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Investigating language learner autonomy and agency at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus.

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Abstract

Research has shown that learner autonomy is a desirable goal (Benson 2), especially in the field of higher education. This study focuses on investigating learner autonomy and agency among third-year Spanish language students at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. This study also seeks to examine and gain insight into students' perceptions and experiences with an autonomous learning project that was done in the first semester of their second academic year, 2019-2020 at the university which was intended to promote and increase students' autonomy. Challenges, learning strategies employed and the effect of reflective journaling to promote student autonomy are discussed. This research took on a case study approach and the data gathered was qualitative as the research instrument used was interviews. The data gathered was coded into various themes that emerged from participants' responses and then analysed. Through the findings of the research, it was revealed that students encounter a variety of challenges while studying Spanish, that students have varying levels of autonomy and agency, and that they implement various types of learning strategies in an attempt to overcome their difficulties. It was also revealed that reflective journaling is a useful activity to promote autonomy amongst students as it fosters a sense of responsibility whereby students are able better to plan, analyse, execute and monitor their learning. The study also reveals some challenges that students encounter while completing the project. Challenges include poor time management, lack of consistency, and overload of work. Nevertheless, the researcher concludes that reflective journaling and students' ownership and responsibility for planning and executing additional activities in their own time are promising tools to foster and facilitate students' autonomy.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the importance of learning foreign languages cannot be understated. The ability to communicate in more than one language is deemed as an essential skill to possess. Moreover, because of Trinidad and Tobago's proximity to Latin America and more recently, the migration of many native Spanish speakers to the island's shores, the Spanish language is of great importance to the country. The language is taught at various levels in the education system, those being at the secondary level and tertiary level. At the University of the West Indies, Spanish is offered at an undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD level.

At the undergraduate level, one of the intended learning outcomes of the Spanish programme, is for students to demonstrate the use of a plethora of higher-order skills and strategies for language learning. In the second year of the programme, students are required to participate in an autonomous learning project in the reading and writing component of the course. The project is seen as a tool to promote and develop students' autonomy. From the first week, students are required to begin a process of permanent reflection to identify and determine some of their difficulties with learning the language. This activity is to be done with the aim of trying to overcome their difficulties. After identifying their challenges, students are required to devise an action plan outlining activity that fit their personality and their own learning style and that the students intend to implement to overcome their challenges. The idea is that the student enjoys the activities that they carry out. The plan must be flexible, and students must also be consistent and flexible in case that they are not satisfied with the results.

The project lasts for 10 weeks and during these ten weeks, students are required to engage in various activities with the goal of improving any difficulty that they may have. They are also required to keep a self-study reflective journal in which they write weekly

journal entries reporting on the extra activities that they undertook to improve their learning outside of the classroom as well as commenting on the process, challenges they may have encountered, their observations and improvements and how they feel. Students are also encouraged to submit these reflections weekly to their teachers in order to receive feedback and any assistance that they may need. At the end of the 10 weeks, students are required to write a report in the form of an article to draw conclusions about the process and the autonomous learning project.

A learner's performance, progress and success in a language are often dependent upon their learning and more importantly, their learning beyond the classroom. Learner autonomy is a widely sought-after goal for many tertiary-level institution programmes. If learners are reflexively engaged in their learning, learning is more likely to be productive and successful as it is more personal and learner-centred (Little 1). Additionally, with respect to second and foreign language learning, effective communication is dependent upon a complex of formal skills that can only be developed through use and since language learning is so dependent on language use, for learners who have a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment, it should be easier to perfect discourse roles that are required for effective and spontaneous communication (Little 1).

As such, this paper seeks to investigate the agency and autonomy of the third year, 2020-2021 students at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus as well as gather the student perspective of the autonomous learning project and its implications on foreign language students' learning process.

Rationale

The motivation for this topic came from the personal reflection of learning a language during secondary school as well as after completing the autonomous learning project of the SPAN2001 reading and writing component. At the end of the sixth form, I noticed that I was nowhere near being fluent in the Spanish language however I was further ahead in the French language. Whilst reflecting, I realized that my progress in French was due to the fact that I was motivated, I had goals that I wanted to achieve, and that my teachers also inspired and motivated me. However, with Spanish that was not the case for me, and as such, my performance was hindered. This all changed after beginning my undergraduate degree and pursuing Spanish as a minor. After reflecting and completing the autonomous learning project in year two, I realized that my mediocre performance in Spanish was due to the fact that I was dependent on classroom activities alone and on my teacher, I was not actively practicing and engaging with the language, not practicing agency, and not doing activities to promote my autonomy with Spanish.

While interacting with my university classmates, I learned that in the past, some of them experienced a lack of motivation and often depended solely on teachers and classroom activity for their language acquisition but after completing the autonomy project they expressed their appreciation and praises for the project. Therefore, as a current year three student with the hope of possibly joining the education sector, I would like to identify challenges that students experience and their effects on their language learning process as well as the strategies that could be implemented by both teachers and students to overcome said challenges. Additionally, I would like to investigate whether a project and process like the SPAN2001 autonomous learning project could be of benefit to both teacher and student in enhancing the learning experience of students.

Aims

- To investigate the challenges encountered by students studying the Spanish language.
- To identify how exercising agency and autonomy can help students overcome their challenges.
- To gain a greater understanding of the impact of an autonomous learning project on undergraduate-level students studying Spanish.

