Rethinking the Learning of Reading Comprehension and Writing Skills of University Students in the Teaching of Spanish: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Writing well in a foreign language (FL) is no easy feat because it demands a higher level of skill and competency. Oftentimes students cite continuous errors in writing as a challenge and indicate that the discouraging impact of continuously making mistakes and the very real struggle to figure out which words to use for correct expression impacts their motivation. This article reflects on the move to a blended program of study for Reading Comprehension and Writing Spanish among final year university students. The study's central purpose is to address students' lack of motivation in reading and writing in the foreign language and to propose some solutions to increasing reading and writing ability among the students through the asynchronous module. Key objectives for the study include a close reflection on the tasks assigned to the students and the level of motivation among students in performing the reading/writing assignments. The study is an exploratory one as it seeks to determine possible best practice in reading comprehension and writing classes at the university level. Undoubtedly, the 21st century learner must be critical in ICT as globally, current trends in education demand the integration of ICT in all curricula; an idea much reinforced following the COVID 19 pandemic. Overall, the study found the asynchronous module to be quite effective in teaching reading comprehension as well as in the practice of writing. However, interactivity is key to student motivation and overall success as much as the use of socially-relevant topics in the global and regional contexts.

Key-words: motivation; foreign language learning; teaching reading; comprehension; writing online; ICT.

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1. Introduction

Writing well in a foreign language (FL) demands a higher level of skill and competency. Additionally, students cite continuous errors in writing as a challenge to writing practice as well as the very real struggle to determine the correct word/s usage. In many of my Hispanic literature classes for example, students continuously indicate that they do not feel adequately equipped in terms of their FL writing skills both to express themselves in the ways in which they would want to and of course in a way so as to receive high grades. Ironically, at the same time, writing is a skill which substantially improves with continued practice and with extensive reading. These are clearly two skills which draw upon similar knowledge bases.

The lack of student motivation to write and/or engage in writing activities, especially in a foreign language, is well documented. (Widdowson, 1983) Moreover, in today's online culture, with blogs, tweets and social media posts, academic writing is oftentimes seen as old-fashioned or worse, archaic. The tedium associated with it is clearly perceived as antithetical to the instantaneous benefits of casual writing, so normative for online success. At the same time, to remain cost-effective, competitive and pedagogically sound, University programs today must ensure online programming and the University of the West Indies (UWI) St. Augustine, is no exception to this logic. One basic assumption made in the writing of this paper is that boredom, especially in relation to the FL reading comprehension and writing classroom is a factor of importance; first because over the years in course surveys, students have self-reported this issue together with the notion that they are mainly interested in just passing the course. Thus, taking Paulo Freire's (2005) concept of "problem-posing education" which has as its base the concept of fostering critical thinking, the idea for this study was born. That is, the use of socially relevant topics as a way of alleviating not only the boredom but also the complicated issue of the lack of motivation among students in the FL reading comprehension and writing module. In addition, it was felt that these topics would spur student interest and thus also address the issue of increased linguistic strategies through specific, intensive readings. Thus, the study's central purpose is: to gain an understanding of the reasons surrounding the lack of motivation among final year students of writing in the Spanish degree program at the UWI, St. Augustine and to discover and propose some solutions to increasing their reading and writing ability.

2. Background

Much of the research conducted to date on language learning strategies are descriptive (Oxford, 2011). However, the use of technology in FL teaching is increasing. The Spanish language undergraduate degree program at the

UWI, St Augustine campus is indexed against the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The students in the final year of the program are expected to attain a C1 level. For the program, Spanish is taught in three modules; Reading Comprehension and Writing, Listening Comprehension and Conversation and Communicative Grammar. In the final year of the program, students read two semester-long courses SPAN 3001 - Spanish Language IIIA and SPAN 3002 - Spanish Language IIIB. The Spanish Reading Comprehension and Writing module is two hours in length on all three levels of the degree program. All of the modules are delivered in small group sessions (tutorial style) with approximately fifteen (15) students in each class. At the introductory level (first year), the module was taught online for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years with limited success. (Arrieta et al, 2016) In the main, students felt the workload between this module and the other two modules was not balanced.

