



The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine Campus
Faculty of Humanities and Education
Caribbean Studies Project
HUMN 3099

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Title of Thesis:

THE “STIGMA” SURROUNDING THE PURSUIT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS A
CAREER AND FIELD OF STUDY IN TRINIDAD

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TITLE OF ASSIGNMENT – The “Stigma” Surrounding The Pursuit of Foreign Languages as a Career and Field of Study in Trinidad

COURSE CODE – HUMN 3099

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank Allah for equipping me with the strength, knowledge and drive to complete this research project. Secondly, I express my utmost gratitude to my supervisor, Ms. Savrina Chinien, for being a gentle guide and source of inspiration, as well as for providing timely and detailed feedback which motivated me to finish this thesis to the best of my abilities. My appreciation also goes out to the participants who so willingly and kindly set aside time to complete my questionnaire. They were indispensable to the success of this research project. Lastly, I thank my Mom for her continuous love and support.

Abstract

In Trinidad, the study of foreign languages has always been perceived as inferior to the study of medicine, law and engineering. This perception has been detrimental to the motivation and confidence of foreign language students over the years and has not only deteriorated their learning experience but has widened socioeconomic divisions in our society through the persistence of hierarchical thinking. It can therefore be said that there is a “stigma” surrounding foreign languages as a career and field of study. This thesis investigates the factors contributing to this “stigma” as well as the extent to which it is present in our society. This study also aims to fill the lacunae in existing literature on the topic of foreign language in the Caribbean and Latin America through a detailed analysis of the perspectives and experiences of foreign language students across two levels of education - secondary and tertiary.

The findings of this study authenticated the researcher’s theory that the ingrained elitist disposition of Trinidadians was at the root of the “stigma” surrounding the pursuit of foreign languages as a career and field of study - a “stigma” which was also proved to exist in Trinidadian society to a large extent. This elitist mentality, undoubtedly a colonial legacy, generated three common misconceptions about foreign languages in Trinidad: (1) STEM careers are more “prestigious” and “lucrative” than careers in FLs (2) Jobs for FL Majors in Trinidad are scarce and (3) A Career in Education is the most viable employment option for FL Majors in Trinidad.

Keywords: Trinidad, Stigma, Foreign Languages, Career, Field of Study, Elitist, Colonialism, STEM, Prestigious, Globalization

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Introduction

Language, whether verbal or non-verbal, is undoubtedly the basis of all human communication and interaction. As the world becomes more and more globalized¹, the benefits of language, particularly learning a foreign language, are making themselves known. Studies have shown that the more proficient a person is at a foreign language, the more likely they are to have a competitive advantage at work (Grosse, 367). The use of a foreign language is also associated with positive attitudes towards innovative technologies and improved self-regulation (Hadjichristidis et al, 647).

There has therefore been a surge in the number of people willing to learn foreign languages (later abbreviated as FLs) across the globe in recent years and the popularization and predominance of FL music in Western media have only increased these numbers. This phenomenon has traveled to Trinidad where the highly adored East Asian culture has spawned numerous students in Mandarin, Japanese and Korean language. Furthermore, the influx of Venezuelan immigrants has enabled many Trinidadians to traverse the “veiled” aspect of our heritage, the Spanish language, with renewed respect and appreciation. There is no doubt that in the coming years, with the reintegration of Venezuelans into our society, Trinidadian English Creole will mutate and evolve into a hybrid language consisting of even more Spanish language elements than it presently contains. However, this trend of the circulation and penetration of FLs around and within Trinidadian society as well as its evolution is, by no means, a new phenomenon.

Trinidad is an island with a rich linguistic history that is often overlooked. During the Spanish rule which began in 1592, linguistic development was slow at first, given that only

¹Globalization is defined as "shorthand for the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology, and resulting in new patterns of global activity, community organization and culture (3).

few Amerindians and Africans were in direct contact with the Spanish language. The Cedula of Population in 1783, however, accelerated our linguistic evolution via the arrival of Francophone European and African immigrants who outnumbered the existing population of Indigenous, European and African Hispanics. French Creole became the dominant language among the masses while Spanish remained the language of the European upper class. In the 19th century, during British rule, the island's linguistic composition was further diversified by the arrival of the indentured Indians, Venezuelans and Madeirans. This linguistic diversification was, however, not so much a linguistic diversification as a linguistic paradox².

In 1838, E.L Joseph, a Scot who had been residing in Trinidad for some 20 years attested to Trinidad's linguistic paradox at the time, "... at the present day, creole French is more the language of the people here than English or Spanish, although it has been a British possession for more than 40 years." That is not to say that Spanish and English were not spoken. The hispanophone population at this time was, in fact, growing among the working class and decreasing among the upper class. As indentured Indians began populating the island in large numbers from 1845, the use of English extended beyond the plantocracy. The indentured Indians, however, preserved their languages of Bhojpuri and Hindi by insisting on speaking both among themselves (Jayaram, 43).

In the 1970s, Spanish was still the first language of some old-aged Trinidadians also capable of speaking English and French Creole. Predictably, their passing signaled the extinction of an entire generation of native Trinidadian hispanophones and the birth of another generation of Standard English and English Creole speakers. Around this time, Bhojpuri was also considered a dying language. Younger generations, now assimilated into the education system and integrated into a creolized society, adopted Standard English and

² This term, created by the researcher, refers to the flagrant disconnect between the language of the colonizers and the colonized in Trinidad during the 19th century. Despite being under British rule, French Creole was the dominant language and not English (Winford, 32)

English Creole as mother tongue. The impact of lusophone immigrants on our language was minimal³. Unlike Spanish, which has hopes of being revived and French, which lingers in the lexicon and syntax of English Creole as well as continues to be spoken to a smaller extent in the rural community of Paramin in the form of Patois, “Portuguese as a heritage language in Trinidad and Tobago has become entirely obsolete with no hopes of revitalisation.” (Ferreira, 103)

Despite all of this, FLs in Trinidad continue to be relegated to the margins of academia and the world of work. Our vibrant linguistic past and its present traces are ignored and Trinidad is largely considered a monolingual society. Although our Creole is significantly influenced by the French language, both lexically and syntactically, the Language and Language Education Policy stipulates that Spanish must be instituted as the first FL in all secondary schools in light of the geopolitics of the region. French, however, does not share this status. Notwithstanding this, French is still taught in numerous secondary schools across the island, namely “prestige” schools, and is offered as a Bachelor of Arts Degree at the undergraduate level at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

