The transformative effect of learning about a culture through foreign language acquisition

A case study of Greek adults learning about Hispanic culture in Spanish language classes in Greece.

Maria Kalouptsi

Supervisor: Emilia Fägerstam
Examiner: Song Ee Ahn

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns a case study which attempts to underline the importance of culture learning through foreign language acquisition in the transformation of prejudices and the fomentation of cultural awareness. More specifically, it aims to present the way in which adult learners’ critical reflection on culture in combination to foreign language learning can lead to their acknowledgement of the equity between cultures and their proximity to “the other”, a fact that is considered to foster cultural respect and awareness. For doing so, a qualitative approach was used in order to examine the perceptions of a group of adults learning Spanish in an elementary level class in Greece. Data was collected from in-depth interviews where participants were asked to expose their opinion of the importance of culture and its connection to language, to consider the implication of culture learning in foreign language learning and to share their personal views of the Hispanic culture as it derives from their studying the Spanish language and reflecting on the Hispanic culture-Spanish language correlation. Research delivered positive outcomes concerning this specific issue and showed evidence that the transformative effect of learning about a culture through language acquisition is indeed possible. Suggestions for further research on the matter are made so as to investigate the replicability of such a transformative effect in other similar cases and to secure the generalization of results.

Key-Words: language, culture, Spanish language, Hispanic culture, foreign language learning, cultural awareness, culture-language interconnectedness, transformative learning theory, adult learning.
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1
INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

A language is a system through which people communicate, exchange ideas, express feelings, cooperate in a community and come in contact with society. A language is much more than grammar and syntax, rules and vocabulary; it carries with it the history and the way of being of a civilization and of the people that grow in it (Μικρός et al, 2001). It also constitutes a way of seeing the world and of interpreting, creating and expressing its meaning (Μικρός et al, 2001); far more than this, it directs, to some extent, the way of thinking of the members of a society so that they perceive the world in a certain way (Αρχάκης & Κονδύλη, 2004).

Culture, on the other hand, is a collection of all these aspects- personality, behavior, way of thinking and living, actions, gestures, problem solving procedures, history, customs, beliefs, ethics, artefacts, (Hall as cited in Μικρός et al, 2001)- that give an identity to a social group and define it. The idea people have of the world that surrounds them depends on the culture they come from (Αρχάκης et al, 2004). For this reason their language, for being one of the features of culture, can communicate their culture (Χριστοδούλου, 2003). That means that when people learn a foreign language, they undoubtedly, and many times unconsciously, emerge themselves in a new world, a new culture. So, language learning can be the path to culture knowing. Thus, as a consequence, “the new language and culture being learned offer the opportunity for learning new concepts and new ways of understanding the world” (Language, Culture and Learning, p.32).

But, if a culture represents a way of seeing and understanding the world, that means that the culture in which a person grows does not only determine the way a person sees their own but it also determines the idea that the person has of “the other”. Ignorance, misconception, incorrect information, distance, are only some of the factors that create stereotypes, ideas and beliefs of “the other” that can be, many times, far from the truth. Foreign language learning can be a way to demolish these stereotypes. By taking the role of the foreigner, when learning about their culture through language learning, the learner can come to understand “the perspectives of others, gain insights into the values and meanings that (the others have) internalised” (Thanasoulas, 2001, p.6) and hence, present a change of approach towards them and manage to see them under a different scope.
This is especially apparent in adult learning. As Brookfield (2012) sustains, a special feature of adult learning is critical reflection. Critical reflection is cultivated through learning (Γεωργοπούλου, 2015) and in the field of adult learning it can be the path to transform misconceptions or false assumptions adults have, when they thoroughly and deeply delve into past experiences and reflect on the reasons and the incidents that made them come to build these assumptions (Mezirow, 2009). So, critical reflection can be the means to stereotype alteration and assumption change. If it is so, than foreign language learning, by bringing the adult learner close to the foreign culture, could really be the way to the better understanding of “the other”.

1.2. Research aim and questions

My initial thought for researching the connection between culture and language learning and the perception-of-“the other” change through foreign language and culture learning, was born from my personal experiences both as a Spanish language student and later as a teacher of the language. Going back to the years of my studying Spanish I remember how surprising it was to me to understand while learning the language that my perceptions of the Spanish speaking world were in many cases a lot different than I had found out after my connection with the Spanish language. In addition, realizing that there is a context laying behind the words that carries with it the history, past, elements of everyday life, beliefs and customs of the Hispanic world was really revealing and made me change the way I would approach any other language I have learned ever since.

Moreover, as a Spanish teacher for the last fifteen years, working with adults, I have many times come across this language-culture approximation. In teaching any language, it is impossible to prevent cultural elements from emerging. The case of the Spanish language is no exception to this rule. Therefore, a Spanish language student can come to understand the Spanish speaking world’s culture through learning to speak the Spanish language. There is only one peculiarity: since the Spanish speaking world is immense for Spanish is the official language not only of Spain but also of many other countries in Latin America¹, the cultural context of the Spanish language is very broad and therefore, learning Spanish opens the way towards the knowledge of many different cultures that are connected through this language.

¹ Spanish is the official language of Spain and of nineteen countries in Central and South America, including also some Caribbean islands, a region that is referred to as Latin America, and of Equatorial Guinea in Africa. It is also a language spoken by more than 30 million people in the USA and by around 3 million people in the Philippines (Barceló et. al, 2006). For the purposes of this study, the terms Hispanic world/culture refer only to Spain and to the Latin American and Caribbean countries.
But, considering as a fact that there is a language-culture connection does not always indicate that there is a conscious change in the way foreign language adult students perceive other cultures. The present study is a case study that aims at researching the Spanish language adult learner’s perception of the Hispanic culture, in a Spanish language course for adults in Greece, focusing on the viewpoint of the learners. The study will examine how these students have changed or altered their insights as far as the Hispanic world’s culture is concerned, through learning the Spanish language. If it is so, than it could be demonstrated that culture learning through language learning can really transform people’s idea of “the other” and lead to cultural awareness, an outcome that could be considered valid in the case of any other foreign language learning.

The research will focus on the following questions:

How do Greek adult students in the elementary level Spanish language class in a private language academy in Greece, learning Spanish in their spare time for leisure purposes, get to know the culture of the Spanish speaking world through learning the Spanish language?

How can this culture knowledge transform their idea of the Hispanic world and alter their prejudices and assumptions towards it?
This study aims at researching the transformative effect of foreign language learning on adult learners. For this reason, special attention is given to the characteristics of the adult learner in order to specify the features that promote, enhance or obstruct adult learning. Furthermore, since the examination of the transformative effect of foreign language and culture learning is at the core of this research project, it is important to include in this literature review part an overview of the basic issues examined in the present thesis, such as language, culture and foreign language learning. Previous research on the transformative effect of foreign language and culture learning is also presented in order to configure the knowledge already accumulated in this field.

2.1. Characteristics of adult learning and the adult learner

According to UNESCO (2009), adult learning/education:

denotes the entire body of organised educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behaviour in twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development.

Therefore, adult learning differs from what could be called pre-adult learning, which abides by statutory policies conformed by educational legislation, in that it is continuous process that takes up an individual’s whole life (Γεωργοπούλου, 2015). Thus, adult learning constitutes a field of special attention for it concerns individuals that are “regarded as adults by the society” (UNESCO, 2009), not only in terms of age but also in terms of what Rogers (2002) defines as adulthood.

Adulthood is the most significative characteristic of an adult (Rogers, 2002). It is comprised of three basic elements, maturity, perspective and responsibility that are connected to autonomy. Maturity, in the sense that an adult is a fully grown person is what he defines as “not just a state but also an ideal to be aimed at rather than achieved in full” (Rogers, 2002, p. 41). Perspective means that adults are expected to make mature judgements about the other and also about themselves based on the
experiences the have accumulated in their lives, a fact that “will help them achieve a more balanced approach to life and to society, to be more developed in their thinking in relation to others” (Rogers, 2002, p. 42). Responsibility has to do with self-management and consciously making decisions and implies that adults are fully responsible for their actions and reactions since “adulthood implies some measure of autonomy, responsible decision-making, voluntariness rather than involuntariness” (Rogers, 2002, p. 42).

These three characteristics combined with the fact that adults approach learning experiences influenced by the learning motifs they already are familiar with and then they interpret reality according to their beliefs, identities and attitudes (Γεωργοπούλου, 2015), all together configure the profile of the adult learner which should be taken into consideration when examining adult learning.