Until 2016-2017, Reading Comprehension and Writing was taught only as a face-to-face module for students in the final year of the degree program. However, in the main because of their advanced level, the program Lecturers took the decision to move to teach the module online to students in the third year, that is, the final year of the BA in Spanish degree program rather than in the first year of the program. It was felt that in keeping with the UWI's *Triple A Strategic Plan 2017-2022: Revitalising Caribbean Development* (2017) which continues to list "IT skilled and information literate" as one of the seven (7) key attributes of the ideal UWI graduate, the final year students of the program would most benefit from a Reading Comprehension and Writing module taught asynchronously online. Indeed, it can hardly be disputed that the 21st century learner must be critical in ICT as globally, current trends in education demand the integration of ICT in all curricula. This innovation was necessary not simply because of the inclusion of digital literacy in the Spanish program but also because the Spanish program needed to address the issue of lack of motivation and decreased levels of reading and writing among students in the face-to-face class sessions. Overall, the paper also attempts to assess the success of that online module and make recommendations for the future of the programming for the final year of the Spanish degree program at the UWI, St. Augustine.

3. Methodology

Over the academic year 2017-2018, final year students of Spanish of the course SPAN 3002 - Spanish Language IIIB in the Reading and Writing module were surveyed via questionnaire to determine their attitudes toward writing in Spanish. The same survey was repeated to a second cohort of students from the 2018-2019 academic year and the results were compared. For this paper, the responses from the surveys were used to formulate a

perspective regarding the development of these FL students' motivation to write. The study did not track the number of hours or pages read by individual students. Indeed, it assumed the completion of all reading tasks by the individual students as assigned by the Lecturers of the course. In essence, the aim of this research was exploratory: to describe the module as well as the assignments and to evaluate/assess if the FL writing among final year students at the UWI. St Augustine is best served in the asynchronous online format especially given that the Spanish section signals as one of its program goals the production of students who are able to effectively communicate in the L2 both orally and in writing and who are confident in the use of a variety of digital tools. In addition, given the online aspect of the module, the use of new technologies were assessed to further unpack if student progress in FL writing is linked in any ways to their levels of digital literacy. In essence, this project can be viewed as innovative for two reasons; first it seeks to increase the motivation in reading in Spanish among final year University students in a Caribbean context through the use of socially relevant topics and thus to increase their writing output but also, a second innovation is the focus on digital literacy through the asynchronous online mode to teaching.

Referencing Kellner (2012), Kaume-Mwinzi points out that when twenty-first century teaching is taking place "learners should be excited by flexible, open-ended, project-based and real-world learning situations that not only teach content skills but that also instill curiosity- fundamental to lifelong learning. They should develop communication and teamwork skills and should appreciate the freedom and responsibility that comes from taking charge of their own learning." (p. 81) In the main, it is this learner-centered teaching approach which is at the core of programming in Spanish in the department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at the UWI St Augustine. The students are seen to be at the very center of the learning experience and student learning is measured through both formal and informal forms of assessment including 'forums,' 'quizzes' and 'tareas' [an extended semester-long written assignment]. The weekly exercises seek to ensure both student participation as well as a continuous measuring of student practice and learning.

Participants for the study were final year students who were majors in Spanish at the undergraduate level. The students were from two cohorts; one in the 2017-2018 academic year and one in the 2018-2019 academic year. The first group of students comprised n=34 and the second n=32. Group one was comprised of more females (n=22) than males (n=12) while group two was similarly composed, that is n=24 females and n=8 males. This gender imparity is not surprising as the majority of students pursuing the degree in Spanish at St Augustine are female. Following the findings of a 2016 survey where students felt to be digital natives (Prensky, 2001) admitted to being wary of online learning, citing issues from the unreliability of internet (wireless)

supply to a lack of computer skills (familiarity only with the smart phone), it was nevertheless decided that the online course would be offered in the final year given the expected level of maturity among final year students. Indeed, as Leu et al (2011) point out: "it is clear that skill with the new literacies of the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) will become an important determinant of an engaged life in an online age." (p. 5) In group one, a total of n=13 students responded to the survey while n=18 responded in group two.

