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**DO HISPANIC CULTURAL ACTIVITIES IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF STUDENTS IN SPANISH COLLEGE CLASSES?**

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**ABSTRACT**

According to previous research, there is a relationship between language and cultural identity. It is also believed that including cultural identity in our teaching curriculum can improve our student's interest in the subject matter we teach, improve the student's teamwork abilities, create more open-minded students, improve student's empathetic feelings towards each other and it could also promote safety and confidence in our classes (Mercurri, 2012; Marks, 2021). Furthermore, Peng (2017) also considers that cultural identity may promote language learning, may improve bidialectal relationships and it may also increase the idea of belongingness to a specific group. This research will answer the following question: does the use of cultural activities affect the academic success in college Spanish classes? 11 classes participated with a total of 146 participants in Spanish college classes in a college in southeast Texas. The results show that 64 percent of the classes who participated improved their total average grade when compared to the non-treatment class. Therefore, we recommend the inclusion of Hispanic Cultural activities in Spanish college classes.

**Keywords:** Spanish, Spanish classes, Hispanic Culture, Spanish teaching, Hispanic Cultural Activities.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

According to previous research, there is a relationship between language and cultural identity. It is also believed that including cultural identity in our teaching curriculum can improve our student's interest in the subject matter we teach, improve the student's teamwork abilities, create more open-minded students, improve student's empathetic feelings towards each other and it could also promote safety and confidence in our classes (Mercurri, 2012; Marks, 2021). Furthermore, Peng (2017) also considers that cultural identity may promote language learning, may improve bidialectal relationships and it may also increase the idea of belongingness to a specific group.

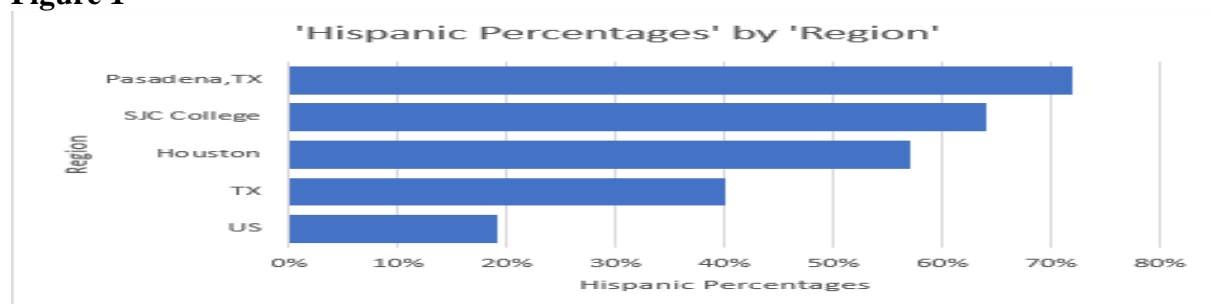
There is still debate on whether we should include culture and cultural activities in our classrooms (Genc and Bada, 2005). In this work, we support the inclusion of culture in Spanish language learning classes for the following reasons: there is a possible relationship between the student's cultural identity and language learning. It may also support the academic success of students of Spanish classes at the college level. Some other reasons in previous research include the following. It could improve the students' social skills, promote the idea of belonging to a social group and it could motivate students to learn more about other cultures and languages. It could also aid language learning at the semantic and pragmatic level (grammar and meaning). It could motivate students to learn about real people and real places that are part of a different culture than their own. There is a big probability that you will find a student with a different

cultural identity than your own in your class. It could also improve the teaching skills of the professors who use them. It could be part of the teaching curriculum in language learning. Finally, it could also improve the academic success of the students in language classes.

The term Latino or Hispanic in this work refers to anybody who described themselves in the 2020 census as such with Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban or another type of Hispanic or Latino form from any of the 21 Latin American countries and Spain where they speak Spanish and Spanish is the official language (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela, also Puerto Rico) (Chávez, 2022b). It also includes persons who may not speak Spanish but still identify themselves as Hispanic, Latino, LatinX or Latine, Caribbean, Afro Caribbean, and or Afro-Latino. It is a matter of preference of the person you ask about it. Some people do not like either of those terms. They prefer their terminology from their country like Mexican, Cuban etc.

