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# **Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in a Reading Comprehension and Writing Online Module: A Higher Education Analysis**

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**Abstract:** The Spanish section of the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at The University of the West Indies at Saint Augustine decided to begin teaching a two hour module of the courses: SPAN 1001 and 1002 to first year students, in the online mode in the academic year of 2014-2015. This paper's principal objective is to reflect upon students' and teachers' perspectives on benefits and challenges of the blended learning mode of delivery for Spanish programme. It examines the online reading and writing module to assess student writing interaction as well as to determine best practice in the teaching of these skills in the foreign language at the tertiary level in a twenty-first century Caribbean context. In order to carry out this reflection, action research was used therefore its data collection consisted of observations of the course design before and after the innovation, student surveys and teacher interviews. Among the most relevant findings are: students and teachers prefer to have an online delivery of this class rather than the previous face to face class; the variety of activities lead to higher interaction among students; change of roles for teachers and students, fostering more active learning among students; and a rise of digital culture for academic purposes. However, some restructuring is required in terms of teachers' feedback delivery and students' and teachers' required time for activities. As recommendations the paper suggests continued promoting of this online module since it develops both technological literacy and higher written interaction in the first year of the Spanish programme.

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**Key-Words:** Blended Learning, online teaching and learning, blended language teaching, Teaching Reading Comprehension and Writing Online, Tertiary Education.

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## 1. Introduction

Online learning is spreading rapidly through higher education, compelling us, as teachers, to face existing assumptions of the teaching and learning process. In fact, higher education institutions are more and more challenged to meet the demands and expectations of the society for prospective students. In Spanish at the University of the West Indies, (UWI) St Augustine campus, the conventional face-to-face mode of language teaching was the norm. However, it was felt that students in the Spanish programme needed to be kept up to date with the use of technology and communication technology in reading comprehension and specifically in writing, and as teachers, we theorised that teaching reading and writing online would increase student writing interaction. Graham, Allen and Ure (2003) found that, by a great majority, Blended Learning (BL) was implemented for the reasons of (1) improved pedagogy, (2) increased access and flexibility, and (3) increased cost-effectiveness.

In order to employ a blended learning environment in the Spanish programme, and as a part of continuous curriculum review, the Spanish section decided to modify the first year of the Spanish Language program during the 2014/2015 academic year. At the entry level for the degree program in Spanish students read two courses; SPAN 1001-Spanish Language IA (Semester 1) and SPAN 1002-Spanish Language (Semester 2). Both are divided into three components: i) Conversation and Listening Comprehension, ii) Reading Comprehension and Writing and iii) Communicative Grammar. Up until the 2013/2014 academic year the Reading Comprehension and Writing module (2 hours) was taught as a face to face class only. In that module students dedicated one hour to the writing component which we (the Instructors) found to be quite limited. We felt that our students were not practising enough written production and there was limited written interaction. The section decided to deliver the Reading Comprehension and Writing module fully online while keeping the face to face classes for the other two modules.

The teaching team for semester one comprised Carolina Arrieta Castillo, Suly Corredor Sánchez, Nicole Roberts and Jairo Sánchez Galvis. At that time, we formulated the idea for the use of action research so as to research and reflect on the online course and to write up the results in the form of a paper. In semester two, the teaching team comprised Carolina Arrieta Castillo, Suly Corredor Sánchez, Paola Palma Rojas and Nicole Roberts. Denscombe (2010) describes practical action research as a strategy used to solve a particular problem. In this study, the project sought to assess

the impact of the online mode of instruction on the quantity of student writing produced. The Action Research method offers a blend of theory and practice. This method was considered appropriate as students partaking in the course would benefit as much as the Instructors who would find the reflection involved in this particular research of great benefit. Perhaps most importantly, we also felt that this kind of research would contribute to overall Instructor effectiveness in the teaching of Reading Comprehension and Writing in Spanish. In addition, it should be noted that this research is significant at the level of administration at the UWI. Our findings would certainly contribute to the knowledge base regarding best practice in the area of teaching and learning in Reading Comprehension and Writing in Spanish at the UWI, St. Augustine.

