?</p>

Table 5.9: BALLI items under RQ-vi

- **Importance**

Given the significance attached to learners' context and the interplay between individuals and their context in this research, exploring whether the war has influenced DU students' preconceived ideas and beliefs about language learning is critical since it sheds light on their experiences and interaction with their environment during the war. This can help me to gain a better understanding of how the surrounding context might have affected their beliefs and attitudes and the way they would approach learning the target language based on their experiences with their context, and of whether that made them modify their beliefs, attitudes or habits. This helps in highlighting the students' interaction with their learning context as well as the continuity of their learning experiences, which is in line with Dewey's (1938) concept of experience.

- **Analysis**

RQ-vi, a twofold research sub-question, is in line with the area of the impact of war which was added to the BALLI survey as explained previously. It is addressed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative analysis addresses: "Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally?" For the quantitative analysis, preconceived notions, adopted from

Horwitz (1988), are defined in this research as ideas and prejudices about learning the target language that learners have acquired and bring along to their classes, which could influence their language learning. For this sub-question, I am measuring 'preconceived notions' quantitatively by employing the survey Likert-scale item (item 45) under the area of the impact of war. This item, used as a descriptor in this research, addresses the students' opinions regarding the effects of war on them and their studies. Thus, the quantitative data analysis procedures of item 45 include descriptive analysis, in particular the calculation of the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to this item. This provides information on the students' views on their experiences of learning English at Damascus University during the war.

- **Reporting the survey results**

Chapter Six presents the quantitative results systematically with respect to each of the research sub-questions. The results are presented in tables in relation to each of the research sub-questions. Below each table, a commentary on the results is provided to highlight all important trends and/or differences. At the end of each section, a brief summary of the results is provided.

Although all the results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Chapter Six, as just explained, indicatively one finding in particular is reported here to further illustrate the justification for deploying a mixed-methods approach in this research. The results of the quantitative analysis of item 45 showed that the majority of the respondents (77.4%) reported that the current unrest in Syria affected their performance in class and their English exams, which confirms that doing this research is worthwhile. Therefore, "when a large-scale survey has revealed certain marked and significant patterns of responses, it is often helpful to fill out the meaning of those patterns through in-depth study using qualitative methods" (Patton, 1990, p. 132). Accordingly, the respondents' answers to this item, acting as the door to open into the qualitative study, suggest that there is a story that I should be

curious about exploring, which requires a second phase to address it in detail. This is why a mixed-methods approach is employed in this research. Item 46, the open-ended question, is presented in the next section which deals with the qualitative phase in this research.

### **5.2-1-2 The qualitative phase**

In this section, I present the steps followed during the second phase of this research. Thus, in section (1), I discuss the semi-structured interviews together with the survey open-ended question, in addition to the interview schedule and the Skype interviews. In section (2), I discuss how the data were collected. In section (3), I explain the data analysis procedures.

#### **1. Semi-structured interviews**

In order to explore the story that the survey respondents seemed to wish to tell as suggested above by the high rate of their responses to item 45, and relying on their responses to the full survey, including the open-ended question, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in the qualitative study in this research so as to provide meaningful details and make more sense out of their responses (Patton, 1990). As explained in Chapter Three, open-ended questionnaires can be used as a data collection instrument within the contextual approach. Therefore, adding an open-ended question to the survey in this research was intended to give my respondents the chance to respond freely and talk about their language learning beliefs and experiences in the context of war in case they wished to provide information that was not captured by the survey items. This would give me the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the context and DU students' experiences from a potential large number of respondents. The responses to the open-ended question contributed to designing my interview schedule, discussed below.

As for semi-structured interviews, they are considered one of the most important

instruments used to collect data and verbal accounts within both the metacognitive approach and the contextual approach. In spite of some limitations, as explained in Chapter Three, semi-structured interviews would help me to explore the students' beliefs, metacognitive knowledge, self-directed language learning and autonomy as part of their language learning experiences, which is at the heart of the metacognitive approach. Semi-structured interviews would also allow me to find out about the students' beliefs and experiences and their interaction with their environment, which is integral to the contextual approach. Thus, concurring with Silverman (2013, p.48), who contends that "[m]uch needs to be done if qualitative research is not to be just a set of techniques but an analytic project", I employed semi-structured interviews with the intention of reaching an analytic understanding of the students' beliefs and experiences with regard to learning English as a foreign language and their attitudes towards English in the context of war.

Interviews are viewed as the natural means used to understand people's thoughts, ideas and emotions (Silverman, 2013). They offer the participants the chance to "discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 347), i.e., based on their individual subjective truths, which is in agreement with the working definition of beliefs in this research. Furthermore, crucial information can be derived when studying complex phenomena through listening to the participants' voices and experiences (Yan and Horwitz, 2008). In particular, semi-structured interviews, as van Teijlingen (2014, p.21) maintains, are considered an adequate tool for exploring beliefs, values, attitudes and motivation especially in "sensitive areas", which is in line with my research questions and theoretical framework. Thus, the interviews in this research would provide direct information about the participants' beliefs and *emic* perspectives, which would help in capturing their "indigenous meanings of real-world events" (Yin, 2011, p.11), which in this research would be associated with their experiences and beliefs about language learning in the context of war.



- **Interview schedule**

The interview questions in this research were primarily inquiries into the factors that influenced the students' beliefs and attitudes towards learning a foreign language in the context of war. So, the themes generated from the qualitative analysis of (a total of 31) DU students' responses to the survey open-ended question, item 46, were used as the gateway between the quantitative study and the qualitative study in order to set up the interview questions. Applying manual thematic analysis, explained below, to item 46 has brought to light a number of themes (reported in detail in Chapter Seven). These themes have highlighted four major areas of investigation that were explored through the interviews. Thus, the interview questions in this research were tailored based on the research questions, the results of the quantitative analysis of the BALLI items and the qualitative analysis of item 46. The four major areas encompass guiding questions, making up the general structure of the final interview schedule (see Appendix C). Probing questions were provided when needed. The table below demonstrates how the themes from the open-ended question relate to the generated four major areas:

<b>Themes generated from item 46</b>	<b>Major areas</b>
Changing priorities	1. The participant's experience of learning English at Damascus University, including their English language classes and English exams in the context of war
Disruptions and obstacles (i.e. not sitting exams, dropping out, etc.)	
Lack of human resources (i.e. teacher shortages, unqualified teachers, insufficient contact hours)	
Feelings (i.e. fear and tension)	2. The different factors that the participant thinks have affected their achievements and performance in the English
Lack of public services and utilities (i.e. power outages, lack of internet access, lack of transport)	

	classes
Lack of human resources (i.e. teacher shortages, unqualified teachers)	
Disruptions and obstacles (i.e. dropping out)	
Motivation for learning English (low morale)	
Changing beliefs and priorities (i.e. survival priorities)	
Lack of public services and utilities	3. How the participant studies English (the nature of language learning) and what strategies or techniques, if any, they utilise to study English
Disruptions and obstacles	
Lack of human resources	
Changing priorities	
Language practice	
Language aptitude	
Motivation for learning English	4. The participant's motivation for foreign language learning at Damascus University in the context of war
Disruptions and obstacles	
Changing beliefs and priorities	

Table 5.10: themes from the survey open-ended question

- **Skype interviews**

My personal preference in this research was to collect data face-to-face in Syria given that I am a personable person. Through the ethics process, however, this was revised to Skype interviews as my research questions and methodology did not require me to be present in the country, which has been undergoing unrest for nine years (see ethics form, Appendix D). Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that significant research benefits can be gained as a consequence of using online interviews particularly where the research population is difficult to access or the topic being explored is sensitive (Coomber, 1997), which is the case in this research and this phase in particular. VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies (such

as Skype and FaceTime) can provide researchers with the ability to interview participants using voice and video via a synchronous (real-time) connection (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016). Furthermore, some participants are more likely to open up during a Skype interview as they can stay in their comfort zones of their choice providing them with a sense of safety, which, as a result, might allow for gaining more detailed information (Hanna, 2012; Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2012). In this research, the Skype interviews were conducted after agreeing with each of the participants on a specific date and time that suited them best taking into account power cuts and lack of internet access in Syria.

## **2. Data collection procedures**

It is important to note that recruiting my interview participants took more than five months, extending from early April 2019 to late September 2019, which, based on my experience during the war, was expected as students were reluctant to be audio recorded while talking about their experiences during the war. For more information on the potential risks in this research, see the ethics form (Appendix D). To begin with, regarding the number of the interview participants, I would like to echo Marshal *et al.* (2013), who contend that qualitative researchers hardly give a definite justification for the sample sizes of qualitative interviews. This is because it is impossible to determine the exact number of interview participants from the onset of a research project (Baker and Edwards, 2012) since the number will change from day to day as the researcher will learn more and reconsider their ideas and plans (Becker, 2012). Nonetheless, there are some attempts aiming at least to establish some guidelines that can direct the sampling process and help in specifying approximate sample sizes.

Specifying the sample size is mainly dependent on the research questions, in addition to the underpinning philosophy, the type of analysis and practical considerations (Mason, 2010; Bryman, 2012). Adler and Adler (2012) argue that the number of interview participants can range from one to more than a hundred, but

due to different factors, including, for example, the timescale of the research, the difficulty of gaining access to the target population and the difficulty of transcription, the best sample size ranges from 12 to 60. Marshal *et al.* (2013) also propose a number of ways in an attempt to decide on a specific number of participants; these include recommendations by qualitative researchers as well as previous studies with similar research design and problems. In addition, Patton (1990) points out that for planning reasons the researcher can specify a minimum expected sample size. Hence, based on my research questions and the objectives of my research and taking into account the context of war and based on previous studies investigating learners' beliefs about language learning as well as recommendations by qualitative researchers, the number that I opted for was (a minimum of) 10.

With regard to the type of sampling, as illustrated earlier, a space was provided in the survey to allow the students to answer the open-ended question and/or to add their contact details if they were interested in taking part in the qualitative study of this research. A total of 47 students of those who participated in the BALLI survey expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews and provided their email addresses. Due to DU students' anticipated reluctance to be interviewed and audio-recorded as mentioned above, I used two sampling strategies, namely snowball sampling, which was my main strategy, and direct contact with potential participants, which was my backup strategy, explained below. As for snowball respondent-driven sampling, it is where potential research participants help in recruiting other participants, from amongst their friends, colleagues, classmates or family members, to take part in research (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). It is used as potential participants are hard to locate or reach due to various reasons. For example, snowball sampling is recommended to be used in research in the Middle East due to difficulties in reaching specific populations and the "culture of suspicion" (Clark, 2006, p.418). It is, therefore, considered an effective tool in conflict-ridden settings (Tracy, 2013).

During the final stages of the BALLI survey data analysis, three students contacted me and expressed their interest in participating in the research. After agreeing with them on suitable dates and times, I conducted the pilot interviews via Skype. During each of the interviews, lasting between 50 to 60 minutes, I used all the questions and probes in my interview schedule, which helped me to refine my wording and to understand what other probing questions might be needed. As a result, the wording of a few statements was slightly modified. The interview questions served the purpose of my research, which is why I decided to include these pilot interviews in my sample size as they worked really well and fit appropriately coming from the same target population.

Aiming to recruit enough participants for the qualitative phase, I employed the snowball sampling strategy given the unrest in Syria. At the same time, all the students who provided their email addresses were sent invitations to take part in the research in hopes of maximising participation in the research. To this end, the three above participants were contacted again and asked to help in recruiting participants from among their classmates. As a result, three snowballs were employed, and each of the three participants succeeded in recruiting two more participants. I decided to take snowballing as far as I could. So, each of the new participants was also contacted to recruit more participants; however, they did not succeed in doing so. Consequently, I had six participants recruited through snowball sampling.

Unfortunately, I received no responses from the survey respondents. Therefore, I sent them another invitation and only three students responded to my interview request. However, only two completed their interviews as the third changed her mind during the interview and asked if she could withdraw from the research, so I consented to her request and destroyed her data immediately. The other two were also asked to recruit more participants; however, they did not succeed in doing so. Therefore, through employing two sampling strategies, namely snowballing and direct contact, I got eight participants. The total number of the participants including

the pilot ones amounted to eleven participants.

All the interview participants were emailed a consent form both in Arabic and English detailing what their participation involved (see Appendix E). They were asked to read it carefully, sign it and email it back to me in advance of their in-depth interviews. I dedicated the first few minutes of each interview to making sure that the participants had read the consent form. I also asked if they had any questions or inquiries about the interviews or the research in general. As is the case with the survey, the participants were given the choice to be interviewed either in Arabic or in English in order for the questions to be comprehensible for them. They were also permitted to code-switch (to alternate between Arabic and English) whenever they felt they needed to during the interview. Allowing the interviewees to use Arabic or to code-switch was deliberate as I aimed to capture any important information emerging from the interviews which ensured that the interview questions served the purpose they were designed for. During each interview, lasting between 50 to 60 minutes, I encouraged my interviewees to tell their stories and talk about their experiences through the ongoing discussion where one thing led to another and through using prompts as recommended by Crouch and McKenzie (2006). Due to the sensitive nature of my research set in the context of war, I was solely responsible for transcribing and translating the interviews with no third parties involved (see Appendix F for a sample transcribed interview). Also, the participants' names were anonymised through using pseudonyms. Information on the participants is provided below.

- **Information on the interview participants**

This section provides basic information on the eleven interview participants. The majority of the participants:

- were females;
- chose to be interviewed in English;

- and did not achieve a pass mark in their final English exam.

Table 5.11 below provides more details on each participant.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Interview language</b>	<b>Exam result</b>
Fida	Male	English	Passed
Hekmat	Female	Arabic	Passed
Ismat	Female	Arabic	Did not achieve a pass mark
Majd	Female	Arabic	Did not achieve a pass mark
Najah	Female	English	Passed
Nidal	Male	English	Did not achieve a pass mark
Nihad	Female	Arabic	Did not achieve a pass mark
Nour	Male	English	Did not achieve a pass mark
Sabah	Male	English	Passed
Salam	Male	English	Passed
Saria	Female	English	Did not achieve a pass mark

Table 5.11: information on the interview participants

The table above remarkably demonstrates that the majority of the participants chose to speak in English during their interviews, including some who did not pass the English exam. A possible explanation for this could be related to the cultural power of the English language in Syria as well as the students' differing motivations for practising spoken English. Generally speaking, English has become a very popular language in Syria even during the war, especially among young people most likely as a result of the strong impact and growing prevalence of social media which is primarily dominated by English. From personal experience, whether before or during the war in Syria, university students and young people in general have always been keen on taking the chance of practising their spoken English with foreigners, particularly native speakers of English from the UK and the USA. For them, it looks trendy and vogueish to speak a foreign language, English in particular. Furthermore, the students could be motivated to speak English for various reasons, such as employment, programme requirements and travel, among others. Therefore, deciding to use English during the interviews could be seen by them as a great opportunity to practise their spoken English given that they would not have much

chance to do so during the war.

It should be made clear here that if the students do not do well in their exams, it does not necessarily mean that they do not want to learn English. Thus, the exam results should not be viewed as an indicator of the students' belief in their ability to speak English. Nonetheless, the exam results could imply that there is a certain problem, which needs thorough investigation.

### **3. Data analysis procedures**

It is worth noting before proceeding that the participants responded to the interview questions with varying degrees of detail although probing questions were asked when necessary and where appropriate. Some of the participants, nonetheless, were reluctant to answer certain questions. To begin with, I would like to stress that data "analysis and interpretation will reflect the constructs, concepts, language, models, and theories that structured the study in the first place" (Merriam, 1998, p.48). Accordingly, I made use of prescribed coding methods in my data analysis for the sake of clarity and flexibility (Saldana, 2015). I, therefore, employed thematic analysis, given its flexibility (Lababidi, 2015). Thematic analysis is defined as "the method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns with data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It involves identifying passages that share a common theme allowing researchers to classify the text into categories and hence establish a framework of thematic ideas about the text (Gibbs, 2007). With regard to this research, I was in quest of any emerging or new themes during the coding process. Therefore, I relied on the analysis of the survey results and the themes generated from the qualitative analysis of item 46 as my basis and then looked for additional ones. In this research, I adopted and applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis in analysing my qualitative data. The steps are outlined below along with the pre-analysis procedures:

#### *Pre-analysis procedures*



- transcribing the interviews;
- re-contacting the participants via Skype for member checking in order to review and confirm the accuracy of the content and information of their interviews;
- importing the interview transcripts into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, to start the qualitative data analysis;

*Thematic analysis steps*

- in-depth and intensive reading and rereading through the interview transcripts in order to familiarise myself with the data;
- coding the data in a systematic manner across the entire data set;
- looking for potential themes through combining codes under relevant themes;
- reviewing themes and checking whether the themes worked in relation to the coded quotes;
- defining and renaming themes;
- and reporting the findings.

Initially, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendation and using NVivo coding features, I coded as many potential patterns and themes as possible. Thus, I started with nearly 40 themes and ended up with six overarching themes subsuming several categories and subcategories. As expected, the interview themes were closely related to the BALLI areas (see Table 5.12 below) since the interviews were conducted purposefully relying on the results of the survey analysis. However, it is important to point out that although there are similarities between the survey areas and the themes generated from the interviews, a new theme, namely learner autonomy, emerged from the interviews as an overarching theme given the importance of this topic in this research.

<b>The survey areas</b>	<b>Themes generated from the interviews</b>
The difficulty of language learning	Difficulty of learning English at DU

Foreign language aptitude	Learner autonomy
The nature of language learning	Nature of the English language learning process
Learning and communication strategies	Language learning strategies
Motivations and expectations	Motivation to learn English
The impact of war	Impact of war

Table 5.12: survey areas and interview themes

It is important to emphasise that the interview themes are specific to my participants from Damascus University and are treated in this chapter as research instruments. Each of the tables below explains how the sub-categories and/or categories were combined to form a sub-theme and/or an overarching theme. The tables also clarify the parameters that I designed and employed to determine what features of my data each category or sub-category captures.

**Theme one:** difficulty of learning English at Damascus University

This theme corresponds to the survey area of language learning difficulty. It helps in answering RQ-i qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. Under this theme, the participants shed light on the difficulties they encountered while dealing with specific language skills, which contributes to the overall theme of difficulty of learning English at Damascus University. They explained how dealing with these skills could possibly pose some challenges to them, representing the downside of their learning experiences particularly in the context of war. The table below clarifies the reporting process of the qualitative results:

Parameters	Category	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the difficulties they faced while speaking English. For example: " <i>When I want to speak English, I feel that I'm short of words.</i> " Fida	Difficulties in speaking	Difficulty of learning English at Damascus University
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants faced difficulties pertaining to vocabulary in reading	Difficulties related to vocabulary in reading texts	

passages. For example: " <i>There are lots of vocabulary words that I don't know and I can't even read.</i> " Majd		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants faced difficulties in using English grammar rules. For example: " <i>I face some difficult in grammar [sic] ... I didn't practise very good about this grammar [sic].</i> " Salam	Difficulties in using grammar	

Table 5.13: interview theme one

**Theme two:** learner autonomy

This is an emerging interview theme, which does not correspond to any of the survey areas per se. It is, however, consistent with most of the survey areas. It contributes to answering the overarching research question and sub-questions. As seen in the previous chapters, learner autonomy is related to all of the constructs dealt with in this research, namely beliefs, language learning strategies, motivation and anxiety. And thus through promoting learner autonomy, "motivation can be maintained, anxiety decreased or at least controlled, and inappropriate learning strategies, based on inaccurate beliefs about language learning, avoided" (Horwitz, 1995, p. 577), which is why I opted for classifying learner autonomy as an overarching theme rather than a category under another theme. Under this theme, the interview participants talked about how they persevered in the face of and coped with difficulties during the war in Syria while studying and learning at Damascus University, which represents the active element of their learning experiences during their interaction with their learning environment. This theme emphasises how learners take charge of their own learning since foreign language learning is shifting towards learner-centred approaches (Little, 1991). It stresses the participants' metacognitive knowledge and self-directed language learning as key elements in assisting learners to become autonomous. It is also worth noting that autonomy can reinforce and foster intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000), as demonstrated in Chapter Four.

Parameters	Category	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about how resilient they were in the face of the unrest in Syria which affected their studies. For example: " <i>There are some issues, such as bombs and explosions. But this made us more determined to learn English.</i> " Ismat	Learner's resilience	Learner autonomy
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants explained how they relied on themselves in coping with the lack of resources at Damascus University with regard to English language learning. For example: " <i>We should work hard to develop ourselves because the university doesn't provide us with enough information.</i> " Salam	Self-reliance	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants showed language awareness manifested in their explicit knowledge about language learning. For example: " <i>I may introduce new activities that can help the students improve their spoken English, such as a drama club</i> " Saria	Learner's language awareness	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants gave an evaluation of their current level of English from their own perspectives: " <i>I think I'm in average [sic].</i> " Nidal	Self-assessment	

Table 5.14: interview theme two

**Theme three:** nature of the English language learning process

This theme is in line with the survey area of the nature of language learning. It helps in answering RQ-iii qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. Under this theme, the participants expressed their views and opinions on the importance of different language skills in foreign language learning. They also evaluated the English language teaching methods at Damascus University,

depending on comparisons they drew between their past language learning experiences and their present experiences, which represents the continuity of their experience. Their views and opinions make up the sub-categories and categories under this theme.

Parameters	Sub-category	Category	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants stated that listening was the most important language skill in learning a foreign language. For example: " <i>The most important thing ... um, it was listening [sic].</i> " Sabah	Listening is most important	Main language skills	Nature of the English language learning process
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants stated that speaking (pronunciation) was the most important language skill in learning a foreign language. For example: " <i>I think speaking is the most important skills you must to have [sic].</i> " Nour	Speaking is most important		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants stated that the different language skills were equally important as they complemented each other. For example: " <i>They are completing each other [sic].</i> " Najah	The skills complement each other		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about how they perceived English language teaching methods at Damascus University and foreign language learning and teaching in general. For example: " <i>The way that English are teaching in Syria it's I don't think it's good because all of ... the teachers are focusing on grammar [sic].</i> " Nidal		DU English language teaching methods	

Table 5.15: interview theme three

**Theme four:** language learning strategies

This theme is in line with the survey area of learning and communication strategies. It helps in answering RQ-iv qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. Under this theme, the participants talked about the specific tactics and techniques as well as the things they used and did to enhance their English language learning in the context of war. The students tended to choose certain language techniques or strategies that were in agreement with their beliefs about foreign language learning (Horwitz, 2012) taking into account lack of resources during the war. The categories below explain the strategies the interview participants used to prepare for their English language exams and the strategies they used to deal with different language skills. Also, the categories reflect the participants' metacognitive knowledge. These strategies can be viewed as the means through which the students would interact with their learning context and surrounding environment as a whole, which adds up to their learning experience at Damascus University, as mentioned previously.

Parameters	Category	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about how they believed they should prepare for their English language exams. For example: <i>"When I prepare for the exam, I review past exam papers in order to familiarise myself with the types of questions."</i> Ismat	Exam preparations	Language learning strategies
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the importance of language practice in foreign language learning. For example: <i>"You must practise and practise and practise to, to learn English."</i> Nour	Language practice	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the techniques and tactics they would rely on while learning new vocabulary and dealing with reading passages. For example: <i>"When I read a book ... in English, I find a lot of words that I don't know. So, I translate these words and</i>	learning vocabulary	

<i>memorise.</i> " Fida		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the techniques and activities they would rely on when practising listening. For example: " <i>It's important to listen to English [songs] and watch English films and pay attention to pronunciation and intonation.</i> " Hekmat	practising listening	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the techniques and activities they would rely on when practising speaking. For example: " <i>When I call my friend, I talk with him English. If there is something wrong, he tell me, and if he makes any mistakes, I will tell him [sic].</i> " Nour	practising speaking	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the techniques and activities they would rely on when practising writing. For example: " <i>I watch ... movie ... er, and I write summary of this movie ... to practise my writing [sic].</i> " Salam	practising writing	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants talked about the techniques and tactics they would rely on when learning and practising new grammar rules. For example: " <i>I read the grammar rules and remember the teacher's explanation and then I try to use these rules in writing.</i> " Nihad	Learning grammar	

Table 5.16: interview theme four

### **Theme five:** motivation for learning English

This theme corresponds to the survey area of motivations and expectations. It helps in answering RQ-v qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. Under this theme, the interview participants talked about what motivated them to learn English in the context of war. They focused on the reasons that made them want to learn English. The categories in the table below are the smallest units under the overarching theme of motivation for learning English. The theme of motivation shows both elements of the students' experience, where high

motivation for learning English represents the active element, while lack of motivation reflects the downside of the experience during their interaction with their learning environment.

Parameters	Category	Sub-theme	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants expressed their love and sentiments for English. For example: " <i>I love English.</i> " Saria	Love of English language	Integrative/intrinsic	Motivation for learning English
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants showed interest in learning about and integrating into the English culture. For example: " <i>I love the English culture.</i> " Sabah	Love to learn about English culture		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants viewed English as a world language that they should learn regardless of any circumstances. For example: " <i>I've always been motivated to learn English since it's the most important language.</i> " Nihad	A perceived need		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to get a good job whether in Syria or abroad. For example: " <i>It helps me to find a good job.</i> " Hekmat	Employment	Instrumental/extrinsic	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to be able to communicate and survive in a foreign country. For example: " <i>I want to travel, because that I have to learn English [sic].</i> " Nour	Travelling abroad		
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English	Opening up opportunities		



<p>in order to be well-equipped and fully prepared for any future opportunities. For example: <i>"English language open many doors to the world ... I must be ... high level of proficiency in English [sic]."</i> Najah</p>			
<p>I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to be able to express their ideas to the entire world about how the war affected them. For example: <i>"Through English, you can express your feelings about the war to people all over the world."</i> Hekmat</p>	Conveying a message		
<p>I grouped together all the extracts where the male participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to be exempt from joining the army (for one year at least). For example: <i>"It allows us to defer joining the military service."</i> Fida</p>	Military service evasion		
<p>I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to be able to give back to Syria. For example: <i>"That's really one of my goals to really give a little back to this country through English [sic]."</i> Sabah</p>	Giving back to the country		
<p>I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their intent to learn English in order to be able to meet certain societal expectations. For example: <i>"People who used to encourage me to learn English before the war encourage me even more now."</i> Salam</p>	Societal expectations		

Table 5.17: interview theme five

**Theme six:** impact of war

This theme is in line with the survey area of the impact of war. It helps in answering RQ-vi qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. This theme also contributes to answering the rest of the research sub-questions qualitatively since it is concerned with the overall context in this research. Under this theme, the context and environment where the students were interacting and were having their experiences with learning the target language were highlighted. Thus, the interview participants talked about how they and their studies, English language learning in particular, were directly affected by the war in Syria. So, each of the categories below addresses a certain aspect of their learning experience during the war, and how that affected their progress and achievement in the English classes and exam. This theme reflected their perseverance and resilience to learn English during the war.

Parameters	Category	Theme
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about their fears, concerns and worries in the context of war and how that affected their studies. For example: " <i>We afraid from [terrorists] come to our university and kill all students with our doctors. Just we afraid from this point [sic].</i> " Saria	Feelings of safety and uncertainty	Impact of war
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about how the lack of essential services affected them and their studies, English in particular. For example: " <i>Studying with bad conditions, no electricity, no internet available because the electricity cut off a long time [sic].</i> " Najah	Lack of public services and utilities	
I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about how the lack of resources at Damascus University affected them and their studies, English in particular. For example: " <i>At Damascus University we missed techniques, some techniques, like English lab [sic].</i> " Najah	Lack of physical resources and extracurricular activities	

I grouped together all the extracts where the participants spoke about how the lack of teachers, particularly the highly qualified ones affected them and their studies. For example: " <i>Almost doctors travel from Syria because the war in Syria and there are students teach us [sic].</i> " Salam	Lack of human resources	
I grouped together all the extracts where some of the participants spoke about how the longstanding war was normalised and how that made them see a "positive" aspect of the war. For example: " <i>After 8 years of war, I've found out that the crisis does have a positive impact ... I started to rely on myself when I couldn't go to my classes.</i> " Fida	Normalisation of war	

Table 5.18: interview theme six

- **Reporting the qualitative findings**

The qualitative findings are reported in Chapter Seven. The themes and categories generated from the open-ended question are presented first. As for the interview themes, they are introduced in relation to the research sub-questions in separate sections. The categories under each theme are linked together to present a clear description and explanation of the overarching theme. The section below discusses the mixed methods phase.

