

A study of Spanish students and their sociocultural perceptions

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Una línea de investigaciones interculturales ha sido desarrollada en el Departamento de Lingüística Aplicada, CELE, UNAM, para estudiar la relación entre la cultura y el lenguaje. Estudios a largo plazo de percepciones socioculturales fueron llevadas a cabo con alumnos y maestros de inglés, con el fin de explorar creencias profundas acerca de la naturaleza de la cultura y su relación con el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras (Chasan y Ryan, 1995; Chasan, Mallén y Ryan, 1997; y Ryan, 1994; 1996).

Los resultados de estos estudios con alumnos de inglés han propiciado estudios con alumnos del español en una universidad rural en los Estados Unidos. El propósito de este artículo es reportar acerca de algunos hallazgos de las investigaciones en el estado de Pennsylvania, así como las investigaciones anteriores. Algunas sugerencias para investigaciones a futuro están incluidas.

A line of intercultural research has been developed in the Department of Applied Linguistics, CELE, UNAM, to study the relationship of culture and language. Long term studies of sociocultural perceptions were carried out with students and teachers of English to explore in depth beliefs about the nature of culture and its relationship to foreign language learning (Chasan & Ryan, 1995; Chasan, Mallen & Ryan, 1997; and Ryan, 1994; 1996).

The results of these studies with English students have led to a study of Spanish students in a rural university in the United States. The purpose of this article is to report on findings of this research in the state of Pennsylvania as well the research leading up to it. Some suggestions for future research are included.

Introduction

An assumption in foreign language instruction is that culture plays a prominent role and that this role needs to be understood. The learner and his language acquisition are scrutinized carefully to gain insights into what occurs as he or she experiences cultural aspects of the new language. Issues of cultural context (Kramersch, 1993; Kramersch & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) and the sociocultural perceptions of students and teachers are being actively discussed in the literature (Lessard-Clouston, 1996a; 1996b; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996).

One of the concerns is the reaction of the learner embedded in his home culture to the target cultures of the language being acquired. The learner and his or her culture have been conceptualized in great detail in educational, anthropological and linguistic literature (See, for example, Burtonwood, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Wolcott, 1991 to mention a few). Numerous approaches, with theoretical models, procedures and solutions for handling of cultural aspects also have been proposed in the literature (Note Barro, Grimm, Morgan & Roberts, 1993; Byram, Esarte-Sarries & Taylor, 1991; Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984; Lee Zoreda, 1997; Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996; and Seelye, 1976). Out of discussions such as these have emerged cultural approaches that recognize the process the learner becomes involved in as he or she comes into contact with a new language and new cultures. These processes are conceptualized differently depending on the focus of research and frequently referred to in the literature as a “decentering” of the self, a “dissociation” from one’s culture or the reaching of a “third place” or a “third culture”.

The process, according to Kramersch (1993), drives experiences with new languages and cultures. It brings the familiarity of native culture into contact with unexpected meanings in the target culture. Meanings associated with one’s everyday life and taken for granted are challenged. She argues that learners construct their personal meanings at the boundaries between native speakers’ meanings and their own. In her comprehensive study of the dialect of meaning production, the potential for success of communicative approaches to language learning lies in this struggle with its pleasure, discomfort and feelings of power for the learner. This struggle engages the learner in the dialect of meaning production, instead of accepting ready-made meanings learners find and express personal meanings.

She uses three frames—social, educational and political—to explain how the “third culture” can be handled in foreign language pedagogy. The language classroom is the “site of intersection of a multiple world of discourses”. Kramersch argues that the “third culture” is a conceptual space, with the language classroom as the site of intersection of these multiple worlds. The “third culture” helps in understanding resistance among language learners to assimilation by the target culture and makes interaction with the target culture cognitive-boundary crossing.

Others, including Byram and his colleagues (1989; 1991), have also found a “third culture”. They too have pointed to a disaccord between native cultures and target cul-

tures and find the student involved in a dialectical process, producing new schemas and a “third culture”. These schemas are created while experiencing other cultures and give an impetus to decentering one self from existing cultural knowledge acquired inside and outside of the classroom (See Byram’s model of cultural information present in the foreign language classroom, 1989:168). Their ultimate aim is cultural experience and awareness as well as language learning and awareness (See also the model for foreign language education, 1989:138).

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) follow a position of diversity in language education exploring person-perception theory (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954) and anthropological hermeneutic techniques (Geertz 1973) with learners as ethnographers. For them, the metaphorical use of the color “purple” captures the synthesis of the home and target cultures. It is the productive, cognitive, perceptual and affective space that is born of cross-cultural contact. It is created when the learner is aware of his or her own “blue” lens and the recognition of the “red” lens of a person of another culture. Neither person can escape his/her lens, but each can overlap to produce a “purple” to create better understanding of the different perspectives and shared meanings.

Teachers and their sociocultural perceptions are beginning to be looked at as they relate to this “decentering”. How do their perceptions enter into the equation that defines the “third place”? Adamowski’s (1991) case study in Toronto, Canada, looked closely at teachers’ ways of perceiving culture and their roles in teaching it. Teachers were surveyed about their role and their interpretations analyzed. Lessard-Clouston’s (1996a) study looked at another EFL site in China and corroborated Adamowski’s finding that teachers gave very broad definitions of culture, including all aspects of daily life, and when asked about language teaching say that they teach culture in their classes either explicitly or implicitly. Both Adamowski, Lessard-Clouston and Byram call for further research into teachers’ beliefs in other international settings and set forth areas needing research (1996b).

