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Student name: CATHY-JO WINCHESTER
Student ID no.: 05743241
Degree Program: BA SPANISH MINOR LINGUISTICS
Supervisor: DR. NICOLE ROBERTS

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Foreign Language Education and the New Normal: A Comparative Study of the Teaching of Spanish in an Online Environment at Secondary Schools in Trinidad.

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted foreign language education across the globe, creating notable challenges for educators, as they transition to a virtual environment. As one of the key factors in the success of online teaching, teacher preparedness is of great importance. As such, this research paper investigates the extent to which the teaching of Spanish at the Secondary School level in Trinidad has changed within an online environment. This study aims to contribute to the existing research on online foreign language education through a detailed examination of the difficulties faced by Spanish teachers in Trinidad within the virtual classroom. Quantitative and qualitative data was obtained through interviews with ten teachers, as well as through secondary research carried out on four categories of schools on the island, each with a different administrative board. The findings illustrate that during the pandemic educators faced challenges in developing and delivering curriculum material, assessing student learning, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. With respect to classroom management, however, teachers were better able to adjust to changes occasioned by the virtual environment. It was found that most teachers were prepared for the transition to virtual teaching, with many engaging in autonomous learning to improve their skill set. Results also indicated that personal factors such as perspectives, motivation and family life more notably impacted teacher preparedness for online teaching than the type of school to which they belonged.

Keywords: Foreign Language Education, Secondary Education, Spanish, Online Teaching, Teacher Preparedness, Trinidad

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INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, or COVID-19, profoundly impacted teaching and learning sectors across the globe. On March 13th 2020, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, Dr. Keith Rowley, announced that “all...places of learning would remain closed for one week...to slow the potential spread of any infection” (CNC3 Editor). Shortly after, the decision was taken to close all educational institutions indefinitely. Consequently, educators were faced with the difficult task of initiating online learning. “Also referred to as distance or e-learning, online education enables learners to acquire course content through the Internet by using a computer from a remote location” (Graber and Chodzko-Zajko 173). While this innovative approach to education can potentially enhance the experience of both teachers and learners, it is not without notable repercussions. Additionally, the delivery of foreign language education presents unique challenges. Foreign language education refers to “the teaching or learning of a nonnative language outside of the environment in which it is commonly spoken” (Moeller and Catalano 327). Learner success can be improved through cultural immersion and the incorporation of interactive, audio-visual material within the classroom. As such, this research is relevant to understanding technology use in foreign language education in Trinidad, as schools strive to support students in the new normal of learning from home. This research paper investigates the extent to which the teaching of Spanish at a cross-section of secondary schools in Trinidad has been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic along with the ensuing transition to online education.

As Trinidad and Tobago continues its Coronavirus response and with no proposed date for the recommencement of face-to-face classes at the secondary school level at the time of this research, it is imperative that stakeholders in the education sector understand the impact of transitioning to a virtual environment. Resultantly, this study was realised due to its relevance for

the changing educational climate. Of particular interest is the exploration of changes experienced from a teacher perspective. In a 2012 study, Kim et al found that “the instructor is the most important success factor in e-learning” (583). Teachers play a crucial role in guiding the learning process, engaging with learners, inspiring participation and providing motivational support. Thus, active investigation into the pandemic’s impact on teachers is warranted. Moreover, this study provides a worthwhile opportunity to enhance documentation on online education in Trinidad and Tobago. While technology integration in classrooms had been initiated prior to the pandemic, this effort was met with varying degrees of success across local secondary schools. The sudden shift to a virtual environment, prompted by the Coronavirus pandemic, however, offered the possibility of expanding the research in this field, since all secondary schools have transitioned to online teaching.

The research presented was developed within carefully selected parameters. The participant database comprised ten (10) Spanish teachers from a cross-section of secondary schools in Trinidad. Due to limited travel between the two islands of Trinidad and Tobago caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the research for this paper was restricted to the island of Trinidad. Despite using remote platforms to conduct interviews, research was focused on Trinidad to mitigate against potential challenges, should the need arise to facilitate face-to-face interviews. To objectively capture the impact on a wide range of secondary schools, the institutions selected for this research can be classified into one of four administrative categories, namely, government schools, government-assisted Catholic schools, government-assisted Muslim schools and private institutions. Furthermore, the schools are strategically located in the north, east, central and south of Trinidad, to obtain a broader perspective on the effects of the teaching of Spanish. The study was undertaken during the first term of the 2020-2021 academic year, as classes during this period

occurred in a virtual environment, thereby allowing for real-time investigation into ongoing online education. The research focused on areas of relevance within education deemed to be essential to the teaching process, particularly, teacher training, curriculum development, assessment, classroom management and teacher motivation.

Many educators in Trinidad have faced numerous challenges in adapting to online learning. “Reports have emerged of teachers struggling with their online classes, and the increase of stress and fatigue” (Delochan par. 1). As a result, this work, which examines the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the teaching of Spanish at the secondary school level in Trinidad, aims to provide insight into the effects of virtual learning on educators, with the objective of enhancing pedagogy. Additionally, the research seeks to promote discussion on the transition to a virtual teaching environment, with a view to expanding the available literature on the subject, as it pertains to Trinidad.

In consideration of the above objectives, the primary research question for this study was “To what extent has the teaching of Spanish at secondary schools in Trinidad changed within an online environment?”

To further facilitate the investigation, the following subsidiary research questions were developed:

- 1) What challenges has the pandemic created for Spanish curriculum development and delivery at secondary schools in Trinidad?
- 2) What complications have arisen for the assessment of Spanish in an online environment?
- 3) To what extent has teacher motivation been affected by the transition to online education?
- 4) To what degree has school governance impacted the teaching of Spanish in an online environment?

- 5) What opportunities in Foreign Language Education have emerged within an online environment?

This study was approached through a mixed methods research design, with the concurrent collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The combination of these two datasets provided “a better understanding of the research problem than either type by itself” (Plano Clark and Creswell 385). Comparisons of the secondary schools were accomplished through the examination of the quantitative data obtained while the research benefited from an exploration into the impacts of the pandemic on individual teachers across the island.

Ten Spanish teachers from a total of seven secondary schools across Trinidad were selected to participate in semi-structured oral interviews. Research was also carried out on each of the schools included in the study. All ten participants were female and their years of service as secondary school Spanish teachers ranged from two (2) years to twenty-two (22) years. One (1) participant indicated her age within the 20-29 range, eight (8) persons belonged to the 30-39 age range and one (1) participant fell into the 40-49 age grouping. The form levels taught ranged from Form One, the first year of secondary education in Trinidad, to Form Five, the level at which students sit the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination.¹

The data collected in this study consisted of both primary and secondary sources. Semi-structured interviews provided the primary oral source for data collection, while secondary sources of data included previous studies, as well as online journals and databases pertaining to the topic. Prior to conducting interviews, an introductory letter detailing the proposed research was

¹ The Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination is administered by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) and denotes the completion of compulsory secondary education in Trinidad and Tobago. It is equivalent to a United States High School diploma obtained after successful completion of Grade 11 in the North American school system.

administered to each Principal. Potential participants were then provided with a form which was signed by the researcher and which indicated the title of the study, the purpose of the research and a description of the procedures. The risks, benefits and confidentiality agreement were also clearly stated (see appendix A). Once written permission was obtained, individual teachers were contacted to schedule the interviews. The online communication platform, Zoom, was used to conduct interviews remotely and to record responses for subsequent transcription and analysis. The administration of an online interview was deemed justified as all participants had internet access and this allowed for adherence to ongoing Covid-19 safety precautions in Trinidad. The researcher was guided by a semi-structured questionnaire comprised of eighteen items, which allowed participants to describe their experiences with the transition to online teaching (see appendix B).

