

## Language learners' representations of Spanish-speaking countries: How can they inform language pedagogy?\*

*Las representaciones de los aprendices de una lengua sobre los países hablantes de español: ¿Cómo pueden ellos informar sobre la pedagogía de la lengua?*

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### Abstract

A number of studies have focused on language learners' images of Spain and Spanish-speaking countries, however, none of these investigations was conducted in an Asian educational context. The current study has addressed this gap in research literature. It investigated not only representations but also salience and favourability of students' images of the target language countries, which has not been done in earlier studies. The respondents were 31 beginner learners of Spanish. Firstly, they were asked to write images that they have about Spain; secondly, they were asked to write the names of Spanish-speaking countries that they know and provide several images for each of these countries. In addition, the students were asked to assign a favourability rating to each of the images in their lists. The findings revealed that the language learners' images of Spain were multifarious and had a richer structure compared to the representations of Latin American countries. Despite this difference, students had predominantly positive attitudes toward Spanish-speaking countries. The article concludes by discussing how language learners' representations of a target language country can inform language pedagogy and offers some practical suggestions.

**Key Words:** Foreign language pedagogy, representations, stereotypes, Spanish-speaking countries, applied linguistics.

## Resumen

Muchos estudios anteriores se han centrado en las imágenes que tienen los estudiantes de lenguaje (español) sobre España y los países de habla hispana, pero ninguna ha sido conducida en un contexto educativo asiático. El presente estudio intenta llenar este vacío en la literatura existente. Se investigó no solo las representaciones, sino también la relevancia y las preferencias de las imágenes de los estudiantes acerca de los países de la lengua meta, lo que no ha sido abordado en los estudios anteriores. Los encuestados eran 31 alumnos aprendices de español. En primer lugar, se les pidió que escribieran las imágenes que tenían acerca de España; en segundo lugar, se les solicitó que escribieran los nombres de los países de habla hispana que conocieran y que dieran varias imágenes sobre cada uno de estos países. Además, se les solicitó asignar una calificación de favoritismo o preferencia a cada una de las imágenes en sus listas. Los hallazgos revelaron que las imágenes de los estudiantes de lengua sobre España eran múltiples y tenían una estructura más rica en comparación con las representaciones que ellos tenían sobre los países latinoamericanos. A pesar de esta diferencia, los estudiantes manifestaron actitudes predominantemente positivas hacia los países de habla hispana. El artículo concluye con una discusión sobre cómo las representaciones que tienen los estudiantes del idioma sobre el país del idioma de destino pueden informar sobre una pedagogía de la lengua y ofrecer sugerencias prácticas.

**Palabras Clave:** Pedagogía de las lenguas extranjeras, representaciones, estereotipos, países de habla hispana, lingüística aplicada.

## INTRODUCTION

People hold various mental images of their own and other cultures. These images permeate our own cultural milieu and are imbibed from childhood (Piaget & Weil, 1951; Lippmann, 1965; Klineberg, 1967). By the time students begin learning a foreign language at school or university, they have already developed a set of mental images or representations of a TL country and people who speak the target language. These images are often stereotypical as they are not based on the students' first-hand contacts with a TL culture and people.

Having a good knowledge of language learners' representations of a TL country could help language educators to develop the cultural component of a language program that would address educational needs of their students (Allen, 2004; Byram & Kramsch, 2008). Making empirically-informed decisions while developing the culture segment of language curriculum is in line with progressive forms of pedagogy that are rooted in a constructivist principle of linking the students' existing knowledge to their new learning experiences (see Allen, 2004 for a review of literature). Based on these considerations, this study raises the following questions:

- (1) What are Malaysian language learners' representations of Spanish-speaking countries, their cultures and people?
- (2) How salient are these representations?
- (3) Are the students' country representations positive or negative?

This study aims to demonstrate how students' representations of a TL country can help language educators make informed decisions about developing the cultural content of a language program. Several of the previous studies have explored representations and stereotypes held by learners of Spanish (Lacasa & Lacasa, 1983; Lusky, 1981); however, none of these studies was done in an Asian educational context. The present study addressed this gap. It investigated not only the content of Malaysian language learners' stereotypes about Spanish-speaking countries but also assessed favourability and salience of these images.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***1.1. Representations and culture in the context of foreign language education***

As stated in the introductory section, students bring into the foreign language classroom a variety of images and representations of the TL country. Steele and Suozzo (as quoted in Allen, 2004: 235) noted that "Unless students are encountering an absolutely exotic culture, they already reach the classroom with an array of stereotypes...". These stereotypes can be true or false, positive or negative and they may reflect or contradict native speakers' views of their country and culture (Níkleva, 2012; Nikitina, Zuraidah & Loh, 2014). More importantly, as Lippmann (1965) noted, stereotypes held by individual people are culturally bound. In other words, each person's worldview is inevitably influenced by perceptions, notions and beliefs that are widely-accepted, agreed-upon and promoted in his or her own cultural milieu.

