

Approaches and Initiatives for Navigating the Teaching and Learning of Spanish as a Foreign Language in the Context of COVID-19

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Abstract

This article explores the application of new technologies in foreign language learning. Particularly, it analyzes the implementation of innovative pedagogical strategies and practices, as well as the methodological approaches adopted by Spanish Majors in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these practices, the article explores strategies incorporated into the design of the courses such as the inverted class or “Flipped Classroom”, collaborative writing and online reflection, gamification, and Virtual Intercultural Exchange.

The aim is to see whether these strategies, including intercultural awareness, have improved Spanish as Foreign Language learning skills.

Keywords: foreign language education, emergency remote teaching (ERT), flipped classroom, collaboration, self-reflection, Virtual Intercultural Exchange

Introduction

RAPID DEVELOPMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY AND ITS APPLICATION IN education have allowed the implementation of student-centred approaches (Cojocariu et al. 2014), where the roles of instructors and learners have shifted and control over learning has been replaced. During the last few decades, the application of new technologies

in foreign language education has been essential for the innovation of methodologies and practices that modify the entire learning process, and its expansion has also altered traditional settings. Indeed, technology offers the possibility to alter traditional methods to develop students' language skills and critical thinking through collaboration, reflection, and active participation.

As educators, we are compelled to explore the application of these new technologies in foreign language education and examine whether they are effective tools through which to implement innovative teaching and learning practices, as well as methodological changes. When properly utilised, technology encourages learning autonomy and self-reflection, especially when implemented through a blended approach that includes online resources and reflective and collaborative tasks, as they have proved to be empowering tools to develop learners' motivation and metacognitive awareness (Sevilla and Gamboa 2016).

In addition, technology has made distance or remote education easier and learning more flexible with the increasing possibility to learn from anywhere at any time (Liguori and Winkler 2020). However, it has also emphasised the fact that learners mediate remote education differently. Remote and online learning is beneficial to students who favour self-regulated learning, as “they can spend more time on the concepts that they need help with and less on those that they can pick up quickly” (Kirtman 2009, 110). Indeed, “self-regulated learners tend to use various cognitive and metacognitive strategies to accomplish their learning goals” (You and Kang 2014, 126), as they have “the ability to plan, monitor and evaluate their own behavior and understand learning strategies” (Matuga 2009). However, self-regulation is not enough to succeed as motivation is a key factor needed in any learning process. On the other hand, we also must bear in mind those students less used to cognitive and metacognitive learning, who may not feel so comfortable learning online (You and Kang 2014) and encourage them to adapt gradually and make sure they will keep engaged in their learning.

COVID-19 and Digital Transformation

The threat of COVID-19 has presented some unique challenges or, more positively perceived, “opportunities” to higher education. Due to the pandemic, colleges and universities have been faced with difficult decisions regarding the continuation of teaching and learning while ensuring the safety of faculty and students. Most institutions have had to cancel face-to-face classes and implement

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to help prevent the spread of the virus. This has called for the adoption of unprecedented changes regarding course delivery and pedagogical approaches for faculty and students. Although ERT arrived at a time in which online and blended learning were already incorporated in Higher Education and seemed the preferred mode of instruction for some institutions, the present global pandemic has accelerated its wider implementation. ERT has enabled the flexibility of teaching and learning needed in such critical situations and, as stressful as it was, due to the urgency with which ERT was implemented, we cannot deny the advantages of online modes during times of crisis. The sudden change has taken us all aback and some campuses were able to support personnel and teams better than others.

Students did also undergo dramatic changes that affected their learning patterns. For example, in Jamaica, like in many other countries, most educational institutions were closed, and young children stayed at home while many students' parents kept working. This situation forced many university students to become caretakers of their younger siblings, which took time away from their learning. Further to this added responsibility, students might not have been able to attend courses immediately due to a lack of adequate internet connectivity, badly functioning technical devices, and/or financial constraints brought about by the downturn in the economy.

Indeed, remote synchronous Spanish as Foreign Language classes – Major Programme – were problematic at the outset due to the continued absence of many students. Gathering the whole class was hard and even when all students attended the virtual synchronous meeting, other technical issues were encountered. Some areas of Jamaica, as it happens in many other countries, already experience frequent power cuts which have caused internet connectivity to be a key issue for both students and staff. In rural areas, where many students at The University of the West Indies reside when not boarding in halls, a lack of adequate devices, and internet services with low bandwidth has caused time lags, poor sound and bad images quality, loss of lip synchronization, and verbal cues which pose major challenges to synchronous teaching. Consequently, teachers have had to find alternative ways to deliver their classes and to adapt materials, transferring content to asynchronous teaching. As a result, we all needed to adapt learning strategies to the new environment and make use of already available technologies such as university platforms – that include Wikis, forums, quizzes, glossaries, assignments, videos, and URLs, etc. Others include social media, Zoom,

WhatsApp, Google Docs and learning apps – like Flipgrid, Padlet, Pickerwheel, Mentimeter, Lyricstraining and Kahoot – and other languages learning apps such as Duolingo and Tandem. ¹

Therefore, though many institutions are leaning towards the permanent inclusion of distance teaching along blended instructional lines as it seems flexible, inclusive, and student-centred, we cannot consider ERT as a long-term solution because its success is contingent upon all students' total access to its online teaching platforms and resources. Emergency Remote Teaching should be engaged as a temporary option for emergency course delivery when the traditional mode is not possible. Indeed, although the primary objective of ERT was to provide temporary access to instruction and offer reliable support during times of crisis, moving towards online and/or blended education seems to be the way forward for many institutions. However, moving fully online will require the reconfiguration of infrastructure, pedagogy, and teaching practices, which some institutions seem to overlook. ²

Tuning into Remote and Online Teaching

Although online learning has become a key part of the foreign language learning experience, the impact of COVID-19 has taken classrooms outside their natural environments, forcing educators and learners alike to adapt accordingly. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze how academic institutions have been able to adopt the remote learning mode in such a massive manner (Carey 2020) and whether the learning outcomes indicate that this is the way to go. However, to see all its benefits, educators should acquire new skills to use pedagogically transformative practice, as remote teaching is not merely the use of technology to convey old teaching methods. As Kern, Ware, and Warschauer (2004) point out:

The use of the internet [is] not so much to teach the same thing in a different way, but rather to help students enter a new realm of collaborative inquiry and construction of knowledge, viewing their expanding repertoire of identities and communication strategies as resources in the process (21).

Therefore, the belief that a teacher who is skilled at face-to-face delivery will become a good distance/remote teacher overnight is a common myth (Davis and Rose 2007). As Davis and Rose claim, “even the most jovial and enthusiastic tutor of face-to-face mode cannot automatically become a successful online

teacher” (318). However, research shows that teachers who believe in the use of technology have greater enthusiasm and motivation when teaching online and greater capacity to face challenges of online learning and those attitudes may be transferred to students. Hoven (2007) explains that teachers’ adoption of change and innovation are more likely to occur when “they can see positive benefits in terms of direct relevance to their content area, usefulness from a practical task perspective, and increased effectiveness for their day-to-day classroom teaching” (137). As such, teachers need training beyond technical skills and software specifics (Compton 2009). According to Easton (2003), online instructors require a shift in their perception of instructional time and space, virtual management techniques, and ways of engaging students through virtual communication.³ Therefore, the medium requires a new set of communication skills besides the ones required for conventional classroom teaching.