Research questions

In this study, the researcher aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by students studying the Spanish language?
2. Are students agentive and exercise autonomy to overcome their challenges?
3. What kind of effect does an autonomous learning project have on students studying the Spanish language at the undergraduate level?

Methodology

This study seeks to investigate students' challenges and strategies used in studying Spanish as a foreign language, their agency and autonomy along with the role that it plays in their learning process and their experience with the autonomous learning project. The researcher conducted this case study at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus and the study consisted of qualitative data. For primary data collection, a structured open-ended interview was chosen. The interview consisted of 16 questions (see appendix 1). The interview questions were based on students' Spanish studying habits before attending university, the challenges that students may face with studying Spanish, the methods students employ to overcome their challenges and questions about their experience, and opinions of the autonomous learning project. The analysis of the data was then carried out by thematic

coding. Information was also acquired from existing literature related to the theme of this study. Secondary sources of data were gathered from various online resources such as journals, databases, books, and related research projects.

Participants

The target population for this study was the year three Spanish language students from the academic year 2020-2021, who study Spanish as a major and minor and who would have completed the autonomous learning project in semester one of the 2019-2020 academic year. A total of six students, via a group chat, agreed to participate. All six participants have been studying the Spanish language for over the past ten (10) years and of six of the participants, four are Spanish and French majors and two are Spanish minors. Additionally, of the six participants, five were female and one was male.

The interviews were conducted online, via zoom, during one week, and were recorded with the permission of each participant. Each interview lasted approximately between 16- 23 minutes. The same questions were asked to all participants. The interview was then transcribed, and the data was analysed, coded, and separated into various themes. Each participant was given a pseudonym in order to keep their identities anonymous.

The following chapter will present a review of existing literature pertaining to this study's field. Furthermore, chapter two will present and analyse the findings from the interview and chapter 3 will discuss these findings and compare and contrast them in light of previous research in the field. The final chapter will present some limitations as well as recommendations for this study and future studies.

Chapter 1

Literature review

This study aims to investigate the agency and autonomy of third-year Spanish language students at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. The study is also intended to gain insight into students' experience with and their perceptions of an autonomous learning project that was aimed at developing and promoting students' autonomy. This chapter will discuss the various factors that aid in the development of learners' proficiency in the language.

Autonomy

Throughout many tertiary level institutions, learner autonomy is regarded as a desirable education goal and many programmes are designed to promote student autonomy in and outside of the classroom. Autonomy is defined by Holec as “The ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (qtd. in Morbedadze 1). Holec points out that “To take charge of one’s learning is to have [...] the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning[...]” (qtd. in Morbedadze 1). According to Little, autonomy is seen as a capacity for detachment which involves critical reflection, decision-making as well as independent action (Little 4). Little’s definition of autonomy denotes that the learner “will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning” (Little 4). According to Little, it is thus the learner’s responsibility to take charge of their learner by assuming greater responsibility. Benson also defined autonomy as “the capacity to take control of one’s own learning” (qtd. in Huang 229).

Taking these three definitions into consideration, it can be said that autonomous learning involves learners being able to manage, direct and take responsibility for their own learning. This is a desirable and practical learning goal as teachers may not always be able to

help and encourage learners as well as provide individualized help and instruction to them at all times (Cotterall 220). Learners are thus able to develop a greater sense of responsibility and become more efficient in their learning process. Nevertheless, this does not suggest that students are independent of teachers or that teachers no longer play a role in students' learning journey to become autonomous (Little 3).

In one of the courses (EAP) to develop English language students' autonomy and encourage learners to take more responsibility for their language learning, Cotterall found that dialogue between learners and teachers was seen as central to fostering autonomy (Cotterall 222). The study found that in the process of fostering student autonomy, it is essential to provide opportunities for learners to be able to ask teachers questions as well as to be able to receive feedback on their progress. According to Cotterall, learner/teacher dialogue was deemed essential as it allows learners to “better understand their language learning experience” (223). The dialogue also aims to clarify the purpose of an activity as well as to communicate learners' responsibility. Therefore, autonomy entails learners taking responsibility for their learning however it does not imply that learning is done without teachers. Autonomy involves learners' choice and action to improve their learning and learners take a more active role in their learning process.

Agency

In the field of applied linguistics, the term agency is relatively new and as a result, the number of studies conducted on agency and its effect on language learning is limited. Autonomy is often associated with agency. Toohey states that “Agency is viewed as the most difficult one to define and there are some researchers who use the two terms interchangeably” (qtd.in Huang and Benson 8). Benson suggests that “agency can perhaps be viewed as a point of origin for the development of autonomy”, (Benson 30). Huang also stated that autonomy and agency are closely related as agency entails the learner's deliberate choice and

action to improve their learning (Huang 230). Nevertheless, Huang emphasizes that what differentiates autonomy and agency is the degree of control that learners are able to exercise in various contexts (Huang 242). Thus, from these definitions, agency can be seen as the initial process of the learner taking control of their learning process and making deliberate choices to positively enhance their learning and these actions can be seen as an essential step towards becoming autonomous.

