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Investigating the challenges students encounter in studying the Spanish language. A case study on a named secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago.

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Abstract

Investigating the challenges students encounter in studying the Spanish language. A case study of a named secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago.

The aims of this research paper are to investigate the challenges students face in the Spanish language at a Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate level (CSEC). The main focus for this research project was to identify the various challenges, the possible causes of said challenges as well as the methods students employ to overcome them. A named secondary school in Trinidad and Tobago consisting of female students only where Spanish is compulsory, was selected in order to obtain information related to the research questions hereunder. Consequently, results were gathered from thirty-three students where only thirty responses were used when analyzing the data. Throughout this study, a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data was retrieved via questionnaires and semi-structure interviews. On the basis of the study’s findings, it can therefore be concluded that anxiety presented itself as a major contributing factor to the challenges students encounter in the Spanish language classroom. Listening comprehension and oral conversation, among the other components of the Spanish language curriculum, were the most challenging as suggested by the findings of this study. The results however revealed the nature of the challenges students experience in the Spanish language classroom as well as what may cause them. Practical suggestions were also identified for future research as well as strategies for teachers and students on ways on which to improve their performance in the Spanish language classroom and by extension, the world.
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Introduction

“In a global economy and increasingly multilingual society, the acquisition of a foreign language has emerged as one of the major goals for children of the next century” (Ganschow et. al, 1998, 248).¹ Knowledge of a foreign language, namely Spanish, has become an essential element of one’s credentials throughout the Caribbean and by extension, the world, whether in an effort to obtain a job or simply accommodate the influx of Spanish-speaking natives to the Anglophone territories. Nevertheless, after many years of studying and tutoring the Spanish language, it has been observed that the majority of the students learning the language have encountered difficulties in one component or the other; in some cases, all components. Where some genuinely loves the language consequent to various factors, some students’ principal objective is to obtain the minimum requirements in order to pass the examination. Studying and continuous practice have been language teachers’ primary instruction to the students in order that they (the students) acquire success in both their receptive and productive abilities in the language. Notwithstanding, it is the researcher’s belief that many teachers of foreign languages do not investigate the underlying causes of factors that contribute to the challenges students experience in learning the target language. Nonetheless, although some students steadily face challenges in learning Spanish, various schools across Trinidad continue to make the subject a compulsory part of the curriculum. So, as an aspiring Spanish language teacher, the researcher thought that it would be meaningful to understand what the underlying reasons behind students’ failure in the various components of the Spanish language curriculum in this particular context

are, in an attempt to address the challenges, they encounter. This research topic emerged subsequent to the fact that the researcher wanted to examine what challenges students encounter in their learning process of the Spanish language, what causes these various challenges, as well as what methods students employ to overcome them. The results of this study however revealed that anxiety is a leading contributor to the challenges the students encounter. Listening comprehension and oral conversation were reported as the most challenging of all components of the Spanish language curriculum for these particular respondents.

**Rationale**

The challenges students experience in learning foreign languages, namely the Spanish language have long been a contentious issue. Based on immediate experiences with students learning Spanish and thus exhibiting signs of challenges with the various components, this study warrants further investigation. As a result, this topic was chosen in order to identify the problems the students face, the causes of these problems and to understand the measures that are employed by students to overcome them. During the past four years, tutoring Spanish at the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate level (CSEC) level, the researcher has observed that challenges are encountered in each component of the language. Consequent to discussions with Spanish language teachers, it was brought to the researcher’s attention that students do not want to put in the extra work necessary in learning a second language; such as the learning of vocabulary, writing and even speaking. The researcher believes that this lack of interest by the students to learn the language is what subsequently gives rise to the challenges the students face in learning Spanish. Moreover, having a profound love for the Spanish language, the notion of making the subject a compulsory course throughout all secondary schools in Trinidad, has always been a
desire of the researcher but many individuals contradict this. Nonetheless, students often detest the subject from the beginning thus not making the effort to learn it. Subsequently, the researcher has decided to investigate these challenges and the attending causes in an attempt to alleviate the high level of indifference toward the subject. Despite the fact that many past-related studies have indicated the various challenges experienced by the students, it is with profound hope and faith that the findings of this study would assist the researcher in formulating successful teaching methods as a prospective Spanish language teacher. In an effort to drastically minimize and further arrest the challenges faced by the students in the Spanish language classroom.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to acquire a profound understanding of the various challenges students encounter in learning Spanish, the possible causes of these challenges and to identify methods students use to overcome these challenges with the objective of creating effective teaching methods, which will benefit future students learning Spanish.

**Statement of the problem**

Students continue to encounter challenges in learning Spanish, which subsequently negatively affect their performance. As a Spanish tutor to form five students, the researcher has observed that they manifest problems in each component of the language. Moreover, it is important for the researcher to fervently investigate the challenges, the causes as well as the methods form five students employ to overcome these challenges.

**Research questions**

In this study, the researcher aimed to respond to the following questions:
1. What are the challenges encountered by secondary school students learning the Spanish language?

