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# The Impact of Theme-Based Language Instruction on Language Learning Effectiveness and Motivation: A Case Study of “Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course”

El impacto de la instrucción basada en temas sobre la efectividad del aprendizaje de lenguas y la motivación: un estudio de caso del curso “Español y Certamen de Belleza”

基于主题的语言教学对语言学习效果和动机的影响:以“西班牙语和选美课程”为例

Влияние тематического обучения языку на эффективность и мотивацию его изучения: Тематическое исследование курса «Испанский язык и конкурс красоты»

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## Abstract

This research aims to explore how theme-based language instruction, an innovative approach for foreign language teaching in recent years, affects learners' attitude and motivation and to prove its effectiveness for building L2 proficiency. "Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course" is the object of the study in order to find out how intrinsic motivation exercises are, since beauty pageants have a solid fanbase in Thailand while in many Spanish speaking countries beauty contests are also a social phenomenon. Altogether 22 students of this course participated in the research, and they were requested to fill in an online questionnaire which served as a tool to collect information concerning learners' attitude and motivation and, moreover, their final exam results were analyzed to examine their level of Spanish proficiency by the end of the course. According to the evidence collected, the Spanish instruction based on beauty pageant theme created an impressive impact on students' attitude and motivation. The questionnaire results showed that, after studying this course, all students admitted to having a positive or very positive attitude towards the Spanish language, Hispanic cultures and Hispanic people. The most motivating factors were the instructor, teaching methods, classroom activities and class atmosphere respectively. Surprisingly, this approach did create a remarkable sense of belonging and empathy between the learners. With regards to Spanish proficiency, the final exam results demonstrated that, overall, the students were able to reach a satisfying level in every skill, especially the reading skill. However, the listening skill presented most difficulties and required special attention.

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*Keywords:* theme-based instruction, language teaching, Spanish as a foreign language, Thai students of Spanish, beauty pageant.

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## Resumen

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo explorar cómo la instrucción de lenguas basada en temas, un enfoque innovador para la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en estos últimos años, afecta la actitud y la motivación de los aprendices y también comprueba su efectividad en desarrollar su competencia de español. El curso de "Español y Certamen de Belleza" era nuestro objeto de estudio para averiguar cómo se ejecuta la motivación intrínseca, puesto que los concursos de belleza cuentan con una base sólida de seguidores en Tailandia mientras en muchos países hispanohablantes se considera un fenómeno social. En total, 22 estudiantes de este curso participaron en la investigación. Se les solicitó que rellenaran un cuestionario en línea, una herramienta para recopilar información relacionada con su actitud y motivación, y, además, su examen final fue analizado para reconocer su nivel de dominio de español al terminar el curso. Según los datos recogidos, la enseñanza de español basada en el tema de certamen de belleza produjo un impacto impresionante en la actitud y la motivación de los estudiantes. Los resultados del cuestionario mostraron que, después de haber estudiado este curso, todos los estudiantes admitieron tener una actitud positiva o muy positiva hacia la lengua española, la cultura hispana y los hispanohablantes. Los factores que resultaron ser más motivadores fueron el profesor, el método de enseñanza, las actividades en el aula y el ambiente de clase, respectivamente. Para nuestra sorpresa este enfoque ha sido capaz de crear un increíble sentido de pertenencia y empatía entre los aprendices. En relación con la competencia de español, los resultados del examen final demostraron que, en general, los estudiantes lograron llegar a un nivel satisfactorio en todas las destrezas, especialmente la comprensión lectora. Sin embargo, la comprensión auditiva resultó bastante difícil para ellos, con lo cual se necesita una atención especial en relación con esta destreza.

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*Palabras clave:* instrucción basada en temas, enseñanza de lenguas, español como lengua extranjera, estudiantes tailandeses de español, certamen de belleza.

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## 概要

本研究旨在探讨主题式语言教学法,了解这一近年来的创新外语教学方法如何影响学习者的态度和动机,并证明其对提高西班牙语水平的有效性。“西班牙语和选美”课程是我们研究的对象,以了解内在动机如何运作。选择该课程作为研究对象的原因在于选美在泰国拥有坚实的追随者基础,而在许多西班牙语国家,这被认为是一种社会现象。该课程共有22名学生参与了研究。他们被要求填写一份在线问卷,这是一个收集与他们的态度和动机相关信息的工具,此外,他们还对他们的期末考试进行了分析,以确认他们在课程结束时的西班牙语水平。根据收集到的数据,基于选美主题的西班牙语教学对学生的态度和积极性产生了令人印象深刻的影响。问卷结果表明,在学习了这门课程后,所有学生都承认对西班牙语、西班牙文化和说西班牙语的人持有积极或非常积极的态度。结果证明,最能激励学生的因素分别是教师、教学方法、课堂活动和课堂环境。令我们惊讶的是,这种方法能够在学习者之间产生令人难以置信的归属感和同理心。总的来说,西班牙语水平和期末考试的结果表明,学生在所有技能方面都达到了令人满意的水平,尤其是阅读理解方面。然而,听力理解对他们来说相当困难,所以我们应该要特别注意该项技能。

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关键词:主题式教学,语言教学,西班牙语作为外语,学习西语的泰国学生,选美

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## Аннотация

Цель данного исследования - изучить, как тематическое обучение языку, инновационный подход к преподаванию иностранных языков в последние годы, влияет на отношение и мотивацию учащихся, а также проверить их эффективность в развитии навыков владения испанским языком. Предмет “Испанский язык и конкурс красоты” стал объектом нашего исследования, чтобы выяснить, как осуществляется внутренняя мотивация, поскольку конкурсы красоты имеют сильную базу поклонников в Таиланде, в то время как во многих испаноязычных странах это считается социальным явлением. Всего в исследовании приняли участие 22 студента этого курса. Их попросили заполнить онлайн-анкету, инструмент для сбора информации, связанной с их отношением и мотивацией, а их выпускной экзамен был проанализирован, чтобы определить их уровень владения испанским языком в конце курса. Согласно собранным данным, обучение испанскому языку на основе темы конкурса красоты оказало впечатляющее влияние на отношение и мотивацию студентов. Результаты анкетирования показали, что после изучения данного курса все студенты признались, что у них положительное или очень положительное отношение к испанскому языку, испаноязычной культуре и носителям испанского языка. Факторы, которые были признаны наиболее мотивирующими, - это учитель, метод преподавания, занятия в классе и атмосфера в классе, соответственно. К нашему удивлению, такой подход смог создать невероятное чувство сопричастности и сопереживания среди учащихся. Что касается владения испанским языком, результаты выпускного экзамена показали, что в целом студентам удалось достичь удовлетворительного уровня по всем навыкам, особенно по пониманию прочитанного. Однако понимание на слух оказалось для них довольно сложным, поэтому этому навыку необходимо уделить особое внимание.