Yashima also discusses agency from the psychological, socio-cultural and poststructuralist perspectives. Within the psychological perspective, agency is closely related to motivation. Learner's sense of agency is an essential factor in increasing motivation to learn a language (Yashima 2). Additionally, from the attribution standpoint, "The learners' explanation for the causes of past successes and failures, is seen as determining their future course of action", (qtd. in Yashima 2). According to Dörnyei, learners' self-evaluation of their ability to carry out certain actions is what determines the amount of effort exerted (Dörnyei qtd. in Yashima 2). This demonstrates that experience and reflection are two essential factors in developing agency and being agentive.

Agency is also conceptualized in terms of a self-regulatory capacity. This refers to the cognitive, metacognitive and affective processes as well as strategies such as planning, execution and regulation that learners apply to improve their learning (Yashima 2). Huang conducted a study at a Chinese university and interviewed students who were enrolled in a four-year BA programme in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TELF). In his study, he concluded that there were some students who took the initiative to improve their oral proficiency in the language by implementing various learning strategies such as consistently practicing and even speaking to themselves. As such, these students were found to be more confident in speaking the language as well as more agentive. Similarly, Aro conducted a study over a period of 14 years to investigate the role that agency plays for two Finnish

learners of English. Both students participated in activities such as watching television in English, using subtitles in movies, and using dictionaries to look up words that they were unsure about. The two students were thus seen to be agentive. It must be noted however that they both had different weaknesses and strengths and they both utilized different resources while exercising their agency. Their knowledge of their weak and strong skills helped them to exercise agency thus emphasizing the attribution standpoint as well as Dörnyei's argument.

Learning strategies

According to Wenden and Rubin, learning strategies are classified as any sets of measures, operations, plans or routines that are utilized by learners to facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval and use of information (cited in Ungureanu and Georgescu 5001). Recently, socio-affective, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies in language learning have begun to receive attention in second language research (Victori and Lockhart 224). According to Ungureanu and Georgescu, socio-affective strategies involve interaction with other people with the goal of assisting the learner and helping their language learning process. Some of these strategies include questioning for clarification, self-talk, self-reinforcement, and cooperation. Furthermore, cognitive strategies are strategies that are aimed at the achievement of a goal or task. These can include activities such as repetition, note-taking, elaboration, translation and summarization. According to Victori and Lockhart however, metacognitive strategies are learning strategies whereby learners reflect on their personal learning process, can set their own needs and objectives, choose resources and materials to achieve their goals as well as monitor and evaluate their own progress over time (223). Chamot et al. discussed four metacognitive strategies which included planning, organizing, managing, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning. These strategies are found to be essential if learners wish to improve their proficiency in language learning. In her

article, Chamot highlighted that students who implement these strategies, often tend to have a higher level of proficiency in their language (2-3).

In a study conducted in Romania with 50 foreign language students, Ungureanu and Georgescu found that students developed their own learning strategies based on their personality, biography, and situation factors (Oxford qtd. in Ungureanu and Georgescu). They recorded that students used three types of learning strategies which included metacognitive, cognitive and socio affective. However, it was found that students used cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies more than socio-affective strategies. The cognitive strategies that students employed in order to improve their proficiency and develop autonomy were taking advantage of opportunities to speak the foreign language, repeating words or sequences in the target language and silently answering questions asked aloud by the teacher. Metacognitive strategies were seen to make students more aware of their challenges and mistakes. Ungureanu and Georgescu noted however that students do not use metacognitive and socio-affective strategies as much as they should. (Ungureanu and Georgescu 5003).

In her study about language learning beliefs of students, conducted with students studying French in England, Graham also found that metacognition and metacognitive strategies help to develop students' proficiency. Graham classes students into categories such as minimalists, intermediate learners who thought success at that level was likely with little effort (303), stagnators, those who were once minimalists however now have reached a point of stagnation in their language learning journey (304) and mastery students, those who valued learning "for its own sake" (305). Their attitude towards effort differed them from minimalists and stagnators. Effort has a positive connotation for these students. Graham found and concluded that minimalists and stagnators did not see it crucial enough to put in effort and as such, these students were not very successful. However, she found that mastery

students had a higher proficiency and were more competent in the French language. This was because these students put great effort into their learning process, and they also utilized and implemented metacognitive strategies.

Reflective journaling

According to Boud, reflection has been described as a process in which experience has been turned into learning (2). Different approaches to reflection exist however, one of the most recently developed approaches by Donald Schön states that for any practitioner regardless of their field of practice, being able to reflect on one's ongoing experience and being able to learn from it, is an essential characteristic to being effective (Schön cited in Boud 2). In his article, Boud speaks about journal writing in the context of learning. He argues that journal writing can be used to ameliorate what one does and how it is done (1). Boud's model also focuses on the essential role of experience in learning. The model's central premise is that learning is often based on previous knowledge and experience and that any effort to foster new learning must take that into account (Boud 3). Therefore, according to Boud, if learners want to make sense of what is occurring in their lives, they must understand that all learning builds on established experiences and learners must be able to make connections between what is new and what already exists to make sense of what is going on around them. As such, Boud argues that reflection should take place not solely after an event, but rather in anticipation of an event, during and after (3).