2. What are the causes of the challenges the students encounter?

3. What are the methods used by the students to overcome their challenges?

Methodology

This research methodology adopted a mixed method approach. A secondary school in Trinidad was chosen, where the Spanish language is an obligatory part of the student’s study. Before selecting the school, the researcher investigated general information about the school and its populace.

Participants

The target population for this study was form five students, who had to study Spanish as a compulsory subject. Throughout the execution of this study, a form five class consisting of thirty-three (33) students was randomly selected. All participants were females between the ages of 16-18 and they all belonged to one class. All are native speakers of Trinidadian English and they have been studying the Spanish language since they entered the secondary school; which is a period of approximately five years.

Fig. 1. Showing the age range of participants
Primary sources

In order that the study adopted and followed a mixed method approach, data was collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Both sources of data collection responded to each proposed research question. The questionnaires comprised of nineteen (19) items. (See appendix 1)

Some items of the questionnaire addressed the proposed research questions, which will be discussed in chapter 3. Nonetheless, the questionnaire included various questions regarding the issues students may face in learning the Spanish language, the various causes of these challenges and the methods the students employ to overcome the respective challenges. The semi-structured interview (See appendix 2) was used to expand on the information gathered in the questionnaires. This interview contained a series of fifteen (15) questions which followed the same method of questioning as the questionnaire but included questions that were not included in the questionnaire. The interview questioned students further into challenges they face and included various questions of the teacher's teaching style as well as recommendations for the Spanish curriculum.

Secondary sources

Information was also acquired from already existing literature related to this study’s title. For this study, secondary sources of data were gathered from various online databases, journals, books and related research projects. Both methods were crucial and yielded substantial information to the study’s research questions.

Field work and data collection
In order to request permission to conduct the study at the secondary school, a letter of consent was sent to the school’s principal. (See appendix 3) This assisted in the contribution and participation of the students in order to retrieve data for the study. Upon being granted permission, consent was also sought from each respondent before they were administered the survey questionnaire or interviewed. Before administering the questionnaire, students were informed of the title of the study and were ensured confidentiality. The questionnaires were then personally distributed to a random form five Spanish class consisting of thirty-three students. However, three responses were eliminated when analyzing the data due to inconsistencies; thus, only thirty responses were used. Following this, five students of the thirty-three were asked by their teacher to volunteer in order to respond to questions in a semi-structured interview; to which they subsequently obliged. The interviewees were then taken into a separate room to be interviewed and were questioned individually and voice recorded. Before recording the interview sessions with each student, permission was requested to which they all agreed. However, throughout the response process, few questions required explanations to those who had difficulties in understanding various terms used in the questionnaire. Explanations were subsequently given to these respondents. It is imperative to mention that all data collection was done in the period of one day at the secondary school.

Ethical considerations

In any research, ethical considerations are always crucial. Throughout conducting this study, ethical principles were practiced in order to collect the necessary data. All data collection methods consisted of informed consent from the principal of the school, the respondents, as well as the teacher of the respondents. As previously stated, prior to the data collection, a request letter was submitted to the principal of the chosen school in order to gain her approval before
administering the questionnaires and interviewing the students. Additionally, no personal information of the school and respondents were collected as the research ensured confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis

In analyzing the data, the researcher employed various online databases as well as excel spreadsheets. While reading all responses in both the questionnaires and interviews, the researcher searched for patterns, trends and emanating themes. In addition, the researcher revisited the data when inserting them into the computer to ensure students answered all questions accordingly and thus eliminated those whose responses did not agree to the questions asked.

Conclusion

The objective of this study is to identify and reveal the various challenges secondary school students encounter through their study of the Spanish language, what provokes said challenges and the various methods the students utilize in order to overcome these challenges. It is important to know what these challenges are as an aspiring Spanish language teacher because it would be of vital importance in combating these challenges as well as in creating efficacious teaching methods in an attempt to ensure the success of the students in learning the Spanish language. Notwithstanding, the following chapter will present a review of already existing literature related to this study’s field.
Chapter 1
Literature review

Introduction

Wilson (2016), in her study, “The Teaching of Spanish as a Modern Foreign Language in Trinidad: A Case Study of the Spanish Initiative Implementation in the Primary Classroom” noted that “In many countries across the globe, modern foreign language learning has become an important though controversial educational issue, especially in places where English is the lingua franca” (27). Language learning challenges as a result of anxiety, listening comprehension and oral conversation have been observed amongst students at a named secondary school of Trinidad and Tobago in this particular study. However, in this chapter, the researchers attempt to capture the relevant literature that circumscribes this study. The literature under review is aligned with two of the study’s research questions and thus seeks to establish the context for this enquiry, locating it within the research literature under three main sections. The first section of this chapter explains the manner in which anxiety acts as a contributing factor to the challenges students face in learning a foreign language in general. This assists in understanding the role affective factors related to apprehension in learning, play in one’s performance of a second language (L2). The second and third sections comment on the various related literature based on the difficulties students face in listening comprehension and oral conversation while offering suggestions as to how to assist students to overcome difficulties in respective areas. Therefore, the final section summarizes the major research conducted in this field.
Anxiety

According to Mejia (2014) in her study, “A Case Study of Anxiety in the Spanish Classroom in Australia,” she stated that anxiety is one of the leading contributors to challenges faced in foreign language learning and in one’s ability to perform in a foreign language context. She further opined that the majority of the students learning a foreign language have encountered anxiety under many circumstances. Additionally, she indicated that the issue of language anxiety has long been a topic of concern for both teachers of foreign languages and researchers; whose aim is to understand what the underlying causes of anxiety are and what measures can be implemented to help students cope with it.