With regard to culture, a socio-anthropological view of this concept considers culture not only as a set of patterns and practices (Sapir, 1994) but also as an array of representations or images (House, 2008). These representations encompass material (e.g., works of art, cuisine, architecture) as well as non-material dimensions (e.g., beliefs, values, ideas and ideals (Harris, 1998; House, 2008; Vázquez, 2008) of human activity. Like stereotypes, these representations are embedded in language and operate in both individual and socially-shared domains. This intertwining of the concepts of representations and culture (as a set of representations) is important not only for a purely theoretical reasoning but also for solving some practical issues, such as developing efficient pedagogical approaches to teaching culture.

Defining culture as sets of images or representations that are being constantly re-evaluated and negotiated could help refute accusations of essentialism in the approaches to teaching culture. Such essentialist pedagogical practices are in evidence when language learners are presented with an assortment of detached facts concerning a TL country realia and various 'tourist-consumer' vignettes that are often found in foreign language textbooks (Chaput, 1997; Byram, 2014). Despite criticisms, such approaches exhibit an amazing tenacity in the language teaching practice (Kramsch,

2014). The following section moves to discussing issues concerning the teaching of culture in the context of foreign language pedagogy.

## **1.2. The teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom**

As Chaput (1997) observed, typically, the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom has been limited to introducing students to various realia concerning daily life in a target language country (e.g., food, family life), its socio-cultural institutions (e.g., education, political system) and important artistic and literary achievements or ‘high culture’. The efficacy of this approach in developing language learners’ cultural awareness and aptitude has been questioned by researchers and educators. For example, Kramsch (2014: 249) argued that these teaching strategies promote “reductionist stereotypes or tourist representations of foreign reality”. However, this *modus operandi* has proved to be difficult to overcome. Reasons for this may include a lack of confidence or even reluctance on the part of language teachers to address deeper aspects of the TL culture (Byram & Kramsch, 2008). Besides, foreign language courses at schools and universities place emphasis on preparing students for exams which aim to measure the learners’ linguistic competence but not their cultural awareness and aptitude. As a result, language programs often fail to enhance language learners’ cultural understanding and leave their curiosity about a TL culture unaddressed. This is ironic because it has been argued that cultural interest and attraction are among prominent reasons why people choose to learn a particular foreign language in the first place (Chaput, 1997).

It is also important to note that adopting innovative pedagogical strategies for the teaching of a target culture has often been hampered by a view that a truly meaningful exposure to culture can begin only after language learners have acquired a sufficient linguistic proficiency to comprehend materials written or presented (e.g., movies) in a target language. An alternative to this opinion can be found in a model proposed by Byram (1997). This model promotes the importance of enhancing language learners’ cultural awareness alongside with developing their language skills, beginning from the earliest stages of a foreign language program. A pedagogical value of this model is that it gives legitimacy to using language learners’ native language (L1) for conducting in-depth explorations of a target culture.

The teaching of culture warrants some caveats. Some studies have reported that even when language educators make conscious efforts to saturate the teaching of a foreign language with the teaching of the TL culture, the outcome of their efforts may be unexpected and even undesirable (Lusky, 1981). For example, as Lusky’s (1981) own teaching experience demonstrated, contrary to the language educator’s best efforts to instil a deeper cultural knowledge and understanding, the students’ pre-existing negative stereotypes about Spanish-speaking countries were inadvertently reinforced during the foreign language course. Analysing how this pedagogical fiasco

could be prevented in the future, Lusky (1981) proposed that language teachers need to be aware of deep-rooted stereotypes and representations of a TL country and speakers in the language learners' own cultural milieu. Using this knowledge, language educators would be able to select teaching materials that preclude the perpetuation of these stereotypes. Besides, language instructors need to devise a variety of didactic tools to nudge their students toward having deeper and more meaningful engagements with TL cultures.

### **1.3. Stereotypes about Spanish-speaking countries and people**

When approached from different spatial and temporal frames of reference, stereotypes about a country can be as rich, complex and contradictory as the country itself, even though stereotypes encapsulate only the most simplistic, reductionist and popular notions. Due to the fact that stereotypes about other countries have deep historical, cultural and psychological roots, it is enormously difficult to summarize them. Several authors, among them Leerssen (2003) and López de Abiada (2007a), have demonstrated how a country's geographical location, its political power, economic status, the past rivalries, hostilities and friendships with neighbouring nations and even a historical epoch have contributed to the formation of stereotypes about this country. Research in psychology recognizes that while stereotypes are not necessarily unfavourable representations of various social, ethnic, and national groups, they do reflect a psychological tendency to perceive 'the other' as different— and often in a negative sense— from oneself. As Leerssen (2007: 17) noted, traditionally, the Other has been perceived as “an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity”. In contrast, auto-stereotypes or representations of one's own national, ethnic, social or cultural group tend to be predominantly positive.

### **1.4. Stereotypes about Spain**

A tendency to have positive images about one's own country and compatriots is present in representations that Spaniards have about themselves and their country. In a study done by Níkleva (2012: 995) images of Spain held by Spaniards included 'sun', 'beach', 'joy', 'celebration' and 'fun'; popular auto-stereotypes were “people are welcoming”, “(people are) not punctual” and “(people) speak simultaneously”. However, regional stereotypes that focused not on the nation as a whole but on one's compatriots from other geographical areas were ambiguous (e.g., 'Andalusians are vague') or even unfavourable (e.g., 'Catalans are stingy') (Níkleva, 2012).