Primary data analysis was applied to this research. As such, the researcher first managed the responses obtained from the interviews by entering them into Google Forms. This facilitated statistical analysis and graphical interpretations of the quantitative data, using the online database Google Sheets. Open-ended questions yielded qualitative data, as participants provided their personal experience with online teaching.

The ethical areas considered in this research are in alignment with the considerations put forward by Polonsky (1998). Voluntary participation was obtained, participants were made aware of the research through informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, since no participant names were recorded, and participants were told of any potential risk or harm. Furthermore, every effort was taken to ensure that results were not misrepresented (Polonsky 1231-34).

This study consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 presents a critique of the existing literature pertaining to the research topic. This chapter reviews the literature on online education, as well as

evaluates previous studies carried out in the field. Chapter 2 presents the findings obtained in the research, and the data acquired through the semi-structured interview questions is graphically illustrated and examined in detail. Chapter 3 offers a critical discussion of the findings of this research paper and relates it to previous work carried out by other researchers. A discussion on the limitations of this research, as well as recommendations for future work are also provided.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a critical review of the extant literature pertaining to online foreign language education. It is imperative to note that there is a salient absence of material on online language education at the secondary school level in Trinidad. Moreover, much of the research on virtual learning does not specifically refer to language teaching. Despite this, research on online education proved valuable as the findings could be applied to the local situation. Previous studies on online teaching are highlighted, to demonstrate existing knowledge on the research topic. Additionally, current thoughts on online education are presented, with specific reference to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on foreign language teaching. This chapter also seeks to identify gaps in the existing literature and establish the contribution to knowledge that can be made by the present research. The previous research conducted on online education is of particular significance to the present study since it guided the formulation of the research questions and aided in designing the semi-structured interview questions which were used to elicit teacher perspectives on the transition to a virtual environment. Much of the previous research centred on technology integration in the classroom, teacher training and preparedness, crisis-prompted online education and challenges in virtual teaching.

In a 2017 study at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, data from questionnaires completed by twenty-three participants was analysed to examine the effect of incorporating technology into tertiary education as well as to critically compare learners' perceptions of technology use at the secondary schools they had previously attended. The results revealed that "technology is heavily used at the tertiary level which has impacted positively on students' progress" (Fortune 17). Moreover, a key finding of that study indicated a disproportionate use of technology at the secondary schools studied. Resultantly, some tertiary

level students had “an advantage having previously been exposed to the use of technology” (Fortune 19).

Fortune’s work, while detailed in its focus on tertiary level foreign language education, creates the opportunity for further exploratory studies on technology use at the secondary level in Trinidad. The direct relationship between technology use at the secondary and tertiary levels indicates the need to better understand the transition to online learning currently occurring in the country. In addition, there is an under-exploration of teacher roles and perspectives in Fortune’s research. In her findings, Fortune noted student challenges with low quality audio clips and incomprehensible speech and suggested that teachers assess the quality of technical resources used in the classroom (20). Consequently, there is a need to evaluate teacher perspectives since the educator plays an essential role in the success of online learning.

A 2018 mixed methods study at a Turkish University assessed the success of a professional development programme aimed at assisting language teachers transition to online education. An analysis of quantitative and qualitative data led the author to conclude that “instructors are sometimes alone in this challenging environment; hence, continuous institutional support was emphasised” (Adnan 104). Similarly, a 2018 study undertaken to investigate the issues facing online Spanish instructors at community colleges in San Diego, California revealed a need for additional teacher training and specific assistance in course content and design for Spanish classes (Díaz 34).

While Adnan relied on extensive data analysis including the use of statistical and regression software, Díaz focused entirely on qualitative data. As such, Díaz’s data was highly subjective and heavily dependent on his abilities to conduct the interviews that yielded the information. The research could therefore have benefited from quantitative data collection and analysis, which

would have allowed for an objective comparison of the issues faced by the instructors. Moreover, the scope of the research offered by both Adnan and Díaz was centred on planned transitions to online teaching. Thus, there is a notable opportunity to add to the existing scholarship by examining the issues faced by online teachers who are confronted with the difficulty of adjusting to an unforeseen and unplanned transition to a virtual environment. As a result, the present research focused on the challenges facing teachers in the unprecedented situation of initiating online teaching without prior planning.

Within the extant literature, two key works specifically discussing unplanned online education were identified. In a 2020 paper, Shivangi Dhawan postulates that the Coronavirus pandemic is a needed impetus for online education, and she affirms that “there is a lack of standards for quality, quality control, development of e-resources, and e-content delivery” (16). This idea is further supported by Gacs, who posits that “the rapid switch to remote teaching has the main goal of ensuring continuity and thus a short-term perspective and sacrifices have to be made” (382-83). These findings highlight the unprecedented impact of the pandemic on virtual education, since many institutions across Trinidad were grossly unprepared for the transition and as such, were forced to focus on material availability, instead of quality.

Gacs presents vital recommendations to guide educational institutions’ transition to online language education and specifically refers to the methods adopted by his faculty at Michigan State University. To exemplify, he indicates that a needs analysis was carried out which determined that synchronicity was crucial to language course design and he affirms that platforms which facilitate a communicative environment are also beneficial. As such, Gacs’ work offers practical findings which were obtained from real-time research.

With respect to challenges in virtual teaching, Fortune identified a lack of access to technology in Trinidad and Tobago classrooms, along with a notable absence of feedback and “basic human touch” as barriers to learning (19-20). “Buffering time and slow-moving computers” hampered the learning process while “the importance of face-to-face interaction was placed above technology” (Fortune 21). Interestingly, Díaz made a similar conclusion in his research, despite having interviewed instructors, as opposed to students, who were the bases of Fortune’s research. In Díaz’s study, “all participants identified the lack of interaction with students as their biggest struggle in the online environment” (30). With further reference to difficulties confronted by educators, Graber and Chodzko-Zajko recognized considerable challenges in the technological proficiency of both instructors and students and acknowledged that course content design was time-consuming, if educators wanted to maintain current material (174).

This chapter reviewed the available literature on online language education. It was found that teacher training and preparedness are critical to the success of online education. Moreover, previous studies revealed significant issues facing educators as they transition to virtual learning. The following chapter presents the findings obtained from the research carried out on the secondary schools as well as the results compiled from the semi-structured interviews.

