The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine Campus
Faculty of Humanities and Education
CARIBBEAN STUDIES PROJECT
HUMN 3099

COVER PAGE

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Title of Thesis:
An investigation of foreign language students’ perceptions of the challenges encountered in Listening Comprehension at UWI after transitioning from Form 6 to university.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAPE- Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination
CSEC- Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate
FL-Foreign Language
FLL-Foreign Language Learning
LC- Listening Comprehension
RQ-Research Question
UWI- The University of the West Indies
An investigation of foreign language students’ perceptions of the challenges encountered in Listening Comprehension at UWI after transitioning from Form 6 to university.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation discusses the transition of FLL undergraduate students from Form 6 to university, the factors that influence their performance in LC in the target language(s) at UWI and the differences in the teaching methods of their previous educational institution compared to those of UWI. The ultimate aim of this investigation is to examine the problems hindering students’ progress in LC in the target language(s) in addition to providing recommendations to learning and teaching strategies that will enhance students’ performance in LC and in a wider context FLL. A mixed-methods approach was used consecutively during the different stages of this research: data collection, and analysis and interpretation of data. Data were collected via individual interviews and questionnaires. Four undergraduate UWI foreign language students (n =8), all in their first academic year from each language programme (French and Spanish) were interviewed. These structured interviews were conducted individually to facilitate a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. Moreover, forty-eight questionnaires were administered to UWI undergraduate students (n = 48) pursuing degrees in both French and/or Spanish. Data provided by this questionnaire included both quantitative and qualitative data which were organised and then analysed. It was revealed that the transition from a pre-university establishment to a tertiary institution was extremely difficult because of the lack of preparation for superior learning as well as the differences discovered amongst the two institutions. These dissimilarities comprised of distinctions in the teachers and teaching methods, the availability of facilities and programme that aid students’ development and the content of the language
programme(s). Furthermore, a variation of factors hindering students’ progress in LC was identified such as the actual processing of the aural text, acoustic, discourse, and linguistic, psychological and affective variables. While the majority of the participants have a negative perception of LC and their performance in LC, it is advisable that lecturers work concurrently with students to aid these problems, and those post-secondary schools introduce a “college experience” programme to better equip students for FLL at the tertiary level. While these recommendations address issues specific to Caribbean countries, they may be applicable to other contexts and countries. It is thus indispensable that there are further studies in this field of research to provide alternative recommendations necessary for FLL students’ development.
**INTRODUCTION**

At the University of the West Indies (UWI) St. Augustine where French and Spanish degrees are taught, students frequently encounter difficulties with the Listening Comprehension (LC) component of the target language(s). As a final year student pursuing both French and Spanish degrees, the researcher herself has encountered this problem and thus sees the need to conduct a study that would resolve or diminish this persistent obstacle.

**Rationale**

The main motivation for the researcher to embark in this project arises from difficulties encountered while pursuing her undergraduate studies as a foreign language student; particularly the problems encountered in the listening component of Foreign Language Learning (FLL) at (UWI). Therefore, this research paper serves to identify the problems encountered in listening comprehension by Spanish and French undergraduate students at the same institution. This moved the researcher to explore/examine possible solutions that may assist students in coping with this difficult skill. Also, understanding learners’ difficulties may enable lecturers to create and develop effective learning strategies which can ultimately improve the learners’ foreign language listening abilities. In addition, this research may provide assistance to those who are interested in this field.

**Purpose**

The present investigation has four main objectives: the principal main objective is to identify the problems encountered in the listening component of foreign language learning at an undergraduate university level, particularly French and Spanish. Secondly, the researcher aims to determine the factors that have caused these problems in Listening Comprehension (LC). The third objective serves to highlight the differences in the teaching methods at a university level in comparison to a post-secondary level. Lastly, the researcher aims to evaluate the efficiency of the teaching methods at a post-secondary school level in preparation for FLL at a university in a non-native country.
Research questions

The present study intends to address the following questions:

1. How have students at UWI transitioned from post-secondary school to a university in terms of LC in a foreign language?
2. What are the students’ perceptions of the main factors that hinder their progress in listening comprehension?
3. How do students’ perceptions of these factors influence their performance in LC at UWI?

Methodology

Data collection methods included interviews and questionnaires. Students’ responses from interviews informed the design of the questionnaire. Data was gathered by both quantitative and qualitative methods. Thus, a mixed-methods approach was used consecutively during the different stages of this research: data collection, and analysis and interpretation of data. Students willingly volunteered to participate in this investigation. Participants were informed that their participation in this research would be kept confidential and their identity would not be associated with the findings in any manner. Four undergraduate UWI foreign language students (n = 8), all in their first academic year from each language programme (French and Spanish) were interviewed. These structured interviews were conducted individually to facilitate a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. As a result, a wider range of information and opinions from each individual were conducive to explore the objectives of this investigation. Moreover, forty-eight questionnaires were administered to UWI undergraduate students (n = 48) pursuing degrees in both French and/or Spanish. Data provided by this questionnaire included both quantitative and qualitative data which were organised and then analysed.

The analysis of numerical data was conducted using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data were transcribed, coded, and then, analysed using thematic analysis in order to draw similarities and to facilitate an easy interpretation of the information collected. After data-coding, the researcher used the “compare and contrast” method, so that the information was better analysed, explained and presented.