In her study, Mejia found that the majority of the students became anxious in the foreign language classroom due to various factors such as stressors. These include lack of preparation which subsequently created feelings of anxiety because the students were afraid of giving inaccurate responses or pronunciations; introduction of new concepts or grammatical structures which the students reported were overwhelming and evoked anxiety because it is difficult to use them in oral practice; oral activities, which they claimed were too nerve-wracking because they felt intimidated to speak among others owing to the fact that such activities made them uncomfortable (6-7).

Mejia proposed that oral assessments always conjure anxiety in the student because many Anglophone students learning a foreign language are confronted with the challenge of learning the vocabulary of a second language, and thus are assessed based on their productive ability in the respective language. On the basis of her study’s findings, Mejia revealed that the more exposure a student has with a foreign language, the more they are conscious of their language learning goals which signifies a decrease in anxiety. It is also worthy to mention that, in
her study, Mejia concluded that the personality, teaching abilities and techniques correlate with
and can contribute to the presence of anxiety in the foreign language classroom (2). Moreover,
Mejia maintained the idea that some teaching strategies or practices serve as leading contributors
to foreign language anxiety in the classroom and suggested that teachers engage in more
interactive teaching in order to assist students to overcome the occurrence of anxiety (1). She
further suggested that students and teachers develop strategies that may be based on their
learning styles in order to help deter anxiety (1).

Horwitz et al., (1986) stated that the foreign language anxiety often manifests itself in
testing situations. They indicated that students reported to have knowledge of specific grammar
but they forget it during a test of oral activities: the instance where the grammar points should be
simultaneously recalled and harmonized (126). In addition, the researchers stated that
communication apprehension, which refers to fear of communication with others, test anxiety
and fear of negative evaluation are the main types of foreign language anxiety in the classroom
(127). Moreover, they maintained the view that “psycho-physiological symptoms” such as
“feelings of worry and dread as well as heart palpitations” cause students to become forgetful of
second language vocabulary thus hindering the language learning experience and overall success
(126).

In comparison to Mejia’s study, Horwitz (1986) indicated that fear of criticism by peers
as well as fear of evaluation are contributing factors to anxiety in students in the foreign
language classroom and thus cause weak performance by those students mainly in oral practice
(126-127). On the other hand, Horwitz (1988) postulated that “teachers should discuss with their
students’ reasonable commitments for successful language learning and the value of some
language ability if it is less than fluent” (286).
MacIntyre and Gardner have investigated language class anxiety in a controlled laboratory setting, by which they employed two main areas of anxiety, “general anxiety and communicative anxiety.” Where the former, refers to anxiety that is not related to language or speaking and the latter, refers to “anxiety in personal settings which was crucially related to both the learning and recollection of vocabulary (296). In this study, the researchers observed classes from the continuing education divisions of a college in order to investigate language class anxiety between the French and English language. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991), stated that the language class can cause more anxiety than any other course taken (296).

They further mentioned that empirical research and reports have indicated that language anxiety can be very pervasive on all stages of language learning and production. In addition, they deduced that an increase in anxiety could cause negative effects such as neglecting oral participation and or avoiding complex linguistic structures in the language classroom. In this study, the researchers have also found that anxiety has negatively affected the students listening comprehension. The students in MacIntyre and Gardner’s study who felt anxious indicated that the language class moves at a rapid pace and they feel left behind. In addition, the researchers have found that “language anxiety consistently and negatively affects language learning and production” (302). Moreover, the study revealed that speaking is “the most anxiety-provoking” of second language activities. This in turn can lead to feelings of frustration and apprehension with respect to future attempts when they cannot communicate in the language (303).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) further expresses the view that second language anxiety has a response particular to anxiety within the second language classroom on the basis of their model (which demonstrates how language anxiety is distinguished from other anxieties). Based on this aforementioned model, created by MacIntyre and Gardner, differences between students’
anxiety levels were tracked to examine the cause of the negative effects anxiety has on one’s second language learning (297). In like manner of Mejia’s study, Young (1991) puts forward the view that the teachers also play a major role in contributing to students’ anxiety levels. She described this preeminent by stating that:

Instructors who believe their role is to correct students constantly when they make any error, who feel that they cannot have students working in pairs because the class may get out of control, who believe that the teacher should be doing most of the talking and teaching, and who think their role is more like a drill sergeant's than a facilitator's may be contributing to learner language anxiety (428).

Contrary to the aforementioned findings of the other researchers, Young (1991) also indicated that anxiety could have a positive impact on students’ second language performance as it serves as a necessity for their motivation (431).