CHAPTER 2: FINDINGS

This chapter relates the quantitative and qualitative findings of the research conducted. Firstly, information was sought on the governing boards of each school, to contextualize the ensuing comparisons. Ten teachers were then interviewed, with the subsequent statistical analysis of data facilitated by Google Sheets. The results obtained are presented textually and graphically. To enhance the quantitative findings and to ensure an unadulterated presentation of teachers' perspectives, verbatim responses to questionnaire items are included. In such instances, and in compliance with participant confidentiality and anonymity, a code from T1-T10 is used to refer to interviewees.

In Trinidad, responsibility for secondary level education lies with the Ministry of Education. Public education is available at no cost to citizens, who may choose to attend a government school or a denominational school. Recently, the government of Trinidad and Tobago has also provided spaces for students at private institutions. To facilitate more efficient oversight and administration of secondary schools, the island is geographically divided into seven education districts. Three government schools were included in this study. They are wholly owned by the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and are funded by the country's national budget. Situated in varied geographic locations across the island, each of these schools falls within a different education district, namely, South Eastern, Caroni and St. George East.

One category of denominational schools in the country is government-assisted Catholic schools, of which two were included in this research. These schools receive financial assistance from the State, however, the Catholic Education Board of Management oversees their administration. Established in 1934, this board is responsible for all matters pertaining to religious education at the schools under its governance ("Catholic Education Board"). As such, these

institutions employ a systematic approach to their educational programmes, to promote the holistic development of their students. Both schools belong to the Port-of-Spain Education District.

Another type of denominational school in Trinidad which was researched for this paper is government-assisted Muslim schools, of which one was included in this study. These institutions fall under the ambit of the Anjuman Sunnat ul Jamaat Association (ASJA). The association was incorporated in 1935 and is responsible for the “spiritual, social and welfare needs” of the communities in which they are located (“Organizational Structure”). Similarly to Catholic schools, religious and moral values are integrated into the school curriculum. The school used in this study belongs to the Caroni Education District.

The final category of school in this study is private institutions. In Trinidad, private schools do not receive financial assistance from the State. Many follow international educational systems, such as British, Canadian or American programmes. The singular private school included in this research presented an interesting partnership with the State. While private, the school has an agreement to accept students from the public education system, if the government does not have the required spaces within its schools. This institution belongs to the Victoria Education District.

Of the ten teachers interviewed, 60% (n=6) initiated synchronous classes in March of 2020, upon the government-mandated closure of schools.² Forty percent of interviewees started teaching synchronously in September of 2020, with the commencement of the new academic year. Of these four teachers, two of them had been engaged in asynchronous teaching since March 2020, by uploading material for their students to the Google Classroom and Edmodo platforms. A noteworthy finding is that two of the ten teachers interviewed had significantly incorporated technology into their lessons prior to the pandemic. One teacher at the ASJA school indicated that

² Ten teachers were interviewed in this study, thus, 60% is equivalent to six (6) teachers. Where percentage values are stated, they are calculated based on a total of ten teachers.

she had been providing her students with material via the Edmodo platform since 2017, while one teacher at a Catholic school described a blended approach to teaching, beginning in 2019, through which she has delivered one class per week via the computer in the classroom.

In discussing the training received, 40% of participants affirmed that they had participated in a workshop hosted by the Ministry of Education. The course, *Using Open Educational Resources for Online Learning*, focused on developing online pedagogical skills and addressing potential challenges that could arise in the virtual classroom.³ At least one teacher from each category of school received this training, so it is evident that it was accessible to all types of schools, regardless of their governing board. Four teachers, two at Catholic schools, one at a government school and one at the private school, were self-taught on the use of online platforms such as Google Classroom and Zoom. Eighty percent of teachers opined that they were at least somewhat prepared for online teaching prior to their first online class, while 50% rated their level of preparation at an 8 or higher out of 10, and 40% indicated a 5-7 rating. One teacher at the ASJA school felt the least prepared to begin teaching Spanish online (see fig. 1).

³ The Trinidad and Tobago cohort of the online workshop *Using Open Educational Resources for Online Learning* ran from 22 September 2020 to 2 October 2020 and was hosted on the *Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for Development* website. Each two-week long course comprised four (4) units of content.

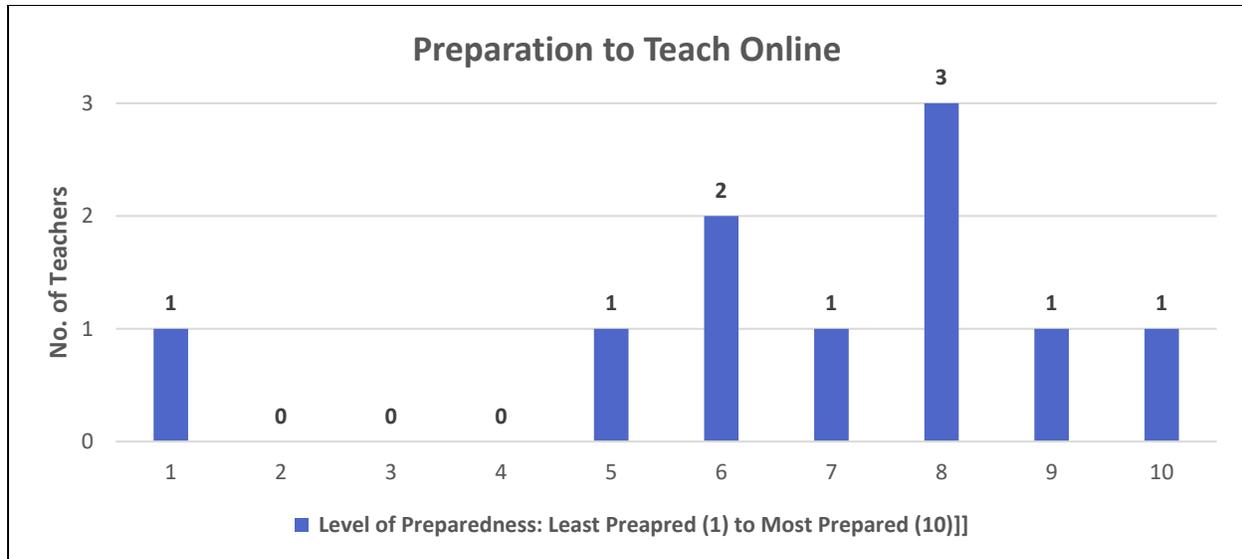


Fig. 1. Preparation to teach online

When asked if the training was relevant to the changing demands of their job, 60% either agreed or strongly agreed, 20% disagreed, 10% strongly disagreed and 10% neither agreed nor disagreed (see fig. 2). Within each category of school, responses were greatly varied, with teachers both agreeing and disagreeing with this statement. Moreover, a particularly interesting finding is that two teachers, one at a government school and one at a Catholic school, received no formal training yet indicated that their self-preparation and self-taught skills were relevant to online education. Conversely, a teacher at a government school who participated in the online course mandated by the Ministry of Education felt that this training was not relevant to the changing demands of teaching.