The purposes of this study are to examine the perceptions of both students and teachers with regard to the online reading and writing module, to assess student writing interaction and to attempt to establish best practice in teaching Reading Comprehension and Writing in Spanish at the tertiary level in a twenty-first century Anglophone Caribbean context.

The research questions for the above purposes are:

- 1) What are the benefits and challenges of an online reading and writing module both in teaching and learning Spanish as a second language at the tertiary level in the Anglophone Caribbean?
- 2) To what extent does the online module facilitate increased writing interaction among students?

## **2. Literature Review**

Since the implementation of the use of technology in language teaching, different authors have tried to define the concept of Blended Learning (BL). For the purpose of this study, we adopt the definition suggested by Graham (as cited in Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012, p.3) who defined BL as the combination of “face-to-face instruction with computer-mediated instruction”. In the courses SPAN 1001 and SPAN 1002, two of the components remain being taught face-to-face, enriched with the use of different learning technologies in class, while the component Reading Comprehension and Writing is taught fully online through the platform myeLearning (Moodle) and other online resources.

Recent teaching approaches in Higher Education and foreign language teaching seek to switch methodologies from teacher-centered to student-centered. Bonk and Graham (as cited in Gruba & Hinkelman, 2012, p.4) explain that “transforming approaches” to blended learning uplift substantial changes in pedagogy, as this focuses on changing the role of the learner from “passive receivers of information to active co-constructors of knowledge”. In online learning environments the learner has the opportunity to do

collaborative work, interact in real contexts, negotiate meaning, as well as to develop their own learning strategies. This aligns with the objectives from The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which suggests the adoption of an action-oriented approach for foreign language teaching because:

“...it views users and learners of a language primarily as ‘social agents’, i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of ‘tasks’ in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent”. (Council of Europe, 2011, p.9)

### 2.1. Advantages for the student and linguistic acquisition

Different authors have focused on analysing the advantages and disadvantages of implementing the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in language teaching.

*Increased motivation.* Warschauer (1996), found that during the early years of introducing ICTs in education, students overall had a positive attitude towards using computers. This motivation could be related to the fact that some years ago computers and the Internet were a novelty, but more recent studies (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Greenfield, 2003; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Segupta, 2001) have also reported a positive attitude from the students. In general, the virtual environments, paradoxically, are perceived as more ‘real’ and closer to daily life than working in a traditional classroom. Participating in a forum or a social network, which Walther (1996) defined as CMC (Computer Mediated Communication), is a more common writing activity, and therefore more meaningful, than writing on paper about a given topic.

According to Bartolic-Zlomislic & Bates (1999), online teaching reduces the levels of anxiety in the learner, as the anonymity granted by this mode can encourage greater participation even from the shy ones (Educational Benefits section, para. 2). Similarly, Sengupta (2001) concluded from a case study that in online interaction, students feel more motivated to participate and more engaged in activities which contribute to balancing the number and the frequency of students’ interactions. Moreover, students make a greater effort to produce better texts when these will be read by a wider amount of readers. Forums, wikis and other resources allow continuous written interaction as well as collaborative work (Weasenforth, 2002).

*Access.* Today, second language learners have access to more information and resources on the internet which assist them with their reading and writing activities. Loucky (2009) found that reading in a foreign language was more meaningful when the learner had access to these tools as Internet provides the learner with possibilities to interact directly with the foreign culture through forums, wikis, blogs, newspapers, videos, podcasts, etcétera. The student finds the material and resources from the internet not only in its original format and context, but also linked to other resources that complement and widen the variety of *input*<sup>b</sup>.

*Flexibility.* Online learners have the flexibility to work at their own pace. Some of the activities may allow the learners to choose materials with which they prefer to work and in a way that they find will facilitate their learning process. By allowing students to take the responsibility for their learning path, online learning helps to develop student's autonomy and independence, which is the aim of the student-centered learning approach (Jones, 2007).