2.2. Language, Culture and Foreign Language Learning

“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”, once said the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (Tang, 2011, p.8). That is, every language represents a specific way in which the people that speak it, understand and confront the social environment that surrounds them. But since language is an important and vital component of culture, for it carries it within, it constitutes the principal means of expressing culture and thus, of expressing the world as the speakers of a specific language tied to a specific culture view it. Thus, it is evident that language and culture are tightly interconnected. In other words “particular languages are associated historically with particular cultures; the languages provide the key to the associated cultures; the languages themselves cannot be fully understood otherwise than in the context of the cultures in which they are inextricably embedded” (Mahadi & Jafari, 2012, p.234).

Considering, on the other hand, that culture is a fundamental element of social life and that language is an agent of expressing it, it is positively concluded that language is also a social resource, a social practice in which people participate in their attempt to communicate with other people (Thanasoulas, 2001). But, of course, language is not only the medium used for people’s communication; it is also an important component of social structures’ development because it contains and expresses all these fundamental features that bond societies’ members, such as customs and cultural traditions (Calleja, 2014, p. 124).

Hence, learning a language equals to learning a specific way of interpreting and making meaning of a specific culture and of communicating it to the others. By way of analogy, learning a
foreign language corresponds to learning a new and in many ways different way of seeing the world, configured by the culture in which the language learned has been created and developed. Thus, learning a foreign language is not an one dimensional procedure; that is because the learner not only acquires the skills to be able to communicate with others in that language, but also obtains cultural competence, described by Thanasoulas (2001) as “the knowledge of conventions, customs, beliefs and systems of meaning of another country” (p. 1), for he/she becomes acquainted with the new culture that the foreign language learned impersonates.

2.3. Previous research on the transformative nature of foreign language and culture learning in the case of adult learners

Because people’s worldviews and behavior are bound by the culture in which they grow, it is not hyperbolic to conclude that people have many times a difficulty in understanding or accepting worldviews and ways of being different from their own (Kitao as cited in Genc & Bada, 2005). Previous research on foreign language learning has shown that learning a foreign language and through it the culture that accompanies it, can facilitate a change of this perspective. Much of this research focuses on the transformative experiences of adult learners of English as a foreign language whereas there has not been a lot of research concerning the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture. Furthermore, much of the research is concentrated more on the importance of culture teaching in foreign language class as a medium of developing cultural awareness and not so much on the indirect benefit that culture knowing through foreign language learning has. Nonetheless, since the interconnectedness of culture and language is an undoubtable premise, it could be considered valid that what stands for English language and culture learning could be valid also for any other language and culture learned and that any culture learning through foreign language learning could indeed lead to a change in perception of other cultures.

The most immediate effect of coming to contact with cultural elements of the foreign language being studied, is that it makes learning itself much more enjoyable and interesting. As Kitao (as cited in Genc & Bada, 2005) asserts, the study of culture makes learning meaningful, increases learners’ interest in the target countries and also “gives learners a liking for the native speakers of the target language” (p. 75). On the other hand, in researching the issue of the inclusion of culture teaching in the foreign language classroom, Thanasoulas (2001) points out that “foreign language learning is foreign culture learning” (p. 2) and thus, the teaching of culture could lead to the development of an understanding
towards the culture being taught, which consequently could alter the pre-established way of viewing the people whose language is being studied (Thanasoulas, 2001).

Similar to this concept is the conclusion Genc and Bada (2005) reach, when researching culture in language learning and teaching. According to their findings, the language learner shows signs of transformation of attitude towards the culture that corresponds to the language being learned. More than that, a raise in the awareness of the target culture is observed as a direct outcome of learning the foreign language which it accompanies, helping at the same time the learner to overcome “the limits of monocultural perspective and reach[ing] the realm of [a] different perspective” (Genc & Bada, 2005, p. 75).

Research on the experience of adult ESL learners has also confirmed the presence of a perspective transformation in culture learning. In a study conducted by King (2000), ESL students not only demonstrated an advanced ability of perspective transformation as far as language and culture learning are concerned, but they also came to realize a personal change in themselves. The preconceived ideas with which students face the target culture began to change after the learners’ contact with the English language, directing the learner towards becoming “more accepting of people from other cultures” (King, 2000, p. 6) and also becoming “more aware of and appreciative of people from other cultures” (King, 2000, p. 7).

Analogous patterns prevail in the study of Gojkov-Rajić and Prtljaga (2013) where in researching foreign language learning the hypothesis that “foreign language acquisition, followed by the knowledge on the related nations and cultures makes people more open for the new and the unknown and more tolerant to diversity” (p.809) is confirmed. Their findings show that by learning a foreign language the learner inevitably comes to contact with the culture of its native speakers resulting in a better understanding of their nature; as a consequence, the learner becomes more open to different worldviews and the possibilities of different perspectives and thus, more open to reconsidering prior attitudes and beliefs (Gojkov-Rajić & Prtljaga, 2013).

An analysis of learners’ perception on language and culture, taken on by Drewelow and Mitchell (2015), manifests that culture knowing gained through foreign language learning supports the understanding of “the other”. In accordance with the results of their study, culture was found to be valuable in giving meaning to language and in “gaining an insider view” (Drewelow & Mitchell, 2015, p. 252), leading to the recognition of the value of the other cultures and to the cultivation of respect towards them. In line with these findings, stand the results given by the research of Brooks-Lewis
(2013) on the significance of culture in foreign language learning. Apart from the idea that culture learning makes language learning more enjoyable and helps in going in depth in learning the language, the relation of culture knowing to the building of cultural awareness was revealed. This research affirms that a change in learners’ perspective derive from the data analysis, showing that culture knowing through language learning fosters “positive changes in attitudes and beliefs and of the learners’ developing self and intercultural understanding” (Brooks-Lewis, 2013, p. 15) leading to a recognition of the value of other cultures, to the revision of stereotypical thinking towards them and to “growth and acceptance of the difference” (Brooks-Lewis, 2013, p. 16).

The present research project aims at adding a bit to this existing literature by presenting the perceptions on Spanish language and Hispanic culture that Greek adult learners of the Spanish language gain while learning Spanish, and to examine if these perceptions agree with previous literature in that culture knowing through foreign language learning is both feasible and viable in this specific case and it can indeed lead to a transformation in learners’ perspectives of the Hispanic culture.
3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research focuses on adult learning and the transformative nature of culture knowledge through language learning in the case of adults. For this reason, this part consists of an overview of the adult learning theory of *Transformative Learning* which the present thesis aims to research in practice. Furthermore, in order to configure the theoretical framework on which this research project rests, this theoretical part includes a more thorough analysis of the constructivist perspective on learning, for it constitutes the epistemological basis of the *Transformative Learning Theory*.

3.1. Constructivist perspective on learning

Human learning is a multi-dimensional issue of great importance to the development of society. How learning takes place, what is its value, the mechanisms people establish in order to acquire knowledge and its impact on cognition, the relationship between knowledge and truth and many other questions deriving from the exploration of the process of learning, are all subjects that have concerned for the last decades the educational scientists, and not only them, since more and more often other disciplines are combined with educational theories or viewed under their scope. Education has, thus, come to the centre of attention of the scientific community and that has lead to the flourishing of a multitude of theories that try to approach education and learning from different perspectives.

The constructivist perspective is one of them. In constructivism, the basic role in learning is shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction. Knowledge is no longer considered as the result of the recognition and acquisition of the objective and absolute truth, simply because there is no such thing, nor is it passively accumulated (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). Instead, learning is viewed from a more relativistic angle and it is considered as the outcome of our personal, socially or individually acquired experience of the world that surrounds us, within the limits of the specific socio-cultural environment in which we reside and act (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003).

Therefore, learning requires the active participation of the learner in the knowledge acquisition process and is accomplished, as Doolittle & Hicks (2003) suggest, when students are “capable of engaging in personally meaningful inquiry resulting in viable knowledge” (p. 92). This point of view concentrates on the fact that knowledge is not an exact reflection of a fixed and unquestionable external reality (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003), but rather the result of the learner’s effort to discover what is meaningful to him or her, based on personal experiences; as a result, the value of knowledge is defined
by “how it suits our individual needs and our own individual actions” (Winn, 2004, p. 80). That consequently leads, according to Doolittle & Hicks, to the assumption that “knowledge attained by the learner may vary in its accuracy as a representation of an external reality” (p. 78), which explains the creation of three different approaches of constructivism.

