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"EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE FOREIGN LANGUAGE THEATRE HAS ON
LEARNING SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE. A CASE STUDY
INVOLVING DMLL SPANISH THEATRE ARTS PARTICIPANTS AT UWI ST.
AUGUSTINE."

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ABSTRACT

The UWI Spanish Theatre Group has been in existence for twenty years at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. Despite this, no studies had been done to ascertain its impact on the students who take part in it. Consequently, this research aimed at exploring the impact that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has had on the students' language-learning process and their personal development. This information proves vital in facilitating the development of learning strategies that can foster second language acquisition. The study subjects were selected by convenient sampling. Semi-structured interviews were used in the data collection process allowing for the gathering of firsthand experiences from both students and Spanish language assistants who were involved in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group prior to 2020. These interviews were conducted via zoom, a virtual meeting platform.

The study revealed that foreign language theatre influenced students' holistic development. Participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group served to reinforce the knowledge that students had acquired in the Spanish language classroom as well as expose them to aspects of the language they would not attain within a traditional classroom setting. The study showed that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group created dynamic students who became better individuals and better speakers of the Spanish language. It should be noted, that due to the Covid-19 outbreak and social distancing restrictions, the UWI Spanish Theatre Group ceased its operations on February 23rd, 2020.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre arts has played a major role in many societies around the world. From as early as the first documented plays staged in classical Greece in the fifth century to contemporary twenty-first century theatrical productions, theatre arts has been used to inspire creativity, self-discovery, expression, and communication. Furthermore, “the primary function of theatre in Ancient Greece was to serve as an educational force within society.” (Siart 5). Withal, the theatre served as an educational tool by disseminating ideas, beliefs, norms, values and the transmission of history and culture by using the stage as a medium.

Nowadays theatre arts continues to be an educational force within society. The theatre has become an instrument through which practical knowledge can be dispensed and specific skills can be taught and learnt. In the 1960’s educators began searching for alternative ways to dispense knowledge outside the conventional means. The twentieth century schooling system in Great Britain began integrating theatre arts into curricula in order to bolster the learning process. This development led to the birth of Theatre in Education (TIE). This novel approach to learning was first developed by the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry England in 1965. TIE was a form of applied theatre that sought to diverge from the conventional approach to education during that era by focusing on active and participatory learning as opposed to rote learning. It was posited that learning outcomes are better achieved when students become active participants in the learning process, rather than learning through means of repetition and memorization.

Since the implementation of TIE, educators began experimenting with theatre arts by using it in different areas of education. One particular field of education in which theatre had been introduced was in the area of foreign language learning. It had been hypothesized that the theatrical

space provides an avenue for learners to bolster their competence in a second language as well as expose them to cultural knowledge, expressed through simulated situations, to which they would not be exposed in a common classroom setting. Consequently, this study will explore this notion by analysing the impact of the Spanish Theatre Group at the University of the West Indies (UWI).

The UWI Spanish Theatre Group began as a co-curricular activity at the University of the West Indies in 1999, staging its first play at the St. Augustine Campus that same year. In the following year, in the year 2000 according to the article *The UWI Intercampus Foreign Language Theatre Festival celebrates its 20th anniversary in St. Augustine*; the UWI Spanish Theatre Group staged its first play for a regional audience in 2000 at the Cavehill Campus in Barbados (Palma 38). The staging of foreign language plays among the University of the West Indies campuses took place on an annual basis as part of the UWI Intercampus Foreign Language Theatre Festival.

The minimum requirements for joining the UWI Spanish Theatre Group includes being enrolled in a program with the DMLL and having at least a secondary school level knowledge of Spanish. Casting calls begin in the second week of the first semester and students who wish to participate in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group can join voluntarily. Once students register to be a part of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group at the beginning of the semester, the preproduction phase commences. During this phase, the Spanish language assistants who conduct the activities of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group choose a play in consultation with the Spanish lecturer who oversees the group's operations. The plays chosen primarily comprise previously published works by prominent Spanish-speaking playwrights or are remastered versions of previously published works. Additionally, during this period, roles for the respective characters in the play are casted. Over the course of the academic year, cast members attend weekly hour-long rehearsals conducted

in the Spanish language by the Spanish language assistants. During these sessions, cast members engage in a number of theatre-based activities such as script reading, theatre-based warm up exercises and other activities that help get them acquainted with the cultural context of the play. At the end of the academic year, the members of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group put on a Spanish theatrical production at the UWI Intercampus Foreign Language Theatre Festival.

