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A Comparison of the Issues affecting the Development of Conversational Skills in Spanish (foreign language) between the level 1 and 2 Undergraduate Students of the UWI St. Augustine.
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A Comparison of the Issues affecting the Development of Conversational Skills in Spanish (foreign language) between the level 1 and 2 Undergraduate Students of the UWI St. Augustine.

ABSTRACT

This study's objective is to aid Spanish foreign language teachers in helping their students of different levels improve their development of Spanish conversational skills by understanding the many problems the students face. The study aims at finding these problems that hinder conversational skills in Spanish as a foreign language and also the areas that are influenced due to these problems. To find these problems, three focus groups were conducted to gain some insight on the various problems faced by the students. This exercise consisted of twelve participants each at the UWI St. Augustine campus, Trinidad and Tobago. From the answers of the focus groups, a questionnaire was developed and given out to a sum of sixty level-one and level-two participants. The results showed that the level-one students undergo more affective factors of lack of confidence, anxiety and nervousness and intimidation while the level-two students have more of a linguistic issues, in particular with grammar, like verb conjugation, using the subjunctive mood and formulating sentences (cognitive competence).
INTRODUCTION

At the University of the West Indies St. Augustine campus, studying a language is quite interactive. The language courses include various components including grammar, reading, writing, listening and of course speaking or conversation. In this study, the focus is on the conversation component of the Spanish language. Students are given videos on specific topics beforehand to stimulate ideas and opinions so that they may be able to have fruitful conversations with natives and their local peers in the classroom. It is expected that through this method, their conversational skills will be developed so that they may reach near native speaker competence in Spanish at a conversational level.

It is necessary to define conversational skills as it does not simply consists of being able to understand what is said by one participant and agreeing or disagreeing, but also to contribute significantly to the topic being discussed. In short, according to bloggers Hugh Dubberly and Paul Pangaro (2009), “Conversation is a progression of exchanges among participants. Each participant is a “learning system,”... . This highly complex type of interaction is also quite powerful, for conversation is the means by which existing knowledge is conveyed and new knowledge is generated.” Therefore, to have well developed conversational skills one must be able to contribute and receive some sort of new information. It is a two-way street of giving and taking information so that both parties gain and learn. In order for this to occur, both parties must commit to engage, add meaning, evolve, agree and disagree, and most importantly learn from the topic being conversed.

On the contrary, this skill is not as easy as it seems when learning a foreign language. In Spanish, there are many factors which may hinder the development of these skills. According
to Judith Johnston, PhD of the University of British Columbia, Canada (2010), “the course of language development reflects the interplay of factors in at least five domains: social, perceptual, cognitive processing, conceptual and linguistic.” Therefore in the language learning process of Spanish as a foreign language, students may experience problems in these areas and thus these students may be unable to carry on a conversation or unsure of themselves. As a consequence, they may not participate in the conversation by adding, they may only be receiving information. Thus, this hinders the development of their conversational skills in Spanish. However, with more encouragement, guidance and self-confidence, they may be able to overcome these factors and excel in conversational skills.

On the other hand, it is a known fact among the university lecturers and the students that the conversation component (which may be the most important one of Spanish) has been ignored in the beginning of the learning process. In the secondary schools, local persons, though well qualified, are the Spanish teachers who are responsible for giving the students a solid foundation of all the components (grammar, reading, writing, listening and speaking) in Spanish. However, the reality is that these secondary school teachers only concentrate on preparing the students for examinations instead of being able to function in the Spanish-speaking world on a day to day basis. For oral examinations, there are a prepared set of questions which students are given answers to learn. This is the closest a secondary school student gets to conversation. Therefore, when they enter university and are expected to be able to maintain a basic conversation, students are stuck and are unable to function well in a Spanish conversation and so they always revert to English. Thus, students face many problems and consequences in their conversations due to lack of experience and practice in this component. As a consequence, in order to try and change this fact, students are forced to
Rationale
Firstly, this topic was chosen as I, myself, experience problems in conversation and so it was of great interest to me to find out if other students had or are having the same problems which hinder the development of conversational skills. This component is usually an overlooked area at secondary school level especially which persons take for granted. To explain, people tend to think that once a Spanish learner can write and read well and knows vocabulary, then he or she can automatically and easily have a conversation in Spanish. However, this is not the case in reality as spoken Spanish is very much different to written Spanish. Thus, those persons who do not study the language are unaware of this and also those who have mastered the language (like teachers, lecturers and professors) tend to forget about this very challenging period. Also, as mentioned before, from the beginning of learning Spanish, teachers tend to ignore the component of conversation. Therefore, due to these reasons, I chose to examine the factors hindering the development of conversational skills so that these issues can be resolved and mastering conversation in Spanish may become easier.

Objective
Due to the fact that there is not much research done on the problems faced in Spanish conversation both inside and outside the classroom in the UWI St. Augustine context, I would like to contribute to the existing research on this area. Additionally, I hope to aid in the improvement of teaching, especially in the area of conversation, so that students’ problems are reduced and they may be able to improve their learning by being able to overcome common problems faced in Spanish conversation and so develop their skills. This research is
done from a student’s perspective and in this way, I hope teachers may be able to understand what students face in Spanish conversation so that they can change teaching styles or simply be able to coach students better.

