

ABSTRACT

L2 LEARNER AUTONOMY/AGENCY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE SPANISH STUDENTS IN TRINIDAD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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Through phenomenological research, the study of the lived experience (van Manen 1990), this inquiry explores institutionalised second/foreign language (L2) learning and possibilities for autonomy/agency (Toohey 2007) among undergraduate students of Spanish at The UWI, St. Augustine.

Three sets of data were collected for this study. The first was an inventory borrowed from educational psychology that explores students' approaches to studying and learning in university settings (Entwistle 2000b). The remaining two sets of data took the form of semi-structured interviews. The first interview explored students' approaches to studying Spanish at the university. The second interview concentrated on students' past lived experiences and self-assessment as students of Spanish. Thirty (30) students consented to be interviewed.

'Approach to L2 studying' as a construct is suggested by this study as a valuable way to understand concrete actions (Huang 2011) students take to practise and improve their L2. Therefore, how students go about studying the L2, their 'approach', can help us to understand students' individual autonomy and sociocultural agency. Based on students' self-assessment, three Phenomenologies or groups emerged from this exploration: Phenomenology 1, '*My level is good. I can carry on a conversation in Spanish*'; Phenomenology 2, '*My level should be better*'; and Phenomenology 3, '*I'm not where I want to be*'. Students in the first group differed from the other two because in their past school experiences they were encouraged to use the language for reasons beyond passing formal examinations. Students in the other two groups appeared heavily influenced and constrained by formal assessment.

Some of the recommendations proposed by this study include the need to explore students' beliefs about L2 studying and the creation of a language advising programme for students with difficulties. The aim of this programme would be to help students to move from peripheral to more active participation in the L2 institutionalised community of practice where the focus should be L2 learning and use.

Keywords: Diego (Andrés) Mideros (Camargo), L2 learning, autonomy, agency, phenomenology, approach, identity theory, sociocultural theory.