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**Addressing Attitudes of Anxiety and Inferiority  
Among English Language Learners in Mexico**

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Dissertation submitted as part of the requirements for the MA in TESOL

I certify that all the material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred upon me.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Arias Sais', is positioned above a horizontal line. The signature is written in a cursive style with some capital letters.

Guillermina Arias Sais

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is a micro-ethnography study that examines students' attitudes and feelings towards English in a private university in the west of Mexico. It also investigates the connections between the socio-cultural context and the attitudes the students hold. It is an attempt to better understand all the possible origins of their negative attitudes and anxiety regarding the process of learning English as a foreign language. I assume that teachers and students need to be more aware of the context and the specific needs of a historical-cultural background. I examine this context using a developmental research sequence (DRS) of ethnography research proposed by Spradley's (1979, 1980). As a conclusion, I argue that if teaching EFL in Mexico pretends to respond to specific context-bound needs, teachers need to adapt their teaching practice and the textbooks as a way to contextualize or even better "Mexicanize" the process of learning English as a foreign language.

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## CHAPTER 1 Introduction

The focus of this critical ethnography is an attempt to understand an overlapping Mexican context of attitudes, feelings, cultural identity, and social relationships of power in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL). The link between foreign language learning and socio-historical heritage is complex, dynamic and intriguing. There are specific interwoven circumstances in Mexico that have an influence on students' linguistic perceptions, like the historical fact that the Spaniards conquered Mexicans in 1492 and the implications this event carries for national identity. Implications might include a wide range of prevailing feelings such as oppression, inferiority, imposition, and domination. The complex cultural and economic linkage of Mexico with the USA along history is another factor that influences how Mexican students perceive English. Our neighbour country represents economic wealth, modernity, technology and education, but it also represents migration, the country where Mexicans go in search of a better life and where they receive unfair treatment and low salaries. This socio-historical context, which might be conscious or unconscious, influences how Mexican students feel when they have to learn English (Despaigne, 2013:176). On one hand, "learning and using a language is at its core a broad interactive process founded on complex relationships with others and with another culture" (Arnold & Brown, 1999 in Logan, 2005:41). That is, English language learning represents the relationship between Mexican culture and American culture, as mentioned before. On the other hand, "the process of globalization seems to be accompanied by a rediscovery and revitalization of the past and a pre-modern sense of community, of deeply emotional and atavistic patriotic feelings towards one's nation" (Wodak, 1999:170). This is, complex ideas and emotional attitudes that I assume Mexicans share about a common past, which are reflected in the attitudes towards English language learning. This complexity encompasses a feeling of superiority implied in the power English language represents: a tool for accessing information, better job positions and the hope of a better life, among others. The counterpart is a negative feeling "towards English-speaking cultures and the language associated with them to be expressed as an unwillingness to learn English"

(Canagarajah 1999, in Lethaby, 2006:51), a feeling of inferiority implicit in the language learner, a feeling of oppression, a feeling of being conquered again. It is precisely in the light cast by this specific socio-historical context that this research will be grounded.

The research will be organized in five chapters. Chapter one introduces the purpose and concerns of the research, its background and justification. Chapter two is a review of the current literature on the theoretical frameworks that will be the basis of this paper. Chapter three describes the qualitative approach framework and the methodology used in this ethnographic research, whose main goal is “to provide a thick description of the target culture, describing the daily life of Mexican EFL community of learners in a western university as well as the cultural meanings and beliefs the participants attach to their activities, events, and behaviours” (Dörnyei, 2007:130). It examines the context and describes the phases and instruments of the research: purposeful conversations, participant observation and in-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviewing. This chapter also details the how the analysis was carried out. Chapter four examines and discusses the findings implications for practice and chapter five offers conclusions.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The emphasis of this research is to gain insight into the local context of Mexican students of English as a foreign language in a private university in the west of Mexico, to better understand their identities, attitudes and feelings towards English. Better understanding of my teaching context might lead to further change my teaching approaches to match my students' needs. It might open a possibility in the future to integrate the research findings to the curriculum; as Clemente (2006:15) states, to “Mexicanize” the leaning and the use of English in a creative and affective way; or as Canagarajah (in Lethaby, 2006:51) proposes: to ‘*appropriate*’ English language, so that learners “use the language in their own terms according to their own aspirations, needs and values” and even “celebrating” the Mexican learners` context.

In this study, attention will be paid to analysing learners' language learning experiences from the perspective of their socio-historical worlds. Since the aims of this exploratory research is to provide a genuine space for Mexican EFL students in this western university, to reveal their identities, fears and concerns regarding EFL, giving them voice and power, the theoretical foundation of the research will be grounded in critical ethnography, which adopts "a complex theoretical orientation toward culture" (TESOL Quarterly). Critical ethnography is situated in its social context, while considering how human relationships and communities shape knowledge. In the context of this ethnography, it implies considering the power English language entails in connection to Mexican culture and its relationships with its neighbour country and our historical past.

## 1.2 Background

This critical ethnographic study is the result of my concerns about a previous research instrument - a focus group (FG) - I carried out as part of the requirements for this MA in TESOL (Arias, 2011). Judging from previously gathered information, there seemed to be a salient feature of anxiety and even fear to perform in English. This anxiety amongst participants in the FG study was manifested as "fear" to speak in English, "fear" to be judged, and "fear" to commit mistakes (Arias, 2011). There were - and there are - students that literally express anxiety and fear to use English in the classroom, fear of not understanding all language input and fear of negative evaluation and low self-confidence. Besides stating anxiety, students display some of its symptoms through behaviours such as evading participation in class and in communicative activities, assignments and classwork procrastination, unwillingness to use the target language, indifference, constant code-switching, nervousness and shyness during oral presentations and in general.

Anxiety clearly exhibited in the behaviours described above can be considered detrimental for their language learning, since it prevents them from affording language practice and optimal learning conditions. What determines this learners' anxiety towards language learning? What makes this anxiety displayed in my context different from other contexts? Little and Singleton

(1990, in Ellis 2008) found that past experience in education plays a major role in shaping attitudes to language learning, nevertheless I think that cultural and historical past play a role too. As Ellis (2008) suggests, beliefs and attitudes might be culturally determined and I assume it is precisely the specific cultural context I am exploring, what makes Mexicans susceptible to anxiety and fear.

