UWI QUALITY EDUCATION FORUM

Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Instruction through Contextualized Activities

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Abstract

This article explores and discusses how the use of contextualized experiences and activities enhanced communicative competence among a group of students learning Spanish as a foreign language. Research data, collected among 18 grade 10 students in a rural coeducational Jamaican high school using contextualized activities, are used to deliberate the impact these activities have on learner communicative competence and autonomy. Grounded in the notion that communicative competence leads to autonomy in student learning, a programme using contextualized activities was planned and implemented. Data were captured through multiple methods (observation, focus group discussions, interviews, questionnaires, and written and oral classroom activities). The findings point to improved communicative competence which enabled autonomy as students became more confident and willing to use the target language – Spanish – in everyday classroom speech and, to a lesser extent, outside of the classroom.

Keywords: communicative competence, learner autonomy, communicative language teaching, contextualized activities, foreign language pedagogies

Introduction

IN RECENT DECADES, THE FIELD OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE pedagogy and programmes has witnessed unprecedented growth and transformations as educators continue to embrace and seek new ways to foster autonomy among students. Unfortunately, even amidst these changes and the imminent need for student autonomy, many foreign language (FL) educators continue to struggle to reach and teach today's 'net-geners' and 'millennial generation', who want to indulge in "*experiential* and *interactive* learning." The terms experiential and interactive are important components of communicative language teaching [CLT], which when used as a method, enables students to communicate effectively and appropriately in the target language (L2) and across contexts (Omaggio-Hadley 2001). Interestingly, even with students expressing the need for more experiential and contextual teaching, many foreign language classrooms continue to be dominated by students who relinquish all responsibility to teachers. These said educators assume and hold control of students who are often passive learners who accept "whatever teachers do or say for them" (Xu 2013, 19). There is then a great need for foreign language teachers globally to assist students under their charge in attaining autonomy in learning and using the target language.

Much of the prevailing literature renders learner autonomy difficult to perceive and understand. Proponents of learner autonomy often position the concept as synonymous with self-instruction. This paper, however, counters that claim and argues that learner autonomy is more than just self-instruction. Rather, it could be defined as the facilitation of learners to assume responsibility for their own learning and to become involved co-contributors to their own learning as facilitated and managed by a trained educator. Furthermore, autonomous learners are able to problematize and critically reflect upon their learning and transfer concepts across disciplines and everyday life activities (Benson 2013; Little 1991; Xu 2013). The idea of autonomy, however, is challenged when foreign language students are reluctant to become responsible users of the L2 even with the best efforts of teachers.

Autonomy, as it is used in this article, envisions and subsumes the overarching goal of teaching and learning – acquiring knowledge, which results in changed behaviours and attitudes. In the case of the foreign language classroom, autonomy is accomplished when students are able to communicate effectively and transfer their target language (L2) skills and knowledge to other disciplines and areas of their lives. Autonomy, then, is not an add-on to the foreign language learning programme, rather it is an "integral part of language learning and language use" (Illés 2012, 510). Little (1991) argues that autonomous learners play an active participatory role in their own learning. This is to say that students take responsibility for their own learning and take advantage of the opportunities and activities presented to them in the FL classroom. These arguments contradict the situations in many FL classrooms worldwide and certainly in Jamaica and the Caribbean.

The genesis of this paper is my observation affirmed by the prevailing literature regarding the general lack of communicative competence among foreign language students. Noting the constant struggle teachers have in their efforts to enable students to be autonomous in their learning, I conceptualized and implemented a programme of contextual experiences to improve oral competence in Spanish among a group of Grade 10 students at a traditional co-educational high school in rural Jamaica. The article explores the research question: "How does the use of contextualized experiences impact communicative competence and by extension autonomy?" Throughout the article autonomy and communicative competence are viewed as the goal of teaching and learning. The paper explores communicative language teaching and contextualized experiences as a mode of accomplishing learner autonomy.

Learner Autonomy and Communicative Competence: Making the Connection

The transformation of the conventional teacher and student roles has fuelled revolutionary growth and innovation in the teaching and learning tools and methods employed in the FL classroom. Moreover, the increasing challenges of globalization and internationalization have driven nations into recognizing the critical role of foreign-language competence in response to the need for effective interaction between countries of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Organization of American States [OAS] 2002). In many contexts then, the intensification of worldwide social relations also accentuates the need for members of global networks to develop competence in one or more additional languages, and/or master new ways of using languages they already know. Globalization ultimately changes the conditions in which language learning and teaching take place (Block and Cameron 2002). In addition, globalization drives the need for learners to become autonomous in their learning if they are to successfully transition and function in the global arena.

Learner autonomy is about personal agency. Agency encapsulates the idea that individuals are able to take responsibility for their own actions and learning through their independent and free choice. Being responsible for one's own learning implies that learners make conscious effort at monitoring their own progress and use available opportunities to their advantage, including classroom activities and homework (Scharle and Szabó 2000, 3). Autonomous learners accept and understand that when activities and opportunities are provided they (the students) are crucial to the puzzle and their efforts are integral to their learning, therefore, they act accordingly. Assuming agency for their learning enables learners to transform their thinking and move from dependence on the teacher to independence, thereby, successfully using language competently across contexts (Palmer 2015). When looking through a looking-glass, autonomous learners are considered to be: motivated; moving to independence; able to demonstrate a confident, responsible attitude and respect for others; reflective of and involved in their own learning.

