Learner autonomy and agency: Students’ ability to better their oral expression in Spanish as a foreign language at The University of the West Indies- St. Augustine

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Abstract

Research has shown that many language students encounter difficulties in expressing themselves in the target language. This present study is designed to examine the effect that learner agency and autonomy have on the development of the communicative ability of a group of students at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine campus. This study also focuses on the role that motivation plays along with agency in improving participants’ Spanish conversation skills. Some of the challenges that Spanish level II and level III students face at the UWI are discussed. The research took an ethnographic approach and the instruments used were focus groups and interviews. The data gathered was qualitative, and the researcher coded the data according to topics that emerged from the students’ responses. Through the analysis of the research findings, it was revealed that students who were more motivated to develop their oral expression in Spanish exercised a greater level of agency and autonomy. Those students employed more learning strategies to overcome their difficulties and improve their conversation skills. These learning strategies were also carried out on a regular basis, and these students maintained a high proficiency level in Spanish language. In contrast, the students with a low proficiency level were less motivated and rarely carried out learning strategies to improve their oral component, thereby, demonstrating a lack of learner agency and autonomy. This study concludes by presenting limitations of the investigation and recommendations.
Introduction

In Trinidad and Tobago, Spanish language is seen as an important asset because of its geographical location and proximity to Latin America. Therefore, it is taught at different levels of the educational system. Some students may decide to further the language at the tertiary level for different reasons. The UWI offers a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA) in Spanish as well as a Major or as a Minor.

This study examines the factors that affect students’ ability to better their speaking performance and the role that learner agency and autonomy plays in learning a foreign language. Students who study Spanish as a foreign language at the UWI have been exposed to the language for approximately seven years in secondary school. However, though having completed many years of foreign language learning, Spanish in particular, students’ competence in the conversation component does not reflect the performance described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) B1 level. The majority of language learners cannot communicate fluently and accurately, as specified by the CEFR B1 level, because they may lack a lot of oral practice and aural abilities. The oral component can be deemed the most important as people who are said to know a particular language are expected to speak it proficiently. Many language learners think that they will become proficient in a particular language simply by attending a language class, and as a result, draw the conclusion that passive attendance is sufficient in learning a language (Brown 102). However, autonomous learning is required to achieve one’s goals such as improving one’s conversation skills (Oxford 83). Many students lack the motivation to learn autonomously and to take charge of their own learning. As such, their speaking skills are not comprehensively developed. Therefore, learner agency,
defined by Carson as “an individual’s capacity for self-awareness and self-determination: decision-making, ability to enact or resist change, and take responsibility for actions”, is essential for a student to perfect their speaking skills (qtd. in Brown 102). This definition suggests that students must play an active role and assume responsibility for their own learning. In order to do this, the use of metacognitive strategies may be vital (Wenden 515-523, Flavell 909-910). Metacognition includes planning one’s learning, setting goals, monitoring and evaluating their own language competence. When students utilize these strategies to improve their skills, their oral expression in particular, they will have greater success in acquiring and learning a second language.

**Rationale**

When I decided to study Spanish at the tertiary level, I thought that I would have been able to communicate fluently in the language upon finishing my degree. However, as a third year Spanish student at the UWI, speaking is one of the skills that I have not been able to develop to the best of my ability. I believe that the main factor for this is my lack of practice, autonomous learning and not developing agency from the beginning of my degree. Throughout my education of Spanish as a foreign language, I mainly depended on my classes to develop my language proficiency. However, eventually I realized that languages require more work and effort in order to attain a high level of competence. Languages demand a lot of practice and individual learning in order to improve the necessary skills. Additionally, after interacting with my classmates for approximately three years, I realized that many of them experience this problem. There is also a lack of motivation to take charge of their own learning and as a result, they are not at the level they would like to be at. Therefore, I am interested in the factors that influence students’ ability
in their speaking performance and the role that motivation, autonomy and agency play in the development of this skill.

**Aims**

To investigate the factors that influence a student’s ability to better his or her speaking performance.

To identify how learner agency and autonomy is influential in the development of students’ conversation skills.

To gain a greater understanding of how motivation affects students’ ability to exercise agency to improve their oral expression.

**Research Questions**

1) What are the factors that affect students’ ability to better their speaking performance?

2) What role does learner agency and autonomy play in the development of students’ conversation skills?

3) How does motivation affect the participants’ ability to exercise agency in improving their conversation skills?

**Methodology**

This study seeks to investigate the factors that influence students’ ability to improve their speaking performance and the role learner agency plays in the development of oral skills in an academic context. This ethnographic investigation comprised of qualitative data. The researcher
conducted this study at the University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine campus. Spanish language at UWI is taught at three different levels. The aims of this study, as defined in the research questions, were investigated based on the insights gained from students pursuing the SPAN 2001- Spanish language IIA and SPAN 3001- Spanish language IIIA courses.