At the national level, Hispanic or Latinos are now about 19 percent of the total population (over 57 million) (Census.gov, 2023). Only about 15 percent of them had a bachelor’s degree in 2016 (PewResearch.org, 2016). 50 percent of Hispanics attended a two-year college at the national level (PewResearch.org, 2016). More than 50 percent of the total Hispanic population in the US lives in California, Texas, and Florida (Interchange.org, 2020). See Figure 1 for more information.

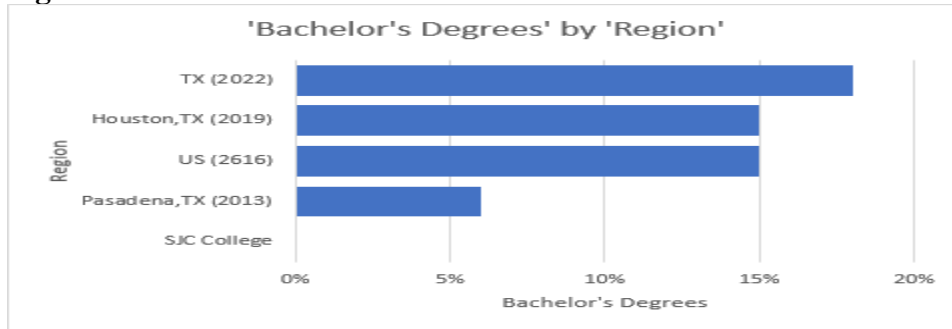
**Figure 1**



Hispanics or Latinos in the US are mostly from Mexican or Mexican American descent, Puerto Rican, Salvadorean and Cuban and Dominican Republic (Chávez, 2022c). Most of Hispanics who get a college degree at the national level are from Spain (first place), Venezuela, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Cuba, Ecuador, Dominican Republic, México (9th) and Honduras (10<sup>th</sup> place) (Chávez, 2022c; Pew Research. Org). Most of the educated Hispanics or Latinos live in the following cities: Miami, Washington, DC., Orlando, Boston, and San Francisco (Atlantic.com, Chávez, 2022c). Hispanic or Latinos in the US are a very diverse population including social, economic, and geographical differences. However, we also share several cultural communalities like the Spanish language, several festivities or holidays, religion, family importance, food, our love for music etc. (Interchange.org, 2020). Latinos also share the following values: Latinos are hard workers, they have very high aspirations in life, Latinos are experts in overcoming obstacles in life and Latinos are very confident in their futures (Hispanicstar.org, 2022).

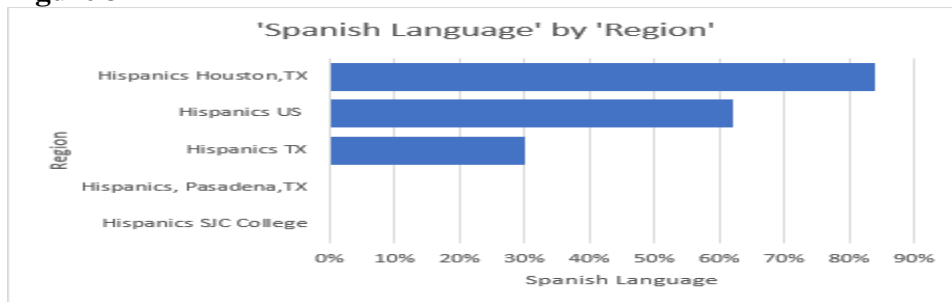
Hispanic population in Texas is now about 40 percent of the population with about 12 million people. About 70 percent of Hispanics in Texas have a high school diploma and only about 18 percent has a bachelor’s degree (Chávez, 2022). About 30 percent of Texans speak Spanish at home (Statisticalatlas.com, 2023). See figure 2 for more information.

**Figure 2**



As of 2019, about 68 million people speak Spanish in the US (62 percent of Hispanics or Latinos). The top 5 states by percentages are as follow: Texas 30 percent (about 7 million people), California 29 percent (about 10 million people), New Mexico 28 percent (about 500 thousand), Nevada 21 percent (about 500 thousand) and Florida 21 percent (about 4 million) (Statisticalatlas.com, 2023). See Figure 3 for more information.