Research Questions
In order to focus my research, I have narrowed it down to two questions with which I would use to collect data. These questions are the following:

1. What are the problems influencing conversational skills?
2. How have these problems influenced students’ development/progress of conversational skills?

Methodology
Participants

The participants of this research were the level-one and level-two undergraduate Spanish language students at the UWI (see Figure 1). The total number of participants of level one was 34 with 28 females (82.4%) and 6 males (17.6%) who were at an average age of 19.5 years. The level two participants included a total of 26 students in which 20 (76.9%) were females and 6 (23.1%) were males at an average age of 21.2 years old. The majority of these students are Trinidadians with a few exceptions of 4 students being from Belgium, Canada, St. Vincent and Antigua respectively. The majority of these students have had the experience and exposure to Spanish as a foreign language in secondary school, thus making the average years of experience in the language 7 years for level-one students and 8 years for level-two students.
Focus Groups

In order to collect data for the research, a questionnaire was needed. However, it was necessary to conduct focus group sessions so that specific areas could be understood about the participants’ conversational skills and their experience with that area in Spanish as a foreign language. Therefore, together with the guidance of my supervisor, a compilation of questions were prepared with the purpose of gaining a better insight about the level-one and level-two participants. Some of these questions included (see Appendix 1 for the entire list):

- How was CSEC Spanish? and CAPE? What about the teaching of conversational skills or speaking skills at CAPE Spanish?
- What are the main problems (strengths and weaknesses) do you think you have in conversation?
- Do you encounter these problems both inside and outside of the classroom?
- In terms of conversation classes, can you identify any factors/issues that may hinder the development of your conversational skills?

- Compare the different problems you face when you are engaged in a conversation both inside and outside of the classroom.

Altogether three focus groups were conducted. The first session was a pilot session. The participants for this first focus group were chosen at convenience as everyone had different schedules and it was difficult to find common times. There were 9 participants of level two. This session was recorded and the answers were analyzed. Questions were revised after the first session. After this process, two focus groups were conducted; one of level-one students and the other of level-two students, with each group having twelve participants. These participants were chosen at random and the sessions were conducted at the beginning of their conversation classes (during the first 15 minutes). These two sessions were conducted on separate days. From the answers that were analysed by both myself and my co-researcher/supervisor to ensure inter-coder reliability of the data collected. We received answers such as:

- CSEC Spanish was about rehearsed conversation.

- CAPE Spanish had no conversation classes, and even though classes were conducted in Spanish, the students spoke in English.

- Some problems faced were lack of practice, problems with Spanish grammar and lack of confidence which affected spontaneity in speech production.

- Conversation outside of the classroom is more relaxed while conversation inside the classroom has a lot of pressure.

Therefore due to these answers and experiences shared by the focus group participants, the questionnaire was formulated based on the problems these students have encountered.
The questionnaire

The questionnaire was created based on the answers received from the focus groups. This questionnaire consisted of a total of eleven questions. The first section of the questionnaire was used to gather biodata information such as nationality, age, sex and experience in Spanish. The second section focused on the practice of Spanish, problems encountered in Spanish conversation, impact on Spanish real-time speech production. The third part of the questionnaire inquired on feedback from lecturers, participation and performance in Spanish, and recommendations on the conduct of classes in the UWI (see Appendix 2 for questionnaire). The questionnaire was anonymous and participants were informed that all information provided will be kept confidential.

This questionnaire was given out to all the students present in level one and in level two Spanish classes who were present on the respective days. A total of 34 level-one students and 26 level-two students participated in the questionnaire with a mixture of females and males. All of the questionnaires were handed out and collected on the conversation class day for level-one and level-two students respectively.

Data Analysis

In order to make data coding more precise, a copy of the questionnaire was created online and all of the data which was filled out manually and collected manually was then entered into the online copy. This then automatically created a spreadsheet of all the findings. After which, questions were chosen to be created into graphs for the display of the findings. The graphs were thoroughly analyzed and edited with the aim of visual stimulation of color, shape and size in mind. These graphs were then ready for data presentation.
Chapter one reviews previous research on the various types of problems faced in foreign language conversation while chapter two focuses on the presentation of data from this research and the various problems experienced in foreign language conversation and identified by the sample population, in light of previous research carried out in the context of foreign language conversation, an interpretation of findings of this study is the focus of the discussion chapter.
CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of studies seemed to concentrate on fluency as a goal of language learners (Nation and Newton, 2009) while others investigated the problems which foreign language students experience in conversation (Tuan and Mai, 2015). These studies indicated mostly affective factors as the main issue in hindering conversational development and some say it is due to linguistic factors like vocabulary (Marsden and David, 2008). All these problems affected fluency which is the ultimate goal of a language learner as these studies suggested.

General Overview of Factors

Foreign language students may pass examinations but according to Tuan and Mai (2015), they also stated that a person studying a foreign language for many years may very well have a low proficiency in terms of fluency and accuracy. The problems that Tuan and Mai found among the students of their study included lack of topical knowledge, pressure to speak under examination conditions, lack of confidence, lack of participation in class, very little preparation time, problems translating especially with the structure and vocabulary of English.

