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Is language the problem?: An exploratory case study of acculturation experiences of Spanish speaking immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago.

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation investigates the importance of competence in the English language on the quality of life of Spanish speaking immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. As of recent, there has been an influx in the number of Spanish immigrants that have entered Trinidad and Tobago. This influx can be attributed to their desire to obtain relief and better living conditions. However, it is noted that language is a crucial factor as it helps to permit effective communication among persons. Therefore, this research paper seeks to identify any possible limitations which may have been encountered by the Spanish immigrants due to a lack of English proficiency and to identify the extent to which the English language impacts their acculturation experiences in the country. The results from this paper show that although language is of great importance, factors such as the attitude of the natives and the availability of job opportunities impact the acculturation experiences of the immigrants more than language.

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## INTRODUCTION

By 2019, Trinidad and Tobago had become a place of refuge for approximately 40 000 Venezuelan immigrants (Teff). These immigrants come to Trinidad with the hope of obtaining better living conditions or to obtain a job which will allow them to assist their family members who have not migrated. However, there are multiple factors which impact the ability of the immigrants to become acculturated into the new country and thereby accomplish the goals which they have set. One barrier between both the natives of Trinidad and Tobago and the Spanish immigrants is a language barrier. This study therefore seeks to identify whether this language barrier impacts the acculturation experiences of the Spanish immigrants and therefore their day-to-day activities. The primary data from this research was collected by conducting interviews with 5 Spanish immigrants and focused on different aspects of their lives such as the importance of fluency in the host language, factors affecting ability to obtain a job, the link between friendships and the acculturation strategies and lastly culture.

### **Rationale**

Due to the increase in the number of Spanish immigrants which have entered into Trinidad and Tobago, it is of great importance for the country to invest in research that focuses on the uniqueness of their acculturation experiences as this will give insight as to how their presence impacts the country. The language barrier poses a problem as it impedes the degree to which effective communication can take place between both groups, locals and migrants, and therefore limits the extent to which both groups can help each other. This study is of great importance as acculturation of the Spanish immigrants into Trinidad and Tobago will bring benefits for both groups.

The presentation of the results of this research can be of great value to the development of Trinidad and Tobago as it can help to raise awareness of the importance of the Spanish language as a second language in Trinidad. A heightened knowledge of this importance may further encourage Trinidadians and Tobagonians to acquire Spanish proficiency. Furthermore, it may lead to the introduction of the Spanish language at the earlier stages of academics which will help to decrease communication barriers at an earlier age. Additionally, it will raise issues of social justice as it will display some of the challenges that the Spanish immigrants have faced due to the inability to speak the English language. As these issues are raised measures can be established so that they can be rectified.

This research is also of great value as it is an area that has not been extensively researched despite the proximity of Trinidad and Tobago to Venezuela, a Spanish speaking country. The reduction of language barriers can possibly create more opportunities for Trinidad and Tobago in regard to Hispanic nations as they would be able to effectively communicate. Additionally, many of the immigrants that have arrived in Trinidad and Tobago are highly qualified and will therefore be able to contribute greatly to the economic development of Trinidad and Tobago (Venezuelans At Work). As these factors are brought to attention this will help to ensure that human resources are not neglected as well as to increase skill level in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Title**

Is language the problem?: An exploratory case study of acculturation experiences of Spanish speaking immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago.

## **Thesis Statement**

In Trinidad and Tobago, it can be argued that language barriers impact the rate at which acculturation of the Spanish immigrants takes place.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) To what extent is language related to the acculturation experiences lived by Spanish speaking immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago?
- 2) How does language influence the interactions between Spanish speaking immigrants and locals in Trinidad and Tobago?

## **Parameters**

For the purpose of this research paper the participants will be limited to immigrants who are living in Trinidad and Tobago as it is easier to contact and interview these immigrants as there are no geographical boundaries. Additionally, the social impacts of competence in the English language will be examined. Therefore, the link between acculturation and English language competence will be analysed in reference to how it impacts communication, relationship building and the ability to obtain a job. Due to the timeframe and the type of information which is needed to be gathered for this project, the number of persons who will be interviewed will be limited to 5 persons.

## **Objectives**

- To identify links between language and acculturation.
- To gather more information and data about the acculturation process for Spanish immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago.

## **Methodology**

For the purpose of this study a case study was done as it permits for an investigation of a small group of persons and then allows for a generalization of the information found. The case study permits for a comparison amongst the individual cases which allows the researcher to identify and gather similarities and differences for analysis (Heale and Twycross). The case study method also has limitations in that large quantities of data may be collected which can make analysis of the data difficult or cause the researcher to sway from the topic (Heale and Twycross). The data collected is qualitative as it reflects the responses of the Spanish immigrants based on the interviews.

