Title: *Exploring Foreign Language (Spanish) teaching best practice in online delivery of the Reading Comprehension and Writing module at the UWI, St. Augustine.*

Sub-theme: Teaching and Learning

Abstract:

Reading Comprehension and Writing are skills which are taught as one of three modules in the Spanish level one degree programme at the UWI, St. Augustine. Historically this language course has been taught as face to face. At the UWI, the Spanish section decided that we could no longer ignore the extensive changes to literacy taking place in a digital world of information and communication. Moreover, we felt that we had precious little research on which we could fall back, both to inform our understanding of the use of online modalities in foreign language teaching as well as to theorise on the impact of online delivery on foreign language courses.

After an impact and assessment study in 2013, the Spanish section of the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics decided to begin teaching this two hour module of the course SPAN 1001 – Spanish Language IA in the online mode in the academic year of 2014-2015. This paper's principal objective is an evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of the virtual mode of delivery through a reflection on one semester's work in the programme. It examines the format used, the perceptions of both students and lecturers with respect to workload, motivation and flexibility.

Among its recommendations, the paper suggests that this online module is necessary both for increasing the technological literacy of students in the Spanish programme and for raising the level of competitiveness of students of Spanish graduating from the UWI.

Keywords: Teaching Reading Comprehension and Writing, Teaching and Learning Online, Virtual Learning.

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1. Introduction

Online learning is spreading rapidly through higher education, compelling us, as teachers, to face existing assumptions of the teaching and learning process. In fact, higher education institutions are more and more challenged to meet the demands and expectations of the society for prospective students.

The Strategic Plan 2012 - 2017 of the University of the West Indies explicitly advocates for the blended model with educational and economic arguments: "Blended learning, besides improving the quality of instruction, will free up physical classroom space by thus reducing the need for additional capital expenditures on physical infrastructure" (The University Office of Planning and Development, 2012). Moreover, the Plan outlines six perspectives which are pivotal to the university's operations. They are: Financial, Employee Engagement and Development, Internal Operational Processes, Teaching, Learning and Student Development, Research and Innovation and Outreach.

With the external recommendation in mind, the Spanish section of the UWI St. Augustine, decided to modify the first year of the Spanish Language programme during the 2014/2015 academic year. The courses SPAN 1001 - Spanish Language IA (Semester 1) and SPAN 1002 - Spanish Language IB (Semester 2) are the entry level courses for the degree programme in Spanish at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. The courses are divided into three components: i) Conversation and Listening Comprehension, ii) Reading Comprehension and Writing and iii) Communicative Grammar.

The purpose was to create a shift from the existing solely face-to-face lessons to the blended model. It was also decided that this new model would be implemented through the *virtualization* of one of the three components of the course. Up until the 2013-14 academic year the Reading Comprehension and Writing module (2 hours) was taught as a face to face class. The Reading Comprehension and Writing module was chosen while keeping the face to face classes for the other two modules: 'Listening Comprehension and Conversation' and 'Communicative Grammar'. It was felt that students needed to be kept up to date with the use of technology and communication technology in reading comprehension and specifically in writing, and we also speculated that teaching reading and writing online would increase student writing competencies.

This paper aims to reflect on both the benefits and the challenges which students experienced over two semesters (September to December 2014 and January to May 2015). This reflection is necessary as we seek to establish best practice in teaching reading comprehension and writing in the FL at the tertiary level in a twenty-first century Caribbean context.

2. Literature Review

The concept "blended learning" is defined as "the effective combination of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning" (Procter, 2003). We want to clarify that for this project, we understand "blended learning" as a delivery mode where online and classroom teaching are combined. The component 'Reading and Writing' is delivered online following an "hybrid model", while the other two components: 'Communicative Grammar' and 'Listening Comprehension and Conversation' are delivered face to face. According to Martyn (2003) in the hybrid model students start the course with a face-to-face- orientation session and the rest of the course is delivered online with the support of a teacher who

organizes the activities and guides the process. Therefore, the courses SPAN 1001 and SPAN 1002 were delivered following a blended learning model.