Rationale

This research project explores the influence of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group at the DMLL. The information acquired from this study is critical for the stakeholders who are responsible for the planning and execution of this co-curricular activity. It will provide insight into the value of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group at the university by shedding light on the role it plays in students' second language learning journey.

This study will also serve as a resource for educators and students who are investigating unconventional language learning tools. This area of research explores the idea of language learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. It explores unconventional approaches to learning Spanish by giving insight into foreign language learners first-hand experiences in foreign language theatre. Subsequently the information acquired from this study can serve to contribute to the creation of innovative language learning strategies and resources.

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to highlight the impact of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus by exploring the experiences of those who

have participated in this foreign language theatre group. It aims to analyse its influence on students' growth as it relates to their holistic development and their proficiency in the Spanish language. Moreover, this research intends to investigate the value of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group as a learning resource outside the traditional classroom setting.

Research Questions

- 1.) What influence has the UWI Spanish Theatre Group had on participants' command of the Spanish language?
- 2.) How has the theatre group made students aware of cultural aspects of the foreign language?
- 3.) What influence has the UWI Spanish Theatre Group had on participants' personal growth and development?

Objectives

1. To explore the influence that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has had on students' proficiency in the Spanish language
2. To discover how the UWI Spanish Theatre Group impacts students' cultural awareness as it relates to the Spanish language.
3. To ascertain the impact that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group had on students' personal development.

Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus over the academic year 2020/2021. Data was collected from a sample size of fourteen persons, including former students and Spanish language assistants who were involved in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. The study subjects were selected by convenient sampling.

The data obtained from the study subjects was acquired through semi-structured interviews, conducted via Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. The use of semi-structured interviews via this virtual meeting platform was done in order to adhere to Covid-19 social distancing guidelines. It also allowed a greater scope of persons to participate in the study as virtual meeting rooms eliminate the limitation of having to establish a meeting point within a fixed geographical space.

The primary objectives were to discuss interviewees' experiences in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group and subsequently ascertain the impact this experience had on their development inside and outside the classroom. Interviews took place over a two-week period and participants were interviewed for an estimated fifteen to twenty minutes. The structure of the interviews allowed interviewees the freedom to provide additional information than that which had been asked by the guided questions. This served to provide the study with key insights into the objectives, the inner workings, and the influence of the UWI Spanish Theatre Group.

CHAPTER ONE

Literature Review

In recent decades, the concept of Theatre in Education has been applied to the field of foreign language learning. Consequently, several studies have been undertaken in order to measure its effectiveness in the area of second language acquisition. According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), second languages are acquired through five fundamental pillars. These bases include communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities. Recent studies exploring the use of theatre as an educational tool in the area of second language learning have asserted that the theatrical space furnishes language learners with these aforementioned pillars. In *Theatre Arts and the Teaching of Second Languages*, Stephen Smith expresses that learning a language and learning a play share a ‘psychological reality’ for the learners. He posits that the theatrical space provides an avenue for persons to bolster their linguistic competence in the second language, as well as foster a deeper social and cultural awareness. Likewise, Yuanyuan (92) affirms, “students’ competency together with their drama acting, intercultural awareness and communicative skills can be extensively improved”.

Fundamentally, the theatrical space is a socially interactive environment that facilitates second language acquisition. Studies have suggested that TIE applied in the area of foreign language education creates a dynamic learning environment because it facilitates collaborative and kinaesthetic learning. According to (Giebert 7) “the theatrical space enables collaborative learning which serves to improve learners’ linguistic and social competences in the foreign language.”

Similarly, Deborah Dubiner affirms that interactions provide the learner with the opportunity to notice the gaps in their knowledge as well as gaps in their interlanguage and the input they receive (4). Furthermore, “the gap between the learner’s current state and their future knowledge is bridged by assistance from others; learning demands social interaction, so that the learner can internalize knowledge out of external action” (Cook 229). These positions coincide with Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. The theory suggests that a learner acquires knowledge through the process of scaffolding, which occurs when individuals of varying knowledge levels interact with each other. It is suggested that those who are more equipped with knowledge can serve to bridge the gaps in their less equipped peers’ knowledge. Likewise, Sun and Yuan (1-18) concord that collaborative learning environments allow students to bolster their skills by learning from each other.