If the premise is that autonomy is one of the objectives in foreign language pedagogy, then it can be assumed that when students are able to communicate in the target language they have gained autonomy over and in their learning. A major way students demonstrate autonomy in foreign languages is by using the target language appropriately in situations across varied contexts. To be deemed competent or proficient in a language, the student should have mastered the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, they should also be significantly aware of and appreciative of the target culture (Ur 1996; Omaggio-Hadley 2001). Notably, communicative competence is developed over time and is highly contingent on the planning and implementation of classroom teachers who facilitate L2 learning through the use of diverse activities and programmes.

Teaching a foreign language amidst the current ever-changing technologies available to students and teachers engenders multiple challenges. Owing to the dynamic nature of current technology and communication modes, the FL teacher needs to be prepared to overcome the challenges if the modern language class is to be effective and students are to become competent and autonomous. Ulaş (2008) describes the present age in which we live as the "communication age" (p. 876). Consequently, emphasis should be placed on appropriate communication task building. Block and Cameron (2002) maintains that language is a vital commodity in the global world. They further added that language is the primary medium of human social interaction, which is the means through which social relations are constructed and maintained. Therefore, employing appropriate teaching methods to accomplish this task becomes an all-important undertaking.

My arguments are grounded in the belief that a major reason for studying other languages is to enable learners to communicate effectively with native speakers, either through writing or speech, in the language of choice in any given context or situation. It is about scaffolding students' knowledge to get them to the place where they are able to communicate with other users of the language. I proffer that communicative competence in its truest form is only really achieved when one can speak, listen, read, write, and understand the L2 in varying contexts. Nevertheless, in the case of Jamaica and other Caribbean islands, the problem of achieving student autonomy is exasperated owing to the language situation and policies that prevail in these societies. In many instances, the target foreign language is not heard outside of the classroom. The absence of opportunities to use the language outside of class often facilitates a lack for students, which demotivates them as they seek to learn the language.

Foley and Thompson (2003) contend that contextualization is an important element in the understanding of text. They further posit that "learners must be able to contextualize a text in terms which are obvious" (p. 208) before they can be expected to reframe it in other ways. When students are able to understand the context and use the target language independently without relying on the mother tongue (L1), then the task of developing autonomy is at least partially accomplished.

The Caribbean Examinations Council Caribbean Secondary Education certificate [CXC- CSEC], hereafter referred to as the CSEC, is the regional examination that students sit at the end of the grade 11 year. Over the years, candidates sitting the CSEC Spanish examinations, in many instances, failed to identify and respond appropriately to given contexts. The Council then embraced the need for a more contextualized examination, and since 2007 students are examined on their appropriate responses in Contextual Announcements and Dialogues on Paper 2 of the General Spanish Examinations. The cues for these are given in English. For this item students have to choose between writing a Contextual Announcement and completing a Contextual Dialogue.

Cognizant of the varying needs of the foreign language student and the many methods of teaching that can be employed, it becomes increasingly important for the teacher of the world language to achieve optimal performance within the classroom. Additionally, in the case of Jamaica and other Caribbean countries entering candidates in the CXC-CSEC examinations, more effort needs to be placed on fostering optimum communicative competence especially in contextualized situations. However, the real issue is to ascertain how teachers may achieve this amidst the many variables within the modern language classroom. It is important to note that this kind of learning can only be accomplished when the teacher has knowledge of who and what she/he teaches and how best to plan to meet their target language needs. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) suggest that "second language learners need to be surrounded with comprehensible language – input – in order to facilitate the acquisition of the new language" (p. 33). Carter (2004) reasons that learners seem to benefit from the opportunity to manage input output possibilities of conversations. In concordance with these writers it is worthy to add that comprehensible input is important since the main aim of students studying a second language is to be able to communicate in the language and in communicating, being understood by their audience.

Developing autonomy: The role of speaking and writing

An important role of the FL teacher is to give students the opportunity to see, hear, experience, and apply the L2 in authentic forms. Tse (2000) purports that students' perceptions of their foreign language learning classroom experiences "have important pedagogical and programmatic implications and have been theorized as having an effect on linguistic outcome" (p. 69). Hence, when preparing these opportunities, the teacher should also allow learners to use the language in meaningful exchanges. It is important that the foreign language of choice be used in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman 2000; Omaggio-Hadley 2001; Richards and Rodgers 2001; Curtain and Dahlberg 2004; Tabors 2008). Ulaş

(2008) concurs with this statement and comments that effective communication is one of the most important skills that individuals should have. When one has mastered the skill of communicating in another language, one will be able to assume authority of the language skills and to transfer said competencies across disciplines and everyday experiences.