This chapter introduces this study in a wider context and provides the rationale, objectives, research questions and methodology of this investigation. In Chapter 1 the different
literature conducted in this field is presented. Chapter 2 reveals the findings of the data collected and subsequently, Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the findings with the assistance of other relevant studies in order to answer the research questions.
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The overall objectives of this chapter were firstly to establish the significance of the general field of study, then identify a place where a new contribution could be made. This chapter critically examines the work done by past researchers in this field in order to determine the appropriate approach for investigating the research questions.

Foreign Language Learning

Foreign language learning (FLL) refers to the learning of a non-native language in an environment where it is not commonly spoken. It is often confused with “second language learning”. According to Moeller & Catalano, the latter is different in that the learner is in an environment where the language acquired is commonly employed. Thus, they believe that a foreign language is one that is learned principally in the classroom and not employed in the society where the teaching occurs. However, the fact that foreign language learning can be done outside of a classroom setting must be taken into consideration.

Traditionally, foreign language learning was thought to be mimetic (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Therefore, the way students regurgitated the information learnt about the language being pursued was a principal determinant of their success at FLL. Researchers have also aimed at understanding the differences in the duration of successful language acquisition to help determine successful FLL. Chomsky (1959) opposed this viewpoint by affirming that the target language had to be modified to the learner’s capabilities. Whether successful FLL is mimetic or modified is yet to be proven. This is due to the fact that it is learnt via the development of all the skills necessary for learning a language (conversation, listening, reading and writing). However, as stated in several studies the listening component is the most primordial of these four aspects of FLL.

Listening Comprehension

The ongoing debate about which of the four language skills is the most crucial for successful FLL has revealed that listening is often considered the most important skill (Rost 2002). Vandergrift (2002) affirms that adults generally spend about 50% of their life listening. This means that it is the most prevalent skill employed in daily activities and develops faster than
all the three other language skills: reading, writing and conversation (Rost 2002). Therefore it is
deemed an “acquired” skill which facilitates the emergence of other language skills and provides
the right conditions for language acquisition (Hasan 2000, Oxford 1990). In addition, LC is
characterised as a receptive skill considering that it is a complex, active process in which the
listener must decipher sounds, understand words and grammatical structures, interpret stressed
words and intonation and retain what was accumulated in the aforementioned (Vandergrift
1999). Tian (2002) adds to this idea by affirming that LC, unlike other skills, is completely
beyond the control of the listener and thus is harder to master.

Graham (2005) adds that it this skill in which students in the post-compulsory phase of
their education feel that they are the least successful because of all the factors involved. Tian
(2002) justifies this idea by affirming that although listening is a primary activity for college-
level students, FLL requires more effort on their part because of their imperfect knowledge of the
linguistic code. Nonetheless, several factors must be considered when reviewing LC due to the
fact that it consists of so many components.

Factors which affect learner Listening Comprehension

Several authors in the fields of both first and second language listening have recently
conducted many studies to determine the factors which affect the listening comprehension skills
of language learners. Rubin (1994) states that there are 5 main categories of factors that affect
this skill: text (variation in a listening passage/text), task (variation in the purpose for listening
and associated responses), interlocutor (variation in the speaker’s personal characteristics),
listener (variation in the listener’s personal characteristics) and the process (variation in the
listener’s cognitive activities and in the nature of the interaction between listener and speaker).
Goh (1998) has an opposing viewpoint; she explains that 5 categories influence the listening
comprehension skills of students: text, task, speaker, listener and the environment. She also
explains that most learners see themselves as the problem. Flavell (1979) argued in line with
Goh’s viewpoint that learners identify a range of obstacles to LC including their own shortcomings. However, these researchers did not consider the effect of the teacher and the
teaching methods on the process of developing or acquiring efficient listening capabilities in the
classroom context.
Contrarily, Amna Abdelgadir Yousif (2006) reveals that 5 different variables account for the problems encountered in LC: linguistic (spoken language) and conceptual variables (unfamiliarity and/or inadequate explanation of theory or disorganization of the task at hand), discourse variables (limited exposure to lengthy, connected speech), acoustic variables (rate of delivery), environmental variables (climate etc.) and psychological variables (boredom and frustration). Taking all these factors into consideration, it can be said that no specific amount neither any specific category of variables affect learner LC. Regardless of all the factors involved, it must be noted that all learners have varying perceptions of LC, the method in which they (should) listen in a foreign language, and more importantly, how they can improve their performance in LC.

Learners’ Perceptions about Listening Comprehension and LC problems

Beforehand, as stated by Yagang (1994), learners’ perceptions of their listening problems can have either favourable or adverse effects on their comprehension skills. It goes the same for many other studies in this field of research. According to Graham: most learners have an idea of their shortcomings in LC in a foreign language, and these difficulties are assumed as the root causes of their lack of success in this primary skill. Thus, if learners believe that they are simply “no good” in LC, no appropriate amount of listening strategies can help the student. However, what seemed important for learners’ beliefs are the strategies employed while listening. Also, most students attribute their already supposed low abilities in LC to the difficulty of the text and task at hand. Jia Tian (2002) corroborates this notion; she affirms that FLL perceive that the strategies learners employ in tackling LC tasks are partially effective.