**5.2-1-3 Mixed-methods phase**

Integrating both the quantitative results and qualitative findings helped in answering the overarching research question presented in Chapter Eight, the discussion chapter. The qualitative findings were used to reinforce and "put flesh on the bones of [the] quantitative results, bringing results to life" (Patton, 1990, p. 132). With both sets of data in mind and following Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) recommendations regarding triangulation *between* methods as categorised by Denzin (1970), I identified all possible links between the quantitative results and the qualitative

findings. I was also looking for any possible trends regarding the participants' language learning belief system and/or any disagreements between both data sets. It is important to point out that, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), methodological triangulation is the most widely used type of triangulation and the one that can offer the most. Thus, the triangulation and integration of both types of methods in this research resulted in the following:

- Confirmation and validation: mostly the qualitative data confirmed data from the survey. For example, with reference to the students' motivation to learn English, both data sets were in agreement with each other in this respect. The qualitative data added more depth to the quantitative data as it explained what type of motivation the students had during the war and why. This, to a certain degree, can be viewed as convergence in terms of triangulation as both data sets are in agreement with each other (Farquhar and Michels, 2016; Morgan, 2019; Nightingale, 2020).
- Explanation and elaboration: the qualitative data explained why a certain trend of beliefs, as revealed through the quantitative results, was prevalent among the participants. For example, with regard to their beliefs about certain language learning skills, the qualitative data helped in explaining the reasons behind the survey respondents' choices and in clarifying the students' exact attitudes, which the quantitative results missed. Therefore, the qualitative study complemented and enriched the quantitative data, which contributed to creating a full picture of the research problem and added an extra level to the understanding of the participants' language learning beliefs and learning experiences. To a certain extent, this can be viewed as complementarity with regard to triangulation where one data set complements the other (Farquhar and Michels, 2016; Morgan, 2019; Nightingale, 2020).
- Disagreement: in one instance, the qualitative data seemed to conflict with the quantitative data. Nonetheless, further analysis of this instance revealed

that this was not exactly the case. Still, it added more depth to viewing the students' situation. This, to a certain degree, can be viewed as divergence in terms of triangulation as one data set contradicts the other (Farquhar and Michels, 2016; Morgan, 2019; Nightingale, 2020).

Consequently, integrating the two data sets has contributed to identifying the factors that have affected the students' attitudes towards learning English at Damascus University, which answers the overarching research question. The factors found were in line with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction, particularly its two sets of factors discussed in Chapter Three. These factors highlighted the relationship between the students' beliefs and their environment and experiences, explained in detail in Chapter Eight. The section below addresses the validity and reliability of this research.

### **5.3 Validity and reliability**

In this section, I present the measures I took in this research to ensure its trustworthiness, i.e., reliability and validity. Before proceeding to explain these measures, it would be more helpful to give validity and reliability working definitions. Reliability is concerned with the dependability, consistency and replicability of the research findings (Nunan, 1999; Zohrabi, 2013) although, for some researchers (e.g., Lincoln and Guba, 1985), achieving the same results is not a condition as long as the results are consistent and dependable. As for validity, it is about the quality of a research study, and whether it is measuring what it claims to measure relying on its instruments, the quality of which is essential given that research findings are dependent on the data collected through these instruments (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2003).

The procedures followed to check the reliability and validity of the research instruments were discussed in sections 5.2-1-1 and 5.2-1-2 above. As for the reliability and validity of the research findings and the research as a whole, the

sections below explain how these were valid and reliable through establishing credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability.

### **5.3-1 Credibility**

The credibility of findings, i.e., ensuring that the findings were true and accurate, relies mainly on a number of procedures, including triangulation, member checking and prolonged engagement (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is aimed at checking on data, whereas member checking and other procedures of credibility are intended as a check on the participants' construction of data.

As for triangulation, methodological triangulation, particularly triangulation *between* methods, was employed in this research, involving the use of different methods in one study, which enhances credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As mentioned in section 5.2-1-3 above, it was done through integrating and combining the analyses of both the quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data, using the participants' own words, complemented the quantitative data through offering more elaboration on and clarification of the quantitative results. Accordingly, bias was minimised and validity was established (Modell, 2009).

For the member checking technique in this research, I organised a second meeting with the interview participants to check the interpretability and clarity of all the transcripts. For reasons related to power cuts and lack of reliable internet access as well as other considerations during the war in Syria, I only managed to meet with seven of the eleven interview participants for a second time via Skype. So, I provided them with a descriptive summary of and key points from their interviews in order for them to review and check for accuracy of my understanding and resonance with their experiences. I also gave them the opportunity to authenticate their responses and fill any gaps in the interviews.

Prolonged engagement has to do with the time researchers spend to understand and

familiarise themselves with the research context, the participants and the people involved. It requires researchers to stay at the research site for a prolonged period of time in order to build trust and establish rapport with the participants (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006). This research was conducted online away from its physical research site and participants. However, through my experience while teaching English at Damascus University for a period extending a few years before the war broke out in 2011 until 2017 when I came to the UK to start this PhD research, I can claim that I have a substantial and significant lived experience and knowledge of Damascus University and the context and current climate in Syria, which provides validity to my analysis. As for building rapport and trust with the interview participants, in addition to sending them informed consent forms to introduce them fully to this research, I exchanged emails with them prior to the interviews to familiarise them with the nature of my research and establish rapport with them.

### **5.3-2 Transferability**

Transferability is the applicability of one's findings to other contexts, including similar situations and similar circumstances. According to DeVault (2019), "researchers cannot prove definitively that outcomes based on the interpretation of the data are transferable, but they can establish that it is likely." Therefore, researchers typically provide "thick description" of the context of the research (Larsson, 2009, p. 33). To this end, Chapter Two in this research was mostly devoted to providing enough and detailed information on the context of this research, including the Syrian Arab Republic, Syrian higher education, Damascus University and the war in Syria. However, I was careful enough not to provide too many details on my participants as I was worried they could potentially be identified, for example, as a result of an unintentional release of my data, which could be an ethical concern. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the special nature of Syrian youth and students, as mentioned previously, and the special

context of this research may be a limitation to generalising my findings in full.

### **5.3-3 Confirmability**

In this chapter, I provided a detailed description of my data collection and analysis procedures so that other researchers interested in applying my findings to their contexts could benefit from. This helped me to establish confirmability, the degree of neutrality in the research findings (Korstjens and Moser, 2017). Therefore, I endeavoured to minimise bias in my research although ruling out bias and preconceptions completely is not possible practically speaking. Nonetheless, their influence can be minimised.

Thus, I did my best to avoid subject bias, resulting from the participants trying to please me because I represent an authority figure at Damascus University, which, consequently, might lead to unreliable results. So, I was very careful concerning my relationship with my participants so that they would give the same or similar answers were the study conducted by another researcher. According to Al Zouebi (2011, p.1), "we need to carefully monitor our position in the research process, and the relationship with the informants, which is critical to maintaining a focus on the research agenda." Thus, I was keen on examining the power relationships between me as a researcher/teacher and my participants during the interviews. For example, I endeavoured to maintain a neutral and impartial stance through focusing in my interview questions on how to answer the research questions without imposing any ideas or thoughts on the participants or showing preferences. Also, I kept assuring them throughout the whole process of the research that their participation was voluntary, and that my position should not affect their responses or their decision whether to answer any question or not. In addition, asking them open-ended questions gave them the opportunity to talk freely about their attitudes towards the topics of my questions. Furthermore, I was careful enough not to imply accidentally or indirectly that there was a right or wrong answer.



I would like also to point out that due to the nature of snowball sampling samples are subject to numerous biases seeing that a potential participant is more likely to recruit other participants from amongst their friends or family members (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Taking this into consideration, bias was reduced in this research through employing three snowballs rather than one or two as mentioned earlier.

Also, I was careful enough not to create researcher bias since I had my own expectations with respect to the results. I, therefore, followed Kusow's (2003) advice stressing the significance of the ability of the 'insider' scholar to sufficiently distance themselves from the context in order to study it without bias. To this end, when I started my data collection, and by means of my research plan and ethics form, I drafted my research project through creating a preliminary record outlining my expectations about data collection and analysis and my findings, which helped me to identify and avoid bias as much as possible later in the process. After each interview, I spent some time to reflect on my immediate thoughts and the notes that I took during the interview, which helped me to capture my own reaction to each interviewee and their responses. While transcribing the participants' interviews and reading through their transcripts, I considered all their responses and did not overlook any information even though at the time some of the responses did not seem useful or important. Although data analysis and interpretation in qualitative research can be easily affected by the researcher's social and cultural identity (Al Zouebi, 2011), I endeavoured during data analysis to avoid, as much as possible, interpreting my data in a way that was affected by my expectations and supported my claims. Accordingly, I distanced myself from my research as much as I could by taking an outsider position, which was not an easy mission to accomplish.

Another issue associated with my positionality as a researcher that is worth spending some time thinking about and reflecting on is the fact that I am both the researcher and the translator of my participants' Arabic interview transcripts. It is important to stress that translation is not about finding synonyms in the target language through

using a dictionary. Rather, it is far deeper than this since translation "is a matter of making intelligible a whole culture" with its beliefs, values and thoughts as the English writer, composer, linguist and translator, Anthony Burgess, contended. Typically as a translator, I avoid word-for-word translation and endeavour to be as objective and faithful as I can to the intended meaning of the original text. While I was translating the participants' interview transcripts, I was keen on highlighting their intended meaning rather than giving a literal version of their exact words in English which might not convey the same meaning. The challenge that I had to deal with was translating their transcripts from an objective translator lens rather than from my own researcher lens, where I might be inclined to interpret things in a way that suited and met my expectations as a researcher. This opened the door to a conflict between two identities. Therefore, with each extract I was translating from their transcripts, I kept asking myself if this was what they meant exactly or this was what I wanted them to mean. It was quite a challenge since I had to distance myself as a researcher and focus on my other identity as a translator.

Moreover, when I reflect on how I conducted the interviews and dealt with my interview participants, I could see the tough challenges that confronted me due to my positionality, being a researcher and a Syrian teacher and citizen. As an insider, I thought that my familiarity with the context and my intimate knowledge of the nature of the Syrian students would help me to build rapport and spontaneous relationships with the participants, which would encourage them to tell their stories and be more comfortable to share information with me that they would not share with an outsider. Nevertheless, upon further reflection, particularly when one of the interview participants withdrew from the research, as mentioned earlier, I felt that the participants might have wished to deal with a researcher who was not an insider, a researcher who does not belong to Damascus University or a researcher who is not Syrian and not familiar with the complexities of the war in Syria. Thus, dealing with an insider might have made the participants more reluctant to share information that they might perceive as dangerous and could cause harm to them given the situation

in Syria.

### **5.3-4 Dependability**

As for dependability, my director of studies was overseeing the process of the research design, data collection, interpretations and analysis, results reporting and conclusion to confirm that my research is dependable, consistent and backed up by data. All my non-identifiable participant data are kept available for inquiry audit if required. It is worth noting that I did not consider asking the head of my department at Damascus University or any of the academic staff there to act as an external audit reviewing and examining the research process and data analysis as I was worried that any of my participants could be potentially identified.

### **5.4 Ethical considerations**

As for the ethical issues in this research, I believe that the current Syrian context requires special research ethics or what Kovats-Bernat (2002, p.214) terms "localised ethic" to suit its special nature. Therefore, an ethical approval was obtained from Damascus University and Bath Spa University. This is an essential step in order to ensure that this research follows ethical procedures and to minimise harm. A few steps were taken to maintain that this research is ethical. These are informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality and data storage.

#### **5.4-1 Informed consent**

An informed consent form in both Arabic and English was emailed to each of my interview participants a week before their interviews were scheduled to begin in order for them to read, sign and return it to me (see Appendix E). The informed consent outlined the scope and purpose of the research. It also detailed what participation entailed and emphasised the voluntary nature of their participation in this research. The participants were also ensured that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and that whether they chose to participate or not

would not affect them or their grades or assessment.

The consent form also detailed how the data generated from the interviews would be treated, anonymised, encrypted, protected, used and finally destroyed. It, besides, made the interview participants aware of any potential risks resulting from taking part in the research and of how I would deal with that and how they could report any anticipated risk to the specialised authorities. Also, to minimise risks, the form stated clearly that the interviews would not discuss the participants' political views given the sensitivity of the context of this research. In addition, the consent form provided the contact details of the head of the English Language Teaching Department, Damascus University, for the participants to turn to for support if the research impacted on them negatively. At the beginning of each interview, I made sure that each participant had read the consent form. I then explained the purpose of the research briefly and reassured them that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their assessment. I also reaffirmed that discussing their political views directly or indirectly would be avoided completely. I also sought their permission to audio record the interview.

#### **5.4-2 Anonymity and confidentiality**

This research followed BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), stating that educational research conducted by UK researchers abroad (whether face-to-face or online) must abide by the same ethics as research in the UK. Thus, I treated my participants "fairly, sensitively, with dignity, and within an ethic of respect and freedom from prejudice regardless of age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, cultural identity, partnership status, faith, disability, political belief or any other significant characteristic" (p. 6). Also, in line with the Data Protection Act 1998, personal information collected in this research such as names of interview participants and names of departments were made anonymous through using pseudonyms in all the data management, including transcriptions and research documents. All data of sensitive nature were held in encrypted documents,

with password protection. Also, under the Bath Spa University Code of Good Practice, the interview participants' privacy was respected. Therefore, my email address was provided in the information and consent sheet to all the participants in order for them to be able to contact me if they had any questions regarding the research. Confidentiality was also ensured through creating a separate Skype account for the interviews, which was deleted at the end of data collection in order to guarantee that the interview participants' details and data were removed completely, as recommended by Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown (2016).

#### **5.4-3 Data collection storage**

Soft copies, recordings, transcriptions and data files were kept safe by means of using Bath Spa University's approved methods of storing data, which included a combination of Bath Spa University's Google Drive facility and its data repositories, *Figshare*. All the files, including transcripts and audio files, were encrypted, and saved in an encrypted folder and uploaded to my *Figshare* account. Those files would be permanently erased from my account at the end of this research. I also created a data management plan in order to make sure that my data were stored in a secure and compliant way.

#### **5.5 Summary**

In this chapter, I have explained the use of mixed-methods methodology in this research in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework as well as the three approaches to investigating learners' beliefs, namely normative, metacognitive and contextual. I have also explained in detail the sequential explanatory design in this research along with its phases, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. The chapter has shed light on how the data collection instruments were designed and used to collect data. It has also explained the data collection and analysis procedures and how both data sets are presented in their respective chapters. It has also dealt with the reliability and validity of this research

in addition to the ethical issues. The next chapter presents the results of the analysis of the quantitative data.

# Chapter Six

*"We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future" (Dewey, 1938, p. 49)*

## Chapter Six: quantitative results

In the previous chapter, I have presented the methodological framing for this research, including the methodology and research design. I have also discussed the reliability and validity as well as the ethical considerations in this research. In this chapter, I present the results of the analysis of the quantitative data in relation to each of the research sub-questions as explained in the previous chapter. In section 6.1, the results of the descriptive analysis of the items linked to each of the research sub-questions are presented, including section 6.1-1 through section 6.1-6. In section 6.2, a summary of the chapter is provided.

### 6.1 Descriptive data analysis

This section presents the results of the quantitative data analysis of the responses of 404 students with reference to the research sub-questions. As clarified in Chapter Five, only one research sub-question, namely RQ-ii, was answered relying mostly on the quantitative data. The remaining sub-questions were answered both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results reflect the students' knowledge about language learning and highlight their agency in the learning process manifested in their perceptions of language learning. The items under the research sub-questions represent the students' beliefs and preconceived notions about language learning. The analysis included the frequency and percentage of the respondents' answers to each item under each of the research sub-questions as outlined in Chapter Five. Tables 6.1 through 6.6 present the results of calculating the means, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages under each of the research sub-questions, presented below. Each of the tables is followed by a commentary and a final brief summary.

- **RQ-i:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning, and what difficulties do they face while learning English at Damascus University in the context of war?



- **RQ-ii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics that successful foreign language learners should possess?
- **RQ-iii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general and at Damascus University in particular?
- **RQ-iv:** What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English, and how do they apply them at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-v:** What are the students' reasons for learning English in general, and what motivates them to learn English in the context of war?
- **RQ-vi:** Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally, and if so in what ways?

It is important to note that all percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number; therefore, they may not total 100%. Also, for ease of narrative reporting and since the focus of the research sub-questions pertaining to the survey areas aims at gaining a general perspective on the respondents' beliefs and opinions about language learning, the percentages for Agree and Strongly Agree, and also the percentages for Disagree and Strongly Disagree have been consolidated. Nonetheless, a full breakdown of the responses of the survey items is still provided in the tables below as a reference. Also, as explained in Chapter Five, the survey items subsumed under the first five research sub-questions were measured based on Horwitz's (1988) descriptors and definitions of the BALLI five areas. The following sections present the results of the students' responses to the items under each of the research sub-questions in detail.

### **6.1-1 The respondents' preconceived notions about the difficulty of foreign/English language learning**

This section answers the sub-question, "What preconceived notions do the students

have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning?" quantitatively. These responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. Table 6.1 presents the results of the students' responses to the survey items under RQ-i.

Frequency & Percent						
<b>3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.72	1.036	12	52	62	191	87
		3.0%	12.9%	15.3%	47.3%	21.5%
<b>4. English is:</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	A very difficult language	A difficult language	A language of medium difficulty	An easy language	A very easy language
2.93	.883	33	61	223	75	12
		8.2%	15.1%	55.2%	18.6%	3.0%
<b>6. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4.00	1.007	14	24	49	179	138
		3.5%	5.9%	12.1%	44.3%	34.2%
<b>15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take for them to learn that language very well?</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	less than a year	1-2 years	3-5 years	5-10 years	You can't learn a language in one hour a day
2.58	1.253	70	172	73	35	54
		17.3%	42.6%	18.1%	8.7%	13.4
<b>27. It is easier to speak than understand English.</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.24	1.167	12	135	69	121	67
		3.0%	33.4%	17.1%	30.0%	16.6%
<b>35. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.</b>						
Mean	Std. deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.36	1.213	21	111	50	146	76
		5.2%	27.5%	12.4%	36.1%	18.8%

Table 6.1: results of the analysis of the survey items linked to RQ-i

To begin with, the data showed that 68.8% of the respondents reported believing that

languages have different relative difficulty (item 3). When asked specifically about the difficulty of the English language (item 4), 55.2% of the respondents rated it as "a language of medium difficulty." A total of 15.1% of the respondents believed that English was "a difficult language"; 18.6% "an easy language"; 3% "a very easy language" and 8.2% as "a very difficult language." Considering a language as a moderately difficult language can be viewed as a facilitative and helpful belief about language learning (Vibulphol, 2004). Therefore, more than half of the survey respondents seemed to hold facilitative beliefs about the difficulty of the English language.

However, they did not seem to hold similar facilitative beliefs with respect to the time required to learn a foreign language, investigated further in the discussion chapter. For example, in response to the question about time commitment to English learning (item 15), the respondents had different ideas. A total of 42.6% of the respondents reported believing that it would take a person one to two years of studying English one hour a day to be able to speak English well. Whereas, 17.3% believed that it would take "less than a year"; 18% "3-5 years"; and 8.7% "5-10 years". The rest, 13.4% of the respondents, believed that no one can learn to speak English well if he or she only spent one hour a day learning it. The largest proportion of the respondents believed that by spending one hour a day learning English, one can learn it in one to two years, which may be viewed as unrealistic time estimation (Horwitz, 2012).

As for their expectations for success in learning English (item 6), 78.5% of the respondents agreed that they would be able to speak English well. For the items addressing the relative difficulty of language skills (items 27 and 35), the responses were varied. About half of the respondents agreed that it was easier to speak than to understand English (46.6%), and that reading and writing English were easier than speaking and understanding (or listening) (54.9%). Accordingly, understanding (or listening) was classified by more than half of the respondents as the most difficult

language skill, followed by speaking and then reading and writing.

To sum up, answering RQ-i quantitatively relies on Horwitz's (1988) descriptors as mentioned earlier. These are the survey respondents' views on the general difficulty of learning a foreign language, the specific difficulty of English in particular, the time requirement to acquire proficiency in the English language and their expectations for success and their assessment of the relative difficulty of different language skills. The results revealed that more than two thirds of the respondents reported believing that different languages have different relative difficulty levels and more than half of the respondents viewed English as a language of medium difficulty. However, they demonstrated unrealistic expectations with regard to their estimates of the amount of time required to learn a foreign language. With regard to their expectations for success in language learning, the majority of the respondents contented that they would learn to speak the target language very well. As for the relative difficulty of language skills, almost half of the respondents reported perceiving speaking and understanding as the most difficult language skills. The percentages above could reflect different language learning experiences based on the students' different beliefs and preconceived notions regarding language learning. At the same time, the percentages reveal that there is an overall trend pertaining to how the majority of the respondents viewed the difficulty of the target language as part of their general learning experience.

### **6.1-2 The respondents' preconceived notions about the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics of successful foreign language learners**

This section answers RQ-ii. The responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. Table 6.2 below presents the respondents' answers to the survey items under RQ-ii.

Frequency & Percent						
<b>1.</b> It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4.16	1.064	20	19	24	155	186
		5.0%	4.7%	5.9%	38.4%	46.0%
<b>2.</b> Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.90	.910	10	28	45	230	91
		2.5%	6.9%	11.1%	56.9%	22.5%
<b>5.</b> Syrians are good at learning foreign languages.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.55	1.085	14	64	94	151	81
		3.5%	15.8%	23.3%	37.4%	20.0%
<b>10.</b> It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.35	1.104	25	75	89	165	50
		6.2%	18.6%	22.0%	40.8%	12.4%
<b>16.</b> I have a special ability for learning foreign languages.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.38	1.037	15	71	115	150	53
		3.7%	17.6%	28.5%	37.1%	13.1%
<b>24.</b> Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.16	1.145	31	76	162	67	68
		7.7%	18.8%	40.1%	16.6%	16.8%
<b>38.</b> People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
2.73	1.218	64	136	91	72	41
		15.8%	33.7%	22.5%	17.8%	10.1%
<b>41.</b> People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.89	1.059	9	42	71	145	137
		2.2%	10.4	17.6	35.9	33.9
<b>42.</b> Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.69	1.108	14	61	63	165	101

		3.5%	15.1%	15.6%	40.8%	25.0%
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Table 6.2: results of the analysis of the survey items linked to RQ-ii

Table 6.2 shows that the vast majority of the respondents (79.4%) agreed that some people are born with a special ability for learning foreign languages, i.e., foreign language aptitude (item 2). With regard to the potential of Syrian people in foreign language learning (item 5), 57.4% of the respondents agreed with the statement "Syrians are good at learning foreign languages", which indicates that these students had a particular positive perception of Syrians' language abilities. In addition, 53.2% of the respondents agreed that people who already knew one foreign language could learn another one (item 10), which could be associated with learners' past language learning experiences and Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity. As for their own potential in learning a foreign language (item 16), the respondents were relatively optimistic about themselves. Therefore, 50.2% of them agreed with this statement. It is worth noting that although 57.4% believed that Syrian people have this ability as stated above, only 50.2% believed that they possess it themselves. This suggests that some of the respondents (7%) believe that the Syrian people in general have this ability, but they personally do not possess it. This could also suggest that these students may have doubts about or "fairly negative assessments of their own language learning abilities" (Horwitz, 1988, p. 287).

Although 79.4% of the respondents endorsed the concept of foreign language aptitude, as mentioned with regard to item 2 above, a total of 65.8% of the respondents agreed that everyone could learn a foreign language (item 42), which seems contradictory, investigated further in the discussion chapter.

The other items linked to RQ-ii are associated with some individual characteristics such as age, gender, and intelligence in addition to academic subjects that may affect success in language learning. The responses to the items in this group were divided. For example, the majority of the respondents reported believing in the effect of age

(item 1) but not of academic subjects (item 38), and there was no consensus regarding beliefs about the effect of gender (item 24). So, 84.4% of the respondents endorsed the statement "It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language", which is one of the most common beliefs held by learners about the special ability for language learning that children possess, which could be considered as supporting evidence of the earlier the better at language learning (Hong, 2006). Almost half of the respondents (49.5%) disagreed that people who were good at mathematics or science were not good at foreign language learning. Regarding the effect of gender on language learning, the responses to the statement "Women are better than men at learning foreign languages" were varied: although 66.8% of the respondents were females, 40.1% of the respondents were neutral, 33.4% of the respondents agreed with the statement, while 26.5% disagreed. This may indicate that the majority of the respondents believed that both males and females could potentially be successful language learners despite the common belief that women perform better in foreign language learning (Brown, 2007; Apairach and Vibulphol, 2015).

Also, a total of 69% of the respondents associated foreign language learning ability with intelligence (item 41). This high percentage of association between foreign language learning and intelligence may explain why almost half of the respondents, as demonstrated in the paragraph above, did not agree with the statement: "People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at foreign language learning." The respondents seem to be relating being good at mathematics and science to being intelligent.

In brief, answering RQ-ii relies on Horwitz's (1988) descriptors as mentioned earlier. These are the survey respondents' views on the general existence of specialised abilities for language learning or what is known as foreign language aptitude, the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful language learners and the issue of individual potential for achievement in language learning. Thus, most of the survey

respondents reported believing in the existence of a special ability for language learning and half of the respondents reported believing that they themselves possessed such ability. As for the characteristics of successful language learners, speaking more than one language was seen as a sign of intelligence. Almost half of the respondents did not agree that being good at mathematics and science contradicts being good at foreign language learning. Finally, most of the respondents agreed that age rather than gender could affect language learning.

### 6.1-3 The respondents' preconceived notions about the nature of English language learning

This section answers RQ-iii quantitatively. These responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. Table 6.3 presents the results of the students' responses to the survey items under RQ-iii.

Frequency & Percent						
<b>8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.62	1.093	14	62	76	163	89
		3.5%	15.3%	18.8%	40.3%	22.0%
<b>11. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.72	1.252	31	53	43	148	129
		7.7%	13.1%	10.6%	36.6%	31.9%
<b>13. In order to speak English, you have to think in English.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.85	1.141	16	51	48	151	138
		4.0%	12.6%	11.9%	37.4%	34.2%
<b>17. The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary words.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4.04	1.044	12	34	38	162	158



		3.0%	8.4%	9.4%	40.1%	39.1%
<b>19. It is better to have teachers who are native-speakers of English.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.29	1.290	36	106	48	134	80
		8.9%	26.2%	11.9%	33.2%	19.8%
<b>22. The most important part of learning English is learning the grammar.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.60	1.167	17	78	52	160	97
		4.2%	19.3%	12.9%	39.6%	24.0%
<b>29. I can learn a lot from non-native English teachers.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.80	1.064	16	39	63	177	109
		4.0%	9.7%	15.6%	43.8%	27.0%
<b>30. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.97	.937	6	31	54	191	122
		1.5%	7.7%	13.4%	47.3%	30.2%
<b>32. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Arabic.</b>						
Mean	Std. Deviation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
3.12	1.229	40	112	62	139	51
		9.9%	27.7%	15.3%	34.4%	12.6%

Table 6.3: results of the analysis of the survey items linked to RQ-iii

The results showed that the majority of the respondents reported believing that vocabulary (79.2%) (item 17) and (63.6%) grammar (item 22) were the most important language skills. However, 11.4% disagreed with the importance of vocabulary words, and 23.5% of the respondents did not agree with the importance of learning grammar in foreign language learning. In addition, almost half of the respondents (47%) agreed that translation was an important part of learning English (item 32). Students holding such beliefs about language learning are expected to

spend plenty of time memorising grammar rules and vocabulary words and translating from English into the first language (Horwitz, 1985). These beliefs could also be looked at as detrimental and counterproductive beliefs with regard to foreign language learning (Peacock, 1999). Also, relying on vocabulary, grammar and translation in foreign language learning is usually associated with the traditional grammar-translation method, explained in Chapter Two.

As for the role of the target language culture (item 8), 62.3% of the respondents reported believing that learning about the culture(s) of English-speaking people was necessary to English language learning. The concept of language immersion had more or less similar results (item 11): 68.5% of the respondents agreed that the best way to learn English is to be in the country in which English is used in daily life. In addition, the majority of the respondents (71.6%) considered thinking in the target language as an essential part of learning that language (item 13).

With regard to their English teachers (item 19), 53% of the respondents agreed that an English native teacher was better to learn from. At the same time, 70.8% of the respondents stated that they could benefit a lot from their non-native English teachers (item 29). The percentages of these two items, namely 19 and 29, showed that the respondents had different perceptions with respect to being taught English by an English native teacher or a Syrian English teacher. According to Aslan and Thompson (2016, p. 88), "students have varying perceptions about NESTs [native English-speaking teachers] and NNESTs [non-native English-speaking teachers] in different areas such as pronunciation, culture, and attitudes towards teaching." This may explain the difference in the percentages above as the students might have associated certain skills with one type of teachers and others with the other type.

Item 30 concerns the perception of English in relation to other academic subjects. The majority of the respondents (77.5%) believed that learning foreign languages is different from learning other academic subjects. This idea corresponds to the nativist approach of second language acquisition, which considers language learning

different from other kinds of learning, which is in contrast to cognitive learning theories deeming language learning as similar to learning other academic subjects (Horwitz, 2012).