In addition to the theatrical space providing an avenue for collaborative learning, theatre also allows participants to learn kinaesthetically. The tactile nature of theatre allows learners to interact with the language in a manner that allows them to contextualize it within the space they are navigating. Herrera and Murray suggest that acting training provides learners with the simulation of real, authentic and meaningful interaction environments necessary for language acquisition (qtd. *The E Theater a Holistic Methodology* pg. 212). Greenfader et al. explain that, “dramatization provides a tangible context for decontextualized language” (4). It is also posited that unlike teaching from a traditional textbook, rehearsed drama allows students to memorize and internalize language and then through roleplaying, they can express themselves in the second language (I-Wen 27).

Guliyeva adds that contextualization through dramatization improves linguistic proficiency because learners gain a better understanding of words used in their appropriate contexts (1-4). Likewise, according to Giebert (3-7)-, “learners are not simply given a list of phrases to memorize

for a vocabulary text but are provided with a role-play situation and thus can memorize difficult phrases in context”. Students learn new phrases and words through this tactile and socially interactive environment. In addition, participants not only build vocabulary in the foreign language but also acquire more motivation to utilize the language. This leads to improvements in oral communication skills.

At the same time, the theatrical space allows language learners to acquire proficiency in the second language through being in a space that provides linguistic and cultural immersion in the foreign language. Wessels suggests that activities such as script readings, memorizing lines, learning characterization, rehearsal, collaborative work, and final performance immerse learners in the foreign language in two contexts- the text (script) and the production environment-, which allows students to acquire and learn the foreign language implicitly (qtd. Theatre production as a language-learning environment for Chinese Students pg. 4). Similarly, Gualdron and Castillo (213) affirm that navigating the theatrical space in a foreign language allows learners to improve their skills in the second language because it enables participants to interact within a linguistically and culturally immersive language-learning environment. Bisson et al. (5) adds that “being exposed to the written and auditory forms of foreign language words results in incidental acquisition of foreign language vocabulary knowledge.” Hulstijin indicates that incidental learning comes as a by-product of a task that revolves around meaning (362).

Studies have also highlighted the impact that the use of drama in the area of foreign language education has on the language learner’s intercultural awareness. Gualdron and Castillo explain that “you just do not interpret a nurse; you interpret a nurse from that time, from that moment, and from the historical condition” (220). Thus, it can be stated that the theatrical space provides an avenue for language learners to contextualize the characters in their social and cultural context.

This leads to the bolstering of cultural awareness, which is necessary for interaction in real life settings. Stern (78-79) suggests that play allows language learners to participate in the new culture, helping them develop a sensitivity to how speakers of the foreign language interact with each other. It also familiarizes them with the cultural appropriateness of words and expressions to specific settings and social situations. Schulz adds “familiarity with the target language culture improves communicative abilities of the learner due to the acquisition of tools that bring about the understanding of sociolinguistic rules such as pragmatics” (20). The foreign language theatre allows persons to use language in their appropriate social contexts, thus enhancing cultural awareness and communicative abilities in the second language.

The theatrical space has provided an avenue for the development of learner’s self-confidence which impacts their communicative abilities in the foreign language. Wilson (230-234) explains that there is a correlation between self-esteem and the ability to orally produce a second language. It is suggested that increased self-confidence improves language learner’s oral proficiency. This self-confidence is enhanced because “drama demonstrates to L2 learners that they are indeed capable of expressing themselves in realistic communicative situations” (233). One technique that plays a fundamental role in engendering self-confidence is the theatrical practice of improvisation. “Improvisation in the theatrical space is a way of encouraging general confidence and fluency in the second language by allowing language learners to explore and exploit their communicative repertoire” (Shriganesha 50). It is further affirmed that students are not engaged in regurgitating preconceived answers, but rather utilize the tools at their disposal to expand their present knowledge through these spontaneous and meaningful interactions. In this regard, Piccoli (3) states that improvisation for the language learner serves to improve their confidence and spontaneity in the second language. It allows students to exercise problem solving involving their experiences to

produce a response in a given situational context while improvisation as a tool, prepares learners for real-life hands-on interactions that exist outside the classroom setting.

Studies have also indicated that language learning through theatre arts can be achieved due to the emotional involvement in the theatrical space. Positive feelings such as enjoying a collaborative and creative atmosphere and pride in achievement, as well as negative emotions such as insecurity or stage fright will be more memorable than in a neutral, predominantly cognitive setting, as it is set apart from other events (Giebert 7). In *The Spark of Learning: Energizing the College Classroom with the Science of Emotion*, Cavanagh hypothesizes that creating emotional connections with and in the pedagogical framework leads to higher retention of information by students. Subsequently, these studies indicated that emotional involvement in the language-learning environment through social interaction and role-playing leads to learners recalling novel phrases and words they learnt in the foreign language while interacting in the theatrical space.