As noted by Hampel and Stickler (2005), online language teachers need different skills from those utilised in traditional foreign language instruction as well as online teachers of other disciplines (*see* Hampel and Stickler’s skills pyramid according to teacher level⁴). Pedagogical strategies for online community building and socialising should be examined to facilitate communicative competence and online interaction (Hampel and Stickler 2005). This implies the revision of course design and assessment as well as the inclusion of interactive tasks, collaboration, reflection, immediate feedback, virtual office hours, and more flexibility with deadlines. The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures (DMLL) adopted this position and required their faculty to modify assessments and re-design course content accordingly to be used on the university’s virtual learning platform, Our Virtual Learning Environment (OurVLE).⁵

However, academic staff training during this pandemic has mainly focused on digital literacy or software-specific orientation. While it is true that these workshops have been very informative and have boosted lecturers’ confidence in the effective operation of these digital platforms, specialised training for best pedagogical practice for online instruction has been rare. Consequently, educators have been searching for different ways to access such information through departmental or private initiatives such as attending webinars, online courses, etc. The DMLL in association with *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie* offered the department’s faculty a well-organised training course on pedagogical approaches and strategies which mainly focused on online foreign language

learning, including learning strategies such as “Flipped Classroom”, gamification, and telecollaboration.

Adopting Strategies to Online Learning

Asynchronous instruction seems to be the most adopted model of online education because of its flexible *modus operandi*. It provides students with accessible materials in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and interactive activities/quizzes that are made available through institutions’ course management platforms. However, as foreign language education is a largely skill-based process rather than only a content-based one, the acquisition of speaking and listening skills also requires synchronous teaching to promote interaction between facilitators and learners as well as among learners. Therefore, real-time visual and oral interaction is imperative. To adequately adapt to the current crisis while ensuring the inclusion of all students despite the disparity in their internet access, the DMLL resumed lectures and listening classes synchronously and asynchronously, the former taking place either through OurVLE and using other online resources such as Zoom. Students benefit from these synchronous sessions, as they are afforded the opportunity to improve their oral proficiency and listening skills, and to engage in intercultural exchange. Also, the students collaborate, present their work, and get immediate feedback from tutors and peers.

One of the most common questions regarding online language learning has been related to oral proficiency. According to Blake et al. (2008), many institutions and educators still harbour doubts that oral skills in a foreign language can be developed through online courses without synchronous components. Indeed, this apprehension seems valid given that language “is not just knowing phrases and conjugations but forming coherent meaning and using that meaning appropriately to engage in real or realistic communication with other speakers of the language” (Lord 2015, 401). Thus, it is contended that weekly Spanish oral classes ought to remain a hundred per cent synchronous.

Moreover, another commented weakness in online courses is the reduction of social interaction, and the difficulty it poses in forging peer relationships which are fundamental for learning and developing a sense of community. According to Harrison and Thomas (2009), communication online has been regarded as superficial and requires time to mature, and this delay may cause students to feel isolated. The absence of a “real” classroom, which better facilitates communi-

cation, can cause not only a lack of interaction but also anxiety and uncertainty amongst students. In addition to the lack of non-verbal clues, such as reading facial expression and lip reading, common technical difficulties of online teaching, may cause the distortion of image and sound. Conversely, Guichon (2010) suggests that the implicit time restriction of synchronous communication, at times exacerbated by the above-mentioned technical challenges, problematises the overall experience of online teaching and learning. These technical failings cannot be overlooked, as they change behaviours and negatively affect the ways in which students interact with teachers and fellow students in a virtual classroom.

It is, then, imperative that coordinators invest time and effort into building community and establishing communication, using alternative pedagogical means, adopting more personal approaches and methods, including collaboration through in- and out-of-class teamwork – using videoconferencing platforms, such as BBC or Zoom, that allow for the subdivision of the groups – and exploring Virtual Intercultural Exchange or *Telecollaboration*. By incorporating these practices, the lack of interaction which tends to lead to helpless passivity may be avoided.

Effective communication and visibility within the virtual classroom motivates active student engagement. Besides, the teacher's presence is necessary for realising personal, meaningful, and education learning outcomes. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) claim the teachers' presence fosters cognitive and social processes and interaction. Thus, presence is an important factor in structuring and facilitating active learning and as stated earlier, builds a sense of online community and supportive response. As Stacey (2002) suggests, the lack of a sense of community can lead to students' frustration. Therefore, the teaching needs to be structured to include synchronous meetings in which real-time interaction takes place between facilitators and students to increase communication and build a sense of community. This cognitive function of the teachers' role is paramount since it helps to create constructive dialogue through guided discussion which largely influences student performance. Therefore, it is social interaction – a learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction, and content interaction – between learner and content, that aid the achievement of learning goals.

In the DMLL, 50 per cent of synchronous classes for lectures and listening practice have remained in place for the Major in Spanish programme, mainly taking up a “Flipped Classroom” approach to optimise real-time meetings to promote a sense of belonging and reinforce what they have autonomously learnt, through interactive activities and discussions. Moreover, we have embraced mul-

timodal Virtual Intercultural Exchange to boost students' intercultural competence, language skills, and digital literacy. This *Telecollaboration* was enriched by gamification, highlighting the social constructivist view of the learning process.

These synchronous sessions also include group work, as it decentralises teaching (McLoughlin and Lee 2010), and promotes engagement, participation, multidimensional interaction, and encourages learners' autonomy. These sessions are recorded, affording students the possibility to watch them in the future. According to Bergman and Sams (2012), this is the great advantage of new technologies and online teaching, as students can view the material again in their own time, rewinding and fast forwarding it, and then apply concepts in practical and interactive activities. Therefore, the synchronous meeting becomes not only the place from which to work out problems and promote sociocultural awareness but also to communicate using the target language and engage in Socratic dialogue. However, we must bear in mind the number of hours students spend in front of device screens during their ERT. Some of them stated, both in their journal writing and in group forums, that the constant exposure to device screens has caused them stress and fatigue, and this is the main reason for which they welcome more flexible asynchronous classes.