In summary, answering RQ-iii quantitatively relies on Horwitz's (1988) descriptors as mentioned earlier. These are the survey respondents' views on the nature of the language learning process, including their preconceived notions on the focus of the language learning task, the role of cultural contact and language immersion in language achievement, in addition to their perceptions of the English language process in relation to that of other academic subjects. Most of the survey respondents agreed that learning vocabulary and grammar were important for English learners. With regard to the role of translation in English language learning, almost half of the respondents endorsed the significance of translation. Also, the majority of the respondents believed that the best place to learn English was to be in an English-speaking country for the sake of language immersion. In addition, most of the respondents acknowledged benefiting a lot from their Syrian English teachers. Lastly, the majority of the respondents agreed that learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects.

#### **6.1-4 The language learning strategies that the respondents perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English**

This section answers the sub-question, "What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English?" quantitatively. These responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. Table 6.4 presents the results of the students' responses to the survey items under RQ-iv.

<b>Frequency &amp; Percent</b>						
<b>7. It is important to speak English with an excellent accent.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>

3.67	.564	19	41	45	145	154
		4.7%	10.1%	11.1%	35.9%	38.1%
<b>9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.93	.149	42	164	56	93	49
		10.4%	40.6%	13.9%	23.0%	12.1%
<b>12. I enjoy practicing English with the people I meet.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
2.86	1.233	14	52	35	167	136
		3.5%	12.9%	8.7%	41.3%	33.7%
<b>14. It's OK to guess if you don't know a word in English.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.77	1.001	12	43	58	204	87
		3.0%	10.6%	14.4%	50.5%	21.5%
<b>18. It is a good idea to practice speaking with other people who are learning English.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
4.08	1.150	23	28	30	137	186
		5.7%	6.9%	7.4%	33.9%	46.0%
<b>21. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.31	1.264	34	100	55	138	77
		8.4%	24.8%	13.6%	34.2%	19.1%
<b>23. It is important to practice with multi-media.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.93	1.068	11	44	47	162	140
		2.7%	10.9%	11.6%	40.1%	34.7%
<b>26. I can learn a lot from group activities with other students in my English class.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.87	1.124	24	29	53	167	131

		5.9%	7.2%	13.1%	41.3%	32.4%
<b>31. It is possible to learn English on your own without a teacher or a class.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.25</b>	<b>1.195</b>	23	116	67	133	65
		5.7%	28.7%	16.6%	32.9%	16.1%
<b>33. Students and teachers should only speak English during English classes.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.65</b>	<b>1.329</b>	36	65	40	126	137
		8.9%	16.1%	9.9%	31.2%	33.9%
<b>34. I can find a lot of useful materials to practice English on the Internet.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.79</b>	<b>1.090</b>	22	35	53	189	105
		5.4%	8.7%	13.1%	46.8%	26.0%
<b>36. I have to spend so much time preparing for big English tests, that I don't have time to actually learn English.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.03</b>	<b>1.189</b>	31	100	36	194	43
		7.7%	24.8%	8.9%	48%	10.6%
<b>37. It is important to speak English like a native speaker.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.66</b>	<b>1.178</b>	18	73	45	161	107
		4.5%	18.1%	11.1%	39.9%	26.5%
<b>43. I feel timid speaking English with other people.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.24</b>	<b>1.266</b>	31	118	53	127	75
		7.7%	29.2%	13.1%	31.4%	18.6%
<b>44. Damascus University final exams are good tests of my English ability.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
<b>3.60</b>	<b>.461</b>	95	201	21	54	33
		23.5%	49.8%	5.2%	13.4%	8.2%

Table 6.4: results of the analysis of the survey items linked to RQ-iv

As for learning strategies, (item 12) the majority of the respondents stated that they enjoyed practising English with other people (75%), and (item 18) that it was a good idea to do this, speaking in particular, with people learning English (79%). In response to a particular kind of language practice (item 23), most respondents reported believing that learners should practise English with multi-media (74.8%). Viewing the internet as a source and resource for English language learning (item 34) was endorsed by 72.8 %.

With respect to group work in the English class (item 26), 73.7% of the respondents acknowledged that it was a useful learning exercise, which is associated with communicative language approaches as mentioned in Chapter Two. As for autonomous learning (item 31), almost half of the respondents (49%) believed they could be in charge of their own learning processes and learn English on their own. The idea of being test-oriented and not having enough time to learn English was endorsed by 58.6% of the respondents. However, according to 73.3% of the respondents, the final English exams at Damascus University were not deemed as a precise indicator of the students' real competence in the English language (item 44), which is investigated further in the discussion chapter.

The responses to the items concerning communication strategies showed contrasting opinions. The survey respondents stressed the significance of speaking English fluently and the value of using English actively, which highlights their interest in the communicative use of English as a means to interact with their context. Thus, the majority of the respondents endorsed (item 14) the use of guessing as a communication strategy (72%), and half of them (item 9) agreed that it was fine to speak with mistakes, giving precedence to fluency over accuracy (51%). However, 74% of the respondents believed in the importance of speaking English with an excellent accent (item 7), and a total of 66.4% stressed the importance of speaking like a native speaker (item 37). Also, half of the respondents (53.3%) agreed that

learners' errors should not be ignored in order to prevent fossilisation (item 21). More than two thirds of the respondents (65.1%) agreed on only speaking the target language in the English classes (item 37), which may provide the respondents with immersion in the target language, which can also relate to item 11. As for their confidence in using English (item 43), half of the respondents thought that they were shy to speak English in front of others (50%).

In brief, answering RQ-iv quantitatively relies on Horwitz's (1988) descriptors as mentioned earlier. These are the survey respondents' views on learning and communication strategies, which are probably the most directly related to learners' actual language learning practices (Horwitz, 1988). The results of the items concerning learning strategies revealed that the respondents reported having some preconceived notions that facilitate the process of learning English such as practising with others as well as with multimedia. Almost half the survey respondents believed that they could relatively be autonomous learners and in charge of their own learning. With regard to communication strategies, even though the respondents agreed with some basic concepts of the communicative approach, they were still influenced by the traditional methods of learning. They were concerned about accuracy and error correction and, which may discourage their attempts to communicate in their English classrooms and hence inhibit them from using English and affect their language learning experience.

### **6.1-5 The respondents' motivation and reasons for learning English**

This section answers the sub-question, "What are the students' reasons for learning English in general?" quantitatively. These responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. Table 6.5 presents the results of the students' responses to the survey items under RQ-v.

<b>Frequency &amp; Percent</b>						
<b>20. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.</b>	<b>Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly</b>

	<b>Deviation</b>	<b>disagree</b>		<b>disagree</b>		<b>agree</b>
4.04	1.184	24	35	26	135	184
		5.9%	8.7%	6.4%	33.4%	45.5%
<b>25. I want to speak English well.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
4.34	.979	6	25	37	95	241
		1.5%	6.2%	9.2%	23.5%	59.7%
<b>28. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.50	1.165	20	86	46	175	77
		5.0%	21.3%	11.4%	43.3%	19%
<b>39. Syrians feel that it is important to speak English.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
4.04	.987	8	33	42	174	147
		2.0%	8.2%	10.4%	43.1%	36.4%
<b>40. I would like to have English-speaking friends.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
4.18	.959	7	25	39	152	181
		1.7%	6.2%	9.7%	37.6%	44.8%

Table 6.5: results of the analysis of the survey items linked to RQ-v

Answering RQ-v quantitatively relies on data about the survey respondents' integrative and instrumental motivations for learning English and their expectations of succeeding in learning the target language. A large number of the respondents agreed with the items linked to RQ-v, which showed that the respondents reported believing that learning English was important and they wanted to do well in English for both integrative and instrumental reasons. Specifically, most of the respondents agreed with the statement, "I want to speak English well" (83.2%) and the majority of the respondents (79.5%) agreed that speaking English was important for Syrians. As for the reasons why they wanted to learn English, the majority of the respondents



stated that it was because of integrative motivation: 82.4% of the respondents wanted to have friends from English-speaking countries, and two thirds wanted to learn about English speakers (62.3%); as well as instrumental motivation: English was important for good job opportunities (78.9%). This may suggest that the majority of the respondents were highly motivated to learn English.

### **6.1-6 The influence of war in Syria on the respondents' preconceived notions about foreign language learning**

This section answers the sub-question, "Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally?" quantitatively. These responses also contribute to answering the overarching research question. This sub-question was also answered qualitatively through item 46 presented in the next chapter. Table 6.6 presents the results of their responses to item 45 under RQ-vi.

<b>Frequency &amp; Percent</b>						
<b>45. The current circumstances in Syria have influenced my performance in the English classes and English exams at Damascus University.</b>						
<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
3.92	1.050	10	49	32	184	129
		2.5%	12.1%	7.9%	45.5%	31.9%

Table 6.6: results of the analysis of the survey item linked to RQ-vi

The majority of the respondents (77.4%) reported that the war in Syria affected their performance in class and their English exam results. Only 7.9% opted for a neutral position. The rest of the respondents disagreed with the statement (14.6%). The section below provides a summary for this chapter.

### **6.2 Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the results of the quantitative data analysis. The data

from the BALLI survey provided insights into the students' beliefs about English language learning and also a general overview of their overall belief system. As demonstrated in detail in the sections above, the data showed that the majority of the respondents held some beliefs about foreign language learning that, according to previous similar studies, were considered as facilitative beliefs, such as a belief in average ability for learning a foreign language and a belief in the use of learning and communication strategies. Also, the majority of the respondents were motivated to learn English despite their discouraging surroundings manifested in the war in Syria and its effects on them and their progress. Nevertheless, they also reported having some beliefs that could be detrimental to their language learning. For example, they believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude represented in the effects of age on learning and acquiring a foreign language. They also still held onto the traditional practices of language learning as evidenced by the great emphasis they placed on the importance of vocabulary words and grammar rules as well as accuracy and accents in learning the target language. In the next chapter, Chapter Seven, the findings of the qualitative data analysis are presented. Both the quantitative results and the qualitative findings are discussed in Chapter Eight.

# Chapter Seven

*"There is all the difference in the world between having something to say, and having to say something" (Dewey, 1943/1966, p. 56)*

## Chapter Seven: qualitative findings

In the previous chapter, I have presented the analysis of the quantitative data in this research, i.e., the descriptive analysis of the responses to the survey items under each of the research sub-questions. In this chapter, I present the findings of the qualitative analysis of the students' responses to the survey open-ended question and the semi-structured interviews, as pointed out in Chapter Five. In section 7.1, the qualitative analysis of the students' responses to the survey open-ended question is provided. In section 7.2, the findings of the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews are presented. Thus, sections 7.2-1 through 7.2-6 present the findings of each of the six themes generated from the semi-structured interviews, which contribute to answering the research sub-questions qualitatively as well as the overarching research question. In section 7.3, a summary of the chapter is provided.

### 7.1 Thematic analysis of data from the open-ended question

The responses to the survey open-ended question, item 46, provided glimpses of the situation and overall environment that the respondents reported being affected by as part of their lived experience during the war and their language learning experience inside and outside their language classrooms. Following are the main themes generated from the responses of 31 students as mentioned in Chapter Five presented together with students' quotes. It is important to clarify that in this section I refer to the survey respondents by numbers since it was an anonymous survey. In the next section, I use pseudonyms given that I worked with the participants very closely during the interviews.

**Feelings of safety:** most of the respondents (24 out of 31) talked about how the war affected them and their feelings, which had negative effects on their studies and progress. For example:

*"I decided not to go out as I was afraid of falling bombs and rockets, which affected my achievement in the English classes and exams."*

Respondent 1

Another, speaking on behalf of his/her classmates, emphasised the direct effects of the surrounding environment on the students:

*"The students are psychologically affected by the surrounding conditions, which impacted negatively on their studies and achievements despite their high levels of competence in English."*

Respondent 2

Another explained:

*"Learning a foreign language requires a lot of concentration in order to organise one's ideas because it's not the mother tongue. This is why it's not surprising if we don't do well in the exam under such circumstances. For me, I have little chance to practise speaking English and improve my language skills."*

Respondent 3

**Low morale vs. motivation:** de-motivation was another effect of the war which led some of the students to lose interest in their studies as pointed out by some of the respondents (7 respondents):

*"As a result of the war in Syria and lack of transport means, I stopped going to my classes for several months, which affected my motivation badly. In addition, unqualified teachers contributed to my bad performance and results."*

Respondent 4

Another said:

*"In general, everything in Syria discourages us from learning."*

Respondent 5

Another respondent suggested that some students began to believe in foreign language aptitude as a result of the war:

*"Some of the students started to believe that they didn't have the ability to learn English like other students. However, if they had more confidence in themselves and if they loved English they would be able to learn this language."*

Respondent 6

Other respondents (3 respondents) reported that they had to drop out of university

for one year due to the bad surrounding conditions.

One respondent stressed the necessity of learning English although the circumstances were not encouraging enough, which might have affected their motivation:

*"English is an important international modern language that we all should learn. However, what happened in Syria made it difficult for us to learn English."* Respondent 7

**Lack of services:** Almost half of the respondents (15 respondents) explained that power cuts and lack of internet access were major obstacles making it difficult for them to study and progress, which also affected their motivation. For example, one of them said:

*"I couldn't study because of power cuts, especially at night. I can't use the internet because of that too".* Respondent 8

In addition, lack of public transport and services as well as road closures prevented the students from attending their classes regularly, particularly the English classes as these classes are usually scheduled in the afternoon since they are not core courses, albeit mandatory.

Some of them (4 respondents) also reported that they could not make it to their final exams due to lack of public transport:

*"I missed three exams as I always arrived late because of lack of public transport."* Respondent 9

Another explained:

*"The current circumstances have affected my performance in the English classes and the English exam. This is because of lack of public transport in my village. I always arrive late to my classes and exams. Unfortunately, Damascus University's rules are very strict when it comes to attendance. I couldn't attend all my classes which made me fail my first year of university. Also, road closures prevented me from arriving on time. Power cuts also contributed to my inability to study at night."* Respondent 10

**Lack of human resources:** as mentioned in Chapter Two, the war resulted in teacher shortages, which led Damascus University to recruit new teachers most of whom did not have much experience in teaching. This according to the respondents led to a decline in the quality of teaching and learning. For example, one of them explained:

*"I believe that my bad performance in the English classes can be attributed to the fact that some of our English teachers aren't qualified enough to teach at university."* Respondent 11

Another added:

*"All native English teachers with their nice native accents, American and British, have left because of the crisis."* Respondent 12

Two respondents complained that the actual contact hours dedicated to the English classes were not enough, which can also be attributed to teacher shortages or to organisational issues. One of them said:

*"The English classes were late in the afternoon, and the contact hours were not sufficient."* Respondent 13

**Changing priorities:** three respondents explained that due to the economic pressures and bad circumstances, they did not have enough time to study as they were trying to find a job and meet their own and their families' survival needs:

*"As a result of the bad conditions, feelings of fear and instability, lack of public transport and high prices, our priorities as students changed. We're more concerned about meeting our everyday needs than learning English."* Respondent 14

The third added:

*"As a result of fear, instability, brain drain, high prices and corruption in the education system, safety and daily basic needs became more important than learning English for the students."*  
Respondent 15

**Normalisation of war:** one of the respondents believed that the longstanding war in

Syria had a "positive" impact on him/her as it motivated him/her to work harder in order to learn English, which may suggest that the war in Syria has been normalised for this respondent:

*"The current situation and my surroundings didn't affect my performance and progress at university. On the contrary, it motivated me to work even harder."* Respondent 16

**Previous language learning experience:** some of the respondents (7 respondents) pointed out that their English was not very good because their past language learning experience was not good enough, which might have affected their current learning experience at university based on Dewey's (1938) concept of experience:

*"Teaching English at the pre-university level isn't as good as it's supposed to be. This is why we enter college with weak knowledge of English."* Respondent 17

In addition, some of the respondents (8 respondents) explained that because of the war, they became test-centred paying too much attention to the content that is examined while overlooking other information that is equally significant. For example:

*"The war has influenced all the students, and consequently they just wanted to pass the final exam without benefiting from their English classes. Some of them even had to drop out."* Respondent 18

**Self-directed language learning:** two of the respondents hinted at the strategies he/she used to manage their foreign language learning during the war. For example:

*"When we speak in English we know our weak points and then improve our speaking watching movies and listening to music very useful and than improve our vocabulary [sic]."* Respondent 19

Finally, one of the respondents summed up most of the points mentioned above:

*"Syrian crisis influence on teaching English language: 1- Lack of security and safety that threatens the lives of individuals. 2- The power outage that has prevented communication through*



*the Internet especially (virtual universities). 3- The shortage of educational staff. 4- The closure of the centres and institutes specialized in teaching languages, especially English. 5- Lack of transportation and difficulty in moving between areas which prevented students from continuing their studies [sic]."*  
Respondent 20

The above themes have highlighted a number of issues that the respondents could see as impediments to foreign language learning under such living conditions and turbulent environment. These extracts shed light on the students' beliefs and experiences during the war and on how they would react and respond to their surrounding environment with respect to foreign language learning. The section below presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews, which provide more elaboration on the above themes as well as the quantitative results.

## **7.2 Thematic analysis of the participants' interviews**

In this section, the qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews is presented in relation to the research sub-questions, outlined below. The following themes were generated from the thematic coding of the interview transcripts as reported in Chapter Five:

- Difficulty of learning English at DU
- Learner autonomy
- Nature of the English language learning process
- Language learning strategies
- Motivation to learn English
- Impact of war

The research sub-questions are:

- **RQ-i:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the difficulty of foreign/English language learning, and what difficulties do they face while learning English at Damascus University in the context of war?

- **RQ-ii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the existence of special talents for language learning and the characteristics that successful foreign language learners should possess?
- **RQ-iii:** What preconceived notions do the students have regarding the basic elements of language learning and the process of foreign language learning and teaching in general and at Damascus University in particular?
- **RQ-iv:** What language learning strategies do the students perceive as effective while learning and communicating in English, and how do they apply them at Damascus University in the context of war?
- **RQ-v:** What are the students' reasons for learning English in general, and what motivates them to learn English in the context of war?
- **RQ-vi:** Has the war in Syria influenced the students' preconceived notions about foreign language learning generally, and if so in what ways?

It is worth noting that in this chapter there are many instances of cross referencing between the six themes below seeing that these themes are interrelated and interconnected as they focus on the students' different learning experiences in the context of war. Also, the short extracts, which represent the participants' stories, take us on a journey into their interaction with the surrounding environment and their overall learning experience. In the sections below, I use pseudonyms to refer to the interview participants as pointed out earlier.

### **7.2-1 Theme one: difficulties of learning English**

This theme contributes to answering RQ-i and the overarching research question qualitatively, as explained in Chapter Five. It deals with the participants' rating of the difficulty of the English language and with the difficulties they reported encountering while learning English at Damascus University and outside their classrooms.

First, none of the participants considered English as a difficult language, which is in

agreement with the survey results as the majority of the respondents (55.2%) did not consider English as a difficult language. Rather, they rated English as a language of average difficulty. Majd, for example, commented:

*"English isn't a difficult language. We have only to concentrate on the language skills."*

However, they explained that they faced difficulties in certain areas, which they attributed to various reasons. Following are the main areas that the participants reported struggling with. The participants' quotes are provided to highlight these problems:

- difficulties in speaking
- difficulties related to vocabulary in reading texts
- and difficulties in using grammar

### **Difficulties in speaking**

The majority of the interview participants (9 participants) considered speaking English as their weakest language skill. They also explained why they believed so. For example, Hekmat remarked:

*"I have a problem with speaking. Although it's a nice language like I have just said, I still find it difficult to start a conversation in English."*

Her comment shows a certain level of awareness of the difficulty she was facing, which can be associated with her metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1986). Also, her comment might suggest that she was interested in the functional and communicative use of English.

Majd explained that the students found it difficult to have conversations in English because they did not get enough opportunity to practise speaking in their English classes at Damascus University, which also reflects her language awareness as well

as her metacognitive knowledge and stresses the importance of language practice in language learning:

*"They [the students] aren't given the chance to practise speaking in English. This is one of the problems that the students face at Damascus University."*

Majd's comment also hints at the surrounding environment, i.e., the war and its impact on their learning (e.g., lack of practice), discussed further in section 7.2-6.

Fida described how he felt when he tried to speak English:

*"When I want to speak English, I feel that I'm short of words. I don't find the suitable words. This is the main problem that we face while learning English at Damascus University."*

Salam also shared a similar opinion:

*"I have some difficult, um, I don't have enough vocabulary to talk very good and when I was in any lecture in and this lecture, talk about [they speak English] I understand about, um, 80% from the, um, what they talk, so I, the specific difficult is the vocabulary. I don't have enough vocabulary to, to be very good in English [sic]."*

Fida and Salam seemed to be relating the problems they were facing when speaking English to lack of vocabulary. Lack of vocabulary can be associated with one form of performance anxiety, namely communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1977; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). Anxious students may experience negative effects during spontaneous speaking activities (Phillips, 1992). They, consequently, may forget previously learned information, including vocabulary (Ely, 1986; Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986). This also relates to the students' beliefs regarding the role of vocabulary in learning a foreign language, as pointed out in the previous chapter, section 6.1-3.

Fida went on to attribute this to the university English programmes which, according to him, were not focused adequately on speaking, discussed further under the interview theme of the nature of English language learning (section 7.2-3):

*"It's about the program. We don't have, we don't have conversation part. We focus, um, on vocabulary, we can say, on grammar, ... not speaking [sic] ... I meant that it's not given enough attention like the other skills at Damascus University ... Rarely do the students get involved in speaking activities."*

Fida's comment indicates that the teaching methods focus mainly on vocabulary and grammar. It also implies that the students were dissatisfied with these methods and language skills.

Nidal, on the other hand, ascribed this problem to being unable to attend the English classes regularly, which means lack of language practice and language exposure according to him:

*"I'm bad at speaking because I couldn't go to my college every time for every lecture, so my pronunciation is bad, um. I don't feel I'm feel ok speaking. I don't feel ok when I speak in English. I think the problem was because I couldn't go to my English lecture and, um, use my English [sic]."*

According to the interview participants, many students found it difficult to attend their English classes regularly either because they felt it was dangerous to leave their homes or because they lived far away from Damascus University and public transport was not available all the time or maybe because of both reasons, which meant for them missing the chance to practise English. More details on the impact of war on the students' learning experiences are provided in section 7.2-6 and in Chapter Two. Nidal hints at the significance of language practice and language exposure in language learning, which highlights his language awareness, discussed in the next section. The extract also shows that he was concerned about pronunciation, which is in line with the quantitative results in this respect.

Moreover, it can be noticed that what Nidal reported here with regard to the English classes seems to contradict what Fida and Majd mentioned earlier about the English classes. Nidal believed that attending his English classes would give him the opportunity to practise speaking in English; on the contrary, Fida and Majd and most

of the other participants blamed the problem of lack of practice on the teaching methods. This may suggest that although the participants attend, more or less, the same classes (with the same or different teachers) and share the general experience of learning English at Damascus University in wartime, each participant has had their own unique experience, which might influence their beliefs and attitudes differently. Prosser and Trigwell (1999, p. 16) argue that "When a student enters a learning context the interaction between the student and this context constitutes a unique learning situation for this student. The situation will be different for each student even though they may be in the same context. The reason for this is that the situation is constituted in the interaction between the student and the learning context – including any other students studying the same subject, the teacher and the milieu."

In addition, shyness, embarrassment, discomfort and fear of losing face were other reasons associated with difficulties in speaking (in public). For example, Najah and Nihad pointed out that the problem they faced while attempting to speak English was related to feeling shy and embarrassed to speak English in front of other students:

*"When I practise speaking, I usually do it with someone who doesn't make me feel nervous or embarrassed if I make mistakes in their presence."* Nihad

Aragao (2011, p. 307) maintains that "feelings like shame, fear and inhibition are strongly associated with beliefs about students' self-concepts in the foreign language classroom". Therefore, these participants tend to feel more comfortable and encouraged to speak English with people that they see as supportive and not critical of them, which could be described as language performance anxiety (McCroskey, 1977). Also, MacIntyre's (2007) willingness to communicate model identifies several social factors that can affect communication, such as the language learner's readiness to have conversations with people who encourage them and do not criticise them. This is in line with the survey items as 50% reported feeling timid when

speaking English in front of others.

### **Difficulties related to vocabulary in reading texts**

Majd and Ismat were the only two participants who reported finding reading and understanding English passages difficult because of their vocabulary words, which, according to them, made them struggle with learning English. Majd highlighted this point saying:

*"My main problem is reading ... So, there are lots of vocabulary words that I don't know and I can't even read. So, I face some difficulties with reading."*

Ismat stressed more or less the same point:

*"The vocabulary that we learn and the content of the texts are not explained enough. Some of the vocabulary words are odd and not familiar."*

This could be associated with learners' perceptions of the role of vocabulary in learning a foreign language, shed light on in the previous chapter, section 6.1-3.

### **Difficulties in using grammar**

Salam was the only participant who reported having difficulty in learning grammar:

*"For grammar, I face some difficult in grammar because I learn the grammar very good but I didn't practise very good about this grammar [sic]."*

Salam's problem can be related to the grammar-translation teaching method, explained in Chapter Two.

In conclusion, according to the interview participants, the difficulties they reported facing while learning English at Damascus University, especially speaking, are mainly attributed to some internal factors, such as feelings of shyness and embarrassment, and to lack of language practice and exposure due to the teaching

methods which were affected by the war and surrounding environment as a whole. These difficulties in learning English represent part of DU students' language learning (negative) experience.

### **7.2-2 Theme two: learner autonomy**

This theme contributes to answering most of the research sub-questions qualitatively in addition to the overarching research question. This theme deals with learner autonomy, which is, as it stands, a new emerging theme since it does not correspond fully to any of the survey areas as pointed out in Chapter Five. Learner autonomy is an important variable in foreign language learning, particularly with regard to the communicative use of English, learners' intrinsic motivation, language strategy use, metacognitive knowledge and self-directed language learning, as highlighted in Chapters Three and Four. This theme sheds light on how the participants tried to adjust their modes of study so as to cope with the impact of war on them. Four categories resulted from coding the participants' interviews under this theme, namely:

- learner's resilience
- self-reliance
- learner's language awareness
- and self-assessment

#### **Learner's resilience**

This category reflects the interview participants' determination and persistence to carry on against all hardships and difficulties. They reported trying to make the most of all means available during the war in order to learn English. In this category, the participants (Ismat, Sabah, Salam, Majd, Najah, Nour, Fida, Saria) explained how they made a lot of effort to continue learning English despite all the challenges facing them, which highlighted their learning experience in the context of war and



their interaction with their environment. Ismat, for example, commented:

*"There are some issues, such as bombs and explosions. But this made us more determined to learn English ... We've tried to adapt to these conditions in order to complete our education ... We will continue studying English whether in bad or good conditions. The language is part of us. This is how we feel."*

As for Sabah, he almost offered us a prescription for resilience so as not to give in to escalating pressures, which is in line with Dewey's description of the active character:

*"But I think if you're having a goal, if you want to achieve something, you can skip those obstacles in a way or another ... the need to be an active, an active person in this society, the need to help and to give always motivated me to get through those obstacles and continue learning [sic]."*

Fida also described how he endeavoured to learn English in spite of all the hindrances facing him. He showed resilience in the following extract, which was manifested in finding solutions to make up for the educational wastage:

*"We weren't able to attend our English classes, so we started to look for alternatives, such as watching films and series in English ... The movies and TV shows usually we download them on laptop ... When there is no electricity, there is nothing to do else, so I can pass the time watching movies and shows ... I subscribed to a mobile data service which is available most of the time even during a power cut [sic]."*

Fida's quote also sheds light on the strategies he employed to learn English, discussed further in section 7.2-4. Determination to study English was also reflected in Saria's words, who described her and her classmates' situation as tragic; nonetheless, she was more persistent to learn English:

*"The situation was tragic for us as students. It was like a challenge. But we were determined not to give up. We decided to complete our education. I like to improve myself regardless of the bad circumstances. My goal is to learn English. And I will work hard to*

*achieve that goal."*

Her comment highlights students' ability to cope with hard conditions as long as they are motivated enough to pursue their goals, which emphasises the active role of individuals in their learning experiences.

### **Self-reliance**

This category concerns how the participants described the way they took charge of their own learning in the face of a discouraging learning environment, which is associated with their self-directed language learning as well as their metacognitive knowledge, which is in agreement with the survey results as 49% of the respondents agreed that they could learn without a teacher or class. Realising that Damascus University was subjected to massive pressures, Hekmat and Majd emphasised that they and all the other students had to exert more effort in order to make progress without expecting any support or assistance from Damascus University, which highlights their autonomy as language learners:

*"Due to lack of resources and teacher shortages at Damascus University during the crisis, success is dependent on the students' own efforts." Hekmat*

Salam provided another perspective on how hard he worked to succeed in his exam while at the same time acknowledging that Damascus University's support was limited:

*"We should work hard to develop ourselves because the university doesn't provide us with enough information ... I did very well and passed my exam. Of course, the reason is that I relied on myself and personal efforts as I didn't get enough knowledge at ... university [sic]."*

According to other participants, self-reliance was manifested in other forms and initiatives, including English chat groups created by Ismat and her friends:

*"Some of my classmates and I created a group to chat in English."*

*"This can improve our conversation skills." Ismat*

The quote above stresses learner autonomy as mentioned above; it also sheds light on the participants' interest in the communicative use of the English language and at the same time. Other activities included meeting in cafés to practise English (Saria, Nihad, Nour), and an English book group created by Sabah and his friends.