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Ключевые слова: тематическое обучение, преподавание языка, испанский язык как иностранный, тайские учащиеся испанского языка, конкурс красоты

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## Introduction

Knowledge of foreign language teaching and learning is an important epistemology that can contribute to the broader horizons of many other fields such as social sciences, politics, economics, culture, history or even pure science. To enrich and enable foreign language teaching and learning, a wide range of methods and pedagogies can be experimented and finally applied, be it in a traditional classroom-based learning which normally focuses on the lexical resources and grammatical structures or any other integrated styles of class conduction. However, when working on a learner's development of communicative and linguistic skills, it can be emphasized in various communicative situations and themes. Thus, foreign language pedagogies can also be studied through sociolinguistic and cultural perspectives as well as social phenomena encountered and experienced by the learners of that particular foreign language.

In the case of Spanish speaking or the so-called Hispanic culture both in Latin American regions and Spain, in the continental Europe, beauty pageant is a remarkable popular cultural trend in which we can observe and witness many interesting linguistic aspects. The proficiency and accuracy of Spanish language to a certain extent can facilitate and provide those who appreciate this genre of cultural product with a better understanding toward the sociolinguistic challenges that arise with the speech contents, opinions or even the national identity that the agent in pageant, namely the 'miss' or beauty queen herself during the pageant or in the Q&A session in which a range of narratives such as personal memory, political ideology and rhetoric are orally expressed.

For many decades, beauty pageant in Thailand has been one of the public interests both at the national and international levels. A large number of fans have formed a solid and relevant fanbase emerging with a peculiar collective identity and characteristics and intriguing intercultural information conveyance and translation in the cybernetic sphere (Duangkong, 2013) where knowledge formation and the horizon of the Hispanic world of the Thai fans are broadened. That has enabled them to connect with its culture and people or 'la gente latina' via the content of Spanish speaking beauty pageant platforms. In this case, Spanish language acquisition plays a significant role in creating easier access to the information and *savoir-faire* of Latino pageantry. Consequently, the coexistence between Spanish language and this genre of popular culture can be used as an excellent opportunity to create an 'edutaining' style of teaching and self-learning tool.

In addition, the covid-19 pandemic, that is occurring and affecting almost every aspect of life at the present time, has paralyzed the classroom-based learning and forced the many institutions to conduct class online. Online class and online-class activities may impede the enthusiasm for learning of the students and cause them fatigue in any online classroom activity, leading them to the isolation from the group in the end. As a result, any form of innovation and pioneering style of teaching should be constantly experimented and introduced to the online learning platform so that learners can avail the new learning options. This also may create and enhance the learning motivation and class participation as a whole and eventually lead to the sense of belonging in the classroom among the learners.

Consequently, this classroom-based research is aimed to study the theme-based Spanish instruction applied in "Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course", a Spanish language course oriented to beauty pageant contents, introduced to the Thai public by Chula's Academic Services Center of Arts at Chulalongkorn University (Thailand). Hopefully,

the findings in this research can guide those who are interested in teaching and learning Spanish as a foreign language to a new paradigm and pedagogy of Spanish language in which an individual learner or collective learners from different social and economic backgrounds can relish and profit this way of teaching and learning at most, for their own purpose of productive learning.

## Literature review

This research involves two main areas of studies: 1) Theme-based language instruction and 2) Motivation in second or foreign language (L2) learning process.

## Theme-based Language Instruction

In order to discuss Theme-based Language Instruction, we do need to understand the concept of Content-Based Language Instruction (CBI) thoroughly. CBI is a teaching approach which integrates language teaching into content teaching of different subjects, by using subject matter as the content of L2 learning as well. Stryker and Leaver (2007) explain that a CBI curriculum needs to be based on the content of a subject, use authentic materials, and satisfy the needs of specific groups of students. Instructors are responsible for designing the course content, materials and activities in order to develop not only the knowledge concerning the subject itself but also the L2 competence as well as thinking skills. Researchers point out that it is an effective and realistic teaching method. Lyster (2018) affirms the effectiveness of CBI in improving students' L2 skills and, at the same time, increases their motivation, compared to those students of traditional instructions which focus solely on language. Stoller and Grabe (1997) explain very well the benefits of CBI: "It provides students with meaningful and authentic language input, boosts students' motivation and interest, encourages the development of learning strategies, and increases the flexibility and variety of subject content instructional design. Finally, it fully reflects a learner-centered teaching philosophy"

According to Brinton et al. (2003), CBI can be divided in three principal models:

1. *Theme-based instruction*: This approach focuses principally on L2 instruction. Instructors need to select a theme or topic which could attract or motivate students, for example, those related to their interests or their goals. If this selection process is done in collaboration with the students, it could probably create more sense of commitment to the learning process. After selecting a theme, all contents and activities of language teaching will be designed under that specific theme which acts as a connecting thread. The language instructor is the only person responsible for the course. Theme-based instruction could be applied to just one session or even developed into a whole curriculum. This teaching approach will be successful or not depending greatly on the selection of adequate themes or topics and how materials and activities are designed to match as perfectly as possible with L2 teaching requirements. The objective of this approach is to draw students' attention toward the meaning and try to avoid an overemphasis on form which could put the development of their communicative abilities at risk (Lyster, 2018). Apart from the language competence, Tussa'diah and Nurfadillah (2018) also reveal that this teaching approach "capitalizes on children's interests, creating a sense of purpose and community in the classroom" (p. 355).