FLs are thus merely viewed as a hobby or a supplementary skill to include on one's curriculum vitae and not as a vital part of our essence as Trinidadians nor a valid career path. Individuals primarily pursue business, medicine, law or engineering as career paths since these fields, in Trinidad, are perceived as highly prestigious as well as windows to wealth and opportunity. FLs, on the other hand, are discredited since there is the notion that there are inadequate career opportunities for FL majors. There is also the misconception that the career opportunities that do exist are not esteemed enough or profitable enough for FL majors to succeed by the standards of our capitalist society. FL majors are therefore advised to pair a FL with another field. If the FL stands alone, it is perceived as valueless. It is thus evident

³ "Unlike the Western European languages of former political and social colonizers, Portuguese never developed a Creole within or without the small Portuguese community in Trinidad. As a minority heritage language or ethnolect, in Trinidad, Portuguese has made no impact on the lexicon of Trinidadian English..."(Ferreira, 13) v

that a “stigma”⁴ exists when it comes to the pursuit of FLs as a career and field of study in Trinidad.

Rationale

Having studied both French and Spanish at CSEC (The Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate) and CAPE (The Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination) levels and presently at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine as a third-year student, the researcher has observed that FL classes comparatively contain the least number of students. Her classmates have also often reported having been discouraged from pursuing FLs by relatives and past teachers and this topic often sparks discussions and debates about the marginalization FL students experience at all levels of education.

The marginalization these students experience includes being treated as less intelligent and competent than business or science students by both teachers and students at the secondary level. FLs are seen as a 'last resort' subject grouping for the 'struggling' students and the intelligence and competence of FL students thus go unnoticed by those in other fields. At the tertiary level, though there exists a greater support system as well as more exposure to the study and career opportunities that exist for FL students, the feeling of inadequacy that most FL students have endured at the secondary level is so deeply engraved into their psyche that they experience an 'internalized marginalization'. This 'internalized marginalization' consists of a perpetual feeling of self-doubt as well as fear of the future. As such, the researcher felt motivated to investigate the experiences of FL students to locate the factors which contribute to the prejudices by which they are confronted.

Additionally, the researcher seeks to enhance the existing documentation on FLs as well as fill the gap in such documentation since this specific topic has not been studied in

⁴ E. Goffman defines stigma as , "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and as something that reduces its bearer "from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one" (3).

depth in previous scholarship. As a passionate FL student, the researcher furthermore intends to highlight the various sectors in which FL majors are in high demand to disprove the widespread misconception that the study of FLs is not prestigious or lucrative. Lastly, the researcher hopes that her study transforms the overall perception towards FLs and by extension, encourages FL majors to explore the numerous opportunities that are available after their studies.

Thesis statement

Within Trinidadian society, it can be debated that foreign language majors are largely 'stigmatized' despite the fact that they are an undeniable asset to society.

Parameters

This study will strictly adhere to the perspectives and experiences of FL students from Trinidad as it is the home of the researcher and is therefore conducive to her acquisition of data from an accessible sample population. However, given the inclusive and exploratory nature of the study, the sample population will be broad. It will consist of Form 6 as well as first, second and third year undergraduate FL students at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine for the purpose of obtaining an extensive array of data.

Objectives

1. To locate the factors contributing to the stigma surrounding the pursuit of FLs as a career and field of study.
2. To reiterate the benefits of studying FLs and the merits of choosing it as a career path.
3. To encourage both a more open-minded and far-thinking approach when it comes to FLs in academia and the world of work.

4. To highlight the multiple career opportunities that are available for FL majors.

Chapter Outline

This study will consist of three chapters. The first chapter will consist of an evaluation of the existing literature about FLs and the misconceptions surrounding its study. It will also include an assessment of the gaps in the existing literature that will be fulfilled by this thesis. The second chapter will provide visual representations of the results gathered from primary research as well as a statistical analysis of these results. The third and final chapter will include a detailed discussion about the results gathered on the perceptions and experiences of FL students and professionals.

Methodology

The general methodology of this thesis follows an exploratory approach, that is, a methodology that investigates a research question that has not been studied in depth previously. This methodology was most appropriate for the researcher's study given the immense lack of previously published scholarship on the specific research question. A method of quantitative (the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data) research was used to acquire primary data to enhance the generalisability, credibility and contextualisation of the study.

Quantitative data was obtained in the form of a questionnaire that consisted of twenty questions related to the experience of FL students in Trinidad. The questionnaire was digitally distributed to fifty FL students using non-probability sampling. That is, the researcher deliberately selected these specific participants as they were known to be FL students at either Form 6 or at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. The questionnaire was an efficient and quick way of gathering a large amount of data in a short

space of time. It consisted of a combination of closed and open-ended questions which enabled the researcher to observe similarities and differences in the experiences and thought patterns of these FL students. However, limitations still appeared, specifically a lack of responses from Form 6 students when compared to students at The University of The West Indies, St. Augustine. As such, the data collected mainly reflected the perspectives of tertiary level FL students. This may decrease the accuracy of the study.

After collecting the relevant data, the quantitative data was organized and expressed in the form of pie charts, bar graphs and tables and via the descriptive data analysis methodology, the distribution of data was calculated and the results were summarized, analyzed and then discussed in relation to secondary sources.

Chapter One

Literature Review

Language facilitates the formation of emotional bonds and socioeconomic ties, the transference of cultures and the forging of identities. In our current world, increasingly globalized and dominated by social media, there has been an increased interest in learning foreign languages. Researchers have therefore conducted various studies on the numerous facets of FL learning, particularly its professional merits in a globalized world, the perceptions and attitudes toward FL learning as well as FL anxiety. Studies have also been extensively conducted on the gender gap in FL education and the methods to improve FL education.

It is imperative to note, however, that the wealth of existing literature about FL learning has failed to thoroughly investigate the negative perceptions about the pursuit of FLs as a career or field of study. Furthermore, research on the aforementioned facets of FL learning was primarily based in Asia, Europe or North America, thereby creating a salient absence of material pertaining to FL learning within the Latin American and Caribbean regions. Notwithstanding these limitations, the extant literature proved to be beneficial as it adequately contextualized the global perceptions of FL learning as well as provided findings that could be compared and contrasted with those of the researcher's. This chapter will be divided into three sections respectively entitled 'The Elite of Trinidad,' 'The Importance of FL in the Workspace,' and 'Perceptions of Language in a Globalized World' for the purpose of elucidating the merits of FLs as extrapolated by previous studies, which would later corroborate the researcher's discussion.

