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Out-of-Class Learning of Spanish during COVID-19: A Case Study in Trinidad and Tobago

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Abstract

This paper describes the experiences of 15 students who reported on their study habits and studying of Spanish outside of the classroom during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when suddenly face-to-face classes had to be delivered remotely. The paper features the voices of eight teachers on how they promoted out-of-class learning. The inquiry took the form of a small-scale qualitative case study with beginner learners of Spanish and Spanish teachers at a language centre. The aim was to explore how students studied Spanish independently after their synchronous live classes by making use of some additional resources recommended by their teachers. Therefore, this paper attempts to look at how students made use of such resources and if they benefited from them. Data for this study were retrieved from an open-ended survey administered to three groups of Spanish students and a focus group interview with eight Spanish teachers. The emerging findings of the study suggest that although students engaged with additional materials, much work is needed in this context to raise more awareness and promote more learner engagement and exploration outside of the classroom.

Keywords: COVID-19, digital resources, out-of-class learning, Spanish, WhatsApp

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students around the globe were forced to move from face-to-face to remote teaching without much notice or prior warning. Trinidad and Tobago, a twin-island republic located in the Southern Caribbean, was no exception. The Centre for Language Learning (CLL) at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus suspended all face-to-face classes on Friday March 13th, 2020, when the government confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in the country. At the time, everything seemed uncertain and it took the university two weeks to design a plan to move forward, a plan that the CLL had to abide by in terms of access, delivery, and assessment.

At the CLL, a language centre that offers non-specialist language courses in 12 different languages to the university community and the general public, both teachers and learners had to rapidly adapt to these new and strange circumstances regardless of whether or not they had had previous experiences teaching and learning in online environments. The internet and online resources became an immediate response to a situation where learning had to take place away

from the classroom and away from one another to exercise physical distance. With more insecurities than certainties, and with some limited training on the use of Blackboard Collaborate, the platform recommended by the centre to deliver live remote classes, CLL tutors embarked on remote delivery and resumed teaching on April 1st.

Among the 12 languages offered at the CLL, Spanish is the largest and most popular language at the centre. In the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, we had 475 registered students for Spanish alone and 15 Spanish language tutors. Our courses are delivered in semesters of 13 weeks, 4-hour weekly face-to-face sessions for a total of 52 contact hours. At the time when classes were suspended, we were in the eighth week of the teaching semester. Remote classes were delivered via Blackboard Collaborate in most cases, while some tutors preferred to use Zoom.

While the context of this study is one of traditional language classroom teaching and learning which had to transition to remote teaching, the aim of this paper is to describe how students responded to studying and learning outside of the classroom and beyond live remote classes. As the course coordinator for all Spanish language courses at the centre and the tutor for three beginner Spanish courses, I set out to investigate how my students made use of some additional resources I made available to them via WhatsApp. Some of those additional resources included the full materials and presentation slides with answers I used in the live remote classes, additional reading, listening and grammar exercises, and the recordings of the live classes.

My objective by making all these resources available to my groups of beginner learners was no other than giving them some control over the learning materials (Benson, 2011) and to further engage them in out-of-class learning. Although we work with an official textbook for each level, I believe that the presentation slides used in class, the explanations provided, and the additional exercises are forms of support that enable students to gain better understanding of the content of the textbook and opportunities for further practice at their own pace and leisure. Only in very few cases the additional materials were compulsory homework, they were a form of informal self-access materials students could use only if they wanted to use for independent study. I shared these materials via WhatsApp, as it was the fastest way to reach students and they could also browse the materials from their cell phones. I encouraged students to engage with those additional materials in order for them to study the language independently, to practise and to reinforce what we had studied in class without the pressure of compulsory assignments.

In the interest of clarity, in the following section I will discuss the importance of promoting out-of-class learning from the classroom as an effort to promote learner autonomy. This will be followed by the section where I will provide details about the design of the study. The subsequent section will contain the emerging findings that will be illustrated with actual data, followed by a brief discussion. The final section will be the conclusion.

