

INVESTIGATING UNIVERSITY OF GHANA STUDENTS' BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT SPANISH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THEIR EFFECTS ON MOTIVATION

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Abstract

This study³ presents the results of an anonymous online questionnaire on the impact of language beliefs and attitudes on students' motivation to learn Spanish and Russian as foreign languages at the university level. Participants of the study included 64 students of Spanish and 45 students of Russian. The findings of the study reveal that the participants have mainly positive beliefs and attitudes towards their language courses despite the apparent challenges they face in the study of these European languages. This contradicts the popular belief that students in Ghanaian universities will find these courses irrelevant in the African context. Additionally, the majority of participants had extrinsic motivations for the study of the respective languages and a significant number of them felt less motivated to study certain subjects; namely, literature and civilization.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, beliefs, attitudes, motivation, anxiety, Spanish, Russian

1. Introduction

Certainly, the benefits of foreign language learning (FLL) cannot be overemphasized. Due to the interrelation between language and culture, learning a foreign language encourages positive attitudes and the appreciation of cultural diversity, enlarges one's worldview and leads to an awareness of the interconnection between language and humanity. Furthermore, FLL improves communication, analytical and critical thinking skills and enhances one's opportunities in the global job market. It offers career opportunities in diverse sectors such as diplomacy, international relations, technology, law, industry and marketing, migration and development, non-profit organizations, government or private administration, and heritage and culture tourism. Finally, given the inevitability of international travel and immigration, knowing a foreign language (FL) is advantageous because it provides personal gratification and a sense of security in the global village.

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³ An article on the Spanish learner participants of the present study was published in *Practice and theory in systems of education* (see Lomotey, 2019a). Support was received from the University of Ghana Building a New Generation of Academics in Africa (BANGA-Africa) Project with funding from the Carnegie Cooperation of New York.

However, several factors affect the successful learning of a FL. External issues such as teaching techniques and the learning environment as well as internal dynamics such as learner characteristics are examples of such factors (Cohen, 2010, p. 161). Some scholars argue that internal undercurrents have more significant bearings on the outcome of foreign language learning. Stevick (1980), for example, argues that “success (in FL) depends less on the materials and teaching techniques in the classroom and more on what goes on inside the learner” (as cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, n.p). Beliefs, attitudes, motivation, perceptions, FL anxiety, expectations and learning strategies are examples of what Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) describe as a “complex web” of learner characteristics which students bring to the language classroom. These factors were therefore investigated extensively in the 1970s and 1980s (Wesely, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Interesting studies that have focused on learner characteristics include Bartley’s (1970) work on the influence of attitude on attrition, Gardner’s (1985) research on attitude and motivation, Horwitz’s (1988) investigation of the beliefs about the language learning of beginning university foreign language students and Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope’s (1986) ground-breaking work on foreign language anxiety. Consequently, learner characteristics are an interesting area of inquiry that has produced an important contribution to the discourse in the field. These studies (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Corno, 1986; Cotterall, 1995; Martin & Ramsden, 1987; Ryan, 1984; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Schommer, 1990; Weinert & Kluwe, 1987) have shown that “attitudes toward learning, and the perceptions and beliefs that determine them, may have a profound influence on learning behaviour ... and on learning outcomes ... and are also central to the learner’s overall experience and achievements” (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, n.p). Considering the important role played by beliefs, attitudes, motivation, perceptions and language anxiety in language learning, studies on these factors are essential for the improvement of the language learning and teaching experience.

3. Objectives

Notwithstanding the significant body of work on the above-mentioned factors, contributions from the African context (specifically, Ghana) are rare. Given the uniqueness of each social group and its potential for enriching on-going academic debates with novel insights, the present study seeks to contribute to the existing literature with perceptions from a public Ghanaian university context. Indeed, as Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) report, it has been noted that cultural differences deriving from learner backgrounds can result in differences in students’ conceptions of learning. Considering the fact that scholars such as Horwitz (1999) have questioned this interpretation of inter-group belief differences in terms of culture, contributions from unexplored sites become even more necessary as they enable further comparisons across varying cultural and educational communities. Hence, the present research

aims at examining the following with a focus on beliefs, attitudes, and motivation in FLL:

- 1) Students' language beliefs and attitudes towards the study of Russian and Spanish as foreign languages.
- 2) The impact of these language beliefs and attitudes on students' motivation to learn the foreign languages in question.