The asynchronous classroom has been of great help to students who have full-time employment and to those who did not have good connectivity or adequate devices at their homes. Moreover, they are an excellent tool to promote reflection and increase learners' autonomy (Benson 2001; Holec 1981; Nunan 1995; Alford and Pachler 2007). In such times, students read, undertake guided activities which include research, production of texts – including reflexive diaries or journal writing, portfolio and collaborative writing – completion of quizzes and meeting up with their peers to carry out group work, etc. The asynchronous assignments are uploaded to the platform and revised weekly to identify progress and send timely feedback to the students. This delivery mode required educators to spend longer hours not only in making effective strategies and giving clear instructions but also writing feedback to ensure formative learning and summative assessment. Finally, we needed to be available, when possible, for individualised orientation – carried out in weekly virtual office hours in which students using Zoom individually express their concerns, share thoughts, etc. Students attended office hours mostly towards the second half of the semester and reported in their journals their appreciation of the opportunity for direct and individual interaction with the teacher.

Practices and Strategies for Resuming ERT Classes

Classes resumed as ERT in April 2020. In the Spanish programme, first- and second-year Spanish language courses, Spanish Level IB and Spanish Level IIB (SPAN1002 and SPAN2502) took place asynchronously and synchronously, in a balanced manner.⁶ As students already knew each other and the dynamics were already in place, their participation improved shortly after classes resumed. Once participation was restored and they felt more at ease with the online medium, they were able to enhance other aspects of the language learning process. By the end of the semester, without compromising on quality standards, the learning objectives were accomplished, and students perceived no severe effects on their learning, obtaining good results with average passing grades of over 80%. However, there was not enough time to explore and fully analyze a large variety of innovations put in place.

The first semester of the academic year 2020/2021 started in September 2020. This semester's focus groups were first and second level Spanish students from the courses SPAN1001 and SPAN2501. Although the students in SPAN2501 (Spanish Level IIA) had already interacted face-to-face and remotely with their peers and the teacher, it took a few sessions to restore their confidence as their motivation was lower than the previous academic year. To boost their interaction and confidence during seminar classes, the lecturer intentionally drew from previous experience, helping the students to connect between concepts and to understand that they were building on the foundational knowledge they already had. This was clearly stated when they wrote their reflective diaries and participated in learning forums. However, the participation was lower than in previous face-to-face sessions. Some students cited internet connectivity as a major issue while others highlighted a fear of the new environment – camera use, video recording, etc. Only approximately 10 per cent of students mentioned that it was their lack of confidence in performing in the foreign language.

During the semester, there were group presentations, essay and story writing, comparative grammar, etc. With the implementation of the “Flipped Classroom” pedagogical approach, students had a variety of materials, that is, content grammar videos, written texts, songs etc., to prepare before classes which were deeply analyzed and practised during synchronous class. Students were also asked to use individual and collaborative online resources such as Wikis and Google Docs, collaborative forums, and language learning apps such as Duolingo and Tan-

dem, among others. Finally, students were invited to participate in an organised Virtual Intercultural Exchange, a computer-mediated learning practice, which was going to be set for the following semester. This activity allowed them to work directly with international peers from other regions of the world, to experience native articulation of the target language, share intercultural knowledge, and improve digital literacies.

Flipped classroom approach for synchronous classes

During the last two semesters, Semester II (2019/2020) and Semester I (2020/2021), and currently (Semester II, 2020/2021), lecturers in the Spanish Major programme have implemented Flipped Learning as the main teaching strategy for first- and second-year language courses. The Flipped Classroom method, or inverted classroom, as it was previously termed, is a pedagogical approach in which teaching and learning are rearranged inside and outside the classroom. The aim of this approach is to increase in-class exposure time to the target language and thus, enable learners to focus on selected topics in greater depth. This learning model is considered modern and innovative, although it has been around for decades in face-to-face classrooms. However, with the increasing use of technology in classrooms, educators have been implementing the Virtual Flipped Classroom. With the Virtual Flipped Classroom approach, learners are required to learn online using e-content and e-activities prepared by lecturers before synchronous learning sessions. It employs asynchronous video lectures and readings with practice exercises and incorporates individual and group-based problem-solving activities in the lesson plan (Bergman and Sams 2012; Tucker 2012).

In the Flipped Classroom mode, the teacher creates videos and interactive lessons so that instruction that used to occur in synchronous classes is now accessed autonomously, in advance of the class. Thus, students of Spanish have been exposed to new materials outside of and before the class by reading or watching materials uploaded by the instructor on the OurVLE platform, available to all students enrolled in the courses. In terms of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001), students did lower levels of cognitive work before the class (gaining knowledge) and then, they would carry out higher forms of cognitive work, assimilating and applying that knowledge in class. Students were able to watch the audiovisual content – mainly YouTube grammar lessons and recorded lecture classes – or read texts such as articles, literary excerpts, linguistic and

grammar notes, etc. – and then answer grammar and content quizzes and/or guided questions about the linguistic and thematic concepts. Thus, during the synchronous lecture students undertook more engaging and interactive activities using the target language by applying the concepts previously reviewed in comparative grammar exercises.

Consequently, by spending less time on in-class grammar explanations the classroom becomes more effective and allows for a deeper focus on the use of the language. Students are required to use their new factual knowledge in the class where they would have direct access to immediate feedback from peers and instructors who can correct misconceptions and provide scaffolding for students to reflect and achieve an understanding of the concept. In that way, “the classroom becomes the space to work problems and analyze more advanced concepts in collaboration” (Tucker 2012, 82). Thus, through the Flipped Classroom we instruct by applying a metacognitive approach where students can set their objectives and monitor their progress, engaging in higher-level thinking activities. On the other hand, it promotes collaborative problem solving (Karabulut 2017) and enhances the interaction between classmates and teacher. Therefore, the Flipped Classroom approach promotes academic twenty-first-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, metacognition, problem resolution, collaboration, motivation, self-efficacy, learning awareness, and perseverance and has proved useful during ERT.

However, this pedagogical approach can be challenging, as there are several obstacles that must be tackled before getting satisfactory learning outcomes. First, students need to gain learning autonomy as they are asked to explore and reflect by themselves to prepare for the following session. Thus, the content needs to be clearly and explicitly explained, otherwise students may be unsure about what they should be doing. Consequently, the Flipped Classroom is a balance between constructivist methods and teacher-directed learning, as students who are initially unfamiliar with the mechanics need more structure and guidance. However, once the approach is understood, learners tend to take more responsibility for their learning and are cognisant of their progress. Also, they become more confident in taking risks, making errors, and come to regard these errors as a positive learning tool. Through Flipped Classrooms, the synchronous session is not structured as a lecture but as an exercise that focuses on student-centred learning with activities that encourage the development of higher order thinking skills. This pedagogical strategy worked better with the second-year group, as they were better equipped for autonomous learning.