Researchers have noted a tendency to viewing neighbouring nations in a more negative light than perceiving people who live in far-away lands. To concur, in Níkleva's (2012) study, the majority of stereotypes about Spain and Spaniards collected among university students in Portugal had negative connotations. It should be noted that negative stereotypes about other nations are tenacious because they are deeply rooted in language in the form of idiomatic expressions and proverbs (e.g., *De*

*Espanha nem bom vento, nem bom casamento*, which can be translated from Portuguese as From Spain, neither good wind nor good marriage).

The origins and transformations of national stereotypes can be traced by studying literary sources from various historical epochs. These sources include folk literature (e.g., proverbs and sayings), travelogues and letters written by sojourners, diaries of diplomats and merchants and, more recently, works of fiction. Literary sources that date back to ancient times reflect a rich tapestry of stereotypical images of Spain and Spaniards (López de Abiada, 2007a). One of the first references to the “people of Iberia” can be found in writings of Greek historian and geographer Strabo (64/63 BC - c. AD 24) who described them as known for their “bravery”, “cruelty” and “bestial rage” (López de Abiada, 2007a: 402).

According to López de Abiada (2007a), distinct images of Spain and Spaniards began forming in European literary sources in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and over the following centuries the perceptions of the country among its European neighbours oscillated from highly negative to highly positive. Literary sources in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, especially those written in French, referred to Spain as a “distant and mysterious place, an enchanted and somehow exotic land” (López de Abiada, 2007a: 243). In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a great political might and territorial conquests of the Spanish Empire “fastened on Spain an unfavourable reputation” (López de Abiada, 2007a: 243). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the country’s weakened military prowess and changed political status initiated a shift in perceptions of Spain to a positive direction. Spain regained its image of an exotic land and Spaniards were once again perceived as proud, passionate and romantic people. The novella *Carmen* written by Prosper Mérimée in the 19<sup>th</sup> century aptly captured these contemporary perceptions of Spain and its people (Mérimée, 2013).

As Leerssen (2003: 47) noted, over centuries Spain’s images in literary works and in the public imagination shifted “from Alva and the Inquisition, to *Carmen* and serenades, flamenco, bullfights and castanets”. He pointed out that this does not mean that the Spanish people or Spanish character had undergone a major transformation. Rather, more positive attitudes toward a less belligerent Spain influenced a selection process of ‘typical’ images of the country and its people and resulted in more positive –and more exotic– representations of the country and people.

Modern Spain is universally perceived as a European country with a rich and vibrant culture, a prominent festive tradition and great artistic achievements. Stereotypes about Spain held by people in various countries would typically include references to bullfights, parties, sunny beaches, great architecture and flamenco (National Stereotypes, n.d.). Spaniards are often perceived as welcoming, flamboyant, vivacious and not punctual people. Among popular stereotypes relating to their behaviour and physical appearance are ‘people speak simultaneously’, ‘Spaniards are

short and brown’, ‘Spaniards are dashing’ (Níkleva, 2012). Some of these stereotypes coincide with the self-images that Spaniards have of themselves and their country; among them are “joy, celebration and fun” (*alegría, fiesta y diversion*) (Níkleva, 2012: 995).

### **1.5. Stereotypes about Latin America**

According to López de Abiada (2007b: 209), “Hispanic-Portuguese America remained *terra incognita* for most of Europe until late in the eighteenth century”. The prevalent images of the continent before the era of Enlightenment were *El-Dorado* and the ‘Noble Savage’. Mason (2007) maintains that first literary sources about the continent that is nowadays known as Latin America appeared in Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These sources were the numerous editions of Christopher Columbus’ letter to the Spanish court in which he described his voyage and its poetic version in Italian “*La lettera dell’isole che ha trovato nuovamente el re di Spagna*” created by Giuliano Dati and published in 1495.

Drawing on an extensive range of literary sources, López de Abiada (2007b) maintains that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the New World of the Americas continued to excite the imagination of philosophers, writers, travellers and scientists. Mason (2007) observed that the far-away lands in the Western Hemisphere and people living there were portrayed in the contemporary literature as greatly dissimilar to the continental Europe and as an exotic utopian ‘other’. Emigration, travel and commerce in the 19<sup>th</sup> century bolstered economic and cultural ties between Europe and Latin America. It should be noted that remnants of the negative imagery about Spain, a country that had a considerable cultural influence on the continent, were often extrapolated to Latin America. Coupled with political unrests and struggles that accompanied the birth of new nations these negative projections gave rise to a popular stereotype of dictatorships and authoritarianism as being ubiquitous in Latin America.

Political revolutions that took place in Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century initiated a shift of perceptions and the appearance of the image of the continent as a tireless fighter against imperialism. As a result, according to López de Abiada (2007b), the images of rebellion, bravery and sacrifice became an inalienable part of the popular imagery about Latin American countries. The ultimate embodiment of these perceptions are the iconic visual images of Argentine-born revolutionary Ernesto Che Guevara which have been ubiquitous in art and popular culture worldwide until the present day. At the same time, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared luscious and vibrant self-images of Latin America and they rapidly spread around the world. This rich and novel imagery was voiced in the oeuvres of Latin American writers and poets, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges, all of whom told to the world Latin America’s own stories and histories.

