Incorporating a Language Learning Platform to Promote Independent Study The case of Spanish at UWI St. Augustine

Diego Mideros Camargo (MLL)
Diego.Mideros@sta.uwi.edu
Maria Landa Buil (CLL)
Maria.Landa@sta.uwi.edu

The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad W.I.
Biennial Conference of the UWI Schools of Education
April 24, 2013

Overview

Type of study:
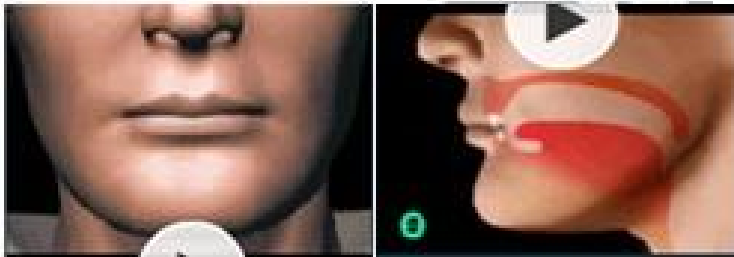- Qualitative case study

Research questions
- How do students from specialist and non-specialist Spanish programmes respond to the inclusion of a Learning Management System (LMS) platform that seeks to complement their classroom learning experience?
- What could possibly explain their responses?
- How does this LMS respond to the programmes needs for self-access and independent learning sought in our student populations?

Objectives:
- to evaluate a commercial LMS as an independent language learning resource for Caribbean university students from the perspective of the students themselves
- to analyse university students' responses to digital independent learning

The commercial LMS

"Comprehensive approach to foreign language learning, combining rich, quality content with the flexibility and interactivity of multimedia."

It is based on the CEFR and it has learning paths that suit each one of the CEFR levels up to C1.

Research contexts
(Spanish at UWI, St. Augustine)

Degree programme at Modern Languages and Linguistics (MLL)	Non-specialist program at the Centre for Language Learning (CLL)
• 3-year, skills-based approach programme	• Spanish for Specific purposes one year long courses (Management and International Relations) and • Semester long general courses from levels A1 to B1-B2.
• 6 contact hours per week in a 13-week semester system	• 4 contact hours per week in a 13-week semester system.
• Students come into the programme with relatively high but diverse levels of proficiency.	• Students enter the programme with little or no previous knowledge of Spanish.

Rationale for the inclusion of the LMS

- "Technology could play a major role in enhancing L2 learners' contact with the target language" (Blake, 2008, p. 2)
  - Diverse student population with different strengths and difficulties that cannot always be addressed in class (CLL and MLL)
  - The need to encourage students to exercise independent and autonomous learning (CLL and MLL)
  - A placement test for new students who have some previous Spanish knowledge (CLL)
  - The progress and achievement tests could be good tools to see student improvement (CLL)

Review of related literature

- Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Beatty, K. (2010)
- SLA, language teaching, and technology. Blake, R. (2008)
- Technology and language learning. Zhao, Y. (2005)
- Autonomy in language learning. Control over learning content. Benson, P. (2011)
- Strong and weak pedagogies for Learner Autonomy. Smith, R.C. (2003)

Implementation

The LMS was piloted during the academic year 2011-12

Assessment was an issue of debate: To assess or not to assess?

MLL LMS as an independent Self-Access tool	CLL The learner population was divided into 3 different scenarios:
Semester 1: 10% of the final mark (4 completed lessons of their level B2 and/or C1) **Semester 2:** 5% of extra-credit	1. LMS **instead of a textbook**. Its use was compulsory and weighed 20% of their final mark. 2. LMS as an **additional tool**. Its use was mandatory and weighed 20% of the final mark. 3. LMS as a **voluntary and optional tool**. Its use had no weight in the overall mark.

Implementation (cont'd)

1. The placement test determines the learner's level and recommends a learning programme according to the level.
2. Students had freedom to explore and to experiment with the LMS contents.
3. The aim was to empower students to control the content of the LMS.
4. Students had to comply with a specific number of lessons (4 lesson MLL) or hours (20 hours CLL).
5. It was strongly recommended that students work on a weekly basis.
6. At the end of each semester we reviewed students' activity reports to determine their mark.