4. Method

The study was done in the 2017/ 2018 academic year. A description of the research setting, the participants of the study, and of the data collection and analysis methods is provided below

4.1 Research Setting

Like other African countries, Ghana is a multilingual nation and has 81 languages of which 73 are indigenous whereas 8 are non-indigenous (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2020). Given its historical background of colonialism by the British, English is used as the official language. It is the principal language used in mass communication, and it is also the main medium of instruction from preschool through to the tertiary level.⁴ English is also used in most homes due to interethnic marriages and cultural assimilation. As a result of Ghana's multiethnic nature, Ghanaians are generally multilingual with one or two local languages as their L1 and English as their L2. Spanish or Russian is thus the L3 (or L4) of the Ghanaian participants of this study.

In relation to the context of our research, the University of Ghana is the oldest and largest Ghanaian university. Generally, the University receives a significantly larger number of applications than it can accept. However, the number of applications received for some courses such as the foreign languages is normally below the maximum quota⁵ provided by the University. Courses are therefore sometimes assigned by the University to student applicants. Students who cannot obtain admission to study their preferred courses due to the quota limit may be offered the opportunity to take up admission in the courses with vacancies if they so desire. In addition, the University uses a "bouquet system" which it introduced in the 2010/2011 academic year. By this method of admitting new students, subjects are categorized into groups or 'bouquets' and students must select a whole bouquet (rather than individual subjects) when choosing their courses during the application process. For example, a student who wants to study Linguistics, Sociology and Dance would have to select the bouquet offering Linguistics, Sociology and Russian. This implies that such a student would not get all his/her preferred subjects but would rather have to take up a course she or he had no intention studying.⁶

⁴ See Owu-Ewie (2006) and Anyidoho (2018) for an interesting read regarding language policy of education in Ghana.

⁵ Some languages such as French and Chinese sometimes have many more applicants than the quota.

⁶ See Csajbok-Twerefou, Chachu and Viczai (2014) for additional information on

The Modern Languages Department of the University has no official policy regarding the medium of instruction. Although there is undocumented support for the target-language-only approach⁷, studies reveal that code-switching does occur in the classrooms due to issues such as the need for effective communication, classroom management and rapport building (see Lomotey, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b). Consequently, classroom interaction in the research setting generally involves both the use of the target language and what Cook defines as the “own language”; i.e., “the language which the students already know and through which (if allowed), they can approach the new language” (Cook, 2010, p. xxii).

4.2 Participants and Survey Instrument

The data was collected through the administration of online questionnaires to first- and second-year students of Spanish (69) and Russian (45) as foreign languages at the University of Ghana. The responses of five Spanish students who did not complete their questions were excluded from the study, bringing the Spanish participant number to a total of 64. The survey instrument consisted of questions on the demographic backgrounds of the participants as well as their beliefs and attitudes towards the study of the languages in question. Additionally, some of the questionnaire items elicited information on the participants’ motivation. The questionnaire consisted of both close-ended questions that allowed for quantitative analysis as well as an open-ended question that sought to elicit qualitative data. Additional data on the research participants are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Demographic information on Spanish FL student participants

Question	Response	No	%
Age:	15- 20	51	79.7
	21- 25	13	20.3
	26- 30	0	0
	31 +	0	0
Gender:	Female	55	85.9
	Male	9	14.1
Nationality:	Ghanaian	61	95.3
	Other	3	4.7

language courses at the research setting.

⁷ The use of the foreign language only as the medium of instruction.

Level:	100	40	62.5
	200	24	37.5
For how long have you been studying Spanish?	1 Year	39	60.9
	2 Years	23	35.9
	< 2 Years	1	1.6
	No Response	1	1.6
How would you describe your level of proficiency in this language?	Beginner	20	31.3
	Low intermediate	34	53.1
	High intermediate	9	14.1
	Advanced	1	1.6
Did you choose this subject when applying for admission to the University?	Yes	50	78.1
	No	14	21.9
Where have you had exposure to this foreign language? (Please check all that are relevant)	At home or elsewhere in the local community	15	24.2
	In a different institution	6	9.7
	In a country where the language is spoken	1	1.6
	No other experience other than previous courses before this academic year	44	71

Table 2: Demographic information on Russian FL student participants

Question	Response	No	%
Age:	15- 20	35	77.8
	21- 25	10	22.2
	26- 30	0	0
	31 +	0	0
Gender:	Female	24	53.3
	Male	21	46.7
Nationality:	Ghanaian	45	100
	Other	0	0