Participants

A total of 24 university students willingly participated in focus groups and interviews. Focus groups were chosen because in a group, the students may have been more honest as they would have been able to relate to each other in case they faced the same challenges. They would have also been able to expand more on their answers when they expressed it orally. Similarly, interviews were chosen because the participants would have been able to expand their answers and explain them better as interviews were done orally. McKay recommends interviews and focus groups when eliciting insights from teachers and students in classroom contexts. She points out that one of the advantages of these methods is that interviewees can be more responsive to the interviewer and therefore, generate richer data. However, a disadvantage is that both focus groups and interviews are very time consuming and more difficult to analyse in terms of finding patterns in the data gathered (51 -52).

There were 16 participants enrolled in the SPAN 2001- Spanish language IIA course and 8 in the SPAN 3001- Spanish language IIIA course. The process of data collection was carried out in two stages. The first stage comprised of two focus groups with second year (SPAN 2001) students and the second stage comprised eight (8) interviews with third year (SPAN 3001) students. Both focus groups were conducted during conversation classes, and in the absence of the lecturer. One focus group was conducted during a SPAN 2001 conversation class from 1 p.m.
to 3 p.m. There were nine (9) students present for this focus group, two (2) males and seven (7) females. The second focus group was conducted during a SPAN 2001 conversation class from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. and seven (7) students participated, three (3) males and four (4) females. The same questions were asked to all participants. The questions were designed to enquire about the reasons for studying Spanish, the challenges the students faced in various contexts and the learning strategies and activities they employed in order to overcome their difficulties (See Appendix). Participants’ responses were audio-recorded and then analysed. Data analysis was carried out by listening to the recordings and transcribing the most relevant statements raised by the participants.

Interviews were conducted to collect data from the year three students. There were eight (8) participants in total, two (2) males and six (6) females. The participants were chosen based on their proficiency level in Spanish language. Four (4) of the students displayed a high level of proficiency while the other four (4), a low proficiency level. These interviews were conducted on different days over two weeks and the duration was between 5 to 8 minutes. All participants were asked the same questions. The interview questions were designed to enquire about the challenges the students encountered in different settings, the learning strategies and activities they engage themselves in to overcome those problems and their level of motivation (See Appendix). Interviews were analysed by listening to the recordings, transcribing participants’ responses and coding these responses according to topics that emerged from the data. The researcher and a research assistant coded the data from both the interviews and focus groups.

As was noted, many students encounter problems in the conversation component of any language. In order for a student to develop and improve this skill, a lot of practice outside of the classroom setting is needed. Thus, it is vital that language students exercise agency and
autonomy by taking control of their own learning to develop their conversation skills. In the following chapters, this study will be placed in the context of other similar investigations and the findings will be displayed. Additionally, the data will be analysed in terms of the contexts, learning strategies and motivation of the participants. The conclusion will then present some limitations and recommendations for this study.
This chapter will discuss various factors that develop the proficiency of second language learners. Firstly, agency in relation to learning another language is examined. Secondly, metacognition is considered as this is necessary in order to exercise agency. Thirdly, autonomy is discussed as this is associated with agency and metacognition. Finally, motivation and how it aids in improving one’s conversation skills in a second language is examined. All four factors work together and are essential in order for language learners to improve and become more competent.

Agency

Agency is defined by Carson as “an individual’s capacity for self-awareness and self-determination: decision-making, ability to enact or resist change, and take responsibility for actions” (qtd. in Brown 102). It is, however, a relatively new term in the field of applied linguistics and due to this, the number of studies conducted by language researchers to investigate the effect that agency has on language learning is limited. Oxford also implied that agents are students who act intentionally, set goals and work to achieve their goals with regards to their learning (80). Yashima, in her paper, reviews agency from three perspectives: psychological, sociocultural and post structuralist/critical. Within the psychological perspective, agency is closely related to motivation, and research has shown that these have an influence on
language learning. Learners were also said to apply various learning strategies to improve their learning. The sociocultural perspective examines how interpersonal interactions aid the learner to self-regulate his learning. As outlined by Lantolf and Pavlenko, a student will construct their conditions for their own learning within a social context, depending on the problems that he or she faces in second language learning (qtd. in Yashima 3). Each individual learner, therefore, will produce different activities with objectives that can be met. Furthermore, both Bourdieu and Gidden had theories of agency from the post structuralist perspective. They focused on the effect of social structure and agentive actions of second language learners. Their theories suggest that second language learners possess the power to change the cultural patterns such as power relationships that affect them “by being reflexive and changing both themselves and these patterns” (Yashima 4). Huang also conducted a study which involved Chinese university students who were enrolled in a four-year BA degree programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in which theoretical learning was primary. The researcher conducted interviews with participants. Huang concluded that some students took their own initiative to improve the oral component by practising as much as possible, even speaking to themselves. These students were found to be more confident in speaking English than those who were not agentive (240). A similar study was investigated by Willett in which there were four English language students. Three of them engaged in group collaboration, assisting each other where necessary, thereby being able to strengthen their skills. These students became more competent in the language, whereas the other student who did not engage in this collaborative work did not attain the same level of competence (qtd. in Fogle 23). In addition, Aro conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the role of agency in two second language learners, Helen and Emma, over a period of 14 years. Both were agentive students as they did activities that helped them to
improve English. These activities included watching television in the target language, using and reading the subtitles in movies and checking words they were unsure about in the dictionary. However, their sense of agency was different in each case as it was influenced by how well their learning methods coincided with the teaching methods. They both had different strengths and weaknesses and in order to improve their weaknesses, they both chose different resources and exercised agency in different contexts (Aro 65). Hence, students need to be aware of their strong and weak skills in a language in order to exercise agency.