Collaborative online writing using Wikis, Google Docs and Forums

Writing is not simply an individual act but an interactive and social process. Research shows that foreign language learners obtain great benefit from collaborative writing (Aydin and Yildiz 2014; Chu and Kennedy 2011; Dobao 2012; Storch 2005). Collaborative writing exercises encourage learners to exchange feedback, express ideas, share linguistic and organisation problems, and contribute to decision making on all aspects of the written work (Elola and Oskoz 2010). The sense of co-authorship of the finished product also encourages students' participation. Therefore, it not only involves collaborative thinking but also helps learners to focus on grammar accuracy, lexis, and discourse (DiCamilla and Anton 1997; Swain and Lapkin 1998). However, collaboration does not need to be bound to the physical classroom. The use of social technology has brought a renewed attention to L2 collaborative writing (Arnold, Ducate, and Kost 2009; Elola and Oskoz 2010; Kessler 2009; Kessler and Bikowski 2010). The open editing and review structure of Wikis, for example, makes them a suitable tool to support collaborative writing (Parker and Chao 2007). Forums and Google docs are also online tools that involve community communication and allow for collaborative writing. The use of Wiki, a tool included in the OurVLE platform, increased with the development of computer-based technologies but, according to Bikowski and Vithanage (2016), learners can expect similar results using Google Docs.

Online collaborative writing moves from individual knowledge to collective production and thus, is grounded in the social constructivist paradigm of language learning that places learners as receptors and constructors of knowledge. In addition, language is not only a means of communication but a cognitive tool that enables learners to solve linguistic problems. Since no two learners have the same strengths and weaknesses, through collaboration, they can enhance their performance beyond individual levels of competence. Therefore, activities that foster interaction and help to construct collaborative knowledge are vital for language learning.

As such, during the last academic year, the first- and second-year courses of the Spanish Major programme have relied on online collaboration to engage students in collective writing tasks in which they helped each other not only to organise content and correct errors but also to achieve syntactical complexity and grammatical accuracy. Through collaborative writing, students were prompted to make suggestions and modify content in a participatory manner. Courses

were divided into small groups to carry out their work for about five weeks in the middle of the semester. This allowed students to carry out pre-writing and post-writing activities to identify any individual gains and improvement (Wang 2015; Bikowski and Vithanage 2016). The students in SPAN1001 completed two tasks using Wiki or Google Docs and SPAN2501 undertook four collaborative tasks using Wiki and Forum tools included in their OurVLE course container. Students were monitored in each Wiki and/or Google Docs task and the facilitator gave written suggestions. The groups started their work during a synchronous meeting through breakout-rooms in Zoom and, while they were discussing their theme and planning the outline for the task, the facilitator frequented the rooms in case they had doubts or further questions. The creative tasks involved were subtitling a short movie or cartoon using H5P and/or Aegisub, creating an antibullying campaign, writing a narrative text – storytelling or anecdote, designing a tourist leaflet together with a video presentation and a reflective essay on their learning process.

Each group was given one week to write and submit their draft. Once submitted, the instructor gave feedback regarding content, organisation, and grammar. Following Lee's (2010) suggestion, instructor assistance was kept to a minimum and global feedback was given to encourage scaffolding. The feedback included questions such as: When is the second conditional required? What does a doubt verb or a possibility require? Upon receiving feedback, students edited their drafts including teachers' suggestions which proved to be a positive exercise to make them reflect upon linguistic and structural elements. The activity involved discussion, dialogues, negotiating meaning over content, organisation and sequencing ideas, and language, that is, detecting grammar mistakes, syntax, and lexicon. Finally, the work was presented in class and was peer-reviewed. Eighty per cent of the final tasks showed an improvement in language accuracy and syntax, adequate lexicon, and content organisation. This was assessed on fluency, content, syntax, vocabulary, and grammar.

To determine whether the students had interacted and collaborated during the process, the facilitator had access to the Wiki pages and Google Docs – including discussions and editing, and could follow the interaction patterns. In general, there was a tendency for the stronger member of the group to take control of the project to earn a higher grade, while some other members remained passive. However, it was evident that each group member learnt from the collaboration and that they were able to reflect on this mode of learning.

Online reflection for socio-constructivist learning

Reflection is not just looking at the past but learning from it by bringing back knowledge and past experiences that lie deep and are taken for granted but not explicitly acknowledged. According to Helyer (2015), through reflection, we examine the past “to learn from what happened and perhaps not repeat mistakes” (15). On the other hand, reflection is also increasingly associated with *reflection on action* (Schön 1987), as “our thinking serves to reshape what we are doing while we are doing it” (26). Thus, it is important to promote students’ reflection throughout the learning process, encouraging them to establish connections between theory and practice, to identify the relationship between course materials, activities, and tools selected, etc. In this way, by writing online self-reflection, students are aware of their learning, while exploring their thoughts and feelings to produce and *revise* their own insights. Reflection, then, transforms experience into learning.

Once students understand such interconnections and recognise that they build their knowledge (Helyer 2015; Roberts 2008), they are better equipped for *learning to learn* (Villoria 2019). Indeed, reflection promotes self-assessment and anticipation of future actions and thus, increases students’ confidence and autonomy, making them responsible for their learning (Villoria 2019; Helyer 2015). According to Bridgestock (2014), *learning to learn* is a crucial skill, alongside accepting responsibility for one’s own learning and development. However, Cavilla (2017) reminds us that, unless it is planned, reflection may affect students’ affective levels but not necessarily cognitive ones. Thus, to be useful for academic performance, reflection needs to be structured and implemented deliberately throughout the course. Helyer (2015) maintains that structuring and embedding a reflective question into an activity is a good practice for future development. She states

Developing an ongoing ethos of reflection means that an individual begins to automatically challenge and question why tasks were undertaken in a certain way rather than how they were carried out, and they will become accomplished at recognizing that they are learning and building skills continuously; it is not a standalone process. (23)

Therefore, learning through reflective practice is essential to the overall process of learning as it provides several opportunities to explore new ways and methods

to enhance students' knowledge. If we consider the fact that foreign language skills are developed progressively, there are grounds for considering reflection as an essential tool to acquire linguistic knowledge. In addition, reflection is not solely an individual's mental process or form of internal problem-solving but a collective activity that helps individuals to redefine their knowledge and approaches to enhance their skills. Therefore, the content design for SPAN2501 and SPAN2502 has been revised to enable students to work together and make structural connections to understand how their knowledge transformed from one level to the next (Bloom 1956). The OurVLE course containers were organised in such a way that students could see their weekly progress, and gradually link grammar and lexical elements to social context. In addition, reflection was implemented in the course by incorporating explicit questions within activities and/or through specific tasks such as journals, portfolio, and collaborative reflective forums.

The students' diaries and their answers to reflective questions for each task showed that online and remote learning promote reflection and behaviour changes through self-directed revision of each portion of the assignment, interconnecting it to other portions of the course or the entire course. Through diaries, they expressed their own identity, evaluated their learning process, and elaborated on concepts they had learnt from the class. Indeed, journal or diary writing helps to develop an awareness of one's learning as it transfers inner speech into written text. In these diaries, Spanish language students from the courses mentioned that reflection helped them to identify the areas of weakness and seek clarification when it was needed. As a result of reflections, some students realised which methods best helped them to improve their learning. One student expressed an appreciation for reflection exercises at the end of most assignments because the explicit question allowed her to summarise what she learnt and how she had learnt it.⁷ In general, journals enabled them to look introspectively and identify which methods worked for them, while allowing them to make necessary changes to what did not. Through reflection other students became aware of their "fossilised errors" – those common grammar mistakes which have never been properly tackled and remain with us even when the use of language is fluent – and of those aspects of their practices that need to be "un-learned" or at least amended, as they were not helpful (Helyer 2015).