I would like to argue that the student might never move to the “third place” because of the effect of their perceptions and those of their teachers. Sociocultural perceptions are an important element involved in a process of decentering especially in a language such as English.(1) They involve concepts, views, beliefs and thinking about cultures of the speakers of the language being studied and experienced during classroom instruction. They may encourage or block student handling of cultural information and learning of the language. That is, the meaning of language in its cultural context can be obstructed. It might be said that for the student to arrive at the “third place” means he is receptive to developing intercultural competence.

Intercultural studies

A series of studies, part of a line of intercultural research carried at the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras (CELE) have examined students’ and teachers’ thinking

about culture and foreign language learning. (2) They have begun to question goal-setting postures of institutions and teachers themselves. Questions are being asked such as: What are students' and teachers' sociocultural perceptions? How do they perceive of the nature of culture in foreign language learning? What are students' attitudes and interests toward learning about cultures of English-speakers? What cultural aspects interest them? What are teachers' perceptions of student interest?

Teachers perceptions about the nature of culture and its relationship to classroom instruction were looked at first in a long term case study with teachers of English (Ryan, 1994; 1996). The results of this study led to a survey of students and their attitudes toward English-speakers and their cultures (Chasan & Ryan, 1995), and later to a close examination of their perceptions of culture and language (Chasan, Mallen & Ryan, 1997).

This article reports on an extension of the sociocultural perceptions to a university settings where Spanish is taught as a foreign language to compare the results with those of students in our previous research. The purpose of this article is two fold: 1.) to summarize the intercultural line of research and 2.) to report on the findings of the study with students of Spanish in a large rural university in the state of Pennsylvania in the United States. Finally, the article will explore the findings of previous studies that led to this study to gain insight into aspects of the social context of foreign language learners that impact curriculum. It will also suggest areas for future research.

A study of teachers' sociocultural perceptions (1994)

The first study (Ryan, 1994) was designed to investigate the ways in which foreign language teachers, specifically university English teachers, perceive the nature of culture and the relationship of these perceptions to behavior involving instructional tasks in the teaching of EFL. An assumption of the study was that a relationship exists between teachers' notions of culture, their consideration of culture as a component of language teaching, and their actual classroom teaching. The aim was to observe the relationship between teachers' perceptions of culture and what occurs as they teach.

The study examined teachers' concepts, notions, ideas and beliefs about culture affecting pedagogical handling of culture in the classroom; it found that teachers had different definitions, concepts and underlying assumptions about culture. Metaphors provided a useful visual image to represent highly personal views, the elusiveness of cultural concepts, and a framework for discussion (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Kovecses, 1987, Ryan 1996).

It was found that teachers' beliefs about culture were closely related to student involvement in developing cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic competence. A curious finding emerging from this study was that when teacher beliefs about the nature of culture were compared with their instructional behavior, especially teacher/student verbal interaction, a mismatch appeared between teachers' perceptions and instructional behavior related to sociocultural aspects of language. For example, during interviews an

English teacher of non-Mexican origin (a native English speaker) strongly supported bringing cultural information into foreign language teaching, emphasizing that “culture is lived and experienced.” This teacher revealed many anecdotal sociocultural experiences with great detail and intensity. However, as observed in the classroom, the teacher demonstrated his linguistic training, remaining highly focused on such aspects of English. In subsequent case studies of teachers (three of Mexican origin and three of non-Mexican origin) this dichotomy continued to appear between the teachers’ handling of sociocultural aspects and linguistic aspects.

In short, this study of teachers’ beliefs about the nature of culture and their language teaching revealed a difference between what teachers assume they are doing—bringing cultural aspects into their instruction—and their classroom interaction with students. Moreover, when cultural information appeared during instruction and teacher/student verbal interaction, it was minimal, appeared spontaneously and was sporadic.

A study of student attitudes toward cultures (1995)

One of the results of Ryan’s 1994 study of teachers led to exploring student attitudes. It was pointed out by some teachers in the case study that students are concerned about cultural imperialism and that they study English for instrumental reasons. We decided to follow further this belief to see if the students also expressed these attitudes. Therefore, we designed a survey of interests and attitudes toward cultures of native speakers of English. Several areas were looked at: direct and indirect contact with English-speaking cultures, the influence of the mass media, attitudes toward North Americans and other countries where English is spoken, as well as general interests in other cultures. Over 550 students in university basic language courses in the UNAM, ENEP Acatlán and UAM Iztapalapa answered questionnaires designed to explore these areas.

Considering the historic, economic and political relations between Mexico and the United States, various factors were considered including historical tensions, sensitivities toward native English speakers, the importance and influence of the geographical proximity of Mexico and the United States, beliefs attaching social mobility and professional opportunities to the study of English in university settings.

Out of the total number of students surveyed a small percentage (less than 1%) had had direct contact with people of English-speaking countries. This percentage of students expressed negative attitudes toward the United States, but not toward other countries where English is spoken (such as Canada and Australia). At the same time, the great majority of all the students considered knowledge of other cultures an important goal of language learning. The primary sources of cultural information for these students included indirect contact with friends and family that had travelled or visited English-speaking countries, and the mass media.