Nation and Newton (2009) think that listening skills aid in fluent speech and Marsden and David suggest a vast range of vocabulary aids in fluency. However, Derakhshan, Khalili and Beheshti (2016) believe that ability, accuracy and fluency can be developed by mainly practice and participation. In their view, they did mention that vocabulary can be built by listening as stated by Nation and Newton above and thus with new vocabulary, fluency can
be attained as stated by Marsden and David. Additionally, Derakhshan, Khalili and Beheshti (2016) stated that some factors which affect speaking competence include affective factors (nervousness, self-confidence, self-efficacy); linguistic factors (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary); and cognitive competence (conceptualization, formulation and articulation).

Affective factors

The issue of affective factors which may play a role in hindering the development of conversational skills, Park and Lee (2005) discussed that anxiety, self-confidence are major factors in conversation development among Korean college students of English conversation classes. The results showed that the higher the students’ anxiety, the lower were their conversation test results. Also, the higher their confidence was, the higher the test results. Therefore showing that these affective factors have a very high effect on a language learner's conversation performance.

A study done on English language learning in a university in Bangladesh India that examines the psychological factor of ‘Lack of confidence’ which was found to be a major barrier that affects the oral performance of the university level adult learners mostly (Jamila, 2014, page 1). She states that these students more than often have very timid personalities and are very much concerned by the way others judge them and their capabilities. Thus, teachers suggested that they take a more positive approach to the oral component (conversation) of language learning and overcome these fears as speaking is an essential part of everyday life.

Another study concentrated on participation in the foreign language classes which is very important in overcoming all the issues discovered by researchers. Of course, if one participates, one gains practice and corrections on mistakes so that they can improve but the
reality is that there are many causes for low class participation. A study, done by Abebe and Deneke in Ethiopia (2015) with English (as a foreign language) students in a range of Universities, found that students choose not to participate as they fear making mistakes, fear of embarrassment by the teacher, having negative traits in their teacher, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, lack of vocabulary, grammar, lack of fluency and lack of practice.

Linguistic Factors

In order to master fluency in a language one must be competent in four key components: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These components, if mastered, may ensure fluency in the second or foreign language, as Nation and Newton have pointed out “If unknown vocabulary is involved, then it is not a fluency activity…[Gaining fluency means] time out from learning new items and time for getting good at what is already known.” (2009, page 9). They also stated that it is very important that the skill of listening is mastered for conversation to be fruitful and meaningful. However, it is unfortunate that this listening component has been overlooked many a times and taken for granted (Nation and Newton, 2009) as it helps learners build up information about the language and how it is used in certain contexts.

One main area of learning a language is mastering vocabulary. It is often associated with one’s foreign language ability (Marsden and David, 2008, 181-198). However, assessing vocabulary deals with receptive knowledge as opposed to productive competence but at the same time a language learner lexical knowledge (vocabulary) is important when assessing spontaneous conversation as one’s fluency is affected by the learner’s second language lexicon. The study consisted of English speakers: forty French and forty Spanish learners who vocabulary use and fluency in speaking the language were assessed. The results showed
that learners produced more nouns and verbs as opposed to other word classes. It did not affect fluency as much as it affected the quality of language produced.

Donaldson (2011) states that, “the issue remains that students are being taught standard, written language spoken aloud, rather than being taught actual native speaker norms of conversation.’ However, due to globalization, persons are expected to speak with native speakers of the language they study, therefore fluency becomes a necessity. The issue remains that instructors teach learners that written grammar and spoken grammar are the same, when in fact spoken grammar appears to be much simpler in some cases, as it does not necessarily has to follow grammatical rules but pragmatics. Teachers do not include pragmatics which is important in social and cultural contexts; and also both teachers and students concentrate too much on textbooks which do not highlight spoken language skills therefore students lack conversational skills.

Cognitive factors

Cognition, in terms of grammatical knowledge and fluency, plays an important part in formulating utterances in a foreign language. One does not simply speak without some effort. A person must think and formulate and even translate in a foreign language what he/she is going to say. Dan I. Slobin (1991) did a study on a variety of languages, including Spanish and English, on their grammar and the influence their native grammar has on the foreign language which they aim to master. He stated that a child learns particular way of “thinking for speaking” and in this way it influences the mental activity (cognitive process) in formulating utterances (Slobin, 1991, page 6).

Many of these problems are experienced by the undergraduate Spanish (as a foreign language) student population. The following chapter demonstrates this with comparative tables and graphs between level one and level two Spanish conversation students. There, one
can see the different problems faced at the different levels as indicated by the students themselves.
CHAPTER 2 - FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data found from the questionnaire with aim of answering the research questions of the problems that influence Spanish foreign language conversation and also the areas in conversation that are influenced by these problems. There are also graphs that show the students' performance and frequency of participation in and out of the Spanish conversation classes, together with whether they find the Spanish conversation classes at the UWI helpful or not.

According to the findings, it can be seen that over 50% of the participants in each level experience five or more problems in conversation (see Table 2). Thus, showing that the development of conversational skills is truly a task.