Nowadays, owing to the artistic achievements by constellations of Latin American writers, poets and artists and also due to the continent's unique past history, its distinctive geography and diverse demography, Latin American countries have collectively acquired a rich and vibrant imagery. It is complex and multi-layered and combines, in the words of López de Abiada (2007b: 210), "sensuality and violence, festivity and oppression... and a wayward rampant vitality in the tropics". Other popular modern-day stereotypes about Latin America include, on a positive side, football, rhythm and dance, colourful culture, lush forests of Amazonia, the Andean peaks, ancient civilizations of the Maya, the Aztecs and the Incas, the conquistadors and the Amazonian Indians. Negative images of the continent often relate to crime, poverty, drug trafficking, machismo and dictatorship (Menéndez Alarcón, 2014; National Stereotypes, n.d.).

## **2. Method**

### ***2.1. Participants and research instrument***

Thirty-one students learning Spanish as an elective course at Level 1 participated in this study. They were majoring in various academic disciplines, such as business, engineering, architecture and the social sciences. The respondents were asked two open-ended questions, namely,

- (4) What images or mental pictures come to your mind when you hear the words 'Spain' or 'Spanish?', and
- (5) Are there other countries where the Spanish language is spoken? Please provide a few images for each country you have mentioned.

They were then instructed to give a mark or favourability rating to each image they had written on their lists. The evaluation scale ranged from -2, which indicated a strongly negative image, to +2 to denote a highly positive image.

### ***2.2. Data analysis***

This study collected both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data were gathered through two open-ended questions. The favourability ratings assigned by the students to the images in their lists were the source of the quantitative data. A benefit of the mixed-methods design adopted in this study is that it enabled triangulation of the findings. In an earlier investigation of language learners' country stereotypes (Schulz & Haerle, 1995) researchers classified the images as either positive or negative based on their own common sense and intuition. This engendered ambiguity in the analysis; for example, the image 'proud', which Schulz and Haerle (1995) had classified as positive, can be also perceived as negative. As a way to avoid this problem and also triangulate the qualitative and quantitative data, the evaluations



of the images' favourability in this study were based on the ratings assigned by the respondents.

To answer research question 1, content analysis was performed during which the images written by the students were separated into categories. The findings from this step of the analysis informed about the structure of the students' images of Spain and Spanish-speaking countries. Content analysis is a data driven approach (Ryan & Bernard, 2003); this means that a researcher does not base his or her decisions on any prior theory, model or a predetermined set of categories. In the current study, the images were joined into categories based on their semantic similarity or proximity of the images. Each category was then assigned a label that reflected its contents. The content analysis did not aim to distinguish categories that contained exactly similar, which would have resulted in a greater number of categories. In this study, representations that made logically congruent entities were grouped together and formed wider categories of images, such as 'Food and wine' or 'Architecture and heritage'. Idiosyncratic images that did not fit into any of the categories were grouped together and labelled as 'Others'. Due to the lack of a unifying theme, salience and favourability of this category were not computed.

To attend to research question 2, this study computed salience of the categories of images. Salience is the importance or prominence of an image, item or a category. It can be assessed by calculating the number of images in a category, in which case the most frequent representations or the largest categories of images would be the most salient. Alternatively, salience can be assessed by considering an image's position in the list. In this case, the images that tend to be placed in the beginning of the respondents' lists would have higher salience compared to the representations placed in the end of the inventories. Consequently, categories that contain highly salient images would have a higher salience. The current study employed the Modified Free-List Salience (MFLS) index developed by Smith, Furbee, Maynard, Quick and Ross (1995). When calculating the MFLS index, both an item's frequency and its position in a list are considered. The MFLS index ranges from 0 to 1 and values that are closer to 1 indicate a higher salience. The computer software ANTHROPAC 4.0 developed by Borgatti (1996) was used to compute the MFLS index in this study.

In order to answer research question 3, favourability or mean valence of the representations of Spain and Spanish-speaking countries was assessed based on the formula:

$$CMV_j = \frac{\sum_{j=1}^{F_j} V_{ji}}{F_j} \quad (1)$$

where  $CMV_j$  is the mean valence of a category of images,  $V_{ji}$  is the valence rating given by student  $i$  to image  $j$ , and  $F_j$  is the number of images in this category.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Representations of Spain, their content, salience and favourability

In response to the first open-ended question the students provided 152 representations of Spain. These representations formed 12 categories of images shown in Table 1. The category ‘Others’ contained nine idiosyncratic images (e.g., ‘flower’, ‘a-a-a’) and was excluded from the further analysis.