Promoting Autonomy Beyond the Classroom

Promoting autonomy in the classroom (Cotterall, 2017) and beyond the classroom (Benson, 2017) has been a core activity for many practitioners and learner autonomy enthusiasts. When referring to self-access centres (SAC), Benson (2017) suggests “an approach to advising that focuses on learners’ awareness of resources, both inside and outside the SAC” (p. 143). Undoubtedly, language learning advising (Ludwig & Mynard, 2019) has come to play a fundamental role in the promotion of autonomy. I would like to argue that language teachers in language classrooms also need training in language learning advising in cases where well-established SACs are not available in their contexts. While trained language teachers may be excellent at teaching the language in the classroom, without notions of language advising they may be unable to help a student “to become an effective, aware, and reflective language learner” (Kato & Mynard, 2016, p. 1), which is what advising in language learning is about. As such, making learners aware of resources and opportunities to engage with the language outside of the classroom in order to be more effective and reflective language learners should be part of the language teacher’s agenda.

An interesting model that could serve as a link between classroom instruction and advising for out-of-class learning is that of Cotterall (2017). Her model distinguishes five affordances that include engagement, exploration, personalisation, reflection and support. In this study, I particularly focused on the first two affordances, namely, engagement and exploration. Engagement means encouraging students to engage with different activities, resources, ideas, and so on, “unless learners are engaged by what is going on in the learning environment, there is no possibility that learner autonomy can flourish” (Cotterall, 2017, p. 103). Exploration means encouraging learners to expand their understanding of concepts and ideas that are of importance to them. In speaking about affordances, Murray (2017) reminds us that “affordances depend on learners’ perceptions. Learners have to be able to see the potential in the environment” (p. 122).

Given that I am mainly interacting with beginner learners of Spanish, I found it relevant to explore engagement and exploration empirically. Naturally, I attempt to create conditions to incorporate the other affordances in my practice, but for the purposes of this study and my effort to promote out-of-class learning during the difficult COVID-19 times, I found it appropriate to explore engagement and exploration. The empirical exploration of the other three affordances is beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, Cotterall (2017) did not attempt to propose “a neat formula for classroom practice – a kind of PPP of autonomy” (p. 114), and she recognises that it might be “challenging to ensure these affordances can emerge in the language learning contexts where we work” (Cotterall, 2017, p. 114). As such, my initial empirical effort is to focus for now on engagement and exploration.

Turning to technology to enhance foreign language teaching and learning and to promote learner autonomy is not a new undertaking and the literature offers ample examples. In fact, *SiSAL Journal* has produced special issues on virtual and other learning spaces (Curry & Mynard, 2014; Mynard, 2011; Mynard & Edlin, 2016). But during these pandemic times, learning from home has become the norm even in cases where individuals were not familiar with the use of technology. Studies conducted prior to the pandemic offer ideas for teachers to promote learning outside of the classroom. For instance, using mobile devices to support language learning (Barrs, 2011; Mashinter, 2011; Osborne, 2013; Wilks-Smith & Thong, 2019) or social media like Facebook (Nakai, 2016; Peeters, 2015; Promnitz-Hayashi, 2011), as well as ideas to promote out-of-class listening (Davis, 2013; Peterson, 2010) among others.

Some studies illustrate how online language learning spaces have been created using platforms such as Moodle (Alzahrani & Wright, 2016; Dofs & Hobbs, 2016; Hobbs & Hynson, 2013), whose designs seek to encourage students to be engaged with the content and materials. An informative case study on autonomy and online environments (Zhong, 2018) suggest that autonomous learners are critical users of multiple online resources.

This study integrated technology mostly in the form of WhatsApp and other platforms for getting students engaged and raising their awareness about the possibilities to continue to study and to practise the language at home while they were under strict confinement.

The Study

For this small-scale qualitative case study, I collected two sets of data. Firstly, I gathered information from 15 of my students by means of an open-ended survey. In addition, I conducted a focus group interview with eight the Spanish teachers who teach with me at the centre.