For cognitive constructivism, the way knowledge is constructed is inextricably associated to cognition. People tend to systemize in their minds in schemas, the world, as they understand it from their personal experience and their interaction with it (Winn, 2004), aiming to construct “a relatively reliable and coherent model of their individual experiential worlds” (Glasersfeld, 1989, p. 130). Personal meaning based on experience (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003), combined with prior knowledge, personal ideas, beliefs and constant reflection on incoming information and its processing (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003), leads to the modification of these schemas in order to reconstruct them under the influence of new experience (Winn, 2004). It is by these mental processes that learning is made possible.

Radical constructivism advocates that even though an external reality may exist, it is unrecognizable to individuals (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). Schemas accommodate and adapt to new personal stimuli of the environment through abstraction and reflection (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003), in order to produce a viable representation of reality. Learning, thus, is the outcome of the rebuilt of one’s mental structures that takes place after personal accommodation and adaptation to the new experiences of their environment.

The social component of learning, whose importance is almost disregarded by these two other approaches, is the point of reference for the third type of constructivism, the social one. Conforming to social constructivism, knowledge derives from social and dialogic interaction between individuals (Bakhtin, 1984, as cited in Doolittle & Hicks, 2003) where communication through language and intermutual experiences determine a socially acceptable level of meaning shared “between people collectively” (Bakhtin, 1984, as cited in Doolittle & Hicks, 2003, p.80). Interaction with others causes a perturbation in the structure of one’s schemas (Glaserfeld 1989), because the individually existing knowledge comes into conflict with the social one (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). As a consequence, this procedure concludes to learning.

Therefore, a kind of transformation of a person is accomplished by learning. Since humans are social beings, that transformation has to come, at least to some extent, through interaction with one’s environment. In constructivism, that happens when a person results in enhancing their knowledge by
obtaining new experience, using stimulus from their own social environment and accommodating it to their prior personal knowledge of the facts. Any experience that is lived can be meaningful whereas only the things that really matter are the ones that are built upon.

3.2. Transformative learning theory

The role of experience and reflection in adult learning is of crucial importance. For this reason, these adult learning features have attracted the attention of many adult learning theorists. Nonetheless, it is in Jack Mezirow’s *Transformative Learning Theory* where the outcome of transformation of prior beliefs, which derives from reflection on experience, is fully explored and annotated.

Mezirow believes that learning is the outcome of peoples’ understanding and interpreting of their life experiences (Mezirow, 1990). That is, learning cannot derive solely from living an experience; on the contrary, it can only be assumed by searching the meaning of each experience and then putting it into practice in real life future circumstances. But the meaning making of an experience is tightly connected to culture because the cultural background in which people are upbrought defines the way each person understands the world that surrounds them. Thus, it is culture that determines who learns what and when. As Mezirow sustains, “the justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context-biographical, historical, cultural- in which they are embedded” (Mezirow, 2000, p.3).

However, what seems real and true to one is not necessarily the same for another because different cultures determine different worldviews. Besides, it is very common for people to form a false idea of an issue or stick to assumptions and prejudices that are far away from being reasonable and realistic but, nonetheless, often considered factual and are taken for granted. The role of transformative learning is to revolutionize this taken-for-grantedness so as people can question their prior beliefs, values, feelings and actions, which are conditioned by what they have been taught previously by others or by what they have absorbed uncritically during their upbringing, aiming at reaching the point where they will be able to think and act on their own and thus, take full responsibility of their lives (Mezirow, 2000).

In consonance with the *Transformative Learning Theory*, critical reflection is what makes adults capable of changing these mistaken presumptions. Without critical thinking, people stick to their habits of mind, which Mezirow (2000) defines as “a set of assumptions, broad, generalized, orienting
predispositions that act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience” (p. 17) that configure their point of view and pattern their actions. Most of the things they consider true and real, their ideology, their beliefs, their judgements, their way of understanding the world, are all stereotypical points of view that people have internalized, influenced by the culture to which they belong. This is a procedure that takes place unconsciously and automatically; therefore, it cannot be changed unless if it goes through a process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 2000), a conduct through which humans are consciously and critically reevaluating their prior beliefs by correcting the misconceptions and distortions caused by their previous way of thinking (Mezirow, 1990).

Of course, even though critical reflection could be witnessed in underage learners too, it is mostly in adult life when it is developed. Put in the words of Mezirow (2009), there is “a critical dimension of learning in adulthood that enables us to recognize, reassess, and modify the structures of assumptions and expectations that frame our tacit points of view and influence our thinking, beliefs, attitudes, and actions” (p. 18). This can be done through critical reflection and the use of imagination. The adult learner, by critically reflecting on previous suppositions, reevaluates them and starts to first imagine and then notice and comprehend the existence of alternative possibilities; that is because imagination can foster a positive attitude towards the existence of alternative contexts and reflection can lead to the acceptance of others’ perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). This is the moment when the learner consequently conquers new knowledge which transforms prior beliefs and what has been taken for granted. By changing this careless assimilation of false assumptions through critical thinking, a transformation in the points of view takes place that thereupon leads to an alteration of the habits of mind. This encourages a perspective transformation, defined by Mezirow as

“the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand and feel about the world; of formulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow as cited in Calleja, 2014, p. 130).

To do so, Mezirow proposes a procedure of ten phases that lead to transformative learning, even though there is no linear pattern in order to experience the transformation nor is it necessary for a person to go through all these phases to accomplish a perspective transformation (Kitchenham, 2008). This ten-phased process begins with the formulation of a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) that could be defined as the experience that instigates the questioning of prior assumptions, passing to the self examination of feelings, the critical assessment of assumptions, the sharing of the transformative process, the exploration of new options, the planning of a course of action and the acquisition of
knowledge to implement it to the trying and then building competence in these new roles that, through critical thinking, will finally result in the alteration of one’s perspective (Mezirow, 2000).

3.3. Theoretical framework of the present thesis

People tend to have fixed ideas of the world that surrounds them and see other cultures through a specific lens. The way we perceive the world is tightly connected to identity and learning is a factor of structuring and restructuring identities. Therefore, learning about a different culture and reflecting on this new knowledge can alter previous beliefs about it (Mezirow, 2000) and bring what Mezirow calls “a change of meaning perspective” (Nohl, 2014).

The line of thought of the present thesis is aligned with Mezirow’s Transformative Learning theory which argues that learning shapes and reshapes the adult learner’s identity through critical reflection on fixed and predetermined beliefs which then changes his/her worldview (Mezirow, 2009). This theory is influenced by the position of constructivism (Mezirow, 2000) that argues that knowledge is indeterminate and constructed when people constantly revise and restructure the idea they have on social phenomena through social interaction.

This theory configures the theoretical frame of the present thesis. The aim of this research is to test this theory in practice and see how learning about the Hispanic cultures through learning the Spanish language can really change the perception the adult learners have of this specific culture and reshape their beliefs of it.
RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter the methodology, the sample and the sampling method, the research process, the data analysis method, along with the ethical considerations, validity issues and limitations concerning the present study, are explained.

4.1. Methodology

This research project is a case study (Cohen & Manion, 1994), for it “entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case” (Bryman, 2012, p. 66). A case study refers to the kind of research which focuses on the particular nature of a single case in question (Bryman, 2012; Bell, 2005; Qi, 2009), in a specific and determined place and period of time (Γεωργοπούλου, 2015; Harwell, 2011). The choice of this approach derives from the fact that the researcher intends to examine a particular phenomenon in a precise and explicit frame, not with the intention to generalize the outcomes but with the intention to delve deep into the uniqueness of this specific case (Creswell, 2011). Therefore, the objective in case study research is not to “identify typical cases that can be used to represent a certain class of objects” (Bryman, 2012, p. 70) because the case study is not a sample of such class of objects (Bryman, 2012) and thus, that type of generalization cannot take place, but rather it is to research the precise characteristics and features that one single case represents.