The Elite of Trinidad

In Alison Mc Letchie's paper entitled "The Parasitic Oligarchy? The Elites in Trinidad and Tobago," she states that leading up to independence in 1962 and afterward, three categories of elites were formed on the island: descendants of colonial officials and plantation owners who were either White or "near White," descendents of Chinese and Syrian/Lebanese immigrants and a relatively small group of Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians and Tobagonians. She further elaborates that the Historical Occupations of these groups were quite similar and consisted of lawyers, doctors and engineers (2). Their Current Occupations, though having undergone small changes, remain relatively the same; the elite Whites and "near Whites" have branched out into business whereas the elite Africans and Indians are still primarily doctors and lawyers given that members of these groups encouraged their children to go abroad to acquire training in these fields (3). As such, among Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian communities, being a doctor or a lawyer became a mark of status for many families. The protagonist in V.S Naipaul's award winning novel "A House for Mr.Biswas" demonstrates the status and pride that Indo-Trinidadians feel when a family member is either a doctor or a lawyer, "[y]ou know, the thing to do is to have three sons. Make one a doctor, one a dentist, and one a lawyer" (179).

George Beckford's plantation society model⁵ argues that the plantation system created by colonialists, initially as part of the larger slave economy, left significant marks on the institutions of the Caribbean long after slavery ended and is reflected in the formation of the three elite groups who might have adopted the role of the colonists in the postcolonial period.

⁵"Beckford's Plantation Society theory describes conditions which contribute to the social structure of post-colonial societies particularly those in the Caribbean. He argues that the Caribbean served as external plantation sites for their European rulers; the result, according to him, are societies with caste systems based on race" (Mc Letchie, 68)

Economist Henry further explains this theory when he maintains that within plural societies and from “the standpoint of Marxian and Dependency perspectives, the new elites that succeeded the former colonial elite have simply adapted to a new role in a continuing relationship between their own peripheral country and the metropolitan center and are the new agents for the maintenance of the old arrangements which are now mediated through transnational corporations and the bureaucratic state” (76).

These works, though they adequately contextualize the origins of hierarchical thinking in Trinidad, do not demonstrate the correlation between hierarchical thinking and the “stigma” surrounding foreign languages. This study serves to explicitly identify and explain that correlation and thus contribute to the existing body of literature on FLs from a Caribbean and Latin American standpoint.

The Importance of FL in the Workspace

Language is a key facilitator of communication, collaboration, coordination and knowledge transfer in multilingual organizations. However, language may also act as a barrier to the aforementioned pillars, which most multinationals seek to implement (Bordia, 417). Frederik Thuesen, in his study entitled “Linguistic barriers and bridges: constructing social capital in ethnically diverse low-skill workplaces” recognises the dual function of language in the workspace.

He highlights that linguistic barriers in the workspace constitute “miscommunication and misunderstandings due to differential second language competence leading to mistrust and hostility” (940) and that linguistic bridges comprise of “efficient intercultural communication leading to the establishment of social relations and social capital” (940). Thuesen further asserts that there are greater intercultural and interethnic communication barriers in low-skill workspaces than in high-skill workplaces.

In contrast, Sarbari and Prashant Bordia, in their study entitled “Employees' willingness to adopt a foreign functional language in multilingual organizations: The role of linguistic identity,” indicate that the choice of one official language in a multilingual organization would undoubtedly create an environment where some members may lack proficiency in the particular language, thereby engendering a communication gap between employees from parent and subsidiary organizations (417). This demonstrates that the intercultural and interethnic linguistic barriers mentioned by Thuesen also pose great challenges in high-skill workplaces. Sarbari and Prashant Bordia therefore believe that FL holds a central role in sustainable international expansion for multinationals.

FL is vital in multinationals when it comes to conducting meetings with representatives from the headquarters, understanding policies and new business ideas proposed by the headquarters, reading documents written in the foreign language, writing reports in the FL and engaging with human resource practices such as performance evaluations (Bordia, 416). As such, creating FL learning policies within multinationals is undoubtedly an effective method of combating language barriers. Such policies would include formally recognising the linguistic identity of employees which would then build trust, create social capital and facilitate interdependent knowledge transfer and policy implementation (Kostova, 318).

Similarly, Thuesen speaks about the concepts of “work talk” and “social talk” in low-skill workplaces. The former includes native speakers in the workplace trying to adapt their language to make it more understandable to non-native speakers for the purpose of task completion. They may even use words from the other party's language and in so doing, they “[guard] against tribal behaviors and [help] to build up emotional solidarity” (Henderson, 372). The latter, on the other hand, involves talking about more personal topics which also “expresses and reinforces solidarity” (Holmes et al, 107) and increases social capital. It must

be noted that in Trinidad, some of the main obstacles to Venezuelan integration are language barriers, exploitation of labor and xenophobia (Saint Ville et al, 3). In these instances, “work talk” and “social talk” may very well be a catalyst to dissolving these obstacles.

This reinforcement of solidarity aligns with Catherine L. Caldwell-Harris' hypothesis that hearing or using our native language may influence us emotionally more than hearing or using a FL (214). As such, she proposed that using a FL is better for making decisions as it encourages a more rational thought pattern. The importance of FLs in the workplace also extends to the Tourism and Hospitality sector. An employee in this sector must not merely possess professional knowledge and skills but must also possess high FL competence. Language barriers hinder the long term success of the hospitality industry. As the world becomes more globalized, the tourism market is increasing and so is the demand for individuals with high FL proficiency (Bilodid, 469).

Previous research has therefore emphasized the role of FL in dismantling language barriers in the workplace and bolstering social capital for the overall success of the company. Its importance in expediting the integration of Venezuelan immigrants in Trinidad and in bolstering the Tourism and Hospitality sector was also stressed. These studies, however, did not sufficiently examine the negative perceptions toward FLs, namely the perception that there are limited jobs in the field of foreign languages. The investigation of these negative perceptions are, however, a key aspect of the researcher's study.

