

The real story of English language teaching in Syrian high schools and the bumpy transition into the university level

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Abstract

English language competence has become necessary to succeed and stay in touch with the world especially in academic fields. It is no surprise that since most of today's research and literature is written in English, the process of English language teaching and learning is an important element of the educational systems especially in EFL contexts. The present study adopts an analytical framework to examine the secondary school curriculum and its approaches to writing instruction and preparing students for higher education. The framework consists of a three-step analysis through which Syria's approach to ELT and the design of the English curriculum in general and writing in specific are compared to the actual teaching practices investigated through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers of English and student survey. Eight high schools and the Department of English at Tishreen University in Syria were visited to gather the necessary information and the results indicate that although the school curriculum adopts the communicative language teaching approach, the communicative features are neglected and English is taught through Arabic with the main objective being passing high stakes tests. Thus, preparation for higher education is not being considered and as a result, both students and teachers are struggling.

1. Introduction

1.1 Communicative language teaching

According to Howatt (1984), English language teaching emerged as an independent field of study in the first half of the twentieth century. One of the reasons behind its emergence is the necessity of teaching English in colonies in a similar way as it is taught in the native country. However, it was not until the fifties that teaching English as a second language and as a foreign language were distinct from each other (Howatt, p. 212). In the 1950s and 1960s, effective writing and speaking in English became under focus especially with the increase in the scopes of international business, commerce, finance and practical communication, in addition to its already being a lingua franca of modern science and technology. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), grammar then was viewed as an abstract concept and many schools had a reaction against teaching grammar. Thus, with the help of the British Council, students of Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth countries were given chances of getting advanced specialist qualifications in various fields, such as commerce, medicine, agriculture, and English language teaching.

In the 1880s at the beginning of the Modern Era, the International Phonetic Association decaled six articles as the principles of second language teaching, which function as the core of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT) that gained attention in the early 1980s (Cook, 2008). The main points included in the articles are that in foreign language contexts, spoken language should be dealt with first and teachers should familiarize students with sounds, frequently used idioms, phrases and sentences in the target language. As for grammar, an inductive approach is to be applied with more systematic analysis of grammar coming at advanced levels. Teachers are also encouraged to introduce students to the culture of the target language and avoid translation.

Finally, as students advance, writing is gradually included in their studies (Stern 1983, p. 89-90).

CLT is based on the theory that communication is the essential element of language use. Achieving communicative competence or the ability to make meaning and conduct oral or written discussion is the main goal of language teaching. The means of achieving competence is through using authentic language and activities such as role-play, pair and group work, focusing on culture, and shifting the focus off grammar and teacher-centeredness into problem solving, interaction, and learner-centeredness (Howatt, 1984; Hymes, 1971; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, Savignon, 2002). Teachers are supposed to abandon their classical roles as dominators and controllers of classroom activities and become facilitators and "counselors" (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p. 121). Regarding learners, classroom activities should be done in a cooperative manner rather than individually. Learners are supposed to be comfortable with pair or group tasks, effectively listen to their peers, be motivated and actively work on their own learning, and not depend totally on the teacher as an example (Breshneh & Riasati, 2014).

1.2. Approaches to writing instruction

According to Silva (1990), the development of teaching of second language English writing resulted from the evolution of teaching writing to native speakers of English. Although L2 writing instruction emerged from that of L1, the context of L2 is quite different from that of L1 and thus, different methods and approaches must be created for the unique situation of L2 teaching and learning.

The controversy whether to follow process or product approaches to teaching L2 writing never ends. Nunan (2015, p. 82) argues that the product-oriented approach weighs importance on the finished product whereas the process-oriented approach puts more importance on the steps involved in the process of composition. In the product-oriented model, learners mimic what the textbooks or teachers provide as models for writing. In addition, grammatical correctness and accuracy on the sentence level are seen as the crucial point since sentences are the base units for the bigger text. The process approach on the other hand places importance on the actual process of composition and the steps that lead to the finished product rather than the product itself.

Nunan (2015) proposes that these two approaches do not necessarily stand in opposition. Instead, they should be completing one another, and both can be implemented in the writing classroom. Harmer (2007) and Nunan (2015) suggest many important aspects that lead to the success of teaching writing in ESL/EFL contexts. First is allowing students to exercise writing and build a writing habit since writing may only develop and improve with practice. If students for whatever reason do not practice writing outside the classroom, teachers should specify some of the time to conduct composition sessions at school. Second is giving useful and meaningful feedback by creating self-correction and peer-reviewing checklists. Third is teachers and learners being aware of the process of writing assessment. Another important issue is genre. The method followed to teach writing depends on the genre or type of text that is required to be written by students. Thus, learners may be exposed to models and texts of different genres and then are asked to produce a written text similar to the model shown to them. Then, as the learners' levels escalate, their writing should be more creative "within a genre, rather than merely imitating it" (Harmer, 2007, p. 113). Hence learners should be involved in the process of writing (planning, drafting, reviewing, and editing), which is rather complex.

1.3 Writing skills and the shift from high school to university

The problem of poor writing skills at high school and the gap created by that when starting academic studies at university is wide spread. A number of studies highlight this issue and discuss its causes. For example, some of the major issues studied are the effects of high-stakes tests on methods of teaching writing, the gap in writing requirements between high school and university and bridging the gap between the two levels, investigating the reasons behind students' deteriorated levels of writing and how to prepare them for university-level writing (See Acker & Halasek, 2008; Addison & McGee, 2010; Alsup & Bernard-Donals, 2002; Applebee & Langer, 2011; Budden et al., 2002; Carroll, 2002; Crank, 2012; Daiker, 2002; Donahue, 2007; Fanetti et al., 2010; Farris, 2009; Graff & Graff, 2009; Huwari & Al-Kasawneh, 2013; Jaxon, 2002; Jones, 2007; Kapanke & Westemeier, 2002; Kim & Kim, 2005; Kittle, 2010; Mosley, 2010; Sullivan, 2010; Thompson & Wilson, 2002). This issue has not been investigated in Syria before. However, as the researcher was once a student at the Department of English in Tishreen University, and later a writing instructor there, she was able to see the huge gap between high school and university and the fact that students are not well prepared for the academic atmosphere and are completely overwhelmed by its tasks. For this reason, this paper investigates the teaching process at Syrian high schools with special focus on writing instruction in order to identify the reasons behind students' lack of competence.