Open-Ended Survey

At the end of the teaching period I created a survey on Google Forms (see survey <https://forms.gle/zJWESAJrhpExpJgC7>), which I sent out to all the students in my three groups, a total of 54 students. I invited them to take at least 20 minutes to think about and report on how they made use of the additional materials I used to share with them after class. The survey contains seven open-ended items. Each item has a number of guiding questions that sought to help students think retrospectively and provide detailed descriptions on how they engaged with the materials. This was a voluntary exercise and 15 students completed the survey with their descriptions. Students granted their consent to use their descriptions. Whenever I use quotes from the survey, I only use pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Focus Group Interview

At the end of the teaching period I had an online meeting with eight of my Spanish teachers at the centre. This interview was voluntary and sought to discuss several aspects of the experience teaching remotely during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main aspects of the interview was to explore the kinds of materials used by teachers and how they encouraged students to use those materials outside of class, and how they promoted out-of-class learning. It is worth highlighting that teachers have freedom to incorporate any teaching strategies they see fit. To ensure quality and cohesiveness the different levels of the Spanish courses share the same textbook series and two assessments conducted in the middle and at the end of the courses. While teachers are encouraged to promote autonomy in their classrooms, and autonomy is embedded in the course outlines of the centre, there is no formal monitoring that teachers actually use strategies to foster autonomy. This focus group interview was a first step to have a conversation with teachers about additional materials and what they expect from their learners to do with those materials. Furthermore, although the centre does have a self-access facility, this facility looks more like a small computer laboratory with some books, but it is underutilised and in need of restructuring.

I created a session on Blackboard Collaborate to conduct and record the interview, which lasted two hours and twelve minutes. All teachers agreed to the interview being recorded. The

data reported in the study are anonymised. The focus group interview took place mostly in Spanish.

Participants

All participants, both students and teachers consented to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. Out of the 54 students who completed my beginner's courses, 15 completed the open-ended survey, 14 of the respondents were females and one was a male. The group of respondents was a mixture between university students and members of the general public taking the courses out of personal interest. University students usually take Spanish as an elective, either because Spanish is a prerequisite for their programmes, or out of personal interest. University students tend to be aged between 20 and 25. Members of the public are not registered university students; they only go to the centre to take their language courses. In most cases, but not all, members of the public tend to be young or adult professionals.

Out of the 15 teachers, eight teachers joined the focus group voluntarily plus myself as the researcher of the study and the coordinator of the programme. Seven of the teachers were females and the remaining two were males. Five of us were native speakers of Spanish from Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The remaining four teachers were Trinidadian, non-native speakers of Spanish who had degrees in Spanish and experience studying abroad or in exchange programmes in Spanish-speaking countries. The ages ranged widely among the teachers, the youngest is in their late twenties and the oldest is 65. However, the analysis will take neither gender nor age factors into account.

Emerging Findings

I shall first report on the responses I gathered from the teachers and how they promoted studying Spanish beyond the remote classes during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be followed by the responses I gathered from the students who completed the survey.

Teachers' Attempts to Promote Out-of-Class Learning

In the focus group interview, all teachers reported actively promoting the use of additional materials for students to practise Spanish beyond the remote classes. Edmodo, Google Classroom, Padlet and WhatsApp were the platforms used by teachers to upload or share additional materials for students to access either before or after class. Although the use of these platforms is customary in the language courses at the centre, the new circumstances of the

pandemic increased their use exponentially; given the nature of the remote teaching classes, relying solely on the textbook to deliver the sessions was insufficient. All teachers reported the need to increase the types of audio visual resources they prepared for class to make the remote classes more appealing and interactive. These materials would take the form of PowerPoint Presentations or Google Slides in most cases. However, two teachers reported not liking using PowerPoint, instead they created Word documents to share with their students. Teachers uploaded these materials on the platforms prior to the session if they wanted students to have access to an explanation or an activity before class, or after the session; in all cases teachers reported sharing materials with the students. The following quotation illustrates the need to have a virtual space to upload and share additional materials. The quotes are in Spanish, but in the discussion, I will translate the main ideas of each quote:

Es necesario tener un espacio virtual como Edmodo, Google Classroom, Padlet o incluso WhatsApp para subir materiales y para tener recursos disponibles para que los alumnos los usen fuera de la clase, para que ellos los usen en su tiempo personal.