**Figure 3**



Regarding Houston area (Houston, Woodlands, Sugarland), we can mention that Latinos or Hispanics are about 39 percent of the population (Houston.org, 2022). Hispanics account for about 36 percent of the total labor force (UH.edu, 2019). We are from Mexican or Mexican American descent, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, central American and or South American (UH.edu, 2019). About 57 percent of the Hispanic population in the Houston Area was born there (UH.edu, 2019). In the Houston Area, only about 15 percent of Hispanics or Latinos have a bachelor’s degree or higher degree (UH.edu, 2019). About 84 percent of the Hispanics speak Spanish compared to only about 71 percent in Texas and 70 percent at the national level (UH.edu, 2019).

Pasadena, Texas has only about 152 thousand people and is about 72 percent Hispanic, 23 percent white and about 2 percent black (TexasDemographics.com, 2013). Most foreign-born people in Pasadena are from Mexico #1 (about 2.5 million), India #2 (about 280 thousand), and

El Salvador #3 (about 3 thousand) (Datausa.io, 2013). About 80 percent of children in grades K-12 are Hispanic (KHOU.com, 2013). In Pasadena 53 percent (4870) of people graduating from universities are Hispanic, White 29 percent (2667), Black or African American 10 percent (914) and Asian 6 percent (531) (Datausa.io, 2013). The biggest colleges or universities in Pasadena, Texas by degrees given are as follows: San Jacinto Community College #1 with 74 percent (7090), University of Houston-Clear Lake #2 with 25 percent (2412) and Texas Chiropractic College Foundation Inc #3 with 1 percent (66) (Dausa.io, 2013). As San Jacinto College is the number 1 choice for higher education in Pasadena, here is more information about it (Collegefactual.com, 2023; Sanjac.edu, 2023). In the fall 2022 about 64 percent were Hispanics (about 20 thousand), White 7 percent (about 5 thousand), Black 10 percent (about 3 thousand), Asian 6 percent (about 2 thousand) the rest other.

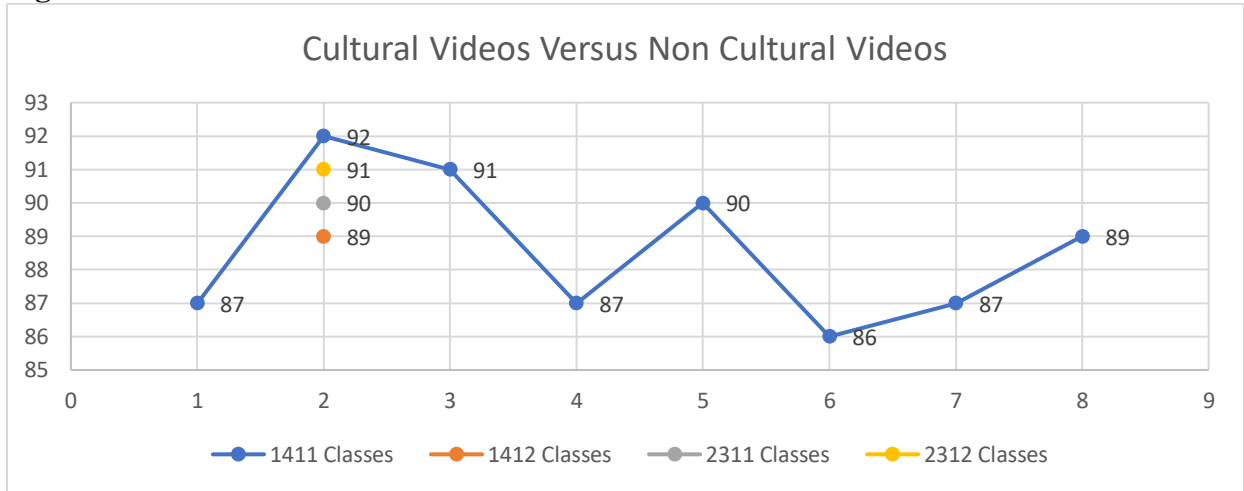
## 2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research will answer the following questions: Does the use of Hispanic cultural activities affect the academic success in college Spanish classes? Participants who are 18 and older and who are not in dual credit classes participated in the study. This study has three surveys. One is the permission survey. Survey 2 is the cultural identity survey. It asks the students to self-categorize into different cultural and language categories. Survey 3 is a self-report of the language's students know. Surveys one and two were done at the beginning of the semester. Survey 2 was repeated at the end of the semester. The results were compared to the end of semester final grade or total average grade in class to see if there is any Pearson correlation with them or any of their questions. There was also a control group in a class that did not include any personalized Hispanic cultural activities in that class. The other classes had personalized cultural activities based on students' responses. Some examples include the use of cultural videos on topics students request to learn about, others suggested by the textbook, others the professor believes are relevant to the chapter or topic covered in class. 171 students took the survey. However, 25 were eliminated as they did not complete the permission slip nor did both surveys. Therefore, there was a total of 146 students in Beginning and Intermediate Spanish classes or semesters 1 and 2 for beginning, and year 2 of Spanish or semesters 3 and 4.