Of course, a case study is much more than a simple description of a story or an event. On the contrary, it permits the researcher to proceed with the in-depth, intensive (Bryman, 2012) examination of the phenomenon under study in a systematic and well organized way where the features of the case are being explored in detail (Bell, 2005). In addition, a case study is strong in reality and therefore realistic, it puts emphasis on the particularities on the specific case studied and it can also provide a large range of alternative ideas on the same subject, for it concerns also the possibility of differing participants’ views on the subject (Adelman et al, as cited in Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 178). Yin (as cited in Bryman, 2012, p. 70) identifies five different types of case study: the critical case, where the researcher examines whether the results of the case studied coincide or not with the propositions of a preestablished theory, the unique case, the representative case which “exemplifies a broader category of which it is a member” (Bryman, 2012, p.70), the revelatory case which aims at investigating a phenomenon “previously inacessible to scientific investigation” (Bryman, 2012, p.70) and finally, the longitudinal case, which is extended in a long period of time.
The case study research is one of the most common research methods in qualitative research. A qualitative research, places interest in the events that take place in the social world concerning either individuals or groups of people and social situations, and aims at researching the particularities of these social circumstances and of the relations that characterize them (Iωσηριόης, 2008). It is the kind of research which “usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2012, p. 714). Qualitative research also has a “preference for seeing through the eyes of the people being studied” (Bryman, 2012, p. 403) and thus, places “a focus on the discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of participants through various strategies of inquiry” (Harwell, 2011, p. 3). Furthermore, the purpose of qualitative approach is “inductivist, constructionist and interpretivist” (Bryman, 2012, p. 714) since “a researcher may construct theories or hypotheses, explanations, and conceptualizations from details provided by a participant” (Harwell, 2011, p.3).

In addition, since the intention in qualitative case research is to examine a case in depth, the sample size is usually small and focuses on a specific environment (Creswell, 2011). A small sample size serves the researcher’s aim to carry out a detailed and exhaustive examination of the case under study. This would be very difficult to do in case of a large sample size and multiple sites and also too time consuming. As a consequence, that fact could negatively affect the course and the outcomes of the research (Creswell, 2011).

Thus, due to the nature of this research, its purpose and the kind of data collected, this study is a case study conducted using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2011). More in particular, the nature of this research coincides with the principle of intensively examining a single phenomenon, in accordance with the fundamentals of case study research, for it aims at exploring the transformative effect of learning a culture through learning a foreign language based on the examination and analysis of a specific group of Greek adult students of the Spanish language in a specific learning environment and in a determined and exact place and period of time. The purpose of the present research is to examine as much in detail as possible this particular case alone and for this reason the data collected derives only from the members of this specific group of adult learners and thus it is small, as case study sample sizes usually are, so as to facilitate the in-depth data analysis. The objective is not to reach generalizable conclusions but to examine the features this case uniquely entails based on the perspectives the participants of this study provide, using their narratives rather than quantifiable data, as it corresponds to qualitative case study research. Hence, the present research project includes the
essential attributes of qualitative case study research and thus, it can be considered as an example of such a type of research.

4.2. Sample

This study was conducted in the private language academy where I work as a Spanish teacher. The academy is situated in a small town in the northern part of Greece. It offers foreign language lessons to students of all ages but in the Spanish language class all the students are adults. For the purposes of this study, I obtained the permission of the owner of the academy, to undertake the research with students that are attending the Spanish as a foreign language class. A total of twenty one students, three men and eighteen women, of between 25 and 40 years of age, voluntarily and with great enthusiasm participated in the study.

The participants are all Greek adults taking Spanish lessons for the first time. All participants were purposefully chosen to be attending the elementary level class for two reasons. First, having limited experience in learning Spanish they would remember better their perceptions of the Hispanic world before starting taking classes. This element is essential for this study since it is the basis from where to start observing the transformational effect. Second, this would help better in examining the transformative effect. My thought was that the elementary level students who are still trying to cope with the basics of the language wouldn’t have reflected much on the meanings behind the words, where culture is hidden, and wouldn’t have emerged they themselves in the Hispanic culture as much as advanced level students, with more knowledge of the language, probably would have done.

4.3. Sampling method

In qualitative research the usual ways of data collection are interviews and questionnaires, observation, and any other written document like diaries, notes e.t.c, or audiovisual material such as pictures and recordings (Creswell, 2011). In observation, the researcher collects information by observing the behavior of people in the specific location where research is conducted while the research takes place (Creswell, 2011). The two main types of interview are the unstructured and the semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2012). In the unstructured interview “the interviewer asks a question that the interviewee is allowed to respond freely” (Bryman, 2012, p. 471), there is no specific list of questions to follow but more a series of topics to be covered and the flow of the interview is quite
similar to a conversation (Bryman, 2012). In the semi-structured, the interviewee has also the liberty to answer freely but to specific questions that cover specific topics (Bryman, 2012).

With the intention of distancing myself as much as possible, since my being at the same time both researcher and teacher could affect the participants’ responses, observation was cast aside. Due to time limits the collection of questionnaires and any other written and audiovisual data was considered inadequate for the purposes of the present research. So, the data corpus of the present study is selected from in-depth interviews. The interviews had the form of open-ended questions, the type of questions that do not “present the respondent with a set of possible answers to choose from” (Bryman, 2012).

My intention was that all the participants would reflect on the same topics but at the same time have the space and flexibility to express themselves freely and in as much detail as they would like to, without having to confront any time or content limitations. So, I opted for a semi-structured interview, which gives the students the opportunity to express their beliefs and understanding on the matter in a narrative form, as it is performed in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012), and which, as Bryman (2010) also sustains, is the type of interview where “the researcher has a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply” (p. 471). This way the interest is placed upon the interviewee’s point of view and thus, it is in accordance with the intentions of the present study.

Interviews were also selected over other methods for another reason. Before definitely selecting the method, I couldn’t decide whether it would be more appropriate to use a questionnaire or an interview. For this reason, I tried to test them both in practice doing a pilot study so as to see which one would give the best results. I arranged an interview with one student and at the same time a questionnaire with the same questions was given to two other students that were asked to fill it in, in their spare time at home.

The interview went really well and gave a lot of data to analyze. But data collection from the questionnaires didn’t have such a positive result. Not only were the participants more than a week late in answering and handing in the questionnaire, but also in both cases answers given to the same questions were too limited in detail whereas some questions were not answered at all. So, even though for reasons of distancing myself the use of questionnaires would be more appropriate, due to the quality of the data collected from the pilot study, the interviews were proved to be practically more adequate as a data collection tool for this specific case study and thus, were finally picked as the right method.
4.4. Research process

The rest of the interviews were conducted in the language academy within a week, in the day and time of the day when each participant was available. Individual meetings with every student-participant were arranged for every half hour and each one lasted from twenty to thirty minutes the most. Each participant received the same instructions. All participants were informed from the beginning that the research aim was to investigate the connection between language and culture and the fact that learning a foreign language can foster learning the culture to which this language is connected or it derives from. Of course, no prior information on the research questions was given to them so as to avoid prior reflecting on the subject and keep their responses as genuine and spontaneous as possible. For the same reason, all participants were asked not to talk about the content of the questions with the other students before having all completed the interview procedure.

Participants were also asked to try and not connect their perceptions and knowledge of the Hispanic world to my teaching. Since the purpose of the research was to make them reflect on their learning and make their own personal meaning out of their learning experience in order to see if the transformational effect was active, they were urged to reflect on everything they could think of that could relate to their knowledge, not only the one gained in the classroom but the one they themselves had acquired in different circumstances, as far as the Hispanic world’s culture is concerned. It was also specifically pointed to them that the research was not about finding the right answer, so they wouldn’t have to worry about that, for this study is based only on their perceptions and thus, there is no need and, most of all, no way to define a personal perception in terms of ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’.

Once all the interviews were completed, all data was transcribed. After the finalization of all the transcriptions, all the data went four times through a process of coding and recoding in terms of certain subjects and themes related to the research questions, according to Bryman’s (2012) instructions of coding in content analysis, in order to categorize the results that emerge from the research process. The following step was to analyze the texts with the participants’ perceptions and then proceed with the final part, the writing of the present thesis.

4.5. Data analysis method

The data corpus analysis followed the method of content analysis (Babbie, 2011), which is a data analysis method suitable both for qualitative and quantitative analysis (Wienclaw, 2015). Qualitative content analysis “is mainly inductive, grounding the examination of topics and themes, as
well as inferences drawn from them, in the data” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Therefore, it suits the purposes of the present research which is inductive as designed.