Listening Comprehension

According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), “listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech and it concentrates on role of linguistic units such as phonemes, words, and grammatical structures and the role of listener’s anticipations, the situation and context, previous knowledge, and the subject” (123). They further connoted that, of the four main components of communication skills, which are speaking, listening, reading and writing, listening is deemed the most crucial as it plays a key role in the communication process. However, Hamouda (2013) stated that “Listening difficulties are defined as the internal and external characteristics that might interrupt text understanding and real-life processing problems
directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of listening comprehension” (117).

In this study, Hamouda attempted to investigate the listening problems encountered by a group of English major students of Saudi Arabia. Hamouda postulated that listening comprehension continues to be the most disregarded part of language teaching in schools since teachers’ main focus is grammar, reading and vocabulary in preparation for final examination (140). He further stated that because listening skills are not part of many books, teachers do not employ it as often in the classrooms, so they test in a way they do not have to teach listening and learners consequently learn to listen but not necessarily acquire the skill of listening comprehension (115).

Moreover, he maintained the view that understanding speech of foreign language is a very challenging task for students as they encounter many difficulties. He further suggested that in order for teachers to assist students to improve in this area, they need to assess the difficulties the students face, and develop effective listening comprehension strategies to help them overcome the various challenges (115). He also suggested that foreign language learners should have knowledge of cultural aspects of a language as this can have profound effects on a learner’s comprehending. Besides, Gilakjani and Sabouri expressed that accents could lead to a significant decline in listening comprehension. Moreover, they indicated that learners are facilitated when they are familiar with an accent as opposed to those who are unfamiliar with an accent of a person, whether native or non-native, and opined that this makes comprehension almost impossible for the learners (127).

In support of this, the results of Hamouda’s (2013) study revealed that the accent, pronunciation, rapidity of speech, inadequate vocabulary, distinct accents of speakers, absence of
concentration, apprehension and substandard quality of recording material were the major problems of listening comprehension experienced by the students. Additionally, Bingol (2014) postulated that unfamiliarity with vocabulary in a second language could also create problems in one’s listening comprehension. Furthermore, he maintained that many words have a myriad of meanings and if used inappropriately in inapplicable contexts, can lead to confusion of the students. He suggested that when listening materials comprise of words the learners know, it would be easy for the students to understand which subsequently stimulates their motivation and engrossment (4). This, as a result, can bring about positive effects on the students’ listening comprehension capabilities.

Bingol further stated that the length and speed of the listening is a significant factor in determining a student’s success in the component. He stated that it is challenging for lower level students to listen to and recall lengthy speech or audios. He proposed that shorter listening passages could make listening comprehension easier as well as reduce the tiredness of the students (4). Howbeit, in comparison to Hamouda’s (2013) study, this study revealed that speed could cause difficulties for the listeners if it is too fast for them to grasp target words and this in turn can create grave problems in understanding words of the second language.

According to Underwood (1989), “Many English language learners believe that the greatest difficulty with listening comprehension is that the listener cannot control how quickly a speaker speaks” (16). Underwood indicated that barriers to effective listening comprehension exist. Barriers which include, but are not limited to, repetition of the speech or audio and concentration. The former addresses the fact that words are usually not repeated for the students and this can tamper with their performance in various assessments; since teachers choose what and when they should repeat a text or audio without knowledge that students did not hear or
understood what was said. The latter however, suggests that it is not always easy for listeners to concentrate on a listening text due to lack of knowledge or interest of the second language (L2) which can lead to lack of attention thus restricting comprehension. Underwood also insinuated that if the listening material were fascinating to the listener, the concentration level would be maximized.

*Oral conversation*

In Gan’s (2012) study of “Understanding L2 speaking problems” Indications for ESL Curriculum Development in a Teacher Training Institution of Hong Kong, found that students or L2 learners of English encounter issues in oral conversation due to factors such as inadequate vocabulary and grammar. He deems this a “stumbling block” in the oral production of the L2, the reason for imperfectly learned pronunciation and intonation, inadequate opportunities to speak the L2 and lack of a focus on language improvement in the curriculum” (50-51).

Gan further implied that based on the results of his study, it can be deduced that students were in agreement that vocabulary was the major reason why they experienced challenges in explicitly expressing themselves in the second language L2. Gan also expressed that a lack of vocabulary can directly contribute to a decrease in the eloquence (fluency) of their speech (50).

On the other hand, Jimenez, (1933) in his study of investigating the difficulties faced by EFL learners, indicated that one of the most problematic areas of teaching and learning a foreign language more specifically the English language as a foreign language, is the oral production (222). In which he believes that students studying EFL tend to encounter challenges in their communicative skills daily (224).
Jimenez further expounded that the issue of fluency development stems from challenges related to the student’s “motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, first language interference and the learning environment.” He also maintained the view that fluency in speakers is drastically related to their challenges in the other components.

Additionally, Jimenez opined that motivation is the driving force towards the attitudes and interests of the learners. It is the reason why students keep motivated to succeed, gain employment opportunities, learn different cultures and meet new people” (224). However, he further asserted that motivation can be affected by psychological factors such as low self-esteem and anxiety as he maintained, “high self-esteem makes people more willing to speak up in groups and to criticize the groups approach.” In support of this affirmation, Baumeister et al., (2003) contended that if there are feelings of inferiority on the part of the students, their oral fluency will be affected (2).