Level:	100	13	28.9
	200	32	71.1
For how long have you been studying Russian?	1 Year	17	37.8
	2 Years	28	62.2
	< 2 Years	0	0
How would you describe your level of proficiency in this language?	Beginner	6	13.3
	Low intermediate	28	62.2
	High intermediate	8	17.8
	Advanced	3	6.7
Did you choose this subject when applying for admission to the University?	Yes	21	46.7
	No	24	53.3
Where have you had exposure to this foreign language? (Please check all that are relevant)	At home or elsewhere in the local community	5	11.1
	In a different institution	3	6.7
	In a country where the language is spoken	0	0
	No other experience other than previous courses before this academic year	37	82.2

4.3 Analytical Approach

As Mills, Pajares and Herron (2006) suggest, self-report instruments such as surveys have a disadvantage because “participants sometimes report what they believe is expected, rather than their true beliefs” (p. 285) and for that reason, “the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity” can alleviate this limitation (p. 285; as cited in Wesely, 2012, p. 99). In the current study, the online administration of the questionnaires was a means of assuring the participants of confidentiality and anonymity in order to facilitate the provision of their true beliefs and sentiments. To ensure anonymity, a secure platform was used in the collection of responses and no data was gathered on the respondents’ identities. Participants’ identities were completely anonymous even after they answered all questions; this made it impossible to trace responses to individual participants.

Furthermore, an alternative mode of analysis was used to complement the simple frequency counts that were done using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences/ Statistical Product and Service Solution (SPSS). Students’ beliefs and attitudes were also analyzed discursively by extracting comments made by participants in the open-ended section of the questionnaire.

5. Findings

The findings of the study will be analyzed according to the objectives of the study: students' language beliefs and attitudes towards the study of Spanish and Russian as foreign languages and the impact of the beliefs and attitudes on students' motivation to learn the languages.

5.1 Language Attitudes and Beliefs

Language beliefs are closely interconnected with language attitudes since it is assumed that, usually, negative beliefs lead to negative attitudes whereas positive beliefs lead to positive attitudes (Gabillon, 2007, p. 2). Barcelos and Kalaja define language beliefs as a composition of "opinions and ideas about the task of learning a second/ foreign language" (2003, p. 231). An important example for the present study is the popular belief that the study of foreign languages such as Spanish and Russian is irrelevant in the African context. Language attitudes are "usually regarded as a positive or negative disposition toward an object, situation, or behavior" (Gabillon, 2007, p. 2). As Wesely explains, current literature in second language acquisition have often approached the issue of attitudes "in relation to two different targets: attitudes toward the learning situation (often encompassing the instructor as well as the instructional techniques used ...), and attitudes toward the target community" (2012, p. 99). Taking these definitions into consideration, items 3, 4 and 12 of the questionnaire probed the participants' attitudes and beliefs towards the study of Spanish and Russian as FLs.

The demographic information shows that the majority of students of both Russian (82.2%) and Spanish (71%) had no prior familiarity or contact with the language before they started to study it. Nonetheless, interestingly, the greater number of Spanish students (78.1%) willingly chose Spanish when applying for admission whereas in the case of Russian, a slight majority of students (53.3%) were assigned the course by the University. Of these numbers, quite a high number of participants (44.4%) confirmed that they encountered some amount of opposition at home when they decided to study Russian. Although there is only a slight difference between this number and those who responded negatively (55.6%), the figures are indicative of the beliefs of parents, other relations, and the learners themselves about the importance of studying Russian. The majority of Spanish student participants did not experience any such opposition (81.3%).

On the reasons for the negative attitudes recorded towards the study of these languages, participants (43.8% for Russian, 61.5% for Spanish) reported that their parents or other relations believed it would not lead to any professional benefits. Also, some participants disclosed that their relations preferred they studied other subjects (43.8%, Russian). Nonetheless, the majority of student participants confirmed that they would recommend the study of Spanish (59.4%) and Russian (62.2%) to others. The results are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Data on language attitudes and beliefs amongst Spanish and Russian students