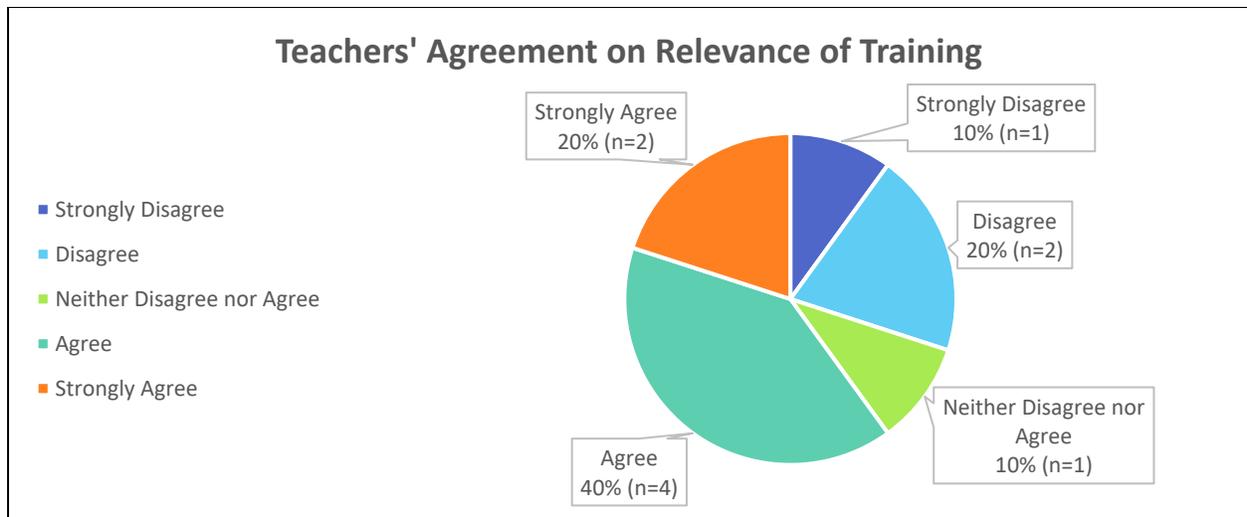


Fig. 2. Teachers' agreement on relevance of training

Seventy percent of respondents agreed that their training helped them to improve in their role as a teacher. Twenty percent disagreed with this statement while 10% neither agreed nor disagreed (see fig. 3). At each type of school, at least one teacher agreed with this statement. Notably, the private school was the only institution at which all teachers concurred that the training enabled them to improve in their functions. All other schools yielded mixed results.

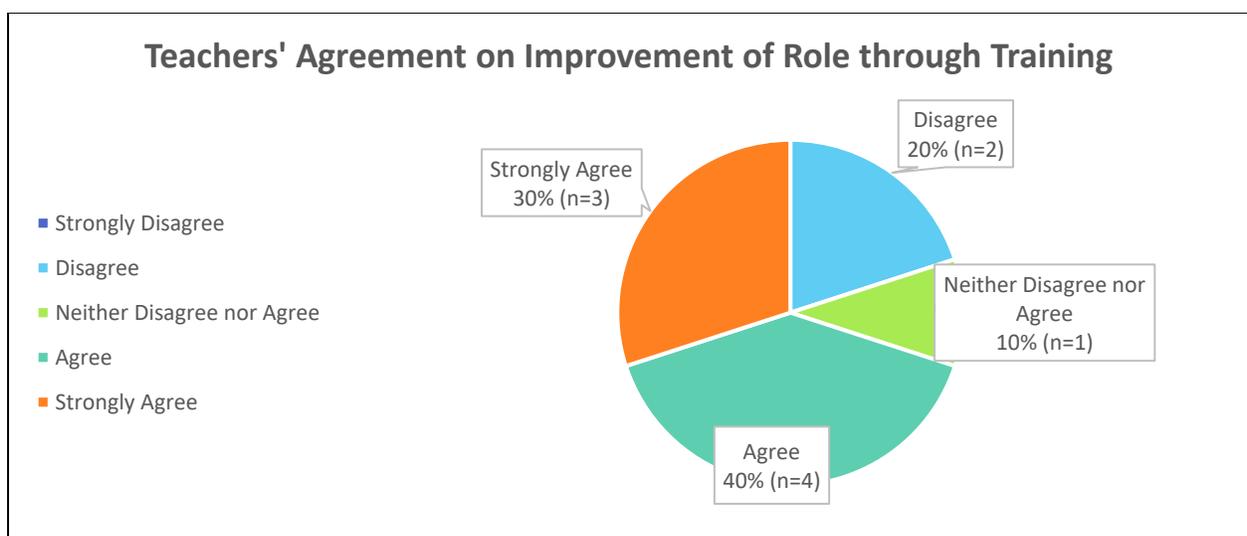


Fig. 3. Teachers' agreement on improvement of role through training

The final statement pertaining to training received the most positive responses from teachers. Ninety percent agreed that their training enabled them to better assist their students in an online environment (see fig. 4). This encompassed all teachers at government, Catholic and private schools. One teacher at the ASJA school indicated her disagreement with the statement.