Perceptions of language in a globalized world

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages distinguishes between plurilingualism and multilingualism. This distinction is significant as it facilitates an understanding of two very different perceptions of linguistic diversity. Multilingualism considers languages as separate and static entities that co-exist in societies or individuals.

Plurilingualism, on the other hand, aims to capture the holistic nature of individual language users as well as their and cultural repertoires.

Within the European Union, plurilingualism and positive attitudes are promoted for the purpose of reinforcing mutual respect and dialogue between individual countries. The goal is to enable mobility, cooperation, and economic development but also to contribute to lasting peace and stability in the region against the backdrop of a globalized world. Vera Busse, in her study entitled, “Plurilingualism in Europe: Exploring Attitudes Toward English and Other European Languages Among Adolescents in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain,” reiterates that cultivating positive attitudes toward linguistic and cultural diversity gains further relevance and importance given current increase in immigration and has therefore become an important objective in European educational efforts (566).

However, Busse further indicates that the rise of English as a lingua franca in Europe and its consequent increasing presence in all European institutions may pose a challenge to plurilingualism. The dominance of English could therefore make Europeans lose interest in learning other languages if it is judged to be an unnecessary, even futile exercise. Anne Pauwels' chapter entitled “Rethinking the Learning of Languages in the Context of Globalization and Hyper Lingualism,” taken from *Plurilingualism and Multiliteracies*, substantiates this view. The chapter examines the impact of globalization on FL learning, referred to as simply “language learning” by Pauwels. She affirms that, “[t]he status of English as a global lingua franca has had major effects on the language learning scene: English has become the language most widely studied as second, third or “foreign” language” (45).

Like Europe, in Australia and the United States, there is a focus on direct-method teaching (teaching via the medium of English) to mixed-language groups of learners. This has various consequences, including students developing the perception of other languages

having a “low status” in comparison to English (Choi, 30) and the rejection of a language teacher's identity as plurilingual (Ellis, 598). In contexts where students tend to share the same language, such as Japan or South Korea, a native English speaker is preferred by students and employers rather than someone who has English as one of the many languages in their linguistic repertoire.

Pauwels attributes this dominance of English across the globe to the commodification of language, a morbid consequence of globalization (44). That is, the language(s) that provides the most access to the global arena for economic gain is considered as having the most linguistic capital and would therefore be implemented in various institutions for the sole purpose of economic expansion. English currently possesses the most linguistic capital. Consequently, native English speakers are presumed to be monolingual, and nonnative speakers are defined less by their plurilingualism than by their perceived deficiencies in English (Ellis, 597).

Authors Diana de Saint-Léger and Andrew McGregor place emphasis on an opposing view: the focus of “language as culture” instead of “language as commodity.” This notion subverts the globalized cosmopolitanism which encourages a sense of uniformity; a “one nation - one language” ideology (Pauwels, 44). “Language as culture,” on the contrary, involves “cultural translation,” that is, an ability to understand another culture in its own terms (Pratt) and the “third place,” that is, the desirable point of intersection where people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet and communicate successfully as well as understand each other while cognizant of their own identity and that of the other. (de Saint-Léger et al, 143).

The studies mentioned have amply addressed the perceptions of FL in a globalized world, namely the concepts of plurilingualism and the dominance of English. They were also the main works that encouraged the researcher to embark on this research project as

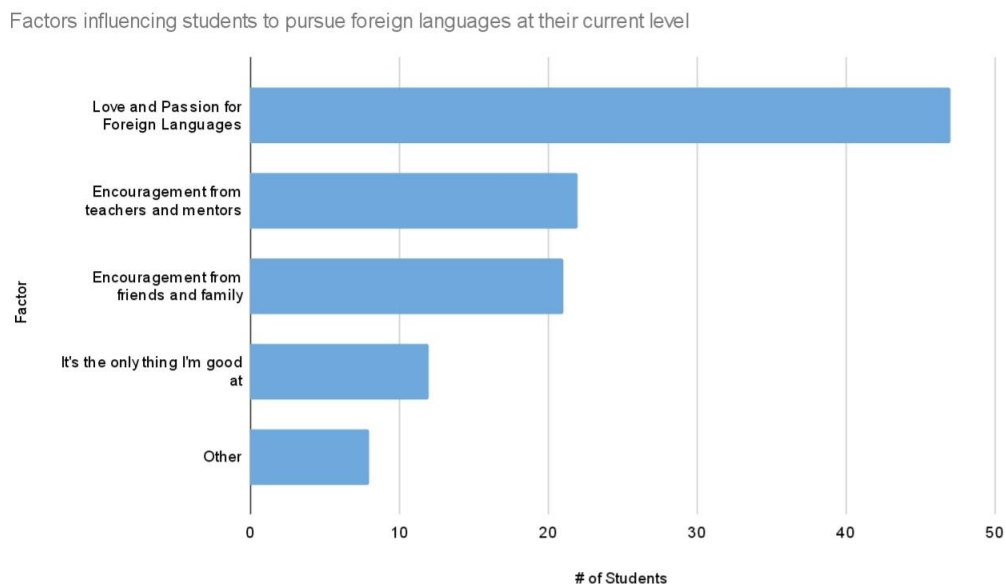
Trinidadian society is not spared from these perceptions. The researcher, in relation to her findings, will elaborate on these ideas in Chapter 3.

hapter 2

Data Presentation and Analysis

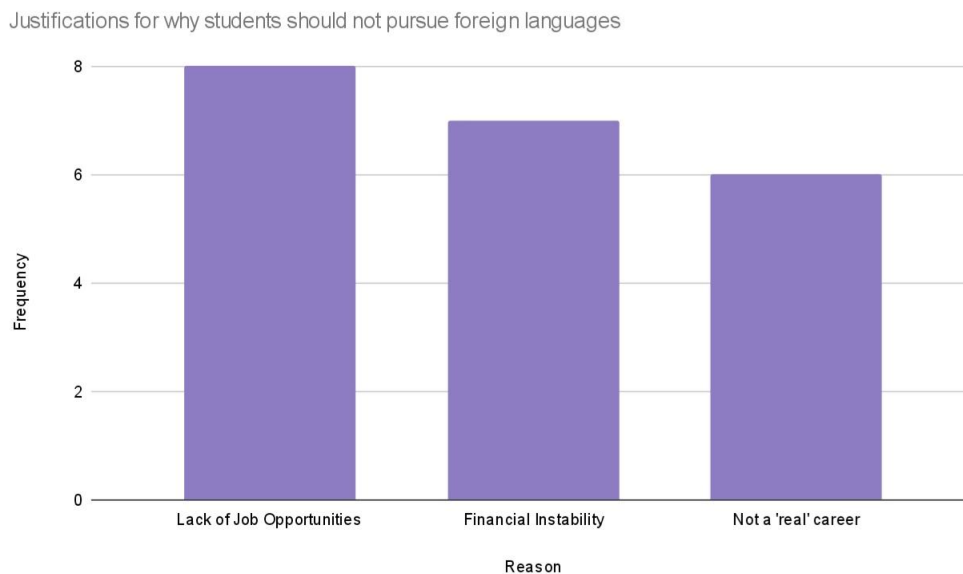
This chapter relates the findings of this study. The quantitative data gathered was analyzed via descriptive analysis and graphically presented in the form of pie charts, bar graphs and tables. The main data points were then summarized.

