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Challenges faced by students of romance languages at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.
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Abstract

This study examined the challenges faced by 50 romance language (Spanish and French) students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. The results obtained from questionnaires answered by students and interviews held with a teacher from each of the departments in question revealed that the following were problems encountered while learning the target language (L2): the transition into a tertiary institution, lessons not meeting the needs of the different learning styles, insufficient time spent practicing, language anxiety and inadequate feedback. Although the findings require more prolonged research into the challenges that foreign language students face, the results hold much insight into them. Their implications were discussed in the context of finding possible solutions for the areas where Spanish and French students struggle most at the UWI, St. Augustine.
Introduction

In recent years the importance of learning a second language has gained tremendous importance as the world becomes increasingly smaller through globalization. More and more schools are introducing languages into their curriculum and encouraging students to pursue them at a higher level. According to Nancy Rhodes, a Foreign Language Education Consultant at the Centre for Applied Linguistics, Washington D.C., “There are now definitely more jobs globally that require language and cross-cultural skills.” ¹

Learning a language however, comes with some unique challenges that students must overcome. Cambridge Dictionary defines a challenge as “(the situation of being faced with) something that needs great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person’s ability.”² A large percentage of the authors from the literature investigated set out to investigate the challenges faced by students of the faculty of Education, Sciences and Social Sciences (e.g. Fook and Sidhu 2014, Kinsella et al. 2017, Mubarak et al. 2009). While others only explored specific challenges faced by language learners such as challenges surrounding feedback (Mackey 2006, Waring 2008), immersion (García-Amaya 2012, Isabelli-García 2016), and language anxiety (MacIntyre and Gardner 1994, Shao et al. 2013).

While specific learning challenges faced by language students are heavily investigated in North America, China and Australia, there is a need to comprehensively understand the challenges

faced by language learners here in the Caribbean. This research seeks to rectify the paucity of regional empirical research on the challenges faced by English speakers learning a second language at the university level. In this paper, the researcher investigates the factors surrounding the challenges faced by L2 students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad. This paper begins by presenting the significance of the study then examining relevant literature after which, the methodology is outlined and justified. The findings are then discussed and the paper is concluded by presenting recommendations to address the challenges encountered by the L2 students.

CHAPTER 1: NEED FOR THE STUDY

1.1 Significance of the Study
The study of the challenges faced by L2 at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine can serve as a learning paradigm for both its students and teachers. This paper’s goal is to clearly illustrate and examine these challenges so that they can be addressed in the interest of making students more successful learners of Spanish and French at the end of the three-year programme. The Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics can also use the findings of this study to tailor the curriculum to address the needs of the students while keeping the university’s standards in mind.

Through extensive research carried out by the researcher, it was found that there were no prior studies focusing on the general challenges faced by L2 students at a tertiary education institution within or outside of the Caribbean. However, various studies were found that investigated specific challenges faced by language learners which had many commonalities with the results of this study. This study therefore serves to fill the void in the literature surrounding the challenges faced by language learners. The researcher, driven by a keen interest to find methods to improve personal performance, hopes that this thesis will also provide insight to other language learners and teachers across the University of the West Indies campuses. There is a firm belief that this paper, bringing key issues to light can lead to significant improvement in the areas where students struggle most.

1.2 Review of Literature
The purpose of this literature review is to examine some of the learning challenge L2 students encounter. This review will also take into consideration factors affecting tertiary students from other faculties. Relevant information pertaining to independent learning, blended learning, feedback, motivation, and immersion can provide insight to lecturers and course administrators in the process of improving areas where students find the most challenges.

Methodology of Review

The body of research studies selected for this literature review focused on areas of learning that when manipulated created positive learning outcomes. Three main databases were utilised to research pertinent studies along with other books and online journals. These databases included: EBSOhost Education Research Complete, Jstor and ProQuest Research Library. These searches yielded many articles, however, a large majority focused on the challenges of primary school students which was not relevant to this study. In selecting relevant literature to review, the researcher sought to review research that was as current as possible however, because of the lack of recent relevant literature a wider time span had to be considered. Thus, the date range of the studies used in the literature review covers primarily the years between 2005 and 2017.

Transition

Research has shown that some students feel mentally unprepared for the transition from a teacher-centred learning environment to tertiary institutions where independent, student-centred learning is advocated. Sawir (2005) in his study on both postgraduate and undergraduate students
notes that initially students claimed that they felt cognitively unprepared for university and believed they were as equally unprepared for the transition.  

Similarly, another study carried out by Sawir (2005) which borrowed heavily from a prior research by Wong in Australia provides a more thorough analysis of this subject. Through his work he found that “many students, accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centred environment with less classroom conversation, found it difficult to make the transition from passive learning” (Sawir 570). Likewise, Fook and Sidhu (2014) emphasize the challenge of the transition to becoming an active learner as one of the major problems faced by higher education students however, the primary focus of their study was student engagement. While proving to be insightful, these studies did not provide a comprehensive analysis on the issue of transition therefore, there is need for further analysis into the specific factors that render transition into a tertiary institution difficult.