Subsequently, these studies highlight that the foreign language theatrical space reinforces language learners' competences in the second language. This is achieved through the provision of a socially interactive environment. Participants are afforded the opportunity to interact with their peers enabling them to boost their skills in the second language through the process of scaffolding. Moreover, the foreign language theatre space creates an immersive language-learning environment that leads to improved competence in the second language by engrossing learners in the linguistic aspects of the foreign language through dialogue and script reading. In addition, participants are given the opportunity to experience Hispanic culture through the play that is being staged. It has been theorized that this exposure to culture enriches language learners' linguistic abilities in the foreign language. Research has also indicated that the theatrical space bolsters participants' self-confidence. It has suggested that this improved confidence leads to better oral production of the

second language. Additionally theatre arts requires emotional investment in order to appropriately embody characters and enact the play. It has been posited that emotional involvement in learning leads to a higher chance of retaining information. Thus, it has been suggested that this plays a key role in enriching one's abilities in the second language.

This chapter summarizes bodies of research which were conducted in order to explore the relationship between foreign language learning and the theatrical space. It ascertains the influence that foreign language theatre has had on individuals who partook in it. The following chapter will present the findings obtained from students who were involved in the foreign language theatrical space at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

CHAPTER TWO

Findings

This chapter aims to present the data provided by fourteen cast members who were involved in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. These interviewees comprise twelve students and two Spanish language assistants. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information and the questions posed were open ended, designed to evoke freewill responses from respondents. The questions asked sought to explore participants' experiences relative to staging a play in the Spanish language and ascertain the impact it had on them as language learners and as individuals. The findings are presented in text form and includes quotations from the persons who were involved. The information obtained are divided into three subsections which were the areas of focus that guided the interview questions. Participants highlighted the impact participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group had on them and the factors which were responsible for it.

Category: Personal Growth and Development

Twelve students and two Spanish language assistants were asked to recount their personal experiences and speak about the influence that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has had on personal growth and development. Interviewee responses were as follows:

“Spanish Theatre really gave me the confidence to participate more in class” (Interviewee 1, cast member 2017-2018). He added, *“After realizing I could memorize an entire play in*

Spanish, I could memorize anything. If I could go on stage and act out three acts of a play that is not my native language, I could remember anything.”

“Theatre really helped with my confidence in terms of speaking the language. If we were having a conversation about something in class, I would feel more comfortable expressing myself and contributing to the conversation.” (Interviewee 2, cast member 2017-2018).

She also stated, *“I became better acquainted with my classmates. We would meet outside theatre sessions in order to practice the script.”*

“One of the reasons I joined Spanish Theatre was to help me improve my people skills. It helped improve my self-confidence and interpersonal skills.” (Interviewee 3, cast member 2015-2018)

“I’m generally a shy person and theatre really helped me come out of my shell. We had to speak a lot in rehearsals. The assistants would encourage us to use our Spanish by having group discussions with the cast about things related to our lives outside of theatre. (Interviewee 4, cast member 2017-2018). She also stated, *“Spanish Theatre brought me out of my shell, it helped me meet new people.”*

Interviewee 5, a cast member between 2015 and 2016 stated, *“There’s always a kind of anxiety you feel when you have to speak with native speakers. Spanish Theatre helped me overcome the anxiety bit by bit. “It gave me the confidence to act in a foreign language. The improvisational activities we were given in rehearsals helped me overcome my fear of speaking and performing in front of others. For instance, one time we had to pretend we were monkeys, and we were swinging on trees. You move around and when they say STOP,*

you jump on a tree. Acting out these bizarre scenarios helped us overcome fear and anxiety.”

Interviewee 6, a cast member in 2013 expressed that, *“There was a comradeship there, we were engaged in a lot of group work which got everyone comfortable speaking the language.”*

“Prior to Spanish Theatre, I wasn’t going on a stage to do anything. Spanish Theatre helped overcome my stage fright. They used to give us random scenes to act out. They were so ridiculous. I think they did it in order to eliminate the fear of being judged. At first, it wasn’t easy but the assistants were there to help.” (Interviewee 7, cast member 2016-2018).