### **Learner's language awareness**

This category highlights the learner's explicit knowledge about language and conscious understanding of how languages work and of how they should be learned and used (Carter, 2003). For example, when asked what they would change about their language learning experience at Damascus University during the war, the interview participants suggested different solutions that demonstrated their language awareness.

Fida suggested adding a half hour to each English class in order for the students to practise speaking in English with each other through discussing and exploring specific topics using the vocabulary they recently learned, which again highlights their interest in the communicative aspect of English:

*"I just want to add about half, half hour to English lecture in university just to be conversation between the students. Two students, um, just talk about, about anything which, with each other. So, they can, can learn speaking, use the vocabulary they have in speaking [sic]."*

As for Saria, she said:

*"For example, I may introduce new activities that can help the students improve their spoken English, such as a drama club or debate club in English."*

These suggestions may imply that the participants were aware of their weaknesses, particularly speaking as explained in section 7.2-1 above, which stresses their metacognitive knowledge. Also, Majd commented on other aspects:

*"I wish we had some interactive screens at Damascus University to help us learn English, which will make the English classes more enjoyable. Some teachers are boring, and we are a digital generation ... Therefore, we feel that we are in need of technology in order for our English classes to be more interactive and not dry or boring."*

Majd could sense a digital generation gap between the students and teachers, which according to her could play a key role in facilitating or impeding the learning process. Also, she emphasised the importance of using modern technologies to motivate the students to learn foreign languages.

Najah stressed that attending her English classes was very helpful despite the fact that most of the participants were critical of the English classes as mentioned previously:

*"Because when we, when I attend the course ... that more interesting from take the lecture [notes] and study at home, and body language of professor encourage me to understand more understand about English language [sic]."*

She focused on a specific aspect in the English classes, namely teachers' body language, which could have made up for the loss of language practice in the classroom according to her. This can also show that the students may have different experiences and different reactions to their surrounding environment as mentioned earlier.

### **Self-assessment**

Self-assessment is associated with learners' ability to talk about their proficiency in the target language as part of their metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1986). When asked about their proficiency level in English, all but one of the participants (Sabah) indicated that they had an intermediate level of English or below. For example:

*"Due to the crisis, I couldn't improve my English any more, and this is why I'm not satisfied." Hekmat*

*"I'm not good a little bit in English language. Medium! ... 'm not happy. In my level now, I'm not happy [sic]." Najah*

*"I'm not good. I'm not in perfect. But I'm good, I'm good [sic]." Majd*

*"I'm in the middle, I believe [sic]." Nihad*

*"I think I'm in average [sic]." Nidal*

Sabah, on the contrary, stated that he was one of the top five students in his English class. However, the participants' self-assessment was mainly based on comparisons they drew between their own performance and their classmates'. In their self-assessment, they depended chiefly on one criterion, which is the speaking skill, including accent and pronunciation. For example, Hekmat explained:

*"I think I have an intermediate level of English ... I believe that there are many students whose level of English is a lot better than mine, evidenced by their ability to start conversations with foreign people."*

Nidal also said:

*"I feel like I'm very weak in English in comparison with my friends because they can speak fluently in English. They can use their language to express their feelings."*

Comparing themselves with their classmates could lead them to experience anxiety and become anxious learners, particularly when they find themselves less proficient than others (Ellis, 2015), which may have negative effects on their autonomy, explored further in the discussion chapter.

As mentioned above, it can be noticed that the participants relied mainly on one criterion with regard to comparing their proficiency level in English with their classmates', namely the speaking skill, including conversation, pronunciation and accent, which could be for a number of reasons. For example, speaking could be the most observable thing within the classroom or it could be that the participants were really interested in conversational English. However, at the same time they were concerned about accuracy, which is in agreement with the quantitative results.

In summary, in this research, learner autonomy is dealt with from a perspective that is specific to my interview participants and their experiences and interaction with their learning context and surrounding environment. The categories within this theme highlighted the students' metacognitive knowledge, their self-directed language learning, and autonomy in addition to their perseverance to carry on in the face of obstacles. The categories also revealed that the students were interested in learning English for functional and communicative purposes. The findings also showed that the participants were concerned about accuracy.

### **7.2-3 Theme three: nature of English language learning**

This theme contributes to answering RQ-iii and the overarching research question qualitatively. It concerns the participants' views on English language learning and what they regarded as the most important skills of language learning in addition to their own evaluation of the English language teaching methods at Damascus University. Under this theme, two main categories are subsumed in addition to three more sub-categories. The main and sub-categories are as follows:

- language skills
  - listening is most important
  - speaking is most important
  - the skills complement each other
- and DU English language teaching methods

#### **Language skills**

Opinions were divided among the participants on the most important English language skill(s). Three subcategories emerged, including (1) listening is most important, (2) speaking (pronunciation) is most important and (3) the last category, the skills complement each other. This reflects the students' different preferences with regard to language learning, which also reflects their different language learning beliefs and experiences.

- **Listening is most important**

Three participants, namely Ismat, Nihad and Sabah, endorsed listening as the most important skill in English language learning. They reported that listening is more important than the other skills because, according to them, listening could help them perfect the other skills, which stresses the importance of the integration of language skills:

*"I think listening is more important than writing words because when I hear the correct pronunciation of a word, I can spell and pronounce it correctly."* Ismat

This is in line with the input hypothesis and input methods (Krashen and Terrell's natural approach and Asher's total physical response), deeming listening comprehension the foundation of acquiring or learning a second language (Horwitz, 2012). Viewing listening from a non-linguistic lens, Ismat also added:

*"I enjoy listening to English because that makes me experience positive feelings."*

This would add another level to her learning experience at Damascus University and her learning experience in general, which also relates to intrinsic/integrative motivation as discussed in Chapter Four.

Sabah gave a different justification for his choice. He compared listening with other language skills and concluded that listening was the most difficult skill and thus, for him, it ranked first in terms of importance. Difficulty equals importance:

*"The most important thing and the most difficult as well, it was listening. You know you can read ... You can write an essay from your own words ... but ... the most difficult one was listening [sic]."*

Sabah's rating of listening as the most difficult skill is in line with the survey results as 46.6% of the respondents ranked listening as more difficult than the other skills. Learners often complain that listening is the most difficult skill as it requires a lot of time to learn and acquire, since it involves "the student experiencing a variety of

emotions ranging from depression and frustration through to exhilaration and pride" (Walker, 2014, p. 167). This range of negative and positive emotions is in line with Dewey's (1916) passive and active elements of experience.

As for Nihad, she believed that listening and speaking are equally important, and both are more important than the other skills.

- **Speaking is most important**

Six participants, namely Najah, Nidal, Nihad, Nour, Saria and Salam regarded speaking as the most important language skill as they contended that being good at speaking would naturally affect the other skills positively, which also emphasises the importance of the integration of language skills:

*"I find the speaking is the most important from the other because when you can speak very good, everything, writing, listening and reading, it will be much easier when you can speak English very well [sic]." Salam*

Moreover, Nidal stressed the importance of speaking for communication in general:

*"For me myself, I think that speaking is the most important skill from those because without speaking you can't sell your ideas, you can't talk whatever you want to others people, you can't communicate with others [sic]."*

Nour emphasised the significance of the speaking skill as a key to achieving goals and success:

*"I think speaking is the most important skills you must to have because like now I'm speaking to you, you don't need to write. Actually, you must to have some listening skills, but the main idea is about speaking like if you know how to speak, you can do whatever you want [sic]."*

As for Najah, she pointed out that all language skills were equally important; nonetheless, she opted for a speaking sub skill, namely pronunciation, as the most important skill of all. Giving a rationale for her choice, she said:



*"The way of saying word correctly to make people understand what we say ... because some people confuse if don't understand anything you say, and sometimes we feel in misunderstanding [sic]."*

Giving special importance to pronunciation in foreign language learning has certain implications with regard to learners' beliefs, discussed in the next chapter. Nihad, as mentioned above, gave the same weight to listening and speaking on the grounds that these two skills together could make it easy for anyone to learn the other skills.

- **The skills complement each other**

Four interview participants agreed to this subcategory, namely Fida, Hekmat, Majd and Najah (though Najah also chose pronunciation as the most important skill). Fida, Hekmat and Majd stressed that the language skills are equally important in the learning process and that no one skill can be used independently of the others. Majd summarised those ideas in the following:

*"There is no skill that is more important than the other. The skills complement each other. For example, you need to listen in order to be able to pronounce words correctly and also to be able to spell them later on. The skills are linked to each other, so we can't ignore any of them."*

Also, Fida stressed the same idea:

*"I think they, they equal in important, they equal because, um, I can't use them without others [sic]."*

Despite the fact that under the previous sub-categories the participants specified explicitly which language skill was the most important part of foreign language learning according to them, they indirectly indicated, based on their explanations, that the skills can be integrated and complement each other. This is an important feature of communicative language approaches as mentioned in Chapter Two.

It is also worth noting that none of the participants rated the writing skill as an important or a needed language skill, which could be attributed to their lack of

practice in their classes and to the fact that MCQ tests do not include an essay writing component at Damascus University, as mentioned previously.

Also, despite the fact that the participants showed interest in vocabulary words and grammar rules, none of them classified these two skills as important parts of foreign language learning, which is in contrast to the survey results where the respondents considered vocabulary and grammar the most important parts in language learning, as revealed in the previous chapter, which is worth looking into.

### **DU English language teaching methods**

All the interview participants shared their thoughts and views on the teaching methods at Damascus University, which highlights their metacognitive knowledge and language awareness as well as their ability to evaluate the teaching methods during their learning experience in wartime. For example, Nidal, Fida and Sabah pointed out that teaching English at Damascus University and in Syria in general was not done properly because teachers kept focusing mainly on grammar and vocabulary:

*"Most of the teachers are focusing on grammar and vocabulary, just grammar and vocab. I don't say that grammar is not good, but the English is not only a grammar ... how to create a sentence, how to use this verb, how, how, and they don't focus on how to speak, how you could [express your ideas] ... so that's a huge problem actually ... I told you, that in Syria they focus a lot on grammar. So, from grade one, I have learned all of the grammar actually [sic]." Nidal*

*"Like grammars, vocabulary. In university, we just, um, how to say [sic], we started learning these rules again. I mean we started doing the same stuff we used to do but in a more elaborate way. So, we feel that we have become experts on these skills." Fida*

Nidal and Fida's comments refer to their previous language learning experience, particularly at school, which relates to Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity. It also highlights the school and university's focus on teaching grammar rules, as explained in Chapter Two.

Fida also added:

*"Teaching English at Damascus University isn't done properly. We suffer from a major obstacle in our English classes which is speaking and conversation. We learn grammar rules and new words, and we keep repeating them all the time. However, when it comes to speaking and conversation in English, not much attention is paid to this skill."*

This extract suggests that Fida was critical of DU teaching methods of the English language. Since he considered the language skills to be equally important, as seen in the previous category, Fida could detect some sort of imbalance in the amount of attention divided between the different language skills, particularly lack of practice of conversational English. He explained that teachers' attention was more focused on grammar rules and vocabulary words while other more important skills were ignored or not given the required amount of attention.

Majd, on the other hand, believed that her slow progress in English could be because she could not apply what she had in her class to real life:

*"I have a feeling that what we learn in the English classes has nothing to do with our daily life."*

Her comment may suggest that she was not only interested in learning English for the sake of passing her exam but also for other reasons, such as communication. This also shows that the students' exam results do not reflect their language learning abilities.

Hekmat stressed that the war was the main cause:

*"As for teaching methods of grammar and vocabulary, I believe ... the classes themselves ... became really boring and uninteresting, and the teaching methods became boring too [but] ... the way I study English was affected significantly by the war ... Everything was affected. The teachers were affected, and their teaching methods were affected too [sic]."*

Also, four of the participants reported that their English teachers would sometimes

resort to Arabic in the classroom. For example:

*"During the lesson, the teachers use both Arabic and English at the same time in order for the students to comprehend the lesson."* Ismat

In addition to their complaints about the teaching methods, some of the participants (4 participants) complained that the teachers tended to show more interest in the high-achieving students and ignore the low achievers:

*"Teachers always pay more attention to the high achievers only and neglect the ones who aren't doing well. This creates some sort of imbalance in the classroom as the high achievers keep progressing, while the low achievers feel more neglected and marginalized and eventually lose interest in taking part in the class discussions and activities."* Majd

According to Anyiendah (2017), this sort of selective teacher attention might lead students to feel that they are being discriminated against, which can result in anxiety and lack of confidence. He explained that the students consequently might find going to their English classes challenging and threatening. He also stressed that this sort of behaviour might be rooted in the teaching methods and teaching systems as a whole. This case can be associated with classroom anxiety and foreign language anxiety, explained in Chapter Four.

As for Nour, he explained that:

*"There is no enjoy when you study English in Damascus University because you feel like there is no connection between the professor and the student [sic]."*

He attributed the feeling of boredom in the English classroom to the teachers' teaching methods and lack of interaction with the students, which also reflects the students' different individual experiences.

In summary, with regard to the participants' perceptions of language learning, particularly in relation to the importance of the different language skills, the participants showed some preferences regarding specific language skills; however,

the majority to some degree indicated that the language skills would be more useful when integrated. None of the participants considered vocabulary and grammar as important skills in foreign language learning, which might have certain implications, investigated further in the discussion chapter. At the same time, the participants expressed their interest in the communicative aspect of the target language. As for the teaching methods, most of the participants showed dissatisfaction with these methods particularly their heavy focus on grammar and vocabulary, which may explain why they did not consider these two skills important.

#### **7.2-4 Theme four: language learning strategies**

This theme answers RQ-iv qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. It concerns the strategies and techniques the participants reported employing in learning the target language in their classes and outside their classes in the context of war. As mentioned previously, this research aims at shedding light on the range of the learning strategies that the participants employed to learn English in light of lack of materials and resources during the war. This is in order to highlight their self-directed language learning and autonomy as part of their learning experience in the context of war. The categories listed under this theme are the following:

- exam preparations
- language practice
- learning vocabulary
- practising listening
- practising speaking
- practising writing
- learning grammar

## **Exam preparations**

Given that assessment is part of the learning process (Biggs, 1999), this category addresses the participants' English exam preparations. The interview participants stressed their reliance on past exam papers as a strategy that could help them to deal with the exam questions, which has contributed to making them test-oriented learners as also pointed out by the survey respondents to the open-ended question. Fida, Ismat, Majd and Nour reported using past exam papers, which focus mainly on vocabulary words and grammar rules:

*"When I prepare for the exam, I review past exam papers in order to familiarise myself with the types of questions ... So, I focus more on grammar and try to memorise some vocabulary words as much as I can." Ismat*

Ismat highlighted the role of memorising vocabulary words and grammar rules in her exam preparation techniques. However, this is in contrast to the participants' discontentment with DU teaching methods which focus on vocabulary and grammar rules, as mentioned above.

Nour also stressed the importance of memorisation, which is associated with rote learning, a memorisation technique based on repetition:

*"What form will be the exam. It was, it require to memorise every single word in the book [sic]."*

Fida also stressed the role of vocabulary and translation in learning a foreign language and in passing foreign language exams, which can be linked to the grammar-translation method:

*"We have become experts on the exam questions, particularly past exam papers. These taught me about the exam questions. As for the vocabulary, I have learned a lot of English words. The problem that we face is our inability to know how to translate the questions [sic]."*

As a result, the participants themselves revealed that they became test-oriented

concerned only about passing their exams. For example, Majd, criticising the teaching methods, explained:

*"We're studying dry and boring stuff. This actually makes you study only to pass the final exam not to learn English."*

Nour concurred with Majd:

*"They [the students] don't study this class for learning, no, just for pass this class [sic]."*

Majd also focused on another aspect pertaining to the English MCQ exams at Damascus University as she explained that she and other students did not pass their English exam because of its format, which does not necessarily reflect their language learning abilities. She said:

*"The exam questions are multiple choice questions; consequently, and due to the surrounding environment, the students don't see the point in attending their English classes. Eventually, they fail their exams."*

Her comment sheds light on the way she processed things and how she associated causes with effects based on her language awareness and her own experience with MCQ exams. This might be due to shortcomings related to multiple-choice tests, as these tests encourage students to memorise certain facts and details and rely on lucky guesses (Higgins and Tatham, 2003). Consequently, from her perspective, attending the English classes would not contribute much to the students' learning and achievement.

She also added:

*"Unfortunately, the exam results don't reflect the students' actual competence in English."*

This may explain why only two participants (Sabah, Nihad) regarded DU English exams as an adequate criterion for evaluating their own competence and proficiency in English, while the rest of the interview participants disagreed with this idea,

which may have some implications regarding assessment at Damascus University, investigated in the discussion chapter. Also, Majd's comment is in agreement with the survey results since 73.3% of the respondents agreed that DU exams were not good tests of their English abilities.

Other participants (three participants) mentioned that they worked really hard and relied mainly on their own efforts:

*"I passed my English exam with a high mark, which can be attributed to the fact that I really worked hard."* Hekmat

*"I studied really hard. I dedicated myself this term because I really wanted to get high marks."* Sabah

### **Language practice**

Six of the participants emphasised the significance of language practice and language exposure in learning the target language. Reliance on language practice as a language learning strategy was also stressed by the survey respondents, as revealed in the previous chapter, section 6.1-4. Bialystok (1978, p. 77) contends that language practice can be employed "to operate on information already in Explicit [Linguistic] Knowledge for the purpose of automatising it and transferring it to Implicit [Linguistic] Knowledge." This indicates that language practice converts the knowledge that the learner has about language into intuitive and automatic information that the learner uses spontaneously. Thus, the more the learner practises and is exposed to the target language, the better they perform and advance in that language (Al-Zoubi, 2018).

Fida, for example, explained that the more the students practised the fewer obstacles they would face. Sabah also spent most of his interview stressing the importance of practising the foreign language being taught but pointed out that:

*"We [the students] don't have any practicing of the language in*



*Damascus University. It's not really available to practise the language ... When you learn English, you can just get the grammar and just memorise it. It's not the way things go. It doesn't work like that. I think it's all about practising [sic]."*

Sabah's extract shows that he was critical of the heavy focus on teaching grammar rules, which he attributed to lack of language practice at Damascus University, which resulted from the war as discussed in section 7.2-6. This may suggest that the students had certain expectations about university learning experience that they would compare with their present and actual learning experience.

Najah echoes Sabah's opinion as she regretted not practising enough as she faced a lot of difficulties due to that:

*"If I practise and practise and practise on English language a lot before I entered the university, because I faced a lot of difficults to ... improve our skills English [sic]."*

Nour commented that all the students should keep practising; however, he realised that his English classes did not provide him with the opportunity to practise speaking for example:

*"You must practise and practise and practise to, to learn English. But in Damascus University, you can go to class ... No one will take care about you if you talk or not, if you practise English or not."*

Nihad and Nidal noted that they were not able to practise much due to the war, which reflected negatively on certain aspects of their performance:

*"If I could go to my classes perhaps I will be better in speaking because then I will practise my English."* Nidal

As mentioned previously, despite the participants' dissatisfaction with their English classes, some of them, such as Nidal, still believed that attending these classes was better than skipping them, which suggests that the students had different experiences within their overall learning experience in the context of war as pointed out earlier.

## **Learning vocabulary**

This category concerns the strategies that the interview participants utilised while learning new vocabulary words and dealing with reading passages. The participants reported using several tactics to learn new vocabulary. These are translation (a cognitive strategy according to Oxford's (1990) classification), memorisation (a memory strategy), using new words in new sentences (a memory strategy), understanding new vocabulary from context, reading dual language English-Arabic novels printed with parallel text (a cognitive strategy), reading short stories (a metacognitive strategy), watching YouTube videos and learning new words through listening (a cognitive strategy). The quotes below clarify these tactics:

For example, four participants (Fida, Najah, Nidal, Salam) relied on translation (English into Arabic) and memorisation:

*"I find a lot of words that I don't know. So, I translate these words and memorise them as they are used very frequently." Nidal*

Nidal's comment can be associated with the grammar-translation method, explained in Chapter Two. This may explain why almost half of the survey respondents (47%) agreed that translation was an important part of learning English. Using translation can make learners teacher-or-dictionary dependent; as a result, they may not be able to develop practical strategies needed for communication with others (Peachey, n.d.). An implication of this is the possibility that learners become less autonomous and less self-reliant, making them lose confidence and doubt their abilities and may eventually start to believe in the existence of foreign language aptitude (Victori and Lickhart, 1995).

On the contrary, Hekmat and Ismat reported avoiding using Arabic translation while learning new words.

*"I check their meanings in an English-English dictionary in order to practise thinking in English. I sometimes try to memorise the shapes*

*of new words through looking at them several times."* Hekmat

Hekmat highlighted the importance of using an English-English dictionary which according to her could help her to think in the target language. Thinking in English is one of the language immersion strategies, which is in line with the survey results as 71.6% of the respondents considered thinking in the target language as an essential part of learning that language. She also relied on drawing mental images of the new words, one of the memory strategies in order to remember them.

Majd and Sabah reported relying on memorisation and the use and repetition of sentences containing new words while on the bus, for example:

*"I usually depend on memorisation. Sometimes, I use the new words that I learn in sentences."* Majd

As for Najah, she pointed out that she preferred reading dual language English-Arabic novels printed with parallel text in order to learn new vocabulary. Salam also recommended reading short stories in order to gain new vocabulary words, which he could memorise on his way to Damascus University through repetition.

Also, in their attempt to integrate different language skills, Saria and Ismat learned lots of new words through listening to English songs and watching English films mainly on YouTube:

*"Sometimes, I learned some vocab from songs ... from some movies [sic]."* Saria

### **Practising listening**

All of the participants stressed the importance of listening in foreign language learning since it is one of the two main receptive language skills. The interview participants used more or less the same tactics. All of them reported watching English films and shows on YouTube and other websites whenever they managed to in order to practise listening, taking into consideration power cuts and lack of fast and reliable internet access, discussed in detail in section 7.2-6. This is also in line

with the survey results as 72.8 % of the respondents reported depending on the internet to find materials to practise English.

Listening on a regular basis and paying attention to pronunciation was recommended by all the interview participants. Hekmat remarked:

*"It's important to listen to English [songs] and watch English films and pay attention to pronunciation and intonation."*

Watching films with or without English subtitles on YouTube was another tactic employed by most of the participants. Fida commented:

*"I sometimes watch programs without Arabic subtitles or with English subtitles. I feel that my speaking and conversation skills are improving."*

Fida explained that through practising listening he could improve speaking as well, indicating that the language skills are indispensable to each other. Ismat provided examples of the YouTube channels that she would watch regularly.

In addition to highlighting the significance of watching English films with or without English subtitles, Sabah stressed that he is an auditory learner, who learns through hearing and listening, indicating his awareness of the type of learner he is. He said:

*"I learn by listening, so getting the information from the professor is help me a lot to remember it even when I studied at home I feel easier to study something when I've already listened to it before from the professor [sic]."*

### **Practising speaking**

The interview participants provided examples of the strategies that they adopted in order to enhance their speaking skills in English, mainly outside their classrooms. For example, using listening as a means to improve speaking was highlighted by some of the participants.

Practising speaking with friends was suggested by Ismat Nour, and Majd who met with their friends in cafés for example to discuss different topics in English.

*"My friends and I sometimes meet and speak English with each other." Majd*

Nour added that he agreed with his friend to correct each others' mistakes while practising speaking, which highlights their concern about accuracy and error correction:

*"When I call my friend, I talk with him English. If there is something wrong, he tell me, and if he makes any mistakes, I will tell him [sic]."*

Repetition was adopted by Najah as a tactic to practise speaking. She utilised YouTube videos to improve her speaking skills by means of repetition and imitation while watching these videos, which are among the oldest foreign/second language teaching and learning approaches (Ghazi-Saidi and Ansaldo, 2017).

Using social networking applications, such as *WhatsApp* groups, were also made use of as a speaking tactic.

*"Some of my classmates and I have created a WhatsApp group in order to communicate in English for a couple of hours every now and then." Nihad*

Also, Saria said that sometimes she would speak English even with her family members as a means of practice.

### **Practising writing**

Only four participants (Salam, Fida, Saria, Nidal) stated that they practised writing, which can be attributed to their lack of practice in their language classes and to the fact that MCQ tests do not include an essay writing component as mentioned previously. This provides evidence that those participants were interested in the functional use of English although they were not required to do so in their classes or for their exams, which also means that their exam failure is not an indicator of their

linguistic ability. Salam, for example, explained that he would watch English films and shows and write summaries of those shows, which can be linked to the integration of language skills:

*"I study English like I watch, I watch a lot of movie and series, um, to practise my listening and I write summary of this movie and series to practise my writing [sic]."*

Practising writing and reading together was another tactic employed by some of the interview participants to practise writing, which can also be linked to integrating language skills. Nidal explains:

*"For writing and reading, I practise it because no need to other students or other teacher to communicate with, so I was practising it. I downloaded books and I try to write about [sic]."*

### **Learning grammar**

The participants gave a variety of answers with regard to how they reviewed the grammar rules taught in their classes. Hekmat illustrated that she would read the rules and try to make sense of them through reviewing examples:

*"As for grammar rules, I usually read the grammar rules and try to understand them through the given examples."*

Nour, Najah and Majd relied on modern technology, YouTube videos in particular, while attempting to find clear and concise explanations of the grammar rules in question:

*"Actually, I hate grammar. I try to, to just watch some video on YouTube to know how to use each one [sic]."* Nour

Majd also attempted to teach the new grammar rules to her classmates as a strategy to learn these rules, which might make her feel more committed to her studies as she would feel responsible for other people:

*"When I teach certain grammar rules to my classmates, I increase*

*my own understanding even more."*

Reading short stories was suggested as a helpful tactic in understanding the grammar rules, as Najah stated:

*"Through short stories ... make learning English language more interesting, and we will learn grammar automatically if listening or reading short story everyday at least one [sic]."*

Nidal and Nihad emphasised that they would usually attend their English classes and follow their teachers' instructions and explanations so as to avoid making any mistakes.

To conclude, the categories under this theme focused on the strategies and tactics that the interview participants reported using while learning and communicating in English in the context of war in Syria, both inside and outside their classrooms. The examples and explanations provided by the participants reflect their metacognitive knowledge and beliefs about language learning, which constitutes part of their learning experiences and interaction with their learning context. They reported using a range of strategies that they believed to be effective taking into account the surrounding environment and lack of resources. Based on Oxford's (1990) classification, the strategies they reported employing fall within the cognitive, metacognitive, memory, affective and social strategies. Those strategies are also the tools they used to interact with their learning environment during their learning experience. Their strategy selection and use reflect how they were trying to cope with their context and the surrounding conditions. The findings revealed that the participants showed interest in the communicative use of English although they were concerned about accuracy and correct pronunciation.

#### **7.2-5 Theme five: motivation to learn English**

This theme answers RQ-v qualitatively and contributes to answering the overarching research question. It concerns the students' motivation to learn English, which is in

agreement with the survey area of motivations and expectations as mentioned in Chapter Five. Under this theme, the coding of the 11 interviews produced two main sub-themes under this theme in addition to several categories under each of the two sub-themes. These are:

- integrative/intrinsic motivation
  - Love of English language
  - Love to learn about English culture
  - A perceived need
- instrumental/extrinsic motivation
  - Employment
  - Travelling abroad
  - Opening up opportunities
  - Conveying a message
  - Military service evasion
  - Giving back to the country
  - Meeting societal expectations

### **Integrative/intrinsic motivation**

The responses under this sub-theme highlighted the interview participants' integrative/intrinsic motivation to learn English in the context of war.

#### **- Love of English language**

The findings show that eight participants were motivated to learn English because they loved it and enjoyed learning it. For example, Hekmat said:

*"I have always loved English ... English is a beautiful language that everybody needs."*

Learning English also helped her:



*"to go away from this world and enter a new and enjoyable world."*

This is testimony to a genuine enjoyment of language learning, an enjoyment so profound that could be seen as a means of escaping from reality, the harsh reality of war, in ways that might be similar to the escapism offered by reading a good book or watching a film. The above quote could also be viewed within the contextual approach as a metaphor that the participant was using to define her context and speak about her experiences of learning English in a specific context (Ellis, 1999 cited in Barcelos, 2003a).

This love for English and enjoyment of learning it was also shared with others and with their teachers, who were also another reason for the participants' love for English.

*"We enjoy attending the classes. The English classes are good. We love learning English, and we prepare for the classes ... I love English because of her [the teacher]." Ismat*

*"[I'd like to] take part in making others love it as I love it." Majd*

This suggests that beliefs and motivation were also social constructs shared and constructed by the learner and others who are involved in their learning experience (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2013), which is also in line with the communal aspect of Dewey's (1938) concept of experience (Acampado, 2019).