Writing and speaking are both productive skills. Both skills require students to encode and negotiate meaning. Perera (1990), however, insists that writing is not a mere way of recording speech. Written language provides different opportunities from speech and requires different skills. It forces the writer to use language in different ways. These different experiences of language can then be fed back in speech and vice versa. Writing is not just a reflection or a record of oral competence but is also an important agent in language development.

Omaggio-Hadley (2004) advises that learning to write a second language is not simply a matter of knowing "how to write things down". Oral language, on the other hand, is acquired in real-life, natural settings through interactions with others. As students develop listening comprehension skills, they begin to make connections between the oral language and the print that represents this oral language (Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). This could prove to be an effective tool in the writing process. One should note that the organization for delivery in speech differs from that of writing. Whereas oral language moves along an axis, written language is visually presented and the overall presentation can be seen at a glance. Both oral and written communication have a target audience. In the oral mode, the speaker can usually see his or her audience and receive continuous feedback. On the other hand, in writing there is very little interpersonal involvement.

Ulaş (2008) contends that speaking is the most common and important means of providing communication among human beings. He further points out that the key to successful communication is "speaking nicely, efficiently and articulately, as well as using effective voice projection" (para. 2). Furthermore, speaking is linked to success in life and occupies an important social in language development and use. Therefore, students should be encouraged to speak the target language. The ability to transfer language structures through speech and writing puts students on the path to becoming autonomous learners.

Communicative language teaching: Teaching language in context

Communicative language teaching [CLT], is student-centred, experienced based, and can thus be a useful tool for the FL teacher to assist learners to attain and maintain autonomy within the target language classroom. The primary goal of the CLT is to develop communicative competence, which is the ability to share and negotiate meanings and conventions across contexts. Definitions of the term have evolved over the years, and today refer to an individual's ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in the target language and across contexts. Omaggio-Hadley (2001), inspired by the work of Savignon, redefined the term as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting." Therefore, CLT pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural and notional aspects of language.

Through the CLT the emphasis is on communication and real-life situations. According to Brown-Mitchell and Vidal (2001), communicative competence has to do with ways of facilitating real communication both in and out of the classroom. Additionally, it deals with whether communication is "formally possible and psychologically feasible" (Skehan 1989, 47). In the CLT classroom, the teacher acts as the facilitator rather than the one who is in charge of students' learning (Richards and Rogers 2001). They also posit that the role of the student is "negotiator" as he or she negotiates with each other, the learning process, and the object of learning. Belchamber (2007) highlights the major elements of the CLT as communication, accuracy and fluency, promoting learning and motivation. These are all important elements that play a part in the implemented programme of contextualized experiences.

Contextualization and authenticity are basic premises of the CLT method (Larsen-Freeman 2000), thereby suggesting that language is not taught in isolation but always within a communicative context. Ur (1996) contends that it is important to teach meaningful chunks of language in context rather than decontextualized items such as lists of vocabulary or isolated examples of grammatical structures. Additionally, Omaggio-Hadley (2001) suggests that second language programmes should provide students ample opportunities to learn language within a context and to apply their knowledge to coping with authentic language-use situations.

Meaningful communication can only take place within "real-world", "real-life" contexts. Kramsch and Thorne (2002) postulate that the ease of access to foreign speakers and cultures provided by Internet communication tools has been hailed as potentially transforming the learning of foreign languages from a decontextualized exercise into an engagement with authentic "real-world" contexts of language use. For this reason, languages should be taught within context. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) maintain that "clear, meaningful and interesting" contexts (p. 25) provide settings in which new language is understandable, and familiar language becomes more memorable and useful.

Research Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature. Bastick and Matalon (2007) affirm that qualitative research is "one of discovery and interpretation". They also make the point that in this kind of research "an in-depth study" of the chosen topic is necessary (p. 5). Furthermore, such inquiries are concerned with context and meaning and generally focus on how people make sense of situations and human experiences (Ary, Cheser-Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen 2006) and use "language data" (Polkinghorne 2005, 137) to derive meaning and understanding.

Under the broad scope of qualitative research this study falls in the genre of Participatory Action Research. Drummond and Themessll-Humer (2007) describe action research as a cyclical process that begins with not only a general idea but with the sense of a problem. Gay and Airasian (2003) highlight four basic steps involved in action research. They argue that the researcher should (a) identify the problem or question to be investigated; (b) brainstorm to gain information about the problem or question; (c) analyze data from a preliminary probe; and (d) take an action to rectify the problem. In the case of this research, I wanted to know how contextualized activities in the FL (Spanish) classroom would enhance communicative competence and learner autonomy. With this in mind, I developed and implemented a programme of contextualized experiences to enhance communicative competence and learner autonomy in the FL classroom. In this research the initial idea or problem, inferior communicative