Fig. 1. Factors Influencing Students' Decision to Study FLs



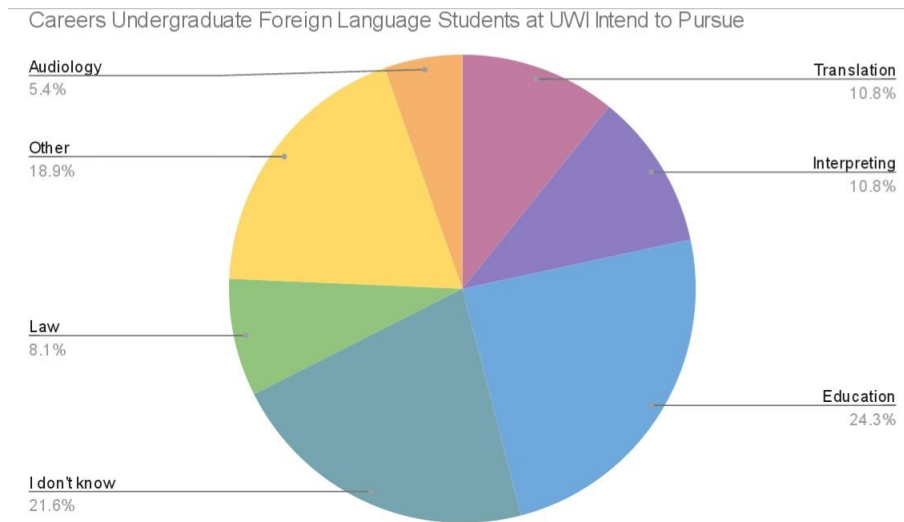
Fifty students were asked to identify the factors which influenced their decision to pursue FLs at their current level. Forty-seven students, the vast majority, indicated that their love and passion for FLs prompted them to pursue FLs at their current level. Twenty-two students indicated that they were encouraged by previous teachers or mentors while twenty-one students indicated that they were encouraged by friends and family. Three students who selected the “Other” category specified that they chose to pursue FLs at their current level because they believe that the career opportunities in this field are numerous and diverse.

Fig. 2. Justifications Trinidadians Give to Discourage Students from Studying FLs



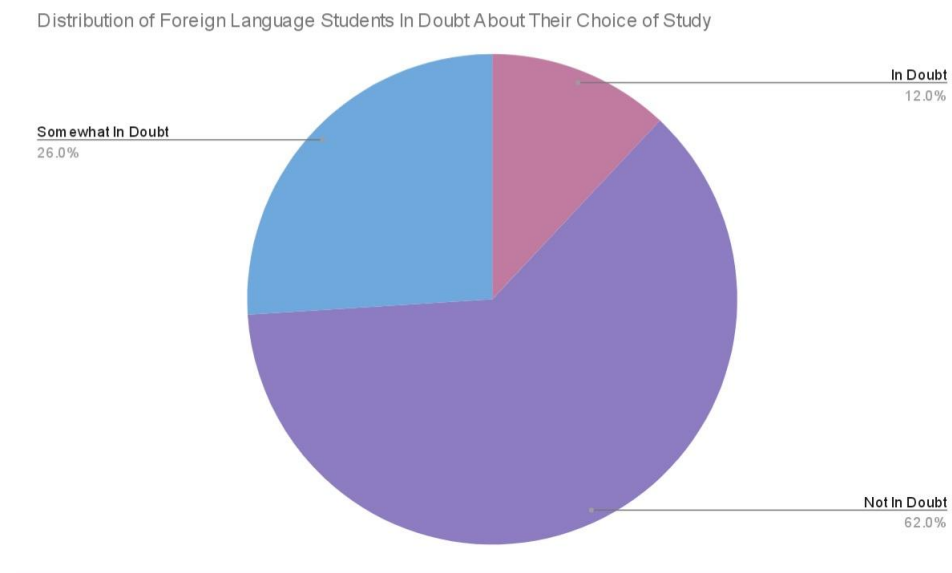
The bar graph shown above presents the justifications given by the mentors, peers, friends and family members of FL students for why they should not pursue FLs as a field of study or career. This open-ended question was preceded by a “Yes/No” question which inquired whether or not FL students were ever discouraged from pursuing FLs by external factors. 40% of respondents indicated that they were discouraged while 60% of respondents indicated that they were not. The 40% of respondents who were discouraged, reflected in Fig. 2., highlighted that the main reason provided by their mentors, peers, friends and family members collectively was the widespread belief that there are insufficient job opportunities for FL majors. This response contradicts the response of the three FL students referenced in Fig. 1., who believe that FLs indeed have many career opportunities. The second most popular reason was the idea that a career in FLs does not procure financial stability. Lastly, the minority indicated that their mentors, peers, friends and family members held the opinion that a career in FLs is not a “real” career.

Fig. 3. Careers Undergraduate FL Students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Intend to Pursue



The thirty-eight undergraduate FL students at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine were asked to state which career path they intend to pursue after graduating. The majority of respondents (24.3%) indicated that they intend to pursue a career in Education. This was closely followed by the “I don't know” category which 21.6% of undergraduates elected. In the “Other” category, which procured 18.9% of respondents, the answers were diverse and creative. Flight attendant, publisher, linguist, social worker and sports media person were some of the careers listed. Interestingly, 8.1% indicated that they intend on pursuing Law.