1. What are the problems influencing conversational skills?

Table 2
Table of the problems faced by the level one and two students in conversation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Level 1 (%)</th>
<th>Level 2 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having to translate in your mind</td>
<td>64.71</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking in a foreign language</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>26.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td>58.82</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to conjugate verbs</td>
<td>67.65</td>
<td>61.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing the correct verb tense</td>
<td>67.65</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of ‘usted’ and ‘tú’</td>
<td>14.71</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>Level 1 (%)</td>
<td>Level 2 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure of speaking accurately</td>
<td>70.69</td>
<td>42.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidated by natives</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>34.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimidated by peers with a higher proficiency</td>
<td>58.82</td>
<td>34.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having peers who are at a lower proficiency and are not willing to</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>19.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>co-operate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulating complex sentences</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the subjunctive</td>
<td>44.12</td>
<td>57.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety or being nervous especially during exams</td>
<td>67.65</td>
<td>57.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge on the topics</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>15.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccurate feedback</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of practice in conversing in Spanish</td>
<td>44.12</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>61.76</td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion with other languages</td>
<td>26.47</td>
<td>19.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accents of native speakers</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching style</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nervousness when speaking</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The speech of speakers are very fast</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 indicates that the major problem faced by the level one students is pressure of speaking accurately (70.69%) (affective factor) while the level two students’ major problem is having to conjugate verbs (61.54%) (linguistic factor). Other popular problems among the level one students were the issues of having to conjugate verbs (67.65%), choosing the correct verb tense (67.65%) which are linguistics factors; having to translate in their minds (64.71%) which is a cognitive factor; anxiety or being nervous in exams (67.65%), lack of confidence (61.76%) and intimidation by peers (58.82%) which were mostly affective factors. On the other hand, popular problems of the level two students included choosing the correct verb (53.85%), lack of vocabulary (53.85%), formulating complex sentences (53.85%) and using the subjunctive (57.69%). Both groups found difficulty with understanding the accents of native speakers, 50% of the participants in each group while comprehension, confusion with other languages and teaching styles were all minor problems.

Figure 3. Chart showing the weekly frequency of Spanish conversation practice of each level of students.
Figure 3 indicates that most of the level one students practice every other day (38.24%) while most of the level two students practice every day (30.77%). Many other students practice once per week, 23.53% of level one and 19.23% of level two and twice per week 17.65% of level one and 19.23% of level two. Showing that majority of the students in both levels do practice often as less than 5% in both cases indicated hardly and no one said never.

Figure 4. This graph shows the percentage of the daily periods of time which the students of both levels practice Spanish conversation.

Figure 4 shows that the most level one students practice for only 5-10 minutes (29.41%) and even less than 5 minutes (23.53%) while the level two students indicated that they too practice for 5-10 minutes (34.62%) but also 11-20 minutes (30.77%). The minority indicated that they practice for very long periods of time such as 1-3 hours, 17.65% of level one and 15.38% of level two. Thus showing that majority of students of both levels do practice often but not for very long periods.
Figure 5. This figure includes 2 graphs: the top graph shows the frequency of participation in class of level one students while the bottom graph gives the same information but for level two students.

Figure 5 indicates that the majority of both levels participate quite frequent in their conversation classes: 41.18% of level one and 42.31% of level-two students participate often and 26.47% of level-one and 26.92% of level-two participate only a few times. It is interesting that the minorities were at the two extremes: all the time with 17.65% of level-one
and 23.08% of level two while 14.71% of level-one and 7.69% of level two said sometimes.
No one indicated that they never participate.

2. How have these problems affected students’ development/progress of conversational skills?

Table 6
This table shows the areas in conversation that are affected amongst level one and level-two students due to the problems experienced from Table 2. These areas are those that need to be mastered in order to have developed conversational skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affected Areas</th>
<th>Level 1 (%)</th>
<th>Level 2 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>88.24</td>
<td>80.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>46.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>61.76</td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of vocabulary</td>
<td>55.88</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rate of speech</td>
<td>61.76</td>
<td>42.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing thoughts and opinions clearly</td>
<td>61.76</td>
<td>53.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>26.47</td>
<td>30.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>38.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical terms</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6 indicates that the major affected area of both levels is that of fluency: 88.24% of level one and 80.77% of level-two students. Others areas that are also mainly affected are: accuracy, range of vocabulary and expressions, and spontaneity of both levels. Areas such as coherence, interaction, content and technical terms were in the minority.

Figure 7. This figure consists of 2 graphs that show Q8a which is rate of performance in the classroom versus Q9a which is rate of performance outside of the classroom. The top graph shows that of level-one and the bottom graph shows for level-two.
Figure 7 indicates that both level-one and level-two students think that their performance in and out of the conversation classroom is more or less the same with very little difference: normal 44.12% (Q8a) versus good 41.18% (Q9a) of level-one students and good 50% (Q8a) versus good 53.85% (Q9a) of level-two students.

Figure 8. This graph shows whether the undergraduate level one and level two students of the UWI think the conversation classes are useful in their development or not.

Figure 8 shows that the majority of the sample population agrees that the conversation classes are quite helpful. 91.18% of level one and 100% of level-two students yes that the classes are helpful while 8.82% indicated no.

These findings are further discussed in the following chapter where reasons and inferences are given concerning the major results of the findings in comparison with the researches from the literature review.
CHAPTER 3 - DISCUSSION

This chapter is divided into two parts based on the research questions. It answers the questions of the problems faced by the level-one and level-two undergraduate students of Spanish as a foreign language. It also describes the areas affected due to these problems they faced. Each question is answered with reference to the findings from the questionnaire and literature review of this study.

