

Spanish language learning in the US: Exploring learners' attitudes and motivation in two sociocultural contexts

*El aprendizaje del español en Estados Unidos:
Explorando las actitudes y la motivación de los estudiantes
en dos contextos socioculturales*

ABSTRACT: In this study, we explore the attitudes, expectations, and motivation of college-level learners of Spanish in two distinct contexts in the US: Southwest Texas and Southern Minnesota. Based on the role that Spanish plays in the current socio-cultural climate, perceptions of the language and its culture, and results from a survey questionnaire, we argue that national discourses and deeply held social beliefs about Spanish and its speakers affect, in expected and unexpected ways, students' motivational drive to learn Spanish in formal instructional settings.

KEY WORDS: Attitudes, context, motivation, learning, Spanish.

RESUMEN: En el presente estudio, examinamos actitudes, expectativas y motivaciones de estudiantes de español en el nivel preparatoria en dos diferentes contextos de Estados Unidos: el suroeste de Texas y el sur de Minnesota. Con base en el papel que juega el idioma español en el ambiente sociocultural actual, las percepciones de la lengua y su cultura, así como los resultados de una encuesta, dilucidamos que los discursos nacionales y las creencias sociales profundamente arraigadas respecto del español y sus hablantes afecta, tanto esperada como inesperadamente, la motivación de los estudiantes para aprender español en el marco de escenarios educativos formales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Actitudes, contexto, motivación, aprendizaje, español.

Introduction

A substantial body of research highlights the important role played by contextual factors in second/foreign language learning, including aspects such as contact with the target language and culture (e.g., Díaz-Campos, 2004), learners' experiences and interactions in the language (e.g., Batstone, 2002; Lacorte, 2007) and the characteristics of the learning setting (e.g., Collentine & Freed, 2004; Serrano, Llanes & Tragant, 2011). Much of this research focus-

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es on how variables related to a particular setting impact learning outcomes, without situating the narrow learning environment in a broader social context. In this study we adopt a somewhat different approach in that our goal is to investigate the attitudinal and motivational profile of college-level Spanish language learners in two different sociocultural contexts in the US: Southwest Texas and Southern Minnesota. In comparing these two groups, we consider ways in which the regional and national contexts may influence learners. We feel that, despite the vast literature on individual factors in language learning, research is still needed to examine the attitudes and motivation that learners bring to the classroom in relation to specific languages such as Spanish, especially given the fact that the role of Spanish in the US is not only becoming increasingly visible but also highly contested.

Attitudes and motivation in second language learning

Norton (1995), among other educators and researchers, has underscored the importance of considering the multidimensional nature of learners' attitudes and motivation in language learning, individual factors which are clearly dynamic and dependent upon a multitude of influences. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), for instance, conceptualize L2 motivation in terms of seven components: integrativeness, instrumentality, vitality of the L2 community, attitudes toward the L2 community, cultural interest, linguistic self-confidence, and milieu. Integrativeness and instrumentality have been long considered in motivation research to explain the reasons why learn-

ers may engage in second language learning. Integrativeness refers to "a positive outlook on the L2 and its culture, to the extent that learners scoring high on this factor may want to integrate themselves into the L2 culture and become similar to the L2 speakers" (p. 20), while instrumentality "refers to the perceived pragmatic benefits of L2 proficiency and reflects the recognition that, for many language learners, it is the usefulness of L2 proficiency that provides the greatest driving force" (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005: 21).

Attitudes toward target language speakers and their communities have also been often investigated in the study of L2 motivation (Gardner, 1985, 2001), including attitudes toward meeting L2 speakers through intercultural contact (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). Cultural interest refers to both interest in products associated with the target language and general knowledge of the way of life of L2 speakers, whether gained through the media or direct exposure (e.g., Abrams, 2002; Lee, 2012). The vitality of the L2 community, on the other hand, includes aspects such as the status of the language and its speakers. This status can be gauged in many ways, such as the representations found in the media and the perceived distinctiveness of a particular L2 group. These broader communities with whom a speaker may not be directly involved but with whom we connect through the power of imagination have been referred to as "imagined communities" (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Finally, linguistic self-confidence involves the learner's belief, or lack thereof, that learning the language is not only possible but within reach, while the component referred to as milieu relates

to the influence exerted by the learners' family and friends.

More recently, Ortega (2009) has reminded us of the intricate ways in which attitudes and motivation are interrelated. She explains that attitudes, one among other antecedents of motivation, are "grounded in the sociocultural milieu of the learners, with its shared values, beliefs, norms and practices" (p. 172). She also discusses ways in which attitudes toward the L2 and its speakers may lead to increased or diminished L2 motivation, affect integrativeness, and influence self-perceptions of communicative competence, and concludes that "past experience and attitudes that emerge in a given sociocultural milieu play a causal role in shaping L2 learning motivation" (p. 175).