Feedback

The question of the effectiveness of feedback on language acquisition has been the subject of numerous qualitative and quantitative studies. These studies have highlighted that students often view teacher feedback as inappropriate, late, or unconstructive therefore, it is then difficult for them to use this feedback constructively. Mackey (2006), heavily based on the work of second language acquisition researchers such as Long’s interaction hypothesis (Long 1983, 1999,  

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4 Ibid., 570.

idem emphasizes that when feedback is provided during conversational interaction it allows for faster language acquisition and development. While these findings are similar to prior research studies, her sample size was too small and the timeframe of the study could be considered as insufficient. This study only observed twenty-eight students over a three-day period in three fifty-minute classes consequently, external motivators other than feedback could have contributed to the students’ grammatical improvements.

On the other hand, her work still holds merit as Kinsella et al (2017) in a much larger study (approximately 230 students) found similar findings. They posit that “Timely and supportive feedback is a crucial aspect of modern teaching and promoting lifelong learning” (Kinsella et al 34). Furthermore, Lyster and Sato (2013) proponents of the Skill Acquisition Theory which is a gradual transition from effortful to a more effortless use of the target language, take the notion of feedback much further and link it to contextualized practice. The conceptual underpinning of this idea is that when feedback is followed by an immediate recast of the error, it helps in the development of procedural knowledge which is more transferable than isolated feedback in the future.

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6 This theory postulates that face to face interaction and communication promotes the development of language proficiency.
Blended learning and student engagement

Blended learning has long been researched and implemented because of its benefits for learning. It is defined as “the combination of face-to-face and online learning” which joins the best features of in-class learning and those of online learning to promote independent, active, flexible learning opportunities for students (Vaughn 248). However, Baten et al. (2009) hypothesise that internet enhanced tools used in learning not only permit access to authentic materials but also the processing of such materials.

In his study, the provision of an authentic framework for learning with focus on the creation and distribution of sharable output via podcasts by students boosted class online participation by over eighty percent. Students opted to continue the experimental podcast programmes after the termination of the study because it created an environment for peer teaching and independent learning while giving them opportunities to practice the target language. This heavily mirrors a landmark study carried out by Gardner (1996) who emphasised that students are considered as motivated when they engage with the language independently and retain a positive attitude towards it (qtd. in MacIntyre 2002).

Vaughn (2014) on the other hand, notes the lack of research concerning the use of online tools and its impact on learning engagement ergo, this is the key area of focus in his study. It was revealed that students who actively participated in online course modules showed improvements

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in their grades; other factors such as learner motivation and prior achievements were not considered. Conversely, Fook and Sidhu (2015) regard student engagement as not only their involvement in discussions and activities but “it also means students’ engagement in thinking and learning” (608).

Group work and supervision

Prior research has examined the negative effects of supervision and language performance as supervision is often linked to language anxiety. To combat this, it has been found that when students work in peer groups they are often more relaxed, and their language output is of a higher quality. The language learning literature has shown that emotion, closely linked to language production, has not received sufficient attention.

Kinsella et al (2017) investigates active participation in groups when working with large numbers of students over an eight-week period. Their study diverges from the benefits of large group learning as supported by Godde and Kauper (2014) and Petrović and Pale (2015). Kinsella et al (2017) envisioned that small-group exercises would facilitate group work exercises and student engagement as well as promote peer learning which is considered to be less intimidating. Despite this study not being based on small group language learning but instead on second year biochemistry students at an Irish university, it has contributed pertinent

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information on the benefits of small group learning that can be used in large group university settings across various faculties.

Small group learning can also be linked to a study carried out by Gkonou (2013) in an English foreign language class. This study revealed that students were hesitant to speak aloud in front of large groups or in the presence of a teacher. Similarly, when these students were divided into groups and told that they were being monitored they spoke again hesitantly. However, when they were unaware of the teachers monitoring them they spoke almost effortlessly. Not only did the small group setting reduce their anxiety but a reduction in teacher supervision also yielded positive results. The fostering of student led learning and student feedback in the context of small groups gave students opportunities to understand complex problems more quickly when simplified and explained by peers.16

Language immersion

The role of immersion programmes in students’ linguistic development has been well documented. Being exposed to the target language in an authentic context and experiencing the culture which surrounds the language has yielded positive results in many studies. García-Amaya (2012) in a study carried out for his doctoral dissertation found that time spent in an immersion programme positively impacts proficiency scores in reading, writing, speaking and listening.17 In the same vein, these findings corroborate the results of a Spanish immersion study carried out by Isabelli-García and Lacorte (2016) who discovered that the immersion model was also found to aid in spontaneous and naturalistic development with regards to linguistic accuracy. The students

who studied abroad and were surrounded by the language in almost every aspect of their daily lives, exhibited increased confidence in speaking as well as improved competence in listening and reading.\textsuperscript{18}

Pérez-Vidal states that “it is generally accepted that a period spent abroad in a foreign language country changes learners’ linguistic abilities, motivation and beliefs concerning language learning” (qtd. in Isabelli-García and Lacorte 545).\textsuperscript{19} The students were tested before the immersion programme began and after with the same language proficiency exam. Overall, the findings showed significantly greater fluency gains for the immersed learners when compared to the at home learners which can be attributed to the significantly greater amount of language exposure.