Researchers as Horwitz have investigated foreign language anxiety (Horwitz *et al*, 1986). They state that when learning a foreign language, any performance in the foreign language will be “evaluated according to uncertain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards,” which “is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept” (Horwitz *et al*, 1986:128). Those socio-cultural standards and relationships among languages, which in this case are Spanish and English, and the people who speak them, namely Mexicans and Americans, are precisely the focus of this paper: what could be the origins of a feeling of anxiety and even fear to perform in English that students in this western university have? Insights gained through beliefs and anxiety research may fail to reflect classroom realities in a Mexican context, which encompasses a unique history and a specific geographical situation. Therefore, research on the roots of anxiety in a Mexican context merits investigation.

### **1.3 Micro-context**

The Programa Certificado de Inglés (PCI) in the university where the study was carried out is a four-skill programme created to reach the international B2 standards of The Common European Framework, providing graduates with a standardized command of English. The programme is designed to promote practice in the four language skills (oral, writing, reading and listening), besides grammar in use.

### **1.4 Macro-context**

On a macro point of view, Mexico’s geographical, historical, economical and political situation influences the English learning processes of Mexican students (Despagne, 2010:58). Mexico was colonized by Spain and Mexican indigenous were dominated in many aspects. Language was one of them. This domination created many feelings, like oppression, imposition and inferiority that still remain



in Mexican culture. If Mexicans still feel that Spanish is a language that was imposed during the colony, in the same vein “the English language is deeply interwoven with the discourse of colonialism” (Pennycook 1998, in Despagne, 2010:67) and Mexicans might feel that English language is also an imposition. All these perceptions towards English that Mexican learners hold and “because of the value of this language and a particular Mexican ethno linguistic reality, Mexicans have different feelings in relation to English, which in turn influence their language learning process” (Despagne, 2010:65).

“English in Mexico, like anywhere else, cannot be detached from its... context” (Despagne, 2013:48). Precisely because English is connected to our neighbour, the U.S., it represents what Philipson (1992, in Despagne 2013:49) calls linguistic imperialism and “a key to positions of power and prestige” (Pennycook in Lethaby, 2006:52). Its effects in the Mexican context can be clearly observed in:

- Educational contexts
- Media
- Economy
- Business trade
- Politics
- Social status
- Tourism and travel
- Migration
- Internationalization

### **1.5 Research Concerns**

In order to further examine the nature of attitudes Mexican learners hold and to explore what determines anxiety in the foreign language context, this study addressed the following research concerns:

- a) Do Mexican learners hold beliefs and attitudes towards English, which might negatively affect their learning experience?
  
- b) What are the origins of the feeling of anxiety and fear that Mexican learners report?

## 1.6 Justification for the research

I was drawn towards this topic because of the following personal and professional connections:

a) “Language learning is fully situated within a given cultural context”, argues Oxford (1996b, in Dörnyei 2005:171), where “various cultural beliefs, perceptions, and values” play a significant role. There are studies from various cultures in the literature, but a few studies referring to the Mexican culture and less specifically referring to the micro-context I intend to study.

b) In order to be able to modify my teaching practice, through activities where students can be made aware of the origins of foreign language anxiety and inferiority and in that way, to be able to suggest how negative attitudes could be counteracted.

c) Since language learning attitudes and beliefs towards English might be unconscious, I am interested in investigating what kind of beliefs about learning English Mexican students possess and particularly the ones related to a possible detrimental of the process, in order to better understand students and as teachers help them to overcome this unfavourable situation.

## CHAPTER 2 Literature Review

To guide the design and to better understand the phenomenon that I intend to analyse, I will examine four main points rooted in the existing literature: First, I will briefly describe the context to be researched relating it to theoretical frameworks and theories in the literature. Afterwards, I will talk about the construct of identity and its implications in EFL. Next, I will talk about Mexican culture in the light of Hofstede's and Trompenaar's cultural dimensions, and finally, I will bring up some aspects regarding beliefs and attitudes that have an influence on language learning.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The starting point for this chapter is the situation I try to research that as I have previously described in Chapter 1, is tied to a complex Mexican context of attitudes, feelings, cultural identity, and social relationships of power in the field of English as a foreign language (EFL). As Norton Pierce (1995b:569-572) claims of critical research, the questions, assumptions, procedures, methods, and approaches used to carry out this research project aim to investigate the complex relationship between the social structure that prevails in Mexican Culture and agency that Mexicans possess, providing the basis for a change in my professional context. Agency is a construct that Emirbayer & Mische (1998:170) describe as "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past, oriented toward the future and acted out in the present." My assumptions are that Mexican university students' "past, present, and future socio-historical positions are reflected" (Ariza & Coady, 2010:12) in the dynamic interactions of foreign language learning, because the concerns posed by this research come from these social meanings and social relationships of power. The focus of this ethnography is precisely the historical past of Mexicans, a past of conquest, invasion and oppression, the reality of the present Mexicans live in relation to a globalized world, and the future Mexicans envision through the acquisition of English language.

Ethnography views language “as a medium through which interlocutors struggle to create meaning through dialogue” says Bakhtin (1981, in Ariza & Coady, 2010:12) and Spradley (1979:17) comments that it is “more than a means of communication about reality: it is a tool for constructing reality.” Therefore, I intend to discover the cultural reality in a micro-context of Mexican English language learners, through language, through the way they talk and in their own terms. By doing so, I strongly believe I am giving them voice and the empowerment needed to transform the possible sources of oppression into positive attitudes towards English language acquisition. When I talk about voice, I make reference to Bakhtin’s notion (1988, in Norton 1997:421), who sees it as a “*speaking consciousness*” related to “the language of others, from previous contexts and oriented towards some future response.” This is, the Mexican identity students in this ethnography might have in the present, in connection to their historical past and to the future identity they might acquire by learning English.