Grammar and Spell Checkers allow for a degree of flexibility among students. They take care of some aspects of low-level cognitive processes by providing immediate feedback about common errors; allowing students time to focus their attention on high-level processes, such as, recognizing types of texts, inferring meaning and developing ideas.

Undoubtedly, conclusions from recent studies on Second Language Teaching that highlight the importance of the learners' individual differences (Martín Peris, 2000) are underscored in our program where for example, there are dyslexic students who could specifically benefit from the use of technology (Mejía, Díaz, Florian-Gaviria & Fabregat, 2012).

## 2.2. Advantages for the teacher and the university.

*The role of the teacher changes* from being a transmitter of knowledge to a mediator. Learners have a variety of resources available online that help to develop autonomy in their own learning process. In this way, Johannesen & Eide (2000) affirm that the responsibility of the teacher is to make the appropriate arrangements to facilitate the learning process.

The teacher is able to monitor the participation of each student and communicate with them individually in a continuous and egalitarian manner. This makes the amount and quality of teacher-student interaction higher than in face-to-face interactions.

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<sup>b</sup> Refers to the external factors that determine the learning context of the foreign language to which the learner is exposed. According to Ellis (1994), *input* are forms of language that may appear in written or spoken form, for example in interactions with a native speaker or the teacher, as well as in non-reciprocal discourse as when watching a film, listening to the radio or reading a newspaper.

*Economic benefits.* Online tutoring not only benefits the students economically by reducing the expenses of transportation to and from the campus, but also the expenses of books and other learning materials may be cut. The university does not receive an additional income for this type of course; however, Bartolic-Zlomislic & Bates (1999) affirm that previous studies have demonstrated that online courses are “at least as cost-effective as conventional courses” (Economic Benefits section, para. 7).

### 2.3. Limitations

Some of the limitations that were expected for the implementation of this course are related to preparedness, time management and computer literacy. It requires that the teacher, as well as the student have some knowledge about how to use certain online applications. Johannesen & Eide (2000) believe that technical aids can also generate reluctance to learn due to many different factors. They affirm that a programme or application which does not function can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration. On the contrary, if it functions as it should, it will increase student and teacher motivation thereby enriching the learning experience. However, it is expected that the teacher and the students are ready to embrace this method of delivery. Johannesen & Eide (2000) believe that the use of technology in teaching can create some level of reluctance, which was evidenced in the initial survey to the UWI Instructors and students; both demonstrated an initial lack of acceptance of the proposal of this online module to the two courses. Among our teachers and students, there was a common belief that this new method would increase the amount of work and would require more dedicated time for the activities from both parties.

Bartolic-Zlomislic & Bates (1999) found in their research that the fact that the course has 24/7 access creates “unrealistic expectations of the course” (Student Preparedness section, para. 3). Teachers and students may believe that they are expected to work online all the time. On the other hand, as the course material and activities are available permanently, students may opt to delay their work. This can affect other students, especially in those activities where interaction and collaborative work is required.

## 3. Research Methodology

Participants in the study came from the cohort of students entering the first year of the Spanish programme of the UWI in August 2014. The study was conducted over two semesters. The initial group comprised 61 students (54 female and 7 male). However, this changed to 45 female and 4 male giving an overall total of 49 students in semester 2. The first year of the programme was chosen as we strongly felt that students at this level should be

exposed to and ultimately display a command of the online environment as relates to reading and writing in a foreign language.

SPAN 1001 - Spanish Language IA is 13 weeks in length. In week 1 of the online course, students were asked to familiarise themselves with the use of the platform and to complete a general questionnaire assessing both motivation and technological knowledge. One in-class session of one hour's duration was held at the start of semester and sought to orient students to the platform (myeLearning) and material to be used in the course. This session was repeated at the start of the second semester. The table below gives a comparison of the elements of both the face to face and the online modules. It shows that in the face to face class, students produced 3 tareas (tasks) and 8 written texts which decreased to 3 tareas in the second semester of the online course. However, students now produced drafts (minimally 3) of written assignments prior to submission. Moreover there were no forum interactions in the face to face class but these became mandatory in the online course.