Spanish			
Question	Response	No	%
Did you encounter any opposition at home when you decided to study Spanish?	Yes	12	18.8
	No	52	81.3
If yes, please indicate the reasons given by parents or other relations who opposed the idea of studying Spanish as a University Student: ¹	They did not see the need for me to study Spanish as a foreign language	2	15.4
	They preferred other subjects	3	23.1
	They felt it would not lead to any professional benefits	8	61.5
Would you advise your sibling or any acquaintance of yours to study Spanish at the University of Ghana?	Yes	38	59.4
	No	2	3.1
	Maybe	24	37.5
Russian			
Question	Response	No	%
Did you encounter any opposition at home when you decided to study Russian?	Yes	20	44.4
	No	25	55.6
If yes, please indicate the reasons given by parents or other relations who opposed the idea of studying Russian as a University Student.	They did not see the need for me to study Russian as a foreign language	2	12.4
	They preferred other subjects	7	43.8
	They felt it would not lead to any professional benefits	7	43.8
Would you advise your sibling or any acquaintance of yours to study Russian at the University of Ghana?	Yes	28	62.2
	No	6	13.3
	Maybe	11	24.4

5.2 Effects on Motivation

Gardner (2005) highlights the essential role of motivation in the understanding of learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. He states that it offers “one parsimonious way of accounting for individual differences in second language acquisition” (Gardner, 2005, p. 21; as cited in Wesely, 2012, p. 100). According to Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory (1985), there are different types of motivation which can be identified according to how much a learner engages in an activity for reasons of personal choice. They broadly define the different types of motivation⁸ as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and amotivation.

On the one hand, they define intrinsic motivation as “doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable” (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 55). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is doing something for its instrumental value such as to get good grades, a job etc (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Intrinsic motivation in particular, has been considered a catalyst which results in high-quality learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 55). Conversely, as Ryan and Deci observe, extrinsic motivation has often been characterized in the classic literature “as a pale and impoverished (even if powerful) form of motivation that contrasts with intrinsic motivation” (p. 55) although there are indeed some types of extrinsic motivation which “represent active, agentic states” (2000a, p. 55). Regarding amotivation, Ryan and Deci explain that it is “the state of lacking the intention to act” (2000b, p. 72) and that “when amotivated, people either do not act at all or act without intent--they just go through the motions” (2000b, p. 72). The authors note that “amotivation results from not valuing an activity..., not feeling competent to do it ..., or not expecting it to yield a desired outcome” (2000b, p. 72).

Questions 4, 5, and 6 of the questionnaire sought to investigate participants’ motivation in light of these definitions. The findings demonstrated that the majority of participants (Russian- 55%; Spanish- 33.3%)⁹ had extrinsic motivation for the study of the respective languages. However, a high percentage of them (Russian- 60 %; Spanish- 73.4%) affirmed that they had positive impressions about the subject during the initial days of their first semester as students at the University. This implies some form of enjoyment and interest in the classes.

Additionally, in the case of Spanish, there was a close split between students who had extrinsic (33.3%) motivations and those who had intrinsic motivations (28.8 %). We posit that the Spanish learner participants’ intrinsic motivation is probably related to the significant number of Hispanic telenovelas which are shown on both national and private television channels.

⁸. That is, “the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action” (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 54).

⁹. It is necessary to note that other response options given to the question *could* also be indices of extrinsic motivation. Nonetheless, in the analysis, the authors focused on the option which *can* certainly be interpreted strictly as an indication of extrinsic motivation only.

Such programs expose students to Hispanic culture, thereby cultivating their interest in the language. Additionally, they enable important factors needed for motivation as explained by Kambon's theory of Second Language Acquisition as "L2 migration analogous, in many ways, to actual physical migration or 'cognitive expansion' towards a new socio-linguistic space" (2015, p. 1).

Furthermore, as explained above, although extrinsic motivation has typically been regarded as less advantageous for learning (in contrast with intrinsic motivation), certain types of extrinsic motivation do produce positive results. Ryan and Deci (2000b) classify four types of extrinsic motivation; namely, External Regulation¹⁰, Introjected Regulation, Identified Regulation, and Integrated Regulation. The authors posit that, generally, the last two are the more autonomous forms. They explain that the third one, regulation through identification, is a more autonomous or self-determined form of extrinsic motivation which "reflects a conscious valuing of a behavioral goal or regulation, such that the action is accepted or owned as personally important" (2000b, p. 72). They also identify the fourth, Integrated Regulation, as the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation and describe it as one which "occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one's other values and needs" (2000b, p. 73). As the authors report, studies in education show that more autonomous extrinsic motivation is "associated with more engagement ..., better performance ..., lower dropout..., higher quality learning ..., and better teacher ratings... , among other outcomes" (2000b, p. 73).