Figure 1: Blended Learning Model SPAN 1001- SPAN 1002
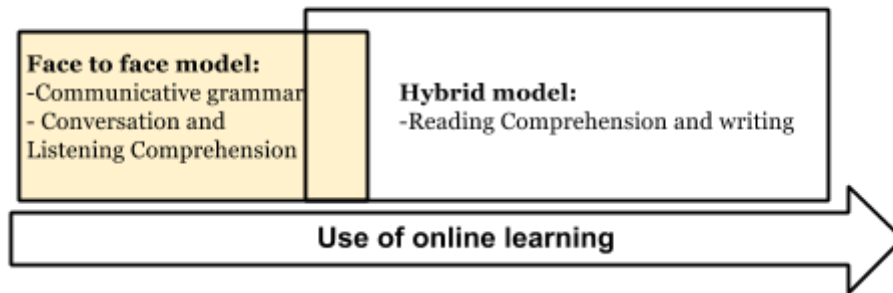
2.1. Advantages for the student and linguistic acquisition

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

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

Some authors believe that online teaching reduces the levels of anxiety in the learner. Bartolic-Zlomislic and Bates (1999) affirm that "anonymity can result in greater participation from all students, including shy ones". On the other hand, Sengupta (2001) concluded from a case study that in online interaction, students feel more motivated to participate and more engaged in the activities. In addition, it contributes to balancing the number and the frequency of the student's interactions.

As for writing, Sengupta (2001) found that a student makes a greater effort to produce better texts when these will be read by a wider amount of readers. Moreover, forums, wikis and other resources allow continuous written interaction as well as collaborative work (Weasenforth, 2002).

Access. Today, second language learners have access to more information and resources on the internet which assist them with their reading and writing activities. In this way, students can rely on technology and tools to solve problems related to low-level cognitive processes such as finding the meaning of words in a dictionary. Loucky (2009) found that reading in a foreign language (FL) was more meaningful when the learner had access to these tools. Internet provides the learner with possibilities to interact directly with the foreign culture through forums, wikis, blogs, newspapers, videos, podcasts, etcetera. The student finds the

material and resources from the internet not only in its original format and context, but also linked to other resources that complement and widen the variety of *input*[1].

Flexibility. Learners have the flexibility to work at their own pace. Some of the activities may allow the learners to choose materials with which they prefer to work and in a way that they find will facilitate their learning process. In this way, the learning process is centred on the learner and not dependent on the teacher or the limitations of the educative system. This implies that this methodology agrees with the conclusions from recent studies on Second Language Teaching that highlight the importance of the learners' individual differences (Martín Peris, 2000)

In addition, we noted that it is frequent to have dyslexic students in our programmes and we felt that they could specifically benefit from the use of technology (Mejía, Díaz, Florian-Gaviria & Fabregat, 2012). Grammar and Spell Checkers provide immediate feedback about common errors allowing students to focus their attention on high-level cognitive processes.

2.2. Advantages for the teacher and the university.

The role of the teacher changes from being a transmitter of knowledge to a mediator. In online education "the students learn more than just the course content" (Bartolic-Zlomislic and Bates, 1999) they have a variety of resources available online that help to develop autonomy in their own learning process. In this way, Johannasen and Eide (2000) affirm that the responsibility of the teacher is to make the appropriate arrangements to facilitate the learning process.

The teacher will be able to monitor the participation of each student and communicate with them individually in a continuous and egalitarian manner; which makes the amount and quality of teacher-student interaction higher that in face-to-face interactions.

Economical benefits. Online tutoring not only benefits economically the students by reducing the expenses of transportation, but also the expenses of books and other learning materials. The university does not receive an additional income for this type of course; however, previous studies have demonstrated that online courses are "at least as cost-effective as conventional courses" (Bartolic-Zlomislic and Bates, 1999).

2.3. Limitations

Some of the limitations that were expected for the implementation of this course are related to preparedness, time management and computer literacy. Johannasen & Eide (2000) believe that technical aids can also generate reluctance to learn due to many different factors, for example, it requires that the teacher, as well as the student have some knowledge about how to use certain online applications. They affirm that a programme or application which does not function can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration. On the contrary, if it functions as it should, it will increase the student's and teacher's motivation thereby enriching the learning experience.