Another perspective taken into account is sociocultural theory, which makes a “general reference to social and cultural contexts of human activity” (Lantolf, 2006:2). The social dimension is significant in our case, since “language and culture function together... to form a social subject, whose self-hood is not unitary but is constantly being created and re-created in negotiation with the social world outside itself” (Granger 2004, in Méndez, 2011:27). In terms of this research this is, language or in this case foreign language learning, works in conjunction with creating a cultural identity, which is a dynamic process that encompasses the social world and a Mexican cultural context.

## 2.2 Research on Identity

Language is closely related to the construction of identity. Along literature, there are many authors who work with the construct of identity under different perspectives. Here I will comment on some of them.

Norton-Pierce (1997:409-410) has explored different ways theorists frame identity. Drawing upon her understanding, she views language, identity

construction and negotiation, as a complex and intriguing relationship, constantly organizing and reorganizing and in relation to the social world. She uses the term identity, to refer to how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future (Norton Pierce, 1997:410). The ideas of Zea and Ramos (1952; 2002, in Hurtado 2011) correspond with Norton's concept of identity and along with them I believe that students in the context I am examining construct their identities understanding their present, who they are as Mexicans, in relation to the world; in this case, our relation to our neighbour country and consequently the English language. This identity is also constructed throughout historical awareness: who Mexicans were in the past; and a link to the future: who they want to be in a globalized world.

Norton-Pierce (1997:420) makes a distinction between social and cultural identity, where the former "refers to the relationship between the individual and the larger social world, as mediated through institutions such as families, schools, workplaces, social services, and law courts," and the latter refers "to the relationship between individuals and members of a group who share a common history, a common language, and similar ways of understanding the world." Somehow, she finds these notions interwoven in a dynamic process.

Based on the work of West (1992) and Bourdieu (1977), Norton-Pierce (1997:411) coins the term "*investment* rather than motivation to capture the complex relationship of language learners to the target language" Norton-Pierce (1995a:9). It signals "the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it." The notion of *Investment* captures both the social and the historical bond to English that I assume students in the context of this research have. That is, how the social context connects Mexicans to the world and their educational and professional requirements, while the historical context connects them to a painful past of conquest and invasion. It also captures their contradictory attitudes and feelings towards English. Investment is precisely the concept that frames this ethnography concerns. As Norton-Pierce asks,

- “What is the learner’s investment in the target language?”
- “How is the learner’s relationship to the target language socially and historically constructed?”

Cummins (2001 in, Ariza & Coady, 2010:14) “argues that students’ identities and their negotiation are reflected in broader sociocultural and political contexts that impact upon individuals’ identities.” He talks about relations of power by a dominant individual, group, or country that is detrimental to others” (Cummins 1996, in Norton, 1997:412). Here, power is exerted over Mexicans by the dominant country, the U.S., its language (English), economy policies, knowledge or intellectual production, modernity and so on, which are generally referred to as globalization.

Schechter & Bayley (1997:513) review some recent discussions of identity construction and come to the conclusion that it is “a complex, multifaceted and dialogic” process, where “identities are seen as symbolic performances generated by individual choices of practices in fluid societal and situational contexts.” They note that these contexts are related to cultural identity and language.

### 2.3 Mexican Culture

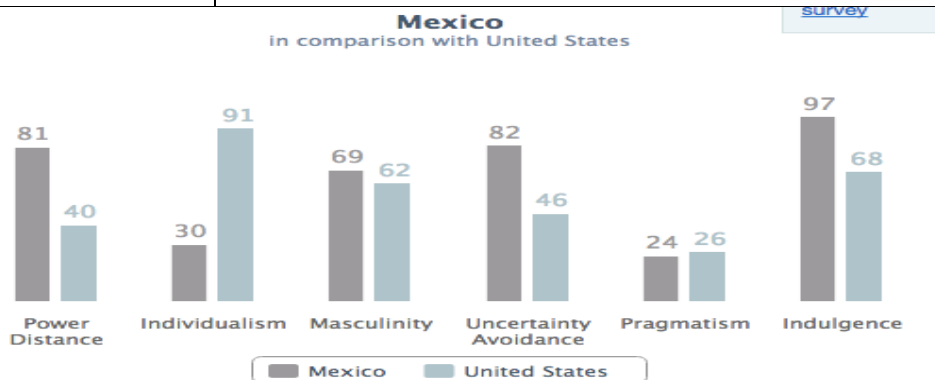
In this section, first I will describe how some authors consider the construct of culture. Then I will address some analysis of cultural dimensions based on cross-cultural research done by Hofstede’s and Trompenaars models of cultural dimensions. Finally, a brief description of Mexican culture found in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude) from Octavio Paz will be done.

Culture is considered not only as a body of knowledge, but also negotiated relationships, dynamic processes, and implicit assumptions (Duff & Uchida 1997, in Norton, 1997:415). As Mato (2000, in Despaigne, 2013:22) states, “culture is not an object of study, but the lens through which the different objects of study are analyzed.” All these conceptions of culture capture the overlapping

context I examine in this paper: the implicit assumptions and relationships my students as a group belonging to the Mexican culture have; the lens through which attitudes towards language are analysed; the way language or in this case foreign language is tied to their social subject. Moreover, Lehman *et al* (2004 in Hager, 2011:4) consider culture “a means for passing on beliefs and behaviours to new individuals in the cultural group, evolving into the norms that define a culture and persevere over very long periods of time.” I consider that this ‘way of being’ of Mexicans in relation to English speaking cultures is a cultural issue that has existed in the country for a long while and that has been inherited from generation to generation.

Hofstede (2014), a social psychologist, developed a model of dimensions of national culture, which has been applied in the practice of many domains of human social life and that can be linked to the field of language learning. The values distinguishing countries (rather than individuals) from each other are grouped statistically into dimensions, which have been largely replicated in cross-national studies. The grouping of country scores points to some of the roots of cultural differences, based in a shared and inherited history. Table 1 in the following page provides a summary of the dimensions and compares Mexico’s scores with those of the USA.