Fig. 4. Distribution of FL Students Who Doubt Their Choice to Study FLs



The pie chart above depicts the distribution of FL students who are in doubt about their choice of study. The majority (62%) indicated that they were not in doubt whereas the minority (12%) indicated that they were in doubt. 26% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat in doubt, thus reflecting high levels of uncertainty among some FL students.

Fig. 5. Reasons why FL Students Doubt Their Choice to Study FLs

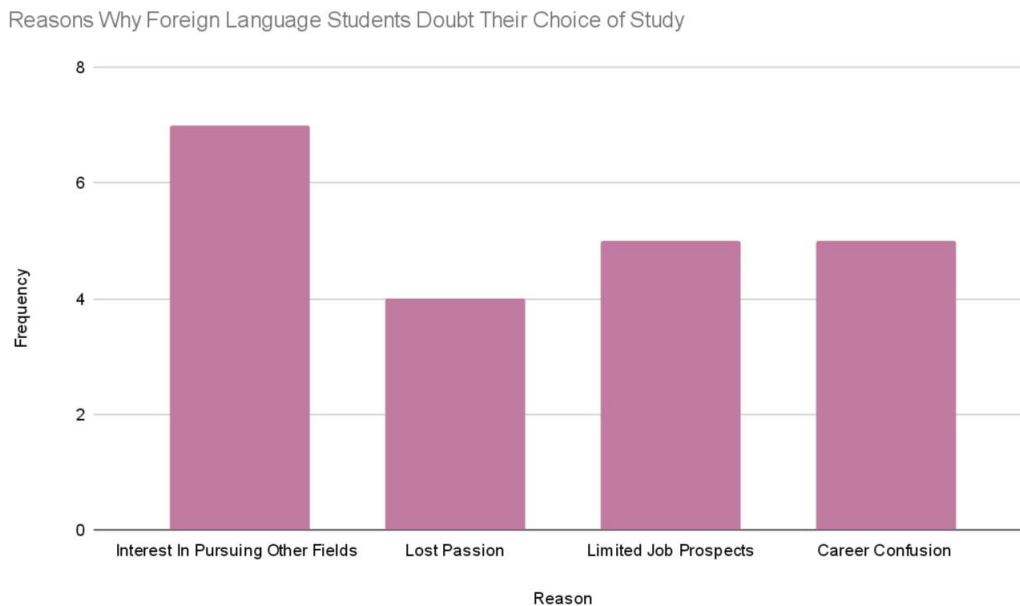
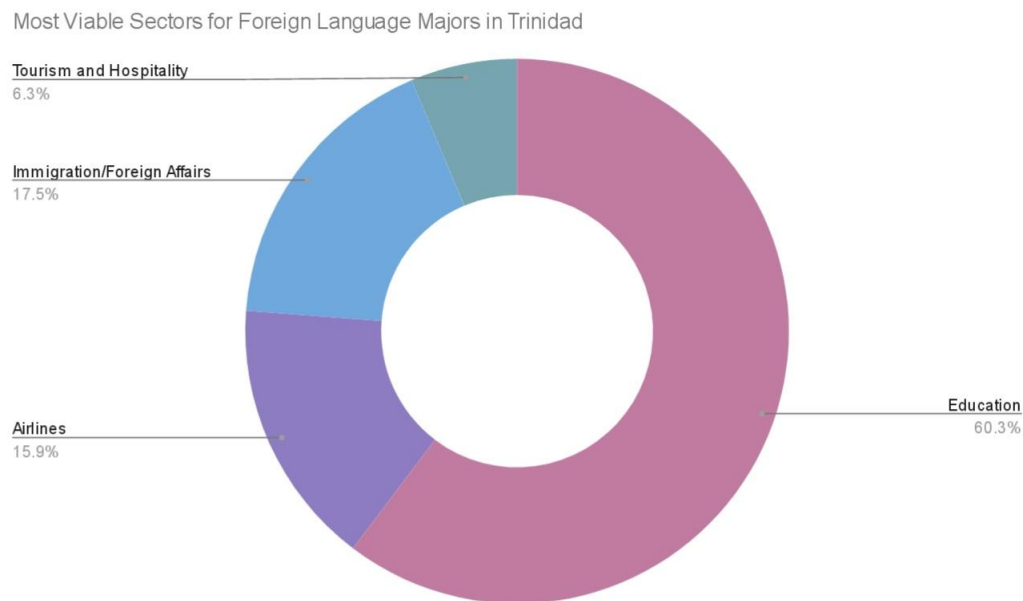


Fig. 4. revealed that 12% of FL students expressed feeling doubtful about their choice of study. Fig. 5. shown above showcases the reasons for the doubt experienced by these students. The majority admitted that they had an interest in pursuing other fields whereas the minority indicated that they lost their passion for FLs. This data point is significant considering that Fig. 1. demonstrates that the main factor influencing FL students to pursue FLs is their passion and love for languages.

An equal number of respondents indicated that limited job prospects and career confusion caused them to doubt their choice to study foreign languages. Another contradiction is detected since Fig. 1. indicates that students chose to study FLs due to the numerous and diverse careers available whereas Fig. 5. signals a reversal in this perception - they now believe that job prospects in the field of FLs are limited. The factor of “Career Confusion”, however, aligns with the findings in Fig. 3. where 21.6% tertiary level students picked “I don't know” when asked about the career they intend to pursue.

Fig. 6. Donut Chart Showing the Most Viable Sectors For FL Majors in Trinidad According to FL Students



All fifty respondents were required to indicate which sectors they believe are the most viable for FL majors in Trinidad. The vast majority (60.3%) indicated that Education was the most viable sector and this aligns with the findings in Fig. 4. Only a minority (6.3%) acknowledged the importance of FL majors in the Tourism and Hospitality sector. Similarly, only 17.5% of respondents recognised the viability of the Immigration and Foreign Affairs sector.