## **Data Collection**

Primary data for this research paper was collected through interviews that were conducted with Cuban and Venezuelan immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. The interview questions were aligned with the information and themes which were identified and analysed in the literature review. Seven participants were interviewed twice with the exception of a Cuban and a Venezuelan as they were unavailable for the second interview. The interviewees lived in Trinidad and Tobago for five (5) months to twenty-three (23) years. The questions were based on the following themes: importance of fluency in the host language, factors affecting the ability to obtain a job, the link between friendships and the acculturation strategies and lastly culture.

## **Chapter Outline**

Chapter 1 is a literature review which explores and analyses information and data which has been researched and collected on the topic of acculturation. Chapter 2 displays the results of the interviews which were conducted with the Spanish immigrants. Chapter 3 is a comparison of

the results of the interviews which have been done with the Spanish immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago with the literature review.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Literature Review

Redfield et al, defines acculturation as “the broader term used to describe the exchange of cultural features that occurs when groups of individuals from different cultures come into continuous and first-hand contact with each other” (qtd. in Kissil et al. 217). Acculturation strategies refer to the manner in which acculturation takes place thereby describing the type of interactions which occur among the groups (Mohanty et al. 155). Berry’s model of acculturation strategies proposes the following four strategies: Integration, Assimilation, Separation and Marginalization (Berry 72). Berry claims that these are the four main strategies which can be identified amongst various groups (Mohanty et al. 155).

Integration strategy refers to the decision of the immigrants to maintain their ethnic backgrounds while consciously making an attempt to interact with persons of the host country and to participate in activities which are unique or associated with the host country. Assimilation strategy categorizes immigrants who forsake their ethnic culture in an attempt to attach themselves to the host country through contact and participation. Assimilation strategy may also result in the emergence of new cultures within society as both the non-dominant and the dominant group join together. Separation strategy describes those who continue to preserve and live in accordance with their ethnic culture while avoiding participation in the receiving country. Marginalization strategy refers to immigrants who were unable to remain connected to their cultural identity while at the same time being unable to connect through contact and participation with the dominant culture. It therefore leaves the immigration group without a sense of belonging.

The willingness of an immigrant group to integrate and to become acculturated within a society may occasionally depend on the attitude of the members of the host country. The results of a study which looked at foreign born counsellors in the USA revealed that the ability for the foreign-born counsellors to undergo the process of acculturation was dependent on the prevailing attitudes and ideologies that the immigrants perceived the locals to have (Kissil et al. 216). This highlights that whether or not the attitudes of the locals are truly negative or positive, the counsellors act on what is believed about the locals (Kissil et al. 216). Titzmann and Jugert's study affirmed the importance of the attitude of the locals in which the immigrants are in direct contact with (2090), they identified that the number of challenges which the German Diaspora immigrant students faced were dependent on whether the interaction between their native German peers and themselves were positive or negative. This study also highlights that the challenges that the students faced, in terms of acculturation, decreased when the local students were less hostile and willing to associate themselves with the student immigrants (Titzmann and Jugert 2090).

It must be noted that there are other reasons which may justify the limited contact that immigrants have with locals. An important factor that can be highlighted is the idea that at various times, culture determines the roles and attitudes of men and women. For example, Tran identified that due to cultural factors, Vietnamese women are not encouraged to interact with foreigners (Tran 756). These cultural factors would have limited the contact in which the older women had with the locals thereby resulting in separation. Additionally, the desire of an immigrant group to maintain their culture may be dependent on the way in which they view their own cultures. Yağmur and Van de Vijver state that when the immigrants cherish and value their

culture, and do not view it negatively, they are more likely to maintain it (1111). This is also the case with language as it is also a part of culture.

Immigrants who are not fluent in the language of the host country may experience language hassles. Language hassles is defined by Titzmann et al. as “the negative experiences resulting from an insufficient command of the local language and are associated with challenges in communication with peers and teachers” (qtd. in Titzmann and Jugert 2080). A wide range of studies based on immigrants has revealed that language barriers have in many ways impacted different aspects of the lives of immigrants. These impacts seemed to be common or similar in nature despite the host country of the immigrant as they were present as long as there was a difference in the languages spoken. The ability to fluently speak the language of the host country was stated to have positive impacts on the quality of life for many immigrants. A study of Ethiopian immigrants of South Africa revealed that the immigrants noted that the benefits of speaking the local languages of South Africa cannot be ignored (Gebre et al. 31). One of the benefits of being able to speak local languages was that it helped to attract economic benefits. It also improved communication with the locals when the need to be in contact with them arose (Gebre et al. 31). The study highlighted that the inability to speak the foreign language limited the range of jobs which were available to them (Gebre et al. 31). Additionally, another study which examined the acculturation experiences of Asian immigrants in Singapore identified two characteristics present within a few of the participants who had the desire to return to their home country (Mohanty et al. 166). This group of Asian immigrants had few local friends and was unable to speak the local language with fluency and it may be possible to link the inability to create local friendships to language barriers (Mohanty et al. 166).