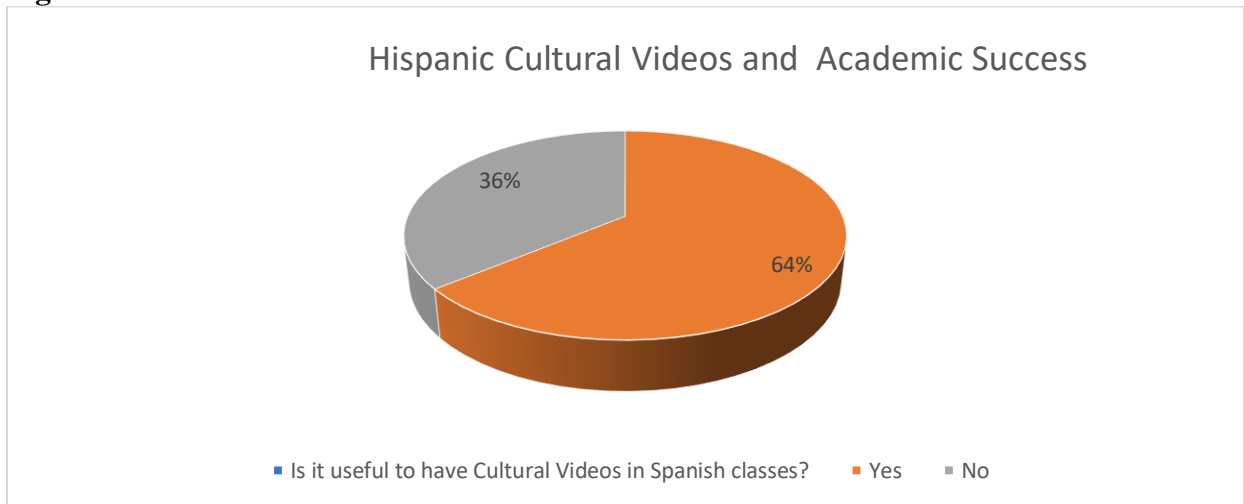
## 3. RESULTS

The findings are as follow for question 1: Does the use of cultural activities affect the academic success in college Spanish classes? 64 percent of the 11 classes that participated increased or stayed the same by 0 to 5 points. See figures 1 and 2 for more information. However, there were 3 classes that did not improve their class average after using cultural activities in class. Therefore, more research is needed. As 64 percent of the classes increased their class average grade, we do recommend the use of cultural activities in Spanish classes. Please note that the use of cultural activities in class does not replace the normal curriculum that also includes the grammar and vocabulary requirements that faculty may have according to their educational institution.