<b>Elements of the course</b>		<b>Face to face</b>	<b>Online I semester</b>	<b>Online II semester</b>
<b>Amount of final assignments</b>		3 tareas 8 assignments for a portfolio 2 quizzes	10 tareas  2 quizzes	3 tareas  2 quizzes
<b>Amount of drafts for final Assignments "Tareas"</b>		0	0	3 Drafts
<b>Contributions in forums</b>		0	at least 4 weekly 4x13(weeks)	at least 4 weekly 4x13(weeks)
<b>Type of resources</b>		Hard copy texts	Online material (Blogs, wikis, forums, glossaries, e-mail, social media and online dictionaries)	Online material (Blogs, wikis, forums, glossaries, e-mail, social media and online dictionaries)
<b>Workload</b>	<b>Students</b>	2 hours - face to face weekly 2 hours work at home	Weekly 4-6 hours 54.3% Weekly 6-8 hours 22.9%	Weekly 4 hours
	<b>Teachers</b>	Face to face weekly class Class planning weekly	Forum interaction  Class planning	Forum interaction  Class planning

		Marking as required weekly	Marking	Marking
<b>Feedback</b>		Teacher: Marks on assignments	Students: Qualitative feedback to classmates Constant interaction in forums  Teachers: Constant interaction in forums  Marking of assignments	Students: Qualitative feedback to classmates Constant interaction in forums  Teachers: Non-marked qualitative feedback to improve final tasks  Constant interaction in forums  Marking of assignments
<b>Access to material</b>		Reading material made available on MyeLearning (Moodle)	Reading material made available on MyeLearning (Moodle) and internet	Reading material made available on MyeLearning (Moodle) and internet
<b>Flexibility</b>		A fixed weekly class schedule  Due dates for submission of assignments.	Activities available during the week 24/7  Due dates for submission of assignments.	Activities available during the week 24/7  Due dates for submission of assignments.

Table 1. *Comparison of the elements of both the face to face and the online modules.*

In the online module, students had ‘Actividades’ as well as ‘Tareas’ to complete each week. These took varied forms and were mainly independent, although ‘foros’ were used to provide students with opportunities to express ideas and opinion through discussion and written interaction. The shorter ‘actividades’ were seen as important to the development of reading strategies, while the longer ‘tareas’ were seen as crucial to providing students with

moments for more thoughtful reflection. Two quizzes were also included and these were conducted online.

At the end of each semester (November, 2014 and April, 2015), students were asked to complete a questionnaire which we created in order to facilitate our evaluation of the modules based on their (student) perceptions. This qualitative data source focussed on the following areas with subsequent guiding statements/questions:

*Course pedagogical design.* This course is organised in a way that helps me learn / The course assignments and lectures usefully complement each other / The course instructions (material, video tutorials etc.) are clear.

*Language Competence development.* This course helps me improve my writing in Spanish / This course helps me improve my reading and comprehension in Spanish / This course develops my writing ability to interact with other people in Spanish.

*Teacher guidance.* The Instructor is helpful when I have difficulties or questions / The Instructor provides meaningful feedback on my work / The Instructor provides meaning guidance on my progress/work.

*Student performance.* I participate actively in all for a / I organise my time so that I meet deadlines well in advance / I review my contributions prior to posting. I guide discussions in for a / How many hours per week on average do you work on this course?

*Overall course perception.* This course develops my ability to think critically / What is my goal in a Spanish degree? / How satisfied are you with this course? / Considering both the limitations and possibilities of the subject matter and the course, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the course? / If you could choose, would you rather have face to face or online Reading Comprehension and Writing classes?