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

In order to obtain positive results from this experience, it is expected that the teacher and the students are ready to embrace this method of delivery. However, in the initial survey, both instructors and students demonstrated a lack of acceptance of the proposal of this new course. "Use of new technology in teaching and tutoring engages teachers but it also creates a certain scepticism" (Johannasen & Eide, 2000). Among our teachers and students, there was a common belief that this new method would increase the amount of work and would require more dedicated time for the activities from both parties; the student and the instructor.

Bartolic-Zlomislic and Bates (1999) found in their research that the fact that the course has a 24/7 access, it creates "unrealistic expectations of the course"; on one hand, teachers and students may believe that they are expected to work online all the time. On the other hand, as the course material and activities are available permanently, they may opt to delay their work, which can affect other students, especially in those activities where interaction and collaborative work is required.

3. Research Methodology
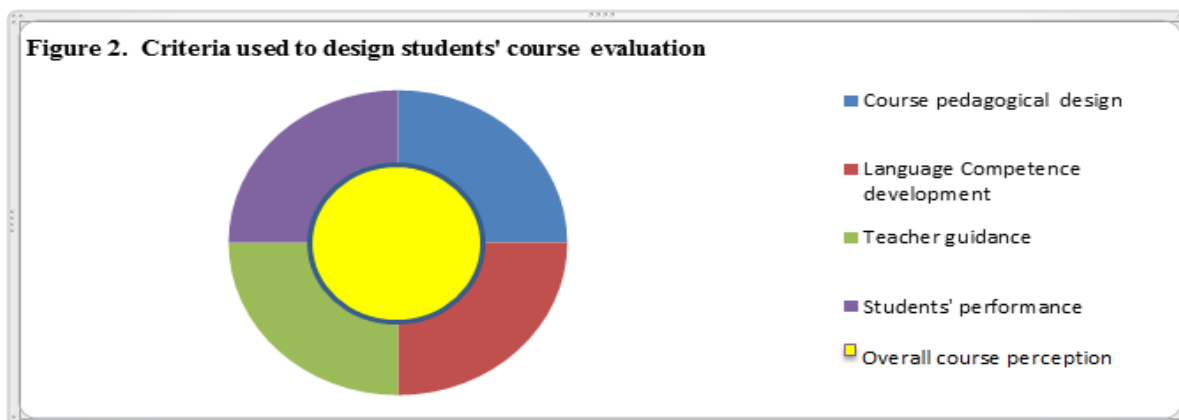
3.1. Method of research

The teaching team of Carolina Arrieta, Suly Corredor, Nicole Roberts and Jairo Sánchez (Semester one) formulated the idea for the use of action research so as to research and reflect on the online course and to write up the results in the form of a paper. Action research method offers a blend of theory and practice that could be used to improve the ongoing course project. In fact, the results of the survey made at the end of semester I (2014) were taken into account to design the content of semester II (2015). This method was considered appropriate as students partaking in the course would benefit as much as the Instructors of the courses who would find the reflection involved in the research of great benefit. Perhaps most importantly, we also felt that this kind of research would contribute to overall Instructor effectiveness in the teaching of reading comprehension and writing in Spanish. However, it is also important to note that this research is important at the level of administration at the UWI as our findings would certainly contribute to the knowledge base regarding best practice in the area of teaching and learning in reading comprehension and writing in Spanish at the UWI, St. Augustine.

3.2. Data collection

Participants in the study came from the cohort of students entering the first year of the Spanish programme in August 2014. The initial group comprised 61 students (54 female and 7 male). However, this changed to 45 female and 4 male giving an overall total of 49 students in semester 2. While it was felt that a completely online module would certainly be more challenging to students, as many of them enter with varying online skills, the first year of the programme was nevertheless chosen as it was also felt that students at this level should be exposed to and ultimately display a command in the world of online reading.