Furthermore, Graham (2005) explains that learners perceive that they have three main factors influencing their LC: vocabulary, speech rate and speaker’s accent. Goh (1991) adds two factors to this list: background knowledge of the topic and type of input. However both studies not review other factors such as the learner and the teacher. Thus, Zhang (2007) declares that the significance of the teacher’s behaviour (such as demotivating students, work overload etc.) plays an important role in their learning.
Transitioning from secondary and post-secondary learning to tertiary learning

Few studies have focused on the academic aspect of transitioning from secondary level to tertiary level of education (Kanno & Cromley 2013), but rather the socio-cultural aspects of this transition. Albeit, the passage from secondary and post-secondary learning to tertiary learning can vary nationally, regionally and also internationally (Guzman, Hodgson, Robert & Villani 1998). Whatever the context, this transition often presents major obstacles for students. Such challenges can be academic (bigger workload, new learning styles etc.), or non-academic and/or logistical: personal or social (financial restraints, balancing social and academic life etc.), large classes and the institution, communication and expectations (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 2015). Time management was identified as the most significant hindrance in students’ transition from second level to higher education. However, this investigation was conducted in a general context and was not specific to FLL students.

Also, it was noted that students with high grades struggle just as much as students with low grades because of this transition (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 2015). This means that the diversity of the language competency affects this transition and thus success of FLL at the tertiary level. Fielding (2011) adds three more factors including the aforementioned: differences in students’ levels of self-confidence, dissimilarities in teaching methods and distinctions in teachers’ expectations of student’s ability to learn autonomously. The extent to which these factors affect students’ performance can be applied to LC in FLL in UWI.

This leads the researcher to pose the question: what does a successful or smooth transition comprise? Candace Lewko (2015) response to this question reiterates the importance of appropriate academic preparation and ongoing support for transitioning students. Oshima & Harvey also corroborate this theory with regards to the importance of academic preparation for FLL at the tertiary level. They assert that many students coming from secondary schools are uncertain about their workload at university because of negative preconceptions on teaching and learning at the tertiary level. These preconceptions stem from the academic preparation (or lack thereof) received at the pre-tertiary level, particularly based on the workload and content of the language programme. Ruth Fielding (2011) also expounds that many first year FLL students perceive a large knowledge and experience gap between the secondary school and university
sector. Despite the transition from one level of learning to another, other factors must be considered to fully comprehend the obstacles hindering students’ performance in FLL, particularly LC.

The purpose of this review was to examine the transition from secondary and post-secondary learning to tertiary learning, the problems encountered by students in FLL studies within the past years, and to see how commentary on students’ perceptions of LC have changed and are still changing. Although few research has been done on FLL students’ transition from post-secondary to tertiary learning, it has been noted that this transition is difficult for students pursuing any programme as the differences between the two levels negatively affect their academic performance. Studies conducted on students’ perceptions and their problems encountered in LC while pursuing foreign language studies have categorized the variables affecting students performance and have conveyed students’ negative perceptions of LC. In the next chapter both qualitative and quantitative findings would be discussed.
CHAPTER 2: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The main purpose of this study was to identify the LC problems encountered by FLL students pursuing studies at UWI. It further examined the factors accountable for these problems as well as the transition from a pre-university to a tertiary institution. As such, this chapter provides a detailed account of the findings from the data collection phase, i.e. both the questionnaires and the interviews.

Phase 1: Quantitative Presentation of Results (Questionnaires)

Accordingly, the first part of this chapter discusses the findings from the questionnaires. The methodology for this chapter (as already discussed in the Introduction) has assisted in the development of this chapter. Subsequently, a comparison and analysis of these findings with the relevant academic literature will be presented in the next chapter.

Beforehand, according to the questionnaires the majority of the participants are females. Forty questionnaires (84%) were completed by female undergraduate students pursuing their studies in French and/or Spanish at UWI and the remaining 8 questionnaires were completed by males. It can therefore be deduced that the difficulties encountered in LC must be mostly attributed to female students given that they are the ones who mainly pursue studies in this field. Also, Fig. 1 reveals that 42 students were pursuing studies in Spanish while 33 students were pursuing studies in French. However, it must be noted that many students were pursuing studies in French and Spanish simultaneously. Four of the respondents did not do any languages at the Form 6/CAPE level of FLL. This means that these 4 students had little or no previous knowledge of the language(s) being pursued and therefore were more susceptible to encountering problems in LC.
However, at the tertiary level more than half of the respondents studied French (25 respondents) and Spanish (39 respondents), whether simultaneously or not, as data in Fig. 1 shows. The remaining 9 students pursued Portuguese, Korean or Japanese in addition to these two dominant languages. Likewise, the majority of the candidates have been studying the target language(s) for more than 7 years while only 7 students have studied French and/or Spanish for less than 7 years. Interestingly, of the 7 students who have studied the language(s) being pursued for less than 7 years, 4 have studied FL for 1 year or less. This small group is undoubtedly the four respondents who have not had any previous knowledge, experience or training with French and/or Spanish as FL and thus, they would have been highly prone to encountering difficulties in the target language(s).