However, the time of testing at the end of the study for the students who were immersed and those who were not was different. The immersion students were tested three weeks before the control group. This disparity could have negative impacted the results of the study as factors such as memory of the test or more hours of practice were not considered. Moreover, the possibility of factors such as motivation or prior competence could have also impacted the final exam scores.

\textit{Implications and future research}


Most of the data gathered in this literature review was done using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Their results provided an opportunity to easily analyse the studies as very thorough information was provided. While challenges specific to French and Spanish undergraduate language learners were not explicitly mentioned, the qualitative nature of the studies conducted on tertiary level students allowed for the examination of other issues which can be transferred to, or influence, future studies seeking to build on prior research. There is an evident lack of studies concerning the challenges faced by language learners at tertiary level institutions in the Caribbean, therefore it is a field where many gaps need to be filled as it relates to research.

García-Amaya (2012) and Isabelli-García and Lacorte (2016) have laid important groundwork on the benefits of immersion programmes for students. However, their studies do not include recommendations for at-home learners to increase their linguistic competence. Mackey (2006) and Kinsella et al (2017) aptly examine the benefits of feedback and its usefulness for language learning yet, there is not a large selection of literature where the benefits of contextualized feedback can be examined. These examples indicate that this is a field that requires research which can add to the existing literature.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1 Instruments

Having chosen to focus on the challenges that language students face here at the University of the West Indies St. Augustine, the researcher needed to investigate what they were from both the students’ and the teachers’ perspectives. The questionnaire, the assessment tool selected, comprised of twenty-five questions in which the students were asked a series of questions to highlight their challenges. Responses from the students’ questionnaires were then restructured into questions to record their opinions and to cross-reference for possible commonalities from what other researchers have observed over the years. Structured interviews consisting of ten questions were conducted with a teacher representing the Spanish department and another representing the French department. After the structured questions were asked, the interviewees were given the opportunity to make comments, ask additional questions and give recommendations.

2.2 Rationale for the selection of research instruments

The questionnaire generally provides both quantitative information and has been deemed the most widely used form of the data gathering devices. Being both easy to prepare and administer, the questionnaire continues to be used to gather information from widely scattered sources (Pandey and Pandey 57). The design of the questionnaire also allows for the gathering of information from a large audience in a short period. Furthermore, according to Stacy Zeiger in her article “Rationale for Questionnaire Method”, “most questionnaires are geared toward

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analysing the attitudes and beliefs of the participants” (Zeiger, Stacy). Participants sometimes wish to remain anonymous, as such, the questionnaire provides a comfortable way for them to divulge information that may normally make them uncomfortable in an interview setting. This confidentiality allows the researcher to gather statistical data on what the majority of the sample think about sensitive topics.

On the other hand, the interview provides qualitative data and it is a “two-way method which permits an exchange of ideas and information” (Pandey and Pandey 59). The interview is necessary in the obtaining of highly personalised data and provides opportunities for the interviewer to probe further into the responses of the interviewee. With structured interviews, according to Bryman, “the aim is for all interviewees to be given exactly the same context of questioning. This means that each respondent receives exactly the same interview stimulus as any other. The goal of this style of interview is to ensure that interviewees’ replies can be aggregated” (qtd. in Kajornboon 4). On the other hand, non-structured interviews are more frequently used to obtain qualitative data and allows for questions to be changed based on the direction of the interview.

2.3 Participation

The sampling or non-parametric method was used where a small group of students were selected by the researcher to represent the target population. According to an article entitled “Research

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Methodology: Tools and Techniques”, the non-parametric method “works with the objective to obtain accurate and reliable information about the [sample] with minimum of cost, time and energy and to set out the limits of accuracy of such estimates.” Apart from the aforementioned advantages, sampling also allows for a “high speed for generalization” while possessing a greater scope in the research field (Pandey and Pandey 40).²⁴

Printed questionnaires were administered to the fifty undergraduate students registered full time as Spanish and/or French majors. Of the participants, there were sixteen were in year one, sixteen in year two and eighteen in year three. The collection of data via questionnaires was carried out over a one-week period. All questionnaires were completed and returned in a timely manner. Geography was a major factor in determining where the questionnaires were administered. Since there are six contact hours for the French and Spanish language course with all being face to face for French and the majority being face to face for Spanish, the Center for Language Learning was chosen as the location to administer the questionnaires; this is where all the language classes for Spanish and French are conducted.