**Metacognition and Metacognitive Strategies**

Metacognitive learning strategies are general learning strategies whereby a learner reflects upon his own thinking and learning process (Chamot et al. 7). Students can begin to understand what type of learners they are when they start to think about their own learning. Therefore, according to Anderson, metacognition involves ‘thinking about thinking’ (qtd. in Camillo 5). Chamot et al. presented four metacognitive strategies which include: organizing or planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating one’s learning (10). These strategies are vital in order to improve one’s proficiency in learning a foreign language. Anderson and Wenden agree with this as they stated, “students who demonstrate a variety of metacognitive abilities work more competently”. The students who incorporate these metacognitive strategies into their learning tend to be committed and demonstrate a positive attitude towards their learning (qtd. in Camillo 5). The fact that students who implement these strategies into their learning tend to have a higher proficiency level was also highlighted by Chamot in one of her journal articles (2). When students plan, manage, monitor and evaluate their own learning, they become better equipped to accomplish tasks and to improve their skills in learning a foreign language. Graham
also reinforces that metacognition aids in proficiency in his investigation. The participants were students of French in England, and they were classed either as minimalists, stagnators or mastery students. Graham concluded that the mastery students were more competent at French and gained better results because they implemented these metacognitive strategies, and put much effort into their learning. However, the stagnators and minimalists did not see the need to put forth effort, and consequently, were not very successful (305). In addition, Paris and Winograd suggested that metacognition has a strong impact on the learning behaviours of language learners. One such behaviour that it influenced was motivation (qtd. in Graham 297).

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is defined by Benson as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (qtd. in Huang 229). Autonomous learners, therefore, take the responsibility and are able to direct and manage their own learning. Autonomy is also closely related to learning strategies as learners will need to implement these strategies in their own learning in order to make progress. Additionally, Huang stated that autonomy is closely related to agency as this also entails deliberate choice and action to improve one’s own learning (230). However, Huang further stated that the degree of control that a learner is able to exercise in a specific context is what differentiates agency and autonomy (242). Oxford, in her study, related the psychological aspect of learner autonomy and concluded that it was associated with motivation (83). Furthermore, research gives evidence that autonomous learners usually have high motivation and are able to execute the action needed to achieve their goals (84). In a study conducted in Canada, researchers found that adults who were considered to be autonomous were motivated to learn a
second language (Oxford 84). Similarly, Benson suggested that autonomy is necessary for effective language learning. He stated that when language learners develop their autonomy, they become better learners (qtd. in Surma 13). Therefore, autonomous language students will have better success in attaining their goals and in effect, will be more competent and proficient in utilizing that second language.

Motivation

Motivation, as defined by Oxford, is “an inner drive, impulse, intention, or goal that causes a person to do something or act in a certain way” (80). Thus, in second language learning, motivation may involve the desire to learn an additional language. Motivation can either be intrinsic or extrinsic. Bénabou and Tirole suggested that motivation based on contingent rewards is extrinsic, while intrinsic motivation is “the individual’s desire to perform the task for his own sake” (490). Moreover, motivation is closely related to agency. A highly motivated student will implement certain learning strategies in order to gain the results that they want which is seen as an exercise of agency (Xiao 4). Rivera-Mills and Plonksy also agreed with this by stating that motivated learners tend to employ more learning strategies (540). On the other hand, studies have also proven that students of a second language who are considered to be agentive underperformed in their exams. The main reason for their underperformance was their lack of motivation. Thus, motivation seems to have a great influence on language learning (Brown 117). In like manner, teachers agree that motivation influences students’ performance as it was shown in a study conducted by Tuan and Mai in Vietnam. They found that 80% of teachers viewed motivation to speak as a factor of great importance that influenced students’ speaking performance. In this same study, English students resorted to speaking Vietnamese because the
students had no motivation to express themselves in English (14). Additionally, the purpose of speaking another language greatly influences the motivation of students. According to Oxford, second language learners tend to be more motivated when they are willing to integrate themselves into the target culture rather than for academic reasons or job advancement (83). Similarly, Aro conducted a longitudinal study, involving two participants over a fourteen year period. The participants, Helen and Emma were studying English as a foreign language and were interviewed on four occasions. The researcher concluded that their motivation for learning English was different in each case and this affected their ability to speak the language. Helen was motivated by the opportunities English will provide for her in the future whereas Emma learned the language because her family members were English speakers. Consequently, Helen was more satisfied with her level of speaking since she displayed a greater motivation for learning the language (53). Another identical study reiterates the importance of motivation in language learning. One study participant, Dan, was a distant language English learner who was very proficient in the language. His main motivation was to improve his vocational competence and increase his income to provide for his family. Owing to this, he applied a variety of learning strategies to help him improve, and he gained positive results (Xiao 10). Hence, motivation may be very influential in the learning of a foreign language.