**Students’ perceptions of their weakest skill**

Additionally, the respondents generally believed that their writing skills are stronger than all the other components according to Fig. 2. For instance: when asked to assess their writing skills, 12 respondents believed that they are “very good” while 28 respondents self-assessed this skill as “good”. Contrarily, 7 respondents perceived these skills as “moderate” while 1 respondent had the perception that this skill is “poor”. It is also noted that there is a higher rating for their reading skills (35 respondents believe that their Reading skills are either “very good” or “good”) contrary to their conversational and listening capabilities (28 and 19 respondents
respectively for the same proficiency). Thus, students perceive that both their listening and conversational skills are either poor or moderate.

Fig. 2. shows the participants’ proficiency (%) in Reading, Listening, Conversation & Writing.

Subsequently, this common negative perception of one’s listening capabilities in FLL accompanies the perceptions that the respondents generally have with regards to LC. As illustrated in Fig. 2, when participants were asked to rate their proficiency in listening from “poor” to “very good”, only 4 students rated their LC skills as “very good” according to Fig. 2. It appears that the remaining 44 respondents have a negative perception of their LC skill because of their assumed poor proficiency. Thus, the perceived low proficiency in the listening component of the target language(s) seem to be a common perception among the participants.

Factors affecting LC

In addition, when asked to state the problems encountered in LC in the target language (Fig. 3) it can be observed that speed of speech is the prevailing obstacle encountered due to the fact that almost all of the respondents face this problem. This is quickly followed by note-taking and listening simultaneously, which negatively affects 35 respondents. Next, accent and background noise conjointly pose a serious threat to the respondents’ (32 respondents each) LC skills and performance.

Furthermore, as Fig. 3 below shows 28 respondents encounter difficulties with the vocabulary used in LC. This means that unknown and colloquial vocabulary used in LC audios
present a threat to the respondents’ understanding of the task at hand. Lack of background knowledge of the theme presented in the audio closely followed by speech of speaker (19 & 18 respondents respectively) succeeds unknown and colloquial vocabulary. However, based on Fig. 4 only 8 respondents are faced with this obstacle. Thus, a lack of understanding of the auditory material is not a dominant challenge but rather the problem that least affects the respondents.

Fig. 3 depicts the problems affecting students in LC
Fig. 4 displays the problems affecting students when watching a movie in the target language(s).

Similarly, speed of speaker is yet again the prevailing challenge as can be observed from the responses to a question about the problems encountered while watching a movie in the target language(s). Fig. 4 indicates that more than half of the respondents face this problem when watching a movie in the language(s) being pursued. Colloquial and unknown vocabulary ensues with 26 students facing this problem. Subsequent to this obstacle is the accent(s) employed in the movie in which 18 respondents encounter this difficulty. In the same way, 11 of the respondents struggle understanding the movie as noted in Fig. 4. Background noise and speech of speaker barely affect the respondents when watching a movie French and/or Spanish as can be observed with the few number of respondents being affected by this. Also, lack of background knowledge and listening and trying to translate simultaneously are minimal problems due to the fact that only 5 and 4 respondents respectively are affected by these factors.
Fig. 5 demonstrates the frequency at which participants encounter LC problems

When asked how often they encounter certain LC difficulties, it was found that speed of speech and unknown and colloquial vocabulary “always” or “often” pose a problem for the majority of the respondents as seen in Fig.5. Conversely more than 50% of the respondents claim that they struggle with unfamiliar topics, different accents, guessing, background noise and poor quality of listening “sometimes” or “never”. Hence, these are not recurrent problems encountered in LC in FLL for this quota whereas they frequently struggle with speed of speech and unknown and colloquial vocabulary.

According to Fig. 6 of the respondents believe that are “very good” and an additional 18 perceive that they are “good” with regards to understanding native speakers. Twenty-five of them have the perception that their understanding of native speakers in FLL is either “moderate” or “poor”. Of the 48 respondents, only 3 have had native speaker teachers prior to FLL at UWI. Thus, when asked of their opinion on native speaker teachers and students’ development in FLL, it is not surprising that most of the respondents (81.25%) view this idea as a benefit to their learning and development. On the other hand, 6 respondents (12.5 %) affirm that this does not help the student but rather hinders one’s development. Three respondents believe that it is an
obstacle and a benefit concurrently and one respondent views this as neither a perk nor a difficulty.

Fig. 6 depicts the participants’ self-assessment of their understanding of native speakers

Likewise, the majority of the responses reveal that feedback received from secondary school and thus Form 6 was helpful as depicted in Fig. 6. When asked to rate the usefulness of the feedback eleven respondents have the opinion that the feedback received is “very useful” and an additional 22 believe it is simply “useful”. Of the remaining 10 respondents, 2 have never received and feedback while the rest believe that the feedback received was not useful to their learning and development in FLL.

**Preparation for LC**

As for their preparation for LC, Fig. 7 indicates that the majority of the respondents listen to audios provided in class (44 persons) and/or watch videos (36 persons). Subsequent to these methods are listening to songs and watching movies (18 and 11 individuals respectively). A mere 3 individuals read books and other material to learn vocabulary specific to the theme presented in class while 1 respondent chats with natives and another uses foreign language apps.
Fig. 7 shows the different strategies employed by participants to prepare for LC.