Furthermore, of the two lecturers interviewed, one was a Spanish lecturer attached to the University of the West Indies St. Augustine since 2004 with a master’s degree in Applied Linguistics and has done several workshops on language teaching and possesses a keen interest in language assessment. The other holds a PhD in French/ Francophone Literatures and an MPhil in Film and continues to do work on the French language and French and francophone literature while teaching translation.

2.4 Procedures

Random selection was used by the researcher whereby students were approached either in their classrooms with the permission of a teacher or in the sitting areas at the Centre for Language Learning (CLL). To request permission to enter the classrooms to distribute the questionnaires, formal emails were written to the teachers a week in advance requesting permission to use the final minutes of class for this purpose. The researcher then arrived at the allotted time to administer the questionnaires.

Emails were written requesting an interview with two members of staff from the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics. This was followed by a series of email correspondence to decide on a suitable time based on clashes in schedules and a favourable location where the interview could be held without interruption. After the selection of a date, time, and location, a final email was sent the day before the scheduled interview to serve as a reminder and final confirmation.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS
3.1 Introduction

The participants at the centre of this study consisted of 16 first year students, 16 second year students and 18 third year students with 10 studying only French, 18 studying only Spanish and 22 studying both languages. From the group of participants, 40 were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, 9 were between twenty-three and twenty-five while only 1 student was over the age of twenty-six. Additionally, a Spanish lecturer (Teacher 1) and a French lecturer (Teacher 2) were interviewed. Discussions with the respective lecturers revealed that 100% of the students identified English as their first language.

3.2 Interpretation and Discussion

Student Learning Styles and Perceptions of Lessons

When asked which learning style best represented them, the results as depicted in Figure 1. below showed that 56% of the students identified as mixed learners (visual, kinaesthetic and auditory, 34% indicated that they were visual learners, 6% claimed to be kinaesthetic/tactile learners and 4% referred to themselves as auditory learners.
The participants further indicated that the lessons did not always cater to the different learning styles present in the class. According to the results, only 13% of the respondents believed that the lessons met the needs of the different types of learners “most of the time” while 24% of them indicated that this was done “some of the time”. However, 11% of the students indicated that the lessons “seldom” matched the learning styles of the students while 2% of them indicated that it never catered to the different types of learners present, see Figure 2. This suggests that 15% of the students are often in a classroom where teachers deliver lessons in a way that makes it difficult for them to grasp what is being taught. Diaz and Cartnal (1994) argues that if in an optimal classroom environment, student learning depends heavily on their various learning styles.
styles, then teachers should be cognizant of these differences and change the way they prepare and deliver their lessons (130).  

![Teaching Styles Meeting Students' Needs](image)

Figure 2.: Bar chart showing the likelihood of lessons matching the various learning styles

Blended learning

Students acknowledged that online tools were used to facilitate the learning of the L2 as seen in Figure 3. below. As expected, the primary tool used was the Myelearning platform according to 64% of the respondents while 34% of them revealed that a combination of Myelearning and Google documents was used. Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 emphasized on the importance of the use of online tools to allow students to access relevant course material outside of the classroom. Teacher 1 further highlighted that the Myelearning platform was used heavily for online testing.

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and practice testing; multiple videos, word documents and educational websites were made available for the students’ perusal. However, Teacher 2 admitted that this is a tool that the French department underutilises therefore, students often have to independently find relevant material to use for practice. Felix (2002) argues that one of the many strengths of the internet is its potential to engage students in creative activities to fill possible information gaps using authentic settings to create meaningful learning (qtd. in Thomas 146).²⁶

![Online Tools Used](chart-image)

Figure 3.: Bar Graph showing the online tools teachers to engage their students

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 студенти Use of Available Resources

To further inquire into the tools that students use when carrying out independent learning follow-up questions were posed. Four questionnaire items measured how often students used the resources available to help them to improve on problems areas or to practice the language. Two of these questions dealt with students visiting the various lecturers and/or the respective language assistants attached to the Spanish and French departments. The results revealed that 82% of the students visited their teachers with varying levels of frequency while 18% of the respondents did not visit their teachers during or outside of office hours. On the other hand, only 48% of the respondents visited the student assistants while 52% did not. Unexpectedly, the results disclosed that 12% of the respondents visited neither the teachers nor the language assistants. According to Teacher 2, “students often complain about various things about the course, yet they often do not utilise the assistance we provide them.”