Although the majority of the students’ perceptions were negative toward the United States but not toward other English-speaking countries, both men and women stated that

they considered it important to acquire a knowledge of other cultures when learning a foreign language. They were interested in learning English for more than utilitarian purposes. While the university department tended to assume that students primarily learned English for instrumental reasons (Lambert, Gardner, Olton & Tumstall, 1968; see also Buck, 1984), in questioning all participants in the study to see if they wanted to learn about the cultures of English-speakers, it was discovered that student interest went beyond functional aims for language to general interest in customs, traditions, literature, social issues, history, music and the arts. In fact, student interest was greater in areas such as these than in general academic areas (for example, the sciences) or in trends, sports and politics. Yet, while they expressed interest in a variety of areas, they also stated that they believed they “were being forced” to study English and were concerned about the effect of “cultural penetration” and “cultural imperialism” on them. *U.S. intervention in other countries* and *attitudes toward Mexican immigrants and workers in the United States* were topics rated very negatively in questionnaires and interviews. More than half of the participants said such attitudes “infuriated” them.

A study of students' sociocultural perceptions (1997)

The purpose of this research (Chasan, Mallén & Ryan, 1997) was to study in depth students' perceptions of the nature of culture and its presence in language learning experiences. It was guided by such questions as: How do students define culture? How do they perceive of culture in relation to language learning?

A constructivist inquiry paradigm (Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller & O'Connor, 1993), using the survey results of an earlier study (Chasan & Ryan, 1995), guided the formulation of “grand tour” questions for use with focus groups (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1993; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). The purpose of the study called for a design that would draw out detailed data about how students think about or conceptualize the nature of culture. This technique explored a defined area of student thinking and permitted the researchers to represent it from the students' point of view. Participants shared their ideas with a moderator in each session.

A model was proposed to represent evolving discourse with the moderator and eight focus groups. Patterns of students' perceptions emerged in each of the three areas studied—language, culture and foreign language learning. For example, when talking about foreign language learning there were two patterns: 1. culture is explicitly taught and 2. culture is acquired through personal experiences while learning a foreign language. This model represents the lenses with which students view culture in these three areas.

Several findings in this study confirmed those of previous research that English language learning was guided by utilitarian goals (or instrumental goals), that cultural information consisted of isolated bits of information, stereotypical aspects of cultures, and concern about cultural imperialism.

Students expressed a concern for ideological penetration in their lives and their language courses, and at the same time acknowledged a lack of cultural knowledge about English-speaking cultures. They were also concerned about the sharing of cultural knowledge and experiences during classroom instruction. They found English teachers and students unwilling to “*open spaces*” (that is, to introduce or volunteer such information.) In other foreign language classes in CELE they had experienced the opposite.

A study of Spanish students’ sociocultural perceptions (1997)

The previously mentioned studies have raised the question of whether similar findings would occur when the language studied is Spanish and the country of origin, the United States. Would students learning Spanish in the United States have interests and attitudes similar to or very different from those found in Mexico where English is studied as an international language or lingua franca? In addition, what would be teachers’ assumptions about their students’ interests and attitudes toward native speakers of Spanish? Whereas students learning English as a Foreign Language are often strongly driven by an academic need to perform in an international language and influenced by attitudes of cultural imperialism, students learning Spanish at a university in Pennsylvania presented a learning environment with a very different social context.

This discussion will follow the research with Spanish students and their teachers and consider the participants, design of the study, findings and implications. The purpose of the study is to probe students’ interests in the cultures of Spanish speakers and explore teachers assumptions about these interests.

Participants

The majority of the university students at the study site are residents of the state of Pennsylvania from both small and large cities (such as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia). They study languages for a variety of reasons, ranging from fulfilling foreign language requirements for graduation to personal reasons. Their interests in language study are related to several factors: the rural setting of the university that draws students from around the state as well as the conservative political atmosphere in the state; the lack of travel and exposure to cultural groups other than their own; their age as young adults; professional goals; desires to interact ethnolinguistically with groups; their awareness of the need to be fluent in Spanish in the international business community; and curiosity about other people.

Research design

Of considerable importance to the study was the formation of a research plan that would provide students with the opportunity to express themselves about sociocultural aspects

of language learning and teachers the opportunity to react to the views expressed by the students. Ethnographic techniques, participant observation and interviews, as well as survey questionnaires were selected to provide thick description data for analysis and interpretation of patterns of thinking as well as social behavior (See the long term research of Byram, 1989; Byram, Esarte-Sarries & Taylor, 1991; and Holliday, 1995 and the use of ethnographic techniques in Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Spradley, 1979, 1980.)

There were three phases to the study. The first phase (*Pre-questionnaire*) consisted of formal and informal interviews with Spanish instructors, followed by classroom participant observations of the five Spanish language classes (elementary, intermediate and advanced). This phase included obtaining teacher/student and university consent to participate in the study. The second phase (*data collection*) involved observations, interviews and questionnaires. The third phase (*Post-questionnaire*) involved data analysis, presentation of results to teachers and teacher interviews about the results. Triangulation of data sources took place during this phase.