**Figure 1**

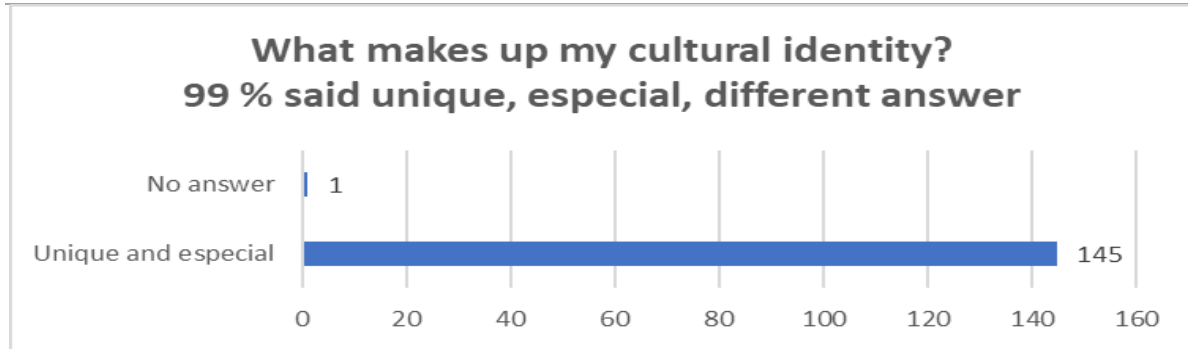


**Figure 2**



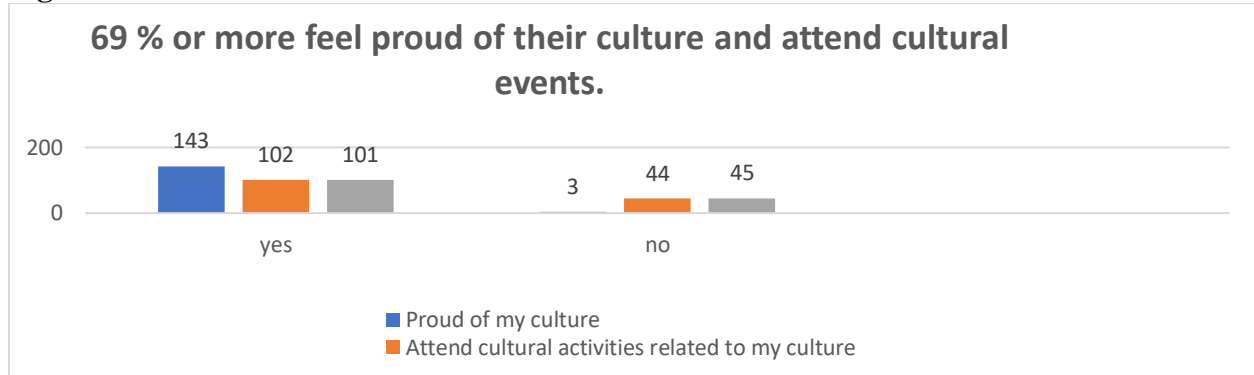
For question 2, How does the cultural identity of my students affect their academic success in college Spanish classes? We found out that 99 percent of the participants said their cultural identity is unique and each of them gave a different answer for cultural identity. 69 percent of the students said they feel proud of their culture and attend cultural events. As you can see, students in this research value culture, cultural identity and cultural events. That is one explanation as to why students responded well to the cultural videos or activities done in class. See Figure 3 for more information.

**Figure 3**



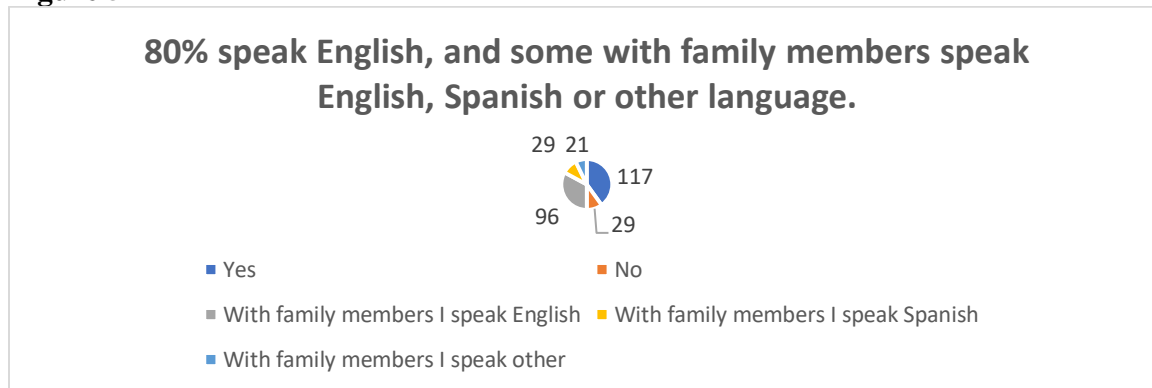
37 percent of students said other was their cultural identity besides white, Mexican American, Hispanic or Latino. 51 percent of students said they are taking the class as a requirement, are white or Hispanic or Latino. See Figure 4 for more information.