1. What are the problems influencing conversational skills?

Level One

Pressure to speak accurately: One of the main problems faced by the level one students is undergoing pressure to speak accurately (70.59%)(Table 2). This may be so as they have entered the university with little or no experience in conversation classes from their previous secondary schools. Thus, when they enter university, conversation classes are completely new to them and so due to lack of practice, they undergo a lot of stress to try to produce accurate and fluent Spanish. Similarly, Tuan and Mai (2015) found that the Vietnamese English students also complained of pressure to be able to deliver good performance while the teachers indicated that it is the students that do not practice and participate in class. In the context in which these students learn English differs from our context as it seems that Spanish students seem to show willingness to interact in the foreign language but they lack experience or practice in using conversational skills from the secondary school level.

Intimidation: The affective factor of being intimidated by native speakers (the teachers) and by peers of a higher proficiency was indicated by 47.06% and 58.82% (Table 2) respectively
of the level-one participants. It is true that the native Hispanic speaking teachers are amicable and approachable, however students will obviously be afraid to produce incorrect structures around them as Spanish is the first language of the teachers. Also, and even worse, if there are students who are more fluent in conversation and are able to express themselves well with little or no mistakes in their utterances, of course the other students will be afraid to speak especially if they are slower in their Spanish speech production. This lack of participation is due to many reasons and intimidation (or fear) is a major factor. Abebe and Deneke (2015) discussed that students do not participate and practice due to fear which really is a personal problem on the student’s path. Students need to overcome the fear of being wrong and understand that making mistakes help oneself and others to learn and improve. Therefore, intimidation seems to be a barrier in the student’s mind.

Grammatical issues: It is important to emphasize here that Spanish grammar is very different to English grammar. Therefore students experience difficulty in translation or in conveying meaning or their thoughts into the target language. Students have particularly problems with choosing the verb tense and conjugating the verb from English to Spanish (67.65% each) (see Table 2). According to Donaldson (2011), this is a mistake that teachers of a foreign language commit; they teach written grammar with a lot of complexity and rules that is very different to a native speaker spoken grammar. In reality, spoken grammar is much simpler with shorter sentences. Therefore, Donaldson suggested that students should be taught “actual native speaker norms of conversation” rather than textbook grammar to improve conversation skills.

Lack of vocabulary: The very most important part of learning any language is to have a large bank of vocabulary. One may not be able to have a fruitful or even fluent conversation if that person lacks knowledge on the required vocabulary. Marsden and David (2008) indicated that vocabulary is not so much linked to productive competence (speaking) but more of receptive
competence (memory/knowledge). Thus, the 58.82% (Table 2) of the level one participants are the ones to blame for this. These students need to take the time to get familiar with the vocabulary of the various topics studied in classes and also basic vocabulary. According to Nation and Newton (2009), however, when encountering new vocabulary, teachers must know that fluency cannot be expected or judged in conversation.

Lack of confidence: (61.76%) (see Table 2). It is important that a student has high self-confidence in order to perform at his/her best, however, due to issues faced in Spanish conversation as stated previously; this may be difficult to achieve. As Jamila (2014) found that these students possess an introvert’s personality and the only way to overcome it, according to the teachers, is to speak in the classroom and be corrected as the Teachers are only there to help them learn and become better speakers of the language. This may be why such a large group is affected by anxiety and nervousness during examinations (67.65%) (see Table 2).

Lack of practice: The findings show that almost half of the level one students have this issue (44.12%) (Table 2). This issue of practice was found as the level one students indicated that even though the majority (38.24%) (see Figure 3) practice every other day for about five to ten minutes (29.41%) (Figure 4), it is still not enough to master a language and gain fluency and conversational skills. According to Nation and Newton (2009), it is important to involve oneself in the foreign language especially by listening because it is only in this way that a learner can grasp concepts used by native speakers so as to use in speaking in conversations. Therefore, practicing both listening and speaking appears to improve conversational skills.
Participation in class: It is surprising however that even though there were high rates of lack of confidence and their major problem was pressure to speak accurately, the findings show that the level-one students indicated that they participated quite often in class (41.18%) (see Figure 5) which is a great way to practice and learn from their own mistakes and errors. So therefore, participation seems to definitely not be an issue that affects their conversational skills development.

Level Two

Verb conjugations: On the other hand, the level two participants indicated that their major problem was not undergoing pressure to speak accurately. By level two, they would have gotten accustomed to speaking in Spanish. The main problem they had was conjugating verbs (61.54%) (Table 2). Many new grammatical rules are involved at this level and it boils down to having a good grasp of the concepts and knowing how to apply them in speech. Even though Donaldson (2011) stated that written and spoken grammar are very much different, unfortunately the teaching style has not been changed and so students must speak the written grammar rules they learn.

The use of the subjunctive: It was also found that 57.69% (Table 2) of the level two students have difficulty in this area. The subjunctive is widely used in Spanish as it is a main part of Spanish grammar at this level and not so much at level one. Nevertheless, both levels have trouble in using the subjunctive mood. A reason for this is that in English, it is not widely used thus it is an entirely new concept to grasp and master. Thus, providing evidence that Slobin’s theory (1991) of one’s native grammar affects his/her cognitive process when formulating phrases and sentences.
Formulating complex sentences: In addition to the higher level of Spanish grammar expected of these level-two students, they experience the difficulty in formulating complex sentences in conversation (53.85%) (see Table 2). It is difficult to have a natural conversation with lengthy sentences as Spanish spoken grammar is different to written grammar (Donaldson, 2011). In a natural and spontaneous conversation, a person gets straight to the point with short phrases and without complexity in their utterances.