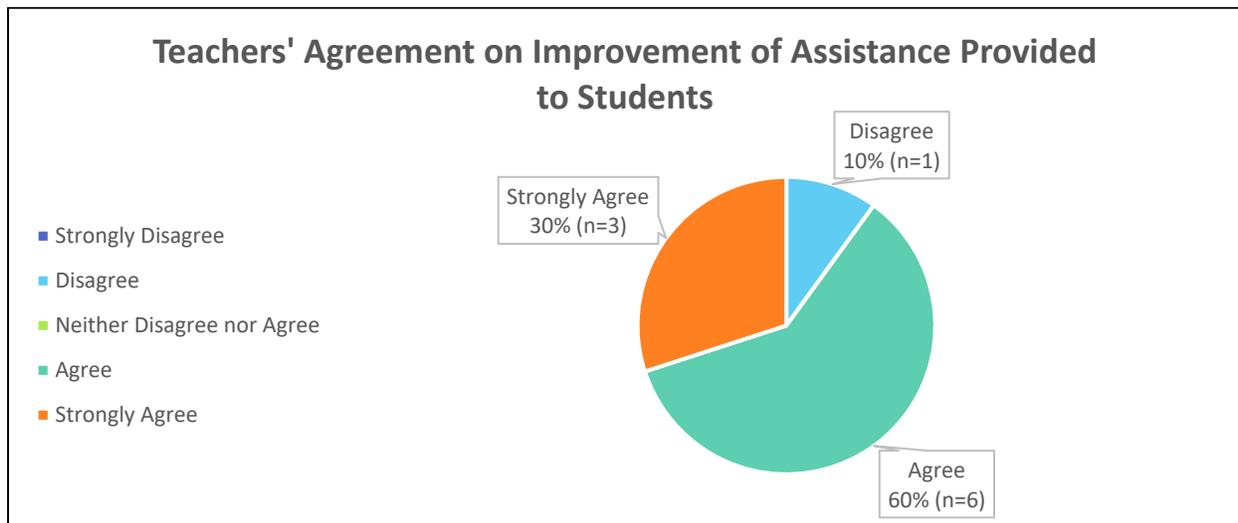


Fig. 4. Teachers' agreement on improvement of assistance provided to students

All participants indicated that they were teaching from home. Seven (7) had access to high-speed internet, while three (3) intermittently experienced technical difficulties such as dropped Zoom calls and buffering of videos. Seventy percent of participants used their personal laptops to teach, while 30% were furnished with a laptop from the Ministry of Education. These three teachers belonged to the government-assisted ASJA school, a government school and the private school. One teacher at a Catholic school indicated that she had been offered a laptop by her administration, however, she chose to use her personal device. Resultantly, there is no disparity of access to devices for teaching online at any of the schools studied. Forty percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had been provided with the resources necessary to teach from home. This included all teachers at Catholic schools and one teacher at the ASJA school. One

teacher at the private school did not feel she was provided with the necessary resources, while 50% of respondents were neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. This encompassed all teachers at government schools and one teacher at the private school (see fig. 5).

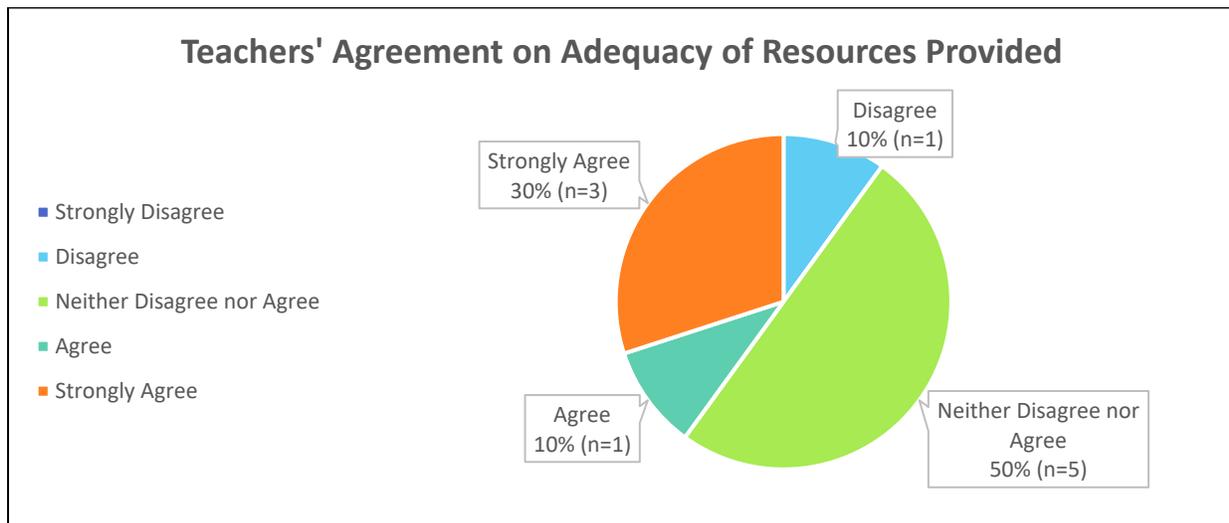


Fig. 5. Teachers' agreement on adequacy of resources provided

With respect to a healthy work-life balance, a greater number of teachers felt supported by their school's administration, with 60% of participants expressing agreement or strong agreement. Twenty percent disagreed that their school supported a healthy work-life balance, 10% strongly disagreed and 10% neither agreed nor disagreed (see fig. 6).

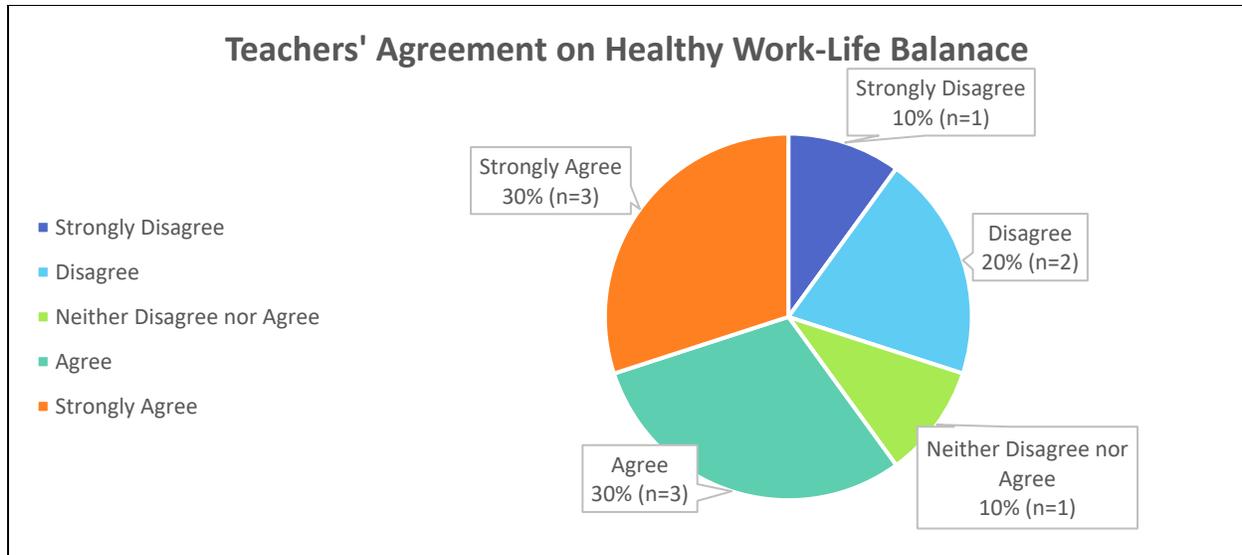


Fig. 6. Teachers' agreement on work-life balance

Within the schools, there was a marked variation of responses to the level of support afforded to teachers by their school's administration. While all teachers at government schools felt supported by their administration, teachers at the other categories of schools expressed contrasting opinions. At the ASJA school, one teacher strongly agreed with the statement while the other strongly disagreed. At the Catholic schools, two out of the three teachers strongly agreed with the statement while one disagreed. One private school teacher disagreed with the statement while the other was neutral. The disparities in responses indicate the possibility that differences in teachers' personal lives may account for the level of support needed from their administration as well as their perceptions of the level of support received.