2. Languages in Syria

Arabic is the sole official language in Syria and it is the mother tongue for the great majority of the population. However, there is not a unified form of Arabic used in everyday communication. Hence, Syria is classified as a diglossic community where Modern Standard Arabic along with multiple varieties of Arabic co-exist. For example, Syria has fourteen governorates, in which Modern Standard Arabic is the official language used in all printed forms, political speeches, and news broadcasting whether on television or radio. However, each of these fourteen governorates has its own vernacular distinguished through variation in the pronunciation of vowels and some consonants, in addition to some lexical differences, which do not completely hinder the mutual-intelligibility between the inhabitants of Syria. These varieties are used as medium of instruction in schools for most subjects although what “should be” used is the Modern Standard Arabic.

There are non-Arab minorities in Syria that use their own mother tongue within their communities such as, Kurdish, Armenian, and Circassian. However, people belonging to these communities have to learn Arabic as it is the sole official language.

As for foreign language teaching, English is the first foreign language, and it is taught starting from the kindergarten level. The importance of English stems from the status it has earned after World War II, as it has become the language of scholarship, technology, science, and commerce. According to Bassiouny (2009), the dominating language used in various fields of science, economy, emails, politics, and internet is English. For this reason, the Syrian educational system hugely focuses on English language education. French and Russian are second foreign languages introduced in Grade VII where students choose one of them to study along with English.

3. The Educational System in Syria

Education is extremely important in Syria, and the government places huge emphasis on providing at least a basic level of education to every single citizen in Syria. According to Rajab (2013), the majority of schools are governmental and the Ministry of Education (MoE) is responsible for all aspects of school education including curriculum

design and development, establishing schools, applying reforms, planning and policies. Figure 1 below summarizes the organization of the Syrian educational system.

All public schools have the same arrangements whereby the teacher is the center of the class and the symbol of authority. Classrooms have a platform where teachers stand in view of the whole class and students sit in rows facing the teacher. According to Rajab (2013, p. 9), "Most Syrian secondary level classes usually accommodate from 30 to 36 students (MOE, 2008)".

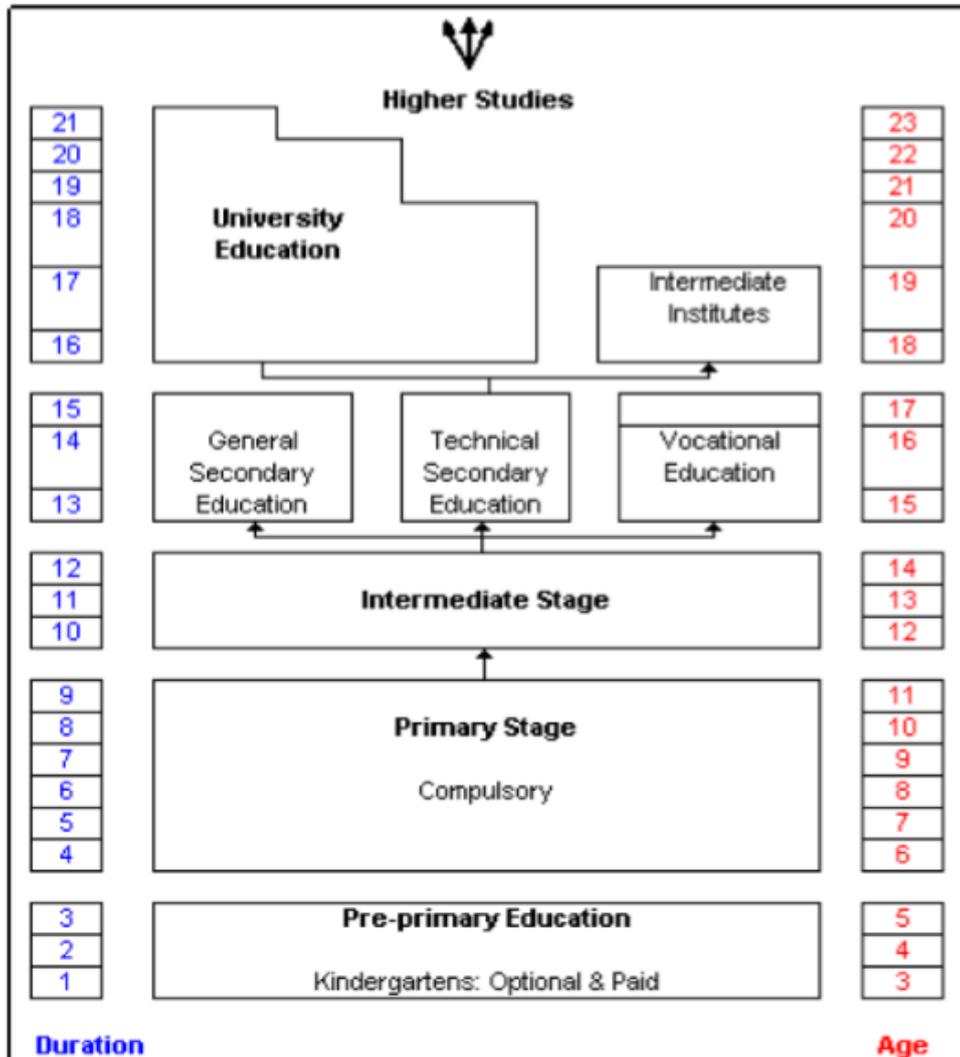


Figure 1. The organization of Syrian educational system as shown in World Data on Education (2011).

3.1. Teacher education

As for teaching English in Syria, the system depends on local teachers rather than native speakers. Teachers go through various stages of education and training prior to and post their career. Rajab (2013, p. 12) offers a summary of the teacher qualifications required to teach at the different school levels as shown in Table 1 below.

There are two types of graduates that are assigned as teachers of English in Syria. First are university graduates who have BA in English Literature and those teach in the

secondary and intermediate levels. Second are institute-graduates who have studied English language for two years, and those teach in the primary level. According to Shalash and Hanna (2009), the Ministry of Education started a project for a permanent development of teachers' qualifications. Sponsored by the Ministry, the in-service university graduate teachers can study for one year in the College of Education and get a Diploma in Education. The in-service institute graduate teachers can continue their study at the College of Education to get a university degree.