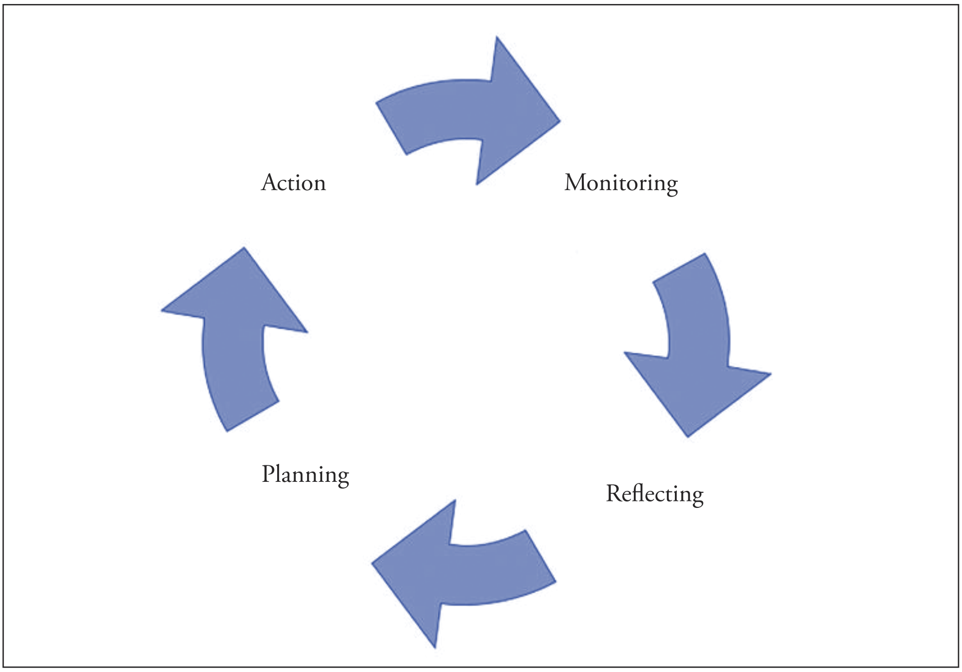


Figure 1: The Action Research cycle.

competence, was re-examined and sharpened continually, until there was consensus (Gay and Airasian 2003). This research was conducted cyclically as I planned, took action, monitored progress, and reflected on the process and meaning continually (Water-Adams 2006) (see figure 1).

I engaged in a 'systematic inquiry' to collect and study information that can help FL teachers to explore and improve their practice. I constantly reflected on my teaching, identified areas of weaknesses, for improvement or exploration, collected and analyzed data relevant to the weakness, then made assumptions from the results as to whether the students' communicative competence had improved or not.

Procedures

The data collection sources used were consistent with those used in a qualitative design. Several sources of collection were used to gather data and to ensure that the data collected were reliable and valid. These data sources included: observations, questionnaires, interviews, and oral and written tests in the target language, Spanish. Focus groups and the development and maintenance of a student participant journal were also employed to aid in gathering information.

The context and participants

The research was conducted in a traditional co-educational high school in rural Jamaica among a group of grade 10 students studying Spanish as a foreign language. There were 18 participants in the study: three boys and 15 girls. Participants were between 15 and 16 years of age. In preparation for the research permission was sought from the school administration, parents and students. Students were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw at any stage of the process.

The study had several limitations which may have impacted the generalized use of findings among FL learners. First, the research was conducted among just one group of grade 10 students. Furthermore, the larger percentage of the sample was female and so a true picture of actual male participation was limited. This may have impacted the results of the study. Second, a few students tended to prefer using the L1, therefore their responses were generally in English. These students had to be encouraged to use the target language. Third, since I, the researcher, was a participant in the study, some student reactions may have been lost to me. In addition, some comments made by students may have gone unheard, and others were not recorded at the moment of occurrence so I may have forgotten or had to rely on memory to record such. Fourth, some students tended to be reluctant to make journal entries of their impressions of individual lessons, and those who did make entries for the most part did so inconsistently.

Procedure for data collection

Data were collected over a period of six weeks. The research was divided into three phases: pre-intervention, intervention, and post-intervention.

Pre-intervention

Having garnered permission to conduct the study from the school's administration, parents, and participants, I administered questionnaires and had informal discussions with students to find out their preferences for activities and their perceptions of Spanish and the need to be proficient speakers of the language. These conversations were initiated in Spanish to determine students' levels of oral competence and to identify limitations which were to be addressed during the intervention. The conversations were recorded and transcribed for further use in the analysis of data. This information was also used as a guide for the development of the intervention.

The intervention

The intervention ran for a period of six weeks, on Wednesday afternoons. Classes on Wednesdays generally lasted one hour and twenty minutes. A programme of interactive contextual experiences was implemented in a bid to improve students' communicative competence in the target language, Spanish. Ur (1996) points out that it is important to teach meaningful chunks of language in context rather than decontextualized items such as lists of vocabulary or isolated examples of grammatical structures. Grounded in this knowledge, I ensured that every activity used was contextualized and authenticity of the language adapted.

The intervention included dramatizations, discussions, role-play, and interviews, giving speeches, and reporting. Most importantly, contextual announcements and contextual dialogues were also included to improve language competence. All activities in the intervention were conducted in the target language as much as possible. A wide range of vocabulary and tenses as well as the Subjunctive Mood was introduced and used during the intervention. Students were provided a list of vocabulary at the beginning of each class. Students' work was corrected, and copied as far as possible.

Post-intervention

At the end of the period of intervention, the researcher again conducted interviews. Students also made presentations on a given context, and this was used to measure and mark improvements in language use.