Forbye, Jimenez mentioned that anxiety is another contributing factor to a challenging oral conversation of L2. He maintained the perspective that due to their anxiety the students refrain from participating in oral activities in competitive environments because they tend to compare themselves to others. He further connoted that they have a fear of making errors because they agonize over the idea that they may be humiliated which in turn increases their level of anxiety. (224).

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) believed that “several factors can limit the beneficial effects of natural exposure to a L2, a lack of peers who speak the target language natively, and incomprehensive communication” (qtd. in Jimenez 226). Additionally, Jimenez argued that this is indeed a restriction since the EFL learners are not afforded the opportunity to engage in the conversation with native speakers. As a result, their learning is focused mainly on grammatical
rules and vocabulary of the target language. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1983) further claimed that the students may be fully capable of reading and writing well but are not able to speak fluently. Instead of there being a development of innate communicative abilities, they are more knowledgeable of “‘sounding,’ grammatically correct using rules and structures but not expressing themselves” (qtd. in Jimenez 226).

**Conclusion**

The reviewed literature has presented the results and major findings of previous research concerning the challenges students face in learning foreign languages as well as possible causes of them. The literature review focused on the main factors related to this investigation; that is anxiety, oral conversation and listening comprehension.

This information however provides the context for this study, which focuses on the challenges students encounter in learning the Spanish language. However, many researches provide information based on foreign languages in general and not specifically to the Spanish language.

The key findings, as they relate to the study’s research questions will be discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 2

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges students encounter in learning the Spanish language, the causes for those challenges as well as to gain an insight as to what methods students employ to overcome them. In this chapter, the findings are presented using both quantitative and qualitative methods respectively. There are different sections that align with the first and second research questions presented in the introduction. Graphic illustrations are used to present quantitative data related to the first research question with respect to various aspects of the Spanish curriculum. A table is used to present the qualitative data related to the second research question. However, it is worthy to note that the researcher made a considerable attempt to present the information with minimal comments as possible in order to create a clear image. Nonetheless, the various responses with regards to the qualitative data were edited to ensure clarity.

Thirty (30) questionnaire responses were used in analyzing the data for this study. In the questionnaire, there were multiple-choice as well as open-ended questions which afforded students the opportunity to select as many responses as they wished, and or give their unique responses or comments respectively. Hereunder, this information will therefore be presented in the form of quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The interview however, tackled each research question and this information will be provided in the section of qualitative data and shows the responses of five of the thirty (30) students.
The data obtained on the basis of the challenges students face in the conversation component of the Spanish language are explicitly illustrated in Fig. 2. It can be clearly seen that the rate of speech of native speakers poses the most challenges for them in conversation as 70% of the students indicated this in their responses. Fifteen students (50%) stated that they were unable to understand what is being communicated while 33.3% equally encountered challenges in oral conversation consequent to their poor knowledge of vocabulary and grammar as illustrated above. However, no student indicated that they were unable to be understood.

Fig. 3. Challenges encountered in listening comprehension
According to the above graphic illustration, 16.7% of the students indicated that they encountered challenges in listening as a result of unclear pronunciation of the teacher, while 56.7% being the most, indicated that the native speaker’s rate of speech is what presented challenges for them in this component. Furthermore, 30% of the students equally indicated that the video’s rate of speech and lack of vocabulary are among the other contributing factors to challenges in the listening comprehension component.

The above graph shows the challenges students encounter in various areas of Spanish grammar. On the basis of the information above, 43.3% of the students expressed that they encounter challenges in conjugating the different tenses that exist in the Spanish language. Additionally, 73.3% of the students, being the highest, appear to have problems with regards to
remembering and accurately conjugating these different tenses. Moreover, 33.3% indicated that they have issues when distinguishing between por and para where 20% reported to having faced difficulties when distinguishing between ser and estar. In addition, 30% of the students also noted that they encounter issues when distinguishing between preterite and imperfect tenses of Spanish. Lastly, 70% of the students responded that they face difficulties when remembering the irregular verbs in the grammar component.

Fig. 5. Challenges encountered in reading

According to the above graph shown in Fig. 5., 36.7% of the students encounter challenges in reading the Spanish language subsequent to their inaccurate pronunciations of various words in the language. Moreover, 63.3% of the students indicated that they were unable to read fluently while 40% were unable to understand what they read.
Fig. 6. Challenges encountered in writing

According to Fig. 6., which shows the challenges students encounter in the writing component of the Spanish language, 70% indicated that their limited vocabulary of the language is what poses challenges for them. Furthermore, 26.7% of the students stated that their poor knowledge of grammar is what also leads to challenges for them in the language. Moreover, 40% of the students indicated that the difficult syntax of the Spanish language is also a contributing factor to their encountered challenges in writing the Spanish language.

Fig. 7. Students who reported having anxiety in the Spanish language classroom
According to Fig. 7., 60% of the students reported to having feelings of anxiety in the Spanish language classroom, while 40% indicated that they did not.