During the semester of university language study 100 students (34 men and 64 women), ages 17 to 31, from Elementary Spanish 1 and 2, Intermediate Spanish, and Intermediate Grammar and Composition were observed and answered a questionnaire about their cultural and linguistic interests. It contained multiple choice, open-ended questions, and Lickert rating scales.

In discussing the study we will relate the findings of the questionnaire to three areas: student language learning, student cultural interest and knowledge, teachers and cultural knowledge. The results of teacher post-questionnaire interviews will also be discussed.

Results

Language Learning

Purpose and reason for learning a foreign language

In the questionnaire the students were asked: “*What does learning a foreign language mean to you?*” Their responses to this question fell into four general patterns. In the first, *a desire to communicate with people of other cultures*, students made comments such as:

It is important to learn Spanish because of the growing number of non-English people immigrating to the U. S. today.

It means grasping the ability to communicate with others who do not know your native language.

It means being able to communicate with large percentages of the U. S. population.

It means being able to communicate with other cultures.

A chance to communicate and learn about a country other than my own. In the second, *a practical use for the language*, students based their responses on personal experiences. They wrote statements such as:

Spanish is the most practical language to learn, being American.

Learning a language means being able to communicate with my future in-laws.

It means being able to better understand my girl friend's culture and being more open to the ideas of other people.

It gives you an added edge in the business world. It helps my career in a bilingual nation.

In the third, *enjoyment*, their comments were very positive:

I adore other languages.

It is a great sense of pride and joy to speak with others in their language.

In the last, *a language requirement*, students mentioned the negative aspect they associated with learning a language. They wrote:

I don't like it; I need it for a major.

I spend a lot of time on it because it's difficult for me and because it's a language requirement for my major.

Considering the fact that the university often requires students to study a language for three semesters in order to graduate, it is surprising that only three out of the 120 students taking the questionnaire mentioned this requirement. On the other hand, teachers, in contrast, frequently pointed out in interviews that their students were studying Spanish because it fulfilled a foreign language requirement.

Reasons for studying Spanish

The reasons mentioned for selecting Spanish as a language to study at the university can be grouped as linguistic, professional and personal. These reasons are listed below:

Professional goals and greater job opportunities related to being bilingual,

Linguistic needs to communicate with Spanish-speakers,

Personal interest,

A desire to expand linguistic and communicative abilities,

Enjoyment,

Communication with relatives,

Interest in becoming fluent in the language,
 Application of Spanish to their future careers,
 Desire to visit a Spanish-speaking country, and
 Future goals including teaching Spanish.

Other languages studied

When asked if they learned a language at home other than English and what it was, they responded differently according to their level.

Table 1: list these languages:

<i>Elementary</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Advanced</i>
French	Croatian	Spanish
Indonesian	Hebrew	French
German	Greek	
Armenian	Chinese	
Indian		

Spanish was only mentioned by a student in the intermediate grammar and composition course.

Language learning skills

The students tended to view their oral and reading skills as positive, whereas they recognized their writing skills required much effort. Table 2 represents these responses by percentages:

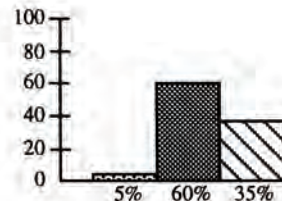
HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE YOUR ABILITY IN SPANISH?

1) *TO READ AN ACADEMIC ARTICLE*

I understand almost all the information in the article especially when the content is related to my academic major (5%).

I understand the general idea and the content of the article (60%).

I can translate the article but often need to use the dictionary (35%).

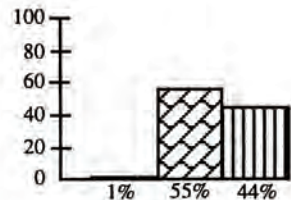


2) TO WRITE A LETTER

It would be an activity almost impossible to achieve (1%).

I could do it but it would take a lot of time and I would need some help (55%)

I could do it reasonably well with a minimum of difficulty (44%).



3) TO SPEAK

I don't have any problems expressing my ideas (5%).

I can express my ideas but with hesitation (84%).

I have serious difficulty in expressing my ideas (11%).

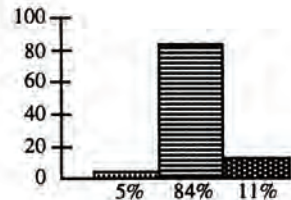


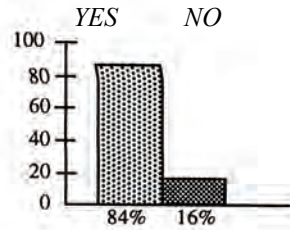
Table 2: Student characterization of reading, writing and oral skills in Spanish

Direct / indirect culture contact

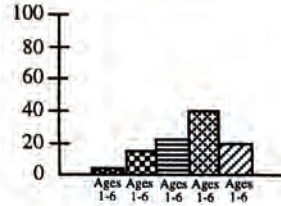
Contact with Spanish-speakers and their cultures occurred directly and indirectly. Eighty-four percent of the students in the study reported having had direct contact with Spanish speakers either in the United States or in other countries. The ages when this contact first occurred varied (See Table 3). Only 1% had lived in Spanish-speaking countries while a greater percentage had traveled to one (29%). When asked if they had friends who had traveled to Spanish-speaking countries, 33% said that they did and that they had discussed their experiences with them. Forty-three percent indicated that they had at some time had Spanish-speaking visitors in their homes.