The research revealed that teachers faced challenges in three salient areas of relevance to education, specifically curriculum planning and delivery, assessment and classroom management. Sixty percent of participants encountered difficulties with curriculum planning. The overarching hindrance to creating lesson plans was the considerable amount of time required for the task, however, teachers also found it arduous to create or procure content which was suitable for online

delivery. Where previously teachers were able to plan lessons weeks in advance, many found they were now only capable of planning content one week at a time. One individual described being “flustered at times” with the amount of work (T3). This sentiment was echoed by other participants who reported that “the planning process is a lot more exhausting than it was previously” (T8) and that “work has been doubled or tripled” (T9). All participants divulged that no fixed scheme of work had been provided by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, teachers expressed a lack of standardization across classes, as they prepared content without the usual consultation with their colleagues. With specific reference to lesson delivery, teachers and students confronted connectivity issues and teachers revealed that a limited number of students actively participated in the classes. Coupled with a lack of camera usage by students, this meant that teachers were unable to discern students’ understanding or progress during the lesson. Additionally, one teacher pointed to an inadequate length of time to thoroughly engage in Listening Comprehension, a component she considered to be essential to the Spanish programme.

Across all schools, similar challenges in assessment were recognized. Seventy percent of interviewees expressed difficulty in receiving completed assignments from their students. At a government school, one educator indicated that she would receive approximately ten to twelve assignments from her class of thirty-five students. At the private institution, one teacher admitted that “submission of assignments can at times be poor” (T10). Moreover, monitoring posed notable complications for teachers. At both the ASJA school and a Catholic school, teachers struggled with accountability in the completion of assessments. They indicated that platforms such as Google Quizzes were not immune to cheating, as students could search the internet for answers to questions. During an oral exam at a Catholic school, a teacher “could hear students turning pages” and she recognized that students could have their phones with them during examinations, since the

lack of camera usage meant she was unable to sufficiently supervise the class (T7). Additionally, one teacher at a Catholic school relayed that “for Spanish, online assessment platforms are limited for the oral component” (T2). Access to suitable platforms was further limited by the Ministry of Education’s inability to provide paid subscriptions for teachers.

The data revealed that classroom management was significantly less challenging for educators than the previously discussed areas. Students had not been disrespectful or undisciplined in online classes. At a government school, one teacher observed that her students were easily distracted, so she employed the available features of the Zoom platform to aid in classroom control. Specifically, she deactivated the chat button and the share screen capability, which resulted in a more focused class. Similarly, at the ASJA school, an educator indicated that she took advantage of the waiting room and mute options on Zoom to assist in classroom management.

The motivation levels of the teachers interviewed have fluctuated since the onset of virtual education. At the ASJA school, one teacher was “extremely overwhelmed” (T1) while one teacher at a government school, in discussing online classes, said that “the medium is a little draining” (T4). At the private school, one teacher spoke about the substantial increase in administrative work and its ensuing effect on her motivation levels. She indicated that she was “drowning” and that she “[wants] to finish the work...but it is never ending” (T10). Conversely, two Catholic school teachers did not experience any demotivation since the transition to remote teaching. One expressed that her motivation did not decrease because “students wanted to keep learning and this kept [her] motivated” (T2), while the other similarly wanted “to ensure students do well” (T7). At a government school, one teacher was more motivated “to challenge herself to think outside the box for delivering content and curriculum” (T6).

Many of the participants expressed that they had been afforded greater flexibility in managing their personal and professional lives. One teacher at a government school recognized that she could pursue online courses while committing to her work as an educator, while a private school teacher was appreciative of not having to commute between home and school. Additionally, one teacher at the ASJA school said that online platforms such as Google Mark Sheet allowed her to “analyze student performance a little more” and “zone in on [their] performance” (T6). Two teachers, one at a Catholic school (T7) and the other at the private school (T9) also acknowledged the benefits of integrating technology into the classroom. At the Catholic school, accessing laptops and the internet was challenging in the traditional classroom, whereas in the virtual environment, students and educators have increased access at home. With remote teaching, the teacher at the Catholic school (T7) is also able to provide her students with supporting material that they would not have had previously. At the private school, the teacher (T9) indicated that she was not able to use technology in the classroom, due to a lack of resources. In the online classroom, however, she can incorporate multimedia into her lessons, making them more interactive.

The research revealed the challenges presented by the transition to online teaching at secondary schools in Trinidad. In the areas of curriculum planning and delivery, assessment and classroom management, teachers at all schools experienced difficulties which directly arose from the adjustments demanded by the new mode of teaching. Consequently, their motivation levels were also impacted. Despite the complications, however, educators in Trinidad recognized various opportunities for enhancing their personal development and increasing the quality of education they offer their students. The following chapter provides a critical discussion and analysis of the findings and relates the results to data obtained in previous studies.

CHAPTER 3: DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

This chapter critically discusses and analyzes the findings obtained through research conducted on a cross-section of secondary schools in Trinidad. The primary research question which guided this mixed methods study was centered on investigating the extent to which the teaching of Spanish at secondary schools in Trinidad has changed within an online environment. The data obtained reveals that Spanish education has in fact undergone significant transformation. The findings indicate that instructors have been impacted in five prominent aspects of education, particularly teacher training, curriculum development, assessment, classroom management and teacher motivation. It was observed that teachers faced similar challenges despite the differences in school administrations, suggesting that the category of school played a minimal role in teachers' responses to the pandemic. Additionally, it was noted that these difficulties bore striking similarities to the challenges faced by educators in other parts of the world. The findings of this investigation will be analytically discussed alongside a careful examination of previous studies, in an effort to contribute to the existing body of research on foreign language teaching during the Coronavirus pandemic.

One facet of Spanish language education in Trinidad which was impacted by the transition to a virtual environment was teacher training and preparedness. A significant portion of participants, 80%, felt prepared to begin teaching Spanish online. Interestingly, of these eight teachers, five did not participate in the Ministry-mandated training course on online pedagogical skills. In fact, only 40% of all teachers interviewed opted to enroll in the workshop. This was due to internet connectivity issues or lack of personal laptops, as indicated by some teachers. Nevertheless, across all schools, individual efforts were made by teachers to familiarize themselves with online platforms and resources, which enabled them to sufficiently prepare for

the onset of virtual teaching. Moreover, one teacher at the ASJA school who took part in the ministry's training course was adamant that she remained unprepared for online teaching on completion of the workshop. As such, it can be surmised that the type of school board did not affect teachers' level of preparation for online classes. Instead, it is possible that factors such as individual skill set, self-confidence or motivation could have contributed to teachers' readiness for the virtual environment.

While 40% of the teachers interviewed engaged in autonomous learning to improve their skills, others relied on training provided by the Ministry of Education. Of the four teachers who participated in the government workshop, two of them indicated that the training did not adequately prepare them to engage in online teaching. The extant literature suggests that "language instructors require additional skillsets in online environments compared to other subject matter instructors" (Adnan 90). This view is also held by Compton, who affirms that teaching languages online "requires skills that are different from teaching other subjects online" (73). As such, there is a rigid dichotomy between online language learning and training for language educators in Trinidad. It is therefore suggested that the Ministry of Education engage in active discussion with foreign language teachers in Trinidad, to better determine their needs. In this way, specialized training courses which would more adequately equip language teachers with the specific tools they require to effectively engage with their students can be developed.