Table 1
Reasons reported by students as to why anxiety hinders or assists their learning of the Spanish language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I get very scared and it makes me forget the little that I know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders my learning, as I tend to forget what I have learnt.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am scared that I would not be able to comprehend what is being communicated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders it because once I get anxious, I seem to not be able to speak and I freeze during oral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, it does because I don't like Spanish and my teacher makes it worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders my learning because I am afraid of embarrassing myself in front of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinders because I am anxious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders because I get scared for orals and messes up my speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders because I am afraid I would not pass the subject.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It hinders because I have social anxiety and if I do not understand a topic or did not hear what an examiner said, I would not ask them to repeat it because of m anxiety.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

This chapter presented the quantitative and qualitative findings related to the challenges students encounter in learning the Spanish language in a secondary school context. Based on the results, it can be deduced that the students experience problems in each component of the Spanish course where some components outweighed the others. Notwithstanding, the chapter that follows includes an interpretation of this study.
Chapter 3
Discussion

In this chapter, the aim of the researcher is to discuss the findings, supported by the cited literature, in relation to each research question that is stated in the introduction of this paper. In an attempt to provide data related to their challenges experienced in the Spanish language classroom, the research focused on a form five class consisting of thirty-three (n=33) students, where only thirty responses were used in the analysis of the data. In this school context, the Spanish language is compulsory. Many crucial insights were revealed from both sources of data used. The data collected, revealed that students encounter a considerable amount of challenges in the foreign language classroom. The affective factor, anxiety, was discovered as a contributor to the challenges the students faced, while oral conversation and listening comprehension were found to be the two most challenging components for the students. Verbatim quotations were employed as well, in an attempt to reveal the students’ unadulterated responses. Notwithstanding, it is worthy to mention that some comments were edited in order to ensure clarity for the reader.

The qualitative and quantitative data as well as the research cited herein, suggested that anxiety contributes to students’ challenges in the Spanish language classroom. Many students indicated that they felt anxious for the oral conversation examinations (see Fig. 7), which supports the claim by Mejia (2014) that oral assessments always evoke anxiety in students. Furthermore, students indicated that they were afraid of oral conversations, because they were afraid to make mistakes or embarrass themselves in front of others. For instance, one participant
commented: “It hinders my learning because I am afraid of embarrassing myself in front of people”.

This finding supported the claim by Mejia that students were afraid of responding incorrectly. Moreover, in relation to Horwitz (1986) affirmation that students would have knowledge of specific grammar but forget it in oral tests owing to anxiety. Students indicated that owing to the fact that they felt nervous for the oral assessments, they tend to forget the little vocabulary that they know. To support this, one student indicated that: “It hinders my learning as I tend to forget what I have learnt.”

Some students also implied that the nervousness prevents them from moving forward which consequently causes them to feel left behind. This reinforces the literature by MacIntyre and Gardner (1991). One student however, indicated that the teacher generated anxiety for them, which supports the affirmation by Mejia that the skills and attitude of the teacher can provoke anxiety in the foreign language classroom (2014). This can be seen in the response of that student when asked if anxiety hinders her learning of the Spanish language: “Yes, it does because I don't like Spanish and my teacher makes it worse”.

With respect to the listening comprehension component, students indicated that due to unclear pronunciation by the speaker who in this context is their teacher, lack of vocabulary and the rapid rate of speech of the speakers were the principal contributing factors that led to difficulties for them (see Fig. 3). This finding can then be interconnected to the claim of Hamouda (2013) that one’s pronunciation, rapidity of speech or inadequate vocabulary can hinder one’s performance in listening comprehension. For example, two students noted that: “Oral conversation and reading due to lack of proper pronunciation by me”, "I do not have enough knowledge of the vocabulary so I faced challenges in understanding.”
Additionally, all interviewees, when asked, disclosed that teachers should include cultural projects because this would assist in the development of vocabulary for them, in the language as suggested by Hamouda (2013) that learners of foreign languages should have knowledge of cultural aspects of a language so that they will improve in each component of the language. Students said: “yes they should be included, it is more fun than reading a textbook”, “Yes, because students knowledge of vocabulary and of the language itself will increase.”

Contrary to this, one student indicated that cultural projects should not be given because she views it as something solely for fun and not for learning: “Cultural projects are only for fun in my opinion and I do not think I will be able to learn anything from them”.

Besides, the majority of the students also indicated that the pace of speech by the teacher or speaker raises problems for them (see Fig. 2&3), which can substantiate the findings of Hamouda’s (2013) study that the “speed of the listening is significant in determining the student's performance in the component.

Students also specified that in oral conversation, another factor that is challenging for them is improper pronunciation by them. This is however supported by Gan’s (2012) study of “Understanding L2 Speaking Problems”. Nevertheless, unsupported by the literature, students revealed that their lack of revision and or practice, inadequate notes or explanations by the teacher and their inability to remember vocabulary and various grammatical tenses were all a part of the challenges they faced in the Spanish language. Furthermore, when asked, they indicated that in order to overcome these challenges, they do a lot of revision and practice, listen to Spanish music, talk to themselves in the language, learn more vocabulary, use online language learning websites, practice with family and take extra lessons. The following are verbatim
quotations noted by the students in their responses to the question asked about the methods they employ to overcome the challenges they encounter:

“I plan to study more and practice conjugations in a way that will make it fun and easier to remember.”