In addition, content analysis is suitable for case studies because content analysis gives the possibility to generate “meaning of and in texts” (Bryman, 2012, p. 714). Moreover, it is appropriate when the research is interested more in the ideas expressed and less in the narrative style (Γεωργοπούλου, 2015), idea that agrees with the purposes of the present study. Therefore, it was adequate for this case study, as it concerns the ideas that are expressed through the interviews and gives the opportunity to investigate all the aspects of the collected data, so as to reach accurate conclusions (Babbie, 2011).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) propose three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional content analysis, which allows “the categories and names for categories to flow from the data” (p. 1279), directed content analysis, which is more structured than the conventional one and summative content analysis, which “goes beyond mere word counts to include latent content analysis” (p. 1283). The present study aligns with the conventional content analysis where data is collected from interviews through open-ended questions to proceed then with the reading of all the data in order to produce codes, then highlighting the words that capture the key concepts which later, with further analysis, will conclude to the generation of categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, since knowledge generated from the analysis of data in conventional content analysis “is based on participants’ unique perspectives and grounded in the actual data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1280), it is appropriate for the present study which aims at examining the research questions from the learners’ perspective.

The process of content analysis, as described by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009), consists of eight steps. Starting with the transcription of the data in a written form, the research goes on with an initial analysis of the content in order to identify themes that seem to repeat themselves in the interviews. Then, categories are generated inductively from the data after its coding. A sample coding is used so as to check consistency in the sample which, when obtained, permits the application of coding on the rest of the data corpus. The themes and concepts that emerge need to pass through a stage of consistency check again, so as to assess the initial coding consistency. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the data and presented in a descriptive and interpretative way, using quotations from the interviews to support the findings.
In the content analysis procedure used in the present research, each transcript was carefully read in detail so as to identify key concepts or words that would be used as a guide for initial coding. Reading and re-reading the texts lead to additional coding, which then concluded in that the questions of the interviews were divided in categories in order to create groups so as to examine the convergence or not of the responses provided by the interviews (Cohen & Manion, 1994). The first category included responses to questions about culture and its value in foreign language learning and about the interconnectedness of language and culture. Those would use as a starting point in the discussion in general, to then pass to more culture-specific issues. The second one explored those focused on the approximation to the Hispanic culture through Spanish language learning. The third one was centered on the ideas provided regarding the transformative effect of this approximation. The contents of the interviews were transcribed and fragments of them were inserted in the narrative of the findings.

4.6. Ethical considerations

At the beginning of each meeting, all the participants were reassured that their anonymity would be kept, that all the data used would be de-identified so that there would be no straight connection between data and a specific person and that for the fragments of the interviews used, the names of the participants would be altered. They were also told that they were allowed to not participate in case they had changed their mind.

In addition, since due to technical problems, the only recording tool available was a video camera, it was discussed and agreed upon that the camera would be used without facing the participant so that no faces would be shown. All the interviews and recordings started only after having obtained once more the consent of each participant. So, the video camera was used only as an archiving device whose purpose was to record the interviews on CDs, whereas the camera’s lens was blank with no image showing. After the end of the interviewing process, every interview was transcribed from the CDs to paper in order to gather the data produced by the interviews and then go forward with their analysis.
4.7. Quality aspects

While the sample size of twenty one interviewees in total might not be considered sufficient to insure validity or generalizability, this is a single case study and thus “the main focus is on the unique case and generalization is not a necessity” (Larsson, 2005, p. 5) since each “single case is unique and […] there is no reason for making claims of generalisation” (Larsson, 2005, p. 5). Furthermore, this study was performed in a specific context and therefore it is subject to the particular circumstances under which it took place. However, the convergence of the participants’ responses and that of their perceptions, as will be presented in the following chapter, enhances the belief that this case is a sample that could be replicable in similar situations with analogous outcomes.

4.8. Limitations

This is a qualitative research and as such, it involves interpretivism and subjectivity (Creswell, 2011), which are both influenced by the researcher’s point of view. Furthermore, I am aware of the fact that, being at the same time both the researcher and the teacher of the students that participated in the research, the data collection might have been “subject to recall bias and self-report bias associated with providing socially desirable responses” (Zunker & Ivankova, p.876), even though all the participants were kindly asked to try to overlook the fact that I am their teacher and feel free to present their ideas and reflections. Nonetheless, the findings are all generated by the participants’ responses and are linearly connected to their personal perceptions. Moreover, interpretivism and subjectivity cannot be avoided to some extent in qualitative research because, as Richards (2003) sustains, “the claim to objectivity implicit in the representation of quantitative outcomes and explicit in experimental research allows the researcher to stand aside from the findings, but this is not an option in qualitative inquiry” (p. 9).

Another limitation of the present research could be considered the fact that all the interviews were conducted in Greek, which is the maternal language of all the participants. The data transcription was made in Greek too. But since this thesis is written in English, the quotes used in the findings section had to be translated in English necessarily, which might have influenced the text to a certain extent, although I have tried to be as accurate in the translation as possible. For reasons of accuracy, I
have also included the explanation of some terms, as they were used by the interviewees in specific contexts.

Furthermore, on the first day of the interviews, unexpected technical problems obstructed the recording as it had been planned and the only option available at the moment was to use a video camera and record the interview on a cd. The same procedure was used the following days with the rest of the interviews so as to not differentiate the procedure for any of the participants. Unfortunately, there was a problem with one CD during transcription and two interviews were deleted. What is more unfortunate is that one of these interviews presented an antithesis to the research subject since the participant declared no transformation of prior perceptions and therefore this interview constitutes a very interesting case. Nonetheless, even though there are no exact quotes to be used in the findings, I have tried to include as much of this participant’s ideas as I can recall.
FINDINGS

The following chapter consists of the research results generated by the analysis of the data collected from the interviews. This data has been analyzed in accordance with the research questions presented in chapter II. More specifically, the participants’ perceptions of culture, its importance and its connection to language, along with its utility in foreign language learning are discussed. In addition, their learning experience as Spanish language students in Greece is presented and the way this experience has transformed their impression of the Hispanic world is explored.

5.1. Language and culture relation and the value of culture in foreign language learning

5.1.1. Learners’ perceptions of the meaning of culture and its significance

The results of the interviews are very broad in context. It is evident that, although there is a convergence in the participants’ opinions and they all consider culture as a vital part of one’s life and personality, everyone gives importance to a different detail or element of culture. This makes the content of their responses very rich. Some define culture as a combination of many things: “Culture is made by the traditions, the music, the dances, the spaces people live in, the culinary habits and the advances in arts and sciences, of a specific society or a nation” (N, question 1). Some focus more on its connection to everyday life: “Culture has to do with the way we speak, we dress up, we express ourselves, the way we cook and we behave, in general the way we live our lives” (G, q.1).

Many remark that culture is representative of the mentality of people: “Culture reflects our philosophy, our beliefs, our idiosyncrasy, our understanding of the world that surrounds us. It resonates with our behavior and it influences our life choices” (C, q.1). What is interesting is that, in this first question of the interview, only one of the participants included language as a component of culture for, according to him: “Culture could be thought of as a kind of discipline that can be communicated through language” (E, q.1).

However, they all underlined the significance of culture as a bond that connects people and gives them a sense of identity. Culture’s value is priceless, for culture is the link that bridges the present with the past:

Culture is tightly connected to our roots, our origins. Through it our traditions are protected from the pass of time and the principles we have inherited from our ancestors
survive in the future. It connects the generations. It helps us not to forget who we are and where we come from. (B, q.2)

This gives a sense of identity because it makes people feel part of the specific society in which they are brought up and also gives them the sense of belonging to it: “Culture is what makes us part of a certain entity that we share with other people” (P, q.2). So, culture brings unity; but on the other hand, it accentuates difference:

Culture differentiates us from others. It puts emphasis on the fact that we are not all the same, we are distinct. Our sameness depends on the uniqueness of our culture, which is what connects us with each other and at the same time, makes us different from the rest (L, q.2).

When describing the value of culture, most of the interviewees, although they pinpoint the sameness and difference in culture, accord in that all cultures deserve respect:

I believe that every culture has its own character. Cultures can’t be compared. We must respect them even though we might not understand them or believe in them. What is different is not necessarily superior or inferior, it is just different (A, q.2).

As a participant observed: “All cultures should be thought of as equal because culture represents people and, among people, there is no human being superior or inferior to another” (T, q.2).