In the present study, the high number of Spanish student participants (78.1%)¹¹ who confirmed that they willingly opted to study the language seems to suggest that the majority of participants identify the study of Spanish as "personally important (Identified Regulation)", and, most likely, "congruent with their other values and needs (Integrated Regulation)" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 72-73) rather than doing so to satisfy an external demand or reward contingency (External Regulation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 72). Consequently, these findings indicate that generally, students of Spanish will have high quality learning as shown by previous studies (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). The results are synthesized in Table 4 below.

^{10.} The least autonomous form

^{11.} See Table 1

Table 4: Effects on motivation amongst Spanish and Russian students

Spanish			
Question	Response	No	%
What are some of the reasons that made you decide to study Spanish as a foreign language?	Because of the possible professional benefits that I can gain in the future.	21	33.3
	Spanish is among the six official languages of the United Nations.	8	12.7
	Spanish is the third most widely spoken foreign language.	7	11.1
	Spanish businesses are flourishing in Ghana.	1	1.6
	I just love the language	18	28.8
What was your impression about the Spanish language course in the initial days of your first semester as a University of Ghana student?	I liked it	47	73.4
	I disliked it	6	9.4
	I was indifferent	9	14.1
	I can't remember	2	3.1
What aspects of the Spanish language do you enjoy studying most? ²	Literature	3	4.7
	Grammar	48	75
	Civilization	9	14.1
	Orals	33	51.6
	All of the above	4	6.3
	None of the above	1	1.6
Did you have any major difficulties with the lessons during your initial weeks in the Spanish language classroom?	Yes	43	67.2
	No	21	32.8
Please indicate the areas in which you encountered these difficulties.	Grammar	10	21.7
	Vocabulary	15	32.6
	Listening	25	54.3
	Speaking	26	56.5

Russian			
Question	Response	No	%
What are some of the reasons that made you decide to study Russian as a foreign language?	Because of the possible professional benefits that I can gain in the future.	22	55
	Russian is among the six official languages of the United Nations.	8	20
	Russian is a Slavic language and Slavs are the largest ethnic groups in Europe.	1	2.5
	Russian businesses are flourishing in Ghana.	1	2.5
	I just love the language	8	20
What was your impression about the Russian language course in the initial days of your first semester as a University of Ghana student?	I liked it	27	60
	I disliked it	10	22.2
	I was indifferent	4	8.9
	I can't remember	4	8.9
What aspects of the Russian language do you enjoy studying most?	Literature	9	13.8
	Grammar	18	27.7
	Civilization	16	24.6
	Orals	17	26.2
	All of the above	4	6.15
	None of the above	1	2.22
Did you have any major difficulties with the lessons during your initial weeks in the Russian language classroom?	Yes	34	75.6
	No	11	24.4
Please indicate the areas in which you encountered these difficulties.	Grammar	18	28.6
	Vocabulary	15	23.8
	Listening	19	30.2
	Speaking	11	17.5

Learner beliefs and motivation are closely related in that by investigating learner beliefs, we can arrive at an understanding of why “learners prefer certain activities and not others” (Pajares & Schunk, 2002; as cited in Gabillon, 2007, p. 3). Extracts from the data showed that participants had

some negative beliefs about some of the courses and this affected their motivation. One participant affirmed that

Literature and civilization and history in Spanish are not necessary
(Female, 15- 20, Ghanaian, L200 Spanish).

Another noted that

There should be more practical work for this course than theory. It should be made easier because some courses are not at all. E.g. literature and civilization in level 200. Also, there should be more exchange programmes not just year abroad (Female, 15- 20, Ghanaian, L200 Spanish).

It was observed that learners do not see the need for these subjects because they do not understand the connection between them (i.e., language, literature, and civilization). These extracts therefore show that learners' beliefs about the lack of importance of literature and civilization affected their motivation to study these courses. In addition to their perceived lack of importance, learners' motivation for the study of these courses appeared to have been affected by their perceptions about the learning situation such as the medium of instruction and the mode of delivery. One participant noted that

The literature aspect of Spanish should be taught in two semesters as it is too much information to grab in just a semester by students who are not quite proficient in the language' (Female, 15- 20, Ghanaian, L200 Spanish).

Another noted:

I really love Spanish over French, but the civilisation and the literature has really done something to me. I honestly think that it could be explained more in English but written in Spanish. If I understand I will be able to elaborate in Spanish. The notes are a lot for those courses. Everything just gets jammed up as if I never learnt. Very frustrating. Thank you.