Dimension of Culture	Definition
<i>Power Distance</i>	<b>Power Distance</b> refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally
<i>collectivism versus individualism</i>	<b>Individualism</b> on the one side versus its opposite, <b>collectivism</b> , is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups.
<i>femininity versus masculinity</i>	<b>Masculinity</b> versus its opposite, <b>femininity</b> , refers to the distribution of emotional roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found.
<i>uncertainty avoidance</i>	<b>Uncertainty avoidance</b> deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual.
<i>Long-term versus short-term orientation</i>	<b>Long-term oriented</b> societies foster pragmatic virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular saving, persistence, and adapting to changing circumstances. <b>Short-term oriented</b> societies foster virtues related to the past and present such as national pride, respect for tradition, preservation of "face", and fulfilling social obligations.
<i>Indulgence versus Restraint</i>	<b>Indulgence</b> stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. <b>Restraint</b> stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.



*Table 1 Hofstede Cultural Dimensions*  
(Adapted from <http://geerthofstede.nl/dimensions-of-national-cultures>)

According to Hofstede's analysis, Mexican culture, as many other national cultures, has been classified as a collectivistic society, where loyalty and preference to the group is a strong characteristic (Cimoli 2000, in Kelly & Kumar, 2005:75). Regarding EFL, this might mean that students hold a strong



feeling of commitment to being Mexicans and all the specific history this might involve. If there is a shared belief of being oppressed, invaded or judged, then Mexicans commit to that belief as part of their culture.

Mexico is considered a hierarchical society, with a high score on power distance. In my own educational context, this might mean that learners expect to be told what to do, with the teacher being an authoritative figure, owner of English language knowledge and with considerable power to impose a culture within language teaching. A high power-distance score involves a belief that power is a source of corruption, coercion, and dominance (House 2004, in Nardon & Steers, 2009:8). We might infer that it could be translated into a feeling of coercion and dominance through language. That is, the students in the context I am examining feel that they are being dominated by the U.S. and by the imposition of the English language as an institutional requirement for graduation.

Mexico is considered a masculine society. Regarding foreign language learning, competition, achievement and success will be the motivating factors. Therefore, if achievement and success are not gained, or are not perceived by learners as gained, learners will not feel successful and their performance in the foreign language might lead to a feeling of anxiety, fear and inferiority.

Mexico has a very high preference for avoiding uncertainty (Hofstede, 2014). When Mexicans feel ambiguity and uncertainty, they bring with it anxiety. This is the case when the students enrolled in the PCI are required to provide proof of competence in English with a minimum score of 550 point in the TOEFL exam or with obtaining the First Certificate of English (Cambridge ESOL) or by passing the final exams from the eight levels that the programme offers. Mexicans feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations like exam performance, not being able to speak accurate utterances in English, or like being judged or evaluated by others for committing mistakes, as happens in exams. This creates an environment of anxiety that reinforces their beliefs of inferiority. Moreover, “students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures expect

their teachers to be experts who have all the answers” (Jandt, 2009:174). A teacher with all the answers is an oppressor figure with authority and power, which might have an impact over a learner with a feeling of inferiority and an attitude of being oppressed.

Mexican short-term orientation is consistent with keeping up with social pressure and a concern with face (Jandt, 2009:176). In the field of EFL, Mexicans might feel a need of not falling behind the rest of the society that has already acquired English as a foreign language, with a subsequent need to fulfill a social obligation. “Short-term oriented societies foster virtues related to the past and present such as national pride” (Hofstede, 2014). This might be the reason why Mexicans keep on remembering their past, consciously or unconsciously affecting the process of acquiring English language.

“Mexican culture has a definite tendency toward indulgence” (Hofstede, 2014) and people fail “to control their desires and impulses”. This might be why students want to have fun in their English classes, but how are they going to have fun if there is a constant presence of a feeling of anxiety and a threatening environment of imposition and domination.

Building on the work of Hofstede (1980) and Parsons & Shils (1951), Trompenaars offered a similar model of culture that focused on variations in values and personal relationships across cultures (Nardon & Steers, 2009:4-5). Trompenaars studies revealed a somehow different feature of Mexican culture, since it was characterized as an individualistic nation, in contrast with the collectivistic Hofstede’s dimension. This difference might be due to the “officially accepted neo liberalism as the government’s political and theoretical framework” (Despaigne, 2010:61), after signing the North American Free Trade Agreement. I assume that there is still much of that collectivism and that we are moving into a more individualized culture, with a focus on individual achievement and independence.

Mexico was categorized high on Trompenaars’ achievement dimension, which “refers to the manner in which respect and social status are accorded to people” (Nardon & Steers, 2009:6). With Mexican culture being high on this dimension,

we could say that Mexicans expect their status to depend on their performance and regarding the field of foreign language learning, we might assume that they expect to perform successfully when learning English, otherwise anxiety and inferiority might appear.

Octavio Paz, Mexican Nobel Prize, essayist and prototype for cultural studies searched for the identity of the Mexican people. He emphasized that “it is inherent that the people of Mexico understand all of the significant events of their past so that they will come to understand their present” (Paz, 1990). This past produces a feeling of inferiority and an “immense apathy concerning many issues” related to the USA, which are stemmed in two centuries of history he continues to say. Spanish invasion of Mexico, European domination, the mixture of cultures, and a continuous chain of conquests are the principal reasons for the Mexican sentiment of inferiority (Paz, 1990). He points out that the central basis of Mexican feeling of inferiority and anxiety is the recurring question of who we are, a constant search for identity. Regarding the concerns of EFL in Mexico, Paz comments explain and exemplify the constant pattern of apathy and inferiority students in the context of this study possess.

#### **2.4 Anxiety, Beliefs about Language Learning**

Oxford (1990:140) states “the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failures,” which encompasses many concepts: anxiety, culture shock, self-esteem, and attitudes among them. Foreign language classroom anxiety has been identified as a specific anxiety reaction, concerning “performance evaluation within an academic and social context” (Horwitz *et al*, 1986:127). It involves a complex set of subjective self-perceptions and feelings such as communication apprehension, worry and even fear of negative evaluation or apprehension about other`s evaluations. It is expressed through behaviours such as avoidance, shyness, difficulty in concentrating and procrastination (Horwitz *et al*, 1986).