For both academic years (2017-2018 and 2018-2019), the modules were taught using the Moodle platform (adapted at the UWI, St Augustine as myeLearning). The course page was populated at the start of the semester with all reading material and assessments. Because the module was taught in an asynchronous manner, it relied on cooperative learning as its mainstay with the teacher's role being mainly one of coaching so as to guide students through the wealth of material presented in the course and to provide feedback on the written exercises and review student progress. Students were expected to embrace autonomy, hands-on and independent learning. Specific to the Trinidadian context, Mideros (2016) argues that this may be problematic as "students reproduce practices that have been culturally constructed and conceptualized as normal in their previous lived experiences" (p. 222) and the reality is that Trinidad and Tobago remains largely an examination-driven culture. Nevertheless, technology has made it possible for all students to access abundant information and to be/come more flexible. Over the twelve weeks of the semester, the modules' exercises centered around the themes of 'Narcotrafficking' (3 weeks), 'Gender, Women and Sexuality' (3 weeks). 'Art' (3 weeks) and 'Ethics' (2 weeks). Student assignments are detailed in Table 1 below:

Week	Reading topics & Writing Assignments
Week 1	Pre-reading reflection
	Reading material: "Narcotráfico" article
	Reading Comprehension (Group activity)
	Forum: Personal opinion commentary
Week 2	Pre-reading reflection
	Reading material: "Narco arte" article
	Reading Comprehension (Individual activity)
	Forum: Debate on Narco Art
	Group activity: Invent a new narco-related tendency (art, music, food)
Week 3	Choice of an article (Individual)
	Forum: Discussion on how to write a review
	Assignment: Write a review of the chosen article
Week 4	Reading material: Gender, Women and Sexuality (Carnival in Trinidad)
Week 5	Reading material: "La pluma violeta" article
	Reading Comprehension (Individual activity)

	Forum: Discussion on topic "It's better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission"
Week 6	Reading material: Gender, Women and Sexuality Reading Comprehension (Individual activity) Forum: Discussion on the topic "Machismo and Misogyny: The music of Maluma."
Week 7	Reading material: El arte Assignment: Art critique Forum: Open discussion on topic of choice
Week 8	Reading material: El arte Wiki: Reading Comprehension Forum: Discussion on the topic "Which door would you choose?"
Week 9	Assignment: Critical commentary on the video "Picasso Baby" by JayZ.
Week 10	Reading material: Ethics Forum: Discussion on the formation of values: Caricatures and other forms of social commentary.
Week 11	Reading material: Ethics Forum: Discussion on Bioethics
Week 12	Submission of Tarea Final (Writing exercise of 700-750 words)

Table 1. Assignments. Source: Own elaboration

Since reading comprehension is an interactive process, but also because the module is online and fully asynchronous, students were encouraged to generate their own comments, to answer questions posed in the fora and to not see the course in the traditional light of the teacher providing questions and the students giving the 'right' or the 'wrong' responses. Indeed, Nuttall (1996) argues that students linking their prior knowledge to new information in a text helps them to develop their level of comprehension. Essentially teaching reading comprehension cannot exclude the other skills. However, central to our concern in this module was to ensure that students read effectively and could then integrate reading with writing for example in their short comments made in the fora or in the summaries produced for the course. (Nuttall 1996)

4. Analysis and Discussion

In terms of the assignments for the course, in the main these were devised and assigned by the Lecturers. However, in week 3, students were given a choice to research and choose an article and then write a review of the chosen article and in week 7, they were asked to write a forum entry on a topic of their choice within the theme. Student responses to the questionnaire suggested several areas of commonality which were the motivational factor, an increase in reading, and by extension reading comprehension, an increment in thinking directly in the FL and digital literacy. Not surprisingly grammatical errors continued to be of concern for many and increasing online skills for a few. Overall students did indicate an appreciation for the online

module and the asynchronous setting which allowed then to set their own pace.