However, one of the interviewees has an opposite point of view: “I believe that everyone thinks that their own culture is better or find some cultures superior compared to others. Why not? Some nations have given much to civilization while others have left nothing behind” (An, q.2). Yet, as she sustains soon after: “Of course, maybe this could be due to the fact that not all civilizations were developed at the same time and under the same circumstances. So I guess one could say that it is logical that cultures are different” (An, q.2).

At the same time, many observe that it is normal for people to comprehend better a culture that is proximate to their own because: “What is closer to what we have learned feels more familiar and is easier to recognize and accept” (R, q.2), whereas: “other cultures might seem strange and use tactics that might not be observable in our own” (J, q.2). Nonetheless:

What seems strange might seem so only because we have a fixed idea of the world we live in and because we take some things for granted. But if we get to know others we might come to understand them better (Je, q.2).
5.1.2. The interconnectedness between culture and language

At this point of the interview, although at the beginning only one of the interviewees had associated culture to language, now that they are asked to express their opinion about the interconnectedness between culture and language, they all very eloquently support this relation: “Language is a part of culture, it is the means to express culture. They both develop parallelly, so one is dependent on the other” (E, q.3). One says: “I believe that you can learn about one’s culture only if you know their language. Otherwise, you miss some essential parts of culture and you can’t understand how and why people think and act as they do” (J, q.3).

Even the way we use language is an expression of culture. As one participant remarks: “Language changes according to culture and vice versa. For example, some years ago, a woman not married in her thirties would be called a spinster. But today, we don’t use this word anymore to describe a thirty year old single woman” (N, q.3). The way we use language is also an indication of idiosyncrasy: “Through language we can understand the character of others. Words show if people are polite, rude, kind, abrupt or not, and this is a segment of their culture” (L, q.3).

In addition, they all concluded that a language expresses emotion, humor and attitude and thus, as these are all indicative features of culture, can communicate it. The following statement embraces this belief:

*The way people express themselves shows a lot about their culture and their self. The way they talk or put emphasis to what they say, if they are poetic, lyric or theatrical, if the talk slowly or fast, loudly or not, if they cut the words or talk out loud and clear, all this tells a lot about where they come from. Think for instance of a country with a language that has many consonants. It seems to me that such a language doesn’t have a lot of colour. I have it connected in my mind with people that are not very open in the expression of their feelings, they seem to me as dull as their language or even as dull as the weather I suppose this country has. The more colourful and melodious a language is, the more happy, independent, alive, dynamic, passionate the people that speak it look like.

Interesting though is the fact that one of the participants sees no link between language and culture. As she says:

*I can’t see why we should consider them connected. They are two different things and each one has its own purpose. Maybe some people see a connection because their mind works in that way. But I guess mine just doesn’t* (An, q.3).
5.1.3. The significance of culture in foreign language learning

When learning a foreign language, coming into contact with elements of culture is inevitable. Nonetheless, that does not necessarily mean that a foreign language student automatically notices the strong relationship that associates culture and language. This is probably why the initial reaction of all the participants, with no exception, when asked about the significance of culture in foreign language learning, was more or less the following: “You know, I have never thought of it. This is a tough question you are asking. Let me think about it for a while”. An understanding of this relationship comes through reflection:

I guess since language is the means through which a nation expresses itself, when you learn a language you learn the way of expression of this particular nation. But the way of expression and culture are interconnected. For example, in Greek there is a word that has no straight translation to other languages, the word “filotimo”. It exists to describe the fact that Greeks are hospitable, eager to give a helping hand to each other and always honor their words. So, when someone learns this word consequently learns this particular way of being of the Greeks (Na, q.4).

There are also explanations of why it is important for a foreign language learner to learn about the culture connected to the language under study:

I think it makes you understand the language in depth. It is like when you go on vacation to a different place and you want to visit the sights, taste local food, dance local dances. The same goes for the language. Just learning grammar rules I believe is not very meaningful. Besides it is boring at times. But, if you also learn about the culture, then it all becomes more interesting because you can explain why they do what they do and say what they say. This is how I see it (R, q.4).

Culture learning through language learning can also make us see the others from a different perspective:

You put yourself in the other’s place and that can open your mind and make you feel closer to them. Sometimes it can make you travel in your mind to other places and picture yourself in them, even though you might have never been there before (E, q.4).

Practically, culture learning is helpful in learning the language itself too: “As a speaker, if you are familiar with the culture, you can express the language better, write it correctly, use it properly” (G, q.4). This is because learning a language profoundly can lead to “the perception of the most fine qualities of the language and thoughts and thus, can foster understanding and using it better” (C, q.4).
5.2. Hispanic culture acquisition through Spanish language learning

The cited above responses concern the initial part of the interview where the focus is more on the language-culture relation in general. But, since this research is a case study that aims to examine the Spanish language adult learners’ perceptions in particular, the focal point of the following questions of the interview evolves especially around the Spanish language and the Hispanic culture. In addition, in order to explore the transformational effect, a comparison and contrast of the initial knowledge of the Hispanic culture and learners’ motives for studying Spanish is needed, so as to define if and how this transformational outcome actually took place.

5.2.1. Motives for learning Spanish and prior Hispanic culture knowledge

Even though a motive is a very personal matter, the responses of the participants show a great convergence. The majority say that they wanted to learn a foreign language and opted for Spanish because of the sound of the language: “I just liked the Spanish language. It sounds very melodic and cheerful, like the Spanish songs are. That makes it more attractive than others which sound a little bit more, I would say, rough” (Na, q.5). A lot put more emphasis on its utility in communication: “Spanish is a language spoken in many different countries and regions in the world. I thought that if I can speak it, this will make me able to communicate in many places” (J, q.5). Or, in other words, as another participant observes:

You know how a lot of people in Greece learn English because it is an international language. And Spanish is a language very much spoken worldwide. So, imagine it. If apart from English I can also speak Spanish, I will be capable to communicate with almost everyone in the world! Ain’t that great? (N, q.5).

As for the previous knowledge of the Hispanic world’s culture, every interviewee admitted to have very limited, if almost none, experience of it. The following statement is representative of all participants’ remarks:

Before starting to take Spanish classes I didn’t know anything in particular about the Hispanic culture. I just knew things that I guess most of the people in Greece know. I knew mostly about Colombus, who discovered America, about some famous painters and singers. I knew about flamenco, bullfighting and salsa dancing, tequila and spicy Mexican food. I had in mind that Spanish people are more or less like us because of the Mediterranean, talkative, loud and smiley. The other Spanish speaking countries seem so far away that I have never thought of how life is there. The only thing I know about these places is that they are poor and dangerous. Now that I think about it, it is very
strange that I have this idea because I have never been in a Spanish speaking country and I don’t know why I have this impression of life and people there. I can’t remember how I have learned all these things. I have never thought about it before. Well, it’s probably because some times we do things and form opinions without thinking about them (R, q.6).

5.2.2. Learning about the Hispanic culture

Coming in contact with the Hispanic world’s culture through learning to speak Spanish, is an outcome that all participants have experienced:

While learning Spanish I get acquainted with elements of the culture that I might have never noticed otherwise. For example, when you read about a tradition or a celebration they have, you get triggered to search a little bit more and find out why they are celebrating, what happened that is so important to them that they need to remember (J, q.7).

They all admit that learning the language is the first step to go forward with culture. As they say, when one begins to learn the language inevitably starts looking for things other than words. In this stage of the interview, the range of responses is very wide for, although there is a convergence in the responses, almost each one of the participants noticed different details of various cultural elements.

One mentions the use of expressions in culture learning:

When you learn some common expressions or the everyday language, that helps you come closer to the culture. Because expressions are not simple words, they carry in them the history and the traditions. To me at least, expressions are a revelation. I remember when encountering the expression ‘vale un potosi’ which literally didn’t make sense. I looked it up out of curiosity and I found that it has to do with the town of Potosí, a gold mining city from the colonial era in Bolivia. I was impressed! (E, q.7).

Many mention music as a means of communicating culture:

Learning Spanish songs helps a lot in understanding the idiosyncrasy of Hispanic people. Songs show their attitude towards life. The language is vibrant and so is their music, not only the sound of it but also the lyrics. Even when the songs talk about bad situations, they do it in a vivid way. That gives the impression that people are like this

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*Vale un Potosí= costs a Potosi*
too. Always happy and alive, very passionate and outgoing, coping with life’s difficulties with optimism and patience (N, q.7).