Another study which investigated the transitioning of students from Mainland China into universities in Hong Kong also stated that communication with locals was inhibited due to the language barriers. The inability to speak the predominant language in Hong Kong which is Cantonese was identified by the Mainland China students to be the first major obstacle that they encountered in their attempts to further their education in Hong Kong (Vyas and Yu 890). Apart from the inability to speak Cantonese, they also shared that they encountered difficulties in understanding the idiomatic expressions. This inability to speak the language resulted in negative emotions and views about themselves (Vyas and Yu 891). Additionally, these students had the need to learn both Cantonese and English. One of the responses given by the students in the research was that the ability to speak both languages, were crucial for survival (Vyas and Yu 891).

A study which was done with foreign born counsellors similarly highlighted the link between language proficiency and self-efficiency (Kissil et al. 216). Similarly, to the Mainland China students, the inability of the counsellors to speak the language of the host country resulted in feelings of inadequacy or decreased the level of efficiency in their work (Kissil et al. 228). This is particularly due to the fact that as counsellors, it is of great importance for them to possess the ability to express themselves in a manner which allows their clients to feel understood (Kissil et al. 228). Their research consequently proved that in cases where the immigrants felt confident in their ability to speak the foreign language, the way in which they viewed themselves and their abilities changed positively (Kissil et al. 228).

Another study reports similar results in terms of language proficiency and psychological wellbeing. The research project focused on Turkish immigrants who migrated to Canada (Aycan and Berry 240). It was noted through the research that the qualifications and job level of the

Turkish immigrants were insufficient for them to be able to obtain a job (Aycan and Berry 240). The results of the study reported that the majority of the Turkish immigrants were unable to attain a job, or they were underemployed. A language barrier was one of the links that were made to the inability of the immigrants to obtain a job that matched their skill level (Aycan and Berry 240). However, they did identify the language barrier as being the main reason for which the immigrants were unable to obtain a job, although other factors also hindered job obtainment such as challenges to obtain the necessary credentials (Aycan and Berry 240). In regard to language, the study also highlighted that although there are available language courses for the immigrants, the courses are limited in that they do not specifically provide the immigrants with the language requirements which are necessary for the work environment (Aycan and Berry 241). This study in comparison to the study based on the students from Mainland China referred to the inability of the Turkish immigrants to get “Canadian experience” as the factor which was the most difficult to overcome to be able to successfully to enter into the workforce (Aycan and Berry 246). Although language was the obstacle which hindered the immigrants from entering the workforce, this barrier only persisted for a period of time as it highlights this barrier as being present within the first six months of them living in Canada (Aycan and Berry 246). However, after the six months other barriers for example market conditions, accounted for their inability to fully enter into the workforce (Aycan and Berry 246).

Although language has been highlighted in many research papers to be of great importance for immigrants to become a part of the society, it is noted that the ability to fluently speak the language of the host country does not necessarily impact the quality of the social interactions that the immigrants may have. The need to speak the language of the host language greatly depends on the nature of the daily interactions of the immigrants on a daily basis. A study

based on Ethiopian immigrants in South Africa described various reasons for which the immigrants did not recognise any substantial reason for becoming fluent in the foreign language (Gebre et al. 31). Due to the communal nature of the Ethiopian immigrants in South Africa, the inability to speak the local languages did not hinder their social interactions (Gebre et al.31). The majority of their communication remained amongst themselves whether it was work related or the formation of friends and other interactions (Gebre et al. 31).

The inability to fluently speak the language of the host language may be linked to the level of self-efficiency which is felt by the immigrants (Titzmann and Jugert 2083). This link between language and self-efficiency appears to be common despite age, it seems to be consistent as long as the immigrant needs to actively use language to be able to conduct the tasks in which they migrated to do. For example, both the foreign-born counsellors in the United States and the German students who lived in Germany showed a link between self-efficiency and language efficiency (Titzmann and Jugert 2083). This may be due to what was stated by Titzmann and Jugert that the ability to speak the foreign language greatly impacts the degree to which they are able to complete the tasks that are assigned to them therefore resulting in low levels of self-efficiency (Titzmann and Jugert 2089).