Motivation, as can be inferred from this brief account, is also a rather context-specific construct. For the purposes of this paper, we emphasize the influential role played by the communities within which learners attempt to learn a second/foreign language. We also adopt McGroarty's (2001) perspective that learners' preconceptions about speakers of the target language and their culture impact the efforts they put into the task. In addition, we argue that learner's attitudes are influenced by public discourses framing languages, cultures, and speakers in distinct ways, and that these frames are often in conflict with educational objectives. In the next sections, we offer a brief overview of the status of foreign language learning in the US, particularly the learning of Spanish, followed by a description of the local contexts in which the participants in our survey were learning Spanish. Finally, the results of the atti-

tudinal survey are reported and discussed in light of these sociocultural contexts.

The national context

Foreign language education in the US

In recent years, foreign language teaching and learning in institutions of higher education in the US has moved from considering the process of teaching and learning languages as a decontextualized educational endeavor, e.g., training the mind to achieve more sophisticated levels of thinking, to more functional perspectives, e.g., interacting with speakers of other languages in workplace settings (Voght, 2000). In addition, foreign language education has been largely promoted in terms of its purported benefits for cultural proficiency, such as being appreciative rather than judgmental when faced with cultural differences (National Standards for Foreign Language Education, 1996). Unfortunately, these ideal goals do not always come to fruition. In fact, language learners at times seem to have opposite views from what those National Standards might suggest. Those opposite views are indicated by the presence of negative correlations between students' language proficiency and their attitudes toward the target culture (Chavez, 2002). The Spanish language, being the most studied foreign language in the US (MLA, 2007), represents an important case for study in this respect.

Spanish and Spanish speakers in the US

According to the US Census Bureau (2010a), Hispanics/Latinos constitute the largest minority group in the country, comprising 16% of the population, with pro-

jections estimating an increase to 23% by the year 2030. This demographic trend, as well as the increasingly visible presence of Hispanics/Latinos in schools and in the workplace, has not always been well-received by the majority population (Chavez, 2008; Henderson, 2011), and nativist and anti-immigration reactions have been increasing in recent years (Marrero, 2012; Odem & Lacy, 2009). Hispanics in the US constitute a diverse group that includes individuals of different origins and races. Unfortunately, labels such as Hispanic, Latino, Mexican-American, Mexican, Spanish speaker, and immigrant have often been conflated, reflecting existing social and ideological views (Leeman, 2004). In general, studies looking at representations in the media of immigrants from developing countries indicate that there is often a negative bias in the way messages about these populations are presented (Martinez-Brawly & Gualda, 2009). In the US, according to Méndez-Méndez and Alverio (2003), there is a distinct imbalance in the treatment of Spanish-speaking groups in the media, with a clear tendency to present these groups in connection to crime, terrorism, welfare, and illegal immigration. The situation has arrived at a point in which, according to some scholars, “Spanish has been criminalised in the USA and continues to be associated with negative attributes by the population at large” (Beaudrie, Ducar & Relaño-Pastor, 2009:158).

Historically, bilingualism and multilingualism in the US have been viewed with suspicion, and at times even as a potential threat to national cohesion (Pavlenko, 2002). In contrast, American institutions of higher education have insisted on the importance

of foreign language learning, and many include it as a requirement for graduation. Spanish constitutes a representative case in this contradictory situation. It has become the most widely spoken language other than English in the country (US Census Bureau, 2010b) while, at the same time, opposition to its use has increased, as seen in the implementation of English-only policies (Barker & Giles, 2004; Gibson, 2004). On the other hand, despite the negative portrayal of Spanish and Spanish-speakers in the US media, enrollment in beginning Spanish classes has been steadily increasing (Brod & Welles, 2000), although “students are nearly five times more likely to be enrolled in a first- or second-year course than in advanced language study” (MLA, 2007:3).

Why do students in the US enroll in Spanish language classes?

Given the conflicting perceptions of Spanish and Spanish-speakers in the US, one must wonder what motivates students to enroll in Spanish classes. Mandell (2002), in his survey of 423 Spanish language learners in a metropolitan university in Texas, reported that the most commonly cited reason was simply to satisfy an institutional requirement. This, Mandell noted, contrasts markedly with learners of other languages who report, as their main motivation, an intrinsic interest in the culture of the target language (cf., Wen, 1997) or a desire to travel to places where the language is spoken (cf., Ossipov, 2000). Thomas (2010) reported similar results. In a survey conducted in a Northeastern university, among students who chose Spanish to satisfy their general education requirements, 71% were not planning to continue learning it be-

yond the required courses. A second reason for choosing Spanish was that it would be “professionally advantageous,” as it would make them more “marketable” (p. 542). In addition, Thomas also noted that students who chose Spanish “showed little [intrinsic] interest in the Spanish language” (p. 544). Finally, he discusses how college-level learners’ attitudes toward Spanish appear to be dependent, to a great extent, on the sociocultural context within the communities where the learning takes place and that positive attitudes toward the Spanish language may co-exist with negative perceptions of the Spanish-speaking population.