As it was noted in other similar investigations, learner agency and autonomy both have a great influence on the ability of a student to improve his or her Spanish language skills, in particular, the conversation component. It was seen that more proficient students employ more learning strategies and display a greater level of motivation. The following chapter will present the findings of the investigation conducted in the form of tables.
Chapter 2

Findings

This chapter presents the experiences of students in learning Spanish as a foreign language at the UWI. The presentation of findings highlights the problems students encountered in three different contexts (classroom, examination, and informal settings), the strategies they employed to overcome these difficulties and their level of motivation.

Context

The students faced various challenges in different settings (classroom, examinations and informal). Many of the participants encountered similar difficulties in the same context. In the classroom, the lack of background knowledge of a particular topic was the main problem. Students with both a high and a low proficiency level encountered this problem. Other difficulties that students with a high proficiency level faced were unappealing topics and lack of preparation. On the other hand, students with a low proficiency level encountered other challenges such as limited vocabulary, anxiety and lack of practice. Students who participated in the focus groups also encountered these problems. In the examination context, the majority of students, whether they displayed a high or low proficiency in Spanish language, encountered the same difficulty, nervousness. There were also other minor challenges such as limited vocabulary and lack of spontaneity faced by some students with a low level of proficiency and one student with a high proficiency level was uncomfortable with his conversation partner at times. Informal settings presented less challenges for the students. The majority of students stated that they felt
more comfortable in informal contexts, though, there were a few students who lacked the confidence and faced anxiety when speaking to natives in these contexts (see Table 1).

Table 1
Problems Students Face in Different Contexts and their Level of Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settings</th>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>Examination</th>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Level of proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unappealing topic</td>
<td>Not comfortable with partner</td>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td>Lack of spontaneity</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Comfortable</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td>Lack of vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of grammatical knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning Strategies

In order to overcome the problems encountered in learning Spanish, the students carried out different activities in which they used various learning strategies. These various learning strategies fell into the categories of socio-affective, cognitive or metacognitive learning strategies. The students who displayed either a high or low level of proficiency in the language
employed these aforementioned learning strategies. However, those who were at a higher level of proficiency carried out these activities more regularly than those who were not. One socio-affective strategy that one student employed during examinations in order to minimize nervousness involved focusing on her partner and less on the lecturer (see Table 2). Additionally, the cognitive strategies that they utilized were the following: reading news articles and posts on social media in Spanish, listening to and watching videos in Spanish, researching vocabulary, practising speaking with friends and with native speakers, using Spanish subtitles when watching movies, utilizing the grammar structures in conversation class and teaching themselves the topic while studying. Furthermore, they implemented some metacognitive strategies which consisted of planning their learning, asking for clarification, organizing and monitoring their speech, and thinking in the language (see Table 2).

Table 2
Learning Strategies and Activities Students Employ and their Level of Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Learning strategy</th>
<th>Level of proficiency</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Socio affective</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Relies on partner to lower anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Reading, Listening, Researches vocabulary, Practices speaking with friends and native speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Asks for clarification, Monitors speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Listening, Watching and transcribing videos, Practicing speaking with friends, Researches vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Thinking in Spanish, Planning, Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Learning strategy</td>
<td>Level of proficiency</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Monitoring speech Reading Using grammar structures in class Practicing with friends Using vocabulary in speech Pretending to teach topics while studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Thinking in Spanish Asks for clarification Monitoring Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Learning vocabulary Reading Watching videos in Spanish Practices with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Asking for clarification Monitoring Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Reading Learning vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Asking for clarification Planning Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Watching movies in Spanish Using Spanish subtitles Researching vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Planning Asking for clarification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Practicing with friends Researching vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Planning Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Singing in Spanish Talking with native speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Thinking in Spanish Planning Monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Speaking with natives Using social media Reading news Watching videos/movies in Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Motivation

All of the students displayed either a high, fair or low level of motivation to improve and develop their Spanish conversation skills. The majority of students reported to be highly motivated. All of the students who had a high level of proficiency and one student with a low proficiency level in Spanish language displayed a high level of motivation to improve their oral expression. Conversely, the students whose proficiency levels were low displayed a fair to low measure of motivation. Two students had a fair level while one student, a low level. The students with a low level stated that their motivation was decreased due to the burden of other courses in their degree program.