In addition to contact with Spanish speakers, students had indirect cultural contact through the mass media. However, of the total programs students watched only 20% were programs in Spanish. The total number of student responses to the types of programs watched included: news (62), movies (66), sitcoms (63), soap operas (31), and sports (41). (Students could indicate more than one area.)

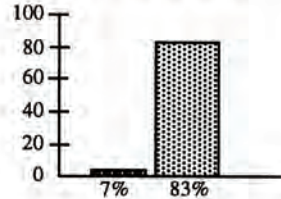
1.) Have you had contact with Spanish speakers either in the United States or abroad? (84% 16%)



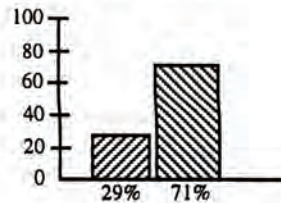
2.) How old were you when you first had such contact?
 ages 1-6 = 5%
 ages 7-12 = 16%
 ages 13-15 = 21%
 ages 16-18 = 38%
 ages 19 or above = 20%



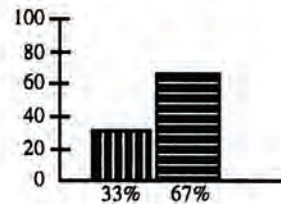
3.) Have you lived in a country outside of the United States? (7% 83%)



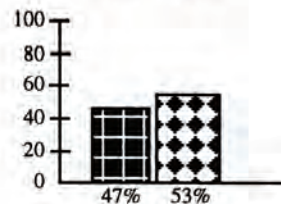
4.) Have you traveled to a Spanish speaking country? (29% 71%)



5.) Do you have friends who have traveled to Spanish-speaking countries? (33% 67%)



6.) Have members of your family lived outside of the United States? (47% 53%)



7.) *Have you had anyone visiting from a foreign country in your home?*
(43% 57%)

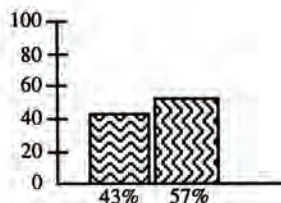


Table 3: Student direct/indirect contact with Spanish-speakers and their cultures

Cultural interest and knowledge

Interest in Spanish-speakers

A hypothetical question was presented in the questionnaire given to the students. They were told to imagine that they met someone from a Spanish-speaking country, that they wanted to learn about this person's country and were to rate their interest in relation to a list of 26 topics as no interest (1), little (2), moderate (3), considerable (4), and tremendous (5).

The responses of the male and female students were compared to reveal any difference in the intensity of their interest when it was considerable or tremendous. Table 4 below shows a similarity between male/female interest on the majority of the topics. The female interest peaked at *university life, fashions and trends* and *role of women*, and the men at *popular outdoor sports* and *what sports are popular*.

The questionnaire results were presented to each teacher individually. When the five teachers were interviewed about the results, they expressed little surprise about the first two topics ("*What someone likes to do on weekends*" and "*What types of parties are given*"). They characterized their students as ones who enjoyed university fraternity and sorority life on campus, parties, drinking and attending sports events such as football.

Obviously it looks like they are not interested in very deep information about culture. They are looking at very superficial things. I suppose that is not surprising but I thought there would be something somewhat more substantive than *what they would like to do on weekends or parties given*. I thought they would like to know more social things, more general things than just parties or what they think of Americans, but they don't, it seems.

The students are very young.. .at least the ones I had last semester. And Pennsylvanians are pretty, pretty conservative. Maybe that's something important to them. That is, the values that they have.

One of the five teachers commented about slang *expressions in Spanish*. She said she let them ask her after class about any expressions they would like to know. The teachers from Panama, Spain and Colombia were not surprised by the lack of interest in *what was occurring politically* or *political dissent*. They contrasted these students with ones in their respective countries where political dissent is actively present in university life.

Table 4: Cultural topics related to Spanish-speakers: Student interest ratings

Topics:	standard dev.		means		difference x - x I
	male	female	male	female	
What someone likes to do on weekends	.55	.52	4.18	4.32	.14
What types of parties are given	.27	.56	4.0	4.13	.13
How interested they are in Americans	.80	.61	3.8	3.95	.15
What they think of Americans	.64	.56	4.1	4.1	0
University life	.63	.64	3.6	4.15	.55
Values people have	.82	.45	3.59	3.97	.38
Slang expressions in Spanish	.80	.79	4.02	3.67	.35
Fashions and trends	.89	.72	3.32	3.91	.68
The role of women	.71	.58	2.98	4.03	1.05
Daily routines	.77	.63	3.57	3.68	.11
Social issues	.75	.67	3.5	3.79	.29
National food and festivals	.80	.69	3.64	3.87	.23
The drinking age	1.14	1.05	3.3	3.26	.04
Which rock stars are the most popular	.81	.82	3.34	3.58	.24
How motivated university students are to study English	.80	.81	3.26	3.54	.28
Jokes	.93	.76	3.5	3.2	.3
Ideology	.76	.80	3.35	3.61	.26
The place of English in their daily lives	.70	.76	3.25	3.58	.33
What sports are popular	.68	.65	4.0	2.97	1.03
The university system	.73	.78	3.32	3.27	.05
What is occurring politically	.80	.62	3.18	3.14	.04
Religious beliefs	1.00	.90	2.86	3.28	.42
The business world	.99	.77	3.27	3.18	.09
Famous literature	.98	.79	2.64	3.01	.37
Political dissent	.84	.83	2.95	2.97	.02
Popular outdoor sports	.74	.71	3.90	3.23	.67