Local contexts of learning

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, learners participating in this study were located in two different geographical and sociocultural contexts in the US. In this section, we describe some of the main characteristics of each context and the institution in which students were enrolled in beginning level Spanish courses.

Southwest Texas: Urban, bilingual, and Hispanic/Latino

The Spanish language program in Texas is housed in a mid-size public university located close to the US-Mexico border, in a vibrant bilingual and bi-cultural community of about 800 000 people, with about 81% of the population identifying themselves as Hispanic/Latino or Mexican, and about 14% describing themselves as white (not of Hispanic origin) (US Census Bureau, 2010c). Given the city’s proximity to Mexico and the many historical, social, and economic ties connecting it to its sister city right across the border, Spanish is used

widely across the community. Even though the linguistic landscape in the city is unequivocally English-dominant (e.g., advertisements, signage), Spanish can be heard almost as much as English in stores, restaurants, government offices, hospitals, and churches, and there is widespread use of English-Spanish code-switching among bilingual speakers in the community. In addition, the main local newspaper is available in both English and Spanish, and there are local TV channels in both languages. The high level of contact between the local population and that of its sister Mexican city is clearly reflected in border crossing statistics: in 2013, at this geographical point, more than 6 million pedestrians and more than 10 million personal vehicles crossed the border (BTS, 2014). Indeed, for decades, it was quite common for people on either side of the border to travel to the other side to work, study, shop, socialize, visit family and friends, attend artistic events, and so forth. However, in recent years, this pattern has been disrupted, in great part due to the drug-related violence arising in many parts of Mexico, particularly along its border with the US.

Spanish language program in Texas

The university has approximately 20 000 students, mostly Hispanics (about 80%) of Mexican descent.¹ The Spanish language program is the most popular among the inventory of foreign language courses offered

¹ Even though the language of instruction at the university is English, Spanish conversations can be heard regularly in hallways, classrooms, offices, cafeterias, computer labs, student lounges, and many other public areas.

at this university, which also include French, German, Italian, Russian, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Chinese. Both Spanish-as-a-Foreign-Language and Spanish-for-Heritage-Speakers courses are offered, and credits from either type of course can be used to fulfill the language requirement (6-9 units) in degree plans that include such specification. At the time when this study was conducted, there were 604 students enrolled in the Spanish program, which accounted for 58% of the total enrollment in foreign language classes, with 275 students enrolled in the Spanish-for-Heritage-Language Speakers track and 329 students enrolled in the Spanish-as-a-Foreign-Language track. Students in the first and second semester in the latter track were invited to participate in the study. The reason for this was so that the two groups surveyed, in Texas and Minnesota, comprised similar students, i.e., learners of Spanish as a foreign language in beginning level courses.

Southern Minnesota: Rural, monolingual, and white

According to the US Census Bureau (2010d), the total Hispanic population in Minnesota was approximately 271 000 in 2013, or about 5% of the total population. Of that total, approximately 180 000 are residents of Minneapolis/St. Paul, with the majority of the remaining population living in rural areas in the Southern part of the state. The Spanish language program located in Minnesota is housed in a medium-sized public university, in a town with a population slightly smaller than 50 000. About 90% of the population is white (not of Hispanic origin), with only 3% of the population reporting Hispanic

descent (US Census Bureau, 2010c). Some of the surrounding areas, however, have slightly higher percentages of people from Hispanic backgrounds, and it is generally from those regional towns that the Hispanic students at this university hail. The university has a student population of approximately 16 000 students, i.e., close to one third of the town's population. The characteristics of the student body reflect that of the community in general, that is, 1.4% of the students reporting a Hispanic background.

Spanish language program in Minnesota

Students at this university must complete eight units of language study to satisfy the B. A. requirement. The Department of Modern Languages² offers language courses in French, German, Spanish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Chinese, with four language major and minor options (French, German, Scandinavian, and Spanish) and graduate courses offered in French and Spanish. Students may opt to take a language assessment to enroll in language courses beyond the beginning level. Spanish is the most popular language choice among the foreign language courses offered. At the time this study was conducted, Spanish attracted 64% of the students enrolled in first or second semester foreign language courses, with 169 students enrolled in Elementary Spanish I and 183 students enrolled in Elementary Spanish II. Given the characteristics of the student population, there may be only a handful of students who speak Spanish as their home or heritage language and enroll

² This was the name of the department at the time of the study. It has been changed since then.

in Spanish language courses in any given semester. Those students are often able to test out of the lower level Spanish courses and, thus, enroll immediately in the Intermediate Spanish courses. Students in the first and second semester Spanish courses (Elementary levels) were invited to participate in the study.