He also added, *“I’m generally a quiet person but in theatre I learnt how to project my voice.”*

“Spanish Theatre helps you understand the language beyond the classroom. It can help persons who may not be very bold to own the language by embodying a character” (Interviewee 8, cast member 2013)

“Spanish Theatre helped me become more expressive and it boosted my confidence in terms of using the language. It also helped me improve my relationships with other students” (Interviewee 9, cast member 2013) She added that, *“We did a lot of improvisational activities in Spanish Theatre, this helped us gain more courage to use the language because it put us on the spot.”*

“The improvisational activities we did in theatre seemed ridiculous, but they help you overcome your fear of speaking and performing in front of others. It eliminates the fear of being judged.” (Interviewee 10, cast member 2016)

“I’m already a confident person. However, Spanish Theatre increased it. It actually helped me build enough confidence to go to Bogota for the first time in 2018.” (Interviewee 11, cast member 2017). He also added *“I met a lot of new people who I’m still in contact with today. They helped me improve my Spanish outside the classroom.”*

“It helped me with confidence, speaking the language out loud in front of people. In Spanish Theatre you were just having fun, you did not feel judged, so it allowed you to make mistakes without thinking about it.” (Interviewee 12, cast member 2011).

“I noticed changes in a student who participated in Theatre at that time. He now lives in Colombia. After the play he was more confident with the language because being in the play helped him not feel ashamed of committing mistakes in Spanish.” (Interviewee 14, Spanish language assistant who conducted theatre in 2017)

Category: Impact on Intercultural Awareness

The twelve student interviewees were also asked about the impact that staging their respective plays had on their intercultural awareness. The Spanish language assistants were also asked about the role they played and the factors which were involved in bolstering cast members intercultural awareness. Participants’ responses were recorded as follows:

“You learn about Spanish culture indirectly. Being a part of the Spanish play in 2017 helped me learn about some of the cultural nuances and colloquialisms in Spain. For

example, we were acting out a scene in a bar, and I learnt how to do a toast in Spanish, “arriba, abajo, pa centro, pa dentro”. (Interviewee 1, cast member 2017-2018).

“I learnt a lot of cultural expressions. I learnt how to toast in Spanish. I also learnt about Hispanic culture through interacting with the script and also interacting with the Spanish language assistants. The assistants would encounter expressions in the play that were unfamiliar to them and we’d get into discussions about how they would say it in their country.” (Interviewee 2, cast member 2017-2018)

Interviewee 3 stated that being involved in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group helped him identify cultural differences in the Spanish speaking community, *“The first play I was involved in was based primarily around Colombia. The other two were centred on Spain’s culture. This helped me identify linguistic and cultural differences between Spanish from Spain and Latin America.”*

Interviewee 4 identified that, *“Spanish Theatre immerses you in the culture. It gives you a different outlook on the language as opposed to what you may receive in the classroom because it requires you to embody Spanish culture.”*

Interviewee 5 added, *“I learnt some slang from various Latin American countries that you wouldn’t necessarily learn in a classroom. In my second year, we learnt los piropos (pickup lines) and some street slang through the script we were rehearsing.”*

Interviewee 6 stated, *“I had to speak with a Castilian accent and embody Spanish culture. I had to learn choreography because I was playing a flamenco dancer. It was culturally impactful.”* During the interview, she noted that, *“You can’t learn a language without*

learning culture. Theatre helps you grasp more of the cultural aspects associated with the Spanish language. You get to learn the language and experience it in a more tactile way.”

Interviewee 8 stated, *“Spanish Theatre helps you understand the language both within and beyond the classroom. “It allows you to own the language by embodying a character. It causes you reflect on the real meaning of a word or expression”* He added that, *“Literature was that part of the Spanish program I did not enjoy because I had bad experiences with literature in year one. After participating in Spanish Theatre, I began appreciating the literature component of the program more, because theatre allowed me to get acquainted with the cultural aspects of the language and literature also focuses on that aspect of that language.”*

“I learnt how to cheers in Spanish. You have to say, arriba, abajo, pa centro, pa dentro. It was also the first time I heard about Aguardiente which is a Colombian rum” (Interviewee 11, cast member in 2017)

The Spanish language assistants were asked about the bolstering of participants intercultural awareness in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. They described how this occurred, *“As it was a Spanish play there were some words that were unknown to us even as Spanish speakers. After finding out what they meant, we told the actors the meaning of the words and expressions and told them words that would mean the same in Colombia.”* (Interviewee 13, Spanish language assistant 2018-2019)