Over the past decade, reflective journals, diaries, and logs have become essential tools for both researchers and learners. Nuan states that "diaries, logs and journals are important introspective tools in language research" (Nunan qtd. in Halbach 85). Reflective journal entries, diaries and logs are also of great importance to researchers as they can gather information from learners that were previously unknown and inaccessible. This can be important and complements other research tools (Halbach 85). Porter et al also point out that

journals and diaries are also valuable tools for learners given that students are required to introspect more about their learning, engage in classroom and additional activities as well as talk about what they are learning. This serves as a catalyst for students becoming more involved in their language learning process and in their courses. (Porter et al. cited in Halbach 86).

Many researchers agree that reflective journal writing is a tool that can be utilized to elicit awareness of a learner's situation as well as aid in planning and preparing new activities and changes that can be introduced and the results monitored. In their research, Ogawa and Hall conducted a study that involved 42 EFL students at a university in northern Japan participating in group work and using reflective journals, with the aim of developing their autonomy. The writing of the reflective journals was based on classroom activities carried out by the students however the content of the journal was left up to the student to decide. The researchers issued a questionnaire at the end of the project which lasted for one semester. Ogawa and Hall found that most students who actively involved themselves in journal writing found the activity was somewhat helpful concerning their opportunity to reflect as well as regarding their writing practice. However, some students reported negatively on the process and stated that they did not know what to write, they did not see the value in the exercise, and they found the exercise to be extra work. Ogawa and Hall concluded that reflective journaling could facilitate learner autonomy, particularly where reflection and motivation are concerned, however, clearer instructions, greater guidance and better implementation of the project are needed.

A similar study was conducted by Porto at the National University of La Plata in Argentina which involved 95 Argentine students enrolled in an English language II course. Students were required to write learning diaries about their English language learning journeys, their classroom activities, and their experience of keeping learning diaries, for a

period of 35 weeks which was then extended to the entire academic year. Just like Ogawa and Hall's findings, Porto also realized that students were not familiar with the process and had never written learning diaries before. This was the basis for her change as well as the fact that a longer period permitted deeper insights and a richer quality of data (Porto 677). Porto found that reflection had an impact on students learning and practicing in the classroom as they were able to change and adapt what they did due to their reflections (690). Porto also found that reflection and diary writing fostered a greater sense of self-examination amongst students as well as a sense of personal control over their learning process. The project enabled students to take greater responsibility and to foster a greater understanding of their learning process thereby eliminating frustration and powerlessness that sometimes arises when control is in someone else's hands. This led to greater autonomy amongst students (691).

Serna conducted a study in which she implemented the use of self-reflection diaries with the aim of promoting autonomy, among a group of 10 students from the ages of 17-21 studying English at a basic level, in the language institute at the University of Pereira, Colombia. Students were required to reflect on their activities done in class, their learning process, their performance and the strategies and tools that they used to accomplish tasks. Students wrote in the diaries 3-4 times a week and whenever else they had something to report. Data was gathered from the students' journal entries as well as student interviews. Serna found that the use of reflective journal diaries raised students' consciousness about their learning process. They were able to deeper understand and act on their strengths and weaknesses in their English language learning process (Serna 30). Serna also found that the reflective diary entries were useful for the teacher. Through her students' diaries, she was able to identify several steps that are essential in becoming autonomous. Serna concluded that the use of reflective journal writing is an essential factor in students becoming autonomous. Additionally, it provides useful information for teachers as it allows both learner and teacher

to recognize students' weaknesses in the learning process, illustrates students' learning styles and strategies, provides greater insight into students' feelings about their English language learning process and the diaries promote consciousness and responsibility amongst learners, which all lead to autonomy (Serna 30-44).

Reflection and journal and diary writing as evidenced by the studies can be viewed as beneficial and crucial to the development of autonomous learners. However, for an effective and efficient process, educators must clearly explain the process and purpose of the activity to learners and consider implementing these exercises for longer periods of time in order to achieve greater results and more in-depth reflection amongst students.

Chapter 2

Findings

This chapter presents the experience of students studying Spanish as a foreign language and their experience with the autonomous learning project at the UWI. The presentation of findings highlights the challenges that students encounter, the process of reflective journaling on their language learning journey and the strategies that they employed to overcome their difficulties.

Challenges

In the interviews, all students reported experiencing various challenges while learning the Spanish language. Students reported on challenges that they experienced throughout their secondary school experience up until their second year studying Spanish as a foreign language at the university level. The data gathered revealed that students encountered challenges in all the components however the listening comprehension, conversation, and grammar component posed the most difficulty. It was noted that out of the six participants, the listening component gave most participants the most challenge. Data revealed that these challenges started at the secondary school level and continued to the university level for some students.

Challenges that students encountered included difficulty in understanding the main ideas of listening comprehension excerpts, difficulty in understanding various Spanish accents, challenges with several grammar constructs and difficulty in speaking the language. It must be noted that students also experienced socio-affective, cognitive, and attitudinal challenges in the various components. These challenges were related to the conversation component and included nervousness, anxiety, and lack of spontaneity. While five participants reported experiencing various challenges whilst learning the language at the secondary school level, it must be noted that there was one student whose challenge was the

pace at which the syllabus was being taught. This participant reported that his main challenge at the secondary school level was that his teachers were teaching the syllabus at a slow pace and he felt as if his progression in the language was being hindered. As a result, he decided to learn the form five syllabus while still in form 4. He then proceeded to write the CSEC exam at the end of form 4 where he obtained a grade I.

Reflection and journaling writing

In an effort for students to take a more active role and approach in their learning, reflective diaries were implemented as a part of the autonomous learning project.