2. *Sheltered Instruction*: This model is common in bilingual programs. It allows L2 students to gain access to specialized materials as first language speakers do, but in a more language-accommodated and supportive environment. In content courses, L2 students will study in a separate group with a L2 native teacher who is also a specialist in the material. Therefore, teachers need to pay attention to L2 students' language difficulties apart from the understanding of the content itself. In one content course, two teachers can work together. A teacher who is a content specialist is assisted by another who is a L2 specialist. They can divide a class into several sessions. For example, a language teacher can spend 15-20 minutes at the beginning of the class to review the readings and prepare the students for upcoming topics.
3. *Adjunct Instruction*: This model refers to an instruction in which a content course is paired up with a language course. Instructors from both courses need a close collaboration in order to accomplish their instructional objectives. Normally L2 students learn content courses with native students and attend a separate class for L2 language. The instructor of the language course will design the course with an aim to equip the students with linguistic skills needed for the content course.

Concerning this particular research, all participants are students of "*Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course*". The characteristics of this course agree most with the definition of "Theme-Based Instruction" as the main objective is to teach the Spanish language using content related to beauty pageant as the tool to connect grammar, vocabulary, communication skills as well as cultural content altogether. Therefore, in the stage of course design, the Six-T's approach of Stoller and Grabe (1997) will be taken into consideration. This proposal is comprised of six important aspects: (1) themes (central ideas for organizing curricular units), (2) texts (content resources for planning of unit themes), (3) topics (subunits of content which explore more specific aspects of the theme), (4) threads (linkages across themes), (5) tasks (basic units of instruction), and (6) transitions (planned instruction which provides coherence across topics in a theme and across tasks within topics).

## Motivation in language learning

There are numerous studies which confirm that motivation is a key factor of language learning success. According to the definition of Harmer (1991), motivation is "an internal drive that encourages and drives somebody to do something" (p.3). Arnold Morgan (2015) points out that it is a combination between cognitive aspects (set goals) and affective aspects (mobilize the energy to accomplish those goals). Both attitude and motivation are changeable depending on each situation the learner is facing. Motivation is composed of three elements: 1) the effort which includes internal drive and also the time invested in learning a language, 2) the willingness to use a language efficiently and 3) the affection for learning a language (Gardner, 1985). One of the most cited categorizations for motivation is the one proposed by Gardner and Lambert (1972) who divide motivation into: 1) integrative motivation which refers to motivation derived from the desire to become part of L2 community and 2) instrumental motivation which refers to motivation originated from the need to use L2 as a tool for professional or academic purposes.

For this research, which aims to study how the interest in beauty pageant affects Spanish learning, the categorization of Deci and Ryan (1985) is highlighted. In their "Self-determination theory", motivation is divided in 1) extrinsic motivation or motivation from external factors such as awards, punishments, grades, instructors, courses, class atmosphere 2) intrinsic motivation or motivation derived from personal interest and desire of the learner such as interest incited from the importance of the language or the culture. In fact, there are a variety of factors which can positively or negatively affect students' motivation. Those factors can be summarized into four main ones: 1) atmosphere in the class 2) method of teaching 3) teacher 4) success or ability to reach an appropriate level of challenge (Harmer, 1991). Therefore, teachers play a major role in motivating the students by selecting adequate methods, content and activities as well as creating a favorable learning atmosphere in the classroom and positive relations among learners. Instructors should always keep in mind that motivation is one of the individual affective factors in the learning process of L2 besides anxiety, self-esteem, attitudes and beliefs, learning styles and strategies (Arnold Morgan, 2015) and, by increasing learners' motivation and creating positive attitudes, the level of anxiety is automatically reduced and, in one way, their self-esteem is boosted.

In general, a CBI classroom is normally more intensive than a traditional L2 classroom and that is why students are able to witness their L2 progress more clearly, which could lead to higher motivation as well (Lightbown, 2014). From the literature review of this area, there is a range of research papers with supportive results of implementing CBI, or to be more precise, Theme-based instruction, in foreign language courses. Students' language proficiency is significantly better than those students from a traditional language classroom. For example, a study conducted with a group of Indian students from College of Education in the Salem district, Southern India, confirms that CBI is effective both in developing English language skills and in acquiring new concepts (Arulsevi, 2016). However, apart from the improvement of language proficiency, most studies point out how positively this approach affects students' motivation. Jiang (2017) explains in his study that, by designing the course based on students' interest, content knowledge, and students' varying language proficiencies, students are provided with an educational opportunity to acquire content knowledge and superior level language skills and at the same time learners' motivation in language learning is enhanced. In the study of Tussa'diah and Nurfadillah (2018), the analysis of students' diary notes, the observation sheet and the interview with the English teacher shows students' positive expression and excitement and confirms that they became more motivated in learning narrative texts, which is the objective of the study. In line with previous studies, one conducted by Oliva Parera and Núñez Delgado (2016) having students of a Spanish class in an American university as research participants, also shows the result of higher level of motivation of the experimental group and clearly underlines an intimate relation between their positive attitude in L2 learning and the content related to their Master degrees which are international politics, environment and business. With the study of Chang Wang and Lijuan Zhu (2020) on effects of content-based communicative language teaching in university English writing classes, it is proven that this approach helps reduce writing anxiety and provides broadened thinking, more profound emotion and increased logic. Another research worth mentioning as it is done in the Thai context is the study of Phonhan et al. (2016) who study the effects of Theme-based instruction in the area of second language writing. The results clearly show that Theme-based instruction can reduce English writing apprehension of this group from moderate level to low level. Moreover, it is proved that student's

writing performance has improved after applying this method and at the same time it helped create good attitudes towards writing in English.

Nonetheless, there is still a lack of studies which focus on the effectiveness of using a specific theme derived from learners' recreational or entertainment interest or hobby for the whole course. "*Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course*" is, therefore, considered a pioneer in this aspect and it is worth proving to what extent it positively affects learners' motivation and at the same time convey the learners to a satisfied Spanish proficiency level.

## Methodology

This research has two main objectives: 1) To study whether Theme-based instruction applied in teaching Spanish through beauty pageant contents is an effective model or not and to what extent, 2) To study how Theme-based instruction applied in teaching Spanish through beauty pageant contents affect learners' attitude and motivation in studying Spanish. The following are the details of different aspects related to methodology of this particular study.