Data Analysis

The aim of the research was to develop communicative competence in the group of FL students through interventions using contextualized activities. Throughout the intervention process students were taught using Spanish as the language of instruction. During interviews and focus group discussions in the pre-intervention stage, I confirmed that students did not like to speak because they did not know what to say and they tended to think in English then translate to the L2. In addition, participants declared that they felt inhibited by their limited vocabulary in the target language hence they were hesitant to participate in class activities for fear of making errors. Stemming from this, an intervention programme of contextualized activities was planned and implemented over a period of six weeks. Upon completion of the intervention, students were again interviewed, tested and asked to fill out a questionnaire about their impressions of the intervention and their L2 use.

A rigorous process of data analysis ensued as I tried to make meaning of the data collected from multiple sources. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the process of the research. Stake (2010) maintains that there is no particular moment when data analysis begins in qualitative research; it occurs throughout the study, rather than at the end of the study (Gay and Airasian 2003). Analysis in the case of the study was a matter of giving meaning to data collected from the beginning to the end of the study (Stake 2010). In an effort to produce the richness of the data, all responses to interviews, discussions, and questionnaires were meticulously reviewed, coded, interpreted, and then presented in a narrative form.

Discussion of Findings

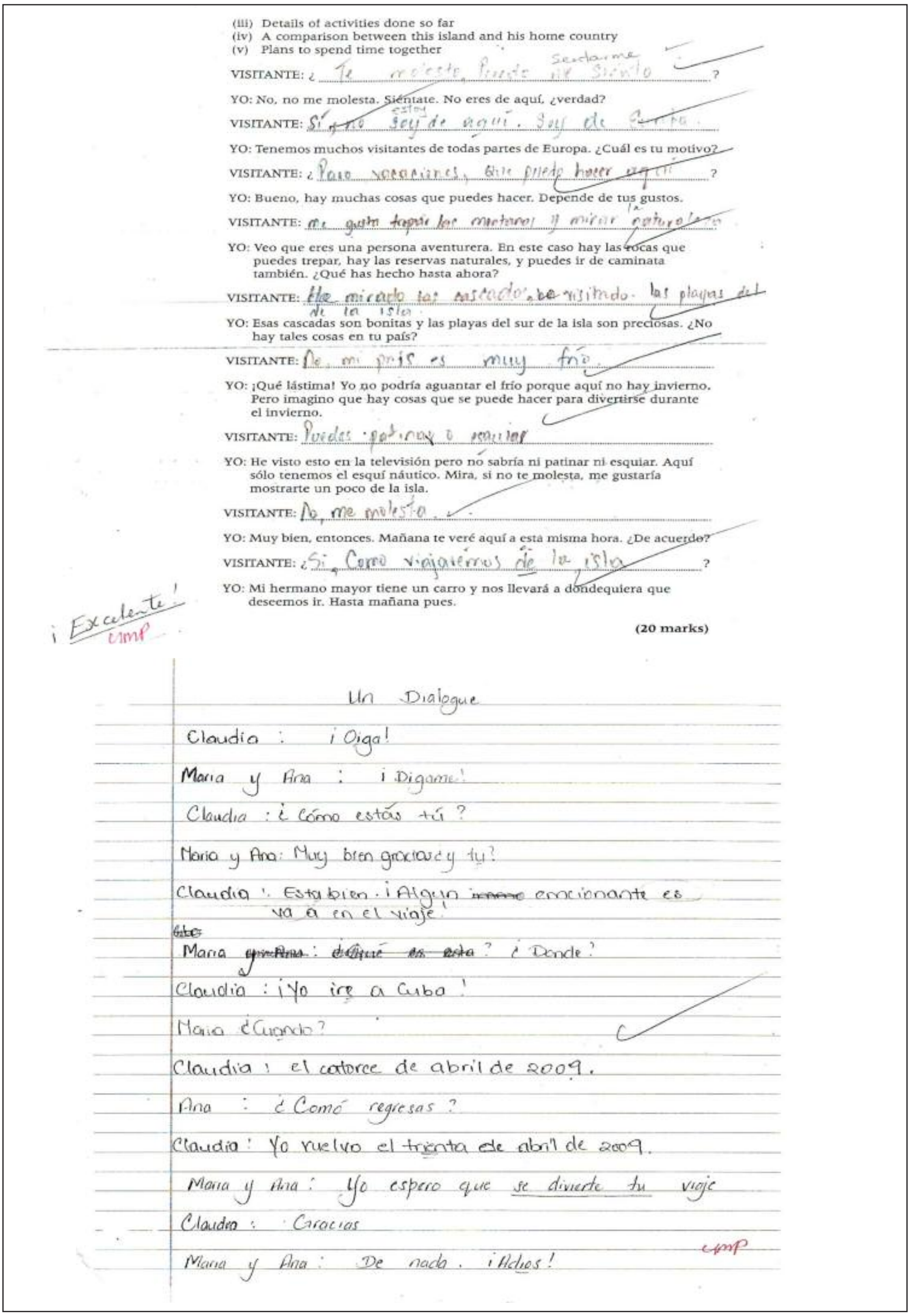
The discussion thus far has set the stage for the basis of this article, which is exploring how the use of contextualized activities impacts communicative competence among a group of students studying Spanish as a foreign language.