Beliefs about language learning refer to learners' notions, perceived ideas, insights, concepts, opinions, representations, assumptions, or mini-theories of the nature of language or language learning (Holec, 1981; Horwitz, 1987; Hosenfeld, 1978; Omaggio, 1978; Wenden, 1987<sup>a</sup>, in Hong, 2006). Horwitz (1987, in Ellis 2008) developed a likert-style questionnaire called the Beliefs About Learning Inventory (BALLI) to assess language learners' beliefs about language learning.

Beliefs and attitudes about language learning, such as the ones in the BALLI shown in table 2, can add to learners' anxiety and in consequence negatively affect their learning experience (Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz, 1988). It might be argued that these beliefs do not always end in anxiety and could equally be quite reassuring, but within the cultural context of low self-confidence and inferiority I am examining, they do increase anxiety.

- Nothing should be said in English until it can be said correctly.
- It is necessary to know the customs, the cultures and the ways of life of English-speaking people in order to speak English correctly and appropriately in a particular context.
- English is a very difficult language.
- Learning the grammar is an important part of learning English.

*Adapted from the BALLI, Horwitz (1986)*

I administered an adapted version of Horwitz's BALLI in the previous phase of a focus group I conducted to accomplish the requests of this masters programme (Arias, 2011). It revealed that Mexican students in the context I am examining hold the beliefs mentioned in the table above, which might lead to debilitating anxiety and even "fear" to commit mistakes when performing in English. Moreover, these kinds of beliefs might be related to the feeling of invasion and oppression addressed in the macro-context.

## **CHAPTER 3 Research and Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and provide the rationale underlying the research approach and the process that was followed. Then, I will address recruitment procedures and ethical issues. A list of the instruments designed to gather data is provided, along with a description of the research process phases and the instruments they involved. After that, I will explain the data analysis method used and the domains and cultural themes that emerged. Finally, validity and reliability of the ethnographic study will be addressed and some limitations of the study will be mentioned.

### **3.1 Research Approach**

Exploratory practice, ethnography and voiced research were used as qualitative research approaches to find out the existing connections between power, identity and culture among Mexican students at university level, as well as the impact they might have on the language learning process.

Qualitative research of explorative nature “has traditionally been seen as an effective way of exploring new, uncharted areas,” states Eisenhardt (1989 in Dönyei, 2007). It allows us to gain insights and formulate new theories. Since this research concerns to a phenomenon from which very little is known, an ethnographic and exploratory approach will document the sociocultural aspects of behaviour it intends to uncover.

Voiced research, within the use of purposeful conversations and in-depth interviews, was expected to ‘reveal hidden realities and to initiate discussion’ (Holliday 2002, in Narvæz, 2006:72). In this case, it was the reality of the life worlds of Mexican’s English language learners at university level. A reality that is likely to portray what is relevant to the researches.

I consider that ethnography, which “implies a theory of culture” (Spradley,1997:5), was the appropriate research methodology, because I wanted to understand my students’ beliefs, attitudes and feelings towards English. Instead of quantitative results, I wanted qualitative results that could help me to better understand the realities of a Mexican context, which I believed was rooted in a specific socio-historical context. Since ethnography is “a non-manipulative study of the cultural characteristics of a group in real-world settings... providing a sociocultural interpretation of the research data” (Nunan, 1992:230), I opted for it. As Spradley (1979:5) states, the essential core of ethnography is a “concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand,” which are directly expressed in language. Participant observation, purposeful conversations, and in-depth, open-ended interviews were used as ethnographic data collection techniques. Interviews data were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes.

### **3.2 Participants and Recruitment procedures**

To maximise exploration from different perspectives (Kitzinger, 1995) of cultural issues, identities and beliefs about language learning of students in a university in the west of Mexico, participants were selected using the method of purposive sampling or possibly quota sampling (Denscombe, 2007:182; Dörnyei, 2007:127-128). In the first phase of the research, I carried out purposeful conversations, directly addressing the topic of anxiety and fear in the EFL classroom. I was able to identify participants who showed or who stated “fear” to communicate in English, which is a personal attribute relevant to the purposes of the research. Following qualitative sampling strategies suggested by Dörnyei (2007:127-128) and in order to take a representative, homogeneous and typical sample, while reaching saturation in different research areas, I recruited nine of the students who met the predetermined criteria, from the different levels of English that exist in the PCI programme.

### 3.3 Ethical Issues

Research was based on fully informed, and freely given, consent of participants. Participants were informed that they are free to withdraw their consent at any time without adverse consequences, and that any data provided by them will be destroyed should they request it. (See Appendix 2)

Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Data (interviews recordings and transcript's) were stored on the researcher's personal computer (password protected) and will be destroyed within 12 months of the completion of the research.

### 3.4 Instruments and Phases of the research

This ethnographic research was carried out in three different phases, but they did not follow a linear sequence because “ethnographic research requires constant feedback from one stage to another” (Spradley, 1979:93). The first reconnaissance–phase involved identifying participants by means of purposeful conversations. The second phase, consisting of participant observations, permitted me to sharpen the focus of the research while being an active and familiar member of the context. In-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviewing conformed the third stage and helped to refine the initial issues raised during previous stages.

#### 3.4.1 Purposeful Conversations

In the reconnaissance phase, aimed at locating informants, I carried out a series of purposeful conversations in order to find students who held a pattern of “fear” and anxiety to perform in English across a tentative sampling. First, I gain trust and rapport and authentic communication patterns with participants emerged (Denzin & Lincon 2003, in Narvæz 2006:77). After communication was established and my interest in capturing what students wanted to say was made evident, I carried out *purposeful conversations* with a casual style, providing a “genuine space within which students can talk about their issues and concerns,” as Narvæz (2006:77) suggests. In order not to rely only on my

memory, I took field notes right immediate after the events, trying not to obstruct the on-going circumstances (Angrosino, 2005:38-39). This initial stage was based on some orienting questions that allowed theorising *in situ*, such as:

- What do you think of English language?
- Have you ever felt anxiety or a feeling of “fear” to communicate in English?
- Tell me what was going on inside you when this feeling occurred?