Difficulty with translation: This is linked to the previous point and also cognition. Similarly, the level two students have trouble translating like the level-one students. 50% (Table 2) of the level two participants indicated this. However, the reason for being slow in translating may be different to the level-one students. The level two body may have this difficulty due to the new and challenging aspects of grammar on which they must concentrate while as the level-one students have a mental fear of being inaccurate in their utterances.

All of the above level two factors are linked to grammatical issues with cognition. This goes back to Slobin’s theory (1991), “in acquiring a native language, the child learns particular ways of thinking for speaking” by which these ways are influenced by their native grammar. Thus, the majority of these students are Trinidadians whose native language is Trinidadian English Creole and Trinidadian Standard English as their second language and are now aiming to master Spanish as a foreign language. These grammatical issues and cognitive issues seems to hinder their speech production and fluency in conversation due to English and Creole grammar influences.

Lack of practice: In the same way, like the level-one students, many level two students lack practice in the language (53.85%) (see Table 2). Derakhshan, Khalili and Beheshti (2016)
believe that ability, accuracy and fluency can be developed by mainly practice and participation. Therefore practice is necessary and of utmost importance in language development. This issue of lack of practice was found to be popular among the level one students as well. The majority of level two students practise Spanish conversation everyday (30.77%) (Figure 3) for five to ten minutes (34.62%) or eleven to twenty minutes (30.77%) (Figure 4) which is more than the level one students and twenty minutes per day may make a positive and significant difference in their conversational skill development.

Accents of native speakers: The level two students also experienced a similar factor that hinder their conversational skills; 50% (see Table 2) have difficulty with the accents of native speakers. This may stem from a lack of practice in the listening component. According to Nation and Newton (2009), it is necessary to master listening in order to have a meaningful and fluent conversation. This refers to the fact that conversation entails two components: listening and speaking. Thus, conversational skills cannot be developed without practice in both areas.

However, unlike the major problem of pressure of speaking accurately that the level-one students face, the level two students seem to be much more comfortable with the conversation component. Additionally, they do not have many problems with confidence and intimidation like the level-one students. This may be so as many may have overcome these fears which would have been major problems in their previous year of Spanish conversation classes.

Anxiety and lack of confidence: In the same breath however, it is curious that they still have anxiety and nervousness under examination conditions in the same way as the level one
students. 57.69% (Table 2) of level two indicated this even though only 30.77% (Table 2) said they have problems with confidence. A reason for this may be because their grades depend on their performance in examinations and thus they feel some sort of anxiety and nervousness. However, this poses as an issue as according to the findings of Park and Lee (2005), the higher rates of anxiety and nervousness, the lower the students’ performances. Therefore since examination results are used to judge a student’s development in conversational skills, anxiety and nervousness act as a barrier to his/her development.

However, apart from these problems which the level two students experience, just like the level one students, these issues do not hinder the participation in the classroom as the majority indicated that they participate often in class (42.31%) (see Figure 5). This shows a very high level of determination and dedication on both paths, that is, by the students of both levels. In this way, with participation, they gain more practice and so are able to try and develop their conversational skills.

Conversely, issues such as comprehension, teaching style, inaccurate feedback, and confusion with other languages all tend to be minority problems based on the data from both levels. These do not seem to be as urgent as the previous problems discussed.

2. How have these problems influenced students’ development/progress of conversational skills?

In both levels it was found that all the students share similar affected areas in conversation which are all consequences (Table 6) of the problems (Table 2) that they face in Spanish conversation.

Level One
Fluency: The most popular affected area which the level-one participants indicated is fluency (88.24%) (Table 6). Of course if they encounter with problems of pressure, confidence, intimidation and grammar, and not to mention very little time practicing, fluency will most definitely be affected. According to Nation and Newton (2011), fluency is mastery of all the components of a language, that is, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus, fluency appears to be achieved through practice and exposure to the language.

Rate of speech: It is expected that since one has confidence issues and fluency is affected, without doubt rate of speech will be affected as well, as indicated by 61.76% (Table 6) of the level-one participants. Rate of speech is linked to cognition as it takes time for some persons to translate and formulate phrases before speech production. Thus, making expressing thoughts and opinions another affected area (61.76%) (see Table 6).

Range of vocabulary: Additionally, the major problem of fluency will be affected if vocabulary is unknown and one must speak in “a roundabout way” in order to try and get their ideas across. However, according to Nation and Newton (2011), one cannot judge fluency if there is unknown vocabulary involved. This may be true as it can be understandable that a person may need some time to find other ways of expressing a thought in which the vocabulary is unknown in the foreign language. Thus, showing that the speaker’s range of vocabulary may be limited, which was the case of the level-one students (55.88%) (see Table 6).

Spontaneity: Also, due to all of the affected areas above, in a conversation, a speaker may not seem to be spontaneous as limited vocabulary, rate of speech, expression have all become an issue, it may be difficult to think in another language or translate quickly and sharply. Thus,
the issue of spontaneity was another affected area indicated by 50% (see Table 6) of the level-one participants.

Performance: After the students were asked about their time dedicated to practicing Spanish conversation, they were asked to rate their performance both in and out of the classroom in conversation. 44.12% of the level one students indicated that inside the conversation classroom their performance was ‘normal’ while outside it went up one to ‘good’ (41.18%) (see Figure 7). This may be because the level one students had indicated that their major problem was pressure to speak accurately. It was pointed out by many students that having a casual conversation outside the classroom with peers was more relaxed as there was no pressure to be accurate. They were not intimidated and felt okay to make mistakes.