Grounded in the belief that when students are competent in communicating, their chances of gaining autonomy are heightened, I used contextualized activities to improve competence in the language skills. Through the analysis of the data gleaned from multiple sources (observation, interviews, focus group discussions, written and oral tests, questionnaires), it was deduced that there was marked improvement in all areas of language applicability, as students participated in contextualized activities and experiences. Throughout the intervention, students grew in confidence as they perceived that they had the potential to act independently in using the target language in other situations than those described or provided in class.

An important feature of the intervention was that students were provided with a list of vocabulary relevant to the context at the beginning of each lesson. Students were encouraged to use the target language (Spanish) and to assume a considerate attitude toward other class members, thereby allowing each classmate the comfort and opportunity to speak without fear. I praised every attempt and demonstration of communicative competence in the target language. Furthermore, error correction was minimal because I wanted students to participate free of inhibition. I observed that over time students began to explore use of the target language and tried speaking from memory.

By the end of the intervention there was a noted improvement in all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Data indicated that continuous use of contextualized activities would result in improved writing and speaking among participants. Students, through repetitive oral practice, began hearing and internalizing correct grammatical patterns, which in turn were reflected in their writing. Throughout the intervention students' written and oral competencies were monitored.

Examples of written tasks completed by SP2 and SP12 are given in figure 2. At the beginning of the intervention, both students were reluctant to participate because they felt they could only 'think in English' before doing any communicative task. The examples presented highlight an improvement in writing. Both activities required students to respond to the written communicative cues presented. Students were presented with the activity and asked to write their response. They had the opportunity to think in the L2 and give appropriate responses. Notably, student responses saw them using the language in creative


(iii) Details of activities done so far
(iv) A comparison between this island and his home country
(v) Plans to spend time together

VISITANTE: ¿Te molesto. Puedo ~~me siento~~ sentarme?

YO: No, no me molesta. Siéntate. No eres de aquí, ¿verdad?

VISITANTE: Sí, no ~~soy~~ estoy de aquí. Soy de España.

YO: Tenemos muchos visitantes de todas partes de Europa. ¿Cuál es tu motivo?

VISITANTE: ¿Para vacaciones, que puedo hacer aquí?

YO: Bueno, hay muchas cosas que puedes hacer. Depende de tus gustos.

VISITANTE: me gusta trepar las montañas y mirar la naturaleza

YO: Veo que eres una persona aventurera. En este caso hay las rocas que puedes trepar, hay las reservas naturales, y puedes ir de caminata también. ¿Qué has hecho hasta ahora?

VISITANTE: He mirado las cascadas, ~~he~~ visitado las playas del de la isla.

YO: Esas cascadas son bonitas y las playas del sur de la isla son preciosas. ¿No hay tales cosas en tu país?

VISITANTE: No, mi país es muy frío.

YO: ¡Qué lástima! Yo no podría aguantar el frío porque aquí no hay invierno. Pero imagino que hay cosas que se puede hacer para divertirse durante el invierno.

VISITANTE: Puedes patinar o esquiar

YO: He visto esto en la televisión pero no sabría ni patinar ni esquiar. Aquí sólo tenemos el esquí náutico. Mira, si no te molesta, me gustaría mostrarte un poco de la isla.

VISITANTE: No, me molesta.

YO: Muy bien, entonces. Mañana te veré aquí a esta misma hora. ¿De acuerdo?

VISITANTE: ¿Sí, Como viajaremos de la isla?

YO: Mi hermano mayor tiene un carro y nos llevará a dondequiera que deseemos ir. Hasta mañana pues.

¡Excelente!
cmp

(20 marks)

Un Dialogue

Claudia : ¡Oiga!
Maria y Ana : ¡Digame!
Claudia : ¿Cómo estás tú?
Maria y Ana: Muy bien gracias y tu?
Claudia : Esta bien. ¡Algun ~~[illegible]~~ emocionante es va a en el viaje!
Maria ~~y Ana~~: ~~¿Qué es esta~~? ¿Donde?
Claudia : ¡Yo iré a Cuba!
Maria ¿Cuando?
Claudia : el catorce de abril de 2009.
Ana : ¿Cómo regresas?
Claudia : Yo vuelvo el treinta de abril de 2009.
Maria y Ana : Yo espero que se divierte tu viaje
Claudia : Gracias
Maria y Ana : De nada. ¡Adios!
cmp

Figure 2: Examples of students' written work after the foreign language intervention.

ways as they thought in Spanish and manipulated structures to approximate appropriate responses. Before the intervention, this was difficult for students because they felt less capable to produce such responses in the target language.