Moreover, when asked what they do while listening to a FL, most of the respondents listen to keywords (31), some listen for detailed information (26) and almost half of them automatically translate. Twelve respondents listen word-by-word while on the other hand 2 persons try to get the main idea of the topic at hand. Also, 1 respondent tries to block out external noise while on the other hand another participant has no inclination of what he/she does while listening to a FL. Thus, although most respondents listen to class-related audios and/or watch videos, a variety of methods are used to prepare for LC in the language(s) being studied.

**Teaching Methods**

Furthermore, respondents were asked to state the differences in the teaching methods of the language studies at the Form 6 level and at university. Four individuals declare that there are no differences. However this does not reflect the vast majority: 28 respondents believe that the main difference amongst the 2 institutions is the presence and wide variety of native speaker teachers at university whereas there is none at the Form 6 level. Also, these respondents conclude that at the tertiary level classes are taught only in the language studied thus deeming FLL more intense at a tertiary level contrary to Form 6 in which classes were taught in one’s maternal language.
Phase 2: Qualitative Presentation of Findings (Interviews)

A qualitative approach was used in order to get a deeper understanding of the problem and fill in the gaps that were unexplored in the questionnaire. This section reflects on the results from the interviews conducted, which would be further analysed in the next chapter.

Primarily, as stated in part 1 of this Chapter, the majority of the participants are females. Five interviewees are females (62.5%), thus the majority of persons encountering problems with LC would be females. Also, 75% of the interviewees are pursuing studies in French and/or Spanish, with 2 of these interviewees studying Portuguese. When asked to state their belief about their preparation for FLL at the tertiary level, 7 interviewees conveyed that they do not feel prepared even after doing CSEC (Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate) and CAPE (Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination). Thus, only 1 interviewee felt that these courses aided in his/her preparation for FLL at a higher institution.

Thereafter, it was found that the interviewees perceived themselves as having a fair proficiency in LC: on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being poor to 5 being excellent, 3 interviewees rated their competency as 4 while the others were bisected into 2-3. Thus, none of the interviewees perceived themselves as having “excellent” LC skills based on the findings. Furthermore, it was found that all the interviewees have difficulties with LC. The two prevalent factors that adversely affect the interviewees are speed of speech (5 persons) and accents (4 persons). Background noise, speech of the speaker and unknown and colloquial vocabulary succeeds after these 2 dominant factors, with 2 interviewees (per factor) struggling with these factors. One interviewee perceives that one of the key problems encountered is the distorted audio while another encounters difficulties with the task of listening and note-taking simultaneously.

Additionally, 7 interviewees had non-native speaker teachers at their Form 6 institutions and 2 of them had native speaker teachers. When asked to state their opinion on native speakers as a FL teacher it was found that 7 of them perceived that they will promote their development and is a benefit contrary to 3 of them who have an opposing opinion. Of these seven, 1 was inspired while another believes that they know the colloquial vocabulary better than non-natives. Thus, the general perception held among them concerning their preparation (or lack thereof) for pursuing FLL studies at UWI can be explained by the absence of native teachers at their previous institutions of learning, whom they highly consider.
When asked to give the frequency in which they perform self-listening to home to improve their oral skills (if it is done), it was revealed that this is not a trend amongst the interviewees. Based on the findings 1 interviewee does self-listening at home 1 hr. every day, contrary to 4 others who perform this activity 2-3 hours per week. One interviewee puts aside 1 hour per week to listen to material apart from class while the remaining two claim that they “do not have time” and thus, no self-listening is conducted. This reveals that the interviewees barely practise their FLL skills apart from class in order to fully master FLL and strengthen their weakest component (LC).

Seven interviewees had non-native speaker teachers at their Form 6 institutions and 2 of them had native speaker teachers. When asked to state their opinion on native speakers as a FL teacher it was found that 7 of them believe that they will promote their development and are a benefit contrary to 3 of them who have an opposing opinion. Of these seven, 1 feel inspired while another believes that they know the colloquial vocabulary better than non-natives. Thus, the general perception held among them concerning their preparation (or lack thereof) for pursuing FLL studies at UWI can be explained by the absence of native teachers at their previous institutions of learning, whom they highly consider.

With regards to their preparation for LC in the target language(s), the interviewees watch videos, movies, series, news or interviews and/or cartoons in addition to listening to audios and/or music. Besides using visual and auditory material, two interviewees use podcasts and one reads. On the contrary, two of them have the perception that students cannot really prepare for LC. Nevertheless, some of the interviews admit that sometimes they do not pay attention while doing self-listening outside of the classroom setting.

Summarily, these findings suggest that the majority of the participants perceive that both their listening and conversational skill comprise the weakest components in the target language(s) with LC being the weakest component. Speed of speech, note-taking and listening simultaneously, accent, background noise and unknown and colloquial vocabulary are prevalent problems encountered in LC amongst the respondents while the problem that least affects the respondents are a general lack of understanding of the task at hand. Also, lack of background knowledge and listening and trying to translate simultaneously are minimal problems. However, speed of speech and unknown and colloquial vocabulary are the most recurrent problems. Most of the respondents do not believe that they can fully understand native French and/or Spanish
speakers whom they consider as crucial to their development in FLL because of the absence of these teachers at their previous educational establishments.