Fig. 7. Possible Reasons for the “Stigma” Surrounding FLs According to FL Students

Possible Reason for “Stigma”	Frequency	Percentage %
Lack of Knowledge About Careers in FL	13	26%
Prioritization of STEM Careers	9	18%
Perception that STEM Careers are more “Prestigious” and “Lucrative”	22	44%
Perception that FLs are “easy”	6	12%

The above data was collected after all fifty participants were asked to state whether or not they believe that there is a “stigma” surrounding the pursuit of FLs as a career and field of study in Trinidad. 100% of respondents said “Yes.” They were then asked to identify possible reasons for this “stigma.” These reasons are reflected in Fig. 7. as seen above. The majority of respondents (44%) asserted that this “stigma” can be attributed to the commonly perpetuated notion that STEM careers are more prestigious and lucrative than FL careers. 26% of respondents theorized that a lack of knowledge about FL careers plays a role in perpetuating the “stigma” surrounding FLs in Trinidad. 18% of respondents underscored a notable factor which is the prioritization of STEM careers. The minority (12%) acknowledged that some individuals view the study of FLs as “easy” in comparison to STEM subjects.

Chapter 3

Discussion

This chapter critically analyzes the findings obtained through research conducted on FL students. The data obtained reveals that a “stigma” surrounding FLs in Trinidad exists to a large extent. Based on the results, it was observed that there is one core factor contributing to this “stigma” - the ingrained elitist disposition of Trinidadians. This has led to the formulation of three main perceptions which has recurred throughout this study. These perceptions are: (1) STEM careers are more “prestigious” and “lucrative” than careers in FLs (2) Jobs for FL Majors in Trinidad are scarce and (3) A Career in Education is the most viable employment option for FL Majors in Trinidad. The findings of this study will be discussed in relation to previous studies, in an attempt to contribute to the existing yet insufficient body of research on perceptions about FLs as well as FLs in the Caribbean and Latin American Regions.

Throughout this study and based on the results presented in Chapter 2, it was revealed that there is the noxious perception among Trinidadians that careers in STEM are more prestigious and lucrative than careers in FLs. Fig. 2. displays the most common reasons why the mentors, peers, friends and family members of FL students dissuade them from pursuing foreign languages. “Financial instability” was found to be the second most common reason thereby indicating that Trinidadians believe that careers in FLs do not generate sufficient income. Similarly, Fig. 7. depicts possible reasons for the “stigma” surrounding FLs in Trinidad. The vast majority (44%) highlighted the overarching assumption that careers in STEM are both more prestigious and lucrative than careers in FL.

The notion of one career being more “prestigious” than another is deeply problematic as it increases the existing divisions that pervade Trinidadian society. It is imperative to recall

that in the post-colonial era, Africans and East Indians, who both suffered the inhumane treatment and conditions of bondage under the British, yearned to break the cycle that trapped their people for generations. As such, many opted for viciously educating their children and this entailed sending them abroad for them to become doctors, lawyers and even engineers (Mc Letchie, 3). These professions thus became status symbols for many Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian families (Naipaul, 179).

Based on the results, this mentality is still infused within Trinidadian society. It has impacted the motivation and passion of FL students and continues to pin them in the trenches of colonialism. We must investigate the factors causing the persistence of this mentality as well as ways to eradicate it and liberate ourselves from the shackles of our colonial ghosts. However, this is beyond the scope of the researcher's study and future researchers must therefore seek to investigate this issue.

Fig. 1. depicts the factors influencing students' decision to study FLs. The most chosen factor was their passion and love for languages. The second most chosen factor was encouragement from either the mentors/teachers, peers, friends or family of students. The minority admitted that they chose FLs due to the numerous and diverse job opportunities in the field. In contrast, Fig. 5. signaled a reversal in the perceptions of these students. The minority confessed that they doubted their decision to study FLs due to lost passion. A slightly higher percentage of respondents cited "Limited Job Prospects" as the source of their uncertainty whereas "Interest in Pursuing Other Fields" was the most popular reason. These findings were both compelling and concerning.

Although the exact reasons for this change in perception were not found, and should undoubtedly be considered for future research, it can be inferred based on anecdotal evidence as well as from the previous research that deficiencies and bias within the school curriculum may have contributed to a diminished interest in learning FLs and a heightened interest in

pursuing other fields that are more “prioritized.” Within Trinidad, dominance of Natural Sciences/Mathematics/ICT Scholarships is problematic as it not only puts FL students at a financial disadvantage but feeds into existing feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. Higher numbers of merit-based STEM Scholarships mean that more money is being invested into these fields and so, FL students in Trinidad experience a reduced quality of learning. The detrimental effects of this on foreign language learning do not exist within the scope of this research. Despite that, it is clear that FL students are victims to “unequal access to language learning opportunities and resources” (Choi, 30) and the FL curriculum is “vulnerable to macro policies and trends in the larger education system” (Choi, 30).

Regarding the careers FL majors intend to pursue, Fig. 3. informs us that 21.6% said “I don't know.” However, the majority of students (24.3%) indicated that they want to pursue a career in Education. This result is similar to the results displayed in Figure 6 where the vast majority of respondents (60.3%) agreed that Education was the most viable sector for FL majors. The minority (6.3%) acknowledged the importance of FL majors in the Tourism and Hospitality sector. On the other hand, a surprisingly tiny percentage (17.5%) recognised the viability of the Immigration and Foreign Affairs sector for FL majors.

These results are a contradiction to Trinidad's current socioeconomic and humanitarian climate. They also emphasize the reality that FL students are not entirely aware of the numerous and diverse career opportunities available to them. Andriana Bilodid asserted in her paper entitled, “Foreign Language Skills as the Main Factor of Successful Career in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry,” that the tourism market is increasing as the world becomes more globalized and so, the demand for proficient FL speakers in the industry is also increasing (469). Although Trinidad's economy primarily depends on oil and gas, tourism still indispensably contributes to our GDP. As such, it is a more viable sector than the results of this study portrayed.

Similarly, the language barrier is one of the main challenges faced by Venezuelan immigrants in Trinidad (Saint Ville et al, 3). The truth is that there are many Venezuelans who speak English but not many Trinidadians who speak Spanish. As such, FL speakers who are certified in Spanish or express considerable proficiency and competence in the Spanish language are regarded as valuable by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. In large multinational organizations, FL proficiency is a necessity as it facilitates communication between parent and subsidiary organizations (Bordia, 417) and thus builds trust, creates social capital and facilitates interdependent knowledge transfer and policy implementation within these companies (Kostova, 318). Therefore, while Education is indeed a viable sector as there is always a demand for FL teachers at the secondary and tertiary levels, the viability of other sectors should not be undermined.