**Table 1.** Categories of representations of Spain, their salience and favourability.

Category	Salience Index (SI)	Salience Rank (SR)	CMV	Mean Valence Rank	Number of images (n)	Rank by size
Language	0.333	1	1.400	7	20	3
Traditional and popular culture	0.308	2	1.318	9	22	2
People	0.302	3	1.379	8	29	1
Football	0.283	4	1.571	5	14	4
Festivals and corrido	0.175	5	1.000	10	9	7
Food and wine	0.151	6	0.500	12	10	5
Cities and sites	0.132	7	1.700	4	10	5
Geography	0.128	8	1.000	10	9	7
Nice country	0.076	9	2.000	1	5	10
Sun and beach	0.068	10	1.800	3	5	10
Architecture and heritage	0.068	10	1.500	6	6	9
Emotional response	0.023	12	2.000	1	4	12
Total*					152	

Note.\* Including the category ‘Others’ (n=9).

All categories of images about Spain were favourable as indicated by their positive mean valence values. The representations concerning the Spanish language, labelled ‘Language’, formed the top salient category of images (SI = 0.333; SR = 1). It contained the students’ representations of the Spanish language. Some of the images in this category were attitude-laden (e.g., ‘awesome pronunciation’, ‘best language’ and ‘language that is nice to hear’). Several students demonstrated their awareness –even if not accurate knowledge– of the important international status of the target language. This was evident in such images as ‘international language’, ‘the second most spoken language after English’ and ‘the third native language in the world’. Some respondents considered Spanish a ‘difficult language’ but also ‘interesting language’. Only two of the representations in this category had received negative ratings, namely, ‘difficult

language' (-2) and 'language' (-1). The rest of the responses were rated positively and predominantly +2.

The second in salience set of representations concerned 'Traditional and popular culture' (SI = 0.308; SR = 2); it was also the second largest group of images (n = 22). Included in this category were images relating to the TL culture, such as 'Spanish culture', 'classical guitar', 'interesting culture', 'songs', 'dance' and '*siesta*'. Several images made references to popular culture, for example, 'movies' and 'Spanish dramas'. Some respondents mentioned Latin American telenovelas that have also been popular in Malaysia (e.g., '*Rosalinda*' and '*Yo Soy Betty La Fea*'). Among the images in this group, the only negative rating (-2) was given to the image '*Yo Soy Betty La Fea*'. The majority of the representations were positively rated by the students.

The following in salience group of representations was labelled 'People' (SI = 0.302; SR = 3). This was the largest category of images of Spain in this study (n = 29). Some images in this cluster referred to physical attributes of the Spanish people as perceived by the respondents (e.g., '[the people are] tall', '[people have] dark hair', 'people are bigger than the Malaysians', 'beautiful and handsome people' and 'sexy people'). There were also references to the perceived individual characteristics and behaviour of the Spaniards (e.g., 'polite people', 'friendly people' and 'people talk a lot and forget about time'). Included in this category were the names of famous people; several of them were Spaniards (e.g., tennis player Rafael Nadal, Formula One racing driver Fernando Alonso and pop singer Enrique Iglesias) and some were from other Spanish-speaking countries (e.g., Colombian pop singer Shakira). One student had erroneously mentioned footballer David da Silva who was born in Portuguese-speaking Brazil. Only one image in this category (i.e., 'sexy people') received a negative rating; one neutral rating was assigned to the image 'people'. The rest of the representations were marked positively and the prevailing rating was +2.

The fourth category in salience was 'Football and football clubs' (SI = 0.283; SR = 4). It contained such representations as 'football', 'World Cup', 'Euro Championship' and 'football team'. Some students had written the names of Spanish football clubs (e.g., *Real Madrid* and *Barcelona*). All these images were rated positively and predominantly +2. Following in salience was the category 'Festivals and corrida' (SI = 0.175; SR = 5). It included the images 'festivals', 'fiestas', '*corrida*', 'bullfight' and 'bullfighting'. The images referring to festivals and fiestas were rated +2. The image 'bullfight' received a negative rating -2 from one student; similar images 'bullfight' and 'bullfighting' were given by other respondents either the neutral rating 0 or a positive rating +1. The category 'Food and wine' (SI = 0.151; SR = 6) was sixth in salience. It contained the reference to 'wine', 'coffee', 'green peppers' and 'pork'. One respondent provided the image '*nachos*', which is a Mexican dish. For the most part, the images in this category were rated 0 and +1; the only image that received a negative rating -1 was 'wine'.

The category ‘Cities and sites’ (SI = 0.132; SR = 7) was seventh in salience. It contained references to Madrid, Barcelona, Ibiza, Andalusia and Granada. Some students associated Spain with ‘interesting places’ and with ‘places to visit’. All these representations were rated positively and predominantly +2. In the category ‘Geography’ (SI = 0.128; SR = 8), which was eighth in salience, some representations attested to the students’ lack of knowledge regarding Spain’s geographical location. For example, one respondent asked ‘is Spain and Latin America the same?’. There were also factually correct images, such as ‘Europe’ and ‘Portugal’s neighbour’. Also included in this category were the references to the weather and climate in Spain (e.g., ‘hot weather’, ‘hot climate’ and ‘four seasons’). These images were rated predominantly +1; two students assigned the neutral rating 0 to their answers. The category ‘Nice and beautiful country’ (SI = 0.076; SR = 9) occupied the ninth position in salience. It contained representations such as ‘beautiful scenery’, ‘beautiful country’ and ‘nice country’; all of these images were rated +2. The next in salience category was ‘Sun and beach’ (SI = 0.068; SR = 10). It included images for ‘nice beaches’, ‘sun’ and ‘tan’. Except for one image that was rated +1, the representations in this category were assigned the highest rating +2.