Undoubtedly teachers believe strongly that students need access to additional resources to practise the language beyond classroom. The extract from the focus group interview above shows the importance assigned by that teacher to ensure that students can have opportunities to engage with the language in their free time, and how those additional resources should be uploaded or shared on platforms like the ones teachers reported using the most.

An interesting social dimension emerged in the interview as two teachers reported that sharing additional materials was not limited to what teachers shared with their students, but it was also a practice that students had adopted:

Cada recurso que usé en mis clases de Blackboard lo subí en la plataforma de Edmodo para que ellos exploraran después. Lo bueno de eso fue que ellos mismos hicieron sus investigaciones por su propia cuenta y subieron material en Edmodo que ellos pensaban que iba a ayudar a los demás. Eso ayudó mucho porque subieron cosas interesantes. Fue la primera vez en todos mis años enseñando que esto pasó.

In the case above, the teacher explains how her students started to share materials they had found themselves via the Edmodo platform. Based on students' own Google searches, when they found something they thought could be helpful for their classmates, they shared the link on the platform and in most cases the resources were useful. What is most interesting about this, in the teacher's words, is that this was the first time ever during her teaching tenure at the centre that this practice had happened. In all the years she had used Edmodo before to share materials, she never witnessed students exchanging resources they had discovered. This highlights both engagement and exploration (Cotterall, 2017) evidenced in students exchanges among themselves.

During the focus group interview we also devoted time to discussing whether or not recording and sharing the recordings of the sessions with students after class was desirable. Only a few teachers recorded their sessions. Some did not know how to do it, some thought the recordings might be too large to store in their computers, some others did not even consider the idea of recording the sessions. My personal take on recording the sessions was always to provide an extra opportunity to students to go back to the session as many times as they would like to in order to revise or to clarify points that may not have been clear during the session. In my own experience, I witnessed how a few students may have relied on the recordings and decided not to attend the live sessions anymore, but I do not have evidence to suggest that this was the case. It could have been that students were legitimately unable to be present. Only three of the teachers in the focus group, myself included, recorded the sessions to share with the students. One of the teachers resisted recording the sessions, as she was concerned students would resort to not attending and relying solely on the recordings even when her students asked her to record:

Mis estudiantes me preguntaron “¿vamos a grabar la sesión?” Y yo les dije “grabamos la primera, pero vamos a ver cómo funciona”. Y después yo dije no. Si es que las grabo todas y las comparto todas, los estudiantes no van a venir, así que no. Era como una manera de que ellos estuvieran en la sesión.

The quote above shows some tension as the teacher was fearful of losing her live audience. Unfortunately, the decision of not recording was not negotiated with the students who asked the teacher to do so. Instead, students were in a sense forced to be present in the sessions

or else they would miss the content delivered. While the concern of students stopping attending sessions if they knew that the recordings would be released at some point is legitimate—I experienced it myself—the benefit of students revisiting the sessions and using the recording as an available affordance should not be dismissed.

Another teacher reported a different experience. Not only was she willing to record the sessions to share with her students, but she also, unsuccessfully, attempted to edit the sessions to eliminate the parts of the video where students were working in small groups and the main room was empty:

Yo grabé todas las sesiones. Mi idea era editar las grabaciones porque eran grabaciones de tres horas y más. Entonces pensaba cortar las partes del trabajo en grupo. Pero el video era muy pesado y nunca pude editarlo con ningún programa. Al final creé un documento en Google Docs y puse las sesiones con las fechas y los enlaces. Esto fue útil para dos estudiantes que son médicas y ellas estaban todo el tiempo trabajando en el hospital. Y ellas fueron las que más se beneficiaron de las grabaciones.