From the very first lesson, I employed group work as a strategy to get students to take responsibility for their learning by participating in class activities. Some students objected and expressed the desire to work alone. They were, nevertheless, encouraged to work in the groups assigned, since I thought that working together as a group would enhance their chances of attaining communicative competence as they negotiated and approximated appropriate responses to cues in the L2. I adopted the role of facilitator and monitored each group as they worked. This was done primarily to ensure that they were using the L2 – Spanish – and to ascertain that each person participated actively. According to Ur (1996) supervision of group work is necessary if it is to be productive and not chaotic. There was maximum participation and everyone was engaged in speaking and writing in Spanish. Students were observed to be working keenly on task while negotiating appropriate responses.

Working in groups gave participants the opportunity to discuss, negotiate and express themselves better than they would if they had worked individually. Proponents of group interaction also suggested that working in pairs increases language use, since students will feel more comfortable speaking in small groups rather than in front of a large class (Omaggio-Hadley 2001; Curtain and Dahlberg 2004). Group activities also prepared students for 'whole class' presentations. Over time, it was noted that group discussions grew in productivity and almost all students were actively involved and participated fully in activities. It was observed that responses were generally correct approximations in the target language. SP2 journalled

> Dear Journal
>
> Today in class we presented orally. We formed groups and presented on the topic "At the travel agency." I was able to participate a lot. I felt comfortable throughout the presentation even though I knew I was making mistakes. It helped me to be more confident.

Oral competence over the period of the intervention improved and continued improving. At the beginning of the programme more than 50 per cent stated that they preferred to think in English and then translate to the target language, Spanish. However, at the end of the intervention indications were that they were thinking and speaking more in Spanish. Students began to feel less inhibited and spoke more freely as they grew in confidence. Over time, the grammatical errors also became fewer. This may be as a result of students' continuous practice, but more so because the language was presented to them in 'whole chunks.' They were able to listen, read, internalize, and model correct and appropriate language in speech and writing.

SP10's journal entry after an activity was

> Dear Journal,
>
> Good God I am learning Spanish! Today was spectacular, overwhelming. I can't even explain. Can you believe that I spoke Spanish with small inconsistencies nearly **whole class today***? Today was a perfect day.

Students were now able to think on their own and give appropriate responses in the target language according to the context and situations provided by the teacher. For example, SP14 wrote

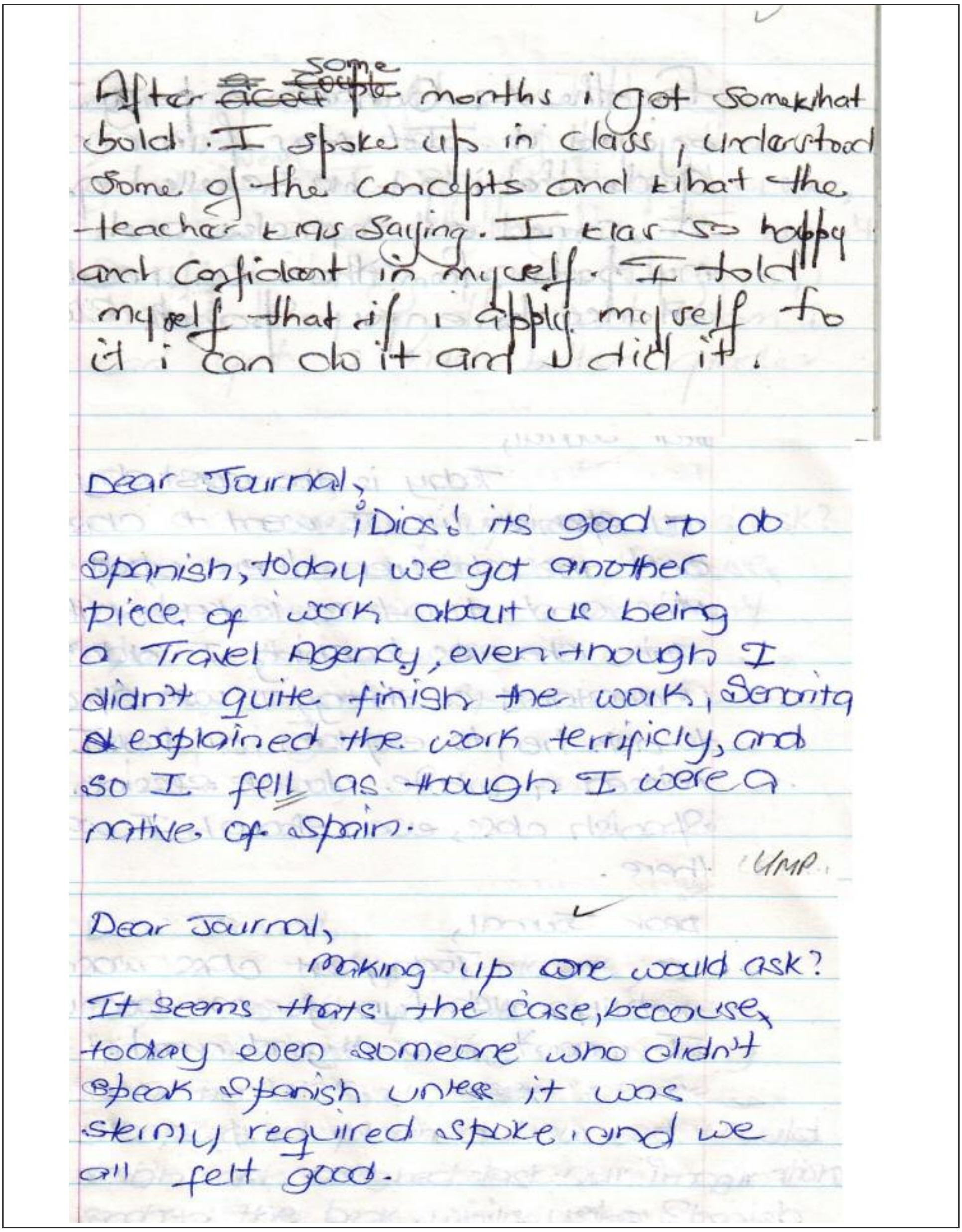
> Well I guess my previous wish is coming true, of course I did not get the chance to go on a trip to a Spanish speaking country, but I had the chance to practise what I would say if our teacher decides to take us there and I enjoy doing that!
>
> Over the past few weeks we have been practising dialogues in Spanish. Each pupil is given the opportunity to express his/her self in Spanish. By doing this I am able to listen to myself and others speak in Spanish and identify both their mistakes and mine. I enjoy this activity because it makes me feel "Spanish literate." I look forward to Spanish class in order to talk to someone in Spanish…