Figure 4



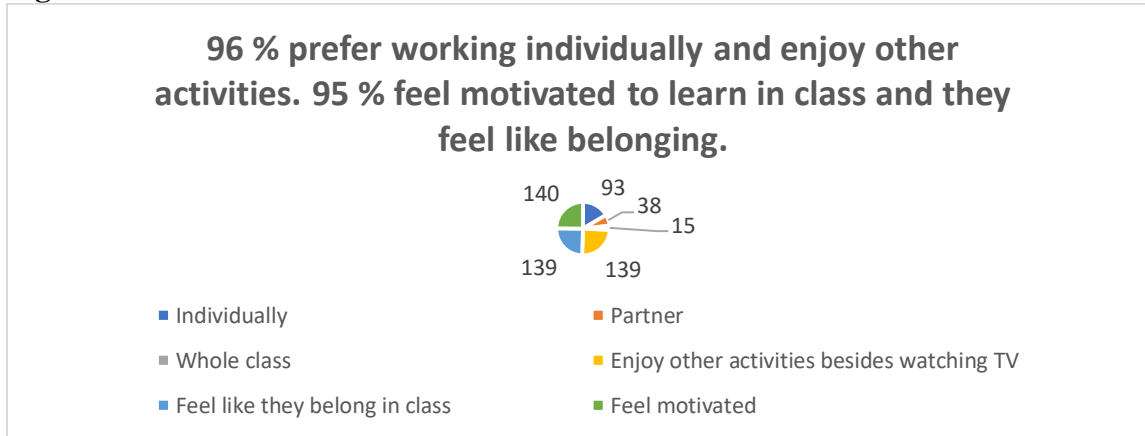
76 percent of the students love language, food and music as seen on picture 5. When asked about their favorite holidays Christmas was the number one choice for 56 percent of the students. Other holidays included Halloween and Thanksgiving. 80 percent of the participants speak English at home with family members. However, they also speak other languages like Spanish.

Figure 5



96 percent of my students love working individually and enjoy other activities besides the ones that come from the textbook. Some of those include cultural videos about holidays, important hispanic people etc. See figure 6 for more information.

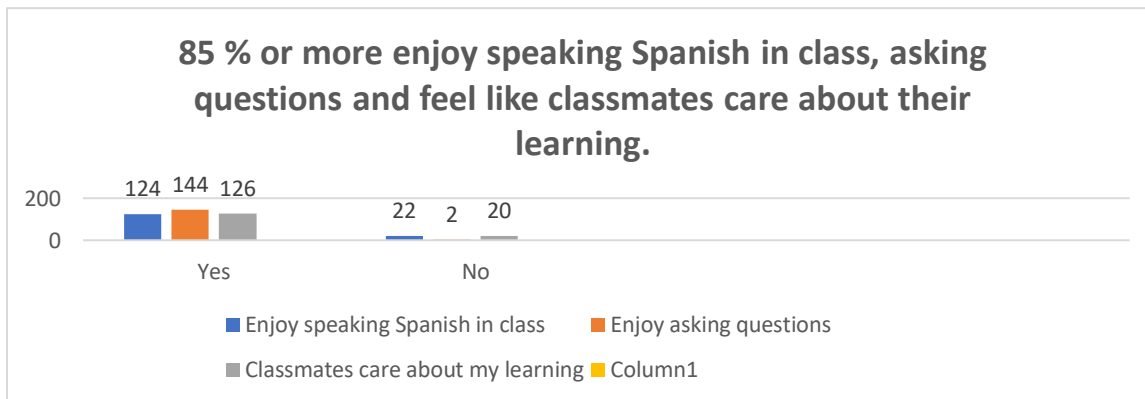
Figure 6



80 percent of the students are at level 5 of English. 85 percent or more of the participants enjoy speaking Spanish in class, asking questions and feel like classmates' care about their learning. This supports the theory of empathy mentioned in other research about culture and languages. See figure 7 for more information.