Ismat's extract about her teacher is in line with the survey results given that 70.8% of the respondents agreed that they could benefit a lot of their teachers (non-native English teachers). Her comment, however, seems to contradict Nour's comments in section 7.2-3 to a certain extent, where Nour thought that the teacher made the English class boring as he/she was not good at interacting with the students. They could be describing the same teacher or two different teachers, suggesting that they were having different experiences within their overall shared learning experience at Damascus University. Thus, each individual student has his/her own unique experience which may influence their beliefs and perceptions differently as stressed

earlier.

- **Love to learn about English culture**

This category is associated with the interview participants (4 participants) who expressed their interest in learning about and integrating into the English culture.

Nidal said:

*"I love to, I love to learn about the English culture, English people, so English will help me a lot."*

Learning English for Nidal will enable him to identify with the native speakers of English. Majd also explained:

*"When we learn English, we don't just learn the language. We also have to learn about the culture."*

For Majd, knowing about the culture is indispensable to learning the language of that culture. Interest in knowing and learning about the culture of the English language was also expressed by the survey respondents as seen in the previous chapter, section 6.1-3.

- **A perceived need**

When asked about whether this was the right time to learn English, Nour and Sabah stressed the importance of learning English as a perceived need. They both emphasised that the choice of learning English should be a priority and should be independent of the surrounding conditions. This may suggest that they had strong motivation to learn English. Nour said:

*"I think there is no time, no specific time to learn English. You have to learn English whatever was, there was a war or there was not a war. You have to learn English [sic]."*

Also, four of the interview participants (Hekmat, Majd, Nidal, Nihad) hinted at the fact that English is a world language; therefore, they need to learn it. This is best

illustrated by the following two quotes:

*"English is an international language, and you need to learn it, which will drive the students, and I'm one of them, to learn it."* Majd

*"It's an international language, and it's used more than any other language."* Nidal

The above categories highlight the participants' genuine interest in learning the target language mainly for the sake of the language itself, which constitutes a unique part of their foreign language learning experience, particularly during the war.

### **Instrumental/extrinsic motivation**

In addition to their integrative/intrinsic motivation, the interview participants exhibited instrumental/extrinsic motivation manifested in the following aspects:

#### **- Employment**

Eight of the interview participants associated learning English with good job opportunities, particularly during the war, which is in agreement with the survey results as 78.9% of the respondents reported being motivated to learn English in order to get a good job. Nour, for example, believed it was very important to learn English in order to secure a good job:

*"English, it's the main required for jobs, for if you want to learn, if you want to employed, if, anything you want to do, you must to learn English, especially in war [sic]."*

While expressing the same idea, Majd, Nihad and Saria pointed out that irrespective of one's field of study, they should learn English to help them find a job. This could also testify to their awareness as language learners of the requirements of the labour market and how they should prepare for that.

*"Learning English during the war is a priority because I should enhance my skills. So, if I want to apply for a job, I'm required to be good at English. No matter what I'm specialising in at university, I*

*have to study English [sic]."* Nihad

Three other participants (Hekmat, Najah, Salam) also highlighted the connection between learning English and employment:

*"When I improvement my English language, I will get an ideal chance in job to work in any companies in the future or any international organisation. My dream will come true if I be proficient in English language [sic]."* Najah

Moreover, acknowledging the current situation in Syria in respect of career prospects and considering English to be a determining factor in reaching his ambition, Fida took this further and expressed his desire to find a good job opportunity abroad:

*"After we graduate from Damascus University, as you know, we have to travel abroad to find a good job opportunity as there aren't enough job opportunities in Syria during the war. When we travel, we need to use English since it's an international language."*

- **Travelling abroad**

All but three of the participants (Saria, Salam, Sabah) pointed out that they wanted to learn English in order to be able to travel and survive abroad.

*"I need English because I'm going to travel abroad away from war, and when I arrive in Europe, I will be in need of English in order to survive."* Nihad

Nihad's need to communicate with foreign people may not seem to be entirely driven by a genuine interest in learning the target language. Rather, her motive is related to her own survival in a new environment with a new experience.

In addition, Ismat hinted at escapism while speaking on behalf of her male classmates and their need to learn English in order to travel and flee the war and survive abroad, where they could have different experiences:

*"As for male students, they kept going to their English classes*

*because they wanted to travel abroad ... Most young men have left the country, and the rest are actually learning English in order to be able to travel abroad and flee the war."*

According to Ismat, the need for travel to escape the war was even more pressing for male students, and thus learning English was their vehicle of survival given that they are required to join the army following their graduation.

The rest of the participants (Hekmat, Majd, Najah, Nidal) also focused on the need to learn English in order to survive the war and be able to communicate when they travel abroad.

- **Opening up opportunities**

Learning English according to the participants could offer them more opportunities. For example, Najah talked about her ambition and plans to pursue her postgraduate studies abroad. She said:

*"After graduation from university, English language help me to complete higher studies abroad in any program, in any master program [sic]."*

Salam expressed the same idea stressing his need to study English in order to progress in his studies and to be qualified to complete his higher studies abroad.

*"In this crisis ... and in my university, I need, the English because I need it in my study ... and to pursue my study in London ... after I finish my university [sic]."*

Moreover, Sabah emphasised that the need to study English is not limited to the English language classes only; rather, this need extends to the other modules and courses since most resources available are in English:

*"And now all the, I mean the main even scientific books, all the books in the world, the main technology, the new technology, is all in English [sic]."*

- **Expressing one's ideas**

Given that English is a world language, learning English has become a tool for sharing concerns and experiences with the world through social media, particularly with regard to the war. Hekmat pointed out that English could help her to talk about how she felt during the war and could thus convey her message to the whole world:

*"Also, through English, you can express your feelings about the war to people all over the world."*

English in this sense has thus become an empowering tool especially for women under such dire circumstances, which could help them to interact with their environment. This may offer them a sense of relief that they are not alone in their predicament, which can enhance their resilience. This also can relate to their lived experiences during the war and their desire to share them with others which will enrich these experiences.

- **Military service evasion**

It is worth mentioning here that students wishing to apply for postgraduate degrees in Syria are required to take an English language exam for their applications to be considered. If they pass the exam, they will be exempted from serving in the military forces for a whole year. For example, Fida commented:

*"For example, it allows us to defer joining the military service."*

Hence, English is used by young men as a means of escape and survival.

- **Giving back to the country**

Sabah explained that he was keen on giving back to his own country. He viewed English as an instrument which could help him and equip him to achieve his goal of serving his country. Also, English here could be seen here as an empowering tool that would help him to achieve his goal:

*"I wanna do something for the country that has always helped me. I wanna do something that really I can give a little bit back to this country that I was raised in. I think by learning English I can do a lot of things [sic]."*

- **Meeting societal expectations**

Ismat and Salam wished to meet societal expectations through English. For Ismat, her family and her English teacher were the main sources of motivation. As for Salam, his father always encouraged him to learn English. He said:

*"My father motivate me to study English and he said to me you should study it very well because English is, it is everything in the world [sic]."*

This point highlights the role of (significant) others in "co-constructing" the students' beliefs and experiences (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2003) as well as motivation, which shows that beliefs and motivation are socially constructed and contextually situated. Therefore, having high motivation, albeit mostly war-driven, could represent, according to Dewey (1916), the active element of their learning experience at Damascus University within the overall surrounding environment, i.e., the war.

To sum up, it can be noticed that whether the participants were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to learn English, their motivation was affected by the overall surrounding environment, i.e., the war and unrest. The participants were mainly discussing their personal experiences in relation to others' experiences, i.e., their classmates, as they were attempting to learn English during the war. All the participants were keen on learning English for more than one single reason (for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons), which could prove that intrinsic/integrative motivation and extrinsic/instrumental motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive as stressed in Chapter Four. Having high motivation can represent the participants' active aspect of their learning experience. Escapism and empowerment could be seen as tools that some of the participants used in order to interact with their environment and survive.

### **7.2-6 Theme six: impact of war**

This theme contributes to answering RQ-vi qualitatively and to highlighting the general environment which helps in answering the rest of the research sub-questions and the overarching research question. It concerns the context and surrounding environment and hence addresses the impact of war on the students and how this as a consequence might have affected their studies and progress in general and their English language learning in particular. Coding the participants' responses under this theme resulted in six main categories, namely:

- feelings of safety and uncertainty
- lack of public services and utilities
- lack of physical resources and extracurricular activities
- lack of human resources
- and normalisation of war

Some of these categories were briefly covered and highlighted by the survey respondents through the open-ended question. Discussing these categories in detail during the interviews resulted in deeper understanding and new emergent categories. The participants showed awareness of the effects of their surrounding environment on their learning experiences and progress. Most of these categories reflect their lived experiences during the war.

#### **- Feelings of safety and uncertainty**

All the interview participants reported that they were affected by the war in Syria, which eventually influenced the way they approached their foreign language learning as they revealed, which is in agreement with the survey results as 77.4% of the respondents believed that the war in Syria took its toll on them and their studies in various forms. They explained that the sounds of explosions and tragic events they witnessed had negative effects on their studies and performance in their classes.



Sabah, Nihad and Nour, for example, talked about one particular incident where mortar bombs fell on the university campus during the exam and how that impacted significantly on their experience at Damascus University:

*"It's [a bomb]. We had one in my class. So, for sure that affected my whole study and all the students as well. So, in that time, it was really difficult to keep up with your studying and as well being safe [sic]." Sabah*

*"I was nervous. I remember one time I was in the exam hall and the sounds of explosive shells were very loud and close. I was trying to finish the exam as fast as possible and as a result I couldn't answer lots of simple questions." Nihad*

Nour recounted another incident where he was attacked by two masked gunmen on his way to university. They stole his phone, laptop and wallet and threatened to kill him, which affected him and his parents very badly. He started rethinking his priorities, which as a result might have affected his motivation and approaches to learning:

*"I was in the alley near the university. I wanted to come back home. There was two guys with guns. They told me to, they put the guns on my head and they told me to give them what I have. They took my phone, my laptop, all the money on my wallet ... it was my first time I was under this condition ... I was too scared. I don't know. I was surprised ... I don't know. It took some minutes to understand what happened around me ... My parents wanted me to travel out of Syria because, you know ... it affected on me so bad [sic]."*

Nihad shed light on another aspect under this category:

*"What made the situation even worse was the teacher who was also nervous, which led to difficulties in communication inside the classroom."*

This may suggest that DU students had to deal with different sources of anxiety, fear and uncertainty which might have led to miscommunication with their teachers. As a consequence, according to Ismat who shared the same experience, this situation contributed to creating barriers between the students and teachers affecting the

students negatively, particularly when coupled with an atmosphere of tension and fear:

*"We felt scared, and while we were taking our exams ... the students were suffering from tension as well as stress ... the students were not sure what to prepare or study to pass their exams."*

As for Fida, he highlighted another dimension of the impact of war on his ability to focus on his studies. He stressed how residential and emotional instability influenced his psychological and mental well-being which eventually reflected badly on his studies:

*"The situation was very bad ... My family ... had to move house due to the violence around us. This in particular had a very negative psychological effect on me ... I was not comfortable psychologically for long time [sic] ... which made me unable to study or work hard."*

Hekmat also had a similar experience with residential instability:

*"My family had to leave our home and move to my grandparents'. Also, my uncles who were forced to leave their homes moved with their families to my grandparents'. There were too many people who have different mentalities and habits living together."*

This, as she reported, resulted in a lot of disruptions to her studies as too many people were living together in the same place.

Another aspect shed light on by Hekmat concerns how young people, like herself, were exposed to scenes of violence and horror, which became the new normal, instead of being dedicated to their studies and taking part in various cheerful activities, such as watching English films to improve her English. She said:

*"Wars always have a strong psychological impact on everybody, particularly students, who are supposed to feel happy and excited about learning a foreign language at this stage of their lives as young people ... I have never ... heard stories of the death of young people and friends. Falling rockets and explosions while I was in class were new experiences for me. I have almost lost interest in my studies in general ... the noises and sounds of explosions that*

*penetrated our ears and hearts while we were in class or while we were taking our exams influenced us negatively."*

Hekmat seemed to be comparing the experience that she expected or was hoping to have as a first-year university student in normal conditions with the experience she was actually having in reality. Her long extract provides evidence on the impact of context on learners' beliefs and experiences. Thus, she had to deal with a totally different experience, which could have left her disillusioned.

Nidal, Fida, Majd, Salam and Najah described how the explosions and bombings distracted their attention significantly and consequently disturbed their studies.

*"The circumstances weren't very good. I live in the vicinity of the line of contact. Therefore, we used to hear lots of explosions, which was very annoying. I couldn't study under such conditions." Fida*

*"Explosions were horrific. While inside the classroom, we weren't able to pay attention to our teachers." Majd*

Nidal sarcastically described his surrounding environment and how unsuitable it was:

*"You can say it's [the surroundings] quiet if you like the sounds of bombs and explosions near your house. No of course, the environment were so bad actually and you can't focus on your study, because of the war outside [sic]."*

Using sarcasm could be viewed as an escapism technique or mechanism in this context that may help Nidal and others to forget about their unpleasant realities and experiences.

One more aspect related to this category was highlighted by Majd, Salam and Saria, who explained how worried they were about their families, which exacerbated the situation further and made them unable to focus on their studies.

*"I face difficult because I live alone with my mother and my sisters, and my father and my brother live in another city [sic]. So, I felt worried about them all the time ... Therefore, I wasn't able to*

*concentrate at all."* Salam

Feelings of safety and uncertainty could relate to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs since basic needs, such as shelter, warmth and safety are more important than higher needs at any point in time. As a result, the students' beliefs, motivation and attitudes might have been affected. Wars and unrest can have direct impact on students' physical safety, well-being and ability to learn. These effects and memories may last with them for so long after the war is over and may consequently affect their academic progress as discussed in Chapter Two.

- **Lack of public services and utilities**

Lack of public transport, traffic jams, power cuts and lack of reliable internet access were the most common obstacles that affected their studies, which subjected them to unique learning experiences where they had to adjust and readjust themselves to cope with their environment. Acute shortage of public transport prevented most of the students from attending their classes regularly, particularly those living far away from Damascus University.

For example, Saria and Sabah stressed that lack of public transport made them unable to attend their classes, particularly the English classes as these classes are usually scheduled in the afternoon:

*"[P]ublic transport ... affected us really badly. We always arrived late for our classes and lectures, and as a result, sometimes we weren't allowed to attend."* Saria

Nidal pointed out that due to prolonged or frequent power cuts and lack of internet access he could not meet some deadlines:

*"There was no internet for three weeks on row. After the internet come again, there was [power outage]. So, we couldn't manage our homework in the deadline [sic]."*

Nour and Salam described their study environment which was not encouraging:

*"It was helpless ... you must to fight to study. There is no lights, no electricity, no internet. Sometimes I study on the light of the candle [sic]." Nour*

Hekmat and Nihad added that electricity cuts in winter made it even more difficult for them to study while they were trying to keep warm since heating fuel was not available.

*"Power cuts affect my studies, especially when accompanied by cold weather, as I try to cover myself with lots of blankets to keep myself warm in winter, I suddenly fall asleep, which prevents me from studying." Hekmat*

Majd also added that electricity cuts affected not only her studies but also her eyes, which would be seen as a negative learning experience:

*"Power cuts for long hours can affect my health negatively. This sometimes affects my eyes and gives me headaches."*

Such impediments could limit the options and resources that the students would rely on in their foreign language learning and could affect their motivation and success or may as a result contribute to pushing them to rethink their priorities.

- **Lack of physical resources and extracurricular activities**

Due to the war in Syria, Damascus University could not afford to provide or maintain the physical resources required for the learning/teaching process. Since most of the Syrian universities, located in war zones, closed down since they were severely damaged, their students were hosted at Damascus University leading to large class sizes as mentioned in Chapter Two. Consequently, most extracurricular activities were suspended. All the participants expressed their frustration with the lack of the necessary facilities to support their foreign language learning.

For example, the number of students used to be accommodated in one classroom tripled, which limited the teachers' options and led most of them to abandon communicative teaching approaches and resort to traditional teaching methods. This

affected the students' ability to practise English in their classes and limited their language exposure as discussed in section 7.2.4. Salam described this situation:

*"The student commitment ... in learn ... English because in university there are a lot of students the same hall, so the lecture [class] ... be boring and you cannot listen very good because there are a lot of students ... [from] another university in Syria ... because all, most of the universities closed because of the crisis in Syria [sic]."*

Najah and Nidal also touched upon the lack of other facilities such as language labs and the English Club and how that affected the students' learning and progress. The English Club included a drama club, a debate club, a book club, a poetry club, a writing club and a presentation skills club, mentioned in Chapter Two:

*"At Damascus University we missed techniques, some techniques, like English lab, because English lab can help students a lot [sic]."*  
Najah

Lack of the necessary learning facilities and resources would put more restrictions on the teachers' and students' available options of learning strategies and tactics and would affect their learning experience.

- **Lack of human resources**

Almost half of the interview participants stated that teacher shortages had a negative impact on their learning and achievement in their English classes. Najah, Nidal and Salam, for example, explained that most of the highly qualified English teachers, Syrians and non-Syrians, left Syria because they did not feel safe anymore, as discussed in Chapter Two:

*"Almost doctors [university professors] travel from Syria because the war in Syria and there are students teach us [sic]."* Salam

Teacher shortage was not only limited to the Syrian universities. Schools in Syria also suffered from the same problem. This also could have its effect on the quality of teaching at school and consequently at university as also pointed out by one of the

survey respondents. Also, Majd explained:

*"Due to the crisis and teacher shortage, schools started to hire unqualified teachers. For example, I know someone who's just finished his high school and is now hired to teach English at school. He isn't qualified or trained. This is wrong and this is the result of the crisis. Therefore, the students start their university education with a very weak basis in terms of the English language."*

Accordingly, teacher shortages, according to the interview participants, could reflect badly on the students' performance and on the overall quality of English language teaching at Damascus University.

- **The normalisation of war in Syria**

Despite, or maybe due to, the longstanding war in Syria, some of the participants seemed to believe that the war and unrest had "positive" effects on them as a coping strategy. Three participants (Fida, Ismat, Majd) talked about their experiences with the war and how it resulted in "positive" impact. The same was also revealed by one of the survey respondents to the open-ended question. Fida remarked:

*"Strangely enough, the crisis has had a positive impact. Of course, wars have no positive influence. But for me, it has affected me positively in a sense. We weren't able to go out much, so we started to look for alternatives, such as watching films and series in English. We started watching these programs more and more as we couldn't go out. I started to feel that my English was improving thanks to these techniques."*

Fida's comments can also be seen as an example of the students' resilience and relentless efforts to interact and cope with their environment as part of their learning experience at Damascus University. Also, his comments shed light on his use of learning strategies and highlight his metacognitive knowledge as well as his ability to talk about the outcome of his learning efforts (Wenden, 1986).

Ismat explained:

*"I think that the good thing about this crisis is the fact that it motivated young men and women to study English more."*

As for Majd:

*"The negative impact changed and became positive motivation. Time was wasted against my will, so I decided to change my own way of thinking."*

These could be viewed as examples of how individuals would impact their context and environment. Not being able to change their context directly, the students seemed to construct their own context through finding the means that can help them cope with their context. This might be the result of the students' effort to survive in their learning environment.

In conclusion, the categories under this theme covered and expanded on the points the survey respondents raised in their answers to the open-ended question, discussed earlier. Also, the above accounts provide a clearer picture of the context which the participants were interacting with and show the sort of difficulties and hardships the students have gone through during the war and how that has affected their studies and approaches to foreign language learning. Each of the participants, and probably DU students as a whole, had their own experiences during the war. There are similarities and many things in common between their experiences. Still, each experience has its own unique identity and nature, which explains how each participant perceived and interacted with their learning context and surrounding environment and how their beliefs might have been influenced and also might have influenced their attitudes and progress. The section below provides a summary of the chapter.

### **7.3 Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the findings of the qualitative data analysis from both the survey open-ended question and the semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data from the interviews and the open-ended question provided insights



into the students' language learning beliefs and learning experience in the context of war. The qualitative data elaborated on the quantitative data, explained and clarified various aspects from the quantitative data, added more depths to the quantitative data and shed light on certain aspects that were not covered by the quantitative data. Different experiences of the interview participants were highlighted. The next chapter presents a discussion of the quantitative results and the qualitative findings to answer the overarching research question.

# Chapter Eight

*"It requires troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs"* (Dewey, 1925-1953: 1933, p. 136)

## **Chapter Eight: discussion of findings**

In the previous two chapters, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven, I have presented the results of the analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data. In this chapter, I discuss the major findings from those two chapters and stress their importance in relation to the overarching research question through connecting it to the theoretical framework and literature review presented in Chapters Three and Four.

### **8.1 Learners' contradictory language learning beliefs**

Unlike studies on language learning beliefs in the mid-1980s attempting mainly to gain an understanding of how students perceive the language learning process (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2011), this research, informed by Dewey's philosophy and concept of experience, is concerned with the impact of context on learners' language learning beliefs and experiences, including learners' interaction with their context. This research has found that the students' beliefs about foreign language learning (together with their motivation for foreign language learning and their language learning strategy selection and use) were associated with their personal experiences and were situationally conditioned and responsive to the surrounding context, i.e., the unrest in Syria. Furthermore, although no pre-war data on DU students' beliefs about language learning are available so as to compare with the present data from this research, given the inconsistencies that the participants were found to have experienced, this research has found that the students' language learning beliefs could "vary or remain stable" (Kalaja *et al.*, 2016, p.10) under the influence of their broad socio-political context. That is, learners' beliefs, especially early ones, may remain stable as long as they are compatible with the context surrounding them and serve learners' purposes. However, when the context and learners' needs begin to change, their beliefs start to adapt to the new changes and new experiences. Old or early beliefs may show resistance, nonetheless.

It is important to stress that although, according to both data sets, the majority of the

participants in this research reported being influenced by their surrounding context, i.e., the war, they, based on their responses, were not passive recipients of that impact. On the contrary, they reacted to and interacted with their context, which testifies to their active character, as described by Dewey, in that they can resist, change, adapt, respond and adjust to their context (Barcelos, 2000). Based on Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction, discussed in Chapter Three, learners' learning experience and overall experience are influenced by two sets of factors, namely internal factors and objective factors that are part of their environment, which brings about experience. According to Dewey, learners' understanding of and reaction to the objective factors are usually affected by their beliefs, attitudes, previous knowledge and emotions, i.e., their internal factors. He also explained that an experience should involve interaction between these two sets of factors in order to generate a situation. This research agrees with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction as the findings showed that different factors and variables within the participants and external others surrounding them influenced their foreign language learning beliefs and experience, and consequently their attitudes towards and progress in learning the target language. This is also in line with Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro (2018), who stress that learners' beliefs "should be considered not only in relation to other learner-internal factors such as motivation, affect, attitudes, and personal history, but also in relation to learner-external factors involved in learning an L2 [i.e., the target language], such as contexts of learning, others involved in the learning process, including teachers and classmates" (p. 229).

To answer the overarching research question, stated below, the two sets of factors associated with Dewey's (1938) principle of interaction were adopted in this research as pointed out in Chapter Three:

What are the factors that influence students' attitudes towards and approaches to learning English as a foreign language at Damascus University in the context of war in Syria?

According to the findings, the factors identified in this research along with other related variables, which were found to have affected DU students' attitudes towards learning English during the war, are as follows:

Objective factors	Contextual factors	Variables	War and unrest
			Lack of resources
			Damascus University
			English classes
	Pedagogical factors	Variables	Teaching methods
			MCQ English exams
Teacher shortages			
Internal factors	Cognitive and affective factors	Variables	Beliefs/preconceived notions about language learning
			Past language learning experiences
			Language aptitude
			Self-directed language learning
			Language learning strategies
			Motivation for language learning
			Anxiety
			Self-confidence

Table 8.1: objective and internal factors affecting DU students

The above factors and variables (Table 8.1) were found to have interacted with and influenced one another affecting the students' learning experiences and beliefs about language learning together with their motivation and strategy use. A total of four contradictions that are multi-faceted have been identified in DU students' language learning beliefs, which have impacted their learning experience and progress in language learning and consequently their attitudes, which is in agreement with several previous studies that characterised language learning beliefs as contradictory (Kalaja and Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos and Kalaja, 2011). For example, Liskin-Gasparro (1998) found that her students held conflicting beliefs about a special language learning programme. The discussion in this chapter is centred on the following four contradictions which offer us the chance to view the above factors in action, i.e., while interacting with each other and eventually contributing to the

formation of these contradictions:

- 1- Students complaining about DU English exams because of their heavy dependence on vocabulary words and grammar rules, while at the same time considering these language skills as the most important parts of language learning;
- 2- Students endorsing traditional learning methods, while at the same time endeavouring to use communicative language approaches;
- 3- Students' high motivation for learning English contrasted with their high anxiety about foreign language learning;
- 4- Students' conflicting beliefs about the difficulty of language learning.

According to the findings, these contradictions were found to have influenced and been influenced by the students' experiences and context, which eventually affected their attitudes towards learning the target language. Reciprocal influences among the variables within each of the contradictions are explained in relation to the other contradictions and their variables, linking these contradictions to one another.

### **8.1-1 Contradiction one**

Students complaining about DU English exams because of their heavy dependence on vocabulary words and grammar rules, while at the same time considering these language skills as the most important parts of language learning

Given that the students' indifferent attitudes towards learning English at Damascus University as well as their very poor final English exam results, as explained in Chapter One, triggered my interest in conducting this research in the first place, I start off this discussion with a focus on the students' views on their English exams. The main issue identified in relation to the English exam is the contradictory and inconsistent nature of the students' beliefs in this regard. According to the findings, the majority of the research participants, both the survey respondents and interview

participants, were critical of the final English exam, particularly its full reliance on vocabulary words and grammar rules. However, at the same time, they were found to be endorsing test-oriented learning approaches based on traditional teaching methods, focusing primarily on the teaching/learning of vocabulary and grammar.

Investigating this issue further revealed that the students' dissatisfaction with DU assessment was just the tip of the ice berg. Various factors and variables, listed in Table 8.1 above, were found to have contributed to this contradiction in the students' beliefs and influenced their progress in learning the target language as well as their overall language learning experience at Damascus University. As mentioned in Chapter Two, DU first and second year English exam questions are multiple choice questions (MCQ). Containing no listening, speaking or essay writing components, these exams test the students' knowledge of English vocabulary words and grammar rules only. The findings showed that the majority of the participants (73.3% of the survey respondents and nine out of the eleven interview participants) believed that the final English exams at Damascus University did not assess their real competence in the English language precisely. That is, their failure in the English exam is not an indicator of their linguistic ability. However, it may suggest that the students were facing problems with learning the target language seeing that the same exams were used prior to the war; nonetheless, the students' results were far better (with a success rate ranging from 38% to 67% then, compared with a success rate ranging from 4% to 9% now as mentioned in Chapter One).

Oddly enough, however, the students were found to stress the importance of memorising vocabulary words and grammar rules (as well as translation) in foreign language learning as the majority of the survey respondents stated that vocabulary (79.2%) and grammar (63.6%) in addition to translation (47%) were the most important parts of foreign language learning. In contrast to the survey respondents, none of the eleven interview participants, when asked, rated vocabulary words or grammar rules as important elements in language learning. They, on the contrary,

complained about the teaching of vocabulary and grammar as well as the use of Arabic in their DU English classes. As it stands, this mismatch between the two data sets may seem as divergence in terms of triangulation in mixed-methods research (Morgan, 2019; Nightingale, 2020). Such seeming divergence can be viewed as an advantage for this research as it demonstrates the value of such methods in uncovering a complex picture and also offers me the opportunity to investigate these inconsistencies and differences (Morgan, 2019). The interview participants, at the same time, reported that they and their classmates would employ various strategies in order to learn new vocabulary words and grammar rules. On the other hand, the majority of the survey respondents (73.3%), as noted above, criticised DU English exams for dealing only with vocabulary and grammar questions. This situation seems like a "love-hate relationship" between students and formal instruction as described by Liskin-Gasparro (1998, p. 164).

As seen in Chapter Seven, the findings revealed that the (interview) participants reported using various strategies to memorise vocabulary and grammar rules, including translation, which is all in agreement with the survey respondents' endorsement of these skills, which are considered the basic elements of the traditional grammar-translation teaching method (Brown, 2007). Still, according to the findings, they were employing certain tactics usually associated with communicative language teaching and learning, such as the integration of different language skills (Wu and Alrabah, 2014), which adds another layer of inconsistency to the present contradiction.