4.1. Motivation

For many of the students in the project, reading is normally carried out online to research and to get information before writing. However, of itself, the act of reading in Spanish was not seen as particularly motivational. Most (n=26) pointed out that for them, motivation came from the topics of the course. As Robert F indicated: "I quite like to write and to read but for me the topic is what most motivates me. The 'foros' were tedious, but in my group, we had differing and different perspectives for some of the topics and that was great" (Group 2) This student clearly demonstrates what Ferhan (1999) argued, which is, that top-down processing is more effective because the prior knowledge of the reader is deemed to be important.

4.2 On becoming a reader

Overall, very few students (n=3) indicated an initial feeling that the online class forced them to read a lot more. However, others said that it forced them to read more widely albeit not necessarily on topics of interest. No real enthusiasm was displayed for reading with the exception of one student who indicated an absolute love for reading. Interestingly, some students (n=7) specifically indicated that they had done or had felt the need to do additional readings however these were mainly on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and one student indicating the use of www.rtve.es. No student indicated the desire to carry out additional writings in Spanish outside of the assignments for the module. This finding lent support to one instructional change as the Lecturers reflected on the future of the course; they decided that for the 2019-2020 course, they would add in to the final 'tarea' student research to identify and read one expert so as to be able to cite on the topic for the 'tarea' as well as one oppositional critic on the topic.

4.3. Looking at mistakes as learning opportunities

Mistakes are inevitable so not letting them discourage was the focus of the "foro." It helped students to be comfortable with expressing their ideas without centering on grammatical errors. Some agreed that it also helped them to identify the areas in which more practice was needed. Accordingly, Chaudron (1988) agrees that this free flow of communication can help to reinforce motivation and thereby serve a greater overall goal than merely correcting grammatical errors which oftentimes remains ineffective. Indeed, as evidenced by this student Alice M (Group one) who said: "I changed my process for reading in Spanish. Now I read every day and I think more about the speed of my reading, the way I read and my global understanding of the text instead of constantly stopping to check the meaning of every word I don't

know." Of course, this type of practice does not address the student who easily becomes anxious if s/he does not understand a word or phrase and there is no denying that further research would be needed on such students as well as on ways to alleviate their anxiety. But there can be no denying that the online forum removes the pressure of performance that a face-to-face class demands.

4.4. Thinking in the Foreign Language (FL)

Some students pointed out that in the face-to-face class setting, especially if put on the spot or called out to answer a question, the easiest thing to do was to try to directly translate the English thought as it came to mind. However, one aspect that this project revealed is that in the weekly forum, students indicated that translation is avoided and this is mostly because they felt that they had the time to think sufficiently, to not rush to give a response. The time needed to process the thoughts on the specific topic was there and then to transfer them to the page making it easier to read the question (or idea) in Spanish, to think more calmly in Spanish and to post a response in Spanish. The following is an example of a forum post on the topic of immigration in Trinidad and Tobago by one student (Group 2):
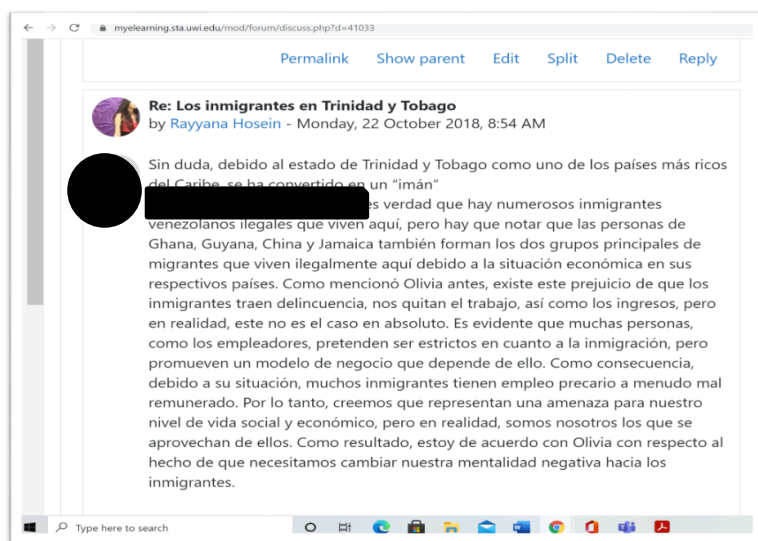