The following table (Table 1) presents a breakdown of the various media students use to interact with the language in an informal context. The majority (56%) indicated that their sole means of interaction with the L2 was through communication with native speakers. In addition, 44% of the students only utilised movies/videos to interact with the language. Many of the other students used a combination of resources to interact with and practice the L2 while 2% of them indicated that they did not use any of the media options given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Percentage of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Movies/Videos</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Speakers</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies/Videos, Radio</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies/ Videos, Native Speakers</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies/ Videos, Radio, Native Speakers</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Table showing the media students use to interact with the language.

Independent learning and Immersion

The questions surrounding immersion, or the lack thereof, presented surprising results. A large majority of the respondents (70%) believed that learning a minority language in a majority context proved to be a challenge i.e. learning French or Spanish in an anglophone country is challenging. Both lecturers indicated that being in an anglophone country means that the student needs to independently pursue the language outside of the classroom context. Teacher 2 pointed out that when in a francophone country it is easier to be immersed in the culture and the language.

Additionally, Teacher 2 noted that:

“since we do not have a French/francophone culture here per say, it is up to the student to interact with other classmates or even write to the lecturers in French and (...) there are YouTube videos and you can listen to the news or watch a movie. Additionally, there is the Alliance Française with many different activities surrounding the French language. It is up to the student to actively pursue the language.”

Outside of the university, students have several opportunities to be exposed to the L2. Students are often called upon to be tour guides and interpreters for cruise ship passengers during the cruise ship season. Other opportunities available to all students are also offered by the university
such as the study abroad and the assistantship programmes. Consequently, the results were unexpected when 86% the respondents indicated that they were aware of the opportunities available to interact with native speakers in and outside of Trinidad, but only 38% of the students aware of the opportunities have utilised them. Unsurprisingly, the same group of students tried multiple immersion programmes and other opportunities to interact with the language. Similarly, Serrano and Muñoz (2007) noticed that even when students were involved in very short immersion programmes, there was an “increased willingness to take full advantage of the opportunity to maximize learning gains” (qtd. in Isabelli-García and Lacorte).27

Moreover, the researcher inquired about the sentiments regarding the different types of in-class immersion activities and found that 100% of the students admitted that virtual interaction in the classroom with students from L2 countries would be beneficial. This question goes a little beyond mere classroom immersion as it is interlinked with the concept of peer teaching and learning since it opens the possibility for a reciprocal relationship where students practice and learn in tandem.

Consequently, it can be inferred that students are open to peer teaching and learning opportunities. The researcher probed further with following question to find a possible justification for why students utilise or do not utilise the available opportunities with the presumption that to the programmes were too costly. However, a large majority (86%) of the students answered that they believed that these programmes were accessible to all students regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds. It can therefore be inferred that although numerous

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opportunities are available for students to practice the L2 or be immersed in a country where the L2 is spoken for reasons that this study did not reveal, they do not utilise them.

**Preparation for and Transition into an undergraduate degree**

During the interview, Teacher 2 firmly emphasized that the CAPE (Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination)\(^{28}\) level did not adequately prepare students for the transition into an undergraduate language degree. However, she highlighted that exceptions do exist and noted that around 3 in a class of 21 were adequately prepared as she referenced her previous year one French Literature class. She further mentioned that the teachers usually have preconceived ideas about where the students are at “because it is a bachelor’s degree and there are minimum requirements. However, the level of French that the students come in with each year seems to be decreasing.” Teacher 1 on the other hand held an opposing stance. He stated that, “I find that another challenge for the students is that some of the older lecturers have a preconception of how the level should be when the students enter.” He added that the teachers were often reminded “to be more demanding of students” when they first enter the institution to introduce them to the university culture of active, independent learning.

Teacher 2 further listed several areas that she considered to be challenging for first year students, these included: poor time management skills, inadequate contact with the target language, insufficient time spent doing independent work, difficulty dealing with the workload, difficulty in transitioning and the culture difference at the undergraduate level versus the CAPE level. In the same vein Fook and Sidhu (2014) in a study with both postgraduate and undergraduate students identified eight similar challenges that students in higher education struggle with, these

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\(^{28}\) CAPE targets Caribbean students who have obtained a minimum of five years of secondary school education and wish to follow their studies; it provides certification of academic, technical and vocational achievements.
included: “becoming an active learner, coping with reading materials, language barrier, time management, burden of assignments, and culture difference in higher education” (606).  

These commonalities make it possible to infer that whether it in postgraduate or undergraduate degrees, the challenges faced as a language student may not be unique to only language students but may be applicable to tertiary education students all levels. The comparative graph

![Level of Preparadness](image-url)

Figure 4.: Comparative graph showing students’ sentiments regarding the transition into the University of the West Indies.

above shows the extent to which the respondents believed that the CAPE level prepared them for an undergraduate degree as compared to the degree to which the University of the West Indies year one programme facilitated a smooth transition. With reference to Figure 4., the students who agreed or strongly agreed that the level of preparedness was adequate and that the transition

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was smooth accounted for 42% of the respondents when combined. However, 58% of the respondents were uncertain, disagreed or strongly disagreed about the level of preparedness at the CAPE level and the University of the West Indies allowed for a smooth transition.