Emphasising the importance of vocabulary words and grammar rules (as well as translation) in learning the target language did not seem to be something that DU students were doing with full conviction. The interview findings showed that the participants were dissatisfied with these skills although they were still holding onto them. Based on the findings, the reasons that have led the students to consider vocabulary words and grammar rules (in addition to translation) as the most



important parts of foreign language learning are (1) their previous language learning experiences, (2) the English language teaching methods at Damascus University and (3) issues with assessment. This is in line with Prosser and Trigwell (1999) who found that learners' approaches to learning were affected by their teachers' approaches to teaching, test types and their previous learning experiences. These three reasons or variables were associated with the context of war in Syria as explained below, which stresses the impact of context on learners' beliefs and experiences.

### **1- Past language learning experiences**

As highlighted in the working definition of beliefs in this research presented in Chapter Three, previous language learning experiences can have effects on learners' beliefs about foreign language learning and future learning experiences (Young, 1991). A total of 53.2% of the survey respondents agreed that having past language learning experiences could have effects on their present or future ones. Some of the interview participants talked about their past language learning experiences, particularly at school, which reflects their language awareness as they were trying to evaluate the teaching methods at school as part of their metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1986). They pointed out that their schools focused on the teaching of grammar rules and promoted the memorisation of rules and vocabulary words. In addition, they explained that their teachers used sometimes to use Arabic during their English classes. The way English is taught in Syrian schools in general is chiefly based on the grammar-translation method focusing mainly on English grammar rules, with passages being translated into and from the mother tongue (Khoja and Mohapatra, 2017) despite the fact that the Syrian Ministry of Education introduced new communicative and interactive language teaching approaches and curricula in schools, as explained in Chapter Two.

Lababidi (2015) explained that when students place emphasis on grammar, vocabulary and translation, this could be related to their previous English language

learning experiences, which are associated with the teaching methods, focusing mainly on grammar, vocabulary and translation. Horwitz (1985) and Kern (1995) also contended that such beliefs about language learning are likely to originate from learners' past language learning experiences. Consequently, learners' beliefs that are formed and shaped as a result of their prior learning experiences can influence their approaches to language learning and affect their academic achievement (Benson and Lor, 1999; Gabillon, 2007b). Trigwell and Prosser (2020) explained that students enter the learning and teaching contexts with their past experiences of learning and teaching, perceive the learning context and approach the learning task in relation to those previous experiences and the context, where their learning outcomes would be consistently associated with those perceptions and approaches. This, in particular, reflects Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity as students' past experiences can have effects on their present and future experiences, which may make them adjust and readjust their study modes in order to cope with subsequent and future experiences.

Accordingly, due to having been exposed to and having used these very skills (i.e., vocabulary, grammar and translation) in their English classes at school, DU students' belief in the significance of these skills has become a fundamental part of their language learning belief system and thus has become a stable one (Hosenfeld, 2003), that is stored in their long-term memory (Brown *et al.*, 1983). Therefore, DU students seemed to have been influenced by their previous language learning experiences, particularly at school, which, as a result, contributed to creating in them some misconceptions about foreign language learning, which in turn might contribute to their unsuccessful subsequent language learning experiences (Horwitz, 1988).

## **2- Teaching methods at Damascus University**

The second reason is the English language teaching method adopted at Damascus University. According to the interview participants and as explained in Chapter

Two, DU English language teaching methods (particularly during the war) were mainly focused on teaching vocabulary words and grammar rules in addition to the frequent use of Arabic by some of the teachers, endorsing the traditional teaching methods, which, as a result, might have contributed to creating hindrances to the students' language learning. Prosser and Trigwell (1999, p. 81) maintained that "the way students perceive their learning and teaching situations [including the teaching approaches and teaching conditions] is central to the quality of their learning." For example, an important area of language learning difficulty among Arab learners of English as concluded by Rababah (2002) is communicating freely in English, which is attributed to the teaching methods of the English language, that mainly focus on vocabulary and grammar teaching. Horwitz (1988) also argues that while teachers and educators may consider many of their students' language learning beliefs as inexperienced or naïve, it is possible that the teaching methods and the language programmes that they use have been affected by the overall societal beliefs about language learning (and their previous learning experiences), which highlights the impact of context, including culture, on the teaching methods and consequently on students' beliefs.

The interview participants reported being displeased with these teaching methods, which is consistent with Yang's (1992) findings revealing that her students were critical of the heavy focus on grammar in their classes. DU interview participants explained that these methods did not meet their expectations or serve their purpose, i.e., the communicative use of English. This may suggest that the participants were not only keen on learning English to pass their final English exam but for other purposes related to communication in real life, which would provide them with tools to interact with their surroundings so as to experience English in a broader sense as well as learn it. This provides more evidence on the complexities of the students' contradictions regarding their beliefs and their learning experience. Also, this mismatch between the students' interests and the content of their classes might impact their motivation for foreign language learning. Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim

(2014), for example, contended that when learners cannot relate what they learn in their English classes to their everyday use and needs, this may affect their motivation to learn English as their English classes and activities do not meet their expectations or goals. This could, as a result, make them lose interest in and become critical of their classes, which eventually might affect their learning experience negatively.

The heavy focus of the teaching methods on vocabulary words and grammar rules at Damascus University was found to relate to issues associated with the surrounding environment, i.e., the unrest in Syria, as mentioned in Chapter Two, which stresses the role of context in constructing learners' experiences (Barcelos, 2003a). As pointed out in Chapter Two and based on testimonies from the research participants, large classes resulting from lack of resources and teacher shortages as well as lack of teaching experience on the part of the new teaching staff during the war all contributed to the (re)adoption and/or endorsement of the traditional teaching methods by (most of) DU teachers.

Thus, these external objective factors seemed to have channelled the teaching methods at Damascus University to focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar and to promote the use of the mother tongue in foreign language learning, especially during the war despite all the efforts exerted to apply the communicative approaches as explained in Chapter Two. This might have contributed to the students' choice of endorsing these language skills as revealed in the survey results, which demonstrates how variables belonging to different factors in this research, such as the English classes and lack of resources as well as their strategy use among others, would interact and affect the students' beliefs and attitudes towards language learning. Horwitz (1985) pointed out that learning a foreign language is often a misunderstood phenomenon, as many people still believe that learning a foreign language is simply a matter of learning grammar rules or vocabulary words or translating from the target language. Such beliefs are completely at odds with theories of second

language acquisition (Horwitz, 2012). Therefore, students holding such beliefs about language learning are very likely to spend plenty of time memorising grammar rules and vocabulary words and translating from English into the mother tongue instead of learning effective analytical skills that have the potential to develop and reinforce the mastery of basic linguistic skills as part of their communicative language learning (Horwitz, 1985).

### **3- Issues with assessment**

The third reason that was found to have led the students to stress the importance of vocabulary words and grammar rules in learning English is DU MCQ exams (testing only the students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar) which seemed to have contributed to transforming the students into test-driven language learners, which in itself could also be viewed as both a cause and a result of endorsing these specific language skills. This highlights the reciprocal influence of the different factors and variables in this research, which sheds light on the interactive nature of the relation between beliefs and context. As mentioned earlier, MCQ exams were used prior to the war and are still in use today at Damascus University. Although the majority of the participants (73.3% of the survey respondents and nine out of the eleven interview participants) criticised DU English exams and did not consider them as an adequate assessment tool as mentioned earlier, a total of 58.6% of the survey respondents reported having "to spend so much time preparing for big English tests, that [they] don't have time to actually learn English" (the BALLI item no. 36). They, as a result, have aimed at passing their exams only and therefore have become test-oriented as commented by some of the interview participants and survey respondents (to the open-ended question), which contradicts their interest in learning English for communicative and functional purposes as well as their complaints about DU teaching methods as revealed in the findings.

Riley (2006) found similar results in his study. He revealed that his respondents reported that they only studied English to pass the university admission exam,

suggesting that they lacked intrinsic motivation for learning English, which may affect their autonomy as discussed in Chapter Four. Due to being test-oriented, students may face difficulties while learning the target language. Kannan (2009 cited, in Abdullah and Hussein, 2013) contends that the difficulties that students face in learning English are attributable to the fact that they learn the target language from an examination viewpoint. He elaborated that they would learn basic grammar rules only to pass their English exams but not to use their English to communicate in real-life situations. This, I would like to point out, may limit their experience as they do not have the tools necessary to interact with their surroundings, which could explain why the research participants were facing difficulties while learning English at Damascus University, particularly with listening and speaking explained in section 8.1-2 below. As such, those students in particular, according to the findings, could be classified as surface learners given that they put emphasis on memorising what is required to complete a given task or to sit an exam (Marton and Saljö 1976; Rutherford, Limorenko and Shore, 2016). Such a surface approach is coherently associated with lower quality learning results (Trigwell and Prosser, 2020).

Thus, becoming test-oriented could be seen as both a reason for and a result of the students' dependence on vocabulary and grammar (as well as translation) in their language learning. Accordingly, the students would gear their study to examination preparation so as to pass their exams only. The findings revealed that the interview participants reported using specific strategies when preparing for their English exams, such as reviewing past exam papers and studying the vocabulary and grammar sections assigned for the exam as reported in Chapter Seven. Horwitz (1988) contended that irrespective of the clear and explicit messages, which students receive from their teachers, "they will not 'learn' that language learning is not just a matter of translation or vocabulary or rule acquisition when it is only those kinds of learning outcomes that are evaluated" (p. 292). Biggs and Tang (2007, pp.163-169) emphasised the same point as they argued that "what and how students learn depends to a major extent on how they think they will be assessed ... [and] what

they think they will be tested on." Also, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) maintained that students who perceive the nature of their assessment as encouraging memorisation and recall are more likely to embrace a surface approach focused only on completing a task or passing an exam.

The studies above are highlighting the link between students' beliefs about the nature of language learning, their exam preparations, the teaching methods, the exam format/content and their test-oriented approach. Therefore, becoming test-oriented is an example of how DU students would tend to change or modify or even adopt certain language learning beliefs, such as the ones associated with their exam preparations, in response to their demanding context despite holding other beliefs that stress their autonomy and self-directed language learning as the findings revealed. Also, becoming test-oriented can show how (old) stable beliefs, such as their belief in the importance of vocabulary, grammar and translation in language learning, resist change since they are rooted in the teachers' practices in their classes, i.e., the teaching methods, as well as the students' past language learning experiences. This sheds light on how the internal factors interact with the objective factors affecting the students' beliefs and constructing their learning experiences in this research.

#### **8.1-1-1 Reflection on the overarching research question**

It could, thus, be concluded that the context in this research, i.e., the war together with its negative impact on Damascus University, as an objective factor, has affected the students' language learning beliefs, particularly those related to their mode of exam preparations and contributed to making them resort to old tactics and strategies and hence go through a different learning experience. The students' focus on passing their English exam only through embracing vocabulary, grammar and translation is, according to the findings explained in the next section, in stark contrast to their need to learn English for communication and to their interest in communicative language learning, which contributes to forming another contradiction in their beliefs. This

may suggest that although the research participants were critical of vocabulary and grammar and the ineffectiveness of these skills with regard to communicative and conversational English, they might have readopted these skills, being part of their early stable beliefs and previous learning experiences, temporarily for the sake of their exams only as a tactic to respond to their context. However, as shown above, although the majority of the survey respondents endorsed vocabulary and grammar as the most important elements in foreign language learning, which could be a perfect match for the teaching methods and their past language learning experiences as well as the exam format, the majority (72.3%) did not pass their final English exam. Still, their exam failure does not necessarily reflect their actual linguistic abilities as also the research participants themselves reported. It, rather, signifies the existence of certain obstacles the students were struggling with.

Beliefs about the important role of vocabulary learning and grammar instruction as well as translation in foreign language learning are considered erroneous or counterproductive and viewed by studies within the normative approach as impediments to learners' autonomy (Benson, 1995, cited in Barcelos, 2003a). Such beliefs and the negative impact they could have on learners' success in learning the target language have been a topic for discussion in previous studies on learners' beliefs (for example, Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988; Yang, 1992; Peacock, 1999, 2001). These studies have found negative associations between learners' beliefs about learning grammar rules and vocabulary words (and translation) and foreign language proficiency as learners would allocate plenty of time in order to memorise vocabulary words and grammar rules and thus are very likely to face negative consequences. The findings in this research are in agreement with these studies, which may explain why DU students were struggling with their foreign language learning.

The same studies above and others have also concluded that learners holding such beliefs would have little or no regard for other language skills and might even refuse



to get involved in other kinds of language activities. They would not be likely to exert any efforts to find or create chances to practise or use English in a functional mode, including, speaking, writing, listening, reading or thinking in English (Yang, 1992), which would as a result limit the range of language strategies they would use (Horwitz, 1988). Conversely, the findings in this research do not support the above conclusion as the participants (survey respondents and interview participants) reported being interested in conversational English and were keen on creating opportunities to practise other skills. This situation might be ascribed to the contradictory nature of learners' beliefs (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2011) and the special nature of the impact of context on their beliefs and experiences, discussed in the section below.

### **8.1-2 Contradiction two**

Students endorsing traditional learning methods, while at the same time endeavouring to use communicative language approaches

The findings showed that the students viewed vocabulary and grammar as the most important skills in foreign language learning and therefore used a variety of strategies to learn new words and grammar rules. Paradoxically, they were very keen on improving and finding opportunities to practise other language skills that are principally associated with the communicative use of English, which was reflected in their motivation to learn English for integrative and instrumental reasons as well as for communicative purposes, discussed in section 8.1-3 below. A possible explanation for this inconsistency could be that their belief in the importance of vocabulary and grammar in foreign language learning was an old stable belief, resulting from their previous language learning experiences, among other things as explained in the previous section. However, as evidenced in the interview participants' dissatisfaction with this belief as well as the survey respondents' discontentment with DU English exams which rely heavily on vocabulary and grammar, the research participants might have been trying to disregard this old

belief as it impedes their efforts to learn the target language communicatively. As a result, they seemed to be swinging and/or fluctuating between rejecting these language skills (as they did not serve their communicative purposes) and at the same time endorsing them as the need arose (for example, to pass their exams), which might have caused contradictions in their beliefs. Woods (1996, cited in Barcelos and Kalaja, 2013) contends that earlier beliefs should be changed or adjusted in order to allow other beliefs to be constructed or reconstructed. However, old beliefs can be more resistant to change as they are strongly attached to learners' emotions, which may result in periods of confusion and disappointment and feelings of uncertainty (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2013). Accordingly, DU students might have resorted to these old beliefs temporarily during this period of confusion in order to pass their English exam and engage with their learning environment in the context of war.

Dewey (1933) explained that learners pay "an external, perfunctory attention to the teacher and [the] book and lesson while [their] inmost thoughts are concerned with matters more attractive to [them]. [They pay] attention with ear and eye, but [their brains are] occupied with affairs that make an immediate appeal" (p. 31). He clarified that learners do so because they want to pass an exam, get a good mark or meet their teachers' or parents' expectations. As a result, he concluded, this may contribute to creating in them general perceptions or attitudes that are not compatible with good thinking. Accordingly, the mismatch pointed out in the previous section between the two data sets regarding the importance of vocabulary and grammar rules does not seem to be actual divergence. Rather, it is probably a consequence of the confusion the research participants were experiencing due to the conflict between incompatible beliefs they were holding. Based on this, the qualitative data do not conflict with the quantitative data. On the contrary, the qualitative data clarify and elaborate on the quantitative data in respect of DU students' beliefs and opinions about vocabulary words and grammar rules. This could be viewed as an example of students' dialogue and negotiation with their context, which highlights their learning

experience.

Thus, despite endorsing vocabulary, grammar and translation, the research participants were aware of the importance of and keen on learning and practising other language skills that are related to the functional and communicative use of English, which was evident in their language awareness, self-directed language learning and strategy use. The findings demonstrated how the war contributed to depriving the students of the chance to practise English in and outside their classes and to limiting the options they could choose from, which contributed to making them change their approaches to language learning and probably adopt other tactics and strategies relying on their language learning beliefs, some of which might have arisen or emerged during learning, as described by Hosenfeld (2003), in response to their context. White (1999) contends that learners' beliefs could aid them in adapting to new surroundings given that they would adjust their original expectations and acquire some experience in the new environment.

The research participants showed willingness to interact with their context so as to be able to practise other language skills associated with communicative language learning. The interview participants, for example, explicitly talked about the language learning tactics and strategies that they believed were useful to English language learning outside their classrooms, particularly in the context of war, which highlights their autonomy and self-directed language learning as well as their overall metacognitive knowledge. Oxford and Nyikos (1989, p. 291) explained that "Use of appropriate learning strategies enables students to take responsibility for their own learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self-direction. These factors are important because learners need to keep on learning even when they are no longer in a formal classroom setting." According to the findings, DU students' self-directed language learning and use of strategies showed that they were aware of the importance of integrating the language skills together and that they could analyse and synthesise, which corresponds to communicative language teaching/learning

(Richards, 2006; Santos, 2020).

Yet, their choices, the findings revealed, were limited to and conditioned by the available means and learning resources during the war and their application of the communicative approach was still affected by the traditional teaching methods. The strategies that learners choose from could be considered context-specific that are associated with a variety of variables, including the learning environment and the requirements of the learning task and the situation (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Breen (2001, cited in Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005) stresses that learners usually work selectively within their learning context and rely on the linguistic and communicative materials that are made available to them in that environment. He also explains that their selectivity draws on their perception and understanding of the conditions they believe to be facilitative or debilitating to their target language learning, which is in line with the working definition of beliefs in this research. However, because some of their beliefs could be uninformed, erroneous or negative, this might lead them to depend on less effective strategies and tactics, which may eventually result in negative outcomes (Victori and Lickhart, 1995). This shows the influence of beliefs on strategy selection and use, particularly mistaken beliefs, as discussed in Chapter Three.

DU students' use of different learning strategies makes their interaction with their learning environment more explicit as they utilise different strategies as a means to engage with the target language. It was found that the research participants employed a variety of language learning strategies they believed to be effective and fitting the surrounding environment. They also endeavoured to create and increase opportunities for language practice and exposure to the target language outside their classrooms. The findings revealed, that the students were aware that Damascus University was sustaining grave damage, and that their English classes did not provide them with enough opportunities to practise English. As a result, they reported that they had to take charge of their learning and exert extra efforts in order

to cope with the lack of the necessary facilities and language activities and with their challenging surroundings, including violence and lack of basic services, such as electricity, internet and public transport. Accordingly, these students could be described or classified as good language learners (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, 1989), which is in contrast to their surface test-oriented approach noticed earlier.

For example, almost half of the survey respondents agreed that they could take responsibility for their own learning without a teacher or a class, stressing their autonomy (Griffiths, 2003). Being autonomous learners can suggest that they were active learners who were willing to respond and adapt to their environment. For example, the interview participants reported trying to make the most of all means available during the war in order to learn English, which also mirrors their persistence to carry on learning English. Some of the research participants even believed that the unrest in Syria had "positive" effects on them, which is an example of their emerging beliefs. These participants' views and opinions may explain how individuals could influence their environment. In their case they cannot put an end to the war; however, they can view it through a positive lens by creating the conditions that could help them to cope with it as they reported. This might be the result of the students' effort to negotiate for their survival in their learning environment, which might require them to modify their beliefs or lead them to adopt new emerging ones as a reaction. Najeeb (2013, p. 1239) explains that "independent learners are expected to develop the ability to engage with, interact with, and derive benefit from learning environments which are not directly mediated by a teacher."

Nonetheless, despite the language awareness, self-directed language learning, strategy use, resilience and autonomy that the research participants demonstrated in their responses to the survey items and interview questions, they, the findings revealed, were still concerned about issues related to the traditional teaching methods, such as their concern about accuracy, error fossilisation and correct pronunciation. For example, the findings showed that the survey respondents and

interview participants stressed the significance of speaking like native speakers and speaking English with correct pronunciation and an excellent accent. The interview participants even self-assessed their level of proficiency in English through comparing their performance with their classmates' depending principally on their conversation abilities as well as accents and pronunciation, used as assessment criteria.

Viewing good accent and correct pronunciation as essential elements in language learning as well as the main criterion to evaluate and assess one's level of proficiency in English in comparison with others indicates that the research participants were still concerned about accuracy and error correction. According to Lababidi (2015), this could be because the students were associating accent and pronunciation with proficiency in foreign language learning. Learners who hold such beliefs, as a result, tend to be less receptive to communicative language learning and teaching methods (Horwitz, 1987). In addition, beliefs about correct pronunciation were found to correlate with foreign language anxiety, and thus learners suffering from anxiety were afraid of making mistakes (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986), which is linked to their preconceived notions as pointed out in Chapter Three.

This may explain why the research participants reported facing difficulties with speaking and listening despite their interest in and need for these skills. The findings showed that the majority of the research participants (survey respondents and interview participants) considered speaking and listening the most difficult language skills. Consequently, they would encounter problems with comprehension, which may be attributable to the anxiety level that they are subjected to while trying to speak or understand English (Horwitz, 2012; Lababidi, 2015). Truitt (1995) and Kuntz (1997a) have also found that learners are likely to view listening and speaking as difficult language skills when they do not have enough self-confidence about their language learning abilities, which is usually accompanied with high anxiety according to the affective filter hypothesis, discussed in Chapter Four. Thus,

students reporting lack of self-confidence, for example while speaking English, had high foreign language anxiety, indicating that they might face psychological and linguistic obstacles and thus avoid taking part in practice activities, which would as a consequence prevent them from developing their language skills (Vibulphol, 2004; Leong and Ahmadi, 2017).

### **8.1-2-1 Reflection on the overarching research question**

Thus, the research participants demonstrated through their self-directed language learning and strategy use that they were autonomous learners, particularly during the war. They also stressed the importance of language practice and the communicative and functional use of English. However, the findings revealed that, either due to holding certain beliefs which might be erroneous (Victori and Lickhart, 1995) or due to lack of the required guidance or due to both, they were still concerned about issues associated with the traditional methods of language learning, such as accuracy and correct pronunciation. They may, consequently, have lacked confidence in using the target language communicatively as the findings revealed.

As a result, it seemed that the students were torn between contrasting beliefs. They, for example, were using strategies and tactics that endorsed traditional teaching/learning methods relying on memorising vocabulary words and grammar rules and translation, which could have detrimental effects (Peacock, 1999). At the same time, they were employing other strategies aimed at the communicative use of English; however, they were still holding some erroneous or counterproductive beliefs, as described within the normative approach, while trying to apply the communicative strategies. This again relates to the previous contradiction, seeing that the research participants' beliefs about the importance of grammar, vocabulary and accuracy were necessary to pass their final exam, whereas their keenness on the communicative skills was associated with their own interest and needs outside the classroom. Dewey (1933) explained that when learners are studying classroom subjects that are not related to their experience and do not trigger their active

curiosity, they will start using approaches and measures for those subjects that are different from the ones they use for daily purposes. Consequently, they may become intellectually irresponsible and unconcerned about the meaning of what they learn. This, he explained, can happen when these subjects and content are imposed on the students without giving them the chance to reflect upon them. Therefore, they choose to pretend to accept and believe in them while applying a totally different set of beliefs outside their classrooms, and as a result learners may become "mentally mixed" (p. 33) and suffer from inconsistencies.

It is also possible that the research participants' foreign language beliefs, impacted by the surrounding context, dictated their choice of strategies, or that their strategy use, conditioned by the limited resources and lack of guidance, contributed to shaping their beliefs about language learning. This finding supports Yang's (1992) argument that, due to uncontrolled factors, learners' beliefs can guide their behaviours and that their choice of strategies can cause their beliefs too. Also, Crawford *et al.* (1994, p. 343, cited in Barcelos, 2003a, p. 15) contend that learners' beliefs "are formed by their approaches and also form their approaches", which could be seen as an indication of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the different variables and factors in this research as noted earlier.

Moreover, a cyclical relationship, as described by Oxford and Nyikos (1989), was found between students' beliefs, their use of strategy and motivation. They explained that "not only does high motivation lead to significant use of language learning strategies ... but high strategy use probably leads to high motivation as well" (p. 295). Yang (1992, p. 148) also suggested that "use of appropriate strategies will lead to an enhanced self-perception of language proficiency and, in turn, increases motivation", which leads us to the third contradiction in the participants' beliefs.



### **8.1-3 Contradiction three**

Students' high motivation for learning English contrasted with their high anxiety about foreign language learning

Speaking of motivation, this research has found that the participants were highly motivated to learn English and had high expectations for success in foreign language learning, which came as a surprise given that the context of war in Syria could affect their motivation to learn negatively. According to the findings, the majority of the research participants (83.2% of the survey respondent and all of the interview participants) expressed strong desire to learn to speak English for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons and attached significance to learning English.

Thus, using a wide range of language learning strategies of their own choice, albeit limited, as reported in Chapters Six and Seven, which is considered a sign of successful language learners (Oxford, Lavine and Crookall, 1989), being highly motivated and having high expectations for success in learning the target language could all represent the active aspect of DU students' learning experience and more importantly may seem to be a good recipe for success and progress in language learning (Oxford, 2003). However, the majority of the research participants reported facing problems with their language learning at Damascus University, which represents the downside of their learning experience, which gives rise to another contradiction. Oxford and Nyikos (1989) argue that the relationship between language strategies and motivation may seem a simple one as highly motivated learners are likely to choose a variety of language learning strategies. Nonetheless, the two authors conclude, the motivation issue quickly becomes complex.

Investigating the situation further through the semi-structured interviews revealed that the participants' motivation to learn English was mostly driven and conditioned by the war in addition to some intrinsic reasons, which sheds light on the impact of context on learners' beliefs and motivation. According to the interviews and survey

responses, the students' foreign language learning experience has gone through ups and downs during the war, which might have, consequently, affected their beliefs and motivation to learn English. As for their integrative reasons, the majority of the survey respondents and interview participants expressed their love for English and interest in learning it, which is in agreement with previous studies (for example, Truitt, 1995; Kern, 1995; Wang, 2005; Lababidi, 2015). With regard to their instrumental motivation, the interview findings showed that the students mainly wanted to learn English for war-driven reasons, i.e., for survival and safety reasons as a result of the war in Syria, such as escaping the war, evading military service, travelling abroad and finding a job during the war. Consequently, besides being a self-actualisation need in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, language learning has become a safety need in the context of war in Syria, which is unique to my participants. This can also reflect how the research participants were trying to cope with their environment through channelling their beliefs and motivation into their survival needs, which can be considered a positive impact on the students (increased motivation) brought about by the war.

The war and unrest in Syria in general could be viewed as a disabling factor affecting the students' motivation through increasing their anxiety levels, which might have influenced their progress in foreign language learning. According to the survey results and interview findings, the research participants reported experiencing personal anxiety as well as classroom/foreign language anxiety due to the war. Learners may become anxious as a result of the learning context they are in (Nitta, 2006), and they are more likely to experience anxiety during the learning process due to being less motivated to learn the target language (Liu and Chen, 2015). Therefore, in order for learners to be able to learn effectively, they should feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment and should not be exposed to high levels of anxiety during the learning process; moreover, they should feel motivated to take part in any learning activities without being concerned about making mistakes (Gibbons, 2017). This idea can be linked to Krashen's (1982) affective

filter hypothesis, discussed in Chapter Four, where the higher the filter, the more likely learning the target language is hindered and vice versa. Anxiety works as an affective filter for learners, and the higher their anxiety, the lower their motivation is which prevents them from receiving language input when they have the chance (Horwitz, 2012; Wesely, 2012). Accordingly, high motivation could be considered the active component of learners' language learning experience while high anxiety its passive element.

This research, however, does not support this hypothesis seeing that the findings revealed that the research participants were highly motivated and highly anxious at the same time. The findings revealed that 77.4% of the survey respondents and all of the interview participants reported experiencing feelings of apprehension, which were associated with the surrounding environment and their English classes/foreign language learning, and that there were significant issues that caused anxiety and affected their experiences and beliefs and consequently their attitudes and success in learning the target language. According to the findings, the research participants, and probably DU students as a whole, were subject to anxiety from various sources as they had to deal with anxiety caused by the war and the surrounding environment as well as test anxiety and other types of classroom-related anxiety, mentioned in Chapter Four. For example, the interview participants and survey respondents reported feeling anxious and frightened while taking their exams at Damascus University which affected their final results. Such a situation could be associated with what MacIntyre and Gardner (1991b, p.90) termed as "situation-specific" anxiety reported in "a well-defined situation" such as exams. As a result, it could be that the students were distracted and thus suffered from apprehension while taking the exam. Therefore, different factors including the exam settings, the unrest, anxiety and apprehension seem to have affected the participants together with their motivation, beliefs and experiences negatively.