The study

The main purpose of this study was to explore similarities and differences in attitudes and motivation held by two groups of beginning-level learners of Spanish in two distinct US geographical settings. In addition to comparing the attitudinal and motivational profiles of these groups, we discuss possible points of connection among attitudes, motivation, and context, in light of the literature reviewed and our knowledge of and familiarity with the learners' contexts and their respective language programs.

Participants and data collection

151 beginning-level Spanish language learners participated in the study, 65 at the university located in Southern Minnesota (average age= 20 years old) and 86 at the university located in Southwest Texas (average age= 23 years old). In both cases, the distribution of male and female students was fairly even. The data-collection instrument used in this study consists of a 17-item survey designed to obtain information about students' experiences learning and using Spanish, their attitudes toward the language and its culture, as well as their self-reported level of motivation and language goals. The survey focused on six main areas: reasons for choosing Spanish (2

items), previous Spanish language courses taken and visits to Spanish-speaking countries (2 items), Spanish language use and contact with Spanish-speakers (6 items), perceptions of Spanish culture (3 items), self-reported level of motivation and perceptions of the value of Spanish (2 items), and future expectancy of Spanish language use (2 items).³

Participant students constituted a convenience sample, i.e., students in beginning level Spanish courses, rather than a random sample. As with any self-reported data, we are aware of the potential for bias in that respondents might provide what they consider to be desirable responses. In order to reduce this, students were reassured that their answers would not affect their participation or performance in class nor their course grade, and that all information gathered would be anonymous and used exclusively for research purposes. Participation in the study was voluntary, and consent forms were collected prior to distributing the survey.

Survey results

Reasons for taking Spanish

One important distinction that can be made among foreign language students is whether they are taking the class as a required or elective one. In our study, 76% of the students in the Southwest Texas group (henceforth STX) reported taking a foreign language class because it was a requirement, whereas the Southern Minnesota group (henceforth SMN) was almost

³ Some of these items had follow-up questions to further specify or explain a given answer.

Table 1. Students' reasons for studying Spanish*

	STX (%)	SMN (%)
It is the easiest to learn	9.30	12.31
I already knew some Spanish	53.49	67.69
I'm Hispanic/Latino	43.02	3.08
I'm interested in Spanish culture	30.23	33.85
I had to choose a language and didn't care which one	13.95	6.15
It is the most popular foreign language	17.44	35.38
It will help me get a better job once I graduate	63.95	69.23
I know/work with people who speak Spanish	72.09	29.23
It is an important language to learn	55.81	49.23
I want to visit/study/live in a Spanish-speaking country	26.74	41.54
Other	13.95	7.69

* Students could select more than one choice to indicate their main reasons to study Spanish.

Source: Own elaboration.

evenly divided between students taking it as a required or an elective class. When asked why they chose Spanish, about one half to two thirds of the students in both groups indicated that they did so because *a*) it would help them get a better job, *b*) they have taken Spanish classes before, and/or *c*) they considered Spanish an important language (see Table 1).

Some important differences were also noted: 72% of the students in the STX group indicated that their main reason for choosing Spanish was that they knew or worked with Spanish-speakers, in contrast to 29% in the SMN group; and 43% self-identified as Latino or Hispanic, versus only 3% in the SMN group.⁴ On the other

⁴ We are aware that the issue of self-identification with labels such as Hispanic or Latino is a complex one. Some individuals may favor other labels (e.g., Mexican American, Puerto Rican) or reject them altogether, even if they have family connections with Spanish-speaking communities.

hand, 42% of students in the SMN group said they had chosen Spanish because they wanted to visit, study, or live in a Spanish-speaking country in the future (versus 27% in the STX group), while about one third of SMN reported choosing the language because it was the most popular one to study (versus 17% in the STX group).

The fact that many students in both groups considered that Spanish might improve their employment options in the future reflects findings from previous studies (Glisan, 1987; Thomas, 2010). In addition, it was also clear that learning about Spanish culture was not high among students' reasons for taking Spanish. Thus, there seems to be a gap between purported goals for foreign language education in the US and students' expectations.

Previous instruction in Spanish

Spanish is the most popular foreign language choice in the US educational system. So, not surprisingly, a large proportion of

students in our study had taken Spanish classes in middle –or high– school 92% in the SMN group and 65% in the STX group. The seemingly negligible effect of previous relevant course work on students’ Spanish placement at college can be said to be, at the very least, disappointing. Many students in our study had –or chose– to start over in beginning level Spanish when they entered college, which suggests that previous courses did not help them achieve even minimal levels of language proficiency. Such placement reflects the situation of many foreign language learners around the country in that levels of attainment continue to be extremely low (MLA, 2007).