Furthermore, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 agreed that the delivering of language lessons in English at the CAPE level is the source of difficulty when transitioning. The language classes at the University of the West Indies are carried out using the L2 however, for many, it would be their first time in a classroom conducted entirely in the L2. This, along with being in a new institution, can result in additional anxiety which can then affect language performance.

Language Anxiety

MacIntyre (qtd. in Shao et al) apropos of language learning and language anxiety asserts that “to some extent language learning in itself is prone to create intense emotion.” Moreover, for him, emotion “just might be the fundamental basis of motivation” (917).30 Scovel (qtd. in Shao et al) corroborates the findings of MacIntyre on the importance of emotion in second language acquisition. He found that “emotions might well be the factor that most influences language learning” (918).31 These experts in the field of second language acquisition gives credence to the observations made by Teacher 1. Teacher 1 found that initially students are nervous about interacting with others in Spanish and often reverted to speaking in English. He stated that “we encourage them to talk even if that puts a lot of pressure on them” (Teacher 1); this was done in an effort to prompt students to speak.

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31 Ibid., 918.
Additionally, it was found that students often felt less confident than their counterparts who were more proficient in the language which resulted in them further shying away from the language. The problem of self-esteem and the novelty of classes conducted entirely in the L2 could potentially have very adverse effects. It can be deduced that such situations increase language anxiety to such an extent that it compromises the student’s optimal learning potential. The focus changes from learning what is being taught to keeping calm or other measures to avoid further embarrassment.

*Practice*

![Time Spent Practicing](image)

Figure 5.: Line graph showing the hours spent practicing per week.
The above graph (Figure 5.) shows that 50% of the students only spend 1-2 hours per week practicing the language outside of the classroom. According to the Teacher 1, many of his colleagues advocate for mirroring the time spent practicing with the contact hours. However, he stated that some students need to practice more than others; the time spent practicing is based on a student’s skill level therefore, not all students have to practice long hours to grasp concepts.

Given the dynamic nature of language, he believes that there are other ‘less rigid ways’ of getting adequate practice.

“Long ago we used to say if you have a course that is two hours, use two more hours if its six hours use six more hours But now we tell them take advantages of opportunities for example we have many Spanish speakers at the CLL and some students are helping those who are in CLL learning English so they help them with their English and interact with them in Spanish.” Teacher 1

Feedback

Teacher 1 indicated that his students often complained that they were not given feedback in a timely manner and therefore it made it difficult for them to apply the changes for the next exam. He further noted that, “in the conversation exam in terms of feedback we have problems because we have a tendency to give feedback only on mistakes namely: grammar, pronunciation, conjugation.” Unlike Teacher 1, Waring (2008) heavily criticized this type of feedback since generally refers to negative or corrective feedback which is linked to language anxiety; he advocates for a different type of feedback which he perceives to be more beneficial to students.

While noting that there is a scarcity of empirical work surrounding positive feedback, Waring believes that it shows students their strengths and in doing so confirms and strengthens their
knowledge. However, the challenge for students arises from the instinctive belief in the deeply-rooted "no pain, no gain" aphorism that is, our belief that “learning occurs only when problems arise” (579)  

Yet, Mackey (2006) advocates for this type of feedback as it allows students to notice their errors in the various language forms and allows them to modify their output which translates to language acquisition (408).  

Teacher 1 admitted that using negative feedback is neither the best method nor the most important type of feedback. He explained that students asked for feedback on other things such as things they were doing well “so we give them a range based on their use of vocabulary and fluency for example.” He claimed that this change has motivated his students to speak more freely and take more risks with the language which serves as a basis for growth.  

Both lecturers mentioned the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) and its relevance in dealing with the challenges that their students face. This is a meeting with various teachers after the midterm exams once per semester; each year group is represented by two of their peers. They noted that the strategic placement of these meetings allows the students to bring forward suggestions, queries and concerns about the first series of exams so that if possible, amendments can be made. Teacher 2 also added that the SSLC is the primary source of student feedback outside of the classroom as it is the students who write the reports and present them to the teachers. Furthermore, it acts as an evaluation as the student representatives gather the strengths

and weaknesses of each of the language components (speaking, reading, listening, writing) while putting forward the recommendations of their peers for consideration by the relevant authority.

The literature showed that the findings based on this study may not only be limited to undergraduate romance language students as students from biology as well as education face similar challenges. The most common of these were the difficult transition into a degree since it comes with a workload that the students have not dealt with before as Fook and Sidhu (2015) confirms. Therefore, it can be deduced that the challenges faced by the undergraduate romance students of the University of the West Indies which are not language specific are quite common to other students. Teacher 1 acknowledged this fact by drawing upon the example of Mathematics students being taught solely through the use of Mathematics concepts and finding it difficult until they have adequately adjusted.