The category ‘Architecture and heritage’ (SI = 0.068; SR = 10), which occupied the tenth position in salience, incorporated representations which depicted ‘elegant and beautiful architecture’, ‘beautiful buildings’ as well as images portraying the UNESCO World Heritage Site Alhambra. These representations were positively rated except for the image ‘elegant and beautiful architecture’, which received the neutral mark 0. The least salient category was labelled ‘Emotional response’ (SI = 0.023; SR = 12). It contained the language learners’ affective reactions toward the TL country, such as ‘something great’ and ‘enjoyable’, rather than the images referring to the actual objects, events or phenomena that exist in Spain. All images in this group were rated +2 by the students.

### ***3.2. Representations of Spanish-speaking countries***

In response to the second open-ended question, the participants named 15 countries and one area –Latin America. During content analysis of the data it became clear that the respondents had supplied very few representations, or none at all, of the countries they had mentioned. In addition, the inclusion of Brazil, where nearly 200 million people speak Portuguese, reflects an erroneous but widespread notion that all countries in Latin America have Spanish cultural roots. Only some of the images concerning the Spanish-speaking countries were given favourability ratings. Also, the content analysis revealed that the students had not provided any images of Uruguay and Paraguay. Due to these missing data, the researcher decided not to calculate the category mean valence (CMV) in this part of the study. However, the favourability ratings that the students assigned to their images are presented in Table 2.

The findings revealed that the image ‘Latin America’ (SI = 0.403; SR = 1) came to the respondents’ mind most readily as an association with Spanish-speaking countries. As a result, ‘Latin America’ was the top image in salience. Importantly, the students had only positive representations of the continent.

**Table 2.** Representations of Spanish-speaking countries, their salience and content.

Area / Country	Salience Index	Salience Rank	Number of Images (n)	Rank by Size	Images and their Ratings
Latin America	0.403	1	19	1	Very friendly (+2); Latino (+2); telenovelas (+2)
Mexico	0.389	2	19	1	Big hat (+1); drugs (-2); songs (+1); US neighbour; illegal immigrants; Mexico city; acoustic music (+2)
Brazil	0.293	3	14	3	Football (+1)
Peru	0.287	4	13	4	Machu Picchu (0)
Ecuador	0.165	5	8	5	Galapagos; Quito; Equator line (0); <i>mi profesora pais</i> (+2)
Colombia	0.085	6	5	6	Crime; Shakira; drugs (0)
Venezuela	0.075	7	3	8	Beauty queens; Miss <i>Universo</i> ; Miss <i>Mundo</i> (0); beauty pageant (+2)
Cuba	0.060	8	4	7	Cigar (0); dance (+2); Havana (+2)
Argentina	0.054	9	3	8	Buenos Aires; tango (0); football (+2); soap operas (+2); Latinos (+2)
Chile	0.037	11	3	8	Santiago; Andes (0)
Puerto Rico	0.032	12	1	15	Beauty queens; Miss <i>Universo</i> ; beach (0)
Costa Rica	0.028	13	2	11	<i>Pura vida</i> (+1); rainforest (0)
Uruguay	0.025	14	2	11	—
Panama	0.010	15	1	15	Panama Canal (0)
Paraguay	0.008	16	2	11	—

Mexico (SI = 0.389; SR = 2) was second in salience. Among the images of this country provided by the students were ‘big hat’ (+1), ‘acoustic music’ (+2) and ‘songs’ (+1). The majority of the representations were positive; the only negative image was ‘drugs’ (-2). Portuguese-speaking Brazil (SI = 0.293; SR = 3), which followed Mexico in salience, was associated with only one image – ‘football’ (+1). Similarly, only one image—‘Machu Picchu’ rated 0—was provided about Peru, the country which was fourth in salience (SI = 0.287; SR = 4). Ecuador (SI = 0.165; SR = 5) evoked images of ‘Galapagos’ (no rating), ‘equator line’ (0), ‘Quito’ (no rating) and ‘*mi profesora pais*’ (+2). The images associated with Colombia (SI = 0.085; SR = 6) were mixed in terms of their favourability although only one image had been given a rating. The images of this country were ‘crime’ (no rating), ‘Shakira’ (no rating) and ‘drugs’ rated, quite counterintuitively, 0. The following in salience country, Venezuela (SI = 0.075; SR = 7), was associated with ‘beauty pageant’ (+2), ‘beauty queens’ (no rating), ‘Miss *Universo*’ (no rating) and ‘Miss *Mundo*’ rated 0.