## Participants

Although there were 30 students enrolled in the "*Spanish and Beauty Pageant course*" at the beginning, only 22 of them could manage to study throughout the entire course and showed up for the final exam and, therefore, they were considered as research participants. Their ages ranged from 15 to 43 years old with an average age of 30.16 years old. All participants reported Thai language as their mother tongue. In terms of gender diversity in the course, 12 participants identified themselves as women (54.5%), 2 as men (9.1%), and 2 as parts of the LGBTQ+ community (9.1%). However, 6 participants (27.3%) did not report their gender. Moreover, the participants came from diverse career backgrounds, namely, high school students, university students, new reporters and TV hosts, translators, market analysts, publicists, hotel staff, and government officials. They also had differences in the Spanish learning experience and Spanish exposure. In other words, 9 participants (41.9%) had never studied Spanish prior to the course. Meanwhile, the 13 others (59.1%) had already studied Spanish from either Spanish courses in university, language institutions, and tutoring schools, or self-learning. Among those with some background in learning Spanish, 2 participants had their bachelor's degree in Spanish with an average of 4 years in learning the language. On the other hand, the 11 others had an average of 4.5 months.

## Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course: course design, teaching methods, and classroom activities

Since beauty pageants have been popularized and nationalized in a way that students could experience this genre of entertainment show, they tended to understand the role of the beauty queens when using Spanish in representing their countries. They were very enthusiastic to learn and imitate the sounds, the lexical word choices and as well as the Hispanic names and surnames they chose to impersonate. This particular course was established as a pedagogical and learning playground where students can academically learn and enjoy, entertaining themselves with beauty pageant contents



provided by the instructor and, occasionally, exchanged among the students. The course tries to provide its students with an instructionally friendly classroom environment (called Safe Zone to learn Spanish by some of them) and promote integration between Spanish language and beauty pageant culture which is rich in extralinguistic knowledge such as geopolitics, gender, and culture represented by its main agents like those professional beauty queens on stage.

The course lasted 10 weeks or 30 hours in total. The theme-based instruction of 3-hour class was given in four different situational themes and the course concluded with a final exam in the last week. The linguistic and communicative contents align with the standard set by the European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for A1 level. This is to ensure that when students bring language into use, they can profit and enjoy the degree of practicality in diverse communicative situations such as creating family narratives, physical description of the individual and personality they are interested in. The thematic and situational contents were organized as follows.

Week 1-2: *'En contacto con el Español orientado al Certamen de Bellezá* (In touch with Spanish oriented to Beauty Pageant). During the first two weeks, the selected topic allowed students to have their first contact with this particular Spanish course. Icebreaking activity was set in the scenario of Miss Universe role play where students could impersonate beauty queen representatives of each Hispanic country. In order to achieve the class objectives that focus on the basic phonetic and sound system of Spanish, students were allowed to explore and expose themselves to the class materials, observing and paying attention to verbal form of communication and pragmaticism such as voice, sound, external points of articulation (such as lips) of the Spanish speaking beauty queens. They were allowed to relish the content of Miss Universe self-introduction round but simultaneously encouraged to pay attention to the sounds, points of articulation and sociolinguistic elements expressed by the agents (Latin American contestants) of Miss Universe pageant, especially when these ladies were pronouncing the name of each Hispanic country.

Week 3-6: *'Información personal ¿Quién soy yo?'* ( Personal information. Who am I?) and *'El perfil, la moda y la gente que me apoya'* (My profile, fashion style and people who support me). In the third and fourth weeks, grammatical resources such as verb conjugation of some basic verbs for self-introduction were introduced to students so that they were well equipped to create a beauty pageant-oriented task. For example, students would be assigned to work on a creative activity in creating their profile, style of fashion or the so-called *look book*. Prior to this learning-motivated activity, students were equipped with family and relative vocabulary, clothing items, hairs and makeups, pantones of colors and the grammatical resources like possessive adjectives as well. Grammatical gender and linguistic register were also mentioned as part of interesting characteristics of Spanish language, the national identity that is worth mentioning. In this very assignment, students were also introduced to the world of fashion or *la moda* and traditional costume culture of the Hispanic world. The instructor used his personal academic interests in the field of woman studies and gender to give an extra lecture entitled *A Look at Latin American Women's Presence in the Media towards a New Horizon to Learn Spanish* introducing some theoretical concepts such as 'language of representation' or some basic theories in gender study to enrich the class learning experience and broaden student's horizon of the topic.

Week 7-9: *Un recorrido por la ciudad de los anfitriones* (A city tour in our host countries) and *Yo me comería todo en el UNIVERSO* (I would eat everything in the universe). The last three weeks of the course were dedicated to greater spheres by which students might found

themselves surrounded, for example, accommodation, household, public places, town or city, which allowed students to gain urban perspectives and their surroundings in Hispanic contexts. These two topics are related to the contents of beauty pageants when the pageant like Miss Universe always showcases the host country and its gastronomy. Lexical and grammatical resources such as those of household parts, public places, and food are provided. Adverbs of place, communicative template sentences of direction and locating places are also present here. The instructor considered these two topics as a great opportunity to incorporate the urban, touristic and gastronomical aspects of the Hispanic world into the class. Not only that of the Hispanic world, but students were also encouraged to use Spanish to express their own Thai cultural identity by creating choices and flexibility when it comes to class assignments and extra lectures. In the assignment of these two topics students were assigned to create their own guidebooks and life-style magazines in which they could select and edit information regarding the two topics themselves. They were mentored and guided by the instructor to work in a basic editorial way. It turned out that students were very much enthusiastic and productive when experimenting with the task.

## Research Instruments

In order to accomplish the objectives of this research, two research instruments were used, each one to serve each objective. On the one hand, an online questionnaire was the most adequate and practical tool for collecting quantitative data related to learners' attitude and motivation, especially during this pandemic period. A set of well elaborated items in the questionnaire could help answer the research questions while the participants could also maintain their anonymity. On the other hand, the instrument which helped to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruction in terms of learners' Spanish proficiency was an exam at the end of the course.

## Questionnaire

The questionnaire was elaborated with Google Form and sent to the participants via e-mail. Most of the items were checklist, 5-point Likert-scale and rank order with an aim to facilitate at most the task of filling the form. However, there were some blank spaces offered in case the participants would like to express more details about any specific item. The questionnaire was divided mainly in 6 parts: 1) personal information 2) previous knowledge of Spanish language and Hispanic culture 3) interest in Spanish language, Spanish speaking countries and this particular course 4) previous attitude towards Spanish language, Hispanic culture and Hispanic people comparing to after studying this course 5) motivating factors during the course 6) overall evaluation of the course.