Table 1. Teacher qualifications required in Syria as shown in (Rajab, 2013)

Stage		Required Qualification
Basic Stage	Primary Schools	Primary/Intermediate Teaching Certificate (teacher training schools and institutes)
	Intermediate Schools	Intermediate Teaching Certificate (BA or BSc- with a Diploma in Educational Studies)
General Secondary		BA or BSc (Preferably with a Diploma in Educational Studies)
Vocational Secondary		Intermediate Institute Certificate, BSc in electrical & mechanical engineering. (Preferably with a Diploma in Educational Studies)
Intermediate and Higher Institutes		University degree
University		MA or PhD

Syria also benefited from the National Training Program for teachers that began in Karachi, Pakistan in 2003, with the cooperation of Aga Khan Foundation. It has been introduced and initiated in Syria with the help of the American Cultural Center, the British Council in Damascus and The Syrian Educational Publishers in cooperation with local senior supervisors at the Ministry of Education. The National Training Team is formulated to train all teachers and prepare them to use the new curriculum and teaching methods based on the CLT approach. According to Shalash and Hanna (2009), training courses and programs take place are regular and continuous throughout each year.

4. English Language Teaching in Syria

English entered the Syrian school system in the 1950s, and the English language teaching underwent changes ever since. According to Shalash and Hanna (2009), the Ministry of Education undertook the renewal of the English curriculum for school education in Syria in mid 2000s with the assistance of British and American experts. The *English for Starters* curriculum in is now based on the CLT approach. The new curriculum integrates cultural topics from different parts of the world in addition to issues designed specifically for EFL learners in Syria. The natural environment of Syria and its cultural, social and moral values are presented throughout the series. Important Syrian figures and their achievements and roles in society are a central source for the material.

There are three major stages in the school education in Syria:

- i. Pre-school level - from the age of three to five years.
- ii. Basic education level, which splits into two stages:
 - a. Beginner: Grade I to Grade VI - from the age of six to eleven years.
 - b. Intermediate: Grade VII to Grade IX - from the age of twelve to fourteen years.

Core subjects taught in this level include Arabic, English, Foreign Language, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Social Studies, and Religion. The basic education with its two parts is compulsory and completely free. There are two semesters in each school year, and there are (a) oral tests; (b) exercises and homework; (c) written tests; (d) terminal exam in each term. According to UNESCO and IBE (2011) "The average score obtained by pupils in (a)-(c) and in the terminal exam (d), constitutes their results". The final score at each year equals the average of the two end-term examinations. At the end of Grade IX, the final examinations are held on a national level and the Ministry of Education sets the exam questions.

iii. Secondary level: Grade X to XII - from the ages of fifteen to seventeen years.

Depending on the score of the Grade IX test, students may opt to continue with either general or vocational education at the secondary level, which is not compulsory. In the general secondary school, students choose to continue their high school by joining either the Literary or Scientific branches. Secondary education ends at Grade XII whose test is set by the Ministry of Education on the national level. Success in this test grants students the Baccalaureate Degree, and the score achieved at this test determines what students will study at the university level, which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education.

According to the website of the Ministry of Higher Education, in the academic year of 2013-2014, those who scored 94% of the total mark in English and 57.7% of the total score of the final Grade XII test were eligible for admission in the Department of English at Tishreen University. Statistics issued by the Ministry also reveal that the total number of students in the English Department at Tishreen University was 4835 students -out of which 72% are females- in the academic year of 2013/2014. The total number of first year students is 1566 -out of which 60% are females.

In terms of staff, one lecturer usually teaches each subject at the Department. In case the subject had practical sessions, a tutor is assigned to conduct practical sessions. So basically, a maximum of two teachers per subject are responsible for 1566 students which is huge number that hinders the application of learner-centered and effective practical teaching techniques.

5. The Framework

The framework adopted for this paper is proposed by Al-Hammadi & Sidek (2015). Richard and Roger's (2001) model of linguistic education is the basis for the present analytical framework, shown in Figure 2 below. It consists of a three-step analysis through which Syria's approach to ELT and the curriculum design in general and writing in specific are compared to the actual teaching practices investigated through classroom observation. The first step is to identify the theories and approaches to teaching adopted by the curriculum. Second, the focus shifts to the design level of the curriculum itself. In this category, learner role, teacher role, writing tasks and the levels of cognitive domain of writing tasks are examined. In order to set the cognitive demands of the writing tasks, Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015, p. 66) have designed a coding scheme which is a "revised version of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive domain level", shown in Table 2 below. The final part of the analysis is the execution level in which classroom observation is used to examine the procedure of classroom teaching.