### **8.1-3-1 Reflection on the overarching research question**

The anxiety the research participants reported experiencing may suggest that the students' high motivation (though they were intrinsically motivated as revealed by the findings) was temporary or fluctuating in a way that is similar to the fluctuation and swinging of their beliefs as discussed earlier. Motivation for foreign language learning changes all the time and may not be sustained (Dörnyei, 1988; Williams and Burden, 1997; Djigunović, 2012), particularly instrumental motivation, as pointed out in Chapter Four. This provides evidence that beliefs and motivation could be dynamic and responsive to the surrounding and changing environment (Mercer, 2011), as advocated in this research. A possible explanation for this situation could be that the anxiety the students reported experiencing might have been what chiefly motivated them to learn English during the war given that they might have viewed learning English as a route for survival, as revealed through the interviews. This may also explain why some of the research participants reported believing that the war had a positive impact on them as noted in the previous section and in Chapter Seven. Hence, it could be that the more anxious they felt due to their surrounding environment and due to the difficulties they reported facing during their language learning experience at Damascus University, the more motivated they got to learn English in their quest of a solution, which, they would hope, might result in a better experience. This is in agreement with some previous studies. For example, Lababidi (2015) found that anxiety could be "a motivating, facilitating emotion" (p. 164). Similarly, Almurshed and Aljuaythin (2019), investigating anxiety in their Saudi EFL students, found a positive link between motivation and anxiety and that motivation "can control foreign language anxiety" (p. 116). Also, Ellis (2015, p. 68) maintains that "in some cases, anxiety can be facilitative, driving learners to make more effort."

Thus, the anxiety that the participants reported being subjected to in this research could be classified as "facilitating" anxiety, as termed by Scovel (1978) in his

seminal study, discussed in Chapter Four, which, he explains, prepares learners for approach behaviour, i.e., to act and try, which is in line with the active element of Dewey's (1916) concept of experience. Still, their motivation seems to be conditioned by and confined to a specific context although they were intrinsically motivated as well. Therefore, I would like to argue that under certain circumstances and conditions, anxiety could become a trigger of rather than a barrier to motivation in foreign language learners/learning. And to put it in literary terms, anxiety may enhance motivation in an oxymoronic sort of relationship. This highlights the role of learners' environment and context in shaping their experiences and hence their beliefs and motivation.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Three, learners may experience anxiety resulting from their mistaken language learning beliefs, particularly those concerning the difficulty of language learning and foreign language aptitude (Horwitz, 1989; Young, 1991; Kern, 1995; Kuntz, 1997; Ohata, 2005). These studies and others found that foreign language anxiety could be the result of holding erroneous or unrealistic beliefs about the difficulty of foreign language learning, such as viewing the target language as a difficult language. MacIntyre (1995, p. 92) pointed out that "there is no doubt that anxiety can be provoked by having difficulty in learning the language, but that is not to conclude that anxiety plays no role in contributing to such difficulties in the first place", discussed further in the next section.

#### **8.1-4 Contradiction four**

Students' conflicting beliefs about the difficulty of language learning

The findings revealed that the students in this research did not rate English as a difficult language, entailing that they are unlikely to experience feelings of apprehension or anxiety (Vibulphol, 2004). However, the data showed that the students were subjected to anxiety and apprehension as seen in the previous section.

Moreover, previous studies (for example, Horwitz, 1988; Mori, 1999; Vibulphol, 2004) have even emphasised that learners who believe that the language they are learning is not a difficult language are more willing to exert more efforts to succeed in learning the target language, with which this research concurs. These studies have also stressed that those learners are more likely to do better at learning that language. This, nonetheless, does not seem to be the case with the participants in this research. Despite their high expectations for success in learning the target language and despite not viewing English as a difficult language, the students, according to most of the interview participants, were not quite happy with their level of proficiency in English, which highlights the contradictory nature of learners' beliefs and the special nature of their language learning experiences.

Thus, the majority of the research participants (55.2% of the survey respondents and all of the interview participants) did not view English as a difficult language, which is in agreement with previous studies (for example, Truitt, 1995; Yang, 1999; Peacock, 1999, 2001; Wang 2005). This finding, however, contradicts what Lababidi (2015) found in her study as her Emirati respondents rated English as a difficult language despite the fact that the use of English in the United Arab Emirates is far more popular than that in Syria. It is even possible to live in the UAE without the need to learn or speak Arabic, as long as one can get by in English (Dorsey, 2018).

Both her participants and my participants are Arab learners of English living relatively in the same geographical region. Nonetheless, it seems that my participants have different perceptions and understandings in relation to the difficulty of the English language. Based on the theoretical framework and contextual approach adopted in this research, this could be attributed to differences in context and differences in students' experiences and needs. The findings showed that my participants were highly motivated to learn English for several reasons, most importantly for reasons associated specifically with the context of war, as seen in the

previous section. Therefore, being in desperate need of English (for survival reasons) in the context of war, the majority of my participants might tend not to perceive English as a difficult language. Akkaya and Ulum (2018) found that the Syrian refugees learning Turkish in Turkey had positive attitudes towards the Turkish language and viewed Turkish as a language of average difficulty that they could learn. Horwitz (1988, p. 285) contends that "it is entirely possible that students who select a language to fulfil their language requirement would view it as less difficult than other students." This was also supported by the students' high expectations for success since a total of 78.5% of the survey respondents agreed that they would be able to speak English well as mentioned previously. Still, most of the participants were not satisfied with their proficiency level in English.

A possible explanation for their disappointment with their progress in English could be associated with the students' mistaken beliefs about language learning, particularly their belief about the time required to learn English. Although, as seen above, the majority of the participants in this research seemed to hold facilitative beliefs about the difficulty of the English language, they did not seem to hold similar facilitative ones with respect to the time required to learn a foreign language. Their estimate of the time necessary to learn English was not consistent with their ratings of the difficulty of English. A total of 42.6%, believed that if they spent one hour a day learning English, two years or less were sufficient for learning to speak English well, which is in agreement with previous studies (for example, Fujiwara, 2011; Apairach and Vibulphol, 2015). However, literature suggests that students need to spend three to five years to acquire oral proficiency and four to seven years to acquire academic proficiency in English (Cummins, 2000).

Such underestimation of time requirement for language learning may result in undesirable consequences. According to Horwitz (1988), thinking that it takes only two years or less to acquire a foreign language would be viewed by many foreign language teachers as a considerable underestimation of the task of foreign language

learning and may lead to negative results. "When students rate the task of language learning as being relatively easy and rapidly accomplished, they are likely to become frustrated when their progress is not rapid" (p. 286). Kern (1995) also pointed out that learners believing that language learning is an easy and quick process can "experience some degree of frustration and discouragement during their foreign language study" (p. 75-76). Such beliefs about language learning were regarded as unrealistic beliefs by Horwitz (2012), which provides more convincing evidence that students' misconceptions and mistaken ideas about language learning can affect their language learning, progress and learning experience, as pointed out in Chapter Three.

Thus, unrealistic estimation of the time required to learn the target language can have negative impact on students' learning experience as they become discouraged if they do not achieve the kind of progress they expect as found by previous studies (Vibulphol, 2004). Ohata (2005, p. 138) contends that "it is quite conceivable that unrealistic beliefs held by learners themselves can lead to greater anxiety and frustration, especially when their beliefs and reality clash." Dewey's (1938) concept of experience manifests itself in this situation given that the students' learning experience here consists of two elements. The first element is related to their unrealistic beliefs, considered as a way of "trying" (1916/1963, p.139) to make sense of their learning environment, which is the active element of their experience. The second element, however, is "undergoing" (1916/1963, p.139) the consequence of their choices, i.e., of holding such unrealistic beliefs, reflected in experiencing anxiety and frustration, which represents the passive element of their experience.

Furthermore, although the research participants did not consider English a difficult language, a total of 79.4% of the survey respondents believed that learners should possess certain talents and characteristics, i.e., foreign language aptitude, in order to become successful language learners. This is in agreement with previous studies, such as Horwitz (1988), Kern (1995), Oh (1996), Park (1995), Truitt (1995) and



Yang (1992), where the majority of their respondents believed in the existence of a special ability for foreign language learning (Hong, 2006). Also, a total of 50.2% of the survey respondents agreed that they themselves have this special ability and thus can learn a foreign language. According to Horwitz (1988), believing in foreign language aptitude could be the result of unsuccessful past language learning experiences, which is in line with Dewey's (1938) principle of continuity as learners' past experiences influence their future ones, as explained earlier in this chapter. Learners' past language learning experience is one of the variables that tie the four contradictions to each other in this research given that its impact is present in all of them.

Nonetheless, at the same time, a total of 65.8% of the survey respondents believed that everyone could learn a foreign language, which seems to contradict their belief in the special ability of foreign language learning reported above. The same observation of contradiction was also reported by other researchers (for example, Kuntz, 1996; Vibulphol, 2004; Wang, 2005; Mokhtari, 2007; Rieger, 2009; Apairach and Vibulphol, 2015). Horwitz (1988) has suggested that learners who believe in foreign language aptitude and yet are confident that everyone can succeed in foreign language learning may perceive that "an average ability is adequate" (p. 287) for foreign language learning. In other words, the respondents may believe that people do not need to be talented to be able to speak a foreign language but average language abilities are probably adequate for learning the target language. Thus, the special ability for language learning is a gift but not a requirement or a condition for language learning.

Interestingly, Horwitz (1985, p. 336) also found that "students who have learned English as a second or foreign language often discounted their own language learning abilities." She explained that these students would consider motivation, perseverance, determination and hard work to be reasons for their success in learning the target language rather than owing to having any special talents.

Applying her findings to my research, I should expect my students to be immune against believing in the existence of foreign language aptitude, given that students in Syria start learning English as a foreign language at the primary level, as mentioned in Chapter Two, and seeing that the majority of the research participants were highly motivated and determined to learn English and had high expectations for success. However, the findings in this research do not fit in with Horwitz's explanation above, as a total of 79.4% of my respondents endorsed a belief in a special ability for language learning. This could be ascribed to the influence of context on the students' beliefs and learning experiences in this research and the fact that their motivation and perseverance might have been triggered by the anxiety they were experiencing as discussed in the previous section. Thus, according to the findings above, the research participants held beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, that are seen as facilitative/realistic while at the same time held other beliefs, that are viewed as counterproductive/unrealistic, which might have contributed to creating contradictions in their beliefs.

#### **8.1-4-1 Reflection on the overarching research question**

Two routes have been identified and traced in this research with regard to the participants' beliefs about and progress in foreign language learning as well as their overall language learning experience in the context of war. Based on the findings, each of the two routes is made up of several variables, which align with each other resulting in a certain learning experience. The first route, which could be described as a deep approach to learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999), consists of variables considered as enabling ones that can be associated with good language learners (Rubin and Thompson, 1983, cited in Thompson, 2005) and are most likely to lead to positive consequences in foreign language learning. These are the participants' high motivation and high expectations for success in foreign language learning (Gardner, 1985, 2000; Dörnyei, 1998, 2005), their facilitative preconceived ideas, such as the rating of the difficulty of the English language (Horwitz, 1988; Mori,

1999), their use of a variety of language learning strategies and self-directed language learning (Yang, 1992, 1999), their autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Wenden, 1998; Barcelos, 2003a) and their interest in communicative language approaches and the functional and communicative aspect of the English language (Wang, 2005). As for the second route, which could be described as a surface approach to learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999), it comprises variables, that could be described within the normative approach as counterproductive, which are likely to result in negative outcomes, but which the participants may seem to view differently. These are their high anxiety and lack of confidence (Horwitz, 1989; Truitt, 1995; Lababidi, 2015), their erroneous beliefs and preconceived ideas, including believing in foreign language aptitude (Horwitz, 1987; Horwitz, 1989; Mori, 1999; Vibulphol, 2004) and the importance of accuracy (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986), and their endorsement of vocabulary, grammar and translation (Horwitz, 1985, 1988, 2012; Kern, 1995; Peacock, 2001), under the influence of the teaching methods, past language learning experiences and MCQ exams, and being test-oriented surface learners.

The two routes can be related to Dewey's (1916) active and passive elements of experience, with the first route linked to the active element while the second to the passive element. They can, as a result, be seen as opposite routes given that the variables under each are incompatible and contradictory with those under the other. However, based on the findings, the majority of the research participants, through their interaction and dialogue with the surrounding environment during their language learning experience, seemed to have been fluctuating between the two routes. They were mixing different and conflicting variables with each other in their foreign language learning as explained under each of the above four contradictions. This fluctuation in the students' choices and mixing was mirrored in the fluctuation of their beliefs and motivation as well as strategy use as discussed in this chapter, which could result in anxiety, and which could represent the students' response to their tumultuous environment and context, i.e., the war. Therefore, the students

seemed to have chosen an amalgam of the two routes where variables from both routes would interact with and influence each other reciprocally causing contradictions in the students' beliefs.

The above confusion could also be associated with lack of "intellectual responsibility", which requires consistency and harmony in beliefs as Dewey (1933) proposed. He explained that when individuals/learners claim holding certain beliefs but are unwilling to accept the consequences of holding those beliefs, this could result in a "split" that may lead to mental confusion. Accordingly, he argued that "no one can use two inconsistent mental standards without losing some of his mental grip" (p. 32). Being on the same page, Prosser and Trigwell (1999, p. 96) found that students who hold what they termed "disintegrated perceptions" would adopt a learning approach that contains elements from two contrasting approaches, namely a surface and deep approach to learning, which could lead to exam failure or to poor learning outcomes. Moreover, beliefs could cause conflicts when they are incompatible with learners' experiences (Barcelos, 2000), which could be attributable to the impact of their ever-changing context. This confusion and fusion of contrasting beliefs and variables in the context of war might have led DU students to undesired results given that the negative route might have had the upper hand under such circumstances.

Thus, the contradictions in the students' beliefs have demonstrated how the interplay between individual and environment, between DU students and their learning context (manifested in Damascus University, their English classes and the learning/teaching resources, as well as their overall environment, i.e., the war) has affected their beliefs and learning experience and consequently their attitudes and exam results. Given that context, particularly the context of war, is ever-changing, DU students are likely to experience other contradictions in their beliefs in future as they keep adjusting and readjusting themselves in order to survive while interacting and negotiating with their learning environment that is impacted by the war. That is,

as the students go through other experiences during the war which could influence their beliefs, based on Dewey's (1938) principles of continuity and interaction, other contradictions may emerge during interaction. Goodwin and Duranti (1992, p. 5) contend that "the dynamic, socially constitutive properties of context are inescapable since each additional move within the interaction modifies the existing context while creating a new arena for subsequent interaction."

## **8.2 Summary**

This chapter has presented a discussion of the findings from both studies in this research. It, thus, has provided answers to the overarching research question. Various factors and variables within and outside the students were found to have affected and interacted with each other creating contradictions in their language learning beliefs. Consequently, the students' beliefs about language learning and their learning experience during the war were influenced and in their turn influenced their motivation and attitudes as well as their performance and success. The next chapter provides a conclusion to this research and summarises its contributions to knowledge, implications, recommendations and limitations.

# Chapter Nine

*"Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another"* (Dewey, 1916)

## **Chapter Nine: conclusion**

In the previous chapter, I have discussed the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative studies in this research and answered the overarching research question. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the most important findings and highlight the contribution of this research to knowledge. I also shed light on some implications and recommendations in addition to the limitations in this research. Finally, I conclude this thesis with some personal reflections on my PhD journey.

### **9.1 Summary of findings**

This research has set out to identify the factors that have affected DU students' attitudes towards learning English and their final English exam results during the war in Syria. Given that learners' attitudes towards and success in language learning are directly associated with their beliefs about language learning as explained in Chapters One and Three, DU students' language learning beliefs were investigated. To this end, a mixed-methods methodology combining three approaches, normative, metacognitive and contextual, under the theoretical umbrella of Dewey's (1938) concept of experience, was employed utilising a Likert-type survey, including an open-ended question, and semi-structured interviews. The research has found that two major sets of factors have contributed to creating contradictions in the students' language learning beliefs, which eventually influenced their attitudes and final exam results. The first set of factors encompassed internal factors associated with the students, including cognitive and affective variables, such as preconceptions, motivation, language aptitude, anxiety and language learning strategies. As for the second set, it comprised external/objective factors relating to the learning context and the overall environment surrounding the students, including the war and lack of resources, among other things. Both sets of factors were found to have interacted with each other and affected the students' language learning beliefs and learning experiences.

This research has also found that learners' beliefs about language learning were not an absolutely fixed construct. According to the findings, interaction between the internal and objective factors and variables under each of the contradictions has affected the students and caused some of their beliefs to change or to adopt a temporary stance such as those related to their exam preparations, or even caused new beliefs to emerge as a consequence, such as the ones associated with their strategy selection and use in light of lack of resources during the war. Furthermore, the students were found to hold certain beliefs that are viewed as stable and resisting change. They were stable in the sense that the students were exposed to and acted upon them frequently since they were mostly the result of their past language learning experiences. It is important to note that these stable beliefs may change alongside the experiences in which they are rooted (Hosenfeld, 2003) together with the changing surrounding environment. The participants in this research seemed to be attempting to avoid being affected by these "stable" beliefs which they held in mind and brought to learning. This was evident in two aspects: first, the findings revealed that the students were dissatisfied with these beliefs viewed by them as impediments to achieving their goal of using English communicatively for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Second, the findings showed that the participants held other beliefs, which they were keen on acting upon and that were in contrast to the ones deemed as "stable". Still, at the same time, according to the findings, the students kept endorsing those "stable" or early ones, which could have contributed to making these beliefs resist change.

Moreover, the findings have revealed that the participants showed awareness of the impact of their learning context and the overall environment on them and their success and progress in language learning, which had both advantages and disadvantages. Being aware of its effects, the students were to some degree prepared and showed willingness to adjust themselves and their modes of study in order to interact with this context, which highlighted their resilience and the active element of their learning experience. However, this awareness seemed to have made some of



them blame their exam failure and slow progress in language learning on the context, which they cannot control and which might have led them to believe in the existence of foreign language aptitude, representing the downside of their learning experience.

It is also important to reiterate that this research attaches significance to the role of learners' beliefs in the learning process and experience as well as to the influence of context on their beliefs and attitudes towards the target language. It has been found that DU students' language learning beliefs were affected by their context and previous language learning experiences and that their motivation and reasons for studying English were mostly driven by the surrounding environment, i.e., the war. The findings also suggested that the students along with their beliefs seemed to have affected their context in that they, through their persistence to study English, created their own learning environment(s) relying on all available, albeit limited, means and resources. Some of them have even affected their surrounding context, i.e., the war, by attempting to view it as having "positive" and motivating impact on them through adjusting and readjusting their beliefs, which is consistent with Dewey's (1938) perspective on the reciprocal interplay between individual and environment.

## **9.2 Contributions**

The findings from this research make several contributions to the current literature. To begin with, I would like to concur with Barcelos (2003a), who contends that research into learners' beliefs about language learning should investigate their beliefs in context rather than simply describing them as predicators of future actions since context is seen as "learners' constructions of their experiences" (p. 20). Wesely (2012) points out that there is a growing but slow appearance of studies exploring the interplay between learners and their context, which suggests that there is a gap in literature with regard to learners' beliefs about language learning in relation to context. Notably, no study, to the best of my knowledge, has explored learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in wartime together with their interaction

with such a context. It is important to note that although there has recently been a surge in studies investigating issues relating to education, war and international development and the social and political dimensions in Syria, no studies have yet been conducted to explore learners' language learning beliefs during the war. This research is the first study to investigate learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in the context of war. It stresses the role of context in constructing and/or shaping learners' language learning beliefs and experiences, especially amid volatile and unstable conditions. Thus, this research focuses on the importance of the contextual aspects of beliefs and the interaction between learners and their context and looks into learners' beliefs in relation to other influential constructs in foreign language learning, namely, language learning strategies, motivation and anxiety, particularly in the context of war. Therefore, the contribution of this research differs from the mainstream cognitive approach in that it underscores the critical role that learners' context plays in influencing their language learning beliefs and learning experiences.

This research is also the first study dedicated to investigating Syrian learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language in Syria (irrespective of the context of war). Even prior to the war, not a single study was conducted to address this topic whether in English or in Arabic. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that one study in particular was conducted in 2018 by Akkaya and Ulum, mentioned in the previous chapter. The study investigated Syrian refugees' beliefs about learning Turkish in Turkey, away from Syria and the context of war. Apart from its abstract, the article was published in Turkish. According to the English version of the abstract, the two researchers employed the BALLI survey only in their study, i.e., the normative approach, which explores beliefs out of context as explained in Chapter Three. Thus, this research still remains the most recent study in this area. Furthermore, this research contributes to the scant research into learners' beliefs about language learning in the Arab world. It also contributes to the field of adult English language learners' beliefs and the broader field of linguistics and foreign language learning.

This research has also utilised three approaches to investigating learners' beliefs about foreign language learning, namely the normative, metacognitive and contextual approaches. Each of these three approaches defines and views language learning beliefs differently and also employs different methodologies as explained previously in Chapter Three. Therefore, employing the three approaches in this research is considered a theoretical as well as a methodological contribution. It is important to stress that the three approaches were necessary for this research especially for my context. For example, through the normative approach in this research, it was revealed that the majority of the students endorsed vocabulary and grammar (and translation) as the most important parts in language learning without providing any explanation or clarification. Employing the metacognitive and contextual approaches highlighted the reasons for their choice and revealed that they were critical of these methods despite endorsing them due to issues associated with their context, which provided deeper insights into the students' understanding of their situation and views on foreign language learning. Without using the three approaches together, it would not have been possible to find out about DU students' experiences and why they had to make certain choices and decisions. Thus, the three approaches were used together in order to complement each other so as to capture the different aspects and dimensions of learners' beliefs about language learning taking into account their context and surroundings.

In addition, seeing that only a few studies have embraced Dewey's concept of experience as their philosophical underpinning to explore language learning beliefs, adopting this concept in this research is considered a theoretical contribution to knowledge. It is important to emphasise that the few studies adopting this concept employed a contextual approach, which considers beliefs as a non-cognitive construct that is social in nature as discussed in Chapter Three, which is different from how beliefs are viewed in this research. According to the working definition of beliefs in this research, beliefs are treated as a cognitive and social construct. Therefore, employing Dewey's concept of experience in this research has been

focused on the students' interaction with their context and the mental activities associated with their beliefs about language learning, which allowed me to find out more about their learning and lived experience inside and outside their foreign language classes from their own perspectives and based on their understandings. It also helped me to highlight the impact of context on the students' beliefs and shed light on instances where the students affected their own environment. As such, the normative and metacognitive approaches in this research were employed to focus on the students' mental processes and on how they viewed language learning based on their prior knowledge about language learning taking into account their context, including insecurity and lack of resources which affected their decisions and choices regarding their language learning. The contextual approach was more focused on the students' interplay and negotiation with their learning context and their overall environment, which also involved a certain degree of reliance on their metacognitive knowledge, which eventually helped in capturing different angles and aspects of learners' beliefs.

Also, methodologically, the use of the BALLI survey to collect data in the context of war, which is the first time to be used for this purpose in this research, was meant to reach a general understanding of the students' overall belief system. However, despite adding an open-ended question to the survey, it did not capture the rationale behind the students' responses in full. It offered significant insights, nonetheless, which also helped in designing the interview schedule for the qualitative study. Based on how this survey was used in this research, more items and open-ended questions can be added in order to collect the needed information particularly when the study is focusing on the impact of context on learners' beliefs.

### **9.3 Implications**

By means of gaining a better understanding of learners' beliefs about foreign language learning in wartime, this research has implications for how students should be supported and aided in learning and improving their proficiency level in foreign

language learning in the context of war. This research has concluded that different factors within and outside the students have affected their learning experience and contributed to creating contradictions and inconsistencies in their beliefs, which influenced their attitudes and learning outcomes. Findings from this research provide a strong basis for future research that can investigate the nature of these conflicting beliefs and how to address them. This can eventually guide language teachers, language schools and educational institutions to reflect on their own practices taking into consideration the students' beliefs about language learning and their surrounding context. As a result, this can contribute to designing more student-centred foreign language classes and language programmes, offering students a perception that these classes and programmes are tailored to them, which could have positive effects on them (Victori and Lockhart, 1995). These classes and programmes will, thus, cater to students' needs and help in adjusting their attitudes and behaviour so as to prepare them to receive and accept new information and boost their autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Benson and Lor, 1999; Wang, 2005; Rieger, 2009), particularly in troubled contexts.

Furthermore, the fact that many countries around the world are currently experiencing unrest and facing turmoil makes the potential contribution from this research more timely, impactful and resonant. This research has shed light on some of the problems and difficulties that the students faced while learning English in wartime. It has also highlighted their language learning strategy selection and use, self-directed language learning and autonomy in the context of war particularly in light of the limited learning resources and materials, which emphasises their resilience and coping strategies. Therefore, findings from this research will be of interest to language for resilience research programmes, such as the ones funded by the British Council in partnership with international institutions, individuals and communities. These programmes examine the impact of language on refugees and host communities influenced by wars and crises by means of identifying the different ways through which language skills can strengthen resilience and providing

suggestions for programme responses that address key needs (British Council, 2018).

#### **9.4 Limitations and recommendations**

Having conducted this research, I recommend the following areas for future research and studies. To begin with, the findings have revealed that DU students held contradictory beliefs about language learning which, consequently, affected their attitudes and final English exam results. However, due to time limitations and the anticipated difficulty of interviewing the same participants another time given the situation in Syria, this research did not investigate whether the students were aware of these contradictions or not, and if so how they dealt with these contradictions and what implications this could have with regard to foreign language teaching and learning. Kalaja, Barcelos and Aro (2018) contend that one topic that has not been investigated much is raising learners' awareness of their language learning beliefs. Therefore, research is needed to explore this area in order to help learners overcome such inconsistencies in their language learning beliefs, which may lead to successful language learning experiences and outcomes. Accordingly, I would recommend taking a longitudinal approach to the research design in order to address this problem.

Also, according to the findings, the participants complained about the foreign language teaching methods at Damascus University because they did not meet or serve their communicative goals and needs. Although DU teaching methods played a major role in this research as an external objective factor, particularly in contributing to shaping the students' beliefs about certain aspects of the nature of foreign language learning, and although some of the shortcomings in these methods were highlighted based on the participants' responses, literature and previous studies, this research did not discuss or suggest any practical solutions to deal with these methods and their impact in general and during wartime in particular, which is another limitation. Therefore, the participants' views and opinions regarding DU teaching

methods could be utilised in order to tailor and design teacher-training programmes and English language learning/teaching programmes that are not limited only to the linguistic aspects in a "narrow decontextualized sense" (Nelson and Appleby, 2015, p.323), but should prepare the students to engage actively with the world outside their classrooms. And the precise way to do this should be the subject of further research.

Furthermore, in a number of instances in this research, the participants hinted at the fact that their English teachers had some degree of influence on them and their language learning, both positive and negative. Their influence is viewed as an important variable affecting the students' language learning beliefs and experiences at Damascus University. However, investigating their beliefs alongside the students' beliefs was not possible, which is also another limitation. Exploring the influence of teachers' beliefs on their students and their experiences could have provided me with more insights into the students' beliefs in this research, particularly in the context of war. Language teachers' views and opinions can have strong effects on their students' language learning beliefs (Horwitz, 1988). For example, they could help students, through explicit instructional strategies, in "developing motivation for language learning, decreasing anxiety, and confronting erroneous beliefs about language learning" (Horwitz, 1995, p. 577). Also, viewing language learning beliefs as a complex contextual variable should necessitate the investigation of both learners' and teachers' beliefs in specific contexts (Barcelos and Kalaja, 2013). Therefore, research exploring the influence of teachers' beliefs and lived experiences on their students' language learning beliefs and attitudes especially in wartime and troubled contexts should be carried out.

Other limitations include issues associated with the semi-structured interviews. Here, I would like to point out that I would have asked some questions differently; however, due to the sensitivity of the context of this research in addition to other considerations, this was not possible. For example, although I was very keen on

encouraging my interviewees to provide as much information as they could, and although they complied with my request to avoid discussing their political views, it still felt for me like walking through a minefield during the interviews as I was worried they might suddenly burst into tears while recalling a certain tragic incident that they witnessed during the war.

Also, I would like to take the opportunity to stress that combining the three approaches in order to investigate DU students' language learning beliefs was not an easy or straightforward undertaking given the fact that, due to the unrest in Syria, I had limited options to choose from with regard to the data collection tools required to employ the three approaches. For example, online classroom observation was one of the options that I could not even think of due to the war. Doing classroom observation would have allowed me to spend as much time as possible with my participants in order to gain a better understanding of their learning experiences in the classroom and of how they would react to and interact with their teachers, each other, the classroom and the overall environment and how that would impact on their beliefs. Unfortunately, this was not possible to implement for ethical and technical considerations. Ethically speaking, the students might be reluctant to give their consent to be filmed for reasons associated with their own safety during the war as explained in the ethical form (Appendix D). At the technical level, doing classroom observations online requires a stable and reliable internet connection, which cannot be guaranteed in Syria because of the war.

Finally, with regard to the findings, given that this research was conducted in a specific context and given the special nature of Syrian youth and students, as mentioned previously, this may be a limitation to generalising my findings in full. That is, this research focuses on a single institution, so although the sample size is significant and the numbers may be representative of students in Syria, the specific culture of Damascus University may differ from other Syrian universities. Therefore, the findings may not be fully generalisable across all Syrian higher education



institutions, or all institutions which are operating in wartime. The data collection was carried out at a particular time frame of a long lasting war. It is unclear whether the results would be the same at the beginning, middle or end of the war. The political context changes frequently and perceptions of personal safety and context also change. Future research could take longitudinal approaches to data collection in order to address this.