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CHAPTER 4: LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Limitations of the Study

- The lack of extensive research on the topic resulted in the researcher having to deeply analyse multiple other related topics to find commonalities that could be used as references.

- The research problem required a lot of time for reading, administering questionnaires and carrying out various interviews consequently therefore it was challenging to complete the research while doing other coursework and exams.
4.2 Recommendations

1. It is evident that a gap exists between the CAPE level and the University of the West Indies year one programme. Therefore, testing of the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking should be done as part of the entry requirements for the French and Spanish degree. These tests could be done during the first week of the semester or even a week before the semester begins to allow teachers to make slight or extensive changes to their lesson plans where possible. The benefits of this would be twofold as it would allow for teachers to know the weaknesses of their students and be able to structure the lessons to address these weaknesses to allow for improved learning of the language.

2. The results indicate that there is an inadequate use of distance learning tools by teachers to facilitate language learning. Consequently, an increase in online learning tools to facilitate blended learning should be implemented. This could be done through: the use of online forums where students would be required to communicate in the L2, video communication applications such as Zoom or Blackboard Collaborate could also be utilised for students to practice their spontaneous speaking and listening skills and online quizzes to learn different language forms such as grammar. However, the existing Myelearning platform offered by the University of the West Indies could be used in the interim by utilizing the forum section available for each course. A mark could be assigned to the comments to encourage students to actively participate in an activity that could potentially help them improve their proficiency in the L2.
3. It was recognized that the lessons often did not cater to the learning styles of all the students in the classroom. As such, the department heads could meet with the course lecturers and consider redesigning their instructional models to effectively use technology to modify lecture-style instruction which often does not meet the learning needs of all students. This means leveraging information technology to allow students to build their skills through targeted practice. These could be implemented using short video clips to explain grammar rules to the use of student controlled listening activities where students are given audio clips that explain specific topics. To ensure that this method is effective, it would be essential for teachers to become familiar with various learning-directed computer programmes; therefore, it would be necessary for the teachers to be trained or retrained to refresh their skills.

4. Teachers noted that level one students often did not have the confidence to speak in class. As a result, the breaking up of the class into smaller supervised groups would be recommended. Small groups reduce anxiety and increase confidence. The teacher would be required to rotate from group to group to ensure that the students are doing the assigned task. At the end of the session, a student could be asked to present on the findings of their group and this would be rotated each week to allow different students to ease into the role of public speaking. This method could increase students’ confidence as they experience what it is like sharing with their peers in a small group and then as a class.
CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, students struggle most with the transition into their undergraduate language degree, however, it was found that the teachers were the ones who noticed that a gap in knowledge existed. The university culture demands more independent work from the students and this work load posed an additional challenge. Also, students did not make adequate use of immersion opportunities which can help improve their fluency and confidence in the language. García-Amaya (2012) corroborates that immersion helps with the overall development of the language learner not only through an increase in their fluency. Many students face personal challenges; however, the findings show that students often do not visit their teachers or language assistants often enough to receive assistance.

The literature revealed that the findings based on this study are not limited to undergraduate romance language students since students from the Science and Social Sciences department in China and Australia face similar challenges. However, with regard to foreign language anxiety, it was found that this anxiety is different from what other students experience “because of the sociocultural and linguistic demands that it imposes on learners” (Shao et al. 918). The most common of the shared challenges was the difficulty in the transition into a higher degree since it comes with a workload that the students have not dealt with before as Fook and Sidhu (2015) confirms. Therefore, it can be concluded that many of the challenges faced by the undergraduate

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romance language students of the University of the West Indies are in accordance with the challenges experienced by students of other tertiary education institutions.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX

Sample Questionnaire

Caribbean Studies Project: The Challenges Faced by Students of Romance Languages at the University of the West Indies St. Augustine

This survey is a part of a research being carried out for HUMN 3099: Caribbean Studies Project. It is geared towards pinpointing the challenges faced by students of the romance languages (Spanish and French) offered at the undergraduate level at the University of the West Indies St. Augustine.

Please answer the following questions as truthfully as possible.