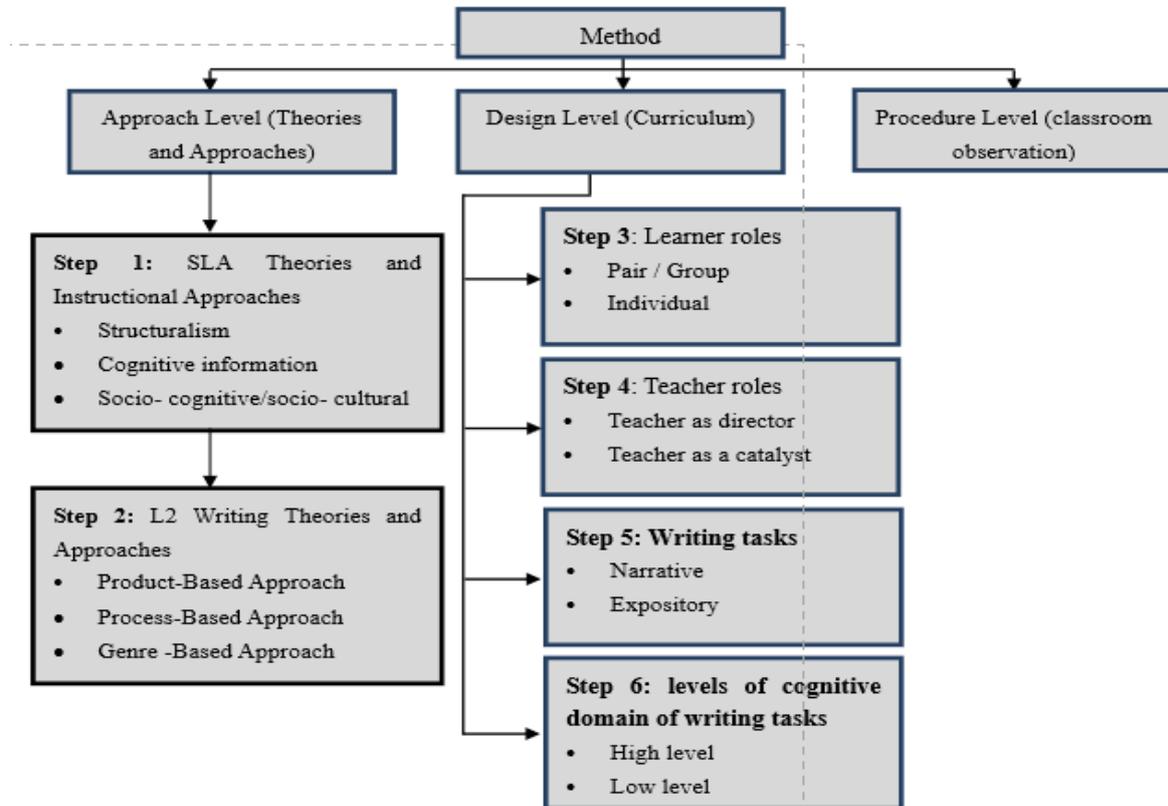


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework developed by Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015)

Table 2. Al-Hammadi & Sidek 2015) Revised taxonomy cognitive levels and keywords

Levels	Skill	Definition	Keywords
Level 1	Remembering	Retrieving relevant knowledge from memory	Define, describe, find, identify, label, list, match, name, outline, recall, recognise
Level 2	Understanding	Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication	Summarize, translates interpret, paraphrase, rewrite, explain, classify, infer, compare, explain, give examples
Level 3	Applying	Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation.	Execute, use, apply, implement, illustrate, prepare, demonstrate
Level 4	Analysing	Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose	Analyse, breaks down differentiate, contrast, organize, deconstruct, edit, distinguish, review
Level 5	Evaluating	Making judgments based on criteria and standards.	Assess, check, criticize, evaluate, justify, prioritize, interpret
Level 6	Creating	Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product	Generate, create, plan, produce, compose, refine, revise, synthesize, develop, reconstructs

6. Methodology

6.1 Analysis of the curriculum

6.1.1. The textbooks

As mentioned earlier, the currently used curriculum has been in service since 2005 and the series is titled *English for Starters*. The Grades under focus for this study are XI and XII. Textbooks for these two grades consist of Student's Book, Activity Book, Literary/Scientific Supplement Book, and Teacher's Book. There are four modules in the Student's and Activity Books, which are subdivided into three units (twelve units in total). Teachers have to complete two modules per semester. Each module discusses one main theme, for example, Module 1 in Grade XII is called *World Issues* and its units are *The Law*, *Migration*, and *Recycling Resources*. At the end of each module is a Review Section with exercises that focus on grammatical points and important vocabularies introduced to students throughout the three units. In addition, an optional project is conducted in case the teacher has time. The Activity Book has activities that parallel the Student's Book and aim to strengthen students' reading and writing. Teachers may assign exercises in the Activity Book as homework or do them in class. As for Supplementary Books, the Literary Supplement explores important aspects of English Literature, such as writers, literary genres, academic writing, and discusses some poems and parts of famous plays. The Scientific Supplement on the other hand discusses a variety of vital scientific topics, such as modern medicines, space research, and recycling waste. Finally is the Teacher's Book, which provides teachers with numerous tips, ideas, and suggestions as to how to discuss the materials in the books. In addition to that, it gives teachers samples of progress tests that can be used to assess students effectively.

6.1.2. *Textbook's approach to ELT*

Analyzing the content of Syria's *English for Starters* is based on what literature suggests as to what the CLT curriculum focuses on and how it is designed. To begin with, teacher's role as the central figure of the classroom is to be changed into that of the catalyst or facilitator of the teaching process. This gives way to working on the ability to achieve meaningful communication via implying activities that represent authentic language use. For example, teachers should create a learner-centered environment in which students engage in cooperative interactions where they are comfortable in conducting role-play, group and pair work rather than individual work. In addition to that, students should be motivated to initiate problem solving and participate in their process of learning rather than completely depend on their teachers. Teachers should also focus on introducing students to the culture of the target language, which must be used exclusively in the classroom rather than translation as meaning of new vocabulary can be guessed from the context. As for grammar, it should be taught inductively with a gradual shift to a more systematic approach as students advance (Breshneh & Riasati, 2014; Howatt, 1984; Hymes, 1971; Richards & Rodgers, 2001, Savingnon, 2002; Stern, 1983).

Another important issue is incorporating an integrated approach to skills development (Nunan, 2004), for instance, before writing on a certain topic, students can listen to and read about a particular topic. Then, they discuss and exchange knowledge regarding the topic before starting the writing process.

The question is: To what extent does the Syrian curriculum follow this recipe? Table 3 below shows the results of analyzing the content of Grades XI and XII textbooks with focus on the occurrence of each skill, student's role, and teacher's role.

Analysis revealed that the curriculum is completely based on the CLT approach as the previously discussed features are clearly stated in the design of the textbooks. First, the textbook adopts a skill-integration task-based approach as language skills are taught through directing students to communicate and do multi-skill meaningful tasks in English. For example, grammar is supposed to be taught through a discovery or inductive approach (see Appendix 1). Integrating main and secondary skills like that promotes mastering both skills, English language competence becomes an end itself rather than a means to an end, learners learn real content rather than forms of language, boosts motivation and allows teachers to assess the students' development of various skills simultaneously (Hinkel, 2010; Huang 2004). The curriculum also prefers pair/ group work (see Appendix 2) to handle tasks as shown in Table 3. As for teacher's role, in most exercises, they are directed to elicit answers from students and encouraged to be enablers, motivators and guiders rather than the controllers of the teaching/learning process (Larsen-freeman, 2000; Littlewood, 1981; Savingnon, 2002). Teachers are directed to avoid translation and encourage students to infer the meaning of unfamiliar lexical items from their contexts or to search for their meaning in dictionaries.