(Female, 15- 20, Ghanaian, L200 Spanish)

These extracts highlight the importance of taking students' expectations into consideration when designing language syllabi given that a mismatch between teachers' techniques and students' expectations can lead to frustration as expressed by the above quoted participants. As Chawhan and Oliver (2000) affirm, teachers' consciousness of learners' expectations "may contribute to a more conducive learning environment and to more effective learning" (p. 25; as cited in Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Also, as Krashen (2002) explains, tension and lack of self-confidence can result in a mental block against language learning.

A filter, an affective filter, can keep input from getting in. We used to speak of a mental block, a block against language learning.

Filter is another word for mental block. You have to let the input in. There can't be a filter keeping the input out, which is what we think the effect of attitude motivation is. With acquirers who do not have self-confidence, where the situation is tense, where (in Stevick's terms) they are on the defensive, the filter goes up. Even when the input is there, even when it is understood, they do not acquire with full efficiency. (p. 222)

The beliefs expressed by the participants are reflected in their motivations for the learning of the individual subjects. Interestingly, there was a striking similarity among students of both languages. As shown in Table 5 below, the majority of participants preferred 1) Grammar; 2) orals; 3) civilization; and 4) literature (in that order).

Table 5: Effects of beliefs on students' motivations for the learning of the individual subjects¹²

	Russian		Spanish	
	No	%	No	%
Grammar	18	27.7	48	75
Orals	17	26.2	33	51.6
Civilisation	16	24.6	9	14.1
Literature	9	13.8	3	4.7

6. Summary and Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings under two main subtopics: 1) the importance of learning the Spanish and Russian languages in Ghana and 2) the importance of literature and civilization courses in foreign language learning.

6.1 The Importance of Learning Spanish and Russian in Ghana

An interesting observation was made about the beliefs and attitudes of the participants towards the study of Spanish and Russian. First and foremost, it was observed that a higher number of the students of Spanish had positive beliefs and attitudes about their language of study than those of Russian. A significant percentage of them chose to study the language (50 of 64 [78.1%]) and 81.3% had no opposition from relations regarding their choice. The figures are lower for the Russian language. Less than half of the participants opted for the language (21 of 45 [46.7%]) whereas (20 of 45 [44.4%]) said they did encounter opposition from relations when they decided to study Russian. Consequently, a high percentage of the Spanish student participants received favorable attitudes from their relations regarding their FL study whereas in the case of Russian, this was so for only 55.6% of the participants.

Notwithstanding the apparent existence of unfavorable attitudes

¹². Data extracted from Table 4.

amongst some of the participants, it is striking that higher favorable percentages were recorded regarding the attitudes participants had *after* they had started to study the languages. For Russian, there was a significant growth in the number of people who were motivated to study the language (21 of 45 [46.7%]) and those who developed positive attitudes once they started the course (27 of 45 [60 %]). For Spanish, although 14 (21.9%) students (see Table 1) confirmed they had no motivation to embark on the study of the language, only 6 out of 64 participants (9.4%) said they remained discontented once they started the program. In the case of Russian, only 10 students (22.2%) continued to have unfavorable attitudes even after starting the language classes.

Similarly, in both cases, Table 3 shows that more than half of the participants affirmed they would recommend the course to others: Spanish (59.4%) and Russian (62.2%). Hence, although for Spanish 21.9% of the participants were obliged to study the language, only 2 participants (3.1%) confirmed that they would not recommend the course to others. For Russian as well, although 53.3% were obliged to take the course, the percentage of students who appeared to remain discontented after starting the classes and, for that reason, said they would not recommend the course was significantly low (6 of 45 [13.3%]).¹³ These summarized findings show a trend in the reduction of the negative attitudes (and most probably beliefs) of the participants after they had experienced studying the languages in question. Indeed, this observation is reflected in the comment below from one participant:

I think those in secondary schools should be informed about Russian so that when they come into the university, they won't be scared when they are given Russian as a course. (Male, 21-25, Ghanaian, L100 Russian)

As we stated in our introductory paragraph (see Section 1), the study of foreign languages is very rewarding and in no way irrelevant to our personal and socioeconomic needs. The problem, however, is that most people are hardly ever aware of its importance. This is not surprising considering that language itself is often considered as a mere tool for communication and thus taken for granted. The power of language, the window of opportunities it opens, its inextricable interconnection with every facet of the very existence of humankind is all too often disregarded.