The representations of Cuba (SI = 0.060; SR = 8) provided by the students were ‘cigar’ (0), ‘dance’ (+2), ‘Havana’ (+2). Argentina (SI = 0.054; SR = 9) evoked the images ‘Buenos Aires’ (no rating), ‘tango’ (0), ‘football’ (+2), ‘soap operas’ (+2), ‘Latinos’ (+2). Two geographical landmarks—‘Santiago’ and ‘Andes’ (0)—were mentioned in relation to Chile (SI = 0.037; SR = 11). Puerto Rico (SI = 0.032; SR = 12), as it had been the case with Venezuela, was associated with ‘beauty queens’ (no rating), ‘Miss *Universo*’ (no rating) and also ‘beach’ (rated 0). Representations concerning nature (i.e., ‘*pura vida*’ and ‘rainforest’) constituted the image about Costa Rica (SI = 0.028; SR = 13). The three least salient countries were Uruguay, Panama and Paraguay. No images were associated in the students’ minds with Uruguay (SI = 0.025; SR = 14) and Paraguay (SI = 0.008; SR = 16) and only one representation (i.e., ‘Panama Canal’ rated 0) was associated with Panama (SI = 0.010; SR = 15).

On the whole, among the students’ representations of Latin American countries, the references to people were prominent. They included ‘Latino’, ‘Shakira’, ‘beauty queens’ and a description ‘very friendly’. Many of the images concerned popular culture, such as ‘telenovelas’, ‘acoustic music’, ‘beauty pageant’, ‘dance’, ‘tango’ and ‘soap operas’. Also noticeable were images referring to cities and famous landmarks. Among them were ‘Mexico City’, ‘Havana’, ‘Buenos Aires’, ‘Santiago’, ‘the Andes’, ‘Machu Picchu’ and ‘Panama Canal’.

## **4. Discussion of the findings and pedagogical implications**

### **4.1. Comparisons of the images about Spain and Latin America**

The findings revealed considerable disparities in the students’ imagery about Spain and Spanish-speaking countries. The representations of Spain were multifarious and had a richer structure. In contrast, the images of Spanish-speaking countries were scarce and limited in scope. Some of the Latin American countries, such as Paraguay and Uruguay, did not evoke any images in the students’ minds. However, there are also several similarities in the content and structure of the students’ representations of Spain and Latin America: the references to people, popular culture and famous landmarks were among the most prominent and salient representations given by the respondents.

Even though the structure of representations of Spain was richer compared to the imagery about other Spanish-speaking countries, some important country-related aspects concerning Spain were missing. Thus, the numerous culture-related images concerned, for the most part, Spain’s traditional culture (e.g., ‘*siesta*’, ‘bullfight’ and ‘*corrida*’) and popular culture (e.g., ‘movies’, ‘songs’). An interesting finding was that the students mistakenly associated Latin American telenovelas ‘*Rosalinda*’ and ‘*Yo Soy Betty La Fea*’ with ‘made in Spain’ cultural products. At the same time, images referring to Spain’s rich cultural heritage and its great artistic achievements were conspicuously

lacking among the students' representations. Not a single reference had been made to the world renowned literary oeuvre '*Don Quixote*' or its author, Miguel de Cervantes. Also lacking were images related to Spain's contemporary reality, including its economy and socio-political life. There were some inaccurate statements as well, especially those concerning the international status of the Spanish language. For example, some students described Spanish as "the second most spoken language after English" and "the third native language in the world". In fact, Spanish is the second most widely spoken world language after Mandarin, not English, while English occupies the third place according to the total number of speakers.

Concerning favourability of the students' country images, the findings revealed that the language learners' perceptions about Spain and Spanish-speaking countries were overall positive. In the case of Spain, there were very few negative images: only "wine" and "difficult language" were rated negatively by more than one respondent. It also should be noted that some of the representations given by the participants in this study aligned with the auto-stereotypes held by Spaniards reported by Níkleva (2012). Among these shared images were '*fiesta*', 'nice beaches', 'sun', 'beach' and 'tan'.

As to the students' images of Latin American countries, the findings indicated that they were overall positive although some students had mentioned such negative aspects as 'drugs' and 'crime'. These findings are different from those reported in the previous studies conducted among American college students (Lusky, 1981; Menéndez Alarcón, 2014). A considerable cultural and geographical distance as well as the absence of past hostilities and present-day rivalries between Malaysia and Spanish-speaking countries might be one of the determining factors that influenced the overall positive representations of Latin America and Spain held by Malaysian students.

Regarding the images' favourability, it was found that some valence ratings given by the students to their images were counterintuitive. For example, the image 'elegant and beautiful architecture' that contains strongly positive adjectives received the neutral rating 0; moreover, a highly negative image 'drugs' was also marked as neutral by one respondent. A possible explanation for this apparent mismatch between the nature of these images and their ratings could be that the 0 ratings might be indicative of the respondents' sense of psychological distance from the provided images. Alternatively, the proposed degrees of valence by the researcher (e.g., -2, 0 or +1) might not have been perceived in a similar way by the respondents. This was a limitation of the current study. Wider range scales (e.g., from -5 to +5) to measure favourability of images may be considered for utilization in future investigations of language learners' country stereotypes. Notwithstanding this limitation, the findings allow for the conclusion that the language learners viewed the TL countries in a predominantly positive light. This finding is important from a pedagogical perspective. As previous studies have indicated, language learners' positive perceptions of a target

language country lead to better linguistic and non-linguistic learning outcomes in a language program (Castellotti & Moore, 2002).