Due to the fact that I had gained rapport with my students, I was able to ask if they had ever felt anxiety or fear to communicate in English at this initial stage. Besides that, the question addressed one of the concerns of the research, which allowed me to locate possible informants.

### 3.4.2 Participant Observation

“A hallmark of ethnography is extended, first-hand participant observation and interactions with participants in the study setting.” (TESOL Quarterly, ethnography guidelines). Participant observation is “the method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, ... openly in the role of researcher... observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time (Becker and Geer 1957, in Denscombe, 2003:200). Participant observation was the second stage of the study, where the research purposes were told to students and I acted as a researcher and as an active and familiar member of the context.

I based the ethnographic focus of the observations in an in-depth strategy suggested by Spradley, (1979:100-11), studying intensively the following domains: (See Appendix 3 Domain Analysis Worksheet)

- What are all the reasons for studying English?
- What are all the attitudes you have towards the English language?
- What are all the kinds of feelings you experiment when communicating in English?
- What are all characteristics of being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language?



### 3.4.3 In-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviewing

This last phase of the research was used to clarify previous phases emerging issues. As Ellis (2008:7) states, “researchers wishing to investigate learner beliefs would do better to rely on qualitative methods such as interviews,” therefore, in-depth, open-ended, ethnographic interviewing was carried out in the Fall-2014 period of classes (August – November). The interviews were conducted in Spanish, to allow students to better communicate their ideas and to avoid language to be a limitation. The guidelines provided by Spradley (1979:59-67) and displayed in table 3 below, were thought-out in the construction of the ethnographic interviewing, which is considered as a speech event with similar features to a friendly conversation.

<b>Ethnographic Interviewing Guidelines</b>	
•	Greetings & taking leave
•	Explicit purpose
•	Ethnographic explanations (project, question, interview)
•	Asymmetrical turn taking
•	Expressing interest & cultural ignorance
•	Restating & incorporating informant's terms
•	Creating hypothetical situations
•	Different ethnographic questions:
○	descriptive questions
○	freelist questions
○	structural questions
○	contrast questions

Table 3 Adapted from Spradley (1979)

Ethnographic questions were carefully planned, since they are “the main tool for discovering another person’s cultural knowledge” (Spradley, 1979:60). After the opening, where the purpose of the interview was made explicit, there were six sets of questions. The Ethnographic Interview Guide with the questions can be found in Appendix 3. The first set of descriptive questions intended to encourage the informant to talk about a particular cultural scene: Mexican students’ identity as English language learners. Then the next set of questions use the freelist technique “used to elicit the elements of a cultural domain,” where answers from different respondents from the same culture should be similar due to the fact that the stimulus question is related to something outside participants (Borgatti, 1999:120). Spradley (1979:60) calls the following set of questions, structural questions, asking for use, not for meaning and which “enable the ethnographer to discover information about the cultural domains,

the basic units in an informant’s cultural knowledge.” The subsequent set of contrast questions, headed to discover the implicit dimensions of cultural meanings of “fear” when using English to communicate. During the interview, the various types of questions were alternated and I expressed interest at the beginning and in the end of the interviews, acknowledging the informant expertise as Spradley (1979:121) suggests. It was also prepared a list of useful prompts to have at hand. (See Appendix 3 Ethnographic Interview Guide)

### 3.4.5 Piloting

I carried out a preliminary micro-piloting to check if amendments needed to be done before conducting the actual study (Sproull, 2002:349). It helped me to check and modify the domain analysis questions and the open-ended interview so that they could yield appropriate information; in other words, that the results of the instruments answered the research concerns. Table 4 below informs on the main changes made.

Instrument / Item	Modification
What do you think of the United States of America and the relationship it holds with Mexico? (Purposeful conversation question)	What are the attitudes you hold towards the English language?
What are all the ways to feel discriminated when learning English as a foreign language? (Participant observation item)	Eliminated
What are all characteristics or attributes of the USA in the relationship with Mexico? (Participant observation item)	Eliminated
Is there a difference among Mexicans learning English and Americans or foreigners learning a foreign language, let’s say Spanish? (Ethnographic Interview Guide)	Contrast question added. It was a powerful tool for discovering the implicit attributions of <i>being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language</i> .
Narrative Inquiry (Instrument)	Eliminated due to time restraints

*Table 4 Adjustments after the piloting*

## CHAPTER 4 Data Analysis

The data drawn on for this inquiry served to illuminate the tacit attitudes held by individuals. Spradley's developmental research sequence (DRS) (1979, 1980) was developed to articulate cultural, semantic knowledge shared by a community of participants. It helped me to describe and articulate the implicit attitudes of individual participants by shifting its unit of analysis from the culture to the individual. DRS allowed for a dialogue with the participants in order to bring to light what the origins of the participants' attitudes towards the English language are and to find possible ways we can prevent them from having a negative impact on the process of learning English, due to the fact that data was anchored in their own self-expressions and experiences (Dennis *et al*, 2011:45).

Spradley's DRS (1979, 1980) analysis approach contributed to a better understanding of the macro and micro-context of Mexican students in this university in the west of Mexico. Probing deeply into the way semantic representations were interwoven, indicated how participants were thinking, regarding to their attitudes, emotions, feelings, cultural identity, and social relationships of power. DRS includes four analytic processes: domain, taxonomic, componential, and thematic, which are addressed in the following sub-sections. Table 5 in the following page summarizes the findings according to the analytic strategy involved.