Figure 1. Forum post 'Los inmigrantes en Trinidad y Tobago'

By its length, this forum post (Figure 1) shows clearly that this student found the topic to be stimulating. Moreover, we should consider that the student's response is a reflection on three ideas which had been circulating in the forum post, that of the Venezuelans making up only a small part of the total migrant and refugee population across the country, the reason for the influx of migrants to Trinidad, that is the significant economic prosperity of

the country and the negative aspects associated with the migrants such as the surge in criminal activity. The post ends with a sense of introspection as the student queries the precarious nature of life for the migrants and the general exploitation which they suffer at the hands of Trinidadians. This was a local topic but also one which connected to a much larger global issue. Notably, second language performance was valued above all else in the posts to the forum. However, if glaring grammatical mistakes were made in a posting, then they were corrected, but smaller errors which did not impede comprehension of the message (as is the case in this posting) were simply left. Students were constantly encouraged to post or to react to posts as clearly and as succinctly as possibly in the L2 and this appears to have been enthusiastically embraced.

4.5. Challenging and engaging ways to using digital resources

We have already pointed out that for some students the topics were engaging. However, for some students (n=6) the interactive nature of the module as well as the variety of media used (You Tube videos, online articles, newspaper articles and blogs) was also a positive source of engagement.

Figure 2. Foro

For example, the above screen shot (Figure 2) is taken from the course (2017-2018) myeLearning page. In this particular forum which was used in week 8, students were asked to look at a short video clip presenting a controversy which broke out surrounding an art expo. Students had to discuss and explain their particular choice given the circumstances which were as follow: At a museum, attendees of the art exposition were given two options: to enter through the main door however, they would have to pass through (in between) two nude persons facing forwards (one male and one female), the subjects were close enough to force someone entering to brush up against the

two nude persons and face one of them; or attendees could enter the exhibition through a small, hidden-away, side entrance. This forum received lengthy posts. For example, this student Stephen D. describes the main door entry as his choice indicating that it is "the only logical option" given that art is subjective. He also raises the concern of sexuality:
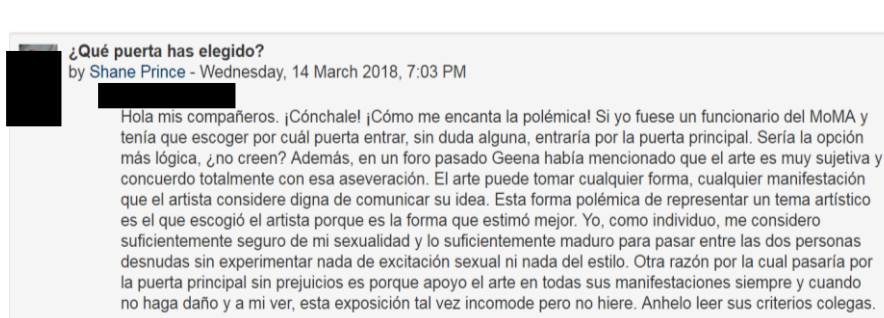

¿Qué puerta has elegido?
by Shane Prince - Wednesday, 14 March 2018, 7:03 PM

Hola mis compañeros. ¡Cónchale! ¡Cómo me encanta la polémica! Si yo fuese un funcionario del MoMA y tenía que escoger por cuál puerta entrar, sin duda alguna, entraría por la puerta principal. Sería la opción más lógica, ¿no creen? Además, en un foro pasado Geena había mencionado que el arte es muy sujetiva y concuerdo totalmente con esa aseveración. El arte puede tomar cualquier forma, cualquier manifestación que el artista considere digna de comunicar su idea. Esta forma polémica de representar un tema artístico es el que escogió el artista porque es la forma que estimó mejor. Yo, como individuo, me considero suficientemente seguro de mi sexualidad y lo suficientemente maduro para pasar entre las dos personas desnudas sin experimentar nada de excitación sexual ni nada del estilo. Otra razón por la cual pasaría por la puerta principal sin prejuicios es porque apoyo el arte en todas sus manifestaciones siempre y cuando no haga daño y a mi ver, esta exposición tal vez incomode pero no hiere. Anhelo leer sus criterios colegas.