A study conducted by Tran implied that sex differences among Vietnamese immigrants in the United States over 40 had an impact on the rate at which English language acculturation took place and the learning strategies which were implemented (747). The results of his research showed that Vietnamese men are more likely to be more successful in English language acculturation as well as more likely to consciously use more learning strategies to improve their fluency of the English language (Tran 748). Similar to the studies mentioned above, fluency in the language of the host country, in this case English greatly determined the ability of the

immigrants to obtain jobs. This study differed from the other studies in that it highlighted that in general, language acculturation was hindered due to age. Although the previous studies mentioned earlier did not focus on the sex of the individual, this study confirmed that older women were the most disadvantaged in regard to job obtainment (Tran 749).

An important factor that can be highlighted is the idea that various times culture determines the roles and attitudes of men and women. For example, Tran identified that due to cultural factors, Vietnamese women are less likely to interact with foreigners (756). Tran, in the study appears to show a relationship between the English proficiency and learning strategies used. It is clear that the men who practiced speaking English with the locals were more fluent in the English Language (754). However, the study based on the students of Mainland China did not seem to link this technique to greater fluency of the foreign language of the students. Additionally, the differences in the suggested fluency of the language of the host country may not be comparable as the degree of fluency which was attained by the immigrants on both studies may differ.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Result

Primary research was conducted in the form of interviews. Initially, five people were interviewed. Three of the interviewees were immigrants from Venezuela, two females and one male; and two were immigrants from Cuba, one male and one female. On revision of the literature review it was determined that the information gathered was not sufficient, therefore, a second interview was conducted. Two of the female interviewees (Cuban and Venezuelan) were unavailable, therefore two new immigrants from Venezuela were interviewed.

The fake names Sandra, Janice, Alex, Susan and Tom were used to represent each interviewee to protect their identity. Sandra, Janice, Alex and Susan are immigrants from Venezuela while Tom is an immigrant from Cuba. The immigrants have been living in Trinidad and Tobago for approximately 5 months to 23 years. Sandra works as a sales representative in a clothes store. Janice works as a bartender. Alex earns a living by doing small errands for his boss. Tom works as an English teacher. Sandra does not work; she spends her time taking care of her grandchildren.

For this research paper the results of the interviewees who completed both sets of questions will be presented. The results were separated into the following themes: importance of fluency in the host language, factors affecting ability to obtain a job, the link between friendships and the acculturation strategies and lastly culture.

#### **Importance of fluency in the host language**

Sandra and Alex speak English fluently. Alex expressed that at times he felt frustrated when speaking the English language, however as he became more familiar with the language, he no longer experienced this frustration. Alex also shared that some people reacted sceptically

when they did not understand when he spoke English. In reference to Sandra, she stated that the reactions of the Trinidadians when she spoke English were mixed, some were kind while others were not. The other three interviewees, Janice, Tom and Susan, are not fluent in the English language as they can only say basic phrases. Janice expressed feelings of nervousness when trying to speak the basic phrases and a dislike for the negative attitude of some Trinidadians which she received when there was an inability to pronounce a particular word. Tom and Susan did not express any negative experiences when trying to speak English as they rarely did. Susan shared that the Trinidadians were very happy whenever she spoke English. All participants emphasized that the ability to speak English is of utmost importance to have the ability to carry out daily tasks. The three participants who did not speak English expressed that the ability to speak the language was not crucial for survival in Trinidad. The other two participants who fluently spoke English expressed that the English language was crucial for persons to be able to survive in Trinidad.

### **Experiences in Trinidad**

#### *Sandra*

She indicated that she has enjoyed her stay in Trinidad and described people to be friendly towards her. Additionally, her ability to speak English allowed her to make Trinidadian friends. She described the ability to form these friendships as a good experience. However, while living in Trinidad she went through a divorce and this was considered a bad experience. The divorce resulted in her having to work for longer hours which was also a bad experience for her. Sandra stated that none of her negative experiences were linked to language.

*Janice*

Janice stated that her overall experience in Trinidad has been good, but she does not intend to stay. She was able to obtain a job, provide for her children and shared that persons treated her well and were willing to help and support her in her time of need. She expressed that she liked the fact that she was able to provide for herself and her family. She also likes some of the cultural aspects of Trinidad and Tobago for example its style of clothes, its beaches, the malls, the dance and the food. Although she had good experiences, she also explained that her inability to speak English fluently resulted in negative experiences. One of her negative experiences was that people would be rude to her when she could not speak English. Additionally, she was unable to defend herself due to the language barrier.