### **9.5 Closing remarks**

In this section, I conclude this thesis by providing some final thoughts on my PhD journey as well as glimpses of that experience. In their article, "Navigating in Unknown Waters", Bencich *et al.* (2002) explained that "at the beginning of the dissertation research process doctoral students cannot see the end, nor can they image how they will get there" (p.289). Since I started this PhD research, I have been on a transformation journey along with its ups and downs, where I had to navigate "the swamps of research" (Davis, 2020, p. 2). My PhD journey has been a self-discovery experience; it, together with its accompanying isolation and loneliness, has been intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually challenging. I have experienced moments of lack of creativity, moments of self-doubt and moments of despair. Also, being away from home, family and friends, and the fact that my country has been undergoing unrest for years in addition to the lockdowns due to Covid-19 all have added fuel to the fire and put me and my resilience to the test. At times, the challenges mounted turning my confidence and persistence into vulnerability and fragility.

Nevertheless, at the same time, it was a journey of self-understanding and self-construction in the sense that I took part in the process of knowledge building and was not a mere outside observer of a phenomenon. I, on the contrary, was "the documenter of events as well as co-constructor of knowledge" (Patnaik, 2013, p. 101). Thus, giving up was out of the question as I have a strong and resilient personality. Therefore, I can confidently claim that the challenges that I have

encountered since I started my PhD have had their positive impact on me as I believe in what Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." This also reminds me of some of my participants who reported that the war in Syria had a positive impact on them.

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# Appendixes

## **Appendix A**

[removed from this digitised version]

## Appendix B

### Students' Beliefs about Learning English as a Foreign Language at Damascus University in Wartime

Dear student,

You are invited to participate in a survey, called the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), dealing with learners' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language (EFL) at Damascus University. This is a research project that is being conducted by Rasheed Abdul Hadi, a PhD researcher at Bath Spa University in the UK. This research project is set to explore your beliefs about and motivation for EFL learning in relation to your attitudes in the English classroom as well as your English exam results. The students' beliefs about EFL learning will be investigated in the context of war in Syria. This survey is anonymous and is part of a research project, embracing a mixed methods approach consisting of two phases, that aims to improve the learning of EFL students at Damascus University as a whole and to support students who may not be doing so well and who may be facing difficulties in their English language classes. The information provided by you in this questionnaire will be used as discussion stimuli for the second phase of this research, i.e. the interview phase, which you may wish to take part in. The information will also be used as descriptions of your views on and beliefs about EFL learning. Major emergent themes from this questionnaire will help in designing more focused in-depth interview questions for the second phase of this project. In order to ensure your confidentiality throughout the stages of the whole project, your anonymised data will be encrypted and uploaded to my Bath Spa University data repository account which cannot be accessed by anyone but me. The data will be destroyed at the end of the project. The findings will be used for the purpose of this PhD research project as well as other academic papers and seminars. Results from your participation in this survey and in the study as a whole will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of foreign language learning at Damascus University. This survey should take no more than 30-35 minutes to complete. You can complete the English version of the survey or the Arabic version. Your anonymised participation in this project is voluntary and is not related to your grades or final assessment. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty or consequence. You have the right to decline to answer any question you do not want to answer for any reason. Finally, if you are interested in taking part in the second phase of this project, i.e. the semi-structured interviews, or if you have any questions, please contact me directly at [REDACTED].

Yours,  
Rasheed Abdul Hadi,  
PhD researcher  
Institute for Education, Bath Spa University  
Bath, UK

عزيري الطالب،

أنت مدعو للمشاركة في هذا الاستبيان الخاص بتعلم اللغات الأجنبية والمسمى "بالي"، ويهدف هذا الاستبيان إلى البحث في آراء الطلاب وما يعتقدونه حول تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة دمشق. وبشكل هذا الاستبيان جزءاً من بحث علمي تحت إشراف باحث الدكتوراه رشيد عبد الهادي من جامعة "باتسبا" في بريطانيا. كما يهدف هذا الاستبيان لدراسة دافعية الطلاب لتعلم اللغة الإنكليزية لمعرفة فيما إذا كان هناك أي صلة بين الأفكار التي لديهم حول تعلم اللغات الأجنبية وبين أدائهم في صفوف وامتحانات اللغة الإنكليزية. ومن الضروري التأكيد على أن هذا الاستبيان مجهول الهوية لأهداف البحث فقط، وأنه جزء من بحث يتألف من مرحلتين. ويهدف إلى تحسين تعلم طلاب جامعة دمشق للغة الإنكليزية بصورة عامة ورفع سوية الطلاب الذين يواجهون صعوبات في تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية على نحو خاص. وستستخدم نتائج هذا الاستبيان في توجيه المرحلة الثانية من هذا البحث، وهي مرحلة المقابلات الشفوية، التي نرجو أن يرغب بعضكم بالمشاركة فيها. كما أن الموضوعات المستخلصة من هذا الاستبيان ستسهم في صياغة أسئلة أكثر دقة للمرحلة الثانية. ونود التنويه إلى أن أي بيانات خاصة بالمشاركين في هذا البحث لن يُفصح عنها لأي شخص كان باستثناء الباحث، وسيتم حفظ المعلومات والبيانات كافة في حساب الباحث الخاص على موقع جامعة "باتسبا"، ومن ثم يجري التخلص منها عند الانتهاء من البحث. وستستخدم النتائج النهائية لهذا البحث في رسالة بحث الدكتوراه بالإضافة إلى المقالات العلمية والمحاضرات الأخرى اللاحقة. ومن المأمول أن تسهم مشاركتكم في البحث بأكمله في الوصول إلى فهم أفضل لآلية تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة دمشق. ونود الإشارة إلى أن استكمال هذا الاستبيان المتوفر باللغتين الإنكليزية والعربية لن يستغرق أكثر من ٣٠-٣٥ دقيقة، وإلى أن مشاركتكم في هذا الاستبيان طوعية، وعليه يمكنكم عدم قبول المشاركة في هذا البحث أو عدم متابعة المشاركة فيه في أي وقت تشاؤون من دون الرجوع إلى الباحث، ومن دون أن يكون لذلك أي تبعات سلبية على نتائج امتحاناتكم النهائية. كما يمكنكم الامتناع عن الإجابة عن أي سؤال لا ترغبون بالإجابة عنه لأي سبب كان. وأخيراً، إن كنتم ترغبون بالمشاركة في المرحلة الثانية من البحث، وإن كان لديكم أي استفسارات حول البحث، يرجى تزويدنا بريدكم الإلكتروني، كما يمكنكم التواصل مع الباحث مباشرة:

Please tick the box provided if you consent to participate in this survey

يرجى وضع إشارة صح داخل المربع إذا كنت موافق على المشاركة في الاستبيان

**-Underline the information that represents you:**

ضع خطأ تحت المعلومة الصحيحة بالنسبة إليك:

Age: (18-25) (26-30) (31-35) (36-45) (العمر): (٢٥-١٨) (٣٠-٢٦) (٣٥-٣١) (٤٥-٣٦)

Gender: Male/Female

(الجنس: ذكر / أنثى)

First time at university: Yes/No

(الدراسة - المرة الأولى في الجامعة: نعم / لا)

**-Choose the option that best expresses your opinion:**

**-اختر الإجابة التي تعبر عن رأيك:**

1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

١- من السهل على الأطفال تعلم لغة أجنبية أكثر من البالغين: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٢- يتمتع بعض الأشخاص بقدرة خاصة على تعلم اللغات الأجنبية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

3. Some languages are easier to learn than others:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٣- بعض اللغات أسهل من بعضها الآخر: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

4. English is: 1. a very difficult language. 2. a difficult language. 3. a language of medium difficulty.

4. an easy language. 5. a very easy language.

٤- تُعد اللغة الإنكليزية: أ-لغة صعبة جداً، ب-لغة صعبة، ج-لغة متوسطة الصعوبة، د-لغة سهلة، ه-لغة سهلة جداً

5. Syrians are good at learning foreign languages:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٥- يتمتع الشعب السوري بقدرة عالية على تعلم اللغات الأجنبية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

6. I believe that I will learn to speak English very well:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٦- أعتقد أنني سأتمكن من التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية بصورة جيدة: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

7. It is important to speak English with an excellent accent:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٧- يُعدّ التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية ولكنه جيدة جداً أمراً ضرورياً: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

8. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٨- من الضروري التعرف على ثقافة اللغة الإنكليزية للتمكن من التحدث بها: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

9. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٩- لا ينبغي أن تتحدث باللغة الإنكليزية ما لم تتمكن من القيام بذلك بصورة صحيحة: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

10. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

١٠- من السهل على أي شخص يمكنه التحدث بلغة أجنبية أن يتعلم لغة أجنبية أخرى: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

11. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١١- إنه لمن الأفضل تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية في بلد ناطق بالإنكليزية (بريطانيا أو أمريكا على سبيل المثال):  
 أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
12. I enjoy practicing English with the people I meet:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٢- أجد متعة في التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية مع من ألتقي من الأشخاص: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
13. In order to speak English, you have to think in English:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٣- حتى تتمكن من التحدث بالإنكليزية عليك أن تفكر بالإنكليزية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
14. It's ok to guess if you don't know a word in English:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٤- يمكنك التخمين إن لم تعرف معنى كلمة ما في اللغة الإنكليزية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
15. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language how long would it take for them to learn that language very well? A. less than a year. B. 1-2 years. C. 3-5 years. D. 5-10 years.  
 E. You can't learn a language in one hour a day.  
 ١٥- إذا قام شخص ما بتخصيص ساعة واحدة يومياً لتعلم لغة أجنبية، كم من الوقت سيستغرق ليتقن تلك اللغة بطلاقة؟ أ-أقل من عام واحد، ب-من عام إلى عامين، ج-من ٣ إلى ٥ أعوام، د-من ٥ إلى ١٠ أعوام، ه-لا يمكنك تعلم أي لغة بمجرد ساعة واحدة يومياً
16. I have a special ability for learning foreign languages:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٦- أتمتع بقدرة خاصة على تعلم اللغات الأجنبية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
17. The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary words:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٧- يُعدُّ تعلم المفردات والكلمات أهم جزء من تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
18. It is a good idea to practice speaking with other people who are learning English:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٨- يُعدُّ التدريب على التحدث مع أشخاص آخرين يتعلمون اللغة الإنكليزية فكرة جيدة: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
19. It is better to have teachers who are native-speakers of English:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ١٩- من الأفضل أن يكون مدرسوا اللغة من البلاد الناطقة باللغة الإنكليزية (بريطانيا أو أمريكا على سبيل المثال): أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
20. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have better opportunities for a good job:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ٢٠- إذا تمكنت من التحدث بالإنكليزية على نحو جيد، سأحظى بفرص أفضل للحصول على وظيفة جيدة: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
21. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ٢١- إذا سُمح للطلاب المبتدئين بارتكاب الأخطاء في اللغة الإنكليزية، سيكون من الصعب عليهم التحدث على نحو سليم مستقبلاً: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
22. The most important part of learning English is learning the grammar:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree  
 ٢٢- يُعدُّ تعلم القواعد أهم جزء من تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
23. It is important to practice with multi-media:  
 A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

- ٢٣- من الضروري التدرّب على اللغة الإنكليزية باستخدام الوسائط المتعددة (استخدام وسائط متنوعة كالتيكنولوجيا الحديثة):  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
24. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٤- تُعدّ النساء أكثر قدرة على تعلم اللغات الأجنبية من الرجال: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
25. I want to speak English well:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٥- أود أن أتحدث الإنكليزية بصورة جيدة: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
26. I can learn a lot of from group activities with other students in my English class:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٦- بمقدوري أن أتعلّم الكثير بواسطة الأنشطة الجماعية مع الطلاب الآخرين في درس اللغة الإنكليزية:  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
27. It is easier to speak than understand English:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٧- يُعدّ التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية أسهل من فهمها: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
28. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speakers:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٨- أرغب بتعلّم اللغة الإنكليزية لكي أتمكن من التعرف على الناطقين بها:  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
29. I can learn a lot from non-native English teachers:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٢٩- أستطيع أن أتعلّم الكثير من مدرسي اللغة الإنكليزية من غير الناطقين الأصليين بها (من المدرسين السوريين على سبيل المثال):  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
30. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other academic subjects:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٠- يختلف تعلم اللغات الأجنبية عن تعلم المواد الجامعية الأخرى: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
31. It is possible to learn English on your own without a teacher or a class:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣١- من الممكن أن تتعلّم اللغة الإنكليزية لوحدهك من دون مدرس أو صف دراسي: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
32. The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from Arabic:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٢- تُعدّ الترجمة من اللغة العربية أهم جزء من تعلّم اللغة الإنكليزية:  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
33. Students and teachers should only speak English during English classes:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٣- يجب على الطلاب والمدرسين التحدث باللغة الإنكليزية فحسب خلال حصص اللغة الإنكليزية:  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
34. I can find a lot of useful materials to practice English on the Internet:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٤- بإمكانني أن أجد الكثير من المواد التعليمية المفيدة لتعلّم اللغة الإنكليزية على الشابكة (الانترنت):  
أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
35. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٥- تُعدّ كلّ من القراءة والكتابة باللغة الإنكليزية أسهل من التحدث بها وفهمها: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة
36. I have to spend so much time preparing for big English tests, that I don't have time to actually learn English:  
A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree
- ٣٦- أضطر إلى تخصيص الكثير من الوقت للتخصّير لامتحانات اللغة الإنكليزية النهائية مما لا يُبقي لي الوقت لتعلّم هذه اللغة



بالفعل:

أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

37. It is important to speak English like a native speaker:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٣٧- من المهم أن نتحدث اللغة الإنكليزية كناطقي اللغة الأصليين (كالبريطانيين والأمريكيين على سبيل المثال):

أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

38. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning foreign languages:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٣٨- إن الأشخاص البارعين في الرياضيات والعلوم لا يبرعون في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية:

أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

39. Syrians feel that it is important to speak English:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٣٩- يعتقد السوريون أن تعلم اللغة الإنكليزية أمر ضروري: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

40. I would like to have English-speaking friends:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤٠- أريد أن يكون لدي أصدقاء يتحدثون اللغة الإنكليزية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

41. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤١- يُعدّ الأشخاص الذين يستطيعون التحدث بأكثر من لغة واحدة أذكيا جداً: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

42. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤٢- بمقدور الجميع تعلم التحدث بلغة أجنبية: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

43. I feel timid speaking English with other people:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤٣- أشعر بالخجل والتردد عند التحدث بالإنكليزية مع أشخاص آخرين: أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

44. Damascus University final exams are good tests of my English ability:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤٤- امتحانات اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة دمشق كافية لتقييم مقدرتي في اللغة الإنكليزية:

أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

45. The current circumstances in Syria have influenced my performance in the English classes and English exams at Damascus Uni:

A. Strongly agree B. Agree C. Neither agree nor disagree D. Disagree E. Strongly disagree

٤٥- لقد أثرت الظروف الحالية في سورية في أدائي في صفوف و امتحانات اللغة الإنكليزية في جامعة دمشق:

أ-أوافق بشدة ب-أوافق ج-لا أعرف د-لا أوافق ه-لا أوافق بشدة

46. If your response to the above statement is A or B, could you please explain how in the box below?

٤٦- إذا كانت إجابتك عن العبارة السابقة (أ) أو (ب)، يُرجى التوضيح في المساحة المخصصة في الأسفل؟

Thank you very much

شكراً جزيلاً لكم

## Appendix C

### Interview schedule (1 hour max)

<p><b>Part one (5 mins)</b></p> <p>Welcome to this Skype call and thank you for taking part in this interview. I am Rasheed Abdul Hadi, the researcher, and I can assure you that this interview will take no longer than an hour. To begin with, I would like to remind you of and summarise the purpose of the research and the objectives of the interview, mentioned in your information and consent form in detail. My research project aims to find out whether there is any correlation between students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language at Damascus University and their English language competency and exam results within the context of war in Syria. Results from the interview will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of foreign language learning at Damascus University.</p> <p>If you have no objections to the information and consent form after you have read it, could I ask you to sign it? Also, I would like to seek your permission to record the interview and take notes as well. I would like also to reassure you that your participation is voluntary and will not affect your grades or assessment and that you can withdraw at any time. Your information and all data generated from this interview will be anonymised, encrypted and stored in a secure environment in order to protect your confidentiality. In addition, I would like to remind you that the interview will not be discussing your political views, so could you please refrain from expressing or discussing any of those views during the interview?</p> <p>Finally, you can contact the head of my department, Dr Mada Saleh, whose contact details are provided in the consent form, to report any concerns or risks resulting from your participation in the current study. Do you have any questions? Would you like to ask any questions before I start the interview?</p>
<p><b>Part two (45-50 mins)</b></p> <p><b>This part is considered the heart of the interview. I will ask the participant focused and probing questions that are related to what beliefs they hold about foreign language learning and their motivation in the context of war as well as questions related to the themes of the survey. The interview questions are grouped under four themes (in the context of war).</b></p> <p>This interview addresses four themes:</p> <p><b>Theme one: Their experiences of learning English at Damascus University, including their English language classes and English exams in the context of war</b></p> <p>Question 1: Could you tell me about your experiences of studying English at Damascus University?</p> <p>Potential probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is there anything in particular about your experiences of studying English that you enjoy?</li><li>• Is there anything in particular that you find challenging? Why do you say so?</li><li>• How does it compare with previous experiences of studying English?</li><li>• If you could change one thing about your experience what would it be?</li><li>• Is the current unrest in the country affecting your experience? How?</li></ul> <p>Question 2: Could you tell me about your experiences of the last English exam you took?</p> <p>Potential probing questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Why do you think it went well?</li></ul>

- What went wrong? Why?
- What were the circumstances surrounding your exam/assessment? (**May include personal circumstances or may be related to the unrest**)

**Theme two: The different factors that they think have affected their achievements and performance in the English classes**

Question 1: How would you describe your current performance and achievement in your English classes? Why do you say so?

Potential probing questions:

- Are you happy with your performance?
- How do you think it compares with the performance of your peers? How do you know?

Question 2: Are there any learning facilities that help you learn English at Damascus University?

Potential probing questions:

- What do you find as enablers to learning English at Damascus University?
- Are there any language labs? How do you use them? Why?
- Are there any extracurricular activities that you take part in? Why? Why not?

Question 3: Do you face any difficulties while learning English at Damascus University?

Potential probing questions:

- What do you find as a hindrance to learning English at Damascus University?
- Do you attend your English classes regularly? Why not?

**Theme three: How they study English (the nature of language learning) and what strategies or techniques, if any, they utilise to study English**

Question 1: Could you tell me about how you study English? Did the unrest in Syria affect the way you study English/how you believe English should be studied?

Question 2: Could you describe your study environment?

Question 3: There are certain language skills involved in language learning, such as speaking, writing, reading, listening. Do you think any of these is more important than the other? Why?

Question 4: Do you practice any of these skills regularly? Why? Why not?

Question 5: How do you usually learn new vocabulary and new grammar rules? Do you use any special strategies? If yes, what are they?

**Theme four: Their motivation for foreign language learning at Damascus University in the context of war**

Question 1: What motivates you to study English? Has this always motivated you or is this current?

Question 2: Some might say that this is a unique time to learning English. Would you agree/disagree with this? Why?

Question 3: What makes you persist despite the unrest in Syria?

Question 4: Could you tell me in what way your motivation to study English is influenced by your surrounding environment?

**Debrief (5-10 mins)**

Thank you. This actually concludes our interview, and I will now stop the recording and give you the opportunity to ask any questions of me and to provide feedback on your interview experience.

- How was the interview for you?
- Do you have any feedback for me?
- Would you like me to clarify any misconceptions you may have about the research?
- Is there anything else you would like to add/tell me?

Finally, I would like to remind you that you can contact Dr Mada Saleh if you have any concerns

about your participation in the research.  
**(More information is provided in the debrief form).**

## **Appendix D**

[removed from this digitised version, pp. 339-363]

## Appendix E

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM Information and Consent Form – Participant

Dear student/participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. You have been contacted as a student learning general English as a foreign language (EFL) at Damascus University. You are invited to participate in Skype in-depth semi-structured interviews as part of a PhD research project funded by Bath Spa University and an international funding agency in the UK. Your participation in the project is voluntary, and if you decide not to take part in the interviews that will by no means affect your grades, future assessment or exam results. You may decide not to take part in the research or exit the interviews at any time without consequence. In addition, you have the right to decline to answer any question you do not want to answer for any reason. Please read the following form and make up your mind regarding the participation in this project. Also, please note that all potential participants in this research project are studying at Damascus University. Every participant is expected to read and sign this form before the interviews start.

#### **1. Who will guide this research?**

Rasheed Abdul Hadi, a teaching staff member at Damascus University, is currently doing a PhD at Bath Spa University in the UK. My PhD research is about the students' beliefs about learning English as a foreign language at Damascus University in the context of war.

#### **2. What is the purpose?**

The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that have affected Damascus University students' attitudes and final exam results in the context of war in Syria.

#### **3. How long will the interview last?**

Each of the participants will be interviewed individually for a maximum period of one hour. The interview will be recorded if you consent to that. The recorded interviews and their transcripts will not be shared with any third party. You will be contacted again through Skype for validation and accuracy purposes. According to my timescale, this is planned to take place roughly one to two months following your interview.

#### **4. The Project: What will you be doing?**

This study will take a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools. The first phase employs an online survey with the aim of understanding beliefs about learning English as a foreign language held by the students at Damascus University. The second phase, the current phase, building on the results of the first phase, will employ Skype semi-

structured interviews which can provide direct information about the beliefs of the participants in the context of war (My Skype ID is: [REDACTED]). This phase will require you to participate in the following:

**4.1. Individual interviews:** If you agree to take part in this research, you will be interviewed to talk about your beliefs about learning English as a foreign language as well as motivation for foreign language learning at Damascus University in the context of war in Syria. In addition, you are giving me permission to use your anonymised information and data generated from the interviews in my PhD research and other related academic papers and publications.

In order to minimise risks, the interview questions will not be discussing your political views. If you insist on discussing those views, I will stop the interview. During the interview, instead, you will be asked questions about:

- Your experiences of learning English at Damascus University, including your English language classes and English exams in the context of war
- The different factors that you think have affected your achievements and performance in the English classes in the context of war
- How you study English (the nature of language learning) and what strategies or techniques, if any, you utilise to study English in the context of war
- Your motivation for foreign language learning at Damascus University in the context of war

You can choose to be interviewed in either English or Arabic or both. You can also choose to skip any question you do not feel comfortable with and you can even stop the interview and withdraw at any time. You can ask for clarification regarding the interview questions as many times as you need. If you have already taken part in the survey, you may be asked for more elaboration concerning some of your answers which are related to the main purpose of this research project.

**4.2. Debrief:** At the end of the interview, I will ask you whether there is anything further you would like to add, whether you have any comments about the project or the way the interview has been conducted, and what you have learned from this particular experience. I will also give you details about how to get further support if you have any concerns.

**4.3. Second Skype meeting:** After I finish transcribing the interviews and start my preliminary analysis of the data generated from your answers and comments, you will be contacted through Skype again in order for me to get your validation regarding my understanding of your interview. According to my timescale, this is planned to take place roughly one to two months following your interview.

If you decide not to take part in the interviews that will by no means affect your grades, future assessment or exam results.

## **5. How will you remember so much information?**

I need your permission to audio-record the Skype interviews as mentioned earlier in section 3; in addition, I will take notes. Your personal information will not be disclosed to any third party.

## **6. What happens with the information I give? Will anyone know it was me?**

In line with the UK Data Protection Act 1998, your personal information collected in this study will be made anonymous to ensure that you will not be potentially identified. Therefore, in line with good practice in conducting research and due to the current situation in Syria, pseudonyms will be used in all the data management, including transcriptions, translations and research documents. All responses, notes, interview recordings and printed and written documents will be kept in a secured environment and no third party will be allowed to have access to them. The recordings and documents will be destroyed completely when they are not needed any longer. As for the written documents (transcriptions), based on my understanding of the University policy of data storage, destroying them will take place at the final stage of my thesis writing as I will be reviewing them repeatedly before I submit my PhD thesis. And I will endeavour to keep up with any change in the University policy. In addition, if you have second thoughts regarding certain answers or information you have provided, and you wish not to share with any one, you can withdraw consent/data by contacting me directly and informing me of your decision. Your data will be ignored and will never be included in the research by any means.

## **7. What if I change my mind and don't want to participate anymore?**

You can change your mind and decide not to take part in the study. If you agree to participate, you can also withdraw from the project whenever you desire to do so without giving any reasons or justifications. Moreover, if you decide to withdraw or not to participate in the project, that will not influence your grades or final assessment. You can withdraw consent/data by contacting me directly and informing me of your decision.

## **8. Is it safe?**

Due to the current situation in Syria, with which you are familiar, potential risks are anticipated given the nature of the war. Potential risks may stem from an unintentional release of my data; therefore, in order to prevent that from happening, your information will be anonymised and all my data will be encrypted. Your anonymised data will be treated with confidentiality and will be kept in safe locations as mentioned in section 6 above. One of the potential risks may result from discussing your political views; thus, in order to minimise risks, the interviews will not be discussing your political views as mentioned previously in section 4.1. I would hence like to reaffirm that discussing your political loyalties directly or indirectly will be avoided completely as it is not part of the focus of the current study. If you insist on expressing your political views [REDACTED] I will stop the interview immediately. Besides, your opinions and beliefs about foreign language teaching at Damascus University which may involve expressing your dissatisfaction with the teaching methodologies, teaching styles, curriculum, course books, education system as a whole, etc. can be another potential risk. These may be perceived as criticism targeting the University or the education system, which may have negative consequences on you as a result of an unintentional release of data. However, I would like to reassure you that your safety and confidentiality are top priority, and that all care will be taken to ensure that. Your anonymised and encrypted data and information will not be shared with anyone. In case you have concerns after you have taken part in the interviews, you can contact the head of my department,



Dr Mada Saleh (email: [REDACTED]), in order to report any risks you may anticipate (for more information, see section 13 below).

**9. Will I receive money for participating?**

No. You will receive no financial rewards in return for your participation in this research.

**10. Where will the research take place?**

It is up to you. However, I'd recommend a safe place with a reliable internet connection.

**11. Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

My PhD thesis will make the most of the results and findings generated from the research. Besides, future academic papers and publications as well as workshops and presentations will draw on the anonymised findings from this project. Also, results from your participation in the study as a whole will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of foreign language learning at Damascus University.

**12. What if I have questions or something goes wrong?**

If you have any questions about the project or the procedures or you would like to add more information at any stage of the research, you may contact me, Rasheed Abdul Hadi: [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

**13. What if I have a complaint?**

If you are negatively affected by the research, or if you have any complaints or concerns regarding the research, the survey or the interviews, you may contact the head of my department, Dr Mada Saleh, either in person ([REDACTED] [REDACTED]) or by email at [REDACTED]. She has a professional degree in educational psychology in addition to her PhD in English language and literature. She can and is willing to provide the necessary sort of support to you. Also you can contact my director of studies in the UK, Dr Kyriaki Anagnostopoulou at [REDACTED].

**Informed consent:**

I have been contacted by researcher Rasheed Abdul Hadi to take part in this project and have been briefed on the purpose and scope of the project. I have been given the chance to ask questions about the project and my participation with the researcher; thus,

(Please tick the box next to each statement and add your initials and signature in the space provided)

-I fully confirm that I have read the information sheet of the above research project  
 .....

-I fully understand that my participation in this project is voluntary, and that I can withdraw at any time without providing any reasons or justifications and that my decision will not affect my grades or my future exam results   
.....;

-I fully understand that I can change my mind and withdraw permission to use data from my interview  .....

-I fully understand that the interview will be recorded and transcribed at a later stage to be used for this research project, and I consent to that  
 .....

-I fully confirm that the measures concerning confidentiality have been clarified and explained (e.g. pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me  
 .....

-I fully understand that the information I will provide will be confidential and will not be disclosed to a third party without my written consent  
 .....

-I fully understand that my responses and the information I will provide will be used in the current research for academic purposes, including the researcher's PhD thesis, future publications, workshops or conferences   
.....;

-I fully understand and agree that the interview will not be discussing my or any political views  
 .....

-I fully understand that my identity will remain anonymous, by means of pseudonyms, in any publications based on the results of this research  
 .....

-I fully understand that I will receive no financial benefits from participating in this research

.....

-I fully understand that the researcher will contact me again through Skype or email for validation purposes after the interviews are over

.....

-I am fully aware of the potential risk that may result from my participation in this research project  .....

-I fully understand that if I am negatively affected or I am at risk of harm due to my participation in the research, I can contact the relevant authorities, represented by the head of the English Dept., Dr Mada Saleh, to deal with situation

.....

-I agree to sign and date this informed consent form

.....

I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix F**

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