Previous and future visits to/stays in Spanish-speaking countries/communities

Many students in the SMN group indicated that they chose to study Spanish in order to visit or live in a Spanish-speaking country. Such visits are assumed to expose learners to the target language and its culture and to offer extensive opportunities to use the language. Even though these assumptions have been questioned, i.e., specific interlanguage

benefits are not always evident (Collentine & Freed, 2004), plans to visit Spanish-speaking countries can nonetheless spark an interest in the language or help to sustain a learner’s initial motivation. In any case, clear differences between our two groups of students were noted. Only 35% of the SMN students had visited a Spanish-speaking country or community, in contrast to 73% of the STX students (see Table 2). However, it is important to note that many of the students in STX reported visiting communities in Southwest Texas in response to the question. If the question had asked about a Spanish-speaking community *outside the US*, the percentage of students in both groups would have been fairly similar.

Most visitors from the STX group reported going to Mexico, mostly to cities right across the US-Mexican border, with less than 15% visiting other Spanish-speaking countries. In the SMN group, 23% had spent time vacationing in Mexico or Spain and about 10% reported visiting other Spanish-speaking countries.

In response to the question, “If you had the opportunity to visit a Spanish-speak-

Table 2. Spanish-speaking countries/communities visited by students

Place	SMN	Travelers (%)	Class (%)	STX	Travelers (%)	Class (%)
Mexico	11	48.0	17.0	25	40.0	29.0
Spain	4	17.0	6.0	2	3.0	2.0
Southwest Texas	1	4.5	1.5	29	46.0	34.0
Puerto Rico	1	4.5	1.5	1	2.0	1.0
Multiple Places	6	26.0	9.0	4	6.0	5.0
Unspecified	0	0.0	0	2	3.0	2.0
No visits	42		65.0	23		27.0
Total	65	100.0	100.0	86	100.0	100.0

Source: Own elaboration.

ing country in the near future, which one would you choose and why?" the country mentioned most often was Spain, followed by Mexico at a distant second, with various South/Central American countries mentioned a few times each (see Table 3).

Table 3. Spanish-speaking countries students would like to visit

	SMN (%)	STX (%)
Spain	54	46
Mexico	14	16
Other	23	24
None (blank answer)	9	14

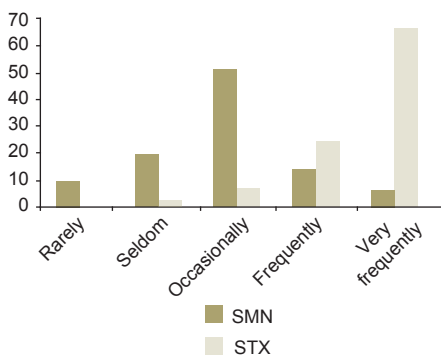
Source: Own elaboration.

Even though we expected Spain to be a popular destination among learners, we were surprised to see the extent to which this was true. When asked to provide a reason, they typically answered with a generally benign comment, such as: *It would be fun, I've heard it is beautiful there, and I want to see Europe*. However, a number of students' answers (about 14%) revealed some biased assumptions, for instance, indicating they would choose Spain *to hear Spanish spoken properly*, or because *it seems the most cultural*. Some students also showed negative attitudes about the rest of the Spanish-speaking world, with comments like [Spain] *is cleaner*, or stating they wanted to go to Spain because *I've been to Mexico already*, with the implication that only Spain and Mexico would be worth visiting. It was somewhat surprising to see that about 10% to 15% of the students did not mention any specific Spanish-speaking country, even when this was presented as a hypothetical situation.

Exposure to and use of Spanish outside the classroom

Encounters with the Spanish language outside of the classroom (e.g., stores, restaurants, TV, web-pages), although not necessarily involving situations in which students themselves use or interact in the target language, constituted one of the most striking contrasts between the groups. 90% of students in the STX group reported that they have contact with the language frequently or very frequently, while students in the SMN group reported that their contact with the language occurred occasionally (51%) or seldom/rarely (29%).⁵ More importantly, only one student in the STX group recorded not having any friends or family who spoke Spanish fluently, compared with 37% of students in the SMN group (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Exposure to Spanish outside the classroom



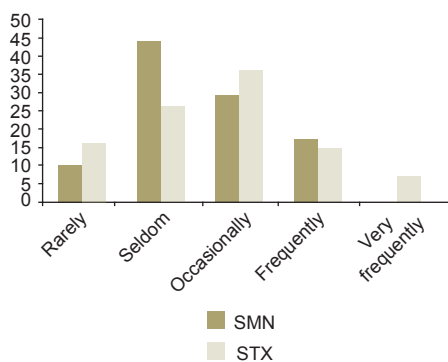
Source: Own elaboration.

⁵ In the survey, points in the scale included the following descriptors (in parenthesis): rarely (almost never), seldom (one/twice a month), occasionally (one/twice a week), frequently (almost daily), very frequently (daily).