Interestingly, 8.1% of respondents said that they wanted to pursue Law. This response is quite possibly linked to the elitist mentality that is at the root of the stigma surrounding FLs in Trinidad. It is, in fact, a common occurrence in Trinidad for sixth form FL students to pursue Law at the tertiary level instead of FLs. Once again, the factors affecting this phenomenon are beyond the scope of the researcher's study but what is certain from this study is that FLs are seen as the means to a “better” career rather than being the “better” career itself.

The results obtained reflected the viewpoints of FL students at both sixth form and the tertiary level. While previous studies highlighted that FLs in the workplace is a necessity and that there are numerous and diverse job opportunities which arise out of this necessity, this study proved that Trinidadians are not aware of or do not respect the job opportunities in the field of FL. Existing literature also proved that English is the most esteemed FL in Asia and Europe. Other languages are thus relegated to a “low status” (Choi, 30). The findings of this investigation, however, have unveiled a situation that is unique to Trinidad and perhaps all

countries that were previously colonized by the British. This unique situation is that the “stigma” toward FLs in Trinidad is less a consequence of English being perceived as a superior language and more a consequence of perceiving the professions of the elite Africans and East Indians as superior to FLs. This study would surely prove useful to future researchers who decide to investigate FLs in the Caribbean and Latin America context as it sheds some light on one of the Trinidadian society's occult colonial wounds.

Conclusion

In Trinidad, the study of foreign languages has always been perceived as inferior to the study of medicine, law or engineering. However, the prevalence of this issue has only been made known through anecdotal evidence. Its impact on foreign language students and foreign language learning has also been severely undermined and thus, although previous research highlights negative global perceptions toward foreign language learning, this particular issue remained under researched within the Caribbean and Latin American context. The researcher distributed questionnaires to a mixed group of fifty tertiary level and sixth form foreign language students who were required to respond to both closed and open-ended questions based on their personal experiences as foreign language students as well as their own perceptions and opinions.

It was revealed that an elitist mindset which began to afflict Trinidadian society in the immediate postcolonial period still persists today and so, the idea that STEM and Law are considered as more prestigious and lucrative than careers in foreign languages was not an assumption on the part of the researcher but a fact. This perception has socially, academically and financially disadvantaged foreign language students and as such, it was proven that, to a large extent, a “stigma” definitely exists when it comes to the pursuit of foreign languages as a career and field of study.

There were, however, numerous limitations when conducting research. One such limitation was the lack of prior research on the overall topic of foreign languages in Trinidad. Studies were primarily conducted in Asian and European countries which was limiting since their sociocultural and socioeconomic are not only vastly different from that of Trinidad but also because for them, English is a foreign language whereas in Trinidad, English is our

mother tongue. As such, the researcher encountered difficulty in correlating existing literature with her findings.

Another limitation was that this study was only limited to the experiences of foreign language students and not the wider public. Citizens from Tobago were also not included in the study due to financial and time constraints faced by the researcher. Furthermore, more tertiary level students opted to respond to the questionnaire than sixth form students due to time constraints and overall reluctance. As such, the study inevitably contains gaps which can fortunately be filled by future research.

Future researchers should include foreign language professionals, members from the wider public and Tobagonians in their investigations to expand research on this topic through gathering perspectives and experiences over multiple groups of people instead of just one group. Research must also be conducted on other Caribbean islands and even countries in Latin America for the purpose of finding similarities or differences when it comes to the perceptions toward foreign languages. This would contribute both to the body of works on foreign languages as well as on the Caribbean and Latin America as these regions remain underrepresented across the globe.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Sample

The 'Stigma' Surrounding the Pursuit of Foreign Languages as a Field of Study and Career

Hi! My name is Talia Sufiya Khan and I'm currently a third-year Spanish and French student at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. I am kindly requesting your help with my thesis entitled 'The 'Stigma' Surrounding the Pursuit of Foreign Languages as a Field of Study and Career' and I look forward to your responses

1. Select your gender *

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Do you study both Spanish and French at your current level? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

3. If you selected 'No' in the previous question, please state which of the two foreign languages you study and whether you have combined this foreign language with another subject/major/minor. Please specify the subject/major/minor.

B *I* U  

Texto de respuesta breve

4. If you selected 'Yes' for Question #2, please indicate why you decided to pursue both Spanish and French at your current level.

Texto de respuesta largo

5. What factors influenced your decision to pursue a foreign language at your current level? *
(Select all that may apply)

- ☐ Love and Passion for Foreign Languages
- ☐ Encouragement from teachers and mentors
- ☐ Encouragement from friends and family
- ☐ It's the only thing I'm good at
- ☐ Otra...

6. Were you ever discouraged from pursuing foreign languages? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. If you selected 'Yes' in the previous question, please specify who discouraged you, whether they suggested that you study something else and their justifications for this suggestion.

Texto de respuesta largo

8. Do you ever feel as though you were better off studying something other than foreign languages? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

9. If you selected 'Yes' for the previous question, please specify what you think you would have been better off studying and why.

Texto de respuesta largo

10. If you selected 'Maybe' for Question #8, please explain.

B *I* U [↔](#) ~~X~~

Texto de respuesta largo

11. Do you ever feel as though your field of study i.e foreign languages is useless? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. Please explain your answer to the previous question. *

Texto de respuesta largo

13. What career do you intend on pursuing after you graduate and why? (For UWI undergraduates)

Texto de respuesta largo

14. Do you intend to pursue foreign languages at the tertiary level? Why? Why not? (For Form 6 students)

B *I* U  

Texto de respuesta largo

...

15. On a scale of 0 to 10, rate how knowledgeable you are about career opportunities that exist in foreign languages. 0 indicates no knowledge and 10 indicates extremely knowledgeable. *

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Briefly list the career paths you believe are most viable for foreign language majors in Trinidad and state why. *

Texto de respuesta largo

17. Do you believe that field of foreign languages is inferior to the study of business, law, medicine, engineering or computer science? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. On a scale of 0 to 10, rate how marginalised you feel at your institution as a foreign languages student. 0 indicates not feeling marginalised at all whereas 10 indicates feeling extremely marginalised. *

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Después de la sección 1 Ir a la siguiente sección ▼

Sección 2 de 2

Sección sin título



Descripción (opcional)

19. Do you believe that the average Trinidadian should show more respect, admiration and appreciation for persons who study foreign languages or pursue it as a career? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

20. In your opinion, is there really a stigma surrounding the pursuit of foreign languages as a career and field of study in Trinidad? Please explain. *

Texto de respuesta largo