## **4.2. Pedagogical implications**

Language educators and educational researchers agree that one of the important purposes of any foreign language program is to enhance language learners' cultural awareness and deepen their knowledge about a TL country. In research on foreign language pedagogy, the teaching of culture has been a prominent topic (Allen, 2004; Byram, 2014; House, 2008; Kramersch, 2014). Among the issues addressed by the researchers have been the meaning and significance of teaching culture in the context of foreign language education (Byram, 1997, 2014; Byram & Kramersch, 2008; Chaput, 1997; House, 2008) and the appropriateness of the cultural component contents for students' learning needs (Lacasa & Lacasa, 1983; Lusky, 1981). This section demonstrates how a good knowledge of language learners' representations of a TL country can help language educators to address these pedagogical challenges.

Considering that culture can be broadly defined as a set of shared representations (House, 2008), it could be a worthwhile endeavour for language educators to collect their students' images and representations of a TL country, its culture and people. This effort could be especially rewarding in contexts where great cultural and geographical distances exist between the language learners' own culture and the target culture. Upon analysing mental images that students hold of the TL country, language teachers would be able to identify gaps and misconceptions in the students' cultural knowledge and tailor the cultural component of a foreign language program according to the learners' educational needs.

The students' representations of Spanish-speaking countries collected in this study identified some conspicuous lacunae in their knowledge about the target language cultures. Especially noticeable were the gaps in the representational structure of Latin American countries and the inclusion of Brazil among Spanish-speaking countries. The fact that Portuguese-speaking Brazil occupied the third rank in salience as a 'Spanish-speaking country' in the students' lists attests to the existence of an erroneous but ubiquitous stereotype of a common Spanish cultural and linguistic heritage in Latin America. Based on these findings, implementing semester-long group projects on Latin American countries and cultures could be beneficial for developing the students' cultural awareness.

Admittedly, selecting topics that would promote a better understanding of such a vast and complex area as Latin America is not an easy task. As Reid (2009: 27) noted, "Latin America is far from being a monolith"; however, he continued, "... it is built from many common materials". To begin with, language teachers might want to identify 'keywords' that are important for the target culture (Williams, 1985; Byram,



1997). To make the teaching of culture more meaningful to the students, these keywords can be selected from the language learners' own representations of the target language countries. Concerning Latin America, Reid (2009) identified such important historical and cultural aspects as the shared linguistic heritage, the prominence of festive tradition, the important role of music and dance and a distinct popular culture (e.g., football, telenovelas). Many of these cultural aspects were included among the students' representations of Spanish-speaking countries. As Balderston, González and López (2000: xxxi) noted, "a popular tune or a national dish may tell as complex a story as a literary work". Based on these considerations, the keywords '*telenovela*' and '*beauty contest*', both of which were among the representations collected in this study and also judged as meriting entries in the Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures (Balderston et al., 2000), could be worthy topics for students' cultural explorations.

In view that Latin America was the most salient image of Spanish-speaking countries in this study, Malaysian learners of Spanish could be encouraged to explore the origins of the keyword and to discover complexities embedded in this term. Two other important keywords mentioned among the students' representations – *fiesta* and 'carnival' – offer vectors for further investigations of important cultural phenomena and a means of enhancing the students' awareness of a rich blending of cultures that has been taking place in Latin America over several centuries. Given that the students had provided various references to the people, another culturally saturated keyword – *el pueblo* – could be a relevant topic for a group research project. The students could be asked to consider similarities and differences between this term and the Malay word *rakyat* (people). In addition, a rich ethnic makeup in Latin American countries could be an interesting research topic where Malaysian students could be encouraged to compare the continents' population diversity with Malaysia's own rich demographic mosaic.

As the findings revealed some important 'keywords', especially those relating to history, art and high culture, were missing among the students' representations of Spanish-speaking countries. These gaps need to be addressed by language educators. In the context of the present study, teachers might want to suggest that students explore some aspects of Spain's and Latin America's history. For example, they could focus on prominent historical figures, such as Simón Bolívar, or on significant events. The students might also be encouraged to investigate historical links between Latin American countries, Spain and Portugal.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has explored mental representations of Spanish-speaking countries held by learners of Spanish in a Malaysian university. It was found that the content and structure of the students' images had been richer in the case of Spain in comparison to

the representations of Latin American countries. Despite some important omissions and several erroneous notions, the images held by the students about Spanish-speaking countries were positive and, for the most part, they referred to people, popular culture and famous landmarks.

The current study has some pedagogical implications as it has demonstrated how exploring language learners' mental representations about target language countries can help language educators to make teaching of the cultural component of a foreign language program relevant to the educational needs of their students. More importantly, as the current and previous studies have shown (Allen; 2004; Níkleva, 2012; Nikitina, Zuraidah & Loh, 2014), addressing language learners' beliefs and stereotypes about a TL country enables language educators to practice progressive foreign language pedagogies that strive to link language learners' prior knowledge and beliefs about a TL country to their new learning experiences and place emphasis on promoting students' critical thinking through exposing them to more ideas about the complex and vibrant world beyond the classroom walls.

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