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EFFECTS OF AN ACCULTURATION PROGRAM
ON THE ATTITUDES OF SPANISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS

Teachers of foreign languages dedicate a portion of classroom time to helping students understand cultural details in hopes that their students will develop more positive attitudes toward those who are native speakers of the language being studied. There is a need to determine if and how much use of classroom time in explaining cultural details aids in building positive attitudes.

In this study, an attempt was made to answer the question: Does the formal teaching of cultural details in a beginning foreign language course affect the attitudes of students toward those people whose language is being studied?

This study is based on the hypothesis that positive attitudes toward Spanish-speaking people can be developed, providing that : (1) a proper acculturation course is provided, and (2) appropriate materials are utilized.

In order to answer the research question, this study was undertaken to measure attitude change in selected classes of beginning University Spanish students. This study measured changes in attitude of students who participated in an acculturation program and compared these changes with the attitudes of students who only received regular classroom instruction. The subject classes for the study were selected from the beginning Spanish classes at Brigham Young University. The acculturation program extended for a period of six weeks and provided additional cultural experiences to the experimental classes.

Eight Spanish classes were subjects for the six-week study to determine attitude change, four classes each randomly assigned to control or experimental groups. Both experimental and control groups were measured at the conclusion of the study by the Revised Bogardus Social Distance Scale¹ and their opinions evaluated by a questionnaire: "How the North Americans Perceive the South Americans."²

In the last four decades scholars have intensified efforts to study attitude change toward a certain country by those learning the foreign language of that country. Some of the most relevant of those studies are McFarlane (1945), Southerland (1946), Nostrand (1964), and Miguel A. Riestra and Charles E. Johnson (1971).

In 1945, Alice M. McFarlane intended to determine if racial attitudes toward African groups could be improved by using a series of films portraying different African races. Her study included fifty-four English elementary students studying foreign language in the elementary schools of Glasgow. Because of a lack of adequate materials, there was no significant improvement. However, it was noticed that films where stories were portrayed had the most influence on attitude improvement.³

Margaret B. Southerland, in 1946, researched to determine if the study of the French language contributed to attitude improvement toward the French people. She studied one hundred and eighty-four students learning French and an equal number of students not studying French in the elementary schools of Glasgow. The results showed that France and its people were rated higher by those who studied French than by those who did not study the language.⁴

Howard Lee Nostrand, in 1964, prepared a questionnaire to determine how North Americans perceived the French people. He also wanted to determine which cultural insights would best prepare students studying French at the University of Washington for a cross-cultural encounter. The preliminary results showed that these French students perceived the French people as being more like the North Americans than did those who were non-French students. At the same time, Nostrand administered his questionnaire to seventy-two Americans who were residing or had recently returned from France. In this group there was a tendency to perceive the North Americans as having all the virtues. The conclusions indicated that those who rated the French people the highest were those who had studied the language and then went to France. It was also concluded that lack of information regarding insights dealing with daily living and social interactions caused the most perception problems.⁵

Using FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary Schools) Spanish Language classes, Miguel A. Riestra and Charles E. Johnson conducted a study to determine if by learning the Spanish language students would improve their attitudes toward Spanish-speaking people. This study involved a hundred and twenty-six students. The researchers used a questionnaire about seven countries: Russia, Spain, Germany, Mexico, France, Argentina, and Bolivia. In the final page of the questionnaire students were asked to categorize which children from the countries named above they would like as playmates. The results indicated that there was a tendency among those children who took Spanish to describe people from Spanish-speaking countries with more positive adjectives, and they also wanted playmates from those countries more so than the children who did not study Spanish.⁶

The current study was intended to measure the attitude change incurred in students by providing them with a systematic acculturation program and by using materials which seem to contribute to the development of positive attitudes.

The acculturation materials included these textbooks: Culture for Missionaries: South America, Hispanic⁷ and Teaching About Culture Awareness⁸, used daily for ten or fifteen minutes during the study.

The population utilized consisted of one hundred and twelve students.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the population:

	First Semester		Second Semester		
Experimental	16	14	6	20	Acculturation
Control	14	16	10	16	Non-Acculturation
Totals	60		52		112

Figure 1. Distribution of the population by class and by semester level.

For ease in analysis, the classes were grouped by semester level. The following figure explains the procedure:

	First semester	Second Semester	
Experimental	30	26	Acculturation
Control	30	26	Non-Acculturation
Total	60	52	112

Figure 2. Grouping of the subjects by semester level.

Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, show the raw scores for both first and second semester at the conclusion of the six-week study.

1	162	11	674	21	309
2	756	12	742	22	498
3	287	13	405	23	644
4	596	14	756	24	668
5	442	15	379	25	483
6	443	16	748	26	519
7	723	17	626	27	636
8	580	18	127	28	708
9	192	19	498	29	405
10	390	20	604	30	294
		X: 509.80			

Table 1. Raw scores and X of the Controls First Semester Spanish Students

1	696	11	700	21	708
2	740	12	756	22	756
3	620	13	603	23	756
4	756	14	711	24	620
5	510	15	756	25	636
6	756	16	684	26	636
7	577	17	604	27	612
8	636	18	644	28	620
9	756	19	756	29	620
10	620	20	723	30	525
		\bar{X} :	669.76		

Table 2. Raw Scores and \bar{X} of the experimental First Semester Spanish Classes.