Doubtlessly, Spanish and Russian are international languages that can offer the benefits of knowing other languages in addition to one's own. According to Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2020), Spanish has a total number of 537,905,240 (as L1: 463,025,390; as L2: 74,879,850) users in all countries. Currently, it is listed as the fourth most spoken language in the world after English, Mandarin Chinese, and Hindi (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2020). It is the most popular second language learned in the United States and

¹³. (see Table 3)

it is one of the official languages of the United Nations and many other international organizations such as the International Criminal Court and the International Civil Aviation Organization. Russian is also an important language with 257,962,060 (as L1: 153,580,550; as L2: 104,326,510) users in all countries (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2020). It is listed as the eighth most spoken language in the world (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2020). Like Spanish, Russian also occupies a central place in the United Nations and many other international organizations such as the International Criminal Court and the International Civil Aviation Organization.

In relation to the importance of learning these two languages in Ghana, it is essential to note that Ghana has bilateral relations with both countries (Spain and Russia). Ghana's bilateral relations with Spain date back to 1967 (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2020). The cooperation between the two countries was made evident by the opening of the Ghanaian Embassy in Madrid in 2004 and the Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of Spain in Accra in 2008. Since 2011, the economic relations between the two countries has increased steadily and the bilateral commercial relations were reported as having hit a historic record in 2019 (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2020). Ghana also has strong relations with other Latin American countries such as Cuba, especially in the field of education since many of Ghana's medical doctors (among other students) received scholarships to train in Cuba.

In the case of Russian, Ghana's bilateral cooperation dates to the 1950's (Kulkova & Sanusi, 2016). Current Ghana-Russia relations are evident in the energy and mining sectors, the field of nuclear energy, security, and education, among others. Kulkova and Sanusi report that by 2011 around 4000 Ghanaian specialists had received education in the USSR/Russia (2016, p. 307).

This brief overview of the importance of Spanish and Russian, and the bilateral ties that have existed (through political dialogue, educational links, economic and commercial cooperation etc) between Ghana, Spain, Latin American countries such as Cuba and Russia, should lay bare the importance of the study of these languages. Indeed, the assumption that the learning of foreign languages yields little benefits is the fruit of negative beliefs and attitudes that have evolved due to the limited knowledge people have about the interconnection between language, history, culture and human existence. This once more highlights the importance of civilization and literature classes in FL courses.

6.2 The Importance of Literature and Civilization Courses in Foreign Language Learning

The findings demonstrate that students of both Spanish and Russian had a low appreciation of the relevance of civilization and literature courses. However, as shown by intercultural communication studies, language learning goes beyond learning how to speak the language, as it encompasses how to use

the language and be pragmatically competent in it as well. Given the fact that “language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality” (Tello Rueda, 2006, p. 172), it is essential to note that “just knowing the language is not enough” (Neff & Rucynski Jr, 2013, p. 13). Certainly, a high grammatical competence is not always indicative of a successful pragmatic performance in the target language (i.e., the foreign language).

Indeed, several authors have highlighted what Ziesing describes as the link between cultural literacy and language fluency (2001; as cited in Neff & Rucynski Jr, 2013). Byram and Risager (1999) note that the role of the language teacher has been defined as that of a “professional mediator between foreign languages and culture” (p. 58; as cited in Neff & Rucynski Jr, 2013). Frantzen (2001) also makes mention of “the artificial language/ literature dichotomy” (p. 123) and notes “the common ground between teaching language and literature and literature theory” (p. 122). Vernier, Barbuzza, Giusti, and Moral (2008) perceive the teaching of culture as a fifth skill for language learners that “enhances students’ overall learning experience” (p. 268; as cited in Neff & Rucynski Jr, 2013, p. 12). On his part, Shanahan (1997) points out that “the cultural features of literature represent a powerful merging of language, affect, and intercultural encounters and often provide the exposure to living language that a FL student lacks” (p. 168). On why such emphasis is placed on culture, Neff and Rucynski Jr. (2013, p. 12) note:

... it is not enough just to have linguistic competence when communicating with someone in a foreign language. Specific cultural references from geography, occupations, pastimes, and historical events and personalities always appear in language, and each culture follows special rules regarding formal and informal address and conversational routines. In addition to memorizing vocabulary and grammar, anyone becoming proficient in a foreign language must know the sociocultural rules native speakers use when they communicate with one another. Not knowing the cultural component of language is problematic.