After failing to manage to edit the videos, she decided to create a document on Google Docs where she would provide the links to the sessions. In her case two students who were also medical doctors benefited the most from the recordings as they had to be on call most times as a result of the pandemic.

Out-of-Class Study Routines During COVID-19 Times

I shall now report on the responses I gathered from students. The first item in the open-ended survey asked students if they had a routine to study Spanish during the time of remote teaching. Out of the 15 students, only four provided descriptions of what their routines looked like. Interestingly, the four students were mature learners, that is, they were aged 30 and over. Although I had not originally intended to look at age, when I was looking closely at the data and I looked at the routines, it was only the mature students who claimed to have routines and described them as in the examples below, all names are pseudonyms:

I did have a study routine. I tried to study Spanish at least one hour per day with the exception of public holidays and some weekends. I tried to be quite consistent during

the term. My study routine included given homework in addition to the work that was covered the week before, plus my own independent research which I used to solidify what I was taught in class. I would look at YouTube lessons in order to expand what was taught or clarify something that may be a bit confusing at the moment for me.

(Dora)

At first it was quite difficult but I decided to use the method I had during classes which was to use the weekend to get ready for the upcoming class. My routine every weekend would be to complete my homework and then go over what was done that last week. Finally I would read ahead and try to find words in upcoming exercises that I did not know and research the meaning. I would read through the instructions and get a sense of what the questions were asking. This I found helped tremendously so that I was not lost in class. This routine was done every week and allows me to keep abreast of the work in class. This boosted my confidence as I would also practice reading various paragraphs in the book before class. On average these sessions of preparation can last between 60-90 mins. It takes time to complete the homework depending on what it was and then to do research on new words and practice reading. (Carolina)

Both Dora and Carolina provided detailed accounts of how they went about studying and preparing for class. Even though Carolina admits that it was difficult at first, she continued to do the same as she had done before the pandemic. It is worth highlighting that Carolina's efforts to engage with the textbook are important given that the textbook is fully monolingual, there are no explanations or directions in English. Since everything is in Spanish from the very start, it is sometimes challenging for some students who would not take the time to try to make sense of the textbook on their own. Both of them seem engaged and their descriptions also suggest that they sought to explore beyond the boundaries of the curriculum to some extent, or at least get ahead of the content covered in class.

Age and circumstances become important in this analysis, even if not considered at first. Three of the mature students who admitted having routines are taking the course out of personal interest, they are members of the public and not registered university students. As such, Spanish is likely the only course they are taking. Their younger counterparts, although they said they did

not have routines, their descriptions did suggest that they had certain set habits when it came to studying Spanish. In their case, Spanish was only one of their courses; they also had other courses to attend. Spanish was an additional course or an elective for some of them:

Nothing changed from my usual routine. I'd attend classes, before it was face to face then it switched to online. I tried very hard not to miss any classes because that's where I learnt the most. I'd spend about an hour or so before my next class doing whatever homework was allocated and printing notes that were given as PDFs and sticking them into my book so I'd have all the necessary materials to be prepared.
(Mónica)

I tried to study for Spanish over the weekends to prepare me for the upcoming week. Sometimes I got caught up in other assignments which led me to miss out on studying (inconsistency) but I tried my best every morning before class to do a little review. My study sessions (whenever I got the chance to) over the weekend were around 30-45 minutes. Additionally, I have a Venezuelan friend and I would try to get some practice with my speaking and writing (over WhatsApp and not necessarily over the weekend but whenever we are able to talk). (Sandra)

All respondents spoke about preparing for class, completing homework and reviewing the work covered in previous classes, which suggest engagement and some level of exploration going back to Cotterall's (2017) model. However, Sandra and another student also spoke about having access to native-speaker friends who would help them to get some practice.