The data from the student surveys were gathered, read through and analysed. The results of the survey made at the end of semester I (November, 2014) regarding the heavy workload were taken into account to slightly alter the design of the content of semester II (2015). The course Instructors also gave their assessments of the course through a face to face meeting at the end of the second semester (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). In this questionnaire the Instructors discussed all aspects of the course and reflected on analysing best practice and on improving the course structure. All of this data was collated and is analysed in detail in this paper.

## **4. Results/Findings**

### **4.1. Materials and Sources**

*Selecting texts in real contexts.* Following the principles of the communicative approach in teaching a foreign language, the selection of texts that made up the course material was determined by their appropriateness to

real life. For instance, a normal activity of the component was to read and get familiar with a digital newspaper article. Afterwards, students were able to produce a written article as close to the authentic material as possible. As one of the Instructors indicated:

“Very often the material I select to work with comes from digital sources. However, if I want the students to work with it in the face-to-face session, I need to print it out and give it to them as a hard copy” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015)

This quotation suggests that face-to-face methodology results in the alteration of the context in which the text was produced. Whereas students of the old module had no choice but to wait to get home in order to access the online material, the students of the online module could access the text in its real platform and in “class time”.

“Many times students were asked to research on a fact or a story and they had to wait to get out of class to connect to the network and visit the pages required to complete the activity” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015).

Additionally, as this Instructor pointed out, the specific dynamics and resources not available in a regular class prevented our students from working with materials in the real context, i.e. the digital context. Thanks to the online module, texts were accessed in the original format and platform.

This aspect also seems to influence the motivation of our students. As one student said: “It was by far more motivating to write my post in a real blog than just on a paper emulating a blog” (SPAN1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015). This comment confirms one of the guidelines of the Communicative Approach which suggests that the more realistic the practice appears, the more motivated the students will be.

*Access to learning content 24/7. The learning is not limited to class time.* The most positive aspect of the 24/7 access to learning content was that students could take the course activities at their own pace and when they felt most inspired. As one student said: “I prefer the online course because it allows me to complete the assignments on my own timing and schedule” (SPAN1001 - Students Survey, November, 2014). Indeed, the new module required students to make decisions about their work schedule by deciding when to complete the assignments. However, there was one drawback in this regard; problems were observed in tasks that required interaction, especially in those groups where members tended to wait until the end to carry out the activity:

“The majority of the group members this semester I had always waited till the night of the discussion deadline to post things when myself

and a few others would post earlier in the week and wait forever for others to discuss with. This jeopardized my marks with regard to participation and was certainly not fair” (SPAN1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015)

As this comment pointed out, the fact that students could access material whenever they wanted, facilitated some of them working just before the deadline. This was not a general complaint, but a situation that arose in one group and, according to the students, made difficult to carry on this type of interactive tasks. It must be noted that this was also an issue for the Instructor in charge of the group: “I tried to monitor the forums everyday for a while but the majority of contributions were posted close to the deadline” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). Instructors eventually adapted their own schedules to their students’ schedules. Thus, the dynamics of each group made the experience of each Instructor very different. For instance, in the following quotation, the Instructor notes: “In my group the weekly activity began right after we posted the instructions” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). Or as another claimed: “Even if I was not connected, most of the activities were completed by Wednesdays” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015).

Therefore, access to learning content 24/7 was perceived as a challenge by some students and Instructors. The exploitation of this aspect of the online module depends on the decision making of the students and the degree of autonomy in their learning process.

*Access to a greater number of resources.* Given the large number of resources available online, Instructors had to have a much more critical sense in selecting materials. As one Instructor indicated:

*“As a teacher, you select the material that you think is serious, appropriate and well written, but you also know that some websites might contain data errors of which you are not necessarily aware”* (Instructors meeting, April, 2015).

This comment highlights the importance of instilling critical thinking in students regarding the validity of information available on the web. For both Instructors and students alike, it is necessary to evaluate the authority of the sources.