Unfortunately, students are often unaware of this since they do not realise that literature is also a means to the study of the language itself. Indeed, as Frantzen (2001, p. 125) notes, “works of literature not only provide meaningful contexts for presenting and practicing grammatical structures in language classes, they also provide examples of structures that can be analysed at more advanced levels for the meaning they convey”. Subsequently, discussions of authors’ use of particular structures, vocabulary, or sociolinguistic features constitute “an essential means of linguistic analysis that can be used to enrich foreign language literature classes” (Frantzen, 2001, p. 120).

Surely, a collaboration between language and literature teachers would go a long way in simultaneously developing the principal skills necessary in language learning. This has been evidenced by Lafayette and Buscaglia’s

(1985) study. Using a non-equivalent pretest- post-test design, these authors compared the improvement in the second language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing of fourth semester French students enrolled in a content course taught in French and students enrolled in a traditional fourth semester French language-focused course. The results were analysed using a covariance analysis to find out the mean gain scores of the intact experimental and control sections on the students' MLA Cooperative French Test. For the experimental group, significant improvement was found in their listening, speaking, and writing skills whereas for the control group, an improvement was found in their listening and writing skills. Their findings suggest that culture and civilization content courses "offer the student a valuable time and money saving option since he or she might be able to study a specific content while simultaneously improving L2 skills" (Lafayette & Buscaglia, 1985, p. 323).

It therefore remains clear that culture, civilization, and literature courses are essential components of FL courses. The important thing is for teachers to carefully select reading materials that are congruent with the learners' degree of proficiency in the target language. As Shanahan (1997, pp. 170-171) notes "one must decide such questions as 'how much', 'when', and 'which literary works' before reaching the final goal of syllabi that maximize the potential that literature has to offer".

Additionally, as learners have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations which include professional ambitions as translators, ministers, ambassadors, Cates' (2004) argument becomes relevant here. Students should realize that the study of a FL goes beyond the study of a linguistic system, given that it can also be perceived as "an international language for communication with people from around the world" (p. 31) and a subject for "learning about the world's peoples, countries, and problems" (Cates, 2004, p. 31; as cited in Neff & Rucynski Jr., 2013, p. 13). Undoubtedly, as Neff and Rucynski Jr contend, students must be made aware of the role of culture and its potential in the study of international languages "as their gateway to becoming global citizens" (Neff & Rucynski Jr, 2013, p. 13).

In sum, the essential role of civilization and literature in language learning should not be underestimated. Language learning must include a focus on language in context. As emphasized by Tello Rueda, "furnishing students with linguistic tools that allow them to realize and comprehend linguistic action in a contextually appropriate way ... is evidently related to the teaching of the TL¹⁴ culture, not viewing it as a product, but as a process that shapes language and at the same time is shaped by language" (2006, p. 171). Needless to say, the royal road to approaching the complex interaction between language and culture is through literature and civilization.

¹⁴. Target language

7. Conclusion

The present study set out to investigate (1) students' language beliefs and attitudes towards the study of Spanish and Russian as foreign languages and (2) the impact of these language beliefs and attitudes on students' motivation to learn the foreign languages in question. The findings show that the majority of Spanish learners were motivated to study the language and did not encounter any discouragement or resistance from family and friends. In the case of the Russian language, a slight majority embarked on the study not by choice but because they were assigned the course by the University. In tandem with this finding, quite a significant number of the Russian participants confirmed that their family and/or friends expressed doubts about the relevance of Russian as a University course.

The study also showed that the participants had negative perceptions and attitudes towards certain subjects, namely, literature and civilization. This negativity affected their study of the languages. Moreover, certain external factors such as instructors' language choice, teaching approach, syllabus contents and workload affect what goes on inside the learner by triggering language anxiety and demotivation.

Finally, another important finding is that although the Spanish and Russian FL learner participants had different beliefs about the languages in question, learners from both groups developed positive perceptions about their language of study once they had begun the university program. This shows that student perceptions, attitudes and beliefs can be modified with the correct teaching approach.

Consequently, lecturers should make a conscious effort to monitor these student difficulties and help resolve them by adopting teaching techniques that will increase both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. This will facilitate the overall goal of the effective teaching and learning of Spanish and Russian as foreign languages. As Okura (2016, p. 138) observes, "good teaching does not necessarily equate to hours spent planning. Instead, good teaching requires a lot of thinking – thinking about what matters to students, what students need to know, how educators can move their students forward, and to ensure that the students comprehend what is being taught".

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