When asked if reflection was a part of students' language learning routine before attending university, responses varied. One student reported that she never used to reflect and that she simply used to go through the motions with her language learning journey in secondary school. Others reported that they never thought deeply about their process. The only aspect that they were focused on was preparing for and passing an exam. One student reported that he reflected quite often while he was in secondary school and it is a continuous process for him. He noted that this was since he is very passionate about language learning and he has goals that he wants to achieve.

All students reported having reflected and written the 10 journal entries required for the project. Responses showed that for five of the participants, after the third week into the project, they began to forget to write journal entries or that they did not write for a couple of weeks due to other assignments that were due. One student explicitly stated that she did not see the point of the project and as such, in week 9 because the deadline was approaching, she wrote five journal entries all at once. There was only one student who wrote journal entries consistently every week. This participant reported that she kept up with the diaries weekly because she did not want to lie, and she saw the benefit in writing each week. Responses showed that although most students did not reflect weekly, they still saw value in the

reflection process. One student stated that in reflecting and writing her journal entries, she realized that she needs to work harder and dedicate more time to develop her speaking competence as well as her writing competence. Another stated that by keeping a reflective journal she was able to see her progress over the course of the semester and that it was unintentionally instrumental in the development of her writing skills.

Learning strategies

In order to overcome the challenges faced while studying Spanish, students engaged in a variety of activities and learning strategies that suited them (see Table 1). Strategies used by students could be classed into cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The cognitive strategies employed by students included listening to Spanish music, watching interviews, videos, movies, and tv series with varying Spanish accents, using subtitles, singing in Spanish, using various grammatical structures while practicing speaking with native speakers, noting down new vocabulary, and writing text messages and emails in Spanish. When asked about the challenges that they decided to tackle for this project, students generally continued to tackle the areas that previously gave them the most difficulty. Enrique was the exception as he expressed that his challenge throughout secondary school was the slow pace at which the syllabus was being taught.

Table 1

Activities and learning strategies that students utilized to overcome their highlighted difficulties.

Participant	Learning strategy	Activities
Anastasia	Cognitive	Watching movies, documentaries and videos in Spanish.
Maria	Cognitive	Going to extra lessons. Listening to Spanish music.
Sofia	Cognitive	Listening to music and watching movies. Repeating words and phrases from movies. Practice speaking with native speakers.
Victoria	Cognitive	Travelling to Spanish-speaking countries. Watching various Spanish tv series Using Spanish subtitles while listening to audios. Listening to Spanish music.
Andrea	Cognitive	Watching Spanish-speaking YouTubers. Doing online auto generated grammar exercises.
Enrique	Cognitive Metacognitive	Watching interviews in Spanish. Singing in Spanish. Talking with native speakers Talking to himself in Spanish and correcting himself. Planning his approach to achieve better results.

As shown above, this chapter discussed the challenges that students face with studying Spanish as a foreign language as well as the learning strategies that they employ to

overcome their difficulties. Their experience with the autonomous learning project as well as reflective journaling was also discussed. The following chapter will discuss and analyse in greater detail the challenges, strategies and experiences of third-year Spanish language students in an attempt to develop their autonomy.

Chapter 3

Discussion of findings

This chapter discusses the agency, autonomy, learning strategies of students and their experience with the project to overcome their challenges that they encountered while studying the Spanish language. It will also discuss the interrelatedness amongst agency and autonomy and the role that learning strategies and reflective journaling play in developing learners' autonomy.

Challenges

With studying a foreign language, learners are highly likely to encounter some difficulty. Some learners may encounter one challenge and others may encounter a variety of difficulties. This study considered all types of challenges whether they be attitudinal or directly related to the various skills involved in learning a foreign language. Depending on the learner, challenges can be overcome but this is dependent on the level of reflection and action that a learner takes. Being agentive is a key factor in students not only overcoming challenges but also in progressing in a foreign language. Thus, progression is dependent upon learners' responsibility in planning and in taking action to improve their learning. In this study, the researcher found that students encountered a variety of challenges in their Spanish language learning journey.

One of the major problems that most participants reported having was difficulty with the listening component. Four out of six participants reported that throughout their secondary school journey and going into the university setting, the listening component gave them the most challenges.

For instance, Anastasia's response encompassed the general response of the four students:

"With the listening component, I used to get frustrated when they would expose us to

different accents and some were not as clear as others. Like for example, the Cuban accent when they just cut off half of the word when they are talking. That really challenged me, especially in year one when we got listening comprehension exercises where I could not understand on the first try, I got really frustrated.”

Maria highlighted another challenge that she faced with the listening comprehension component, “I had a lot of problems trying to grasp the main messages of different audio clips. I think during sixth form especially, it was like a big hit for me that I didn't really understand what people were saying.” Both Anastasia’s and Maria’s responses demonstrate the challenges that the students face with the listening component and they also highlight that students' difficulties within the same component vary. While all participants commented on difficulties that they face in terms of studying the language and the skills aspect of it, one participant, Enrique, commented that his main challenge throughout secondary school was that the syllabus was being taught too slowly for him. Enrique said, “The challenge that I faced was that they were teaching the syllabus too slow.” Enrique found that during the form1 to form 5 years, there was a lot of repetition in the content taught and that that it was being dragged on. Enrique can be seen as agentive ever since his secondary school experience. This is because of what was going on around him in his school context and the fact that he decided to employ other strategies and accelerate his own learning. Enrique stated, “because there was so much repetition in my opinion, I decided to go ahead with the syllabus and when I was in form 4, when we started the form 4 syllabus, I said well great, I am going to do the form 5 syllabus on my own. Then I wrote the exam at the end of form 4 and got the grade one early.”