*Tom*

He displayed a more radical attitude, compared with the other interviewees. He indicated that he did not have any good experiences in Trinidad and that there was nothing that he liked. He stated this although he was able to obtain a job and provide for his family. He explained that his bad experiences were related to his inability to speak English, as when customers asked for items and he was unable to respond, he was met with an attitude.

*Alex*

He shared that he did not have any bad experiences. Although people were rude at times to him when he made mistakes while speaking English, it did not matter to him. He also stated he has a love for the Trinidadian culture. For example, he likes Trinidadian food and therefore proceeded to list a number of dishes which he enjoys. Furthermore, he stated that he likes the beaches, the landscape and scenery and he enjoys teaching Spanish. He greatly enjoys helping

people to learn Spanish as it is his language. Additionally, he loves to help people as he expressed that he took pleasure in assisting to do an interview for this research paper.

### *Susan*

Susan did not have many bad experiences as she mainly stayed at home. However, one bad experience occurred at the hospital as no one was able to understand what she was saying, which resulted in them saying to come back another day. Fortunately, a Cuban doctor eventually came to help. It was also noted that at times Susan experienced persons moving away from her while she was walking. Her good experience was related to the kindness of some Trinidadians and her landlord. She explained that they were very helpful and kind to her.

### **Factors affecting the ability to obtain a job.**

Sandra lived in Trinidad for 19 years and has been working in a clothes store for the last 8 years. She expressed that the ability to speak English increased her confidence while working as it allowed her to communicate with her customers. Sandra shared that the main obstacle to obtaining a higher paying job was the lack of job opportunities and vacancies. She also said that her stay in Trinidad improved her English fluency. Initially Sandra learnt the English language in university and then improved by having general conversations with persons in Trinidad. Alex has lived in Trinidad for 21 years and has been living in Tobago for 2 years and works as a Spanish teacher. Alex stated that English competence increases work opportunities as communication is a crucial aspect of any job. As he has citizenship in Trinidad and Tobago, his ability to obtain a job is not hindered by language or a work permit. Similar to Sandra, he said that his stay in Trinidad improved his ability to speak the English language. Additionally, Alex learnt to speak English through hearing the Trinidadians speak as well as by having topic specific conversations.

Janice has been living in Trinidad for five months and works in a bar. The inability to speak English did not hinder her ability to fulfil her job requirements as she used an online translator to communicate while on work. The lack of language competency and a permanent migratory status limits her opportunity to acquire a better job. As this interviewee mainly interacted with Spanish speakers, her stay in Trinidad did not improve her ability to speak English. Janice learnt basic phrases in school while living in Venezuela. Tom has been living in Trinidad for 3 years and 10 months. He earns money by doing various small errands. The inability to speak English limits his work opportunities. Tom also stated that acquiring a work permit would not have increased his ability to get a better job as job options are limited due to the increased number of Venezuelans present. He said that he was able to improve his ability to speak the English language because of his length of stay in Trinidad. Tom learnt basic phrases by hearing the Trinidadians speak. Susan has been living in Trinidad for one year. She is not working, and she expressed that she does not have the need to obtain a job as she spends her day taking care of her grandchildren.

### **Friendships and its link to acculturation strategies**

The interviewees who were able to speak the English language fluently expressed that friendships were made based on the personality of the person. Sandra said that as she stayed in Trinidad for 19 years, she has more Trinidadian friends in comparison to Spanish friends. Sandra and Alex expressed that they have different types of friendships. It therefore did not matter to them whether they lived with Trinidadians or Spanish speakers. Of the other participants who only had the ability to speak Spanish, Tom expressed that he did not have Trinidadian friends due to language barriers; his closest relationship was with co-workers. He also said that he does not have many Hispanic friends due to limited free time. Janice shared that she has a Trinidadian

boyfriend and communicates with him through a translator or with the assistance of a friend. Susan describes her Trinidadian landlord as family as they are very kind to her and help her when the need arises.

All participants expressed that the attitude of the Trinidadians and Tobagonians mattered in terms of creating friendships. They therefore stated that they preferred to make friends with Trinidadians and Tobagonians who were kind. Of the participants who did not speak English fluently, one of them expressed that it did not matter whether they lived amongst Trinidadians or Spanish speakers as they rarely have the need to communicate with their neighbours. However, the other two participants who did not have the ability to speak English expressed that they preferred to live with Spanish speakers as they would be able to communicate and understand them better.