This chapter presented the numerical and qualitative findings of the data collected from the study. In the next chapter both quantitative and qualitative findings would be discussed and analysed with the assistance of the relevant literature in order to answer the research questions.
CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION

The aim of this dissertation was to answer specific RQ(s) (Research Questions) initially posed by the investigator. Therefore, this chapter serves to answer the RQ(s) via a critical analysis of the findings and the studies used by researchers in this field.

Beforehand, it is imperative to restate the RQ(s) in order to provide an accurate response to each question. In response to the first RQ: how have students at UWI transitioned from post-secondary school to a university in terms of LC in a foreign language?; this investigation has demonstrated that the majority of the students have had difficulties transitioning from their previous Form 6 institutions to a university environment (UWI). These difficulties were due to the differences in the teaching methods at both institutions, the availability of technology and programmes in Form 6, the course material, and the lack of interaction with a variety of native speaker teachers in secondary and Form 6 schools as compared to UWI. It is not surprising that the participants encounter difficulties with these aspects considering that the results have conveyed that they have a moderate self-perception of their understanding of native speakers of the target language(s). This directly relates to the few number of native speaker teachers present at their pre-tertiary establishments.

When asked to give an account of their experience with LC and its teaching methods at UWI 50% of the interviewees stated that the teaching methods were not helpful for exams in addition to the fact that it was difficult to adapt to the native speaker teachers’ level. Thus, it seems that most of the students did not feel prepared for FLL at UWI because they were particularly affected by the differences in the content of the language programme(s) and the teachers and teaching methods at the tertiary level. It has been revealed that the lecturers demotivate students because of the boring and monotonous coursework and teaching methods, in addition to the lack of patience and interaction on the lecturers’ behalf as well as their superiority. Zhang (2004) explained the importance of teachers’ behaviour on students’ academic performance as teacher demotivation was considered the most important factor of language learning. Yousif’s study also corroborates this theory by stating that psychological factors (demotivation, boredom) affect learner LC in FLL.

On the other hand, opinions on the teaching methods are divided: based on the findings it was also revealed that the teaching methods for LC are adequate and interesting and the teachers have good student-teacher interaction at UWI. This finding opposes that of Zhang’s study due to
the fact that it was also discovered that the native teachers inspired some of the participants. Also, contrary to past research which has stated that learners can be affected by personal, social and other non-academic restraints (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education, 2015), this study has proven that such variables are not necessarily (key) factors in learners’ performance. Although this study has revealed that time management was a significant hindrance in students’ transition from second level to higher education, the findings have indicated that this is not a crucial aspect of the learners’ transition. It appears from this research that academic challenges are more problematic than non-academic factors because of the vast differences between the two educational levels and the lack of preparation for such a transition. Interestingly, contrary to Fielding’s study (2011), it has been noted that the participants were not influenced by differences in their levels of self-confidence and in teachers’ expectations of their ability to learn autonomously.

In relation to the second research question: what are the students’ perceptions of the main factors that hinder their progress in listening comprehension?; and the third research question: how do students’ perceptions of these factors influence their performance in LC at UWI?, this study has revealed that students are adversely affected by the actual processing of the aural text acoustic, linguistic, discourse, psychological and affective variables as mentioned by Yousif (2006). The results have proven that speed of speech, accent and background noise (acoustic variables) are prevalent problems encountered in LC. Similarly unknown and colloquial vocabulary (linguistic variables) negatively impact learners’ LC performance as based on the findings of this study and also stated in Kelly’s study (1991). Boyle (1984) and Goh (1999) ratifies this finding by stating that knowing the meaning of words is crucial for learners’ understanding. As the findings have shown, the meanings of unknown and colloquial vocabulary plays a pivotal role in LC as it can alter learners’ performance. Hasan (2000) reiterates that most learners believe that meaning resides exclusively within those unfamiliar words. Thus, learners perceive that lexical ignorance is a dominant and recurrent challenge encountered in LC, which leads the researcher to infer that this is ascribed to the listening strategies employed while preparing for LC as shown in the findings of this study. Contrary to these strategies employed by effective listeners, many students use ineffective listening strategies by listening to every detail to get the main idea or by guessing what was said. Tian (2002) stated that these listeners are under the false impression that they must understand every single word in order to get the
message. The researcher has thus inferred that learner’s ineffective listening strategies may have contributed to their problem of unknown vocabulary in LC in FLL.

The lengths of audios (discourse variables) also have a negative impact on the respondents’ LC performance according to the results of this study similarly to Yousif’s research. This has been proven true as discovered in this study when many participants stated that they were not focused when listening to audios, particularly because of the length of the audios. Call (1985) affirmed that memory span for target language input is shorter than that for native language input because lapses in concentration, loss of memory and fatigue may occur. It can thus be inferred that the lengthiness of the auditory material played in the classroom setting negatively affects learners’ concentration and thus would have caused them to forget or ignore pertinent information that they heard, thus decreasing their performance in LC. Also, note-taking and listening simultaneously poses a significant threat to learners’ LC development based on the results. Blau (1990) affirmed that learners can benefit from the extra processing time provided by the pauses in audios compared to a long duration of foreign speech, as conveyed in the findings of this study. However, unlike Yousif’s study conceptual variables (lack of background knowledge, lack of understanding) are not an important problem in LC neither do environmental factors pose a threat as revealed in the findings of this study. Interestingly, environmental factors were not even mentioned as a contributor to the problem of LC in FLL. It can thus be deduced that the facilities available at UWI have aided the students’ development of the language given the fact that they are in a closed setting surrounded by technology and not exposed to bad climate.