In the focus group discussion at the end of the intervention students indicated that they thought the intervention greatly aided them with their communication in Spanish. When asked how, the following were common responses:

- I feel more comfortable
- I feel more confident
- I remember vocabulary given in class and feel I can apply them to whatever situation.

* Indicates an error

Additionally, SP3, SP8 and SP11 made journal entries that corroborated what other participants articulated that they felt their communicative competence had improved during the intervention (see figure 3).



After ~~a couple~~ some months i got somewhat bold. I spoke up in class, understood some of the concepts and what the teacher was saying. I was so happy and confident in myself. I told myself that if i apply myself to it i can do it and I did it.

Dear Journal,
¡Dios! its good to do Spanish, today we got another piece of work about us being a Travel Agency, even though I didn't quite finish the work, Senorita explained the work terrificly, and so I fell as though I were a native of Spain.

UMP.

Dear Journal,
Making up one would ask? It seems thats the case, because, today even someone who didn't speak Spanish unless it was strictly required spoke, and we all felt good.

Figure 3: Journal entries of three students expressing confidence in using Spanish.

The positive reactions and unbridled enthusiasm of students to speak and write in the target language, coupled with the positive feedback they shared, led me to deduce that they were now more enthused about in-class activities that led to interaction among themselves. Students willingly engaged in class activities and in the target language (Spanish).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Indications from data collected and rigorous analysis were that participation in contextualized activities points to improved communicative competence in Spanish among students. Throughout the intervention, students negotiated language and took responsibility for their participation. Participants were also able to use the target language appropriately in context. The fact that students were able to accomplish these objectives led to the conclusion that the use of contextualized experiences and activities leads students to become autonomous learners. Students were presented with a wide range of vocabulary and language contexts from which they learnt to communicate appropriate structures. All students indicated that they benefited from the intervention, however, some experienced more success than others. The experience left students with a new attitude towards speaking Spanish as they were able to do so without being coerced, which speaks to autonomy. Students, in showing autonomy, began speaking among themselves and with the teacher outside of general classroom time.

From this research I developed a clearer understanding of the fact that all four language skills are important in the development of communicative competence and that they also aid in making students more autonomous in their learning. No skill can be taught independently of the others, rather there has to be an integration of all four language skills. Making students comfortable and responsible is an important step to ensuring improved competence in the L2

Group and pair work were useful strategies used in improving students' target language competence and in the development of autonomy, as they took responsibility for their own learning through the activities provided. The interaction and negotiation among students allowed them to develop confidence within themselves and their weaker areas were strengthened. Stronger students supported and aided weaker ones. Group work essentially prepared them for individual work. Although students were able to speak effectively in the target language within the given contexts, there is concern as to whether they can apply this knowledge to a new context. This suggests that additional activities within other possible contexts would prove beneficial to students.

With the improved results garnered from the use of interactive contextual experiences, it can be deduced that the use of interactive activities should be encouraged in the teaching of any foreign language to assist teachers in developing autonomous learners. Students tended to favour these interactive activities, hence, these should be considered as a major part of the foreign language experience.

In concluding, foreign language teachers, in seeking to attain autonomy in their students, should employ the use of authentic materials and activities that reflect the needs of students. These authentic activities should allow for student involvement in the class and in varying language contexts. Cubillos (n.d.) held that FL learners develop proficiency in the target language by actively participating in linguistic exchanges (output). Therefore, we see the undeniable need for student involvement in the learning process and the need to give them the opportunity to participate in language classes. They should not only be given the opportunity to speak, but to use the language meaningfully to carry out communicative tasks that are engaging and useful to students in other contexts. In so doing, the students will be motivated to learn and participate in class activities and use the L2 outside the domain of the classroom. Thus, the class becomes more effective as students feel that they have played a role in the programmatic and pedagogical dynamics of the class and that their concerns and needs are important to the process.

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