Table 3. Content analysis of Grades XI and XII textbooks

Teacher Role				Target of Activities								Skill under focus
Director		Catalyst		Individuals		Pairs		Groups		Whole class		
Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	Grade XII	Grade XI	
22.85	31.03	77.14	68.96	19.69	18.51	40.09	37.03	13.63	14.81	25.75	29.62	Discuss
26.66	18.18	73.33	81.81	21.73	18.18	39.13	45.45	13.04	18.18	26.08	18.18	Read
0	18.18	100	81.81	25	33.33	20	11.11	0	11.11	25	44.44	Listen
25.71	31.03	74.28	68.96	26.19	14.81	38.09	50	11.9	9.25	23.08	25.92	Grammar
20	8.57	80	74.28	26.19	16.66	42.85	46.29	7.14	5.55	23.8	29.62	Vocabulary
31.25	10.34	68.75	89.65	20	11.11	33.33	37.03	6.66	29.62	40	22.22	Speak

6.1.3. Textbook's approach to writing instruction

Table 4 below shows the results of the analysis of the writing tasks assigned for Grades XI and XII revealing their types, target, teacher role, approach, and cognitive level. In all of the writing tasks, teachers are given the role of a director and a facilitator of the writing process. The majority of the tasks are designed to be accomplished through pair work inside the classroom or individually if teachers assign writing as homework. As for the approach to writing instruction, the textbook recommends using a mixed approach of product/process as students in some instances are given a sample or an example of what they are supposed to write (see Appendix 3). Analysis also reveals that the dominant level of cognitive demands is Level 1: Remembering, followed by Level 6: Creating and Level 2: Understanding, then comes Levels 3: Applying, 4: Analyzing and 5: Evaluating.

Table 4. Analysis of writing tasks adopted from Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015)

Type of Task		Target		Approach				Level of cognitive demands					
Narrative	Expository	Group	Pair	Individuals	Process	Product	Both	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6

The curriculum also exposes students to a wide variety of writing topics. For example, in Grade XI, they are required to write in formal and informal contexts, plan an outline for their work, do text analysis, write detailed descriptions of people, places and statistical diagrams, produce sound arguments, and write reviews. In Grade XII, students practice the same kind of topics but in the scope of subjective and objective essay writing. Students are also introduced to organizational issues, such as introductions, conclusions, coherence and cohesions. In Unit 6 in Activity Book, students have to write an essay in 100-120 words, including arguments for and against on one of these topics: *the arguments for and against protecting wild animals; the arguments for and against keeping household pets; the arguments for and against eating meat*. They have to follow a four-section essay where the introduction comes first with an outline of the issues. Then, they have to write

one argument for and one against the selected topic. Finally, the conclusion should contain a brief statement of the students' opinions and ideas (see Appendix 4).

Skill integration is also implied in writing instruction. For example, in Unit 6 of Grade XII Student's Book, students have to write a report based on a discussion they had earlier. They have to read a text, decide on suitable headings for the parts of the text, discuss their work and write their report as a group while teachers offer help only when necessary; see Appendix 5.

6.1.4. Writing at the Department of English

As for the first year writing course at the Department of English in Tishreen University, it works on the level of paragraph writing. According to the syllabus, students are provided with the practice required to produce a variety of grammatically correct sentences in unified paragraphs that are logically patterned. Grammar, sentence structure, types of sentences, and punctuation are focused on throughout the courses. Students are introduced to the basic concepts of paragraph writing (topic sentence, unity and coherence). Emphasis will be given to both the writing of cohesive summaries and explanatory pieces on different topics. As for testing, the Department requires a good command over English as a prerequisite for a pass grade. The content and ideas are extremely important. The marks are usually divided evenly according to the ideas required to cover a particular question. Critical thinking, using appropriate examples and the ability to present and debate ideas are essential for scoring. The third criterion is related to layout, organization, the use of appropriate lexis and terminology.

Upon looking closely at the objectives of writing at both levels, they actually work as two links in a chain. High school writing paves the way for academic writing as it introduces students to literature, literary genres, paragraph and essay writing, and writing techniques. According to the syllabus of the Department, first year students should be able to produce summaries and explanatory writings. These categories fall under *Level 2: understanding* of Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive levels (Al-Hammadi & Sidek 2015). See Table 2 above. However, the question is: To what degree do school teachers apply the recommendations and directions of the curriculum?

6.2 Procedure level

6.2.1. Participants

Eight high schools in Latakia City are selected for this study. The sample includes all the different social, ethnic, and religious varieties in Latakia. Thus, the researcher chose two urban schools (one all-female and one all-male), two city-center schools (one all-female and one all-male), one urban mixed school, one private high school (mixed), and School of the Distinguished (mixed). The process of collecting data took place during October/ November 2016. Table 5 below summarizes number of sessions and types of schools selected for data collection.

Table 5. Types of Schools and Total Number of English Sessions Attended

Number of sessions	Location and type of school
6	City-center/ all-female
3	City-center/ all-male
6	Urban/ all-female
3	Urban/ all-male
6	Urban/ mixed
3	School of the Distinguished/ mixed
3	Private school/ mixed
Total number of sessions = 30	

In total, eleven teachers of English participated in the process of observation. Table 6 below gives a detailed picture of their gender, workplace, and teaching experience. To maintain the teachers' confidentiality, they are given alphabetical letters to refer to each one. Teachers are organized in order of conducting classroom observation.

Table 6. Sample Teachers

Years of experience	School			Gender	Teacher
	Gender	Location	Type		
16	All-female	City-center	Public	Female	A
19	All-female	City-center	Public	Female	B
33	All-male	City-center	Public	Male	C
16	All-male	Urban	Public	Female	D
34	All-female	Urban	Public	Female	E
30	All-female	Urban	Public	Male	F
18	Mixed	Urban	Public	Male	G
35	Mixed	Urban	Public	Male	H
25	Mixed	City-center	Public	Female	I
46	Mixed	Urban	Private	Male	J
Total numbers of teachers = 10					

6.2.2. Classroom Observation

This study adopts a mixed-method approach to data collection as it contains both qualitative and quantitative aspects of classroom observation and analysis incorporated together (Creswell, 2003). Mixing both approaches is done for multiple reasons, one of which is validity. Validity of data increases when gathered in various methods (methodological triangulation), as the problem is approached and answers are sought after from multiple perspectives. Triangulation increases the validity and accuracy of the collected data (Dörnyei, 2007; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Jick, 1979; Mackey & Gass, 2005). This means that through the mixed-methods approach, researchers may be able to find answers that qualitative or quantitative methods alone cannot answer.