The personal information part was designed to see the general characteristics of our research participants. The information collected would portray more clearly the profile of those interested in this type of theme-based course designed to satisfy a specific interest related to entertainment. Their previous knowledge of Spanish was also vital for the analysis of linguistic and communicative competence at the end of the course. In relation to attitude and motivation, there were altogether three items in this questionnaire. The first item was designed to seek top reasons which made the participants enroll in this course. This data would help us to identify whether their motivation is mainly intrinsic or extrinsic and whether they are closely related to Theme-based Instruction or not. Following, participants were required to specify in which level, rank-

ing from 1 to 5, is their attitude towards three main aspects, comparing before and after this course: 1) Spanish language (its importance, usefulness, difficulty, etc.) 2) Hispanic people (images, stereotypes, lifestyles, behaviors, etc.) and 3) Hispanic culture (identity, uniqueness, history, liveliness, etc.).

The next section was designed to find out which factors impact positively on learners' motivation for the entire duration of the course. From eleven choices offered, participants needed to select one up to five factors which motivate them most and then they needed to specify the degree of impact of each selected factor, ranging from 1 to 5 in the scale. Moreover, there were blank spaces for them to add more factors or to explain details of selected factors. These open-ended comments would become valuable for the analysis as they could contribute more concrete details of these motivating factors.

In the final part, participants were requested to identify the degree of satisfaction, ranging from 1 to 5, towards the course in various aspects, including accomplishment in developing Spanish competence, knowledge related to Hispanic culture, content of the course, instructor, teaching methods, teaching materials. The questionnaire ended with an open-ended optional question for the participants to fill in their impression about this course in case there were some aspects not covered previously.

Prior to handing out the questionnaire to the participants, it had been submitted to two evaluators specialized in applied linguistics and then some points were amended as suggested by them. This research project was approved also by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

## Spanish proficiency test

The final exam of the course was the main tool used to evaluate Spanish competence of the learners. The categories and situations designated in the exam were similar with those assignments the students had been familiarized with while conducting the thematic classroom activity such as self-introduction filming, short essays and role play writing; dialogues and conversation writing or even basic translation in which reading for comprehension is part of it. In general, the test was an adaptation from the book ¡Dale al DELE! for A1 level from Enclave Editorial (Spain). This book is a compilation of samples of DELE exam –*Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera*– a standardized Spanish proficiency test with most recognition offered by Instituto Cervantes. For this research, the final exam included only three communicative skills: listening, reading and writing. The exam followed closely the model of DELE exams in terms of topics, task types, questions used. However, some details were adapted to suit beauty pageant theme. For example, the writing part was divided into two sections. Firstly, students needed to write a short essay introducing oneself as a candidate of Miss Universe 2021 in order to impress the judges and Miss Universe organization and, for the second part, as Miss Thailand they needed to write short answers about the country such as the national costume, Thai food and tourist attractions. Although the audio of the listening part was taken from ¡Dale al DELE!, the instruction was slightly modified as follows: “*You are going to listen to Angela Ponce, the first transgender woman who participated in Miss Universe 2018 in Thailand....*”. Even though the speaking skill was not included in the final exam, it is also evaluated through class assignments according to the same criteria proposed in CEFR and used for DELE exam: coherence, fluency, accuracy and range.

# Results

## Questionnaire

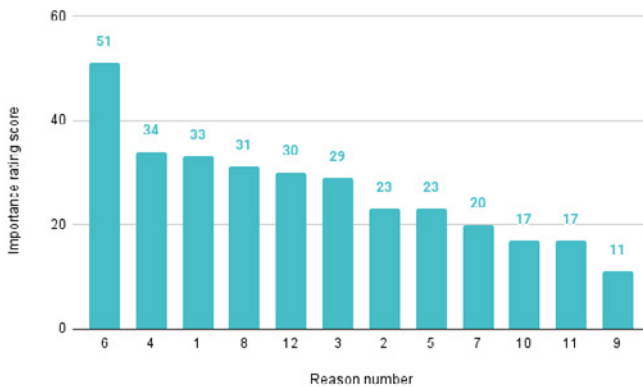
The results of the questionnaire about learners' motivation and attitudes were divided into 4 parts: 1) interest in Spanish language, Spanish-speaking countries and this particular course 2) previous attitude towards Spanish language, Hispanic culture and Hispanic population comparing to after studying this course 3) motivating factors throughout the course 4) overall evaluation of the course.

## Interest in Spanish language, Spanish-speaking countries, and this particular course

The survey revealed that entertainment media (68.2%) is the main medium used by students of "Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course" to follow up the Hispanic world, while political, social, and economic media ranks second (40.9%). This data interestingly demonstrated a correlation between learners' interest in beauty pageants as a form of entertainment and their interest in learning Spanish language. In addition, the research found that the participants' top five reasons for choosing this particular course were the interest in Spanish language, interesting course content, the interest in beauty pageants, the interest in Hispanic cultures, and the instructor, respectively. The reasons provided were: 1) interest in beauty pageants; 2) interest in/having followed beauty queens from Spanish speaking countries; 3) interest in/ having followed Spanish media: music, movies, shows, and series; 4) interesting content of Spanish and Beauty Pageant course; 5) Spanish as an internationally important language; 6) interest in leaning Spanish language; 7) interest in new ways of learning languages; 8) interest in Hispanic cultures; 9) benefits for current education and career; 10) benefits for education and career in the future; 11) planning to travel to Spanish speaking countries; 12) instructor.

Figure 1

*Ranking of the reasons for which Thai learners of Spanish chose Spanish and Beauty Pageant course*



## Previous attitude towards Spanish language, Hispanic culture, and Hispanic population compared to after studying this course

The research revealed that, overall, learners' attitude of this course towards Spanish language and Hispanic population and cultures significantly improved by the end of the course. That is to say, after the course, there was a significantly increasing number of learners reporting each aspect of the aforementioned attitudes to be positive to very positive (level 4 = positive, level 5 = very positive). On the contrary, there was a clear drop in those reporting themselves having negative to very negative attitudes (level 1 = very negative, level 2 = negative).