In the main, students pointed to the large number of resources that the online platform offers as one of the positive aspects. One of the students commented: “When completing course activities it is very easy to jump from one page to another to get additional information” (SPAN1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015). Indeed, online texts are structured with hyperlinks that take the reader from one page to another with ease, allowing the students to delve into topics that attract their attention. Related to this aspect, another

student referred to one of the activities of the course: “There were activities in which we were given a webpage with many links and it was up to us the decision of what links to visit and which not, like the one about Ana Frank” (SPAN1001 - Students Survey, November, 2014).

Deciding which resources to select in order to complete an activity requires decision-making skills. Once again, another aspect born from the online module appears related to the autonomy of the students in the learning process.



Figure 1. Screenshot Activity “El diario de Ana Frank”. Source: <http://www.annefrank.org/es/Ana-Frank/El-diario-de-Ana-Frank>

*Different types of activities.* One of the most positive aspects according to the students was the diversity of activities carried out each semester. This module required two main activities: reading and writing. The online platform gave the opportunity to read and write in different formats and procedures: glossaries, forums, wikis, quizzes, blogs, emails, etc. As one of the Instructors said: “The searching and creation of course material was much easier in this module thanks to the variety of tools available on the net” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). This quotation suggests that the range of possibilities that all tools mentioned above provide for a class of writing skills was perceived as an advantage by the Instructors.

In addition, it seems that the variety offered more teaching options, and not necessarily more difficulties:

“We used various applications and programs such as wikipedia, gmail or facebook. No explanation was needed because both students and Instructors were familiar with them” (Instructors meeting, April 2015).

When an obstacle presented itself, students were able to overcome the digital challenges:

“There was a task in which we had to make a screenshot of our assignment. I had no idea of how to do it. Now it seems incredible that I

did not know how to do such a basic task” (SPAN 1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015).

The variety of activities is also related to the motivation of the students: “I like the variety of the activities and assignments for each week. It is something to look forward to and it really does capture my interest” (SPAN 1002 - Students Survey, November, 2014).

Capturing the interest of the students is one of the main objectives of educational practice. If we grasp the attention of our students on the course topics, it is guaranteed that they will be motivated to complete the task and reap the benefits of the course. One of the students mentioned an activity of the course:

“I always wanted to open a blog, because I wanted to share my experiences with the rest of the world, but I was not motivated enough to do it on my own. So when we were told to write it, I thought it was a fun assignment” (SPAN 1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015).

Thus, the variety of tools at our disposal became one of the greatest advantages in our online Reading Comprehension and Writing module. Screenshot of the activity "glossary of health" (Semester 2, 2015) in which students had to define a word related to the health field and add a related image



Figure 2. *Glossary of health*. Source: <http://grupochavezradio.com/website/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Antibioticos.jpg>

#### 4.2. Students and teachers' roles

*Intervention not simply attendance.* One of the benefits of the online delivery mode is that participation does not depend on the student's attendance. As one Instructor said:

“Normally, in every face-to-face dynamic, there are a few students who do not actively participate. You see them trying to be invisible and leaving the questions to be answered by their classmates” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015).

The confusion between attendance and participation facilitates the mindset of some students who believe that their simple presence in class is valued by the Instructors. However, learning a foreign language requires the practice of skills through an active learning engagement. In the online module, participation was linked to contributions in the forums and not to mere attendance. The perception of the students is that this format demands a more active role from them.

“Many second language lessons are monologues of the teachers, and students contributions take up little class time, but in this course it was just the opposite” (SPAN 1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015).

This active role is also reliant on the efficiency of the module in preventing the student from being tempted not to engage in class, either because of laziness or shyness. As one of our students said:

“I like that we can actively participate in forums and contribute to our classmates’ opinions because sometimes participation in a classroom environment is hindered due to timidity and fear of being wrong” (SPAN 1001 - Students Survey, November, 2014).

This quotation suggests that written communication encourages students to participate more and diminishes the fear of being wrong. It is clear that the ease of their work being amended by written communication encouraged students to participate more. All in all, the fact that the online module required a greater commitment from the students was considered beneficial by both students and Instructors.