The participants also had different reasons for their motivation. For instance, some of the participants in the focus groups expressed the desire to travel to various Latin American countries, live in a Spanish speaking country and incorporate the use of Spanish in their future careers such as translation and interpretation. Therefore, their motivation was extrinsic as it was influenced by outer factors.

In addition, other students desired to become more proficient in the language and aspired to speak Spanish fluently. Others mentioned that they had a passion and great love for the language. This motivated them to study Spanish language at the tertiary level. Thus, their motivation was intrinsic as it occurred within the students themselves. Therefore, each student had a different level of motivation which was either intrinsic or extrinsic (see Table 3).
As shown above, this chapter discussed the various challenges the level II and III students encountered in the contexts of the classroom, exam and in informal settings. The various learning strategies that the students engaged in to improve their speaking performance was also discussed. Additionally, the level and types of motivation of both low proficiency and high proficiency students was considered. The next chapter will discuss and analyse the actions the students take in order to improve their oral skills.
Chapter 3

Discussion

This section discusses the activities and learning strategies that students employ in order to overcome the challenges they encountered in Spanish conversation at the tertiary level. Additionally, this chapter examines the interrelatedness among agency, autonomy and motivation in the learning of Spanish as a foreign language at the UWI. The role that these factors play in the improvement of students’ conversation skills will also be discussed.

Context

The context in which a student is in has a strong impact on their ability to develop their oral skills. This study considered the classroom, examination and informal settings. A student’s agency is strongly influenced by these particular contexts. This is because a learner has total responsibility to implement certain actions in these various contexts in order to overcome any difficulties and improve the speaking of the language. In this study, the participants, both of a high and low proficiency, experienced challenges in the three different contexts.

One major problem that participants of the focus groups and interviews faced was the lack of background knowledge in the classroom when discussing a particular topic. In order to overcome this difficulty, some students exercised agency by researching the topic before class. For example, participant 7, a less proficient student, mentioned, “I do research on the topic to be discussed in the classroom beforehand”. Consequently, she felt more confident when
participating in the classroom context. In addition, all of the students who were at a lower level of proficiency mentioned that they lacked practice in Spanish conversation and therefore, their ability to converse in the classroom was inhibited. When asked if they were doing anything to overcome this problem, the majority stated that they were not. For instance, participant 6, another student with a low proficiency level reported, “I know that I lack vocabulary and practice so sometimes I may not talk as much as I should in class,” but when asked whether she was doing anything to overcome this problem, she replied, “No”. The lack of practice outside the classroom seems to indicate little interest on the part of these students to exercise agency in the classroom and autonomy. For this reason, they do not take sufficient actions to control their own learning process and may not be supplementing classroom teaching methods with individual learning strategies. Hence, their ability to improve their conversation skills is inhibited.

Participant 4, a student with a high proficiency level and participants 7 and 8, students with low proficiency levels also expressed that they lacked spontaneity which prevented them from speaking in the classroom and in the examination settings. This may have been due to the lack of practice. It took more time for them to formulate a sentence in their minds before they expressed their thoughts. Therefore, the students with a lower level of proficiency saw much need for improvement in their speaking skills. For instance, participant 6, a student with low proficiency level mentioned, “I think that my conversation skills need a lot of improvement because I believe I could do a lot better and I think I need to practise a lot more”. Additionally, participant 8 stated, “I am not at the level I would like to be”. Hence, these students did not put much effort into trying to overcome their problems in the various contexts. This may imply that they lacked agency and autonomy.
On the other hand, the students who were more proficient practised their speaking skills regularly and as a result, were better able to develop and improve this component of the language. Hence, these students experienced less anxiety, especially in the classroom setting as a result of being more confident. This is similar to the study conducted by Huang as the more agentive students who took more initiative to practise their conversation were more confident (240). Furthermore, students who are agentive and have a desire to better their speaking skills will take advantage of the settings in which they are in, in order to improve. For example, participant 3 stated, “Sometimes I try to use the grammatical structures in conversation class because grammar is a bit difficult to remember”. This participant seems to be an agentive learner because she took advantage of the classroom setting in order to improve the grammar component. Therefore, she took actions and responsibility to improve her own learning, thereby maintaining a very high level of proficiency. By means of this, she noticed an improvement in her conversation skills. This may suggest that when this is done regularly, there will be less need to pause and formulate sentences and grammatical structures in one’s mind before expressing the sentence. As a result, participant 3 said, “I am happy with the level I am at but there is always room for improvement”. Additionally, participant 1 demonstrated agency by employing one socio-affective strategy during her examinations, as she reported, “I focused more on my partner and less on the lecturer so that I will be less nervous”. This is the socio-affective strategy which she used in order to overcome this problem of anxiety within the context of examinations, thereby exercising agency as she took responsibility for overcoming this problem. Participant 1 has also experienced satisfaction from employing this learning strategy as she said, “My grades in Spanish are good this semester for conversation”.
Cognitive and socio-affective learning strategies