Figure 2

*Attitudes towards Spanish language*

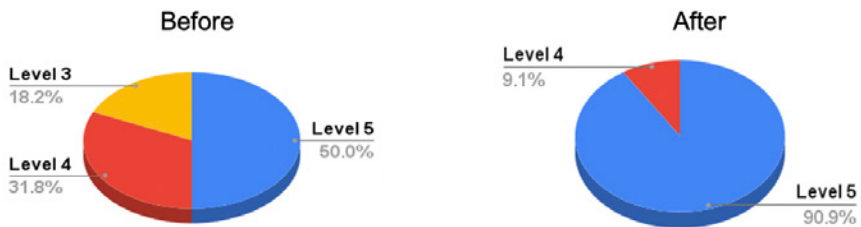


Figure 3

*Attitudes towards Hispanic population*

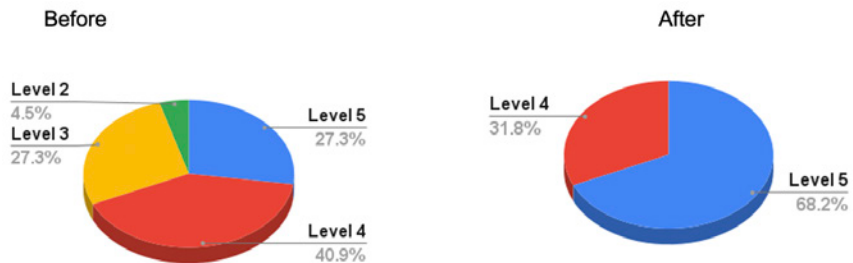
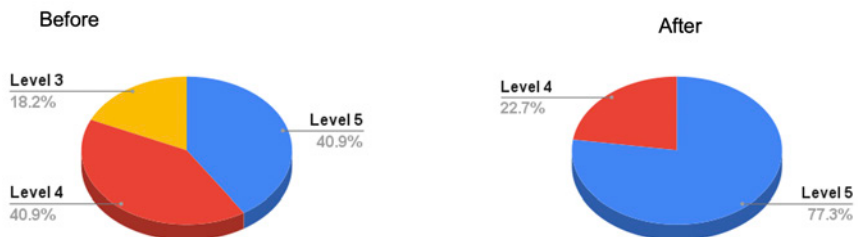


Figure 4

*Attitudes towards Hispanic cultures*



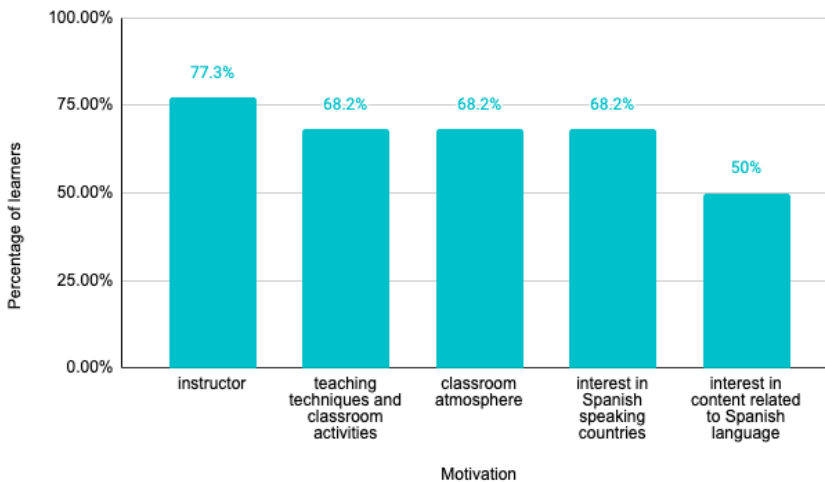
## Motivating factors throughout the course

According to the survey, the most influential motivating factor which 77.3% had chosen was the instructor, followed by teaching methods, classroom activities, and class atmosphere, with 68.2%. The learners further explained that the instructor demonstrated a strong passion for the sociocultural content related to beauty pageants and beauty queens, particularly, in Spanish speaking countries. The majority stated that the instructor always added interesting social and cultural facts which were the knowledge he gained from his working experience in beauty pageant industries and his own research. That is to say, the interests of the learners and the instructor were matched. Thus, this was deemed by the learners as a motivation to learn Spanish.

In addition to the opinions on the instructor, the learners acknowledged that the method of teaching Spanish based on the context of the beauty pageants was innovative and effective considering that the goal of language learning was clear and concrete. In other words, it was learning Spanish in order to understand the language of their favorite beauty queens. Another important motivation was the variety of classroom activities and exercises related to the beauty pageant. This helped students boost the sense of belonging and self-expression in the class, which resulted in a friendly learning atmosphere. Meanwhile, over 50% of learners had also deemed the content relating to the Spanish language as their motivation. They wanted to improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills so that they could understand and create the content in Spanish language, specifically related to entertainment media, beauty pageant, and etc.

Figure 5

*Learners' top five motivating factors throughout the course*



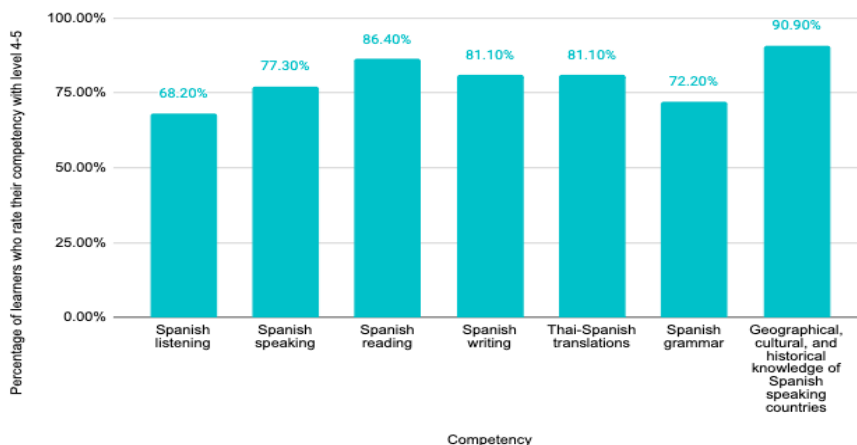
## Overall evaluation of the course

Overall, the learners in this course reported their improvement in Spanish language and course satisfaction to be *improved to greatly improved* and *satisfied to very satisfied*

(level 4-5), respectively. To clarify, more than 50% of learners rated themselves with the level 4-5 in various aspects of Spanish competence and sociocultural knowledge: listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, grammar, and geographical, cultural, and historical knowledge of Spanish speaking countries.