<p><b><u>Domain analysis:</u></b></p> <p>A search for the larger units of cultural knowledge.</p>	<p><b><u>Some identified domains:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Attitudes towards the English language</li> <li>*Feelings when communicating in English</li> <li>*Characteristics of being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language</li> <li>*Reasons for studying English as a foreign language</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Taxonomic analysis:</u></b></p> <p>A search for internal structure of domains that leads to identifying contrasting sets.</p>	<p>Located contrasts in and relationships between students' attitudes towards the English language and their investment in it.</p> <p>Generated a concept map of students attitudes and feelings towards English, as well as reasons to study it.</p> <p>A general conception of Mexican identity when learning English was outlined.</p>
<p><b><u>Componential analysis:</u></b></p> <p>Process of searching for contrasts, sorting them out, grouping some together as dimensions of the contrast, and entering all this information onto a paradigm.</p>	<p><b><u>Some identified contradictions:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Reasons for studying English vs Reasons for not studying English</li> <li>*Positive vs negative attitudes towards EFL</li> <li>*Mexicans' historical context vs Mexicans actual context</li> <li>*Mexicans' inferiority vs USA superiority</li> <li>*Positive vs Negative characteristics of Mexicans English language learners</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Cultural themes:</u></b></p> <p>A search for the relationships among domains and how they are linked to the culture as a whole.</p>	<p><b><u>Some cultural themes identified:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Globalization of English is a reason for studying it.</li> <li>*English is an imposed foreign language in Mexico.</li> <li>*English language learning involves appropriating a culture.</li> <li>*Malinchismo is involved in the process of learning English.</li> <li>*Anxiety expressed through different feelings is experienced when learning English.</li> <li>*A sense of inferiority is felt by Mexican English language learners.</li> <li>*Mexicans' history plays a role in the process of learning English.</li> </ul>

*Table 5 Summary of substantive findings according to the analytic strategy involved.  
(Adapted from Dennis et al, 2011)*

## 4.1 Domain Analysis

When analysing ethnographic interviews, I developed a preliminary overview of the cultural scene on the basis of the domains I had identified in the previous participant observation and purposeful conversation stages. Key folk terms (defined as samples of the way people talk) used by informants were highlighted to provide a general view of the scene and helped to construct cultural domains. “Domains, as cultural categories, are made up to three basic elements: *cover term, included terms, and semantic relationship*” (Spradley, 1980:89), where the name of the cultural domain is the cover term; the included terms are the names for the smaller categories; and the single semantic relationship is the linking together of two categories.

Different domains were identified regarding participants’ attitudes and feelings towards English, reasons for studying it, as well as characteristics of being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language. Appendix 4 shows the domains identified for the purpose of this micro-ethnography study. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews and observation field notes were used to fill in the domain analysis worksheets. One domain that emerged through this analysis was *Attitudes towards the English language*. “Attitude” as Dörnyei (1994: 274) states, “is used in social psychology and sociology, where action is seen as the function of the social context and the interpersonal/intergroup relational patterns.” The excerpts below illustrate the patterns of this social context, in other words, the attitudes learners held towards the English language:

“The United States of America and all what they represent is like the (economic) empire and then the language (English), as a consequence, it must not be learned...”

“(Learning English means)...your things instead of foreign traditions, you accept them as yours, but it is not because you like it, it is a social imposition... It also means rivalry...”

“History is important... there is a kind of historical resentment...”

Similar statements were collected and the corresponding semantic relationship that identified these utterances as attributes of the cover term *Attitudes towards the English language* formed the domain. Fig 1 below shows an example of this domain. (See Appendix 4 for domain analysis)

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Strict inclusion	Cover term
Imperialism language Prejudice Considering E as an ideology Consumerism ideology Imperialism language Must not be learned Not caring Imposition Cultural imposition Social imposition Inferiority Being conquered Rivalry Historical resentment Dependence Resilience Difficulty to learn Dislike Malinchismo Depreciation	is a kind of	attitude towards the English language

Fig. 1 Attitudes towards the English language Domain

## 4.2 Taxonomic Analysis

“Taxonomic analysis takes the researcher deeper into those structures to developing a hierarchy of terms associated with each of the cover terms for the identified domains” (Dennis *et al*, 2011:43). This kind of analysis provided an in-depth examination of the domains and uncovered how students in the context examined were engaged with the English language and the feelings and attitudes they held towards it, as well as the concept of being a Mexican studying English they believed in. Individual concepts were made explicit through semantic formulations and then they were mapped out to create a

taxonomic analysis for the cover term *Being a Mexican studying English*. Fig 2 shows an example of the taxonomic analysis done.