The implementation of certain activities and learning strategies also aids students to become more competent in a language. However, these activities need to be carried out frequently in order for students to improve and to achieve their goal of attaining the level they would like to be at. In this study, the students of both Spanish language IIA and IIIA carried out a variety of activities in order to develop their conversation skills, among the other components which are listening, grammar and reading and writing. Similar to the study conducted by Graham, the students were classed into either a low proficiency or high proficiency level. The students at both levels and those of different proficiencies carried out similar activities that involved the use of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective learning strategies. These activities were similar to those executed by the participants in the longitudinal study conducted by Aro. These included watching television in the target language, using and reading the subtitles in movies, and checking words they were unsure about in the dictionary. However, the frequency in which these activities were done varied. According to Yashima, each learner will carry out certain activities to meet their objectives (4). This was evident in this investigation. The students who had a higher level of proficiency engaged in more autonomous activities in order to improve their Spanish conversation skills. Also, they executed these activities on a regular basis. These activities provided them the context and opportunity to practise various learning strategies. For instance, when asked how often Spanish is practised, participant 1 stated that she practises speaking every day and this gives her an opportunity to improve and become more fluent in the language. Additionally, participant 2 mentioned, “[...] not every day, just when I have a conversation exam I would practise a little more but generally when I’m revising grammar or doing lectura for instance, I would speak aloud so this would help me when I have to converse”.

As a result, this develops her oral expressions, making her a competent student. Participant 4 also stated, “[...] what I do is that I skype a Venezuelan friend of mine and we talk every weekend so I could learn from him and increase my expression”. This strategy allows him to improve his conversation skills and fluency in Spanish. As a consequence, these students demonstrated a high level of agency and autonomy because they regulated their own learning and not only practised in the classroom context. They made their own decisions regarding when they should practise their oral skills. In addition, even though participant 2 displayed a high proficiency level, she stated, “I think I am not at the level I want to be in Spanish and it bothers me a lot”. However, she said, “the most I would practise speaking is at school”, and this was due to her introverted personality. As a consequence, she mentioned, “I try to do a lot of things at home like when I’m doing other work I would listen to Spanish to get new vocabulary which would help me in my speaking”. Thus, this participant, knowing that she is more reserved, took the responsibility for her own learning by employing learning strategies and engaging in other activities at home, thereby, exercising autonomy and agency. As a result, this student maintained a high proficiency level in Spanish and gave evidence to Chamot who stated that students who implement these strategies tend to have a higher proficiency level.

In contrast, the students who possessed a lower level of proficiency, on a regular basis, did not put into practice many activities toward developing their conversation skills. Even though they carried out activities such as singing, reading, watching movies in Spanish, learning new vocabulary and conversing with native speakers, the activities were not done often enough to allow the students to achieve a higher level of proficiency. Participant 5 expressed, “I actually don’t practise speaking a lot, sometimes I read and it helps with vocabulary [...]. I don’t really practise outside of class”. Likewise, student 6 only practises when there are conversation
examinations and does not practise regularly outside of conversation class. She said, “I usually practise before exams or if I talk to somebody which is not on a regular basis […] outside of class I don’t practise very frequently”. Moreover, when asked how much time was dedicated to the practice of Spanish, participant 8 stated, “Almost none at all […] occasionally I may practise outside of class”. Thus, this implies that these students exercised a low level of agency. They depended on the classroom context to speak Spanish and did not utilize cognitive learning strategies in order to develop this skill. Therefore, they did not assume full responsibility for their own actions and were not classed as agentive learners.