With respect to curriculum planning and delivery, one notable difficulty was the absence of a fixed scheme of work from the Ministry of Education. The lack of standardization of content material meant that individual teachers at the schools developed their own content for their classes. One researcher notes that sudden transitions to remote learning necessitate compromises in the quality of online education (Gacs 383). While it can be understood that the Ministry was faced

with an unprecedented challenge in moving all students to a virtual environment and, as such, was forced to make difficult decisions on the quality of material taught, the lack of standardization not only created undue stress for teachers but also jeopardized the level of education received by students. Teachers' workloads increased substantially, and many felt unable to keep up with their lesson plans. In addition, the Ministry of Education removed several topics from the curriculum, such as those relating to the Spanish alphabet, the Spanish-speaking world and Spanish place names in Trinidad. Consequently, the teachers at the private institution in the study, T9 and T10, felt that students were deprived of key opportunities to practically apply their language skills, since they considered these topics to be crucial to the Spanish curriculum. As Trinidad continues to move forward with virtual language education, it is essential that the foreign language curriculum be addressed so that a higher level of education than that afforded in a face-to-face classroom can be achieved online.

Furthermore, at each type of school, at least one teacher expressed challenges with time management for lesson planning. In a study on the changing educational climate in India, the investigator found that educators faced challenges in developing engaging content, as well as "changing their teaching methodologies, and managing their time" (Dhawan 15). This belief is also shared by other experts in the field of education, who assert that "implementing course content for an online course can be more time consuming than for a face-to-face class" (Graber and Chodzko-Zajko 174). The findings of the current research lend support to these claims as 60% of participants struggled with their new workload. One key observation with respect to workload was noted in the interviews. At the government, Catholic and Muslim schools, teachers reported that they created content for their classes without the collaboration with other teachers that would normally have taken place. At the private school, however, both teachers worked together to create

lesson plans for all form levels. This is likely a result of the fact that at this school, they were the only two Spanish teachers on the faculty. As such, coordination and collaboration may have been easier to implement.

With respect to assessment in a virtual environment, the literature indicates that “a primary concern is the degree to which instances of cheating...may appear in an online as opposed to face-to-face class format” (Graber and Chodzko-Zajko 174). While two Catholic school teachers voiced concerns over the possibility of cheating, the fundamental challenge experienced by most teachers interviewed was the lack of submission of assessments. In each category of school, educators cited poor completion rates for assignments, with students turning in assignments late or not at all. This is likely due to the high number of students across all education districts in Trinidad who do not have access to the necessary resources for online learning. Prior to the start of the 2020 academic year, the Minister of Education, Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly confirmed that 65,000 students do not have access to laptops or internet connectivity (Doughty par. 1). Therefore, since Graber and Chodzko-Zajko focused on the challenges of higher education in an online environment, it is likely that students at that level would have greater access to devices than at the secondary school level in Trinidad.

In further contradiction to the available literature, two teachers, one at the private school (T9) and another at the ASJA school (T5), did not face any challenges with assessment. On the contrary, both educators recognized the value of assessing their students using online resources. T9 maintained that online platforms enabled timely and efficient self-assessment for students, while T5 used online resources to analyze students’ performance much more profoundly than in the traditional classroom. These latter findings suggest that an educator’s degree of professional involvement, adaptability and technological prowess are all contributing factors to their level of

adjustment within a virtual environment. Moreover, this is further evidence that the Ministry of Education should strive to focus training activities on areas critical to foreign language teaching, so that all educators can effectively execute their duties, regardless of teaching mode.

In the area of classroom management, the findings of the current research support much of the available literature. Investigations done at community colleges in the United States revealed that “one of the main issues faced by online Spanish instructors [was] the lack of opportunity to interact with their students” (Díaz 38). Similarly, in Fortune’s work with university students, the participants preferred “real life interactions to improve their listening comprehension” (21). At the secondary schools studied in Trinidad, teachers reported a lack of participation by students in online classes and a noted reduction in student energy and enthusiasm. Due to the sudden nature of the transition to online education, it can be inferred that students had not fully adapted to the new environment. As such, it is imperative that stakeholders work to ensure that students are not only furnished with the physical resources they require to pursue their education but are also mentally equipped for their new normal of learning.

Likewise, class interruption was a challenge faced by teachers in Trinidad which was in accordance with previous works. In a study involving one hundred and seventy-four online language educators, “the disruptive, volatile nature of synchronous online meetings” was identified as a problematic area within virtual teaching (Meskill et al 170). While teachers across all categories of schools in the present study concurred that students did not display disrespectful behaviour, the educators experienced varying levels of classroom disruption. At both a Catholic school and the private institution, this disruption can be attributed to technical difficulties, as students were unable to use their microphones or experienced poor audio quality, resulting in delays throughout the lesson. At a government school, interruptions stemmed from background

noises within the students' homes. Thus, social factors such as family life affect the quality of education received by a student. Undoubtedly, it may prove arduous to provide students with a suitable environment for online learning, however, educators must consider the individual factors which may impact student performance.

Teacher motivation levels varied greatly across the secondary schools in this study. While some teachers felt highly motivated to teach Spanish online, others were demotivated by the challenges they faced. This finding is not surprising, when the personal and subjective nature of motivation is considered. Teacher motivation emanates from "individuals' intrinsic values" and refers to the reasons to choose to teach and to continue in the profession (Han and Yin 3). This explains why, at each category of school, there were teachers at either end of the spectrum of motivation. Factors such as technological skill, self-confidence, work-life balance and administrative support all contribute to the motivation held by an educator. As such, the type of school alone cannot account for teachers' outlook on virtual teaching or the opportunities envisioned by each educator.

An analysis of the findings of this research reflects the results obtained by other researchers in the field. Many of the challenges faced by secondary school Spanish teachers in Trinidad mirror the frustrations expressed by online language educators in other parts of the world. Despite this, the current research revealed adversities which were either not uncovered by or contradicted the available literature. To exemplify, the current study demonstrated that some foreign language teachers in Trinidad faced difficulties in the completion and submission of assessments by their students. This hindrance was not noted in the literature that was examined. As such, this study can prove beneficial to future investigations on online language education.

CONCLUSION

Across the world, the Coronavirus pandemic has significantly changed the nature of education, with many institutions forced to transition to a virtual teaching environment within a short space of time and without adequate prior preparation. In Trinidad, secondary schools were abruptly closed in March 2020, leading to the initialization of virtual classrooms. As teachers constitute one of the key stakeholder groups within education, it was imperative to examine the effects exerted on them by the unprecedented move to virtual teaching. This research sought to examine the extent to which the teaching of Spanish at the secondary level in Trinidad was affected by the transition to the online classroom.

Ten (10) Spanish teachers were interviewed from a cross-section of government schools, government-assisted Catholic schools, government-assisted Muslim schools and private institutions. Semi-structured interviews as well as secondary research on the topic were subsequently analyzed through a mixed methods approach, which yielded quantitative and qualitative results.