What was most surprising about almost all responses was the fact that it seemed as though the pandemic had not affected the participants' lives and their learning routines. Their descriptions in a sense suggest that they quickly adapted to remote learning and having to study from home. Only the fourth mature student captured in her description the real struggle of a mother trying to complete her university studies and study Spanish with (at times) an unstable internet connection:

I usually prepared for Spanish class by reviewing what we would have covered in the previous classes as well as by attempting most homework. However, keeping up with

Spanish became a little more challenging during the weeks of remote teaching as I was also homeschooling my children as well as working on my thesis and taking a course in sign language. I missed some of the information given in the WhatsApp chat and due to unstable internet connection at times I also missed some things during class sessions which made it difficult to understand and follow in class. Nevertheless, I tried to dedicate 30-45 minutes at least to Spanish 2-3 times a week which included researching information on the internet if I didn't quite understand something done in class. For the most part, I was consistent with this throughout the term. Most times I would study Spanish at nights when my family slept whereas before I would have done this during the day when they were at school. This definitely impacted the quality of my study as I now had to fit all of my studies in the night. (Karina)

Given the limited number of students who completed the survey, it is difficult to capture the struggles that students would have faced during the weeks of remote teaching and learning. The case of the CLL is a special one because the student population is a mixture of university students and the general public. The general sense that I got from my students and from speaking with other teachers was that most students had a stable internet connection with which to access the sessions. Anecdotally, only one of my students, who was a university student, told me she would be unable to be present due mainly to financial constraints and internet access.

Out-of-Class Use of Additional Materials

The survey focused on whether or not students used i) the presentations slides and ii) the recordings made available to them before or after my classes and if they found those resources beneficial for them to study Spanish independently.

I found the presentations extremely helpful especially when it came to grammar and vocabulary. It was easy to follow and not complicated. I used to go through them often. What I liked about it is that the presentations were eye catching with the little illustrations and colour changes too. Again, they were very helpful in helping me understand complicated concepts such as the grammar rules as it was easy to visualise. (Doris)

The presentations were easy to follow, very understandable, and they were fun because activities were included at the end of each presentation. I went through presentations for a couple of the latter topics, like family and personality. I would say I didn't go through them very often, but I used them to make necessary notes. (Andrea)

I would only look at the presentations once I was unable to fully grasp during the session and this was not very often since the in class explanations were sufficient for me. However, the ones I went through were very helpful as I was able to take my time and carefully go through, along with YouTube videos and extra links provided by the lecturer. (Sandra)

I didn't go through them (the presentations) very often because I would take my own notes during class. However I know they would be especially helpful if I missed a class or came a little late to a class because I could see exactly what was missed. (Ana)

I had no problems with the method of the presentations however the usual face-to-face classes seem to get students more interactive. (Jorge)

All respondents found the presentations slides helpful and beneficial. As seen above the fact that the presentations contained visuals and straightforward explanations were aspects raised by students. However, younger-university students reported using them at times when they felt something was not clear, the more mature students reported a higher use of the presentations:

The presentations were extremely helpful when sent. I would go through them often based on the revision I was doing. The presentations were in line with what was taught in class and assisted in re-enforcing the topic. Sometimes in class things may have moved a bit quickly and so the presentations provided an opportunity for you to learn again. It was also handy having it so you can go it over and over again. Those notes were very good with work done and the corrections so you could see where you went wrong. (Carolina)

I would go over presentations shared after class very often. I liked the presentations and found them quite helpful especially as they were quite relevant to the lessons taught and were not boring in any way. (Dora)

The presentations were very helpful for revision after class sessions. I went through the presentations frequently after each session as I had some time apart from work to review. The presentations were very straightforward and easy to understand and very helpful. (Julia)

Once again one might interpret that university students had more courses to pay attention to and that is why in the responses they expressed that they would only look at the presentations whenever they were unable to grasp something during the remote session. But theoretically this takes us to Murray's (2017) notion that students have to see the potential in the environment or in the artefact. Everyone did see the potential but the kind of engagement varied depending on students' preferences.