However, it is important that students' process of self-awareness takes place under the instructor's guidance. During asynchronous learning, learners are

not always able to identify the key elements of an assignment and they do not stop frequently to think about how the assignments are designed or the possible connection with other assignments and the course outcomes. As such, questions should be directed to ensure correct interpretation, and to generate debate and understanding of those key factors.

Moreover, students felt heard and understood as the suggestions they posted in the reflective collaborative forums were taken onboard and thus they became co-writers of the course. There were two reflective collaborative forums during the semester: the first in week 4 and a second one in week 10. The guided forum included a questionnaire that students answered in a joint manner and then each group shared their responses via the OurVLE Forum with the rest of the class, promoting deliberation. In this way, they had to share their ideas about learning: methods, strategies, practices, and activities. They also discussed their weaknesses and strengths and suggested additional tasks. For instance, they felt the amount of online work was overwhelming. The workload was, subsequently, reviewed and towards the last few weeks of the semester the amount of work for the asynchronous classrooms was slightly reduced. Several students also showed interest in the analysis of song lyrics and undertaking more group work. These suggestions were also taken on board and students designed an activity in H5P with their favourite Spanish/Latin American song. Each student chose the video of a Spanish song and created questions embedded in the video. The activity was later presented to the class and the colleagues had to answer the questions. Also, students used [lyricstraining.com](https://www.lyricstraining.com), a free platform to learn and improve foreign language skills through music videos and the lyrics of songs.

Sharing collective forums and reading what worked for others also helped them to progress and try new things. Indeed, reflection from a sociocultural perspective is developed through social interaction and semiotic mediation (Vygotsky 1978), and research suggests that it is most effective when reflection involves others, as the chance to collaborate and share ideas about new ways of operating enhances the learning process (Gray 2007). Therefore, although reflecting critically and sharing outcomes can be frightening and may cause feelings of vulnerability amongst those exposing their thoughts and feelings (Helyer 2015), adopting collaborative reflection offers multiple input and thus, improves students' performance and, consequently, satisfactory grades, which is one of the measurable outcome in any student learning process.

Gamification

Gamification has been used in both traditional and web-based teaching-learning contexts and there is a strong link between gamification and new technologies. Therefore, as the 21st century moves forward and education becomes more techno-oriented, gamification is being positioned as a key strategy in teaching and means of overcoming the challenges that the learner faces while pursuing fluency in foreign languages. Gamification not only applies game mechanics in non-game related contexts but also enhances language learning skills (Kapp 2012; Wood and Reiners 2012; Figueroa Flores 2015). The main objective is to increase participation and motivate users using game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and immediate feedback. Gamification mechanics include time limits, progression, feedback, clear goals, among others to increase participation, motivation, empowerment, and engagement.

Gamification has been implemented as a motivational tool and a form of formative assessment. According to Muntean (2011), game-based learning tackles both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, combining different strategies, elements, and experiences. While own achievement is an intrinsic motivation that improves engagement and autonomy, extrinsic motivation is achieved by using rewards, points, badges, etc. On the other hand, Graham (1984) states that gamification involves instrumental and integrative motivation, as it promotes retention and memory, cognitive organisation, and active and conscious focus on action upon events. Consequently, gamification positively influences students' behavioural patterns, habits, and emotions through problem solving. In addition, game-based tasks promote competition through social interaction.

Sailer, Helse, and Klevers (2013) identify six principal perspectives in motivation research that have been linked to gamification and can apply to foreign language learning: trait, behaviouristic learning, cognitive, self-determination, interest, and emotional. Each one of these characteristics enhances motivation for the learners. For example, the trait characteristic advances motives as individual experience such as achievement, need for power, and affiliation (McClelland 2009). Setting rules determines how to reach the goal and a timely feedback system provides information on the progress of each participant. On the other hand, game-based elements such as points, grades, badges, progress bar status, performance graphs, and leaderboards are explicit visual representations of achievements.

The Spanish courses SPAN1001-SPAN1002, SPAN2501 and SPAN2502 have

integrated game-based tasks into both tutorials and seminar classes to record students' progression as well as to facilitate students' achievement of course objectives. Using the OurVLE platform, teachers designed quizzes that provided immediate feedback. When the quiz was not designed as a graded assessment, students could make more than one attempt to record their progress. Students were also encouraged to use Kahoot amongst other platforms. Kahoot is a game-based platform where facilitators created a few quizzes for them, providing badges, reward points, and trophies. For instance, in Kahoot, the game elements were more obvious than in the quizzes used on OurVLE, as it provides badges, reward points, trophies, and allows educators to check the completion track, total logins, and frequency of visits to the platform.

Badges are an excellent tool for language learning because they improve participation and lower levels of anxiety and shyness while increasing confidence due to their ludic appearance. However, they cannot be used as a substitute for a graded assessment, just as games cannot substitute the goal of the language units; they may only improve it. Unfortunately, student motivation is triggered mostly by grades, forgetting sometimes the significance of the whole learning process. In any case, gamification has not been fully explored with the cohort groups to be able to make a full assessment.

Virtual Intercultural Exchange: Telecollaboration

In an interdependent world, facilitators need to expand the limits of students' mobility and expose them to a deeper understanding of intercultural challenges. Virtual Intercultural Exchange projects contribute to the development of learners' autonomy, linguistic accuracy, intercultural awareness, and digital literacies. O'Dowd (2017) defines it as "The application of online communication tools to bring together classes of learners in geographically distant locations to develop their foreign language skills, digital competence, and intercultural competence through online collaborative tasks and project work" (1).

Virtual Intercultural Exchange creates opportunities for (semi)authentic communication, meaningful and guided collaboration, and first-hand experience of working and learning with partners from other cultural backgrounds and contributes to internationalising university education. Consequently, Virtual Intercultural Exchange or Telecollaboration has become an essential tool for the development of students' intercultural awareness, and it is an alternative for those

who cannot engage in traditional physical mobility exchanges. Telecollaboration is especially useful in light of travel restrictions implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, there is a growing interest in Virtual Intercultural Exchange, not only to repair the lack of physical mobility but also to offer students the possibility to interact with international peers using their target foreign language. Some students in the cohort groups expressed a desire to interact with international partners and thus downloaded Tandem, where they can meet and chat with native Spanish speakers. However, a Virtual Intercultural Exchange cannot be compared to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), nor to social media groups where there are not educational purposes, nor sustained interaction. We cannot compare it with mobility or virtual mobility either since the latter does not have the same sustained pedagogy for interaction. Virtual Intercultural Exchange is a learner-centred approach that involves sustained learning and intensive interaction. It develops technology skills and is structured to foster a mutual understanding of the new culture. The University of the West Indies currently has an agreement of traditional foreign exchange with the Universidad de Valladolid, Spain, through the Erasmus + programme. However, this is for a very limited number of students and we need to find alternative options to provide students with the opportunity to internationalise while developing their ability to communicate successfully in intercultural contexts using technology in innovative ways.