1	484	11	756	21	531
2	612	12	756	22	612
3	756	13	756	23	684
4	756	14	756	24	756
5	700	15	513	25	520
6	756	16	740	26	636
7	756	17	596		
8	756	18	604		
9	756	19	720		
10	684	20	547		
		\bar{X} :	667.76		

Table 3. Raw Scores and \bar{X} of the experimental Second Semester Spanish Students.

1	221	11	345	20	756
2	548	12	318	21	756
3	756	13	146	22	756
4	756	14	493	23	396
5	446	15	473	24	510
6	439	16	276	25	604
7	330	17	756	26	721
8	551	18	748		
9	732	19	756		
10	644	\bar{X} :	547.42		

Table 4. Raw Scores and \bar{X} of the control Second Semester Spanish Students

The mean for both Spanish students groups in the experimental was significantly higher than the mean scores of the Spanish students in the control groups.

The SS for both the experimental and the control groups was as noticed in table 5:

	First Semester	Second Semester
Esperimental	560395.37	238763
Control	1005876.80	-753727.65

Table 5. Showing the SS scores for both groups

To analyze the data the randomized two-group design (Posttest only)

T score was utilized. The formula used was:

$$T = \frac{X_a - X_b}{\sqrt{\frac{SS_a - SS_b}{(N-1)(N-1)} (1 N_a \quad 1 N_b)}}$$

First Semester	Second Semester
3.76	3.21

Table 6. The T scores for both beginning Spanish levels,

Now that the T scores for the beginning Spanish levels of instruction have been determined, a table of T is consulted to determine the probability of obtaining T: 3.76 and T: 3.21. The degrees of freedom for the beginning first semester Spanish level was 28 (N-2), for the second semester was 24. The table of T for 24 at 0.05 was 2.064, and for 28 was 2.048. Our T scores were 3.76 and 3.21, which are considered significant. From this analysis we might conclude that the attitude change for both beginning Spanish levels were significant. Therefore, it is concluded that the teaching of cultural details at the beginning semesters of Spanish study contributed to create more positive attitudes toward Spanish-speaking people.

The questionnaire: "How the North Americans Perceive the South Americans," was used to evaluate the impact of the acculturation program. Due to a lack of space in this publication no comments obtained from the participants will be reported. However, it should be mentioned that most of the participants agreed on the positive impact such a program had on their preconceived ideas about the South Americans.

Results of the study suggest that an acculturation program at the beginning levels of Spanish instruction is beneficial in building positive attitudes. While the significant results of the study are attributed to a systematic presentation of cultural details, to a controlled time limit, and to appropriate materials, the researcher obviously cannot generalize these results to all educational settings where the study of culture is desired. It is apparent, however, that relatively simple means are at the teacher's disposal to evaluate the degree of attitude improvement by using an appropriate cultural program (although this information is available only after the acculturation program has been established). To avoid results that are biased in favor of the researcher's desires, the amount of influence of the nationality of the teacher should be studied.

This research has attempted to determine the attitude change in students by an appropriate cultural program, but not the effect that understanding of cultural details has on communication. Certainly, the easiness in communication by understanding of cultural details is of utmost importance, and this also needs to be determined. Anecdotal accounts and research indicate that in addition to the form of instruction (direct method, audio-lingual approach etc.) faulty procedures, lax in teaching, difficulty of the material, insufficient time, and flagrant cheating by students are a few factors that can cause bias in taking cultural tests.

In further studies on the effects of acculturation programs, it would be helpful to consider other populations as well, such as ethnic groups, those with different learning styles, etc. Also, there is no need to restrict such studies to classical empirical research. For example, personal interviews following the end of the acculturation program may provide excellent insights not otherwise available.

Finally, this study indicates the value of teaching cultural details in a beginning foreign language course in affecting the attitudes of students toward those people whose language is being studied.

REFERENCES

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²The researcher's questionnaire was adapted from the one developed originally by Howard Lee Nostrand. For further reference see endnote 5. The original was intended for French-speaking people.

³Alice Muriel MaFarlane, "A Study of the Influence of the Educational Geographical Films Upon the Racial Attitudes of Elementary School Children," British Journal of Educational Psychology, 15 (1945), 152.

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⁵Howard Lee Nostrand, Experiment in Determining Cultural Content and Survey of Language Teaching Research (Seattle, Washington: Department of Foreign Languages, University of Washington, July 1969), 1-75.

⁶Miguel A. Riestra and Charles E. Johnson, "Changes in Attitudes of Elementary-School Children Toward Foreign-Speaking People Resulting From the Study of a Foreign Language," The Journal of Experimental Education, 33 (1964), 65-72.

⁷Missionary Training Center, Culture for Missionaries: South America, Hispanic,
(Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), pp. 1- 143. For a detailed
outline on how this book was used in the study, the reader is referred to
the researcher's thesis.

⁸Gary R. Smith and George G. Otero, Teaching About Culture Awareness,
(Denver, Colorado: Center for Teaching International Relations, 1977), II, 111-132.