To prepare for their changing roles, many teachers engaged in independent, autonomous learning, while others attended virtual training courses on online pedagogy, hosted by the Ministry of Education. It was found that the key areas of education in which teachers faced challenges were curriculum planning and delivery, as well as assessment of student performance. While similar challenges were expressed at the cross-section of secondary schools, there were notable differences in the responses of individual teachers. Classroom management, contrastingly, was an area in which all teachers were more successfully able to meet the demands of online education. Teacher motivation has varied significantly since the onset of virtual teaching, with some educators affirming they were more motivated than in the traditional classroom, while others have since been

demotivated. This disparity, as well as the stark differences in the impacts of virtual teaching on individual teachers points to the contribution made by personal factors such as individual perspectives and family life to the adaptation of teachers to the virtual classroom. Moreover, it was noted that the administrative board of a school had minimal effects on teacher preparedness and adjustment to the online classroom.

The research conducted faced various limitations. One such restriction was the limited availability of prior research on Spanish language education at the secondary level in Trinidad. Although previous work has been carried out on online learning across the world, the focus has largely been on English as a Second Language or on Spanish education at the tertiary level. Moreover, minimal information was obtained on the impact of virtual teaching on the educator.

Additionally, this study was limited to a small sample size of participants. In the face of Coronavirus health protocols established on the island of Trinidad, interviews were conducted via online platforms. The physical closure of schools made it difficult to contact a larger number of teachers for participation in the study. It was also observed that, at some schools, Spanish teachers were reluctant to participate in the research due to overwhelming time constraints and increasing workloads. In addition, schools in Tobago were unavoidably excluded from the study due to the Coronavirus safety protocols in place at the time of the research. Consequently, there is notable opportunity to investigate the impact of online foreign language teaching at secondary schools in Tobago.

This research sought to add to the knowledge base on online Spanish education in Trinidad by presenting quantitative and qualitative findings which describe the changing roles of Spanish teachers and the challenges they face in adjusting to the new normal of online teaching. As such, it is hoped that this work will be used to further the discussion on the subject as well as contribute

to the development of specialized training that is designed to assist foreign language teachers in a virtual classroom.

To further expand research on this topic, it is suggested that studies be carried out with a wider range of teachers and schools in Trinidad. Government-assisted denominational schools not included in this research should be incorporated into future research. As such, future studies can include teachers from Presbyterian, Pentecostal and Hindu secondary schools. Moreover, comparisons can also be made through the inclusion of private schools which offer different curricula to that of the schools in this study. Thus, schools offering American, Canadian or British education programmes can be examined. Additionally, since schools in Tobago were not within the range of this study, they should be included in future work carried out on the topic.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

ST. AUGUSTINE, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO, WEST INDIES
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Telephone: (868) 662-2002 Ext. 83280/ 82623/ 82036/ 83868/ 82588/ 82488/ 82486

E-mail: mll.fhe@sta.uwi.edu Website: <https://sta.uwi.edu/fhe/dml/>

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

“Informed consent is a decision to participate in research taken by a competent individual who has received all the information necessary to arrive at an informed decision. The individual is required to have understood the information, considered the information and to have arrived at the decision without coercion, undue influence inducement or intimidation.”

Identification of Project: HUMN 3099 Caribbean Studies Project

Title: “Foreign Language Education and The New Normal: A Comparative Study of the Teaching of Spanish in an Online Environment at Secondary Schools in Trinidad.”

Principal Researcher: Cathy-Jo Winchester

Purpose of the Research and Invitation to Participate:

Purpose: To examine the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the teaching of Spanish at the Secondary School level in Trinidad.

Invitation: I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

Sampling: Ten (10) Secondary School Spanish Teachers.

Description of procedures: Semi-structured interview conducted by the principal researcher.

Contribution expected from the participant: Open, honest responses to interview questions. Estimated time for interview is thirty (30) minutes.

Risks and Discomforts: Apart from the time of the interviews, this study should not cause any risk or discomfort to the participants.

Benefits: The completed HUMN research paper submitted in fulfilment of the BA Spanish degree.

Confidentiality:

All the information retrieved from the interviews will be kept confidential. The data will be anonymized (this means that the data will be treated in such a way that the identity of the participants will not be revealed). The only person who will have direct access to the data will be Cathy-Jo Winchester.

The data will be reported in a final paper titled: "Foreign Language Education and The New Normal: A Comparative Study of the Teaching of Spanish in an Online Environment at Secondary Schools in Trinidad."

Freedom to Withdraw:

Your participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time if any problems occur or if you simply change your mind. You have the option to exclude from the study data obtained through your participation, should you decide to withdraw. Refusal to participate will not adversely affect your relationship with the researchers.

Contact information main researcher: Phone: 729-2398
Email: cathy.jo.winchester@gmail.com / cathyjo.noel@my.uwi.edu

CONSENT AND SIGNATURE

I confirm that the purpose of the research, the study procedures, and any possible risks or discomforts, as well as the possible benefits that I may receive by taking part in the study, have been explained to me. I further confirm that I have been provided with the telephone number of the Principal Investigator for contact in the case of an emergency. I have read this Consent Form and my signature below confirms that I am willing to take part in this study.

Participant's Name (print)_____

Participant's Signature_____

Date_____

RESEARCHERS' STATEMENT AND SIGNATURE

I have explained the purpose of the research, the study procedures, including those that are investigational, the possible risks and discomforts, and the potential benefits, and have answered all questions regarding the study to the best of my ability. In my opinion, the participant understands these issues and has voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Name and Signature of Investigator obtaining Informed Consent:

Date: _____

A copy of the signed Informed Consent Form must be left with each participant.

APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Teachers' Background Information

1. Please indicate the gender with which you identify.
2. Please indicate your age range: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+
3. How long have you been teaching Spanish at the Secondary School level?
4. What form levels do you teach?
5. When did you start teaching Spanish online?

Teacher Training & Preparedness

6. Prior to your first online class with the school, what (if any) training did you have to teach Spanish online?
7. On a scale of 1 - 10, with 1 being least prepared and 10 being most prepared, how prepared did you feel to begin teaching Spanish online?
8. Using a scale of Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree, please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the training you received:
 - I. The training has been relevant to the changing demands of my job.
 - II. The training has helped me to improve in my role as a teacher.
 - III. The training has helped me to better assist my students in an online environment.

School Support

9. Have you been teaching from home, at school or other location? If 'other', please expand.
10. Do you have access to high-speed internet at your teaching location?

11. What type of device have you been using to teach online?
12. Using a scale of Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree, please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding the support you received from the school:
 - I. My school's administration has provided me with the resources necessary to teach from home.
 - II. My school's administration has helped me to maintain a healthy work-life balance while teaching from home.

Challenges

13. What challenges have you faced with lesson planning and delivery in an online environment?
14. What challenges have you faced with assessment online?
15. What challenges have you faced with classroom management in an online environment?

Teacher Motivation

16. How has your level of motivation been affected by the move to an online environment?

Opportunities

17. What new opportunities have been presented since moving to an online environment?
18. What benefits do you feel have been gained or can be gained from teaching online?