**Metacognitive learning strategies**

Additionally, the students examined in this study employed some metacognitive strategies in order to improve their Spanish conversation skills. These included planning and organizing their learning, asking for clarification, monitoring their speech and thinking in Spanish. According to Anderson and Wenden, students who demonstrate metacognitive strategies tend to reflect a more positive attitude towards their learning (qtd. in Camillo 5). This was evident in this study because some participants of a high proficiency possessed a positive attitude towards learning Spanish. For example, participant 1 demonstrated metacognition to a great extent. This student stated, “[…] you have to have a very high level in your oral expression in order to use the language”. This shows that this student is aware of the level she should be at and sets goals to attain that level. One strategy which she utilized to increase her proficiency level included the planning of her learning as she said, “I try to incorporate at least one conversation in Spanish per day”. Also, her conversations were mostly spontaneous, which indicated a high level of self-confidence. Hence, this student exercised a great level of agency
and autonomy in order to develop her Spanish conversation skills and this metacognitive strategy gives evidence that this student is agentive. Chamot also highlighted the fact that students who implement these strategies tend to have a higher proficiency (2). In contrast, all of the students, both of a high and low level of proficiency carried out some of these metacognitive strategies. However, it can be inferred that students of a lower level of proficiency did not carry out these metacognitive strategies as often as the students of a higher level of proficiency. Participant 8, who had a low level of competence in the language, gave proof of this as he demonstrated a lack of monitoring. He stated, “If I’m speaking and I’m talking about a topic I know a lot about, I won’t really go back and try to fix the errors”. Furthermore, it can be assumed that those of a low level of proficiency, even though they may have implemented some metacognitive strategies, did not fully carry out activities regularly. If they engaged in metacognitive strategies regularly, they would have developed their oral skills to a greater extent. For this reason, they maintained a low proficiency. In order to increase their level, they need to exercise more agency and autonomy by being more responsible for their own actions and carrying out these activities more regularly.

**Motivation**

Motivation is another factor which influences a learner’s agency and autonomy. Previous studies have proven that motivation has a great influence on language learning and causes one to want to learn a particular language. As Xiao mentioned, a student with great motivation will employ certain learning strategies in order to achieve their goals and improve his or her learning of that language. This is seen as an exercise of agency. This study is similar to that of Xiao as it was evident that the students of a higher proficiency level were more motivated than those who had a lower level. For example, when asked the question, “How motivated are you to improve
your oral expression?”, participant 1 stated, “I would say very motivated [...] when learning a language you’re going to have to use it anywhere you go so it’s very important to me”.

Additionally, participant 4 mentioned, “[...] very, very motivated. I must be a native speaker”.

Hence, participant 4 displayed intrinsic motivation as he had a strong desire to improve his communicative ability. He set a goal to be able to speak the language fluently, regulated and took control of his own learning process by engaging in learning strategies regularly to attain this goal. For example, he conversed with a Venezuelan friend every weekend, learned vocabulary and watched educational Spanish programs to learn new expressions and improve his speaking ability. As such, he can be considered to be an agentive learner. The ability of these students to carry out the socio-affective, cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies regularly was therefore influenced by their high level of motivation to attain their goal of speaking the language fluently. Therefore, it is evident that the students with a higher level of proficiency exercised more agency due to their high level of motivation. Also, the opportunities that a language provides for a student in the future influence his or her motivation. In the longitudinal study conducted by Aro, it was concluded that Helen displayed more motivation than Emma due to the opportunities that English would have provided for her. In like manner, some of the participants possessed a high level of motivation because they have goals of using the language when they travel and in their future career. For instance, in the focus groups, one student stated, “I want to become an interpreter so I just keep focusing on that”, and another mentioned, “I am a person who loves to travel and learn new cultures”. Hence, these students displayed a high level of motivation due these extrinsic factors.
Contrasting, most of the students who had a lower level of proficiency in Spanish language had little motivation. When asked how motivated she was, participant 5 said, “Honestly, not very motivated right now… seeing that I’m in a school environment, there is a lot of pressure so after I graduate I think I’ll focus more”. Participant 8 also had a similar experience. He stated, “On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d give myself a 7.5, like I would like to but I have more pressing things”. Therefore, these students displayed a fair to low level of motivation as a result of the pressure of other courses from their degree program. Additionally, improving their Spanish conversation skills was not a priority for these students as they had other academic focuses or personal challenges. Hence, this inhibited their ability to exercise agency and employ learning strategies regularly in order to develop their oral skills. On the other hand, when asked about her motivation, participant 6 replied, “Oh my gosh very motivated […] but sometimes I have so much work that I don’t get time to practise”. Thus, as in the case of participant 6, a student’s motivation, while strong, can be affected by mental fatigue or pressure from other university courses. Consequently, the ability of a student to exercise agency and autonomy can be affected as they may not engage in sufficient learning strategies to improve their conversation skills. Therefore, as evident in the study conducted by Brown, motivation does have a great influence on language learning. A lack of motivation causes one to underperform and maintain a low level of proficiency in the language as there is also little agency exercised by the students (Brown 117). Furthermore, even though a student may be motivated, their agency and ability to carry out learning strategies regularly may be hampered due to the pressures that exist from other degree courses.
As was noted, this chapter examined the relationship among learning strategies, learner agency, autonomy and motivation. It was seen that these factors play an important role in the improvement and development of one’s Spanish conversation skills. The students who implemented more learning strategies and carried them out often displayed a higher level of proficiency. Additionally, the students who had a greater level of motivation were more agentive and maintained a higher level of proficiency in Spanish language. The next chapter will summarize the relevant findings, give possible applications of the study, discuss the limitations present and give recommendations.
Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the factors that influence a student’s ability to better his or her speaking performance, identify how learner agency and autonomy is influential in the development of one’s conversation skills and gain a greater understanding of how motivation affects students’ ability to exercise agency in improving their oral expression.