Therefore, during the first semester of the academic year 2020/2021, an experimental modelling approach was undertaken together with students from the Universidad de Caldas, Colombia, to offer students from both universities the opportunity to take part in a virtual intercultural exchange project to take place during the following semester.⁸ Before its implementation, educators from both institutions met to plan and structure the exercise, create activities, and finalise the timetable. Then, instructors informed the SPAN2502 students of the possible Virtual Intercultural Exchange, and they were enthusiastic about the opportunity. The students were informed that, as in any intercultural collaboration, the project would require compromise, willingness to adapt, openness to cultural differences and understanding what is acceptable and what is not when interacting. Indeed, this will cause a slight change in behavioural attitudes to language learning which is a key component for success. To communicate with international partners, students will be using different apps and platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, etc. The teacher will be following such conversations and discussions to address

any possible issues as soon as possible. The project's approach has been enriched by gamification strategies to engage students intrinsically in the learning process and includes tasks to improve reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, as well as intercultural awareness and digital literacies (*see* endnotes for project development and results).⁹

Conclusion

Since education could not be halted due to the health crisis provoked by COVID-19, educators needed to identify ways to maintain quality teaching and learning outside of the traditional classroom setting. Indeed, moving towards ERT/online education requires a continuous review of our teaching and assessment practices and we must redesign courses including innovative instructional learning methods to create a learning experience that fosters language competence, learners' autonomy, interaction, collaboration, and cultural awareness.

Therefore, to adequately transition to ERT, institutions need to make sure internet access is available to each university member – students, and staff alike. Also imperative to the successful implementation of ERT are provisions for training teachers beyond technological skills to improve teaching and learning opportunities, maintain quality standards, design online assessments, and avoid creating any kind of social divide. According to Hampel and Stickler (2005), “preparing teachers for this learning system is essential, considering that efforts and the cost of creating materials online can be wasted without adequate training and support” (321). The implementation of ERT should take place in progressive phases, gradually motivating the students to access the courses, revise learning materials, and above all, collaborate, and interact with each other and their instructor.

The strategies and approaches adopted by the educators in the Spanish courses SPAN1001, SPAN1002, SPAN2501 and SPAN2502 during the last two semesters, and the current one, have been essentially student-centred and they have promoted participation guided by the synchronous presence of the educator. This presence was essential to ensure inclusion and build social interaction. In addition, collaborative practices have been central, and they have spurred the redesign of the course, both in synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes.

However, the results show that participation was not fully achieved in the first-year courses, SPAN1001 and SPAN1002. One possible reason is that the students did not know their peers and educator prior to the beginning of the course and so

a sense of community was more difficult to build. This was likely compounded by the fact that often, many students refused to switch on their cameras. Secondly, not all students were familiar with inverted classroom approaches and/or with the necessary autonomy required to work asynchronously. This resulted in a lack of real-time participation since many students did not do the preliminary work which led to a weak understanding of concepts and poor development of language skills. In addition, this affected the dynamics of the group although information was clear on the platform and tutors were constantly interacting and sharing information. Consequently, some first-year students felt lost.

On the other hand, second-year students benefited greatly from advantages of the online mode – that is, individualised and timely feedback, flexible times, availability of virtual class recordings, interactive activities, Wikis, etc. – and they adopted the changes easily. The highest evaluated comment was the timely individual feedback received and the way in which having it helped them to improve their writing skills. However, although asynchronous instruction has proved to be more flexible and gives more accessibility to the students, as it promotes critical thinking, reflection, and improves writing skills, many prefer working in real time sessions. Therefore, the balance between asynchronous and synchronous classrooms was appreciated by the students.

Furthermore, the focus on collaboration and reflection has been essential. Students from both first- and second-year groups positively evaluated the teamwork and the guided reflective tasks. The social process of writing allowed students to learn from each other, not only improving their writing skills but also their critical thinking. SPAN1001, SPAN1002, SPAN2501 and SPAN2502 students reached agreements and co-produced and co-authored the work, sharing weaknesses and strengths. Reflection, on the other hand, encouraged self-assessment and revision of what they had learnt and how they had learnt it. By doing it individually and collaboratively, always under the guidance of the instructor, they exchanged different strategies and methodologies and also gained an understanding of what they were learning and how.

Finally, the use of Virtual Intercultural Exchange (VIE) during the second semester 2020-2021, developed learners' autonomy, linguistic accuracy, intercultural awareness and digital literacy. In addition, the multimodal and socio-constructivist project, enriched by gamification, improved students' self-confidence. Indeed, the students of SPAN2502 stated that the timely feedback and the Virtual Intercultural Exchange were highly appreciated. This was not only stated in their

responses to the questionnaires but also observed in their class participation after the project.

In conclusion, this analysis calls for the continuous review of our own teaching practices and the redesign of instructional models that incorporate a broader use of technology while trying to provide practical alternatives to overcome possible challenges. If this is achieved, we will be better able to equip students of foreign languages with the necessary skills to perform successfully in a global context which very often presents unforeseen challenges such as those resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notes

1. During the ERT, we have employed a variety of online sources – apps, platforms, etc. These resources can be downloaded and installed on PC's and mobile phones:
 - Aegisup:** a free open-source cross-platform subtitle editing programme.
 - BBC:** a virtual classroom solution to power online teaching and video conferencing (a version is included within the OurVIE platform).
 - Canvas:** a course management system that supports online teaching and learning and allows posting of videos, texts, grades, assignments, etc.
 - Duolingo:** free language learning platform designed like a game.
 - Flipgrid:** a free education focused platform to create and share short videos and texts.
 - H5P:** a free open-source collaborative framework to create, share and reuse interactive content.
 - Kahoot:** a game-based learning platform.
 - Lyricstraining:** a free website to learn and improve foreign language skills through music videos and song lyrics. It also has a special karaoke function that allows users to sing and enjoy while learning.
 - Mentimeter:** software to create interactive presentations, lectures, and workshops.
 - Padlet:** A web app that allows users access to content and post notes on a digital wall including images, links, and videos. It is available for almost any internet device.
 - Pickerwheel:** an online resource for teaching that allows for random choices, etc.
 - Tandem:** free language exchange application to find online a target native language speaking partner.
 - Zoom:** a cloud-based video conferencing service you can use to meet virtually with others.

2. In an ideal world, online courses should be developed and delivered under the peer review of a group involving educators, instructors, designers, e-learning media developers, and graphic designers, which means a considerable institutional investment. In ERT, most of the courses are designed, developed and delivered by the teacher, who has been left without a team of support. Thus, institutions should be aware of the teacher's role in such critical times.
3. Easton divides these skills into six categories: interaction – involving discussions, timely feedback, peer learning, advice, and counsel – management – monitor, evaluate, performance, allow presentations, support services, etc. –, organization – set clear learning outcomes, objectives, rubrics, organize materials and activities, identify learning styles, needs, present materials, and activities, etc. – technological competent manner use – content matter and teamwork technical, support and collaboration with a team.
- 4.