### **Cultural preservation**

All interviewees said that they kept some part of their culture such as the food and type of music. With the exception of Sandra, all of the interviewees spoke their native language regularly. Sandra was the only participant who shared that she no longer practiced her culture because of the 19 years which she stayed in Trinidad. The other four participants firmly stated that they did not lose their culture or had the ability to lose their culture while they stayed in Trinidad or Tobago. Their main reasons were that their culture was a part of their identity with Susan describing it as “in your blood.”

The three interviewees who could not speak English fluently expressed that they had no desire to stay in Trinidad as they described Trinidad as a country of transit. They are ready to return to their country as soon as it allows them to have a better quality of life. Sandra expressed that she would like to remain in Trinidad because her child is Trinidadian. Alex also expressed

that he would have liked to remain in Trinidad simply because he likes the country. Additionally, all participants explained that they wanted their children to be able to speak Spanish and English. The main reason was because of the opportunities which speaking two languages provided for them. Only one of the participants said that they wanted their children to continue to speak the Spanish language as it is a part of their culture.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Comparisons of Literature review and findings

The data collected in the literature review was compared to the results of the interviews which were done with the Spanish immigrants in Trinidad so as to analyse the similarities and differences between the data. This section is separated into the following themes: factors affecting the ability to obtain a job, language as a means of survival, link between duration of stay in the host country and the ability to improve language competency, the impact of language fluency on social interactions and the link between language and culture.

#### **Factors affecting the ability to obtain a job**

All of the interviewees stated that English competency allowed for an ease of communication between themselves and the Trinidadians which further led to the creation of better job opportunities. This idea coincides with the findings of multiple studies which identify the importance of language competency of the host country (Gebre et al.31, Vyas and Yu 890). However, similar to data presented in a study by Aycan and Berry with Turkish Immigrants, language competency does not guarantee the ability to obtain a better job as this is also impacted by other factors. For example, although Sandra is competent in both Spanish and English, she works in a clothes store and has not been able to obtain a better paying job due to the lack of job vacancies. Similarly, Tom although he believed that English fluency was crucial, he was not convinced that it would have permitted him to obtain a better paying job. Tom said that “the ability to speak English will not allow me to obtain a better job because there are a lot of Latin Americans living in Trinidad and Tobago right now.” Therefore, both Sandra and Tom recognise

that acculturation into Trinidad and Tobago is not solely dependent on language but influenced by different factors. As both Tom and Sandra are not able to obtain a higher paying job it is evident that the ability to become fully acculturated into the country is hindered by external factors which the immigrants cannot control.

### **Language as a means of survival**

A study done by Vyas and Yu with students from Mainland China quoted a student who referred to language proficiency as crucial to survival. However, this idea was not held by all of the Spanish immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago who were interviewed. In the present study, Alex and Sandra stated that their proficiency in the English language was necessary for survival and both of them were fluent in the language. The other interviewees stated that it was not crucial for survival. Their reasons are as follows, Tom said “I have been able to stay in Trinidad for 3 years and 10 months without knowing the language”, Janice also stated “Well I have been living in Trinidad although I cannot speak English.” They have been in Trinidad for approximately 5 months to 3 years and ten months, and were able to live, and two of them were able to obtain a job and therefore equated those activities to survival. Alex stayed in Trinidad for 21 years which would have caused him to forget some of his initial experiences in the country as he completed his tasks without the ability to speak English. Additionally, when Sandra arrived in Trinidad, she was able to speak English, which facilitated her survival. It can therefore be stated that English fluency, although of great importance, does not solve all of the issues that arise for the immigrants nor does it guarantee greater economic opportunities.

The word survival means different things to the various immigrants. Although Janice stated that proficiency in English was not crucial for survival, she did indicate that she was unable to defend herself when the need arose. The ability to defend oneself is linked to survival

as should the need arise; she can be accused wrongfully and be incapable of justifying herself or get into unnecessary arguments. Additionally, although she uses a translator to communicate on her job and with her boyfriend, this is not the most effective mode of communication as mistranslations can occur which will result in misunderstandings. Additionally, although Susan stated that she survives without being proficient in the English language, due to limited contact with the Trinidadians, this will prove to be critical to survival as the need to become integrated into society arises. For example, in reference to her visit to the doctor, she initially got turned away due to communication barriers. In the event that the illness was life threatening the consequences of not being able to speak English would have unfortunately been detrimental.

Alex, who also stated that English proficiency was not essential for survival also stated that language barriers prevented him from creating close relationships with the Trinidadians. However, building relationships is of great importance in terms of survival as it serves as a source of strength in difficult times and aids understanding amongst persons. Therefore, these participants noted that English language was not crucial for survival; this shows that it is a matter of perspective as well as that there is a limited view on the importance of the language. Similar to the study done with the Ethiopian immigrants in Africa, although the language did not seem to be a major obstacle it must be noted that both groups of immigrants would have had limited opportunities which would have significantly improved their survival abilities as well as their resources (Gebre et al. 31).