Moreover, the results of this investigation are broadly consistent with Rubin’s (1994) study in which the participants are influenced by the interlocutor, speaker and process. Hasan (2000) declared that students more frequently encounter problems with the speaker (accents, speed of delivery) as has also been discovered in the results. However, Rubin as well as Vogely (1998) mentioned that learners are affected by the text and task, which has not been the case based on the findings. In fact, the aural text and the task at hand is the least encountered problem. However, what has not been mentioned in past research is the effect of native speaker teachers on FLL students. Based on the results it has been revealed that native speaker teachers promote the students’ development considering that they aid students to get acclimatized to the target language(s), the accents/speech, the speed of speech and colloquialisms employed by the native
teacher in addition to having “first-hand experience” of the language(s) being pursued. Therefore, the responses generated prove that in FLL native teachers help the students’ academic and holistic development better than non-natives. Conversely, respondents who perceived this as a hindrance to students’ development explained that native teachers cannot clarify misunderstandings in the students’ mother tongue, thus deeming the target language(s) even more difficult to learn and master. It can thus, be stated that non-native teachers would be best befitted to assist the students’ understanding and development in FLL because they can better clarify misunderstandings and relate to students in their native language (English). Contrarily to these two opposing findings, it was revealed that respondents who viewed native teachers as having no impact on students’ development concluded that FLL cannot be learned in the classroom alone and that students’ development depends on their knowledge of the target language(s).

With regards to their preparation for LC in the target language(s), the interviewees watch videos, movies, series, news or interviews and/or cartoons in addition to listening to audios and/or music. Besides using auditory material, two interviewees used podcasts and one used reading to complement his/her subject knowledge. One interviewee commented that he/she transcribed the audios listened to during leisure. Interviewees were also asked about their perceptions on how they could improve their LC skills (if they think that improvement is needed). All of the participants perceived that they needed to improve their LC skills, and believed that this can be done via practising with native speakers of the target language(s), watching and/or listening to more audios, songs, news, interviews, movies and/or videos and by reading more. Contrary to this viewpoint, it was also revealed that teachers cannot really help in the improvement of their LC skills. One of these interviewees also stated that “teachers do not give enough advice on how to improve LC” and “LC is a skill that one is born with.” Thus, these interviewees have a negative perception about LC and their improvement in this skill. All in all the general perception was that they needed to improve their LC skills.

Also, after being asked to give their opinion on whether LC and how (if it does) it affects their conversation performance, 5 of the interviewees (62.5 %) declare that it helps to have a better understanding given the fact that “you have to listen not only to reply but to understand. In addition, it was conveyed that they gain useful vocabulary from audios that can be used in their conversation, which thus facilitates and enhances the progress of their conversation. One
interviewee also affirmed that it helps the student have a more enhanced and natural accent, improves the conversation intonation and fluency and makes the humour more humane while another states that it helps to distinguish accents. Conversely, one interviewee believed that there was no relation between the 2 components. However, the researcher discovered that there was a gap of research in terms of the influence of foreign language LC skills on the development of conversation.

In this chapter the researcher attempted to answer the research questions of this investigation. It was identified that there was a difficult transition in LC from pre-tertiary to tertiary learning, in terms of teaching methods, availability of technology and lack of native speaker teachers. In general students not only perceive that LC was their weakest and most difficult skill but that they lacked the appropriate preparation to pursue undergraduate foreign language courses. On the other hand, the main factors that hinder their progress in listening comprehension were identified as linguistic, acoustic, discourse, memory, background knowledge, and psychological and affective variables. Listening tasks for the aural texts were not seen as a major obstacle to their performance as students acknowledged understanding task instructions. Finally, it was discovered that these factors have a negative influence on their performance in LC and furthermore, there was a common perception of the necessity of improvement to cope with the challenges encountered at UWI.
CONCLUSION

This investigation aimed at examining the problems hindering students’ development in LC in the language(s) being pursued at university level. Data collected from interviews and questionnaires administered to undergraduate FLL students provided insights on the challenges encountered in LC. However, findings cannot be generalised because of the small sample size used in this research. This research has proved that as expected, students experienced challenges in LC because of the difficult transition from post-secondary school to university. These challenges were attributed to LC teaching methodology, the use of technology in the classroom and the absence of native speaker foreign language teachers in secondary schools. The latter one was seen as an important factor because students perceived interaction with native speakers as beneficial for their LC skills development. The researcher found that there was a gap in terms of previous empirical research conducted on the transition from secondary school to university in foreign language listening comprehension.