When asked how often they actually used Spanish outside the classroom, students in the STX group reported using the language more frequently than students in the SMN group. As shown in Figure 2, 22% of students in the STX group reported using Spanish outside the classroom frequently or very frequently, 36% reported using it occasionally and 42% seldom or rarely. A similar pattern was found among students in the SMN group, although no students reported using the language very frequently: 17% reported using Spanish frequently, 29% use it occasionally, and 36% indicated they seldom or almost never use it outside the classroom. Although these numbers can be expected because these are beginning level students, it is worth noting that even the students in the STX group who reported encounters or contact with Spanish on a daily basis do not seem to be taking advantage of these situations to attempt to use the language.

The apparent lack of willingness to participate or interact in the target lan-

Figure 2. Use of Spanish outside the classroom



Source: Own elaboration.

guage, even among students with extensive possibilities to do so, may be related to a number of factors. Second language speakers of Spanish may be perceived as outsiders among native, bilingual, or heritage language speakers of the language, who may resist –consciously or not– attempts at cross-cultural communication, especially if the interlocutor is not yet very proficient in the language. Another possible reason may be related to instrumental motivations. As in Thomas’ study (2010), it seems that many students in our study view their Spanish language learning either as means to achieve a future goal (e.g., getting a better job) or because they have a general sense that Spanish may be important, especially if one is surrounded by it, as is the case of students in the STX group. The latter case, however, does not necessarily imply the adoption of positive attitudes towards the language and its speakers, as will be discussed below.

Desire to increase use of Spanish

The next question asked students to report whether or not they would like to increase their use of Spanish, and if so, why. A majority of students indicated that they would like to use Spanish more (SMN= 81%, STX= 90%). However, students differed in their explanations. In the SMN group, most comments (48%) were related to improving their language skills, as in *to help me practice and become better at using the language, or to be able to speak fluently*. In other words, using the language seems to be interpreted as an activity with an instructional orientation. In contrast, most of the responses (61%) provided by students in the STX group indicated a desire to use

more Spanish for actual communicative purposes, as in *To interact with those who know more Spanish and I have a lot of Spanish speaking friends and costumers.*

It is worth mentioning that authentic communicative situations can have an inhibiting effect, as many learners find it difficult to take the risks involved in participating in real-life interactions (Batstone, 2002). This can partially explain the apparent lack of participation in actual interactions –as opposed to a desire to do so– among students in our study, including those in the STX group. In fact, it may be particularly true for the latter group as they find themselves in a context in which high levels of English-Spanish bilingualism are quite common.

On the other hand, we noticed that, in comparison to their SMN counterparts, students in the STX group often expressed a more integrative orientation, as illustrated by answers such as *It would help me feel more integrated in my community/city,* and *I live in a border community and am Hispanic.* And yet, a few of the students in the same group also had some strong negative views, denoting either resentment against the pervasive role of Spanish in the community or emphasizing their non-Spanish background: *I don't feel I need to in this country, this is America and*

an English speaking country. No, because I was not raised speaking Spanish so I have a hard time understanding it. A few students in the SMN group also expressed similar negative attitudes, as revealed by answers such as *I feel like I have to but I don't want to.* and *I don't talk to people who speak Spanish.* It is not difficult to imagine the impact that such attitudes are likely to have on a student's language learning process.

Associations made with Spanish culture

One attempt at exploring students' attitudes in our study included asking them to indicate the topics or themes which most readily came to mind when asked to think about the Spanish language and its culture. As shown in Table 4, the topic that students in both groups most frequently associated with Spanish was immigration. This choice suggests that for many learners, regardless of their learning setting, Spanish is –first and foremost– a language strongly tied to immigration and immigrants. To a certain extent, this is understandable. It is to be expected that in regions close to the US-Mexico border, discussions about immigration and issues pertaining to undocumented immigrants occur regularly in the local media and constitute a common topic of conversation. On the other hand, the fact

Table 4. Topics most often associated with Spanish language and culture

SMN	Times selected	%	STX	Times selected	%
Immigration	28	43	Immigration	44	50
Soccer	28	43	Family	40	50
Music	27	42	Catholicism	38	48
Tequila	27	42	Soccer	37	48
Bullfighting	22	34	Music	36	39

Source: Own elaboration.

that immigration issues were also at the top of the list for students in the SMN group attests to the strong influence of the media and social perceptions related to language use, as well as the many direct and indirect ways in which Spanish language and culture are tied to discussions about immigration in national discourses.