In addition to that, one participant says:

*Music is not only about love and passion. It can also be political or refer to history, it can speak about important periods in a nation’s life. Songs talk about common life’s troubles as well. Now that I can understand Spanish I understand better what the songs say. Listening to them I get to know more about what problems the Hispanic world is facing and this way I learn more about how the situation is in these countries and what people are mad about or disappointed with* (P, q.7).

Habits are also revealed from language. The love of people in the Hispanic world for different types of celebrations and ceremonies explains a lot about their nature:

*From what I have learned about their celebrations, I get the idea that they are very warm and communicative people who want to approach others and don’t stay locked in their own self. The way they all gather around and celebrate with food and music, the way they share this with others, even the fact that they find an excuse for a celebration in everything, is characteristic of their energy. To me it shows that they have a thirst for life* (De, q.7).

Some participants also observe that the nature of the Spanish language itself and its usage can also disclose culture. The following reference sums up this point of view:

*From what I have learned so far, I believe that the Spanish language bears politeness. Since the third person in singular is used to speak formally to one person and the third person in plural to speak formally to more people, those who speak the language automatically adjust to that condition. So, even if it is done unconsciously, they learn how to express themselves politely. This is a very strong cultural component that inevitably characterizes them* (A, q.7).

### 5.3. The transformative effect of learning about the Hispanic world’s culture through the Spanish language learning in practice

When asked if their initial motive for learning Spanish has changed after almost a year of taking Spanish language classes and learning about the Hispanic culture, it is remarkable and quite surprising
that the immediate and spontaneous response of all the participants is “no”. But then they continue: “My motive hasn’t changed at all. It is just stronger” (Je, q.5), “I just like the language more and I am more eager to learn it now” (De, q.5), “I find it more difficult than I first thought it would be but that can’t stop me from learning it. On the contrary, now I like it more despite the difficulties and I am more determined to learn it anyway” (E, q.5), “Nothing has changed, I just enjoy learning it now and that makes me want to continue studying” (Ka, q.5). And then, comes the stricking realization: “What was I thinking! That of course is a change!”

5.3.1. Reflection and critical thinking in reconsidering stereotypes

In Mezirow’s theory of Transformational Learning, reflection and critical thinking are core elements of any kind of learning. But reflection is not an innate reaction, although one would think that it is. Reflection is a process of consciously examining deeply any experience and distilling knowledge from it through critical thinking. The questions used in the interview were purposefully elaborated in a way that was hoping to trigger this reflective process in order to examine the change in perspective of the interviewees. At this point of the interview each participant, even the one who saw no connection between language and culture at the beginning, realizes a change in perspective that had never noticed in themselves before and a novelty in their apprehension of the Hispanic world. As one participant observes:

I think that before starting to understand the Hispanic culture it all seemed very far away to me. I had this opinion even about Spain that is a mediterranean country and supposedly more close to us. I was totally against bull fighting for example and I couldn’t explain to myself how they enjoy doing that. I might still not agree to it but now I understand why it is so popular. It is part of their tradition and it suits their passionate temperament (Sa, q.8).

Another one adds:

They were all strangers to me before. But learning the language you come closer to people I think, they become more familiar. It is easier for me now to speak with a Spanish speaking person than it is with a Chinese, not only because I know some words but also because I understand the way they think (Je, q.8).

A third one continues:
They all seemed so far away before. I don’t feel like that anymore. I understand that they are simple people just like me. That they have their everyday life with the everyday problems and they are struggling to survive just like everybody does. They might have a different way of dealing with their life because their culture is different and so are the conditions of the places they live in but that doesn’t change the fact that they are simple people. And people are people everywhere (E, q.8).

It is evident thus, that culture knowledge acquired through language learning promotes cultural awareness and provokes an approximation to the other. This is an outcome observed in the comments of each participant in this research. Coming to the realization that all cultures have their value and deserve equal respect fosters a positive change in the attitude towards the others, a growth in tolerance of the different and a break down of prejudices. Put in the words of an interviewee, which are representative of all the participants’ points of view: “We are not so different after all. If we all understand that we have much more in common than differences this world will be a better place. We are all just humans, simple people who share the same world. This is what binds us all together” (De, q.8).
DISCUSSION-SUGGESTIONS-CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the results of the research project are discussed and suggestions are proposed so as these results may expand existing knowledge on the significance of culture learning in foreign language learning and prompt further research on this field. In short, the importance of culture learning in instigating critical reflection is reviewed, its ability to foment cultural proximity and intercultural communication is grounded and the need for future investigation on this specific issue is proposed.

6.1. Discussion

The aim of this research project was to examine whether reflecting on culture knowledge acquired from learning a foreign language, can transform the idea foreign language students have of “the other” and consequently lead to cultural awareness. Previous research on the matter has demonstrated that such an event is not only probable but in reality certainly viable, a fact that aligns with the results of the present research.

To the assumption that there is an inteconnectedness between language and culture and that foreign language acquisition and the culture knowledge it embeds can foster respect towards diversity and tolerance of pluralism, the findings of the present research affirm a strong correspondence. The results also come to analogy with previous research in that culture knowing not only makes language learning more enjoyable and gives language meaning, but it also fosters a tolerance towards other cultures and a better understanding of different ways of life, a fact that makes people more accepting by raising their cultural awareness. Furthermore, the premise that foreign language learning can lead to a change in preconceived ideas and provoke a revision of stereotypical thinking prompting a transformation of peoples’ attitude, is also confirmed. In all, the results reveal that such a transformative effect is actually possible and thus, the eventuality of cultural awareness is not hypothetical; in reality, it is absolutely feasible.

Starting with comments about the nature of culture and its value, participants exposed their beliefs of why culture is important. They described it as a fundamental component of people’s lives and a vital characteristic of their personality. Moreover, they all agreed that culture has the quality of a nexus which connects people who share the same culture together, defines their common past and
determines their common identity. At the same time, a culture promotes this unity when in contrast to other cultures; because what binds people together is what makes them different from “the other”.

Of course, being different doesn’t mean being superior or inferior. Participants’ observation of the equality of cultures was overwhelmingly positive. What is more pleasantly surprising is the fact that this remark was brought up at very early stages of the research project as a natural response to the value of culture, even before participants had the chance to deeply reflect on their view of “the other”. The one interviewee who demonstrated discord at the beginning, considering the possibility of superiority or inferiority of one culture towards the other, immediately justified this belief by using the influence of circumstances as an explanation of the difference between cultures.

Nonetheless, although language was not recognized from the start of the interview by almost none of the learners as a prevalent element of culture, yet soon after they all concurred in that culture and language are interdependent and that this interconnectedness is both inevitable and undeniable. Only one of the participants presented an opposite opinion sustaining that there is no evidence of such a connection. But in a total of twenty one interviewees this was the only exception. What’s more, this same participant in the subsequent parts of the interview provided a lot of examples of personal culture learning through language learning which she herself experienced in Spanish language studying. This fact not only provides evidence of such a relation but it can also be considered as a proof of the transformative effect in practice. Summing up the diverse aspects of the language-culture connection that derive from the participants’ comments, language was presented as the means of revealing a particular idiosyncrasy, attitude, behavior and way of living of those who share the same cultural background. Seen from this aspect, the idea that language bears culture and that it communicates it, was proved to be reasonably legitimate.

As far as the significance of culture in foreign language learning is concerned, the research gave very interesting outcomes. Even though initially all learner-participants indicated a disregard towards the relationship between these two features, it was not long before they started to realize that culture knowing is fundamental to foreign language learning. By critically reflecting on the matter, they demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of this distinctive quality of culture. As it derives from their comments, they all agreed in that, apart from the fact that culture learning is practically helpful in learning the language accurately and in detail, it also is more creative and fertile; not only because it makes foreign language learning more interesting but because, and most importantly, it makes it meaningful.
Moreover, a growth of appreciation of “the other” was witnessed at this stage of the research as well. Discussion on culture unfolded feelings of approximation towards different cultures, as culture learning was thought of as an inciter of openmindedness. Putting oneself in somebody else’s position and seeing the world from a different perspective was considered as a positive effect of culture knowing through foreign language learning for it fosters understanding of what seems distant and unknown and thus, it can bring people closer together.