1. Age range
   □ 18 – 22 □ 23 – 25 □ 26 years or older

2. What romance language do you study?
   □ Spanish □ French □ Both

3. What is your year of study?
   □ Year one □ Year two □ Year three □ Other __________________________

4. What kind of learner do you consider yourself?
   □ Visual □ Auditory □ Kinesthetic/ tactile □ Mixed

5. Do you believe that the lessons taught are tailored to suit the various learning styles?
   □ Most of the Time □ Some of the Time □ Seldom □ Never

6. How often are textbooks and other supplementary material used in the teaching of the target language?
   □ Very Often □ Often □ Not Very Often □ Not at All

7. Does the University's bookshop carry ALL the essential texts required for the course?
   □ Most of the Time □ Some of the Time □ Seldom □ Never

8. Does the cost of books make them accessible to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds?
   □ Yes □ No
9. Do you agree that the exams given are effective in testing the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) taught in class?
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Undecided ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

10. To what extent does the grades allocated for assignments reflect the workload?
☐ To a Great Extent ☐ Somewhat ☐ Very Little ☐ Not at All

11. How often do you visit teachers during their office hours for assistance?
☐ Always ☐ Very often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never

12. How accessible are teachers to provide guidance to students outside of their office hours?
☐ Very accessible ☐ Accessible ☐ Somewhat accessible ☐ Not accessible

13. Do you visit the language assistant? **If NO skip following question.**
☐ Yes ☐ No

14. How easy is it to obtain an appointment with the language assistant?
☐ Very easy ☐ Easy ☐ Difficult ☐ Very difficult

15. How likely is it for teachers to use a combination of in-class and online learning tools in their presentation of the course material?
☐ To a great extent ☐ Somewhat ☐ Very little ☐ Not at all

16. Which of the following online tools do teachers use to engage students in the target language?
☐ Myelearning ☐ Blackboard Collaborate ☐ Google docs ☐ Chat rooms

17. Which of the following do you use to interact with the target language?
☐ Movies/videos ☐ Radio ☐ Native Speakers ☐ None of the Above

18. Approximately how many hours per week do you spend practicing the target language(s) outside of the classroom
☐ Less than One Hour ☐ 1 - 2 hours ☐ 5 - 7 hours ☐ More than Seven Hours

19. Are you aware of the opportunities available for students to interact with native speakers?
☐ Yes ☐ No
20. Which of the following opportunities available to language students have you utilised?  
☐ Study Abroad ☐ Assistantship ☐ Tour Guide ☐ Interpreter for Cruise Ship Passengers

21. Do you believe that these programmes are accessible to students of all socio-economic backgrounds?  
☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Undecided ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

22. How beneficial would it be for language learners to engage with students from countries where the target language is spoken through video conferencing or similar programs?  
☐ Very beneficial ☐ Beneficial ☐ Moderately beneficial ☐ Not beneficial

23. Do you believe that studying in an anglophone country poses a challenge to effectively learning the target language?  
☐ Yes ☐ No

24. Do you think that the CAPE level adequately prepared you to pursue a language at the undergraduate level?  
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Undecided ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree

25. To what extent do you agree that the University of the West Indies allows for a smooth transition between the CAPE level and the undergraduate level?  
☐ Strongly agree ☐ Agree ☐ Undecided ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly disagree
Sample Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a teacher at the University of the West Indies?
2. Which language and which component(s) of the language do you teach?
3. As a teacher what are some of the things that you perceive to be challenges that your students face?
4. Which of these challenges do you think stand out most?
5. Do you believe that it prevents the students from performing at their best?
6. If students complain about the ways in which the course material is presented, are these complaints considered and addressed in a satisfactory manner?
7. The teaching styles there are used, do you believe that they are geared towards reaching the different type of learners in the classroom?
8. Do you believe that the CAPE level adequately prepares students for a smooth transition into an undergraduate degree?
9. Do you believe that the year one syllabus allows for a smooth transition into the University from the CAPE level?
10. Do you believe that your students spend enough time doing independent learning or practicing the language?
11. Do you believe that learning a foreign language in an anglophone country poses a challenge to your students?
12. Do you have any recommendations as to how these challenges can be addressed by the university, the students and the students themselves to allow students to progress in the language?
13. Do you believe that the challenges discussed are unique to language learners?
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
Undergraduate Coursework Accountability Statement (To be completed by student)

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2016-2017         SEMESTER:  II
COURSE CODE: HUMN 3099           TITLE: Caribbean Studies Project
NAME: KENNITA HENRY             ID: 815007008

1. I hereby certify that I am the author of the attached item of coursework and that all materials from reference sources have been properly acknowledged.

2. I understand what plagiarism is and what penalties may be imposed on students found guilty of plagiarism.

3. I certify that this paper contains no plagiarised material.

4. I certify that this is my own work and that I did not receive any unfair assistance from others (including unauthorized collaboration) in its preparation.

5. I certify that this paper has not previously been submitted either in its entirety or in part within the UWI system or to any other educational institution.

6. In the case of group work:
   a. I certify that the individual work of each member of the group has been clearly indicated;
   b. that where no such indication has been given, I take the responsibility for the work as if it were the section of the paper for which I am solely responsible; and
   c. that I have not collaborated with any members of the group to breach the University’s regulations.

Signature: ........Kennita Henry...............

Date: ....................4/18/18.........................