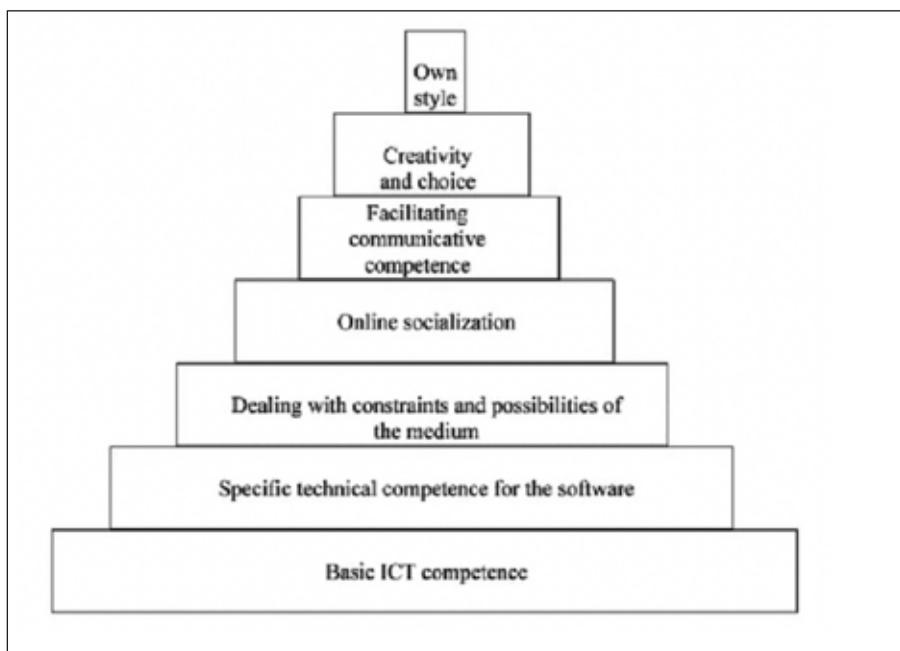


Figure. Skills pyramid (Hampel and Stickler 2005)

Hampel and Stickler divide the teacher levels, identifying the skills for each group – technological skills, pedagogical skills, and evaluation skills. However, their pyramid of skills from lower to higher levels seems too strict as many of the abilities overlap across levels.

5. Proposed assessment scheme for courses SPAN1001-1002 and SPAN2501-2502 online to be changed from 50% coursework and 50% examination to 100% formative assessment and accumulative assessment.

<p>SPAN1001-1002 Language IA–B</p>	<p>In-Course (60%): 10% x 2 In-course quizzes including reading comprehension tasks, grammar, and essay writing. This takes the form of multiple choice, embedded answers, true/false, short answers, and essay writing. In-course Listening comprehension quiz (5%) In-course oral practice via Zoom. BBC or WhatsApp as alternative (5%) Coursework: Reflective diary, interactive activities and/or Collaborative writing Wiki/Google Doc/Blog (10%). Individual oral test via Zoom/ BBC/WhatsApp: (15%)</p>	<p>Final Assessment (40%): Listening Comprehension Quiz (audio or video authentic material) Delivered in OurVLE container as quiz with multiple choice, short answers, True/false (15%) Written and Oral Assessment (25%) Listening Quizzes to be completed within 45 minutes once opened. Written examination to be completed within 2 hours will be open for a period of 24 hours (48 hours on certain occasions) and 5 minutes oral questions.</p>
<p>SPAN2501-2502 Spanish Language 2A–B</p>	<p>In-course (60%): Course work 10%. This may include: Blogs, Audiovisual presentations, Collaborative writing, portfolio, reflective diary and/or interactive activities. Telecollaboration project: 10% Reading comprehension quiz 15%. In-course listening comprehension quiz 5% In-course oral presentation/podcast 5% Final in-course oral expression synchronous 15%</p>	<p>Final assessment (40%): Listening Comprehension quiz 15%. The final assessment has written and oral component. Comparative grammar quiz 10%, written essay 10% and oral component 5%. Time limits to submit in-course quiz and essay: one (1) hour and thirty (30) minutes. Open for 2 days. Listening quizzes opened for 24 hours to complete and to be submitted between 20 and 45 minutes. Written final assessment open for two (2) days and submitted within 2 hours and the oral components via Zoom or WhatsApp in allocated times (10 minutes) within 3 days.</p>

6. The courses SPAN1001- SPAN1002 objectives are comparable with CEFR B1 level. The functional and linguistic aims set for SPAN2501-2502 are comparable with CEFR B2 level.
7. The main ideas conveyed by students through the reflective diaries included:
 - A feeling that their point of view was acknowledged.
 - The feedback was provided in a timely manner.
 - They could identify concepts learned and they could apply knowledge.
 - Reflection helped them to clarify concepts.

8. The project has been an initiative undertaken by individual facilitators. In this case, Dr. Maite Villoria, coordinator of the Spanish Section at DMLL and coordinator of the courses, has been working together with Miss Vanessa Arias (MA student at the University of Barcelona, to implement virtual intercultural exchange. The project will connect 12 UWI students of second year Spanish Language SPAN2502 with their international partners, four (4) Spanish as Foreign Language (ELE – Español como Lengua Extranjera) at the Universidad de Caldas, Colombia. The Project is part of a Master’s Research Thesis (Trabajo de Final de Grado in ELE (Formación de Profesores de Español como Lengua Extranjera) at Universidad de Barcelona, Spain.
9. To prepare for the telecollaboration, teachers from both universities were in regular communication for over a month to structure the project which involves four synchronous two-hour meetings and activities covering reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills as well as critical thinking and intercultural awareness. The project, *Cross-cultural stereotypes*, was designed by Miss Vanessa Arias, MA student of ELE at the University of Barcelona, and currently associated with the Universidad de Caldas and Dr. Maite Villoria, Lecturer of Spanish at the University of the West Indies. The schedule follows three steps:

First step: “Getting to know you”. This is an introductory phase in which students will be exchanging personal information. This is a conversational encounter in which there is little negotiation of meaning.

Before their first meeting, students will receive a questionnaire in which they will be asked about their motivations to learn a foreign language and what they expect from this exercise. In the same communication, there will be the project scheme, information about the first activity, instructions on the apps to be used, and the assigned group for each student.

Activity 1: Each student will elaborate a two to three (2-3) minute video presentation using *Flipgrid* in which they will introduce themselves – name, age, degree course, and reason(s) for studying Spanish – and identify three (3) aspects of Colombian culture. The video will be available to all students, and each student is required to watch at least the videos uploaded by the members of their group.