As for the class recordings, students appreciated their availability, but the responses as to whether or not they looked at them were mixed:

I attended all live classes to date. My favourite thing was the recordings. I found the recordings especially helpful in my revision largely to the fact that I was able to listen again and again and was better able to understand what was taught better than in a classroom setting where I could have possibly missed valuable information. I did listen to the recordings very often. (Dora)

I liked that there was access to the recordings if I missed a class. They were useful for studying for exams. I would still attend the sessions because there I had the opportunity to interact with my classmates and ask questions if I did not understand. (Julia)

I went through the class recordings at the end of each week and it was helpful in understanding certain concepts that I may not have fully grasped during the live

classes. It was also useful around exam time to refresh my memory on what was done and also to help in pronouncing certain words for the final exam. I still prefer to attend the live sessions and learn in real time because you can ask questions which may not be possible in looking at the recordings. (Doris)

Dora, Julia and Doris describe the potential I first saw when I decided to make it a habit to record and share the sessions with the students. Naturally, as Julia and Doris put it, attending the live sessions for interaction and for the chance to ask questions combined with the possibility of watching the class recordings again are available opportunities for students to use. But making the recordings available can also help students with unstable internet connections who might miss bits of information as in the following case:

I would only listen to the recordings if I missed a class or had really poor internet connection during a class. If I really didn't understand something, having the recordings available was useful as I was able to go back and listen. (Karina)

The students who reported not actively viewing the recordings relied on attending the live sessions and taking their own notes, which goes back to what students perceive as an affordance:

I never went through a class recording after class because I made notes to not have to go back to those recordings. The live sessions were useful because they helped me to understand some of the topics better, whilst the lecturer (you) were talking I jotted down some important notes. I attended a few live sessions so I didn't wait for the recordings. (Andrea)

Apart from the additional resources I shared with the students, only a few students reported independent use of other materials. Viewing videos on YouTube and using language learning applications like Duolingo were the main additional activity reported in the surveys. Only in two cases students had access to native-speaker friends:

Of all the resources, I find YouTube videos to be particularly useful. Maybe after/ before each topic there could video related to that topic. It really helps the information to stick. (Ana)

I did not do extra exercises out of what were given by the lecturer, however, what I found very useful was talking to my Spanish speaking friend. However, I know everyone may not have access to a native speaker but what also helped was watching Spanish shows. Both assisted with my listening and pronunciation of words and phrases. Learning the lyrics to Spanish songs as well I believe can help with pronunciation. (Sandra)

I do not know of much alternative resources but I do like YouTube, Quizlet, Profedeles.es, Kahoot. Written exercises given related to what was taught in the classroom and all given was relevant to enhancing same, garnering and reinforcing our knowledge base. (Dora)

The last survey extract by Dora, one of the mature students, reports on a number of sites that offer different kinds of content, explanations and exercises for students to practise the language. Dora was the exception rather than the rule in the responses recorded in the survey. In this case, the exploration affordance is lacking according to the data. While the students appear engaged, they still need to receive more encouragement to explore more on their own.

WhatsApp

Most students, 14 out of 15, praised the use of WhatsApp as a convenient and fast way of communicating and sharing materials for the class. Although we had started to use WhatsApp before the pandemic, once classes had been suspended, it was extremely easy to stay in touch with students and to keep them abreast of when and how classes would resume. After the pandemic, I would simply share with the WhatsApp group the links to the presentations, the class recordings and additional exercises. Below Sandra summarises everyone's opinions:

In my opinion, WhatsApp was very useful to disseminate information. If not all, majority of the students are always on WhatsApp therefore information about the class

times, changes, extra links and exercises were never missed because we are always on the app and it is easily accessible. EDMODO is useful but at times I found it difficult. Notifications lag and may not always come in which can cause a student to miss out on important information. For individuals who do not have access to WhatsApp, I see emails to be a reliable option. (Sandra)