Methodology

- **Qualitative case study**
- **Data collections strategies**
  - We used surveys seeking to determine students' perceptions of the platform and how they approached it. They included items concerning learners' views on:
    - i. ease of use and user friendliness,
    - ii. content and
    - iii. flaws.

- **Ethical considerations**

  All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and granted their permission to use the information they provided. The identities of the participants will be kept confidential at all times during the study and its dissemination.

Methodology (cont'd)

	MLL	CLL
S U R V E Y S	**LMS Experience Survey**: • online survey (google forms). • (15) items. Four (4) closed items and eleven (11) open-ended items.	**LMS Experience Survey**: • online survey (encuesta fácil). • (14) items. (12) closed items and two (2) open-ended items.

P A R T I C I P A N T S	(N=47) completed the survey
	     (N=19) 1st year students
	     (N=23) 2nd year students
	     (N=5) 3rd year students
		(N=58) completed the survey
		     (N=20) Spanish for specific purposes
		     (N=38) from the general programme:
		         (N=8) 1A
		         (N=15) 1B
		         (N=10) 2A
		         (N=5) 2B

Findings: Students' responses

MLL (N=47)	CLL (N=58)
(N=38) found it beneficial (N=42) would recommend it to a friend	(N=40) Satisfied (N=7) Very satisfied (N=51) Would recommend it to a friend

Students in both groups perceived the LMS as a useful platform highlighting elements such as:

- Vocabulary and structure
- Rich variety of exercises
- Interesting videos for listening comprehension and culture
- Instant feedback
- The speech recognition feature was appreciated by those students who could use it without major technical difficulties

Findings: Students' responses

| MLL	CLL
"Although last semester it was done last-minute, I found that it was rather enjoyable. It's a more informal and way to recap things we should know and learn things we do not know. However, there are glitches with regards to the mic which make it cumbersome at times."	*"I think it is a very good way to learn the language especially since it encourages me to practice at home. It is like having a Spanish teacher at home."*

Findings: What could have influenced negative responses?

	MLL	CLL
Technical difficulties	*"…there were many difficulties with the voice recognition. There were times where I had to say my sentences 35 times before it was recognised and i was saying the sentence correctly."*	● *"The microphones give problems at times."* ● *"It is some times difficult to record and process for the pronunciation exercises, particularly on a home computer."*
Time consuming	*"My experience was useful in terms of learning Spanish, it was also a different way to study and learn new things, however, it was too time consuming."* **(MLL)**	

Findings: What could have influenced negative responses?

	MLL	CLL
Placement test	*"The assessment was inaccurate. I guessed most of the answers on the assessment test and still performed well. (...) The assessment indicated that I was at a B1 level of Spanish which is not at all true."* (CLL)	
Repetitiveness and level of difficulty	*"I disagree with the fact that the activities were appropriate for my level. (...) most of the activities did not challenge me in any way. They were fun at first because of their simplicity but after a while, it became a task."*	*"... it's a horrible program to use. i learnt nothing..i am just doing it to get the 30 hrs. I have to study Spanish on my own from a text book. It has things like hang man and crossword puzzles....how is that teaching me Spanish."*