Students would have all videos uploaded before the first meeting. During the first synchronous two-hour meeting in Zoom, students will introduce each other and meet their international partners. Then, in groups of four (4) students, Jamaican and Colombian, they are placed in a breakout room to carry out guided activities using Spanish to communicate.

Activity 2: Via *Padlet* they will read a journal article about Eddie White, an Australian artist who drew stereotypical images of women from Medellin (Colombia). They will comment on the article in *Padlet* columns next to the text and their comments will be available to the whole group, opening a written debate in which

they would write on questions such as: why were Colombian women upset about the drawing? Etc.

Activity 3: Through Kahoot, students will play True/False games designed by the teachers in which they will be asked about Colombian culture – Colombian students will be giving their feedback to the game and they will comment on possible misconceptions.

Activity 4: (only Jamaican students) The previous activity will lead to their individual and asynchronous assignment – written 300 words essay in *Padlet* on how their previous views have been challenged, what other aspects they have learned about Colombian culture and identity, their opinion on stereotypes. The essays will be peer reviewed and they will also receive comments from Dr. Villoria.

Second step: “Comparative analyses”. In this second phase, the information shared will go a step further and students will be comparing and analyzing cultural products of their own cultures – music, food, folklore and traditions, newspapers, stereotypes, etc. This task will require providing their partners with explanations of the cultural significance of certain cultural products and practices – stereotypes in this case, engaging in a dialogue to establish similarities or differences between the two cultures.

To achieve the second step all students will meet two hours synchronously for a second time via Zoom, synchronously to be divided into their small groups.

Activity 5: Jamaican students will link the perspectives seen previously about stereotypes to their country, asking Colombian students to identify aspects of the Jamaican culture and explain how Jamaica is perceived abroad. Jamaican students will respond in Spanish, challenging stereotypes, and giving cultural information.

Activity 6: Using Spanish Jamaican students will describe Colombia using 3 words and vice versa, and responses will be analyzed through *Mentimeter*. The teacher will analyze the responses and the map will show whether changes in perspective have taken place.

Activity 7: Students will play *Pickerwheel* with 5 questions about Jamaica – what it means to be Jamaican, characteristics that define you as Jamaican, etc.

Activity 8: (only Colombian students) write an individual 300 words essay on one of the aspects they have learned about Jamaica. The meetings are monitored by Vanessa Arias and Maite Villoria, who will be entering the breakout rooms on Zoom.

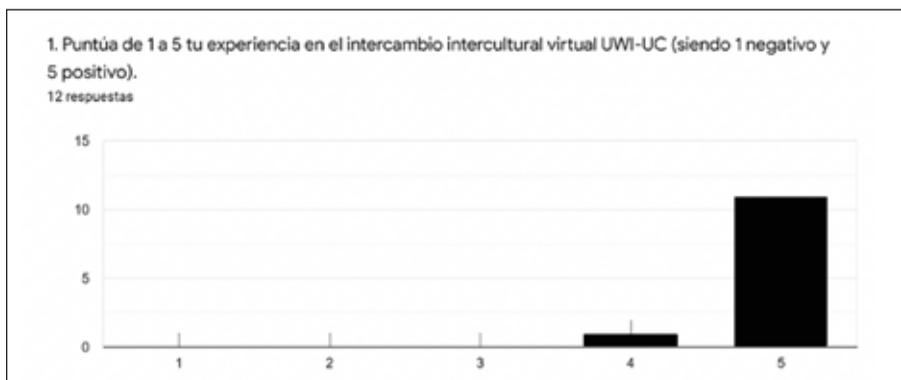
Third and Final step: “Collaborative product”. In this last phase, students will work together with their international partners to develop a project or create an activity in which they have to share and compare information as well as co-produce a video presentation, blog, podcast, etc. The project findings will be presented orally to the class and also in writing.

During the third synchronous two-hour meeting, students will work together to produce a final video presentation which will be presented in the fourth and last

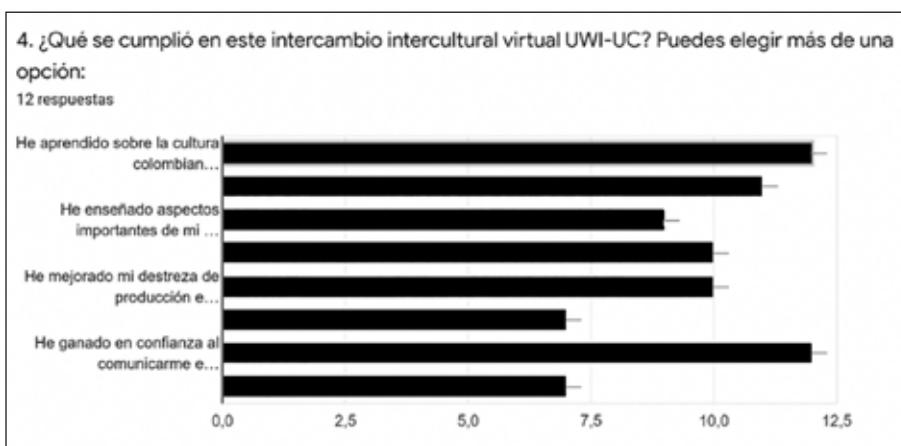
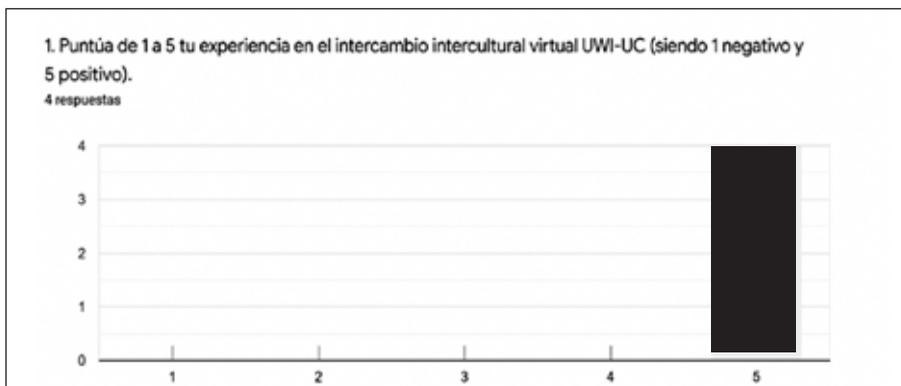
meeting. Students will share their views on the virtual intercultural exchange and complete a final questionnaire.

Having finalised the task, the results of the questionnaires (12/12) are as follows:

Jamaican Students



Colombian Students



Students' answers stated that they would repeat the experience as they had not only gained self-confidence but also improved their oral and writing skills as well as digital competence. Amongst their comments it was stated that they valued the experience of learning the language within its context and the awareness of the need to learn the culture as it is the cradle of the language. They also pointed out that they have learned to debunk stereotypes and generalisations. Another positive aspect of the intercultural collaboration has been the interaction. All students would recommend this learning approach.

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