“I use online language learning websites and audiobooks to help me overcome my challenges. I also listen to Spanish music and try to translate them.”

“Get notes, read from other textbooks and google some things.”

“Speak to Spanish friends and family and help boost my confidence or attend Spanish lessons.”

“Studying daily, practicing reading and learning vocabulary as well as practice using the tenses. There are also apps and games, which are interactive and assist in my learning and understanding Spanish.”

However, students (3.3%) indicated that they faced no challenges and therefore they continuously revise.

Summary

This chapter provided an interpretation of the emerging findings obtained from quantitative and qualitative methods, in relation to previous related literature. The findings pointed to the various challenges students face in the Spanish language classroom, the reasons for these challenges and the methods these students use to approach their challenges. The findings provided varying results and those results, contrary to already existing literature in some
instances. However, the chapter that follows includes a summary of this study as well as various limitations, recommendations and areas for future research.
Conclusion

The overarching objective of this study was to investigate and hence understand the challenges students’ face in learning the Spanish language at CSEC level. The study found that students’ encountered challenges in each component of the Spanish language. Withal, anxiety presented itself to be a major contributor to challenges these students’ face in the Spanish language classroom. The difficulties in listening comprehension and oral conversation were found to be the two most difficult of all components for the participants in this study.

This study’s main attention was in a secondary school context in Trinidad where the Spanish language is compulsory. In order to gather rich understandings of the challenges students’ experience, a case study approach and the use of qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were the methodological tools of data collection for this research project. Both methods provided qualitative as well as quantitative background data on the present status of the Spanish language classroom in relation to this study’s research questions. In spite of the limited number of respondents who participated in this study, the data obtained, afforded an in depth understanding of the challenges students face in the Spanish language, what may possibly cause these challenges and, what methods the students employ to overcome the various challenges.

Limitations of the study

Throughout this study, a few restrictions arose. The initial plan of this investigation was to compare the results of the challenges students studying Spanish as a mandatory course faced, as opposed to those who had the subject as an elective. However, due to the constraints of time
and the disapproval of conducting the study at various schools, it was decided to investigate one school particularly where the Spanish language is compulsory. The author, as a sole researcher, was unable to interview the teachers in order to further gather information of the students’ performances and the teachers’ perceptions as to what challenges the students encounter and why they believe the students’ encounter them.

As a result, the researcher felt that the questionnaire and interviews would be able to provide substantial information required to satisfy the study’s research questions. Moreover, informal conversation with the teacher of the surveyed class provided useful and pertinent information about which component presents the most challenges for the students.

*Recommendations*

It is the hope of the researcher that both teachers aspiring and actual, as well as students having read this project, will have a more profound understanding of (1) the challenges encountered by secondary school students learning the Spanish language, (2) the causes of the challenges the students encounter and (3) the methods used by the students to overcome their challenges in learning the language; in an effort to better formulate ways to tackle these challenges beforehand and to subsequently alleviate the severity of the challenges. At the beginning, teachers should take time to understand the difficulties of their students and find ways in which to combat them. Students should take more responsibility for their learning, understand what their difficulties are in learning the language and be resourceful. The researcher also recommends that more research be done in this area.
Future research

The researcher believes that further research should be done on the following:

➢ The oral component of the Spanish language curriculum
➢ The role affective factors, in relation to apprehension, affects performance
➢ The link between oral difficulty and cognition
➢ Comparison and contrast of the results of students having the Spanish language as a compulsory part of their study and of those who have the language as an elective, in an attempt to see if this is a possible factor in the students’ performance.


Appendix 1

Dear Form 5 student,
I am a final year student, currently doing HUMN3099-Special Project. I am interested in knowing the problems/challenges you face in learning the Spanish language. This is not a test, so there are no "right" or "wrong" answers and it is completely confidential; you are not required to write your name. Please be honest with your answers so that Spanish language teaching may be improved which can benefit both you and future students. Thank you.

Nationality: ...........................................  Age: .......................  □ Female  □ Male

Please assess your current command in the Spanish language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very weak</th>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
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<td>Fluency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listening comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1) What secondary school do you currently attend? ...........................................................................................................

2) How many years have you been learning the Spanish language? ...............................................................