In his response, Enrique highlights an important factor to becoming more proficient in a language and that is personal effort. He stated, “I think that the reason why a lot of students do not progress or are not satisfied with where they are in the language is because of their

lack of personal effort and also the fact that it takes so long to reach the important things that you need to function in the language.” As evidenced by Little’s and Huang’s definitions of autonomy and agency, Enrique’s actions illustrate that he has a high level of agency and autonomy because of how he critically reflected, made important decisions about his learning, made a deliberate choice and took independent action to improve his learning. He reflected, planned and monitored his progression and because of that, was able to achieve a higher level of competence in the language.

When asked about any challenges that students may have faced while completing the autonomous learning project, participants responded that faced challenges such as lack of consistency and discipline, poor time management, lack of motivation, loss of interest in their degree, the overload of schoolwork and difficulty in seeing the purpose and relevance of the project. The main issue that hindered students’ engagement with some of their intended learning activities as well as journal writing, was the overload of other schoolwork. Sofia’s response highlights what 5 participants expressed. Sofia stated, “I think that for me, time management was an issue and I ended up writing some of the journal entries late and just to submit. I don’t think that it had to do with the loss of motivation or anything, it was just that we had so many other things to do, and this was just like a project that didn’t carry many marks or weight as a French lit essay or something like that.” Anastasia also raises the point of time management, consistency, and the priority of other assignments. She said, “When you’re doing a double major and you have to balance Spanish and French, it’s really hard and then you have normal school assignments to complete you know?” She goes onto to say, “I had put on my plan that I wanted to watch a 20-minute video every day in Spanish but if I had a French reading comprehension to rush down the night before class, I am not going to sit down and watch something in Spanish and rack my brain in French, No.” However, concerning Anastasia’s last comment, she realized that perhaps it was her fault as the plan

was not practical. Nevertheless, from both Sofia's and Anastasia's responses which are representative of most of the answers important information is gathered. Sofia's comment, "just to submit" and "so many other things to do and this was just like a project that didn't carry much marks or weight as a French lit essay or something like that," highlights that perhaps, students did not necessarily see the immediate value in doing the project and did not perceive the project as just as important as other assignments like writing a French literature essay. For Sofia and some others, during the process, the project was seen just as something to submit and not as an essential activity for their autonomous development. Anastasia's comment also illustrates that this project was not "normal" and perhaps not as important as other regular assignments like a French reading comprehension homework. From both participants' responses, it is evident that several factors influenced students' consistency in completing the project, particularly the journal writing.

Another important challenge for teachers to take into consideration is explaining the significance of the project in learners' language learning process and clarifying instructions. Ogawa and Hall found that some students did not know what to write, they did not see the intended value of the exercise and the exercise was considered as extra work for them. Porto also found that students were not familiar with the activity of reflective journal writing. Victoria's response substantiates what those students experienced and what those researchers found. Victoria said, "I was kind of confused at the beginning of the project. I was like, what do they mean by we are doing it by ourselves? And what exactly do we have to do?" She went on to say, "I was kind of confused by the project and kind of annoyed that we weren't really doing a lot of what I thought that we would be doing in Lectura because it was a complete change." Like some students in Ogawa and Hall's study, Victoria did not understand the project which may imply that perhaps the purpose, instructions and intended goals of the project needed to be explained more in-depth to students. Additionally, like

Porto's study, Victoria expressed that this activity was completely different from what she was accustomed to and as such, that was a cause for her apprehension. Participants' responses show that while doing the project, students did not see the immediate value of the activities and that other assignments that were considered more important, were the causes for their lack of motivation, time-management issues and lack of discipline and consistency.

Learning strategies

Students expressed various challenges that they faced and continue to face while learning Spanish. To overcome challenges, various learning strategies are implemented by students. Unlike Ugureanu and Georgescu, Graham and Aro's studies, where students implemented cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies and they found that metacognitive and cognitive strategies were the strategies implemented the most, this study's data revealed that cognitive learning strategies were preferred by learners and only one learner implemented metacognitive strategies to his process. Enrique was the only participant to incorporate metacognitive strategies into his learning routine. As Yashima states, learners will carry out specific activities to meet their personal objectives. Enrique's approach to his learning demonstrates this. He said, "Over the years, I've done a lot of personal reflection in terms of figuring out where I still have to go and what improvements I still have to make, especially when it comes to career-wise and where I want to be". Due to his personal goals and objectives, Enrique has been taking an agentive and autonomous approach to his learning in order to improve his skills. As he stated, he strived to remain consistent while he took a more assertive role in his approach to language learning and actively sought out opportunities to engage with the language and to better himself.

Consistency is seen as a key factor in developing and improving one's proficiency. Although all students were not consistent in writing their journal entries, they all reported trying to do their activities as they saw it as beneficial. Anastasia said, "I kept the journal for

the sake of the project and because it was for marks but since the project, I have not been journaling, but I am glad that we had to do it because now I know what works for me.”