SPAN 1001 - Spanish Language IA is 12 weeks in length. In week 1, students were asked to use the platform, to complete a general questionnaire assessing both motivation and technological knowledge. One in-class session of one hour's duration was held at the start of each semester and sought to orient students to the platform (myeLearning) and material to be used in the course.

Each week students had 'Actividades' as well as 'Tareas' to complete. These took varied forms and were mainly independent activities although 'foros' were used to provide students with opportunities to express ideas and opinion through discussion and writing. The shorter 'actividades' were seen as important to the development of strategic readers while the longer 'tareas' were seen as crucial to providing students with moments for more thoughtful reflection. Two quizzes were also included and these were conducted online. Students were asked to complete 18 question questionnaires in order to evaluate the module, focusing on 5 criteria as follow:

Figure 2. Criteria used to design students' course evaluation

- Course pedagogical design
- Language Competence development
- Teacher guidance
- Students' performance
- Overall course perception

The course instructors also gave their assessments of the course through a face to face meeting that was recorded. In this meeting instructors discussed all aspects of the course and reflected on analysing best practice and on improving the course structure. Overall, all of this data was collated and is analysed in detail in this paper.

4. Results / Findings

4.1. Regarding the material and the sources

- **Selecting text in real contexts**

Following the guidelines of the communicative approach in teaching a foreign language, the selection of texts that made up the course material was determined by the appropriateness of these to real life. Given the online methodology, students could access the text in its real platform. For instance, a normal activity of the component was to read and get familiar with a digital newspaper article. Afterwards students were able to produce a written article as close to the authentic material as possible. In terms of the financial benefit to the UWI, this module proved efficient resource utilisation when using the myeLearning platform as the software in which students have access to real context material, forums, assignments communication channels among other interactions. Additionally, no physical infrastructure is needed to carry on the class and encourages a culture of soft-copy material delivery, thus reducing the printing budget.

- **Access to learning content 24/7. The learning is not limited to class time**

The most positive aspect of the 24/7 access to learning content is that students can take the course activities at their own pace and when they feel most inspired. As one student said: "I

prefer the online course because it allows me to complete the assignments on my own timing and schedule" (SPAN1001 Survey, November 2014).

Not only learning content but also course documentation (course outline, rubrics and any other relevant information) were permanently available for students on myeLearning throughout the two semesters. This point addresses one of the best practice items: accessible documentation.

However, there was one drawback in this regard; the fact that students could access material whenever they wanted facilitated some of them working just before the deadline. This caused problems in tasks that required interaction, especially in those groups where members tended to wait until the end to carry out the activity:

> "The majority of the group members this semester I had always waited till the night of the discussion deadline to post things when myself and a few others would post earlier in the week and wait forever for others to discuss with. This jeopardized my marks with regard to participation and was certainly not fair" (SPAN1002 Survey, April 2015).

- **Access to greater number of resources**

Here again we find both an advantage: access to more resources and different types of activities, as well as a challenge: the overwhelming abundance of online resources that makes it difficult to select appropriate materials.

Regarding the access to more resources, it is clear that students could access a greater amount of material and tools as they completed their activities: translators, dictionaries, online encyclopedia, etc. In many cases, it facilitated their tasks and allowed them to make a thorough investigation of those elements that caught their attention: "Thank you for the 'flipped classroom'. I like the 24 hour access and convenience. It allows me a lot of independence for research" (SPAN1001 Survey, November 2014).

For example, in one of the activities for the first semester; students had to surf a web page containing information on the diary of Anne Frank. They had the opportunity to visit the links they wanted in order to research the history of this historical figure. Then, they were asked to comment in   the forums on what they   had   found out.
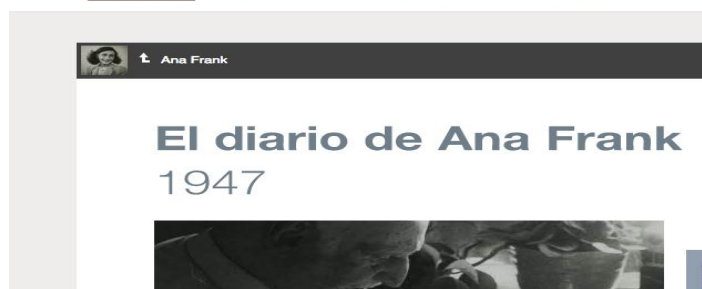
Screenshot Activity "El diario de Ana Frank" http://www.annefrank.org/es/Ana-Frank/El-diario-de-Ana-Frank/