Participation on the LMS dropped significantly from semester 1 to semester 2 (MLL)
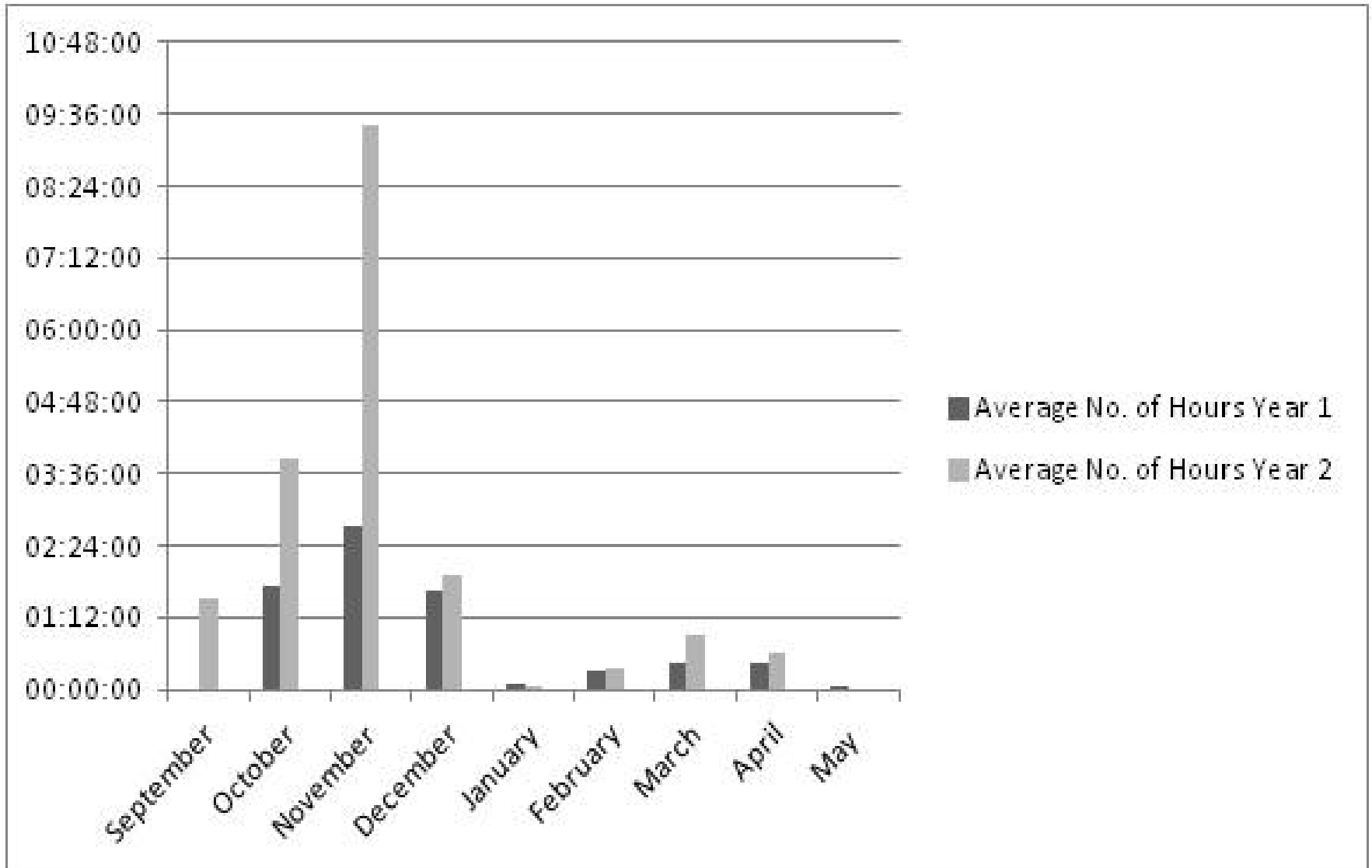
How does this LMS respond to the programmes needs for self-access and independent learning sought in our student populations?

Both cases yielded similar findings. In both cases findings were mixed:

- Despite the positive responses at both **MLL and CLL** the participation on LMS dropped significantly from semester 1 to semester 2.
- CLL's scenario 2 was the most successful one. Students responded well to the 20% of the final mark and the occasional use of the LMS in class.
- At MLL students only participated actively in semester 1 when it was a mandatory activity that affected their mark. They stopped using it in semester 2 when it became optional although there was an extra credit involved.
- It seems to work better for beginners than for advance students.
- The LMS seems a good additional resource for language learning, but there are issues with the different testing tools in the system.
- It lacks social interaction.

Findings and closing remarks

"The effects of any technology on learning outcomes lies in its uses." (Zhao, 2005, p. 17-18)

..any activity without adequate pedagogical planning - technologically enhanced or not- will produce unsatisfactory results (Blake, 2008, p.11)

Strong pedagogies versus weak pedagogies for learner autonomy (Smith, 2003)

-This LMS has great potential as independent learning resource. Yet, some students paid more attention to the compulsory element and approached the task superficially.

-Although the implementation was carefully planned, students' response to it was not as expected.

-Independent study does not necessarily mean students working alone, this study shows that students need guidance even in independent tasks.

-The results lead us to wonder whether employing a weak-oriented pedagogical approach, in which learners are assumed as non-autonomous, could support learners' independent learning. E.g. assign specific activities.

¡Gracias!