Student interest in Spanish-speaking countries

Students were asked to rate countries where Spanish is spoken by the interest these countries held for them. Their choices ranged from “no interest” to “tremendous interest”. Spain held “tremendous interest”, almost twice the percentages of Puerto Rico and Mexico. However, in combining “considerable interest” with “tremendous interest” Spain, Mexico and Puerto Rico (in that order) were very close. Table 5 represents the sequence of rating and the percentage for each country.

Table 5: Student interest ratings of Spanish-speaking countries

<i>Tremendous Interest:</i>		<i>Tremendous and Considerable:</i>	
Country:	Student Response %:	Country:	Student Response %:
Spain	44	Spain	76
Puerto Rico	25	Mexico	73
Mexico	23	Puerto Rico	71
Venezuela	15	Costa Rica	43
Cuba	14	Colombia	42
Costa Rica	13	Panama	39
Panama	10	Cuba	38
Argentina	6	Venezuela	37
Colombia	6	Ecuador	27
Peru	5	Argentina	21
Guatemala	4	Chile	20
Chile	2	Guatemala	18
Ecuador	2	B olivia	8
Paraguay	2	Paraguay	7
Honduras	0	Honduras	7
El Salvador	0	El Salvador	0

Comparing cultures (C1 and C2)

This question was also part of the questionnaire:

Which do you find more interesting:

- (a) To learn about characteristics of Spanish- speaking cultures which are very different from your own or
- (b) To learn about characteristics which are very similar to your own culture?

The majority of students answered a). When Spanish teachers were shown the questionnaire results, it surprised them that their students responded this way. A variety of reasons were given why students answered as they did. Some said students are intrigued by the new, the different, unusual life styles, values, ways of thinking, perceptions, and beliefs of others. Others recognized the importance of communication and cultural information gained.

One teacher remarked that during student diary and journal writing, his students expressed interests about Spanish-speaking cultures, travels they had made and questions that they had because of these experiences. A teacher from Puerto Rico stated: "Students start with their own culture and move to Spanish-speaking cultures." She criticized textbooks and their content as not providing materials and experiences authentic to Spanish speakers:

The problem is enough time and also the way the textbook is structured. Most of the cultural information is in a box. It has a very small amount of information—one piece of information.

The readings are related to student interests. They don't mention what is happening in other countries. The U. S. articles are written for Spanish speakers, but those in the United States are for the audience, not Spanish-speakers in Spanish speaking countries.

Another teacher in her comments further responded that most Latinos would not be interested in the articles found in their textbooks; that is, a native speaker would not read the selections.

Student interest in Spanish-speaking cultures

Do you consider that learning about cultures of Spanish-speakers will help you in speaking Spanish? Explain.

Students responded to this question and explained in a variety of ways how their ability in Spanish would be helped. Culture was directly tied to their concepts of language. They related it to 1) *relating to people*, 2) *communicating with native speakers*, 3) *using appropriate language* and 4) *studying a foreign language*. They wrote:

1) Relating to people:

- Understanding a person's culture makes it easier to relate to that person.
- You need to know how to relate to the person you are talking to.
- Understanding the culture will help you to understand people's responses and reactions to you.
- I think it helps us to learn how to interact with the people of various countries. If we interact better we will communicate better.

- I think it would be easier to communicate with anyone if you know about their culture and history.

2) *Communicating with native speakers*

- Understanding the culture will make it easier for me to communicate when I go to a Spanish-speaking country.
- It will help me to relate better to these people and maybe keep me from saying something that would be okay in English, but insulting in Spanish.
- It helped us understanding how people want to express themselves and learn how they do things compared with us.
- We need to learn values and customs so as not to offend them in conversations.
- You can understand where they are coming from.
- Expressions and how to speak to different people contains ways of saying things that are specific to each culture so we must learn more about cultures.

3) *Using appropriate language*

- By knowing cultural aspects I will know what is appropriate to say and what is not.
- Understanding how they live and act gives you an idea of the kinds of things they might say in everyday conversation.
- I will be able to learn certain phrases that come up often in daily life.
- I will know what is polite, accepted and the norm.
- You are able to give responses that are correct and not insulting or embarrassing when you speak to them.
- It gives one insight into what the practical uses of words are.
- Words, phrases and meanings will be easier to remember when they can be associated with interesting topics.