On the other hand, the large number of resources available online meant that tutors had to have a much more critical sense in selecting this material. As one tutor said: "As a teacher,

you select the material that you think is serious, appropriate and well written, but you also know that some websites might contain data errors of which you are not necessarily aware" (Instructors Survey, April 2015). A good strategy seems to be instilling critical thinking in students. For both Instructors and students alike, it is necessary to evaluate the authority of the sources.

Antibioticos:

Antibióticos son tipos de las medicinas se puede usar para matar las bacterias o infecciones en el cuerpo. Existen en las formas de Las pastillas y los líquidos.

Screenshot of the activity "glossary of health" (Semester 2, 2015) in which students had to define a word related to the health field and add a related image

- **Different types of activities**

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One of the most positive aspects according to the students was the diversity of activities carried out each semester: "I like the variety of the activities and assignments for each week. It is something to look forward to and it really does capture my interest" (Student Survey Semester I, November 2014). There were glossaries, forums, wikis, quizzes, blogs, emails, etc. Obviously this module requires two main activities: reading and writing. The online platform gives the opportunity to read and write in different formats and procedures, which, ultimately, helps to increase the motivation of the student. This point is related to one of the best practice indicators mentioned in the introduction: *Teaching Learning and Student Development*.

4.2. Regarding students' and teachers' roles

- **Intervention not simply attendance.**

This aspect points to the benefit of participation not being related to the attendance, We all know that some students are present in body but not "in soul" in our classes. The online method is a good way to prevent the student being tempted not to engage in class, either because of laziness or shyness, since there were mandatory post in the forums. As one of our students said: "I like that we can actively participate in forums and contribute to our classmates' opinions because sometimes participation in a classroom environment is hindered due to timidity and fear of being wrong" (SPAN1001 Survey, November 2014). Thus this module proved to promote an "Active learning" which is fundamental in assuring academic quality.

- **Student's tasks can be followed and evaluated easier by the teacher.**

The evaluation of the learning process not only involves assigning a grade to the students' work. In our case, it was essential to give feedback on how to improve writing skills. The possibility of having the contributions of our students registered every week allowed us to make an individualised tracking of the acquiring process of their written competence. Every

successful evaluation goes through a learning process monitoring in which feedback is crucial. Moreover this methodology facilitated continuous *Student-staff contact.*

On the other hand, this same method entailed some challenges to be taken into account in future applications of the virtual project. The constant feedback that the module required to be successful supposed an increase in instructor's workload. At the beginning of the course, Instructors agreed an agenda in which they pledged to give feedback weekly. This task became especially hard in the second semester, when instructors were enrolled in a greater amount of departmental activities and courses/modules. As one of the tutors said: "There were weeks in which I was really busy teaching and correcting. I had no option but to postpone the feedback of the online component" (Survey instructors, April 2015).

An Instructor would never skip class because of the workload. But it is easier to feel that providing feedback to students can pass to the background when there are other teaching activities prioritised. Some students noticed this: "The course is designed in a way that facilitates learning, however, the lack of feedback from the tutor made it very difficult to track my progress during the semester" (SPAN1002 Survey April 2015).

Thus, getting the commitment of the Instructors with a realistic agenda of work is a challenge to be considered for the next semester. This aspect is essential to the success of this component.

4.3. Regarding the results

- **Greater written production**

Significant among the data sets collected is the number of texts that were produced by the students of the component. Summing up forums and final tasks, the minimum number of texts required to pass the component in the first semester was about 9 final tasks and 36 forum posts. In the second semester, due to reduction of final tasks, the minimum number of texts to be produced was 3 final tasks and over 36 forum posts. Considering that in the former face-to-face modality of this component each student was required to produce 3 final tasks and 9 forum posts, the online modality shows an increase in students' written production. To write these tasks and forum posts students also needed to read each other's work. Therefore, the student's practice of reading and writing has been greater. Whether student writing has been better is an indicator that is not intended to be addressed in this study, even though it would be interesting to do it in future research.