According to Mackey & Gass (2005), classroom observations "are a useful means for gathering in-depth information" (p. 186). For this study, Ullman and Geva (1984) Target Language Observation Scheme (TALOS) is the basis of the developed checklist. Analysis of the parts of the TALOS reveals that there are two main sections. The first one is a checklist designed for the observation of low-inference categories such as, overall classroom verbal and non-verbal activities of both the teacher and the students. The other is a 5-point scale (extremely low to extremely high) high-inference scale, which is filled by the researcher after the completion of the observation. Ullman and Geva (1984, pp. 119-20) suggests "By coding the same classroom events in two distinct ways ... it should be

possible to check the validity of the categories as representing theoretical constructs observable in second language classroom practice." This method of validating the observation scheme is called "construct validation" (Chaudron 1988, p. 6).

However, to avoid limiting the observations to a specific set of categories and thus creating, "a kind of tunnel vision because the observer sees only those behaviors that coincide with the categories in the observation scheme" (Mackey & Gass, 2005), unstructured observation sessions are conducted first to see the pattern that might emerge. Then, structured observations are conducted using an observation scheme with various categories adopted from TALOS (see Appendix 6).

The systematic observation is based on dividing the session into 10 time intervals -4 minutes each-, which covers the entire 40 minute-session. However, the researcher kept ready to take side notes during the systematic observation in order not to miss any important patterns that may emerge.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1. Unstructured classroom observation

The majority of the observed teachers show similar patterns concerning teaching methods. Sessions begin with a revision of grammar rules and vocabulary. Throughout the sessions, teachers stress the importance of the final Grade XII national examination, and clues and important notes are always given to students. For example, teachers point out potential sentences as "important for translation" or "fill in the blanks". Grammar is taught deductively. The inductive or discovery approach is not practiced since some teachers deem it as a time-consuming. Full word-for-word translation of the vocabulary and reading passages is done and students are not encouraged to infer or guess meanings of words from their contexts as suggested by the curriculum. Speaking and listening exercises are skipped since, according to the teachers, there is not sufficient equipment, the overload of classrooms, and the fact that speaking and listening are not included in testing. The dominant language is Arabic and English is barely spoken in class as the main objective is teaching students how to pass the tests. English is a means to an end rather than the end itself. Teachers heavily dominate the classes as they decide what and how to discuss. Pair/group work is rarely practiced and most activities are directed to individual students or to the classroom as a whole. There is no interaction or communication between teachers and students or between students themselves. The sessions follow a lecture pattern where students are supposed to sit quietly and listen to the teacher explaining, reading, and translating. Students then are allowed to ask questions after explanations are done. There are only rare instances where students are given the chance to initiate discussions and problem solving.

As for writing, it is not practiced inside the classroom as the curriculum prescribes, and it is handled in three ways. First, teachers assign them as homework and then students submit them to the teacher for evaluation and written feedback. Second, teachers provide students with ready-made samples of every single writing task included in the book. Students are free whether to memorize these samples and use them in tests or to write their own paragraphs or essays in manners similar to the teachers' sample. Third, teachers skip writing sections altogether as ready-made sample of the prescribed paragraphs and essays are available for students to purchase from various libraries or from private tutors. Neither writing nor other language skills are taught in integration. The heavily task-based structure of the textbook is completely ignored and each skill is practiced in exclusion. For example, discussion and reading exercises that function as a preparation for a writing task are ignored.

7.2. Structured classroom observation

The findings of the unstructured observation are further supported by the results of the analyzed categories of the observation scheme (see Appendix 5). Table 7 below reveals the results of the low-inference checklist.

Table 7. Results of low-inference categories

Target of in-class activities							
Whole class 33.5%		Groups 4%		Pairs 10.5%		Individuals 56%	
Focus of activities							
Culture 0%			Function 25.5%			Form 74.4%	
Teacher role							
Translate 78.5%	Motivate 19%	Facilitate 9%	Answer 2.5%	Ask 24%	Discuss 10%	Narrate 0%	Explain 45.5%
Types of student utterances							
Translate 16.9%	Silence 6.6%	Lengthy 4.5%	Question 3%	Sentence 34.66%	Phrase 27.33%	Word 6.5%	Nonverbal 0%
Language use							
Student				Teacher			
L2 28.7%		L1 71.2%		L2 24.7%		L1 75.3%	

Unlike what the textbook suggests, teachers control classroom activities. The process is teacher-centered and depends on teachers explaining the lessons in Arabic rather than English with heavy focus on formal aspects of language rather than its functional or cultural ones. In terms of exercises, teachers direct their questions to the class as a whole or to individuals. Pair or group work is rarely practiced because, as some teachers claim, it is time-consuming and schools are not equipped for such kinds of activities. On the part of students, producing lengthy discussions in English has rarely occurred, otherwise, their responses are restricted to sentences, phrases, and translations when asked.

As for the second part of the observation checklist, the tables and charts below summarize the results of the high-inference categories, which are checked immediately after each session. It is revealed that the task-oriented approach to teaching, which is what the curriculum is based on, is actually low. Teachers adopt the classical way of explaining materials and rules to students rather than following the deductive approach. In addition, both teachers and students use Arabic more extensively than they use English. Some observed sessions are completely dedicated to translating a text and grammar instruction in Arabic.

Teachers dominate the speaking time and initiating problem solving, as students only respond when teachers ask them to. However, teachers' humor, enthusiasm, students' attention, and participation range between *high* and *fair*.