Level Two

Fluency: It is very interesting that from the findings, the majority of the level two students (80.77%) also indicated that fluency is a majorly affected area even though they had more grammatical issues as opposed to self-esteem issues like the level one students (see Table 6).

Rate of speech: Likewise, the level two students did have problems with their rate of speech (42.31%) (Table 6) and expressing thoughts and opinions clearly (53.85%) (see Table 6). It is understandable that since they undergo many issues with Spanish grammar and the need to produce complex sentences, they will have translating issues and so these areas will be affected. Thus showing that they experienced the same consequences as the level one group but due to different problem areas.
Range of vocabulary: It is also very curious that the level two students experience an effect in the range of vocabulary that they use in conversation (53.85%) (see Table 6). This implies that they still have limited vocabulary even at this stage in their Spanish university courses. However, even though the statistic is lesser than the level one’s (55.88%) (see Table 6), it is not a very big difference. Therefore one may wonder if these issues and affected areas may be as a result of lack of practice and exposure to the Spanish language.

Spontaneity: Of course, after seeing all these affected areas and understanding that for fluency, one must have sharp cognitive abilities in order to process and translate ideas and opinions quickly. However, just like the level one participants, the level two students have spontaneity consequences (46.15%) (see Table 6) due to their major grammatical problems. As these students have more exposure to Spanish grammar, they are required to use these grammatical rules in speech production and they must do so while having a meaningful conversation. This is obviously difficult.

Accuracy: What is different though, unlike the level one students, the level two students do not seem to have such a great effect on the accuracy of their speech in conversation. Only 30.77% (see Table 6) indicated having accuracy problems. This may be so as the level two students practice more often and for longer periods than the level one students. Thus, they become aware of errors and are able to correct them.

Performance: After the level two students gave their ratings on their performance it was seen that they thought they performed ‘good’ in conversation both inside (50%) (see Figure 7), and outside (53.85%) (see Figure 7), of the classroom unlike the level one students. However, it is seen that more persons of level two perform better outside of the conversation classes.
This may be so as, similar to the level one students, there is a more relaxed environment with peers as opposed to with native teachers so there is a certain comfort zone outside the conversation class.

The students of both levels were asked about other affected areas such as coherence, interaction and content in their conversations but these were not very popular affected areas as indicated by the participants. They were all in the minority.

Should there be any changes to conversation classes?

Lastly, both levels were asked if the conversation classes help them with their development of conversational skills. The majority of level one students (91.18%) indicated that yes these classes so help while only 8.82% said no (see Figure 8). The answer from the level two students was completely positive as 100% (see Figure 8) of the participants agreed that the conversation classes at the UWI help them develop their skills.

After this, they were all asked to give recommendations to help improve the conversation classes and the majority indicated that they would change nothing, while some suggested a change in the length of time of the class or different class activities or different topics for discussion so that the class is more interactive and interesting.

Therefore, it was seen that the level one students are affected mostly by the affective factors like pressure, intimidation, anxiety and nervousness while the level two students experience linguistics factors mostly grammatical issues like conjugation, verb tense and aspect, using the subjunctive mood and formulating complex sentences. Apart from that, they both had similar cognitive issues however, participation in class was not affected, they continue to try to improve their skills.
CONCLUSION

This study consisted of sixty participants who are students studying Spanish as a foreign language at the UWI, St. Augustine campus. They were divided into two groups: level one and level two. These students participated in focus groups and from their answers and experiences, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire was handed out to most of the level one and level two students which was then analyzed in order to present the findings.

This study found the issues that affected their development of conversational skills in Spanish. The results showed that the level one students are hindered by affective factors that include pressure to be accurate when speaking, lack of confidence, intimidation, anxiety and nervousness while the level two students were more affected by linguistic factors (grammar) and cognitive factors such as verb conjugations, the use of the subjunctive mood, formulating complex sentences and translating. Additionally, they shared a few issues that included lack of practice and lack of vocabulary. The findings also indicated the affected areas which are needed for conversational skills. Both the level one and two students indicated that due to those problems they face, their fluency in Spanish is most affected. Other areas included rate of speech, range of vocabulary, Spontaneity, accuracy and even their performance in class.

Limitations

Firstly, in the literature review, it was difficult to find journals and books on issues particularly in Spanish conversation. The majority of research papers found were in foreign countries speaking of learning English as a foreign language. Also, a lot of the researches
used spoke mainly about achieving fluency, other factors such as rate of speech, accuracy, expression and spontaneity were overlooked. Apart from the studies used, the majority of studies available were mainly on assessment of conversation as opposed to developing conversation in a holistic sense.

Recommendations

In order to encourage more participation and practice, teachers should have different topics for discussion. Topics that are more functional in everyday life so that students gain conversational skills and competence in a realistic manner as opposed to using topics for discussion that they do not even talk about in their native tongue.

Also to encourage the more timid students to partake in class discussion, teachers should come up with more activities that the class can do as a whole so that it can boost self-confidence and reduce anxiety and nervousness.

Lastly, the length of time of classes should be shorter, maybe one hour, this way all students get a chance to speak but the class is not lengthy as to lose students’ focus. If more practice is needed, then there should be extra half hour sessions for students who choose to practice more.
WORKS CITED


Marsden, Emma, and Annabelle David. "Vocabulary use during conversation: a cross-sectional study of development from year 9 to year 13 among learners of Spanish and


APPENDIX 1

Questions used to conduct the focus groups.