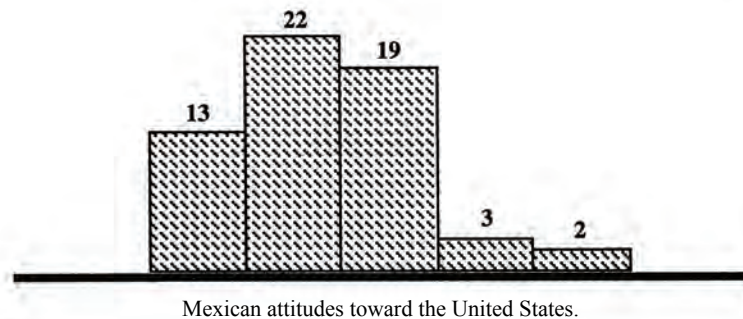
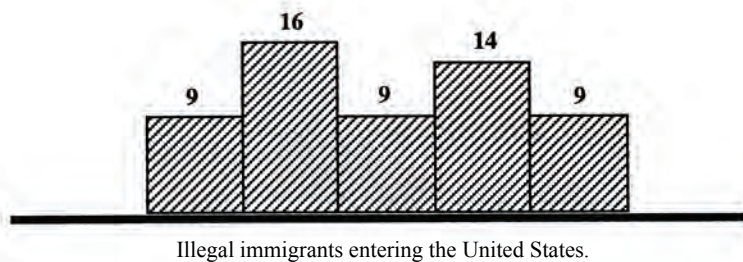
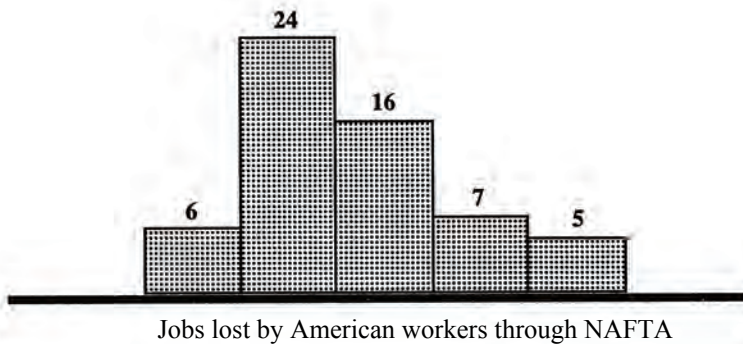
4) *Studying a foreign language*

- Understanding a culture leads to better motivation in learning a language.
- It would be something interesting to learn about the language.
- It gives a background and a reason for learning the language.
- I believe learning culture will help us to better understand from whom and why the language has evolved.
- It is good to have a background about Spanish-speakers so that way you sound more educated when talking.
- It can make you a well-rounded Spanish student.

Student attitudes

Students rated their feelings about three topics: 1) Jobs lost by American workers because of NAFTA, 2) Illegal immigrants entering the United States, and 3) Mexican attitudes toward the United States. The second topic caused the most negative response with a mean of 3.5 for the totals of the five options. The mean of the first topic was 2.9 and of the second, 2.4. Figure 1 represents their responses: (3)

Figure 1 : Student topic ratings (percentiles)



Teachers and cultural knowledge

In the questionnaire the student were asked to think about their Spanish instructors and what they told them during the semester about Spanish-speaking cultures (“*What does learning a foreign language mean to you*”). They were asked to recall something interesting or intriguing and to write about it. Student reponses can be grouped into several domains. Their tendency was to compare aspects of Spanish-speaking cultures with their own culture. For instance, they commented about *food*:

People in Ecuador find iguanas good to eat. They see nothing unusual about iguanas and do not try to keep them as pets like people in the United States do.

about *work schedules*:

In Spain the work schedule is much different than in the United States. The Spanish take a long lunch break then return to work later. Also, the times they eat are much later than in America.

about *pets*:

Pets are not as common in Spain as they are in the United States,

about *language*:

The use of formal language is Spain in greater than in the United States, but it’s on the decline.

Latin Americans have slang like in the U. S.

about *habits*:

The Spanish stay up later than Americans.

On the other hand, there were students who described cultural aspects they learned about the teachers’ countries without comparing them to aspects of their own culture. They recalled their teachers talking about the people of their countries, making statements such as:

“They enjoy living there and spending their lives there”

Architecture, history, social events, dances, traditions, parts of the country and the university system were other topics that attracted them. One student matched his image of Spain with experiences described by his girl friend. The image he had formed through his Spanish classes was very similar. One student commented on the teachers’ lack of knowledge of U. S. culture. She said that her teacher from Spain was not familiar with famous TV personalities (“*She has never heard of the Brady Bunch, Magic Johnson, and Gilligan's Island!*”)

When asked to respond to how often their teachers talked about personal experiences related to aspects of Spanish-speaking cultures by indicating *never*, *sometimes* or *frequently* to the question, the majority of the students said *sometimes*. Then, when asked if they considered learning about the cultures of Spanish-speakers would help them to speak Spanish, the majority said yes.

Teacher post-questionnaire interview

We have considered student interest in the cultures of Spanish-speakers as a component present in the social context of foreign language learning. Teachers' opinions and beliefs about student cultural interest need to be considered if classroom instruction and curriculum design are to reflect the social setting of the student. It is important that differences between the assumptions held by teachers about student interests and interest students express be examined by the teachers themselves.