- **Time spent**

This was another of the major challenges of the project. When considering the material of the component, tutors decided to create meaningful learning activities that required active searching of information from the student. As a result, students complained that they took too long doing the activities. In fact, the survey conducted at the end of the semester showed a "disturbing' data, half of the students (48%) said that they spent more than 6 hours per week doing the activities of the component (and 16% who used more than 8 hrs.), as one student explained:

> "...during the first half of the semester, there were too many activities to complete before the deadline, which required a lot of time for only one aspect of the course. Sometimes only one activity took more than an hour to complete…"

The Instructor's aim, in terms of workload for the students, was calculated at 2-4 hours of work per week. Thus, by the second half of semester 1, the Instructors decided to reassess the amount of work and eliminate some activities. This was taken into account when creating the material of the second semester. For example, weekly final tasks were substituted by only three final tasks every four weeks. Furthermore, the amount of forum activities to be completed every week was decreased. The change was noted and as a result of that the survey of April (2015) shows that 73% of students spent less than 6 hours per week working on the component. The same student quoted above continued:

> "...But now it has gotten better. The assigned work can be completed within the allotted time and there is no rush to complete the assignments hours before the deadline as they can be easily completed during the week in intervals".

● **Digital culture**

What began as a challenge: familiarity with digital tools integrated into the course, was meant soon to become a profit. In the survey of students at the beginning of the sem 1 course, nearly half of the students (43%) confessed to being wary of online learning. An observation of the evolution of the course, though, shows how students slowly managed to master the tools of the myeLearning platform. The tool "Questions Forum" registered 7 to 9 posts every week in the first half of semester 1. These posts were produced by students enquiring about the correct procedure to complete the activities. The same tool registered only 1 to 2 posts in the second half of that semester, a number that continued decreasing in the second semester. As one of the students said: "The course allows us to improve our computer skills, which is crucial in the world today". After the online module experience, the digital skills aimed by the UWI for the distinctive graduate seems to be compatible with the language learning objectives.

5. Conclusions

The Spanish Language section of UWI decided to modify the programme from the existing face to face modality only to a blended learning programme by delivering online the Reading and Writing module. We believe this *virtualization* project proved efficient for two reasons. On the one hand, for having more advantages than disadvantages at the teaching/learning level, according to both students' and instructors' opinions and moreover, for being in line with the objectives of international best practice.

The following challenges/difficulties must be taken into account in future applications of the virtual project.
● One of these is finding a balanced and fair workload with other modules of the course by reducing either the number or the length of course activities.
● Future course instructors need to better inform both students and other teachers about the benefits of blended learning in our programme, which allows students to acquire digital literacy.
● It will also be essential to establish a working agenda agreed by tutors to face a task that is perceived as essential for students in assessing the course: that is, consistent feedback on their work.

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

Nevertheless, several advantages were identified. The online component frees up physical classroom space by thus reducing the need for additional capital expenditures on physical infrastructure at the UWI. This is undoubtedly an advantage regarding funding issues and it also refers to one best practice item: "the efficient use of resources".

In academic quality, this module proved to enhance teaching, learning and student development experiences as well as the commitment of students to this programme by:
- Increasing students' motivation because of the diversity of activities and different roles, that students have in online learning, by which their participation in the course is not limited solely to attendance but to the intervention in forums. Thus promotes the modality of "Active learning".
- Granting students access to more resources in more realistic contexts that facilitate the learning process and allows the realistic practice, therefore, making the student more communicative, which is a fundamental aspect in teaching and learning foreign languages.
- Creating flexibility in the learning process that encourages autonomy, inviting students to create their own work agenda.
- Increasing written interaction not only among students but also between students and teachers, thereby reinforcing "Staff-student contact".
- Facilitating student acquisition of the necessary digital skills for success in a modern workplace. This is a fundamental attribute of the distinctive UWI graduate.

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

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