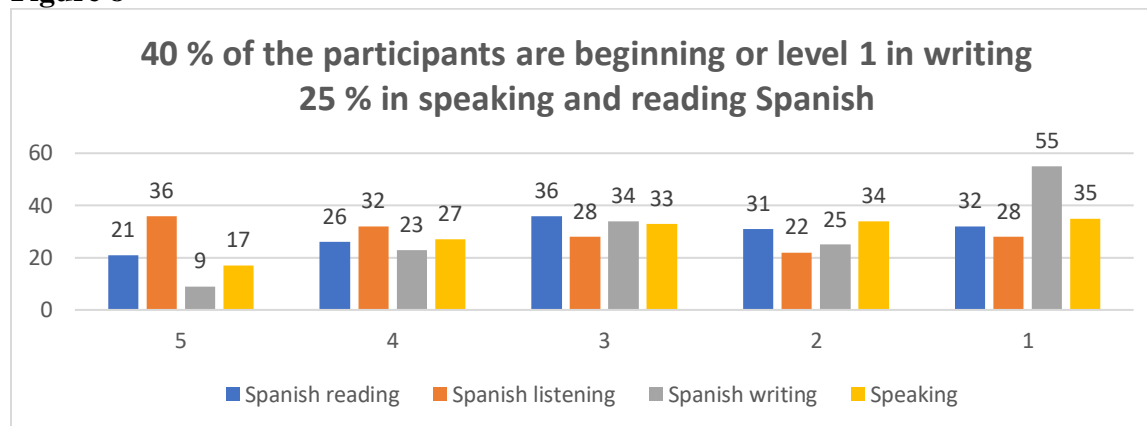
Figure

7



40 percent of the participants are beginner speakers of Spanish and/or level one in writing. 25 percent of them needed help in Speaking and reading in Spanish. Therefore, the professor needs to increase writing and speaking skills in class, in assignments and or exams. See Figure 8 for more information.

Figure 8



There were also questions about the professor’s teaching style. 99 percent of the participants stated that they believe their professor cares about students and their learning. 73 percent of the participants gave recommendations to improve the professor’s teaching skills. Some examples are as follows: teach more about the Hispanic culture, allow the class to do more research activities about a cultural topic, learn about all forms of Spanish, talk about cultural holidays and traditions related to the culture of the students, etc. Finally, only 10 percent gave final comments and 90 percent gave no comments. Some of the comments included to teach more about the Hispanic holidays, its meaning, etc. As you can see, the use of cultural activities helps students to increase their academic success in Spanish classes. However, there were some beginning classes that did not increase their academic success in class. The researcher needs to investigate other ways to improve the academic success of the students besides the use of cultural activities.

**4. ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As seen in the previous results, the use of culture in Spanish classes is beneficial for some students. However, we should consider the size of the sample. Therefore, more research must be done with a larger group of participants. Some previous research about languages and culture has been done in the past. Therefore, here we present some information relevant to our research. The plus sign + indicates that yes, we also agree with previous research, but the minus sign – means that we did not find that in our research, or it was not proven.



**Table 1**

Previous Research	Chávez 2023 (this work)
1. There is a possible relationship between the student’s cultural identity and language learning.	+yes, 64 percent of the classes who participated improved their total class average between 0-5 points.
2. It could improve the student’s social skills.	+, yes, students worked individually and or partner and or group
3. It could promote the idea of belonging to a social group.	+, yes, all students identified themselves as belonging to a cultural or ethnical group 99 percent of them
4. It could motivate students to learn more about other cultures and languages.	+, yes, participants put down in the comments topics to learn more about the Hispanic or Latino culture like holidays, Hispanic food, etc.
5. It could aid language learning at the semantic and pragmatic level (grammar and meaning).	+, yes, students were able to learn language through exams, listening, speaking, reading and writing activities
6. It could motivate students to learn about real people and real places that are part of a different culture than their own.	+, yes participants put down in the comments topics to learn more about the Hispanic or Latino culture like holidays, food, etc.
7. There is a big probability that you will find a student with a different cultural identity than your own in your class.	+, yes, most of the students all have unique, different cultural identities
8. It could also improve the teaching skills of the professors who use them.	+, yes, students also gave recommendations to practice to the professor investigating
9. It could be part of the teaching curriculum in language learning.	+yes, in the campus where the study happened, it is a requirement to teach about other cultures of the Hispanic world
10. Does the use of cultural activities affect the academic success in college Spanish classes?	+yes, 64 percent of the classes who participated improved their total class average between 0-5 points.

**5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As you can see, the use of cultural activities in Spanish language classes at the beginning and intermediate level helped to improve the academic success of the students who participated in the research. This work also supports a relationship between language and cultural identity as many of the students who participated in the research consider themselves as Hispanic or Latinos. They also participated in cultural activities outside the classroom. However, more research is needed with a bigger sample and in more classes. Some general recommendations are given as follow:

- Increase the number of participants.

- Increase the number and type of classes.
- Do research with other level of Spanish classes like superior and advanced.
- Continue doing Hispanic cultural activities in classes with students in Spanish classes as they helped with the academic success of the students who participated in this research.

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