Although she was not as consistent as she intended to be, she saw the merit in doing the reflective journaling and she was able to benefit from the exercise as she learned more about her learning style and preferences and what works best for her. She attributed that to having to reflect weekly. Victoria also stated that post-project, she did not keep up with the journal writing however she makes every effort to continue the activities that she started during the project as they are beneficial to her progress. Victoria stated “you still want to improve, so I do keep up with the same activities like watching tv-series and movies with different Spanish accents and simple things like emailing my lecturers in Spanish instead of English, even though doing it in English would be way easier you know? I still find myself trying to use the language outside of the academic context and continue with my autonomous studies.”

From the data gathered, it is evident that students found the learning strategies that they employed during the project, useful and beneficial to the point that they continue to do them post-project.

Reflection and journal writing

Reflection and journal writing are regarded as invaluable tools in an individual's learning process. Porter et al. argue that reflective journals and diaries are the catalysts for students becoming more involved in their language learning process and in their courses. Reflection of one's learning history and journey and implemented action can lead to greater autonomy in learners. When asked if they used to reflect before having to do the autonomous learning project, four students reported that they never used to reflect or actively think about how they can become better. They stated that they were just going through the motions. Enrique stated that he actively reflected all throughout secondary school as languages are something that he is passionate about and he has various goals that he wants to achieve.

Victoria stated that she has a passion for foreign languages however her reflection and autonomous actions came into being because she felt that she was not getting adequate assistance from her secondary school teacher and she was not satisfied with her performance.

When asked about having to reflect and about the project in general, all participants stated that in retrospect, the reflective journal and the entire project was beneficial to them in several ways. Students expressed that through reflective journaling, they became more conscious of their learning process and style. Anastasia mentioned that reflection was never a habit of hers however because of the project she learned so much more about herself and her learning. She stated, “I never used to reflect about my learning journey or my progress or anything because again, they were just feeding us a syllabus and we didn't have to think about anything really. I always knew I wanted to go further with language and pursue it at a tertiary level, but I mean, in form 4 and 5, I was not sitting down and thinking, ‘hmm how can I be better at this?’ ‘How can I make language a part of my life?’ It was more like ok let me write something and learn it off for my IA or for my exams, you know?”.

Nevertheless, when asked about her experience with reflective journaling during the project, she stated that “This “forced” reflection really did benefit me as I really had to do some deep introspection into my learning process and because of that, I now know what works best for me as a learner. During the process, I remember finding out that I was a kinaesthetic learner”. She also mentioned that with the project in general and the weekly reflection she was able to see her progress which something was exciting for her. “It was really cool and satisfying to actually see my progress in terms of the length of my writing. Like I went from writing half a page or one paragraph for the first entry to like 3 and 4 paragraphs; I know that they gave us a limit but yeah, I eventually ended up with a double-sided entry and that was really something for me as I saw myself getting more comfortable with using the language especially in writing, which was one of the areas that I decided to

tackle in this project”. Anastasia’s attitude to reflection before doing the autonomous learning project is similar to what Porto found among some students in that when students do not see the goal or purpose of an activity and are stuck in their habits, they do not make an effort to try to understand or to participate in activities (Porto 685).

Andrea’s response was also quite interesting. When asked about what she took away from the reflective journaling and autonomous exercises, she spoke about progress and determination. Andrea stated, “I think that the importance of a reflective journal is progress. Through the process, I was able to see where I came from and how far I came even though it was only a few weeks. So, like from my very first entry to the second to last one, I was able to see changes and because of that I learned that if I stick to something that I can do well”. She continued stating that, “It also taught me that once you’re determined to do something, you will do well, and you might get back the passion”.

Maria’s final response succinctly encapsulates the views of all students regarding the effect of the project on their language learning journey one year after completing the autonomous project. Maria expressed, “I think that the autonomous learning experience that we had in Spanish should not only be applicable to Spanish but to all areas in the department, whether it be French or Portuguese because I think that it was really a catalyst. I think it did change things and changed them in a way that I didn't even realize and as such, I think that it should be implemented in courses like French as it could help develop students in a different way and encourage students to take control of their language learning”. Andrea also mentioned that the project was so impactful for her that she decided to apply it to French language learning as well. She stated “The thing about the project is that I did it for both French and Spanish because it impacted me so much. So, what I did was I made the plan for both French and Spanish and carried out the same exercises in both languages”. Maria’s and Andrea’s responses demonstrate that they saw value in the project and as learners, it was a

worthwhile experience for them. For Maria, the effect was so great that she advocates for it to be implemented in other courses so that other students can benefit from it. This is interesting as when first asked about what she thought about the project, she expressed that her initial reaction to it was fear and feeling anxiety and pressure to “show the teacher that I had improved”. Her retrospection certainly highlights the positive effect and power that the project could have on one students’ learning process.

From the data gathered, it is evident that the autonomous learning project that involved personal reflection, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating was a worthwhile activity and project that teachers and learners can engage in. As Anastasia stated, “It took Spanish out of a strictly academic context and made me realize that this is a living thing and a tool that you have for life”. These types of activities help both the teacher and the learner as, in the teacher’s case, they can better understand the challenges and needs of their students and be able to assist them in overcoming challenges and developing their autonomy. Concerning students, Andrea highlights an important point. She stated, “One thing that I think the project taught us is not to depend solely on the teacher and I think that is a very powerful thing that they taught us”. In other words, for learners, reflective and projects focused on autonomy have the potential to foster a greater consciousness among students where their learning process is concerned as well as be a catalyst for a more hands-on approach to their learning and for them to exercise greater responsibility through planning, executing and monitoring their learning.