Category: Impact on Spanish Language Proficiency

Interviewees were also asked about the impact that their participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group had on their command of the Spanish language. They were also asked about the ways in which this was achieved. Their responses were as follows:

“One of the areas that I improved in was my pronunciation and fluency. The lecturer and Spanish language assistants would correct my pronunciation during script readings. In addition, theatre requires you to connect with your character and think about the meaning of the line and the emotion it would evoke before saying it. Embodying my character really helped me own the language. You have to know what you are talking about, that you aren’t just reciting Spanish, so it made me feel a lot more natural.” (Interviewee 1, cast member 2017-2018)

“We acted out random improvised situations in theatre. It helped me recall the vocabulary I already knew, and it helped me become a better speaker because it forced me to think on my feet.” (Interviewee 2, cast member 2017-2018) She also stated that *“Being in class you don’t get the opportunity to speak as much because Spanish is usually a big class, but theatre provided me with the opportunity to speak more in Spanish. This helped me improve my speaking skills in the language. We had to read the script out loud. This helped me with my fluency and pronunciation of Spanish words.”*

“The assistants would correct mispronunciations while we read the script out loud. (Interviewee 3, cast member 2015-2018) He added that, *“The good thing about Spanish Theatre is that you have people from different years. We would help each other in terms of pronunciation, understanding expressions and words.”*

“The lecturer in charge as well as the Spanish language assistants were instrumental in helping me with the language. They would help with my pronunciation of words during script reading sessions and even incorporate short grammatical notes in the session. My co-stars would also meet with me to practice acting out scenes and help me with the language” (Interviewee 4, cast member 2017-2018).

“I joined Spanish theatre because I wanted to keep practicing the language, although I was French major. I had previously studied Spanish in high school. I found that after a few weeks of attending rehearsals, it became much easier to speak, my fluency was better than what I had come in with.” (Interviewee 5, cast member 2015-2016)

“Theatre provided immersion in the language. It helped me learn new words and expressions. I was able to communicate better with my Spanish speaking friends.”
(Interviewee 6, cast member 2013)

“My confidence grew as I participated in Spanish Theatre, and that confidence impacted my pronunciation and fluency in the language in a positive way.” (Interviewee 7, cast member 2016-2018)

“Spanish theatre reinforces aspects of the language that students learn in the classroom such as grammar and vocabulary. You have to recall what you already know in order to participate in the group discussions and do improv (improvisational acting exercises).

“Having to enact random scenarios in theatre helped increase my fluency in Spanish. It helped me in my interactions with my Spanish speaking friends outside the classroom.”
(Interviewee 10, cast member 2016)

“The Spanish language assistants were instrumental in helping me memorize the play and also improve my Spanish. They helped me run through my lines and thoroughly understand what I was reading.” (Interviewee 11, cast member 2017) He added, *“I began noticing that I was a lot more fluid in terms of how I spoke. I was not pausing as much. When you participate in a play of that nature you begin to comprehend more and you speak a lot better”*

“We would start theatre sessions speaking about things that did not pertain to theatre. The Spanish language assistants would speak to us collectively, asking about our week, our classes and daily lives. This helped me improve my speaking skills as it built my confidence in terms of speaking the language.” (Interviewee 12, cast member in 2011)

Spanish language assistants were also asked about their input in the language learning process during theatre sessions.

“We would stand in a circle and would ask the students about their day, their classes and have conversations about things that were relevant to them. We said that if you are here, you are here to speak Spanish. However sometimes if they did not know a word we would let them say it in English and we would tell them how to say it in Spanish”. (Interviewee 13, Spanish language assistant 2018-2019). She stated that, *“We would go over lines with students by having them read parts of the play out loud until their pronunciation and expressions were good, repetition, repetition.”*

“We focused mainly on speaking and pronunciation. We did not really focus on teaching grammar. We tried to encourage the actors to speak Spanish even if they made some mistakes. Of course, we would correct them, but we wanted them to feel comfortable in

their ability to speak the language.” She added, “We made students read the script aloud to each other so that everyone can hear how each other sounds while reading. We would read the script a few times. In the first reading, we refrained from correcting them. However, at the end of the second and third reading, we would correct any mispronunciations and we would encourage students to express as best as possible the emotion that the line is meant to bring out.” (Interviewee 14, Spanish language assistant 2017)

CHAPTER THREE

Discussion

This chapter aims to interpret the findings highlighted in the previous chapter. It will discuss the scope of influence that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has on the students who have participated in it as well as highlight the factors that contributed to this impact. According to the findings presented, the UWI Spanish Theatre Group influences students' personal growth and development, their intercultural awareness, as well as the impact it has on their competence in the Spanish language. The information gathered from interviewees indicate that the main factors responsible for influencing students in these areas were social interaction, improvisational activities, script reading and the embodying of characters within the foreign language theatrical space.