In addition to immigration, students in both groups also perceived music and soccer to be strongly related to Spanish speaking cultures. In this case, the increased visibility and popularity of Latino musicians and singers, not only in Spanish language broadcasts but also in mainstream English language networks, helps to explain this particular association. Similarly, the ascending popularity of soccer, particularly among American youth, and its status as a national sport in most Spanish-speaking countries, facilitates this particular connection. An important difference, however, was noted with the remaining associations among the top five. Many students in the SMN group associated Spanish with bullfighting and tequila. These two concepts, of course, are related to long-standing stereotypical images found and continuously promoted in tourism advertisements. Being further removed from Spanish-speakers and Spanish culture, students in the SMN group appear to rely more on preconceptions about Spanish culture fueled by common stereotypes. In contrast, students in the STX group chose family and Catholicism, which can be considered two strong indexical representations of social life in the Spanish-speaking world. We assume that frequent social contacts with Spanish-speakers reported by students in the STX group provided a window into these

social markers associated with Spanish language culture.

How valuable is it to learn Spanish?

We turn now to a discussion of the relative value of Spanish language learning among the students in our study. The most popular answers in both groups were that Spanish was “valuable” and “very valuable”. However, 51% of STX students chose the latter whereas only 31% of SMN students did. In addition, a larger percentage of students in the SMN group (13%) reported that they considered Spanish to be of little or no value (2% in the STX group). When asked to explain their answers, the most common response (30%) from students in the SMN group focused on potential job opportunities, such as *to get a job over someone who can't speak it or it should help me get a job after I graduate*. The second most common response (21%) made reference to the growing number of Spanish speakers in the US, as illustrated by comments such as *More Spanish-speaking people are coming to our country*. Among those students who considered learning Spanish of little or no value, the majority of responses revealed strong nativist views or negative feelings toward Spanish-speakers. One student, for instance, wrote: *They are speaking it in the US, they should learn English but don't so I will learn Spanish*.

The idea that Spanish might be of value at some point in the future, even though it was not really clear when or how, was also expressed by students in the SMN group, with statements such as: *because you never know when you'll need to use it*” and *“I think it could be useful later in life*. These came in stark contrast to the more common answers ex-

pressed by students in the STX group, who linked the value of Spanish to their current need to communicate with Spanish-speakers (24%) and to their geographical context (21%), with comments such as *Spanish is the language most of my friends & colleagues speak; [I'm] living right next to the border, and most people [here] speak it.*

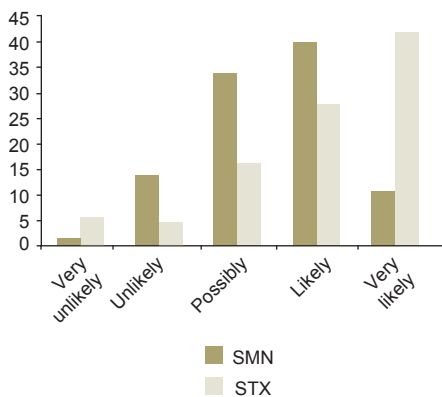
Likelihood of using Spanish in the near future or becoming fluent in Spanish

The next two questions asked students to rate their likelihood of using Spanish outside class in the following two years and of becoming fluent in the following five years. As shown in Figure 3, 70% of students in the STX group believe it is likely or very likely that they would be using Spanish in the near future, while only half of the students in the SMN group felt as confident. A similar pattern was found with regard to students' expectancy of ultimate language attainment (see Figure 4). A larger percentage of students in the STX group (56%) reported this was likely or very likely, whereas only 33% of the students in the SMN group felt as confident.

Self-reported level of motivation

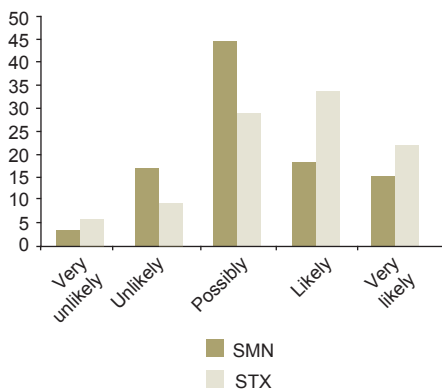
The reasons for studying a specific foreign language and the opportunities to use it, as well as the general attitudes towards the language, its speakers, and its culture, are all likely to affect a students' level of motivation. As reported above, the students in the SMN group have less exposure and fewer possibilities to interact with speakers of the language, and they also seem to rely more on cultural preconceptions and stereotypes. In contrast, students in the STX group have frequent contact with Spanish and native

Figure 3. Likelihood of using Spanish in near future (next 2 years)



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 4. Likelihood of becoming fluent (next 5 years)

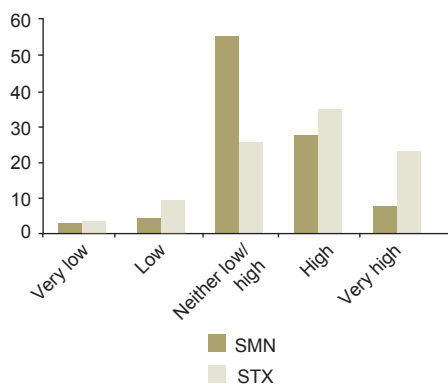


Source: Own elaboration.

speakers of the language and have a less stereotyped view of Spanish language and culture. Not surprisingly then, when asked about their level of motivation, a higher percentage of students in the STX group (58%) characterized it as high or very high, whereas most of the students in the SMN

group (55%) characterized their motivation as neither low nor high (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Self-reported level of motivation



Source: Own elaboration.