It was evident that agency has a great influence in the development and improvement of one’s conversation skills. The results of the study indicate that the Spanish level IIA and level IIIA students at the UWI who had both high and low proficiency levels encountered many challenges in their conversation skills in different contexts. These included the lack of background knowledge, unappealing topics, lack of preparation, lack of vocabulary, spontaneity and grammatical knowledge and anxiety. In order to overcome these difficulties, the students carried out various learning strategies. Some of the cognitive strategies which they employed were: reading articles and books in Spanish, listening, practising speaking with friends and native speakers, researching vocabulary, watching videos and singing in Spanish. The metacognitive strategies which the students engaged in were: planning their learning, asking for clarification, organizing and monitoring their speech. These learning strategies were carried out by the students of both a high and low level of proficiency. However, the results from this study proved that students who had a higher proficiency level employed more autonomous learning strategies in order to overcome their challenges and improve their conversation skills. Their actions confirmed that they were more agentive students as they were able to make decisions regarding their own learning and took control and responsibility for their own actions (Brown 102). Additionally, the agentive students who had a high level of proficiency engaged in the
activities more regularly than the students who had a low proficiency level. Also, they tried to practice their conversation skills outside of the classroom setting in order to improve and consequently, these students were at the level they would like to be at and saw little room for improvement. In contrast, some students in the study did not carry out the learning strategies regularly in order to overcome their challenges in the conversation component and therefore, maintained a low proficiency level. These students did not exercise agency in their own learning and as a result, they were not at the level they would have liked to be at, and saw much need for improvement. Furthermore, as postulated by Dornyei and Skehan, motivation is one factor that correlated positively with the use of learning strategies (qtd. in Rivera-Mills and Skehan 543). This study provided evidence of this as it was seen that the students who had a greater motivation to learn Spanish as a foreign language exercised more agency by carrying out more learning strategies and, therefore, maintained a higher level of proficiency in the conversation component than the students who had a fair to low motivation. This investigation also reported that students’ motivation was either intrinsic or extrinsic.

**Limitations**

The sample size for this study was very small as there were 8 students who participated in the interviews and 16 students for the focus groups. This would have limited the insight that the participants provided, whereas, a larger sample size would have generated more data. Additionally, in both focus groups, the proficiency levels of the students were not known. Therefore, their ability to exercise agency in improving their oral skills could not have been related to their proficiency levels. Also, there was no data that specified the grades of the participants which would have provided concrete evidence of their levels of proficiency.
**Recommendations**

As was indicated in this study, many language learners do not carry out learning strategies effectively in order to gain a higher command of the language. Therefore, lecturers can provide guidance for students in order for them to use more effective and long-lasting learning strategies to overcome their problems. This will allow the students to exercise more agency and develop and improve their conversation skills. Additionally, in order to attain better results, another investigation can be replicated using more participants at different levels to substantiate the findings which have been manifested in this study. Moreover, the conversation grades of the participants can be utilized in the findings to provide definite proof of the improvement or lack thereof in the conversation component. This will also give evidence of the effect exercising of agency has on students. In other similar studies where focus groups are used, the proficiency levels of the participants should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, other factors can be investigated in similar studies to determine other elements which influence students’ communicative abilities.
Appendix

Focus Group questions

- Why are you studying Spanish?
- What are the main challenges you experience in the oral component
  a) in the classroom?
  b) in exam situations? and
  c) in informal settings?
- What steps are you taking to overcome these challenges?
- Do you use the feedback given by lecturers to improve your conversation skills?
- Do you take advantage of the student assistant program to help improve your oral expression?
- What motivates you to improve your oral skills?
- Are you at the level you would like to be at as second year students?

Interview questions

- How would you assess your own competence in your oral expression in Spanish?
- How much time do you dedicate to practice your speaking skills in Spanish?
- Do you practice speaking outside of class?
- What are the main problems you experience
  a) in the classroom?
  b) in exam situations? and
c) in informal settings?

- What activities do you do to overcome these problems?
- How motivated are you to improve your oral expression?
- Do you plan the activities that you do before you actually carry them out?
- What do you do when you come across a word that you do not know?
- If you make mistakes (for example grammar mistakes) while speaking to someone, do you go back to correct your errors?
- What do you do when you do not understand a word when speaking to someone such as a native speaker?
- Are you at the level you think you should be at as a third year Spanish student?
Works Cited


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