**Figure 6**

*Percentage of learners who rated their Spanish competence and knowledge of various aspects of Spanish speaking countries at the level 4-5*



In terms of course satisfaction, up to 90.9% of students reported being very impressed by the instructor. Meanwhile, 81.8% were very impressed by the course content and teaching techniques. Also, 68.2% were very impressed by class materials. Importantly, 95.5% informed that this course truly met their expectations. The learners further commented that the instructor's strong passion for the sociocultural context of beauty pageants had motivated them to learn Spanish. Apart from the teaching role, the instructor also portrayed himself as an encouraging pageant coach and mentor, corresponding to the theme and content of the course. Consequently, the class ambiance was not too academically stressful. Moreover, classroom activities, exercises, and class materials were based on the beauty pageant theme, which matched the learners' interests. According to learners' comments, this led to their enjoyment, high class participation, and less anxiety about committing mistakes.

## Spanish proficiency test

The following is the result of the Spanish proficiency test which is also a final exam for "Spanish course oriented to beauty pageant contents". These scores are of those 22 participants of this particular research. In order to analyze the exam results, it is important to take into account the fact that almost 60% (13 participants) have a previous knowledge of Spanish although their average period in studying this language prior to this course is only 4.5 months.

**Table 1***Percentage of final exam scores*

Score Skill	Average	Highest	Lowest
Writing skill	92.26%	100%	86%
Reading skill	94.76%	100%	80%
Listening skill	76%	96%	52%

In general, the exam scores turned out to be impressive. It is true that a certain level of familiarity with the Spanish language might be a great help for those who did study the language previously. However, it is undeniable that the lowest scores of all skills, except listening skill, are more than satisfactory. Regarding the writing test result, the average point reached as high as 92.28% while reading comprehension was at 94.76%. The exam was wrapped up with the listening part which showed the lowest average point at 88.83%. When reflecting and analyzing the test results it is found that the reasons why the students' writing and reading skills are impressively well performed can be based on their class experience and experiment that allowed them to gain familiarity with the use of the language. The person with the highest score in writing (100%) graduated as a Spanish major in 2012, or nearly 10 years ago. However, this score does not really affect the average as in general students did obtain good marks and the lowest is 80% which is considered indeed a high score. From the test result the writing exam part 1 in which students are instructed to create narratives about their personal stories and profiles, impersonating and playing a role of their ideal beauty queens, the findings show that in general the score in this part a bit lower than the second part of writing due to the fact that the later required only short comprehensive answers while the first part focused more on storytelling and narratives that require more accuracy and proficiency of the language used. It is the part where grammatical errors like tense, collocation, and cognates (false friends) and alien linguistic structures, primarily the so-called anglicisms and direct literal translation from Thai structure can be found. However, the majority of the students could surpass the minimum amount of 8 meaning full sentences required to be written in this part. The instructor and examiner intentionally established this instruction to ensure that the examinees in the end were able to deliver the fundamental sentences normally used in the scenario.

In the reading comprehension test, the students' comprehensibility was evaluated via a cultural text that was similar to those used in the class in the thematic situation text designated by the instructor. The performance of the examinees in this particular part turned out to be at 23.69 points or 94.76% and eight students got all correct answers. This result agrees with the study of Srivoranart (2011), conducted with Thai students majoring in Spanish, which demonstrates that reading skill showed the greatest progress and was also the only skill that most of Thai students could reach B2 level when they were about to graduate. Listening is the skill that the students in this course lack proficiency at most. The figure that appears as the average points is 76% only which is significantly lower than other skills evaluated and even three participants got lower



than 60% which is set as a minimum pass score for DELE exam. This reflects that this skill is a time-consuming learning skill and the students in this course must work hard on the skill development. Each score level may imply and feature an individual development pattern of language learning due to different learner strategies and self-motivation gained before and during the course by the examinees. Some students, more or less, had been familiarized with the Spanish sound system prior joining the course while some found themselves struggling when listening to the long conversation even though it belongs to A1 level of DELE. All of these findings being analyzed here eventually can imply that in the future the course designer and instructor may have to create the skill balance among the four main skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing for the more effective learning and better impact.

Regarding the evaluation of the oral expression, the instructor set it apart from the exam due to the limitation in the availability of time and convenience between the examiner and examinees. Classroom assignments were used instead to evaluate students' speaking skill and oral proficiency based on the coherence, fluency, accuracy and range. Along the course, the instructor also put emphasis on the articulation of the sound that the students may produce with difficulty while conducting some oral interpretation and conversational roleplay. Audiovisual materials with 'teletext or videotext' that correspond with the A1 level were provided to the students so that they could listen and read while enjoying the content. Mainly three class assignments, 'Mi perfil' (My profile), 'mi canción favorita' (My favorite song), 'Mi primer día en el concurso' (My first day in the contest), were used for the evaluation of oral proficiency and comprehensibility. When looking at the *range* gained by the students, students tend to be able to have enough language; vocabulary, grammatical resources to express him/herself even though with some grammatical errors, collocation and word choice on the designated topics such as in the video presentation of self-introduction, greeting conversation used in one of the roleplay activities during the course as demonstrated in the following dialogue below.

A: ¡Hola **mi compi nueva!** Soy Amanda Chalisa Obdam de Tailandia. ¿Cómo te llamas?

B: ¡Hola Amanda! Llámame Estefanía. Soy puertorriqueña, pero vivo en Países Bajos. Encantada

A: Encantada. ¡Adelante!

B: Pues, la cama **cerca la** puerta está UN POCO desordenada.

A: Tengo 17 maletas y voy a **desempacar**. ¿Te parece bien si **lo** tomo? ¿Qué cama quieres?

B: ¡No te preocupes! Hay **muchos espacios cerca** la ventana también para mis maletas. Además, sueño mejor cuando dormir lejos de la puerta.