3) Is Spanish a compulsory subject at your school?  □ Yes  □ No

4) Is Spanish an elective subject at your school?  □ Yes  □ No

5) What challenges do you encounter in learning Spanish in each of the following components?

   a.) **Oral conversation**: Tick the item(s) that apply to you.
     - ☐ Inability to understand what is being communicated
     - ☐ Inability to be understood by teacher
     - ☐ Rate of speech of native speakers is too fast to comprehend
     - ☐ Poor knowledge of vocabulary
     - ☐ Poor knowledge of grammar

   b.) **Listening comprehension**:
     - ☐ Unclear pronunciation of teacher
     - ☐ Rate of speech of native speakers is too fast
     - ☐ Rate of speech of videos is too fast
     - ☐ Lack of vocabulary to understand what is being conveyed

   c.) **Grammar**:
     - ☐ Conjugating different tenses
     - ☐ Remembering and accurately conjugating radical changing verbs
     - ☐ Differences between por & para
     - ☐ Differences between ser & estar
     - ☐ Differences between tenses - preterite and imperfect
     - ☐ Remembering Irregular verbs
d.) Reading:
- Unable to pronounce words accurately
- Unable to read in a continuous flow
- Unable to understand what you have read

e.) Writing:
- Lack of vocabulary to write Spanish texts
- Poor knowledge of grammar to write extensively
- Limited vocabulary to write about different topics
- Sentence structure is difficult to remember

Other (s): ..........................................................................................................................

6) Which component(s) of the Spanish language pose the most challenges for you? Tick
- Reading comprehension
- Writing a sentence
- Listening comprehension
- Learning grammatical rules
- Pronunciation
- Orals
- Writing a complex sentence

Other(s): ..........................................................................................................................

7) What do you think is the cause of the aforementioned challenges in learning Spanish?
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........................................................................................................................................
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8) What methods do you employ to overcome all of the previously mentioned challenges in learning Spanish?
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........................................................................................................................................
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9) How do you feel about your knowledge of vocabulary? ☐ Secure ☐ Insecure
Please specify why: ............................................................................................................... 
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

10) What are some of the strategies you believe your teacher should employ in the classroom to assist in the elimination of the challenges you face?
- Cultural projects
- Plays
- Bring native speakers to the class
- Show movies
- ICTS
- Use of music
- Use short videos online

Other(s): ..........................................................................................................................

11) Would you say that the teaching style of your teacher works effectively for you? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Please explain why: ...........................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
12) Which grammar topic(s) would you say is/are challenging for you to learn? Select the items that applies to you.
- Preterit tense
- Imperfect tense
- Conjugation
- Subjunctive mood
- Future tense
- Past continuous tense
- Use of ‘por y para’
- Use of ‘ser y estar’

Other(s): ..........................................................................................................................................................

13) How enjoyable is learning Spanish for you?
- most enjoyable
- enjoyable
- least enjoyable
- I detest it

Please specify why: ..............................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................

14) What would you say is the cause of some students’ failure at the CSEC General Proficiency Spanish Examination?
.............................................................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................

15) What do you think about providing remedial classes for slower learners of the Spanish language?
.............................................................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................

16) If you could change one aspect of the Spanish curriculum, what would it be? ..........................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................
Why? ....................................................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................

17) Would you say that any affective factors such as anxiety hinder or assist in your learning of the Spanish language?
- Yes
- No

Please explain: ......................................................................................................................................................
.............................................................................................................................................................................

18) How motivated are you in learning Spanish?
- Extremely motivated
- Barely motivated
- Not motivated

19) Does your native language (English) interfere with your productive ability in the Spanish classroom?
- Yes
- No

Please explain in what ways: ..................................................................................................................................

END OF QUESTIONNAIRE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!
Appendix 2

Interview questions – Semi-Structured interview

1. Why did you choose to study Spanish?
2. Do you like the subject? Yes/No?
3. Why do/ don’t you like it?
4. Do you face challenges learning Spanish? What are they?
5. Which component would you say pose the most challenges for you? (Reading and writing, listening comprehension, oral conversation, grammar?) - Why?
6. What methods do you use to overcome these challenges?
7. Do you have any anxieties with regard to learning the language? Yes/no What are they?
8. Would you say the anxiety works for or against you? (If any)
9. Do you believe your teacher is aware of these challenges? Yes/No
10. What strategies does your teacher employ to help you overcome the challenges you face in the Spanish classroom?
11. What do you think about making Spanish compulsory at your school? (Elective) - What do you think would the consequences of this?
12. What do you think about making Spanish an elective at your school? (Compulsory school) - What do you think would the consequences of this?
13. Does your teacher include cultural projects in the Spanish class? Yes/No
14. If yes, would you say this helps in your performance of the language?
15. If no, do you think the teacher should include them? Why? Do you think if the teacher is to include them, it would assist in your performance of the language? How?
16. What suggestions would you make to your teacher to make Spanish somewhat easier to learn?
Appendix 3
Consent form

The Principal
Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Kerlene Churaman and I am a final-year student of the University of the West Indies (UWI), currently doing HUMN3099-Caribbean Studies Project. This project aims to investigate the challenges students face in learning the Spanish language. As a result, I am asking your permission to allow the form five students who study Spanish at your school to complete the survey being administered. As an aspiring Spanish teacher, it is my hope that the data from this survey will contribute to a better understanding of the different challenges faced by students in learning the language. This will allow me to create more effective teaching methods which can alleviate the problems the present students face in the classroom, as well as future generations. All information collected are strictly confidential and anonymous as the students will not be required to write his/her name. Please sign below as an agreement to allow the students to participate in the survey. Thanking you in advance.

________________________________

Name of Principal (please print)

________________________________

Signature of Principal