Table 8. In-class language use

Use of L1									
Students					Teachers				
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high	Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high
0%	0%	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%	10%	30%	60%
Use of L2									
Students					Teachers				
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high	Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high
30%	50%	10%	10%	0%	60%	20%	0%	20%	0%

Table 9. Speaking time and initiation of problem solving

Speaking time									
Students					Teachers				
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high	Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high
40%	40%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	50%
Initiation of problem solving									
Students					Teachers				
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high	Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very high
90%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	10%	0%	90%

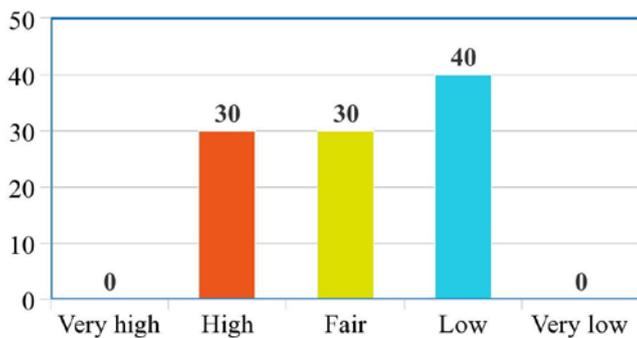


Figure 3. Percentage of task-oriented instruction

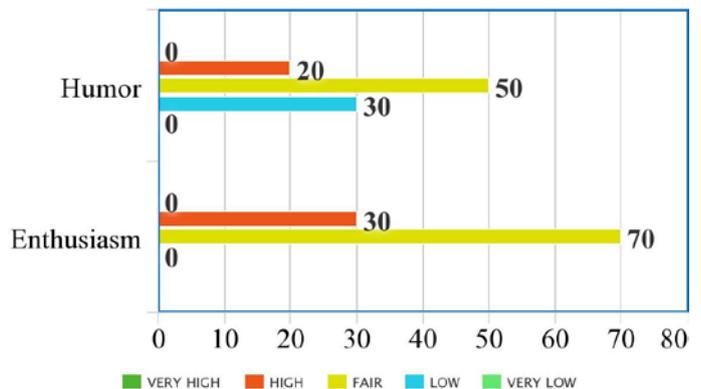


Figure 4. Teachers' humor and enthusiasm

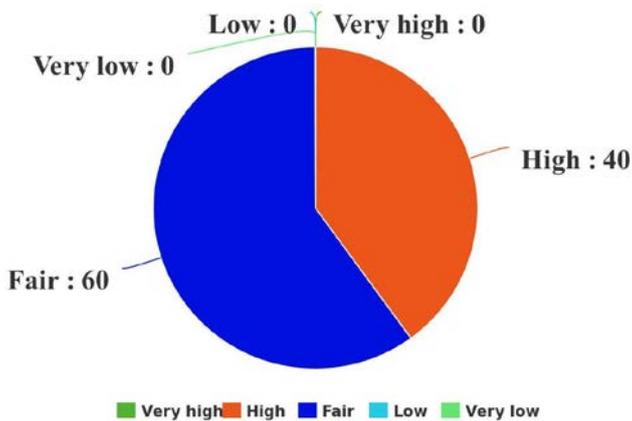


Figure 5. Students' attention

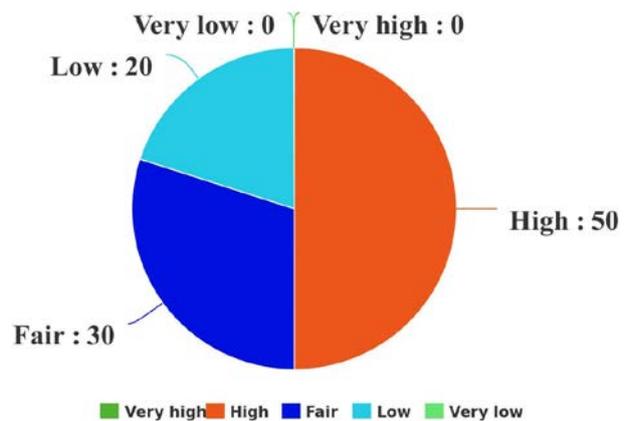


Figure 6. Students' participation

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that there exists a significant issue at hand. Although the curriculum is based on the CLT approach, it is in fact being taught through the classical grammar translation method, which focuses on teaching vocabulary and grammar. It appears that the communicative function of English is not the aim of the Syrian teachers, rather what matters is how much students score in the final examination, an issue that is rooted in the Syrian society and schools cannot be the only institution to blame, since the national Grade XII test is the only qualifier for university admission. For this reason, the communicative aspect to English is completely neglected by school teachers whereas grammar and translation are heavily focused on.

The lack of exposure and practice of listening and speaking activities at high school totally contrasts the scene at the university level. Lecturers at the Department of English in Tishreen University use English exclusively as a means of instruction and communication with students. Students are expected to be able to perform oral and written discussions and analyses of literary concepts. The first year writing instructor at the Department states that high school is heavily test-oriented. The importance of the product prevails over quality and process. With this background, it comes to no surprise that students are under-prepared for academic levels and consequently feel overwhelmed and unable to cope with the complex demands of the Department.

This study does not place the blame entirely on the teachers who in the end are working to achieve what seems to be the objective of school education, which is graduating from high school with high marks that qualify for a seat at university. However, there are multiple factors that contribute to the issue. One of these factors is in fact the influence of standardized evaluation system on the high school teaching practices. (Fanetti et al., 2010, p. 82) name this phenomenon as the "factory model", which weighs importance on the result rather than process and rules over learners, and thus hindering success in at university. The results also imply that the relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education is severed. There are no established channels of connection and thus the two levels are not functioning as a continuum, but rather as two close-ended separate entities. The effects of this separation translates itself in the difficulties that both first-year university students and instructors are constantly facing.

In order to overcome this issue, a suggested solution is to change the testing system and incorporate the audio and spoken aspects of language in the evaluation process. Then, genuine and effective teacher-training programs and workshops should be organized and application of the curriculum's objectives should be fulfilled, especially in terms of the

communicative aspects of language and the gradual acquisition of language skills. Continuous evaluation of the curriculum and teaching practices are also quite important to ensure the quality of education. In addition to that, further research into the primary and intermediate school levels is recommended to study the teaching process and identify any issues retraining the use of the recommended communicative approach to language teaching.

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Appendix 1

How to teach grammar rules

(10 mins)

This exercise will further students' understanding of the past perfect, and of how to express the order of events accurately.

Read the rubric to the class and go through sentence

a together. Tell them that there are two different tenses in each sentence, and ask a volunteer to identify the first (*had eaten – past perfect*), and another to name the second (*welcomed – past simple*). Ask a third student which of the activities came first (*eating a special breakfast*) and elicit the rule from the class. Point their attention to the *Grammar file* if they need some help. Get them to complete the table individually, and compare answers as a class.