This research gathered data from students’ perspectives. Thus, from this perspective it was identified that several factors hindered students’ progress in LC. These include the following: the actual processing of the aural text, linguistic, acoustic, discourse, and psychological and affective factors. Furthermore, it was revealed that the transition from a post-secondary school to university was extremely difficult because of the lack of preparation for pursuing foreign language(s) at an advanced level. One of the findings that this research identified was that the majority of the participants had a negative perception of their performance in LC which may influence their confidence in the target language(s).

Recommendations

Based on this study it was revealed that the problems encountered in LC in FLL at UWI cannot only be ascribed to students, but also to the language programme(s) they were pursuing. As such, participants have provided recommendations to develop effective teaching strategies for FLL at UWI, particularly French and Spanish. It has been found that the teaching methods at UWI made students uncomfortable and unconfident. Thus, students perceived that the LC teaching methods at UWI were not fully beneficial to their foreign language learning and development, particularly when compared to their post-secondary establishment and should be adjusted to their learning
requirements. This can be done via spending more time with the listening component of FLL in the classroom concurrent with increased audios to aid learners’ LC development. Also, it was noted that the audios played in class varied in terms of speed of speech, and should gradually develop throughout the academic year rather than vary. This would help the students to get acclimatized to the varying speeds of speakers employed in LC. Furthermore, it was discovered that participants have the perception that the workload was very difficult to adapt and thus, FLL in French and Spanish should be made simpler. Nonetheless, it is pivotal that researchers continue to add to the existing field of empirical research to enhance FLL.

**Limitations**

One of the main limitations encountered in this research was the small sample size. A small number of participants may not allow the researcher to make generalisations in the area of FLL.
WORKS CITED


Yagang, F., 1994, Listening: Problems and solutions. In T. Kral (ed.) Teacher Development: Making the Right Moves. Washington, DC: English Language Programs Divisions, USIA.

APPENDIX 1-SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions:
1. What language/languages do you study?
2. On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your oral proficiency in the language being studied?
3. Tell me about your prior experience (in secondary school/Form 6) with listening comprehension.
4. Do you think that you encounter problems in Listening Comprehension? If yes, please state as many problems as possible.
5. Do you do self-listening at home to improve your oral skills? If yes, how often?
6. Do you think that CAPE adequately prepared you for learning a foreign language at UWI? Why do you think so?
7. Tell me about the teachers you had at secondary school/Form 6. Were they native or non-native speakers? Tell me about their teaching methods.
8. How was the listening class at secondary school/Form 6 (if you had any)?
9. Do you think that having a native speaker as a foreign language teacher is a challenge or an advantage? Please state why.
10. How has your experience been in listening comprehension at UWI, so far?
11. How was your performance in the first listening comprehension test?
12. What do you do while listening to audios in class, in exam situations, at home/leisure?
13. How do you prepare for the listening component of the language you are currently studying?
14. How do you think that you can improve your listening skills, if improvement is needed? Do you have any plan in mind?
15. How does the listening component affect your performance in conversation?
16. Do you think that the listening component helps you to have a better proficiency in the conversation component? If yes, how do you think it helps you?
17. What do you think about the teaching methods of the listening component of the language you are currently pursuing?
APPENDIX 2- SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear student,
I am Tonyalee Williams, a final year student doing HUMN 3099-Special Project. I am interested in knowing the challenges you encountered in Listening Comprehension. This is not a test, so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers and it is completely confidential. Please be honest with your answers so that French & Spanish language teaching may be improved which can benefit both you and future students.
Thank you.

1. What is your sex? □ Male □ Female

2. What language(s) did you study at Form 6?

3. What language(s) are you currently pursuing at UWI?

4. How long have you been studying the language(s) you are pursuing?

5. How would you assess your proficiency in the following areas in the language you are studying?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening Comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. What problems do you encounter in the listening component of the language you are currently pursuing? (Tick all applicable.)

- Speech of speaker
- Lack of background knowledge/Unfamiliar topic
- Accent
- Colloquial/Unknown words
- Background noise
- Lack of understanding because it isn’t the native language
- Speed of speaker
- Taking notes and listening at the same time/simultaneously

Other:

7. What difficulties do you face when you watch a movie in a foreign language? (Please list as many as possible)

8. How good are you at understanding native speakers?

- Poor □ Moderate □ Good □ Very good

9. In secondary school/Form 6 was your language teacher a:
□ Native speaker □ Non-native speaker

10. How useful was the feedback you received from your secondary school teacher?
□ No feedback given □ Not useful □ Useful □ Very useful

11. Do you think that having a native speaker as a foreign language teacher hinders or promotes your development? □ Yes □ No (Please state why):

12. How do you study/prepare for the listening component of the language you are studying?
□ Listen to songs □ Listen to material/audios provided in class
□ Watch movies □ Watch videos
Other:

13. What differences do you think there are in the teaching methods of the language you are studying at a Form 6 level and a university level?

14. What do you while listening to a foreign language?
□ Listen word by word □ Listen for detailed information
□ Automatically translate into your native language □ Listen for keywords yes
Other:

15. How often do you encounter the following problems in Listening Comprehension?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guessing what the speaker is saying</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar topics</td>
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<td>Speed of speech</td>
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<td>Different accents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown words/phrases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Background noise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of listening is poor</td>
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