Discussion

The findings reported here strongly suggest that students' attitudes toward the Spanish language and its culture, self-reported levels of motivation, and expectancy in terms of ultimate attainment, are all influenced by the local and national contexts. Important differences were found among the two groups of students surveyed in terms of the multiple relationships that exist among local contexts of learning, opportunities to use the target language, reasons for learning it, and their motivational drive. However, and equally important, similarities were also determined which appear to be tied to social discourses about Spanish language culture and wide-spread beliefs about the value of learning Spanish in the US.

As reported in other studies, most of the learners in our study enrolled in first semester Spanish courses to fulfill an institutional requirement even though many

studied the language before entering college. Such prior courses appear to have little effect on students' placement and level of proficiency. We also found that students' cultural backgrounds and social networks provide an equally important rationale for choosing a specific foreign language. If students are of Hispanic background or maintain frequent contact and social relationships with Spanish speakers, as was the case with many of the learners in Southwest Texas, they will be more likely to remain motivated to learn the language, even if they may have seen little evidence of success from their previous attempts. In addition, such students' learning settings provide more tangible and immediate reasons for learning the language. Students in Southern Minnesota, in contrast, must rely on more long-term goals and somewhat vague notions that their Spanish language learning may become significant once they graduate, as it is expected to add value to their professional profiles. Understandably, long-term learning goals may not be enough to sustain a positive attitudinal stance and motivational drive.

We also notice that for learners in Southern Minnesota, their experiences inside and outside the classroom did not appear to help in countering stereotyped perceptions of Spanish culture. Such preconceptions, which depict a culture not just as foreign but as exotic and peculiar, are less likely to sustain learners' efforts, motivation, and investment. Furthermore, the role that the media plays in shaping the views and attitudes of students across the country, whether bilingual, Hispanic Southwest Texas or monolingual, white Southern Minnesota, seems to be perva-

sive. Spanish is perceived, first and foremost, as the language of immigrants. Given that terms such as immigrants, Spanish-speakers, and Mexicans are often conflated in media reports, and that these tend to be negative and alarmist (Albakry, 2010), then students' choice of Spain as the preferred Spanish-speaking destination may simply reflect a desire to move away from such negative associations.

Another finding worth discussing is the fact that few students in either group reported an interest in Spanish culture as a reason for learning the language, a factor that contributes positively to the shaping of a learner's attitudinal profile and motivation (Wen, 1997). This contrasts markedly with professed goals of foreign language instruction in the US. For some students, even a hypothetical trip to a Spanish-speaking country is outside the realm of desired possibilities. For them, Spanish is either a means to gain access in one's local community or to augment one's prospects of future employment, in the US. Cross-cultural understanding in a more global sense does not seem to be a major drive behind students' investment in Spanish language learning.

Another striking difference between the students' contexts of learning relates to opportunities to interact with Spanish-speakers. Practically all students in Southwest Texas reported that such opportunities abound in their locality, whereas for students in Southern Minnesota they occur only occasionally. And yet, about half of the students in both groups reported that they seldom use Spanish outside of the classroom. This may be related to the fact that students were enrolled in be-

ginning level Spanish courses. However, if they follow common patterns that indicate that relatively few foreign language learners in the US attain higher levels of proficiency, then the possibilities afforded by a context in which opportunities for using the language are multiple may be, in the end, inconsequential. On the other hand, about one half of students report taking advantage of existing opportunities to use the language, at least occasionally. However, students in each group who engage in interactions with other Spanish-speakers, outside of the classroom, appear to do so with different motives in mind. Students in Southwest Texas report using the language for more immediate integrative and communicative purposes whereas students in Southern Minnesota appear to view these interactions as opportunities to practice the language. These findings can be connected to the relative perceived value of Spanish, students' reasons for learning the language, and to their use of the language outside the classroom: for students in Southern Minnesota, Spanish appears to be a means to become more "marketable". In contrast, for students in Southwest Texas, the value of Spanish relies on its potential to break down current communication barriers in a community that is already, and has been for some time, mostly Hispanic/Latino.

Finally, we venture to say that the extent to which students in one group consider Spanish as the language of "others" and as having some vague potential benefit once they graduate, whereas students in the other group see it as a way to meet an immediate need, given their many friends, co-workers, or relatives who are Spanish-dominant, may partially explain how

they see themselves as future speakers of the language. Most students in Southwest Texas were fairly confident that they will be using Spanish in the near future, and

were fairly optimistic about becoming fluent speakers in the long term, whereas their counterparts in Southern Minnesota were not nearly as confident or optimistic.

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