The data collected from the fourteen respondents highlighted that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group provided an opportunity for collaborative learning through script readings and group discussions which were guided by the Spanish language assistants. Cast members stated that these activities allowed them to improve their oral communication skills in Spanish by bolstering their pronunciation and fluency in the Spanish language. Interviewee 3 who participated in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group between 2015 and 2018 stated, "*The assistants would correct mispronunciations while we read the script aloud.*" He added, "*The good thing about Spanish Theatre is that you have people from different years who would help each other in terms of pronunciation, understanding expressions and words.*" In addition, a Spanish language assistant highlighted "*We would stand in a circle and would ask the students about their day, their classes*

and have conversations about things that were relevant to them. We said that if you are here, you are here to speak Spanish. However sometimes if they did not know a word we would let them say it in English and we would tell them how to say it in Spanish". These social interactions and group exercises support the theoretical position taken by Deborah Dubiner in her study *Second Language Learning and Teaching: From Theory to Practical Checklist* which suggests that "the gap between the learner's current state and their future knowledge is bridged by assistance from others; learning demands social interaction, so that the learner can internalize knowledge out of external action." (4). It also affirms Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory which posit that knowledge is obtained when individuals of varying levels of knowledge in a particular subject area interact with each other.

Additionally, the findings indicated that having to embody a character played a pivotal role in immersing cast members in the cultural and linguistic aspects of the Spanish language. The findings show that embodying characters led to improved proficiency in the Spanish language as well as increases one's knowledge regarding the cultural and linguistic aspects of the language. This was achieved because cast members were given the opportunity to internalize the language and share in its culture by taking on the persona of the character that represents a specific aspect of the Spanish speaking world. Interviewee 1, who participated in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group between 2017 and 2018 stated that, "*embodying my character really helped me own the language. You have to know what you are talking about, that you aren't just reciting Spanish, so it made me feel a lot more natural.*" It also afforded him the opportunity to learn and retain vocabulary, "*we were acting out a scene in a bar, and I learnt how to do a toast in Spanish, "arriba, abajo, pa centro, pa dentro*". Equally, interviewee 6 who was a cast member in the UWI

Spanish Theatre Group in 2013 stated, *“I played a Flamenco dancer. I had to learn choreography. I also had to learn how to speak with Castilian accent. This helped with my pronunciation.”* Her response shows that embodying her character allowed her to become familiar with the material aspects of Spanish culture which allowed her to improve her proficiency in the language. This concurs with the idea that “familiarity with the target language culture improves the communicative abilities of the learner due to the acquisition of tools that bring about understanding of the sociocultural rules such as pragmatics” (Schulz 20). The findings support Gualdron and Castillo’s research *Teatro para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas: The “E” Theater, una metodologia holistica* who state that “the theatrical space provides an avenue for language learners to contextualize the characters in their social and cultural context which leads to the bolstering of cultural awareness which is necessary for interaction in real life settings” (20).

Furthermore, the data gathered indicated that the improvisational activities conducted in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group was critical in improving cast members’ self- confidence and proficiency in the Spanish language. Interviewee 9, a cast member in 2013 stated, *“Spanish Theatre helped me become more expressive and it boosted my confidence in terms of using the language”* She noted, *“we did a lot of improvisational activities in Spanish Theatre, this helped us gain more courage to use the language because it put us on the spot.”* This supports the theoretical position of Shriganisha’s study *Using Theatre to Enhance Learner Language in English Classrooms* who posited that, “improvisation in the theatrical space is a way of encouraging general confidence and fluency in the second language by allowing language learners to exploit their communicative repertoire” (50). Likewise, interviewee 10, who was a cast member in 2016 stated, *“having to enact random scenarios in theatre helped increase my fluency in*

Spanish. It helped me in my interactions with my Spanish speaking friends outside the classroom.” This affirms the idea that “improvisation as a tool, prepares learners for real-life hands-on interactions that exist outside the classroom setting” (Piccoli 3).