Of course, theory does not always concur with reality. So, even though theoretically speaking the participants revealed an understanding and recognition of difference as something distinctive but yet not separating, it was still imperative to examine the application of their beliefs in practice. Besides, the research was designed with the purpose of making learner-participants reflect on their own personal experience of Hispanic culture acquisition through Spanish language learning, in order to examine if and to what extend critical reflection on culture can really transform prejudices and stereotypical thinking and thus foster empathy and respect for other cultures.

Very interesting is the fact that although participants admit to have had an attraction towards Spanish, for it is a colourful and melodic language, characteristics that made them want to learn to speak the language, they acknowledge that this was not enough to make them want to search for any cultural elements or other specific features of the Hispanic world before starting to take Spanish lessons. Neither did that the recognition of the fact that Spanish, for being widely spoken worldwide, is a language which embraces elements of many different cultures and therefore it is very useful in intercultural communication. Hence, their understanding of the Hispanic world was narrow and limited to some basic knowledge.

Yet, when asked to reflect on their learning experience they all, including the one participant who was reluctant in linking language to culture at the beginning, demonstrated an approximation to the Hispanic culture, accomplished through Spanish language learning. According to the participants’ words, language learning opened the way to a better understanding of the attitude and the different ways of life in different Spanish speaking countries and has broadened their feelings of sympathy and affection towards their inhabitants. They no longer considered them distant, strange or different; on the contrary, knowing them better triggered comprehending them better and therefore, justifying their actions and reactions better.

As a consequence, a positive change in the learners’ beliefs of the Hispanic world’s reality was accomplished and eventually a revision of stereotypical thinking took place. Thus, the results of this
research coincide with Mezirow’s *Transformative Learning theory* hypothesis which supports that a reframing in an adult’s beliefs is made possible through critical reflection. They also align with existing bibliography on previous research which has demonstrated that culture approximation through foreign language learning can foster a reevaluation of stereotypical thinking.

From all the above, it can be considered valid and well-founded that critically reflecting on culture knowledge acquired through foreign language learning can undoubtedly encourage a conscious alteration in perspective and by doing that, lead to an elimination of prejudices. On these grounds, it would be accurate to conclude in that it can promote intercultural awareness which will hopefully put the foundation for a potential future social change in the interest of all humanity.

### 6.2. Suggestions

The present research is a case study and therefore, it concerns a limited number of data collected in a specific time and place. That could raise doubts around the possibility of generalization and replicability of its findings. Nonetheless, in qualitative research the aim is not to present a case study as a representative sample of typical similar cases (Bryman, 2012), but to study in as much depth as possible a concrete issue. From this point of view, the objective of this study has been met. However, the positive results that this research has generated regarding culture learning through foreign language learning when prejudices’ overcome and stereotypical attitude alteration are concerned, are indicative of the strong relation that connects foreign language learning and intercultural awareness.

Thus, it is suggested that further research on this field should be undertaken in order to examine whether in other languages and in different circumstances this foreign language learning can have similar results. If it is so, and it is believed that it is, then it is considered appropriate and indispensable to pay more attention to foreign culture learning in foreign language learning. That is because culture learning not only makes learning more memorable and enjoyable but it also, and most of all, provides clear insights on the sameness and difference of the others fostering sincere appreciation and respect.

In addition, due to time limitations, the data collection for this research was necessarily restricted to the use of a small sample. The interview process was chosen as the only appropriate research method also for the same reason. It would be interesting thus to expand research with the participation of other Greek learners who are learning in different environments. It is considered that
the variety of their perceptions would bring new insights to the phenomenon under study. Much more intriguing it would be to research also students from other countries in respect to the Hispanic culture appreciation and to examine if indeed people coming from different cultural backgrounds can show similar appreciation and proximity to “the other” despite of how close the culture under study is or seems to be to their own.

It is also recommended that this research is continued with the same participants during their experience of Spanish language learning. That could offer new insights on their perceptions’ transformation when in contrast to their initial and early stage learning beliefs. Investigating the transformational effect in different levels of language learning while this learning is still in progress, could bring to light diverse outcomes and help in considering and evaluating in depth this specific research question from different angles.

Likewise, although this escapes the premises of the present study which is focused on adult learners, it would be appealing to explore this transformative effect of culture learning through foreign language learning with underage learners. A very brief mock interview undertaken with underage learners out of personal curiosity of investigating this issue, demonstrated primary feelings of respect of different cultures far beyond one would expect to notice in these early stages of a personality development. Thus, it is recommendable that researchers interested in doing social research concerning underage students should bear that in mind as a probable theme for future exploration.

Moreover, a combination of other research methods is advised. A mixed methods approach with the use of both qualitative and quantitative data would enrich the range of information assembled. The use of diverse methods of data collection such as diary keeping and participant observation with notes keeping, in addition to the use of more than one researcher, could be of benefit to that. This way research on this specific issue would be supplemented both by a large variety of data and by the different perspectives different critical minds who work parallelly together distinguish in a matter.

Last but not least, a side effect observed by this research process, is believed to deserve special mention for it entails food for thought. In practice, participating in this research project, instigated learners not only to reflect on cultural issues and on their perception of the others, but it also had another very important impact on them. Being asked to give their opinion made them feel respected and appreciated. That had a very positive outcome both in their learning, because it somehow motivated them more to concentrate on their studies and also in their relation to each other because they all felt like being part of a project whose conclusion depended on them.
This positiveness consequently reflected also on the teacher-student relationship because learners appreciated the fact that they were given the chance to have such an experience in a foreign language class that would otherwise be focused on mere vocabulary and grammar rules studying. Not to mention how grateful and pleased a teacher is when noticing such an appreciation and when experiencing positive student attitude towards him or her, as a token of respect. Apart from that, participants’ reflecting made learning more provocative for them and, as they all affirm, activated conscious reflecting on other issues on a constant basis as well. So, it is suggested that learners’ perceptions should be taken into account in any learning instance for it is valuable for them and fructiferous in any learning process as a whole.

6.3. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that cultural awareness can be ingenerated in foreign language learning, for language bears within it culture and thus, learning a language communicates also the culture this language expresses. In proof of that claim, this study has showed that foreign language adult learners can come to understand even the finest features of the language they study and therefore, develop insights of the attitude and way of life this particular culture represents. From there on, by consciously and critically reflecting on their learning, when learners engage in a self-development process of continuous reflection, they eventually reach a point of recognition of the existing equity among cultures and among people. Thus, it is not utopian to conclude that an intercultural approach through foreign language learning fosters respect, embraces tolerance of the difference and unfolds empathy towards “the other”. Hence, learning with, from and by the other, is imperative; because if we desire this world to change for the best of everyone, we must work to achieve this social change all together.
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APPENDIX 1
Appendix 1 consists of the questions asked in the interviews in Greek.

ΕΡΩΤΗΜΑΤΟΛΟΓΙΟ

1. Τι είναι κουλτούρα;

2. Ποιά είναι η αξία της;

3. Ποιά είναι η σχέση γλώσσας- κουλτούρας;

4. Σε τι ωφελεί να γνωρίζεις την κουλτούρα της χώρας της οποίας τη γλώσσα μαθαίνεις;

5. Ποιο ήταν το αρχικό σου κίνητρο για να μάθεις ισπανικά και τι άλλαξε στην πορεία;

6. Τι γνώριζες για την κουλτούρα των ισπανόφωνων χωρών πριν ξεκινήσεις μαθήματα ισπανικών; Πώς είχες αποκτήσει αυτή τη γνώση;

7. Πώς έρχεσαι σε επαφή με την κουλτούρα των ισπανόφωνων χωρών μέσα από την εκμάθηση ισπανικών;

8. Πώς έχει αλλάξει η επαφή σου με την ισπανική γλώσσα την αντίληψή που είχες για τον ισπανόφωνο κόσμο; Ποιά είναι η νέα οπτική που έχεις αποκτήσει;

Ευχαριστώ πολύ για τη συμμετοχή!
APPENDIX 2
Appendix 2 consists of the translation, from Greek to English, of the questions asked in the interviews.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is culture?

2. Which is its value?

3. Which is the connection between language and culture?

4. Why is it important to know about the culture of the place where the foreign language you are learning is spoken?

5. Which was your initial motive for learning Spanish and what has changed on the way?

6. What did you know about the Hispanic culture before starting to learn Spanish? How had you acquired this knowledge?

7. How do you come in contact with the Hispanic world’s culture through learning to speak Spanish?

8. How has your contact with the Spanish language shifted your idea of the Hispanic world? What new insights have you developed?

Thank you for participating!