A Spanish teacher from Colombia, as she was interviewed about the results of the student questionnaires, admitted that she refrained from talking about cultural events she was aware of during her classroom instruction. The example she cited was the tradition of *El carnaval del diablo* that takes place every two years for five days after Christmas in the town of Rio Sucio, Colombia. She pointed out that although the carnival is famous throughout Colombia it is not something that would be mentioned in their Spanish textbooks. She explained that this carnival is about the devil:

Like a week of parties every day. Celebrations to this symbol, the devil. It is very common for the people to be drunk every day, all the time. They are also doing things that for me are very, very special. I mean they are beautiful. But I wouldn't be comfortable talking about them with my students today. I would think that it's not appropriate for them within their world view, their own culture. Maybe that is not a good thing to think.

She said, "If I were from Brazil, it would probably be a little bit difficult talking about the carnival of Rio." In addition to her reticence about talking about certain events in her culture, she recognizes that there are things she says which conflict with information students receive through textbooks both linguistically and culturally. (She recalled one student saying, "What? This is what the book says and you are saying something different."). She was unable to resolve this conflict during the interviews and maintained her position of tending not to reveal aspects of her cultural knowledge.

Discussion

The initial questions driving this study are not easily answered, but several preliminary observations about teachers' and students' sociocultural perceptions may be mentioned.

During each stage of the study the teachers were involved in reflection about personal beliefs, and the process varied with each teacher. There was considerable variation between teachers' perceptions of students' interests and students' expressed interests. In fact, teachers were surprised at the results of the questionnaire when the results did not coincide with what they believed.

Students were aware of the role of Spanish in their lives, as well as recognizing its importance in their professional lives and careers. Not only were they aware of the great opportunities language fluency provides, but they also expressed interest in developing more their communicative skills in order to be able to talk with friends and relatives. They pointed out the increasing numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States. Future goals involved having direct contact with Spanish-speakers in their country as well as Spanish-speaking countries. Spain, Mexico and Puerto Rico especially attracted them.

There was also awareness about the benefit of learning about cultures of Spanish-speakers. They tied cultural knowledge to relating to people, communicating with native speakers, as well as helping a person to use language appropriately.

At the same time students had a variety of interests in Spanish speakers and their cultures, their greatest interests related to university life and popular trends on campus. It is significant that teachers had anticipated many of the interests students revealed during interviews and questionnaires. Moreover, the lack of political concern also did not surprise them at all. It did greatly surprise them though when students expressed interest in learning about the characteristics of Spanish-speaking cultures "very *different from their own*."

Additional results emerged in relation to cultural knowledge and their teachers. The students, in reflecting on their language learning experience and cultural knowledge they had gained about Spanish speakers and their cultures from their teachers, revealed that their teachers "sometimes" talked with them about their cultural experiences, but not very often.

Conclusion

Considering the discussion that began this article, what has been learned about the questions raised and about how perceptions fit into the equation of the "third culture"? Perceptions about the cultures of English speakers are visible components in discussions of language learner experiences. Assumptions held by teachers about students' perceptions do not necessarily coincide with student beliefs. The specific interests of Spanish and English students vary in general, but tend to differ most in interest in political concerns. It was noticeable that in the studies with English students a greater number of students responded strongly, mostly negatively, to political events involving the United States and Mexico than did Spanish students in Pennsylvania. Undercurrents of ideological concerns surfaced, bringing in strong political feelings.

Perceptions are very much part of the struggle to find personal meaning in a new language and its cultures and find one's own "third culture". Perceptions can enhance or impede the process that occurs when the learner meets the intersection of worlds of discourses and searches for meaning.

The "third culture" and the relationship of sociocultural perceptions has implications for foreign language curriculum designers and the classroom teacher. This discussion has attempted to draw attention to these perceptions and propose that they be considered a component in designing goals for culturally-sensitive programs. To overcome the implicit resistance among many foreign language teachers to go beyond linguistic aspects of language and cultural facts (Kramsch, Cain & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996), institutions need to involve teachers in classroom research and produce results that departments can incorporate in objectives. An understanding of the social context of language learning is needed in order to make theoretical and practical decisions that ultimately lead to culturally-sensitive curricula.

The present study has only touched the surface of a wide range of areas related to perceptions and attitudes. Each of these areas could be explored to greater depth in long term qualitative studies using ethnographic techniques. They could be explored for any foreign language; they could be the basis for cross-cultural inquiries that might gain insight into student and teacher thinking.

It is anticipated that this research will lead to future interest, discussion and research by those in postgraduate work in applied linguistics. A few areas might be suggested: 1) The "third culture" and meaning production, 2) Sociocultural perceptions and curricula design, 3) Ideological posturing and foreign language learning, 4) The intersection of global culture with the target and home cultures in language learning, and 5) The social context of learning.

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End Notes:

1. The complex social setting of Mexico, further complicated by the fact that it has the United States as a neighbor, has been found to enter into classroom teaching (Francis & Ryan, for publication 1998; Ryan, 1994) in both rural and urban settings and have considerable affective influence.
2. Research on cultural perceptions with other languages, French and Spanish in Quebec and Mexico have revealed secondary findings that include negative attitudinal positions toward the United States. (Note referenced articles of Charaudeau, Gómez de Mas, Zaslavsky, Chabrol, 1992; Gómez de Mas, 1998 and Rugerio, Costa & Gómez de Mas, 1997.)
3. Note Chasan and Ryan's 1995 survey of student attitudes related to North Americans.

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