The findings also indicated that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group boosted participants self-confidence and improved their interpersonal skills as it afforded them the opportunity to create friendships. Interviewee 11, a cast member in 2017 stated, *“I’m already a confident person, however, Spanish theatre increased it.”* He added, *“It actually helped me build enough confidence to go to Bogota for the first time in 2018. I met a lot of new people who I’m still in contact with today.”* Interviewee 14, a Spanish language assistant who conducted theatre in 2017 confirmed this, *“I noticed changes in a student who participated in Theatre at the time. He now lives in Colombia. After the play he was more confident with the language because being in the play helped him not feel ashamed of committing mistakes in Spanish.”* This supports the idea that “drama demonstrates to learners that they are indeed capable of expressing themselves in realistic communicative situations.” (Wilson 230-234)

This chapter served to interpret the findings acquired through the semi-structured interviews. It organized the qualitative data given by former cast members and language assistants in order to ascertain the influence that UWI Spanish Theatre Group has on the students who partake in it.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this research was to respond to three fundamental questions. These questions were posed in order to ascertain the scope of influence that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has had on students' command of the Spanish language, their awareness of Hispanic culture as well as find out the influence it had on their personal growth and development. The research focused on how participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group affected students as language learners inside and outside the classroom. In order to respond to the research questions posed, primary data was acquired from individuals who partook in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group prior to 2020. Subsequently, this chapter responds to these questions by synthesizing the information acquired from this research.

The study found that the UWI Spanish Theatre Group has exercised a positive influence over students' command of the Spanish language. It is noted that participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group positively affect participants' ability to speak the Spanish language. The research found that cast members' fluency and pronunciation were areas which were bolstered through involvement in this foreign language theatre group. It also afforded participants the opportunity to maintain and build their vocabulary in the Spanish language. The study showed that this was achieved through the process of staging the play, which included script readings, group discussions, improvisational activities and the embodying of characters.

Script readings and group discussions were particularly critical in facilitating collaborative learning within the foreign language theatrical space. The research found that the creation of a

collaborative learning environment creates social interaction which serves to bridge gaps in learners of the Spanish language. During script readings and group discussions, the Spanish language assistants as well as the students who were more advanced than their counterparts would correct mistakes in pronunciation, allowing persons to advance their level in the language. Furthermore, script readings and group discussions also allowed cast members to learn new Spanish expressions as well as, retain Spanish vocabulary they already knew. The study also found that improvisational activities guided by the language assistants were key in helping students improve their communicative abilities in the Spanish language because it enhanced their confidence as it related to communicating verbally in the second language in and out of the classroom.

This study also found that participants acquired a deeper knowledge of Spanish culture through participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. Cast members were introduced to the material and immaterial aspects of Spanish culture through engagement with the script and through social interaction within the theatrical space. The staging of the Spanish play allowed cast members to have an immersive language learning experience. This immersive language learning experience was facilitated through embodying Spanish speaking characters. This allowed language learners the opportunity to internalize and contextualize the language. Actors were given the opportunity to learn the true significance of expressions as well as learn about nuances which exist within Spanish culture. Fundamentally, this equipped cast members with the capacity to acquire knowledge about the Spanish speaking world that can be applied to real-life situations.

Another area in which cast members were impacted was in the area of self-confidence. The study found that cast members acquired increased self-confidence as a result of partaking in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. This enhanced self-confidence improved cast members' ability to communicate in Spanish in and out of the Spanish language classroom. The bolstering of their confidence was accomplished through the improvisational activities which were conducted in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group. These improvisational activities helped eliminate cast members fears of being judged negatively by others. This subsequently led to participants gaining the motivation and capacity to communicate in Spanish in and out of the traditional classroom setting. Another key aspect of the rehearsals which increased participants' self-confidence was the fact that Spanish language assistants were not extremely rigid when students committed errors while speaking. Although the assistants corrected the cast members when they committed errors in the Spanish language, they also gave them the freedom to express themselves in the Spanish language.

Recommendation

Finally, the research posits that participation in the UWI Spanish Theatre Group equips language learners with the ability to become more proficient learners and communicators in the Spanish language. Thus, it is advised that this foreign language theatre group maintain its operations and students be encouraged to join the foreign language theatrical space because it contributes to their development as communicators outside the Spanish language classroom, as language learners inside the Spanish language classroom and as individuals. Additionally, it is recommended that Spanish lecturers at the University of the West Indies integrate theatre into the language learning classroom. This can be most effective in a Spanish literature classroom. It will

provide learners with the opportunity to experience the Spanish language beyond the text they are reading by giving them the opportunity to learn the language experientially through the process of acting.

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