### **Link between duration of stay in the host country and the ability to improve language competency**

All interviewees stated that they were able to improve their ability to speak the English due to their stay in Trinidad with the exception of one. It was noted however that the participants Janice, Susan and Tom were still only able to say basic English phrases although they stayed in Trinidad for approximately 5 months to 3 years and ten months. This lack of a drastic improvement in English proficiency can be attributed to different factors for example the levels of exposure which they had to English speakers as well as their active attempt to learn the English language. Alex, said “when I came to Trinidad, I was unable to speak English however I learnt English through conversations and by focusing the conversation on a specific topic.”

The 3 Spanish immigrants who were not fluent in English, mainly learnt through hearing Trinidadians speak with the exception of Janice who had prior knowledge from school. There were therefore no cultural barriers that prohibited the immigrants from learning English as were present in the case of the female Vietnamese immigrants. The results also did not reflect a difference in language fluency based on gender as in comparison to the research accumulated from the Vietnamese immigrants (Tran 756). However, it can be noted that similar to Tran’s study, the learning strategies were what were of most importance for the immigrants to be able to increase their fluency in the language. Additionally, job obtainment was not attributed to gender as in the study with Tran as all the participants worked irrespective of language fluency and gender with the exception of Susan, a grandmother who chooses to supervise her grandchildren.

### **The impact of language fluency on social interactions**

Social interactions among the Hispanic interviewees were mainly impacted by language. Janice, Susan and Tom, who could not speak English had few Trinidadian friends. Janice said, “My Trinidadian friends are those who are able to speak a little Spanish which allows for communication between us.” Janice and Susan indicated that they preferred to live amongst other Spanish speaking people as it eliminates the language barrier. Susan said, “I prefer to live with Spanish speakers as I am able to understand and communicate with them,” she also ensured that she expressed that her choice to remain with the Spanish speakers was not due to personal racism. Janice, however, with the use of a translator and the help of a friend, is able to communicate with Trinidadians. Despite the language barrier, Janice has a Trinidadian boyfriend and uses the aforementioned modes to communicate with him. However, her Trinidadian friends to some extent are limited to those who can speak both Spanish and English. Although, for the Ethiopian immigrants in the Gebre et al. study, the language was not a pressing issue and at times they did not see the need to learn the language as they are communal in nature, this was different for the Hispanic immigrants. This is due to the fact that those who were interviewed worked and had to actively communicate, however they found a means to get around the language barrier. Another key factor that influenced the friendships of the immigrants was the attitude of the person. All participants stated that this was a key factor apart from language as this was important to the fluent Spanish speaking immigrants as well. Alex said, “although language is of importance to build a relationship the attitude of the person also matters.”

## **Link between Language and Culture**

The interviewees were asked whether or not it is possible for them to lose their culture as a result of the length of time which they have been staying in Trinidad and Tobago. All of the interviewees with the exception of Sandra shared that it is impossible for them to lose their culture. They stated that it was a part of their identity and therefore did not express any factor which would have resulted in them losing their culture. Alex who has lived in Trinidad for 21 years and has been living in Tobago for 2 years answered the question by saying “Never,” meaning that it is impossible for him to lose his culture. Susan also responded by saying “I cannot lose my culture; it is in my blood.” Therefore, the four immigrants who stated this, did not show any dislike or feelings of inferiority in reference to their culture as shown in the acculturation strategies integration and separation by Berry which were presented in the work by Mohanty et al. However, it is difficult to categorize them based on acculturation strategy methods described by Barry, as they seemed to only see the need to acculturate whenever there was a language barrier. Participants also appeared to be a bit unsure as to what was meant by culture. It appeared as though they did not recognise language as a part of culture. This may be the reason why many of the participants mainly wanted their children to learn the Spanish and English language and as it increased opportunities. The idea of Janice, Tom and Susan wanting their children to be bilingual although they themselves do not see it as absolutely necessary for themselves shows they do understand the importance of being able to speak both languages and that they believe that it should be accomplished even if it does not provide immediate opportunities.

Additionally, although the attitude of the Trinidadians mattered, they all stated that persons with negative attitudes can be found amongst Hispanic and Trinidadian persons.