1. How was CSEC Spanish? and CAPE? What about the teaching of conversational skills or speaking skills at CAPE Spanish?
2. Ok, now in UWI, tell me about your experience with conversation (in UWI), for instance, teaching of this skill, and so forth.
3. What are the main problems (strengths and weaknesses) do you think you have in conversation?
4. Do you encounter these problems both inside and outside of the classroom?
5. How often do you practice conversing in Spanish outside of the classroom?
6. In terms of conversation classes, can you identify any factors/issues that may hinder the development of your conversational skills?
7. Do you receive feedback on the progress of your conversation skills? What type of feedback do you receive? Is it useful in helping your conversational skills to develop?
8. How would you rate your participation in the classroom? (how much do you participate in the class of conversation?)
9. How would you rate your performance in conversation inside of the classroom?
10. What problems do you face when trying to formulate an idea or trying to express an opinion?

   SPAN 1001 (tasks students were asked to perform: to describe a picture or a video they watched, to explain simple situations, to give opinions on simple subjects/matters/topics or from videos they watched)
   SPAN 2001 (tasks students were asked to perform: to tell stories with details, to express ideas using complex sentences)

11. Compare the different problems you face when you are engaged in a conversation both inside and outside of the classroom.
12. How would you describe the process of building/constructing a sentence that goes on in your head when you try to express an idea or opinion? For instance…(give a situation)

   SPAN 1001 (topics discussed during the last weeks were: family problems, description of a picture, person or situation)
SPAN 2001 (topics discussed during the last weeks were: education and technology, corporal punishment, bullying, sex education)

13. So tell me, how did you prepare for your first conversation exam? [Follow up questions: Did you rely on memorization? Did you prepare an outline (write some points)?]
   Why?

14. Are these same methods you commented earlier when you prepare for an examination being used in conversation outside of the classroom or only in exam situation?
   How do the rating scales (which are used to assess your conversation performance in examinations and your participation in class) guide you in tackling areas in which you need to improve your speaking skills?
APPENDIX 2

Questionnaire

Dear student,

I am Rhia Mahabir, a final year student, doing HUMN3099-Special Project. I am interested in knowing the problems you face in Spanish conversation. This is not a test, so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers and it is completely confidential; you are not required to write your name. Please be honest with your answers so that Spanish language teaching may be improved which can benefit both you and future students. Thank you.

…………………………………………

Nationality:   Age:       ☐ Female ☐ Male

What level are you at?     ☐ Level I     ☐ Level II

1) How many years have you been studying Spanish?

2 a) How often do you practice conversation in Spanish?

☐ Everyday ☐ Every other day ☐ Once a week ☐ Twice a week

2 b) When you do practise conversation in Spanish, how long does the conversation last?

3 a) Do you practice with native speakers or with local peers?       ☐ Yes ☐ No

3 b) Does this aid in your conversational development?       ☐ Yes       ☐ No

4) Indicate the problems you face in conversation, choose as many of the options as it applies to you:

☐ Having to translate in your mind       ☐ Pressure of speaking accurately

☐ Thinking in a foreign language       ☐ Intimidated by natives

☐ Lack of vocabulary       ☐ Intimidated by peers with a higher proficiency

☐ Having to conjugate verbs

☐ Choosing the correct verb tenses

☐ The use of ‘usted’ and ‘tú’       ☐ Having peers who are at a lower proficiency and are not willing to
co-operate

- Formulating complex sentences
- Using the subjunctive
- Anxiety or being nervous especially during exams
- Lack of knowledge on the topics
- Inaccurate feedback
- Lack of practice in conversing in Spanish

- Lack of confidence
- Confusion with other foreign languages
- Accents of native speakers
- Comprehension
- Teaching style
- Other, specify:

5) What is affected due to the problems which you experienced from above? Choose as many of the options as it applies to you:

- Fluency
- Spontaneity
- Accuracy
- Range of vocabulary
- Coherence
- Rate of speech
- Expressing thoughts and opinions clearly
- Interaction
- Content
- Other, specify:
6 a) Do you receive feedback on the progress of your conversation skills?  ❑ Yes  ❑ No
6 b) What type of feedback do you receive?

6 c) Is it useful in helping your conversational skills to develop?  ❑ Yes  ❑ No
6 d) How is it useful?

7 a) How much do you participate in the conversation class, on a scale of 1 to 5?
❑ 1: Never  ❑ 2: Sometimes  ❑ 3: few times when I’m asked to  ❑ 4: often  ❑ 5: all the time
7 b) Why?

8 a) How would you rate your performance in the conversation class, on a scale of 1 to 5?
❑ 1: terrible  ❑ 2: fair  ❑ 3: not too bad  ❑ 4: good  ❑ 5: excellent
8 b) Why?

9 a) How would you rate your performance in conversation outside of the classroom, on a scale of 1 to 5?
❑ 1: terrible  ❑ 2: fair  ❑ 3: not too bad  ❑ 4: good  ❑ 5: excellent
9 b) Why?

10 a) Does conversation classes at UWI help in your conversational development in Spanish?
❑ Yes  ❑ No
10 b) How so?

11) What would you change in your conversation classes to help improve your development?