*Student’s written performance can be followed and evaluated easier by the instructor.* The evaluation of the learning process not only involves assigning a grade to the students’ work. In our case, it was essential to give feedback on how to improve writing skills.

“The possibility of having the forum entries of our students recorded every week allowed us to make individual tracking of their written interaction. This monitoring is just impossible in a face-to-face mode” (Instructors meeting, April, 2015).

Every successful evaluation goes through a process of monitored learning in which feedback is crucial. This weekly monitoring was intended to

give feedback on different types of mistakes: grammar, vocabulary, coherence, etc.

By contrast, there was a dramatic increase in the Instructor's workload due to the amount of feedback that the module required. At the beginning of the course, Instructors agreed upon an agenda which entailed that feedback will be given weekly. This task became especially hard in the second semester, when Instructors were enrolled in a greater amount of departmental activities and courses/modules. As one of the Instructors said:

“Weekly feedback was time-consuming. You need to read carefully the contributions, grade them and send it to each of your students with a justification for it” (Instructors meeting, April 2015).

Another Instructor also reflected on this same issue:

“I do not believe it is necessary to correct every sentence or every single post. Most of the time students acted as peer reviewers by asking their classmates for clarification. There is an invisible feedback, it is not explicit, and yet, it works” (Instructors meeting, April 2015).

According to the Instructors, the feedback on students' work came from other students as well as from the tutors of the course. However, the perception of some students was that the amount of feedback received from Instructors was insufficient:

“The course is designed in a way that facilitates learning, however, the lack of feedback from the tutor made it very difficult to track my progress during the semester” (SPAN1002 - Survey April 2015).

As this quotation implies, the perception of some students was that the comments from their Instructors were crucial to their charting progress in their written skills. Thus, getting the commitment of the Instructors with a realistic schedule is a challenge to be considered for the coming years.

#### 4.3. Results

*Greater written production and interaction.* Significant among the data sets collected (and previously indicated in the methodology section) is the number of texts that were produced by the students of the component. Summing up forums and final tasks, the minimum number of texts required to pass the component in the first semester was about 10 final tasks and about 40 forum posts. In the second semester, due to the reduction in final tasks, the minimum number of texts to be produced was 3 final tasks and 40 forum posts. Considering that in the former face-to-face modality of this component each student was required to produce 11 texts, the online modality showed an increase in students' overall written texts production.

Interaction in the face-to-face module was mostly oral and the written texts were produced out of the class. As this Instructor indicated:

“We normally used class time to give explanations on how to write better. When I asked students to produce their own texts there was no interaction, either among them or with me” (Instructors meeting, April 2015).

The online module solved that problem thanks to the forum tool. “We finally interact with each other by written means” (Instructor meeting, April 2015).

To write these tasks and forum posts students also needed to read and reply to each other’s posts.

“They have written more, they have read more. We also gave them more written feedback to read. It is possible that their written skills benefitted from this” (Instructors meeting, April 2015).

Therefore, the student’s practice of reading comprehension and writing production and interaction has been greater. Whether it has been better is an indicator that was not intended to be addressed in this study, even though it would be interesting to do so in a future research.

*Time spent.* Time spent was another of the major challenges of the project. When considering the material of the component, tutors decided to create meaningful learning activities that required active searching for information by students. As a result, students complained that they took too long doing the activities. In fact, the survey conducted at the end of semester 1 showed a ‘disturbing’ factor; 27 out of 56 students said that they spent more than 6 hours per week doing the activities of the module (9 of them spent more than 8 hrs.). As one student explained:

“...during the first half of the semester, there were too many activities to complete before the deadline, which required a lot of time for only one aspect of the course. Sometimes only one activity took more than an hour to complete...” (SPAN1001 - Survey, November 2014).

This was taken into account when creating the course for the second semester. The changes made resulted in 26 out of 35 students who spent less than 6 hours per week working on the component (Survey of April 2015) The same student quoted above continued:

“...But now it has gotten better. The assigned work can be completed within the allotted time and there is no rush to complete the assignments hours before the deadline as they can be easily completed during the week in intervals” (SPAN1002 - Survey April 2015).