Therefore, the attitude did not greatly impact their activities in Trinidad. Additionally, all of the immigrants who did not speak English had the desire to return to their home country. This desire was related to the fact that negative factors pushed them to migrate to Trinidad as well as their main purpose for coming. Janice, Tom and Susan expressed that they would like to return to their home countries once the quality of life improved. When Tom was asked whether he would like to return to his country he said, "yes and that Trinidad is only a country of transit." They did not describe Trinidad as a place where they wanted to stay. However, the Spanish immigrants who had the ability to speak Spanish and English were both well established and acquainted with the Trinidadian culture and expressed that they would have liked to stay in Trinidad. Additionally, they came to Trinidad of their free will and were not influenced by negative factors. Therefore, although the Asian immigrants who wanted to return to Asia were unable to speak the host language and had no friends this cannot be said as the reason for the Hispanic immigrants wanting to return to their country (Mohanty et al. 166).

## CONCLUSION

One of the purposes of this research paper was to identify the extent to which language is related to the acculturation experiences of Spanish speaking immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago. Another purpose of this research paper was to find the ways in which language influences the interactions between Spanish speaking immigrants and locals in Trinidad and Tobago. The information gathered shows that although language is of great importance in terms of communication, the Spanish immigrants preferred to build relationships with natives who were kind to them. Therefore, the attitude of the natives was what influenced the desire of the Spanish immigrants to build a relationship with them, as the Spanish immigrants were willing to build relationships with the natives who were friendly even when a language barrier existed.

Additionally, the ability of the immigrants to obtain a job was not solely dependent on their competence in English, but job availability. Therefore, competence in English did not guarantee a job or obtainment of a better job. Although language barriers were present, all of the immigrants were able to carry out everyday tasks such as going to the grocery, making friends, and finding a job without any major problems. Therefore, language did not greatly impact their acculturation experiences.

### **Limitations**

The interviewees were only limited to Venezuelan and Cuban immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago although there are also Peruvians and Colombians in Trinidad and Tobago. The lack of variance in the participants chosen was due to an inability to contact and meet with Spanish immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago, from different countries. Participants were chosen based on whether they lived in close proximity of the researcher or were reachable through online resources. The interviews done with the Venezuelans and the Cubans to some extent would not

have been able to reflect the experiences of the Colombians and Peruvians as each group of the Spanish immigrants although having experiences unique to themselves, will also have experiences that were impacted by their home country.

### **Recommendations**

More research can be done in reference to the perceptions which Spanish immigrants have about what it means to survive. Furthermore, research can be done with a greater variety of Spanish immigrants in the Caribbean as a whole, so as to do a more in-depth research about the Spanish Immigrants as well as from different Spanish speaking countries.

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## **APPENDIX A**

The following are the questions which guided the interviews with the Spanish immigrants.

### **Fluency and Importance of the language**

- 1) To what extent are you able to speak the English language fluently?
- 2) To what extent do you feel confident or comfortable speaking English?
- 3) What limits your ability to speak or learn English?
- 4) Do you feel the need to learn to speak English to be able to carry out daily tasks?
- 5) How has your experience of speaking English been when carrying out full discussions?  
How do you feel about it? How do people react to you?
- 6) Do you think that the inability to speak English fluently impacts your confidence while working, interacting with others, doing daily activities and your ability to get a better job?

### **Ability to get a job**

- 7) How long have you been living in Trinidad?
- 8) Are you working?
- 9) What kind of job do you have? Where do you work?
- 10) Do you think that the inability to speak English fluently limits your job opportunities?
- 11) Do you think that if you receive a work permit you will have the ability to obtain a better job/ or a job that you prefer?
- 12) Do you believe that you have been able to speak English more fluently because of the length of time which you spent in Trinidad?
- 13) How have you learnt to speak English?

### **Friendships and link to acculturation strategies**

- 14) Do you have close relationships with the Trinidadians? And with the Hispanics? What type of relationships do you have with the Trinidadians and the Hispanic immigrants? What about with the Trinidadians?
- 15) Do you think that the attitude of the Trinidadians impacts the type of relationships which you have with them?
- 16) Generally, do you need to use English to communicate? For example, is it necessary for you to communicate with the Trinidadians regularly throughout the day?
- 17) Do you prefer to live with other Spanish speakers instead of Trinidadians? Why?

### **Culture**

- 18) Which aspects of your culture do you preserve in Trinidad?
- 19) Which aspects of the Trinidadian culture have you included in your life?
- 20) Do you believe that you can lose your customs and your culture if you remain in this country?
- 21) Do you like staying here? Why?
- 22) (If they have children) Would you want them to speak Spanish? Why?
- 23) Do you prefer to speak Spanish while you are here? Why?
- 24) Do you think that you need to be able to speak English in order to survive here? Can you give me more details?