As Anastasia, Andrea, Maria and Enrique pointed out, Spanish is no longer just a subject that they study for, but it has become incorporated and integrated into their daily lives as they actively engage in activities in the language that are not directly related to their academic studies. Additionally, all students except Sofia agreed that this project helped them with the transition to online learning and all that it entails. Andrea stated, “The classroom

dynamic has changed due to COVID and now it is a lot of independent learning especially for us Spanish students as there is no Lectura class per se, but we have to work independently and make sure to plan and get the work done as there is no physical class or teacher to remind us, etc. So, I really do think that they prepared us well to work independently, without even realizing that COVID would come and turn everything upside down”.

After reviewing the data gathered, it is worthy to suggest that as Porto highlighted, reflective pieces and projects like these should be implemented for a longer period of time than just 3-10 weeks as it would allow for greater and more in-depth analysis of data for both learners and teachers. Maria, when asked about what she would have done differently, she stated that “I would have wanted the project to go a little bit longer instead of thirteen weeks. If it could have been for the entire academic year to see more growth and development, I think that would have been great”.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the autonomy and agency of third-year Spanish students at the University of The West Indies, St. Augustine campus as well as to gain insight into their experience with and perceptions of the autonomous learning project that was done in their first semester, of their second year of university, 2019-2020.

Despite the limited number of participants in this study, the data obtained revealed that students face a number of difficulties in studying Spanish as a foreign language. The results of the study indicate that the challenges encountered include difficulties in understanding various Spanish accents and slang, grasping the main messages of audio clips, communicating, and understanding native speakers, issues with certain grammar structures and issues with confidence in speaking the language. It was evident that for some participants, agency and autonomy had an influence on the development and improvement of their skills. To overcome their difficulties, students reflected on their language learning journey and their challenges and devised a plan that was suited to their personal preference as foreign language students.

All students agreed that the reflective process taught them a lot about themselves and increased their self-awareness where their language learning journey and progress were concerned. To overcome their challenges students carried out various cognitive learning strategies throughout the 10 weeks of the project. Results revealed that there were 4 very agentive students who were motivated by their goals, continued to use various learning strategies, and reflected every week. In contrast, some students did not carry out the learning strategies regularly and did not reflect weekly. All but one student reported that on more than one occasion, they did not keep up with the journal writing on a weekly basis as factors such as lack of motivation, other assignments, and lack of time management caused them to neglect their journal writing.

Nevertheless, from the responses, it can be said that there are varying levels of autonomy amongst the third-year Spanish language students and that students' levels of agency and autonomy are based on different factors. Additionally, it is evident that all students found value in the Spanish language autonomous learning project that was completed in Semester one of the 2019-2020 academic year.

Limitations

This research was conducted one year after students did the autonomous learning project. During the interview, two students responded that they thought that they did certain activities which may imply that they may have forgotten what they did during the project. One student explicitly stated, "I have to try and remember because this was a long time ago for me". Additionally, the evaluation was subjective as the study was evaluated solely from the student's point of view. An analysis of students' weekly reflective journal entries would have provided more insights and information as to whether they were truly autonomous or if the project aided in developing their agency and autonomy. Furthermore, the sample size of the study was very small. There were only 6 students who participated, and this would have limited the insights provided by participants as well as it would not have been representative of the entire class. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized.

Recommendations

As was indicated in the study, students face a number of challenges when studying Spanish as a foreign language. Students utilize various learning strategies in order to overcome their challenges and gain a higher command of the language. Having to reflect, plan and execute their own activities independently, students gained an increased self-awareness about themselves and their learning process and this allowed them to attain a greater sense of agency and autonomy. As Victoria stated, the autonomous learning project should be applied to other language courses in the faculty as it is a catalyst for greater

autonomy and success in one's language learning journey. Furthermore, the project could be implemented for a longer period, perhaps for an entire academic year as suggested by Victoria as it encourages students to take control of their language learning. Additionally, further research can be conducted in the context of a larger study to substantiate the findings of this study and to make further generalizations.

Appendix

Interview questions

1. How long have you been learning Spanish?
2. Before the autonomous language learning project in year 2, what were the main challenges you used to experience as a student of Spanish?
3. What specific actions did you take to overcome your challenges before the project?
4. How did you use to reflect on your language learning before university?
5. What did you think about the project?
6. What were the challenging areas that you decided to tackle in the project? Why?
7. How did you go about completing it? (Give me as many details as possible)
8. What were the difficulties that you encountered while completing the project?
9. What did you learn by keeping a reflective journal?
10. How consistent were you in keeping this journal?
11. Did you devote weekly time to the assignment, or did you leave it to the end, close to the deadline?
12. In what way or ways did the project help you take more responsibility for your own Spanish learning?
13. In what way or ways do you still apply anything that you learned or that helped you during the project, to your current studies or routine?
14. In what way or ways do you believe that the project prepared you for how things are going now with the pandemic and having to switch your entire academic routine around?
15. If you had to do the same project over, what would you do differently and are there any other areas of difficulty that you would have addressed?

16. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

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