Whereas in semester I the dedicated time for the activities seemed to increase the amount of work, student's feedback on the new methodology in semester II showed that it was possible to adjust the workload to students' and instructor's expectations.

*Digital culture.* What began as a challenge: familiarity with digital tools integrated into the course, was meant soon to become a profit. In the Student Survey made at the beginning of the semester I course, nearly half of the students admitted to being wary of online learning. Hence a "Queries forum" was created in order to solve problems related to activities and digital skills:

"After week 5, we started feeling that the students were getting familiar with the platform. In the first half of semester I there were about 7 to 9 posts every week in the "Queries forum", most of them enquired about the use of the platform. This same forum registered only 1 to 2 posts in the second half of that semester" (Instructor meeting, April 2015).

According to this Instructor, the decrease in the number of enquiries in the "Queries forums" is explained by the increasing familiarity of the students with the platform. The process of learning through the myeLearning (Moodle) platform was directly linked to the improvement of computer skills: "The course allows us to improve our computer skills, which is crucial in the world today" (SPAN 1001 - Students Survey, November, 2014). And this other student who admits that "Thanks to this course, I have discovered *Google Drive* and now I even use it to make the grocery list" (SPAN 1002 - Students Survey, April, 2015).

As we have seen in the literature review, one of the main challenges of this kind of project is the reluctance of some Instructors to integrate digital tools and sources in their teaching strategies. The Spanish section of UWI was not an exception. After the online course experience, the digital challenge is perceived as: "Writing emails, uploading pictures, doing screenshots... Nothing done in this module should be beyond the capabilities of a member of a tertiary education institution" (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). It also seems reasonable to expect that all members of staff at the Institution get familiar with the myeLearning (Moodle) platform which is used at the University: "Besides the external tools, this module has forced me to know the ropes of myeLearning" (Instructors meeting, April, 2015). Therefore, the online course experience has improved the digital culture among both students and Instructors. It has also helped them to overcome any reluctance to technology.

## **5. Conclusions**

The Spanish Language section of UWI decided to modify the programme from the existing face-to-face modality only to a blended learning programme by delivering online the Reading Comprehension and Writing module. The data gathered in this study suggest that the online course implementation project proved efficient for improving the academic quality, having more advantages than disadvantages at the teaching and learning level, according to both students' and Instructors' opinions.

- The following challenges must be taken into account in future applications of the online course:
- One of these is finding a balanced and fair workload with other modules of the course by reducing either the number or the length of course activities.
- Future course Instructors need to better inform both students and other teachers about the benefits of blended learning in our programme, which allows students to acquire digital literacy.
- It will also be essential to establish a working agenda for the Instructors that allows them to provide consistent feedback, as this task is perceived as necessary for students.

This study did not aim to investigate the influence that online delivery had in the acquisition of written skills. Further research on this area is necessary so as to find out whether or not there is evidence of superior results in the written skills of the students who participate in the module.

Nevertheless, several advantages were identified that concern the academic quality of the programme. This module proved to enhance teaching, learning and student development experiences as well as the commitment of students to this programme by:

- Increasing students' motivation because of the diversity of activities and different roles that students have in online learning. In addition, their participation in the course is not limited solely to attendance but to the intervention in forums. This promotes the modality of active learning.
- Granting students access to more resources in more realistic contexts that facilitate the learning process and allows the realistic practice. This makes the student more communicative, which is a fundamental aspect in teaching and learning foreign languages.
- Creating flexibility in the learning process that encourages autonomy, inviting students to create their own work schedule as they carried out the weekly 'tareas' and engaged with the various class activities.
- Increasing written interaction not only among students but also between students and teachers, thereby reinforcing staff-student contact.

- Facilitating student acquisition of necessary digital skills for success in a modern workplace. This is a fundamental attribute of the distinctive UWI graduate.

Perhaps the greatest advantage identified in the online delivery module is the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of students' writing skills which improves their overall academic quality.

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