In terms of fluency and accuracy, during the oral activity filmed in the format of the videoclips, students were allowed to prepare the scripts and rehearse so it is logical that they could keep going comprehensively, even though for grammatical and lexical accuracy they may fail easily at this point. Repair and repeat are clearly evident, especially in longer sentences. Moreover, when the students had to deal with the *impromptu* question that may go beyond the basic template sentences taught in the level, they were found struggling to answer especially in the classroom when the instructor had to conduct code-switching and immediate translation to facilitate the better understanding of the students. This is because the student could not catch and understand some particular words used in the statement or speech in the session. One remarkable oral activity that could serve as a springboard for the students to practice and gain

more articulation is the roleplay activities. The instructor would assign the students a task that would allow them to cling with the conversational language required by the level and encourage them to correct and improve their pronunciation. Oral interpretation techniques via singing and news reading were applied from time to time to the class so that the student could realize the relevance of phonetics. Last but not least, *coherence* was also taken into consideration as well when it comes to the oral evaluation. The students could link a series of simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points when creating a conversation or speaking scripts that they were normally allowed to prepare in advance before filming or appearing in front of their laptop or PC camera as shown in the excerpt below.

A: ¿Qué quieres ser de mayor?

B: Quiero ser guía ¿y tú?

B: Quiero ser pintora pero ahora quiero ser miss universo.

A: Yo también. ¿Quién miss universo te gusta más?

B: Me gusta Catriona Gray. Ella es muy guapa y lista. ¿Y a ti?

A: A mí también, me encanta Catriona Gray.

B: ¿Qué te gusta hacer?

A: Me encanta viajar en mi país porque mi país tiene mucha naturaleza hermosa ¿y a ti?

B: Me gusta ir a la playa y comer.

A: Mi país tiene muchas playas hermosas. Si tú tienes tiempo libre, puedes viajar a mi país.

B: Sí, seguro.

A: ¿Qué comida te gusta?

B: Me gusta la comida española. ¿Y a ti?

A: A mí también, pero prefiero la comida tailandesa.

B: Vale, hasta luego.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Since the terrain of foreign language teaching has always encountered challenges, numerous innovative methods and approaches have constantly been proposed. In this difficult time of the Covid 19 pandemic, most of the classes, including language classes, have to switch themselves to online platforms where traditional teaching does not seem to be an effective solution. Theme-based instruction is chosen to be the core of this research as it permits a great combination between language teaching and contents related to learners' interests, which could be a favorable way to attract students' attention through the whole course, no matter if it is online or not. The profile of students enrolled in "*Spanish and Beauty Pageant Course*" allows us to understand more clearly the target group for courses with similar characteristics and, in this case, a high diversity in terms of ages and professions can be witnessed. This is proof that a language course based on an entertainment theme could greatly build up a group of learners with mutual interest and hobby despite their individual differences. In this case, the interest in course content oriented to beauty pageants and the interest in beauty pageants are top reasons for which they decided to enroll in the course, apart from the willingness to learn Spanish language. This common intrinsic motivation plays a crucial role in creating empathy among them. For example, students of this course constantly exchange knowledge and tips related to Spanish learning and also

beauty pageant news and updates through the course's *line* group, which certainly highlights their enthusiastic participation in the learning process.

Consequently, the results of this research confirm the vital role played by Theme-based instruction in enhancing favorable learning atmosphere, increasing positive attitude towards Spanish as well as Hispanic culture and people, and motivating the students. By comparing students' attitude towards Spanish language, Hispanic Culture and Hispanic people before and after the course, the difference is dramatic. By the end of the course, everyone displays a positive or very positive attitude. Concerning motivating factors, the instructor turns out to be the factor which motivated them most during the whole course as they could feel the instructor's passion for the material and his effort in providing them with sociocultural content related to beauty pageant in Hispanic countries as well as other interesting cultural facts and anecdotes. This information also connects with the following most motivating factors –teaching methods, classroom activities and class atmosphere– as students considered this theme-based instruction as innovative and effective and the instructor did a great job in engaging students in classroom activities related to the world of beauty queens. In other words, their intrinsic motivation or their interest in beauty pageant is enhanced by external factors like the instructor, teaching techniques and class atmosphere which afterwards turned into extrinsic motivation which nurtured them all along the course. Moreover, this friendly atmosphere places emphasis on cooperation instead of competition which could reduce a certain level of anxiety while facing a new language and, as a result, increase students' sense of belonging and self-esteem. In other words, this course prioritized the importance of the affective domain in L2 learning and did finally prove its significant role.

In relation to the effectiveness of this approach in increasing learners' Spanish proficiency, this study underlines that it really could lead the students' proficiency to a very satisfied level in almost every skill. Interestingly, the questionnaire revealed that at the end of the course the learners were satisfied with their language improvement and sociocultural knowledge. Regarding the final exam results, the average score of three different parts is 92.2% for writing, 94.76% for reading and 88.83% for listening consecutively, although three students could not manage to pass 60% in listening skill. These exam results coincide with self-evaluation asked in the questionnaire. Regarding linguistic and communicative competence, participants considered that reading skill was the one with most notable improvement and command while listening skill presented the most difficulties. As for speaking skill, evaluated through class assignments, students seemed to have enough linguistic resources to express themselves although some grammatical and lexical errors were detected and many still struggled when facing unfamiliar words or structures. Nonetheless, geographical, cultural and historical knowledge of Spanish speaking countries seems to generate the most impression among the students, affirming the need to integrate sociocultural content as part of a foreign language course.

In conclusion, this research evidences the importance of the four motivating factors proposed by Harmer (1991). Class atmosphere, teaching method, instructor and ability to reach an appropriate L2 level of challenge are obviously reflected in the research results. Above all, theme-based instruction has proved itself to be a very promising approach for L2 teaching during this disruptive time and could be used not only to potentialize the L2 instruction, but also to facilitate the cultural knowledge of that particular language. For example, in the future, when considering the rise of popular culture, this cultural and social phenomenon can be experimented on and applied

by L2 instructors to motivate students to learn and acquire linguistic proficiency and accuracy as well as the appreciation of contemporary global and local culture. In a nutshell, any entertainment contents or genres that are on the rise and have become the interest of learners are highly recommended to be taken into consideration and applied for the said theme-based instruction. Hopefully, this research could shed light on more innovative proposals for L2 courses, considering learners' intrinsic motivation as the essence of the course design.

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