Figure 3. FORO entry ¿Qué puerta has elegido?

What is striking with this forum entry (Figure 3) is the perception that 'contemporary art' allows for all/any representations but the student also raises the issue of sexuality which was not part of this discussion but, given the nude subjects at the entrance to the exposition, forces a comment. His ability to easily converse on these topics signals a certain level of mastery in the language. Indeed, the language which he uses is informal, grammatically sound and at the same time quite effective.

4.6. Digital Literacy

No students indicated problems with the use of technology for the course. All students indicated that they had possession of a smart phone, as well as access to a tablet or laptop together with internet connectivity for the module. The ease of writing was also facilitated because the course provided them with links to access information to which they may not have been privy. For example, how to change to a Spanish keyboard or the use of shortcut keys for accents (on the English keyboard), as well as explanatory videos for assignments. No students complained of a lack of typing skills. One additional factor with relevant implications for digital literacy is that students who normally complain about group work, were able to share comments, thoughts, ideas with others through the forum, or a Google docs page shared on myeLearning thus creating a sort of innate ecosystem for sharing, discussing, cross talking and ultimately practicing the kind of collaborative sharing so necessary in today's world of work.

All of the students who responded (n=34 and n=32) indicated the maintaining of the online module for the final year Reading Comprehension and Writing Module for the course. Overall, the issue of time was a central

concern but in a positive manner. One student Peter S (Group two) said: "It gave me autonomy but most importantly it gave me the time to read and write wherever I wanted. So, I could use the journey home in the maxi [a route taxi in Trinidad and Tobago] to read the assignment or to read the article and even begin a response or to do the response at home later."

5. Conclusions

The present study supports the notion that reading comprehension and writing interlock. In this particular context, that is, a study of final year students in a Caribbean university setting, it is clear that one way by which students can improve their reading comprehension is strategy instruction. In this study, the effect of the use of socially relevant topics was investigated and students were found to particularly enjoy the contemporary aspect of the topics as well as the timeliness of their social relevance. For example, immigration was a topic with significant impact given that Trinidad and Tobago continues to receive an influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees, due to the situation with its very porous borders as well as the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, a mere 11 kilometers away.

It is clear that for FL writing, practice is the key. And this is exactly what students managed to do in the forum as well as the extended 'tarea final'. What was more important than the brevity of the writings was the fact that in every week of the semester students were writing something in Spanish. Also, with the online module, students get the additional bonus of the development of skills such as word-processing, conducting research, collaboration in teams and of course the use of digital technologies in the construction and presentation of their work. The reading comprehension and writing module online at the final level of the degree program was a success with 100% of the students (n=34 and n=32) indicating a desire to continue this module online due to its flexibility and ease. Clearly though, an innovation should not be maintained simply because it affords students a greater ability to manage their time. Nevertheless, this aspect cannot be ignored as it represents a common challenge among many of our students at the St Augustine campus.

To underscore its real-world usefulness, it is as Leu et al. (2011) indicate: "Individuals, groups, and societies who can identify the most important problems, locate useful information the fastest, critically evaluate information most effectively, synthesize information most appropriately to develop the best solutions, and then communicate these solutions to others most clearly will succeed in the challenging times that await us." (p. 5) Interestingly what Leu et al (2011) could not predict was the Covid-19 pandemic of March 2020. And when the pandemic hit, the Spanish program was well placed. Students in the Spanish degree program had already indicated their acceptance of this potential as they resoundingly recognized

the need for the inclusion of online reading and writing as a central element to their degree major. This article described the results of a small study. Online reading and the use of the internet for research are clearly demonstrated in the writing produced by the students and this is admirable. What remains clear is that the students must continue to be prepared academically for the online age of information and in this the Spanish program at the UWI must continue to demand ICT competence as an important module of the curriculum.

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