However, one student found WhatsApp difficult to navigate, particularly when messages started to rapidly accumulate, which would make it difficult to locate earlier or even old messages on the chat:

While I appreciate the use of WhatsApp, for me, as I said previously, I would have missed some things scrolling through the chat. I would prefer a different medium because I could go directly to the information that I am looking for. It is also a more personal space for learning and I can ask questions or pose queries to the instructor without disturbing my other colleagues. (Karina)

Karina's perspective illustrates that for something like WhatsApp to become an affordance (Murray, 2017), the user has to perceive it as such and see the value and potential it has. In Karina's case the accumulation of messages caused her to miss important posts that she would have been able to navigate better in a more static platform such as Edmodo or Google Classroom. It is also interesting to see her comment on asking questions to the instructor, given that she could have messaged me privately and not on the general chat.

Discussion

In terms of exploration, the data suggest that some students did explore and make an effort to expand their knowledge independently. However, exploration did not emerge very strongly in the data. Some students, generally the mature ones, made explicit comments about researching information on the internet in cases when they did not understand something. Most students reported looking at explanations on YouTube, which I encouraged them to do as I always provided links to videos that could help students understand better difficult concepts. Also, some teachers reported a social dimension of exploration as some students began to share

links to sites they found useful with their classmates. Nonetheless, more encouragement is needed for students to explore more on their own.

The exploration of two of the five affordances, engagement and exploration, proposed by Cotterall's (2017) model to promote learner autonomy provide some important lessons. Undoubtedly, as teachers we have the responsibility to ensure that our students are engaged in the learning process. In the context of remote teaching it is crucial to help students to engage with the language and the materials given that learning takes place at home in most cases. The data in this study show that students did engage with the additional materials that I made available to them. The level of engagement varied depending on students' perceptions of the materials as affordances. As illustrated by students' responses, in certain instances some students would engage more with the presentations slides as a form of independent study to practise and to clarify concepts. Interestingly, the mature students displayed a higher level of engagement with the materials. Although the university students who participated in this study perceived the presentations positively, they did not necessarily engage as much with them. My interpretation is that given that Spanish is one more of the courses they are pursuing at the university, perhaps they needed to devote more time to the other courses. The same applies to the class recordings, which were mostly appreciated by mature students.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reported a small scale qualitative case study that sought to examine how beginner students of Spanish at a language centre in Trinidad and Tobago made use of certain resources for out-of-class learning during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In most cases students made use of the presentation slides and additional exercises that the teacher shared with class on the WhatsApp group. Class recordings were also made available to the students; however, not all students perceived the class recordings they had access to as an affordance for their learning, which is a reminder that in order for anything to be or become an affordance, individuals need to see potential for use and learning (Murray, 2017). Only a few students saw the possibility of revisiting the class to clarify concepts as an advantage.

The study sought to look closely at the affordances of engagement and exploration from Cotterall's (2017) model for promoting learner autonomy. The data suggest that students did engage with the materials, even though the engagement varied from student to student depending

on the affordances they perceived in such materials. Mature learners tended to engage more with the presentation slides and the class recordings. Although the exploration affordance did not emerge very strongly in the data, there is evidence that students did explore some of the additional resources, particularly explanations on *YouTube* videos. However, more encouragement could motivate students to explore more beyond the curriculum of the course.

A surprising finding was that in describing their study routines during the time of strict confinement, most students did not raise many affective issues that could have negatively impacted the quality of their learning. Only one student, a mother who is also finishing university and who by the time of the course was also homeschooling her kids, brought up interesting dimensions of the struggles she faced to engage with the language while juggling other roles at home.

Given that very likely remote teaching and learning will continue for the academic year 2020-2021 in Trinidad and Tobago, larger-scale studies are necessary in order to explore students' habits and routines while they study at home, which could provide worthwhile information about out-of-class learning. Much work is needed in this context to raise more awareness and promote more learner engagement and exploration outside of the classroom.

Notes on the Contributor

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