Appendix 2

Orientation to pair/ group work

Lesson 5
Overview
Outcomes To use multi-part verbs to express processes
Language focus Multi-part verbs with *get*; indefinite pronouns with *else*
Pronunciation Unstressed words
Materials Students' Book page 47; Cassette
Grammar reference Activity Book page 83

Vocabulary Multi-part verbs with *get*

1 (20–25 mins)

a On the board, write *multi-part verbs* and ask students to give some examples. Explain that you are going to study multi-part verbs with *get*. Read out sentence **1** and ask the students to match *get up* with the correct meaning (**B**).

Put them in pairs to complete the task. Go round and offer help if necessary.

b Put the students in pairs. EITHER tell them to discuss each question in turn OR allocate one of the questions to each pair, so that they have more time to discuss it in depth. When they are ready, invite different students to share their ideas with the class and allow brief class discussions about each question.

Using else

2 (10 mins)

Read out the information and the first sentence and invite a student to complete it using words from the box (*something else*).

Then allow time for the students to copy out the sentences and complete them. When they have finished, ask them to compare answers with those of a partner.

Pronunciation How many words?

3 (15–20 mins)

a Play the recording, pausing after each sentence for the students to write it down. Repeat as necessary.

Tapescript 5.2 – see page 78

Students' Book page

Vocabulary Multi-part verbs with *get*

There are many multi-part verbs with *get* in English.

a Match the verbs underlined in these sentences with the correct meanings A–F below.

- 1 I have to get up early to go to school.
- 2 My father and his colleagues get on very well.
- 3 I've had a bad cold, but I'm getting over it now.
- 4 We have to get in there under 10 minutes. I should not get down to reading.

b Students compare their sentences with those of another student. Are they the same? Invite different students to write each sentence on the board.

Play the recording again, pausing after each sentence for the students to repeat it.

Tapescript 5.2 – see page 78

Appendix 3

Example 1 of writing task instruction

Writing

1 Write a letter to a local newspaper making recommendations which might help to solve ONE of these problems.

- There are very few public places in your town where people can go to keep fit.
- Very few tourists come to your town because they know nothing about it.

Follow this paragraph plan.

- 1 Begin the letter by briefly describing the problem you have chosen.
- 2 Make your main recommendation.
- 3 Make a second recommendation.
- 4 Conclude the letter by saying what you hope will happen next.

Write 100–120 words (in your notebook).

Appendix 4 Example of writing task instruction

4 Write your essay in 100-120 words, including arguments for and against. Choose one of these titles:

The arguments for and against protecting wild animals
The arguments for and against keeping household pets
The arguments for and against eating meat

Follow this paragraph plan:

- 1 Introduction outlining the issues
- 2 Arguments for
- 3 Arguments against
- 4 Conclusion, including your own ideas

Use the same or similar expressions to structure your essay and to express your ideas as the writer of the essay on page 36. Refer to the list you made in exercise 2.

Appendix 5 Example of skill integration

Lesson 8

Overview
Outcomes To write a report
Language focus Expressing possibilities e.g. *may, perhaps*; making recommendations, e.g. *This means that ...*
Materials Students' Book page 51

Writing A report

Remind students about the previous lesson's roleplay discussions. Tell them that they are going to write a report about the new housing project and that, as before, they are to imagine that they live in the affected town.

1 (15 mins)
 Tell the students that they are first going to read a report written by a group of local business owners from the town. For economic reasons, they support the building of the housing project on the protected wetlands, which is the closest site to the town.

Under threat

Ask them to read the report. When they have finished reading, they should fill in the four gaps for headings at the beginning of each paragraph.
Suggested answers: *Purpose of report; Why build on the wetland?; Why not build elsewhere?; Conclusion*

2 (15 mins)
 Ask the students to return to the groups they were in for the speaking activity in the previous lesson. Whilst students should write their own reports by returning to their groups, students can remind each other of the points they discussed in the previous speaking exercise. Tell them to plan their reports, using the ideas from their previous discussions. They should decide on the section headings for their reports and then write down their main ideas.

3 (15-20 mins)
a Ask students to read the *Useful Language* box and remind them that the report from the local businesses used bullet points to get key points across.
b Tell them to check their spelling, grammar and punctuation very carefully, then to read another student's report. Does he/she express the same point of view? Collect in the reports for correction. You could ask students to produce word-processed copies for a class display.

Appendix 6 Classroom Observation Checklist

A. General information:

- Teacher's Name:
- Gender:..... Years of experience:.....
- Name and type of school :
- Classroom equipment:

- Grade:.....
- Date and time of class:
- Duration of the lesson:.....
- Number of Students:.....
- Gender of students: all-female all-male mixed
- For mixed classrooms:

Number of females

Number of males

B. In-Class observed Categories:

Teacher												
		Instances per four-minute intervals										
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Whole class	Target of Activities	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Small group		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Pairs		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Individuals		
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Form	Focus of activities	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Function		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Culture		
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Explain	Teacher's role	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Narrate		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Discuss		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Ask		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Answer		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Facilitate		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Motivate		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Translate	Skills under focus	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Listening		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Speaking		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Reading		
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Writing	Materials used	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Textbook		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Authentic		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Audio-visual		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Dictionaries		
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Role-play	Language use	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Other		
										<input type="checkbox"/> L1		
									<input type="checkbox"/> L2			
Students												
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Nonverbal	Types of Students' utterance	
										<input type="checkbox"/> Word		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Phrase		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Sentence		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Question		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Lengthy		
										<input type="checkbox"/> Silence		
Notes:										<input type="checkbox"/> Translation	Language use	
										<input type="checkbox"/> L1		
										<input type="checkbox"/> L2		

C. Post-observation Checklist

Teacher		
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Level of task-oriented instruction
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's use of L1
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's use of L2
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's speaking time
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's initiation of problem- solving
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's humor
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Teacher's enthusiasm
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Students		
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Students' initiation of problem-solving
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high	Student's use of L1
	<input type="checkbox"/> High	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Low	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Very low	

Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Very low	Student's use of L2
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Very low	Student's speaking time
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Very low	Student's attention
Notes:	<input type="checkbox"/> Very high <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Very low	Student's participation