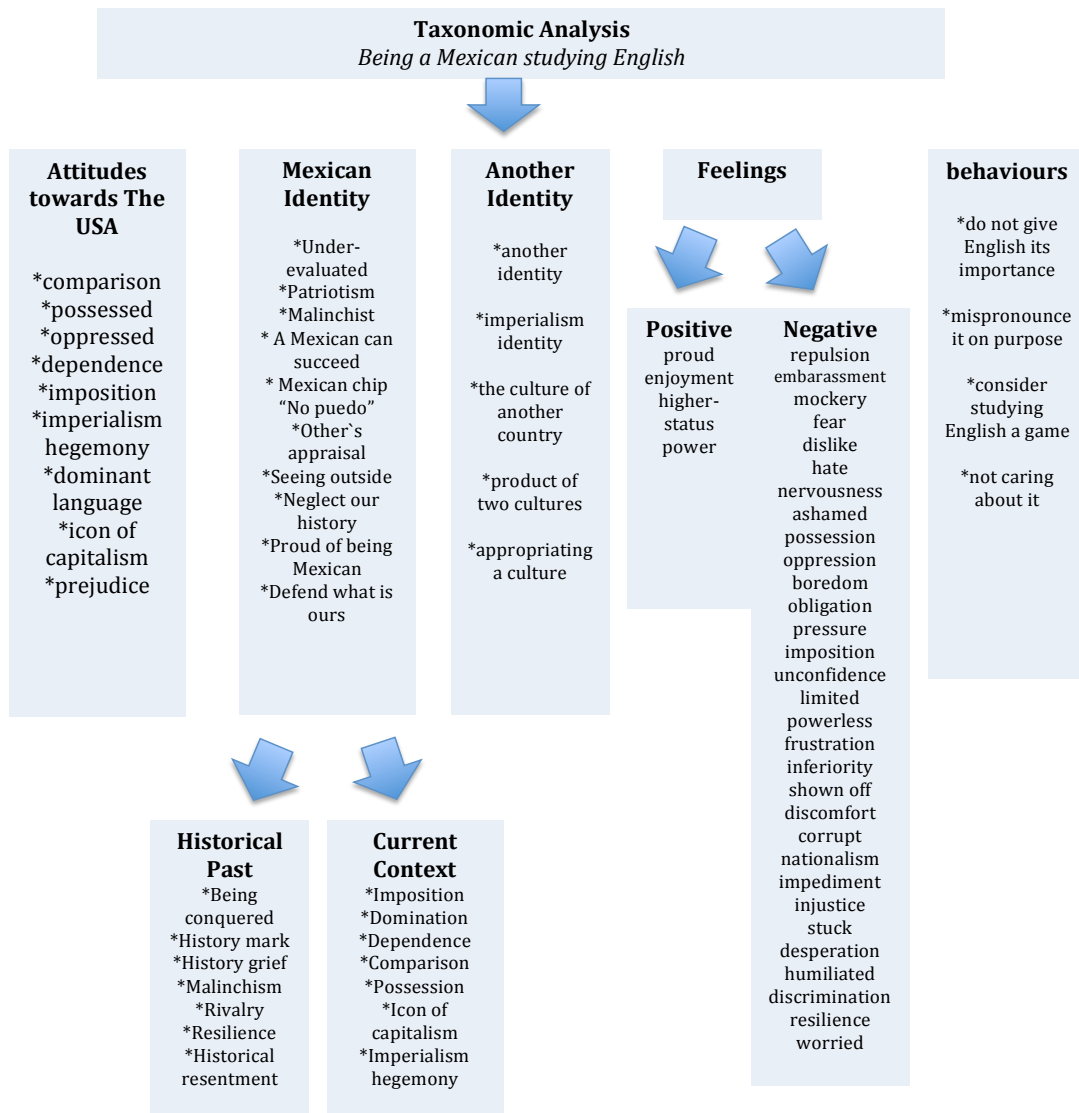


Fig. 2 Taxonomic Analysis of *Being a Mexican Studying English*

### 4.3 Componential Analysis

Through componential analysis, we get at the implied exploration of semantic and taxonomical relations, identifying “a set of differences or contrasts– terms that lie just outside the domains and taxonomies, marking the boundaries between what has been included and what is necessarily excluded” (Dennis *et al*, 2011:43). I searched for the possible relationships among symbols and I

could find contradictions, tensions and omissions between the individuals and the Mexican culture within which they were acting. Componential analysis allowed me to locate several contrasts and exclusions such as:

- \*Reasons for studying English vs. Reasons for not studying English
- \*Positive vs. negative attitudes towards EFL
- \*Mexicans' historical context vs. Mexicans currently context
- \*Mexicans' inferiority vs. USA superiority
- \*Positive vs. Negative characteristics of Mexicans English language learners

One of the contrasts that emerged occurred between students' feelings and attitudes towards English, their concept of being a Mexican studying English and the reasons they expressed for studying it or for not studying it. Fig. 3 shows this contrast.

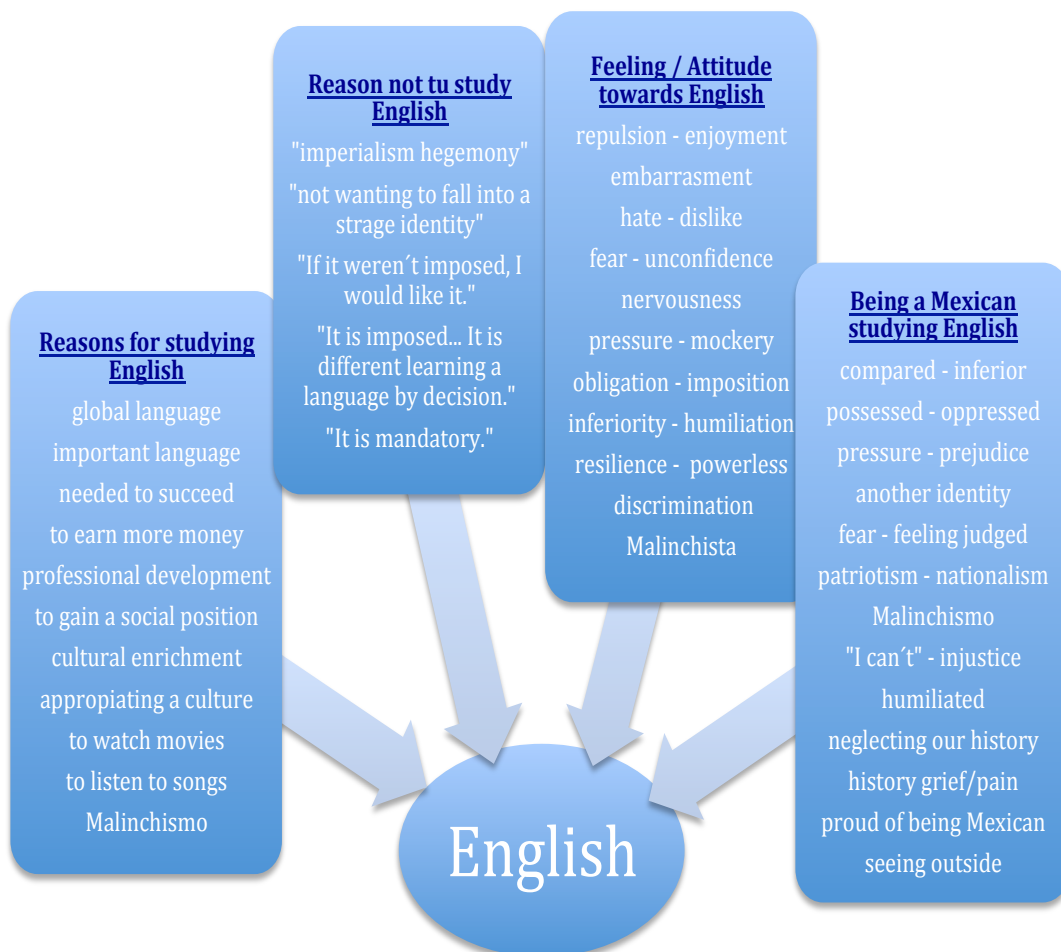


Fig. 3 Componential Analysis

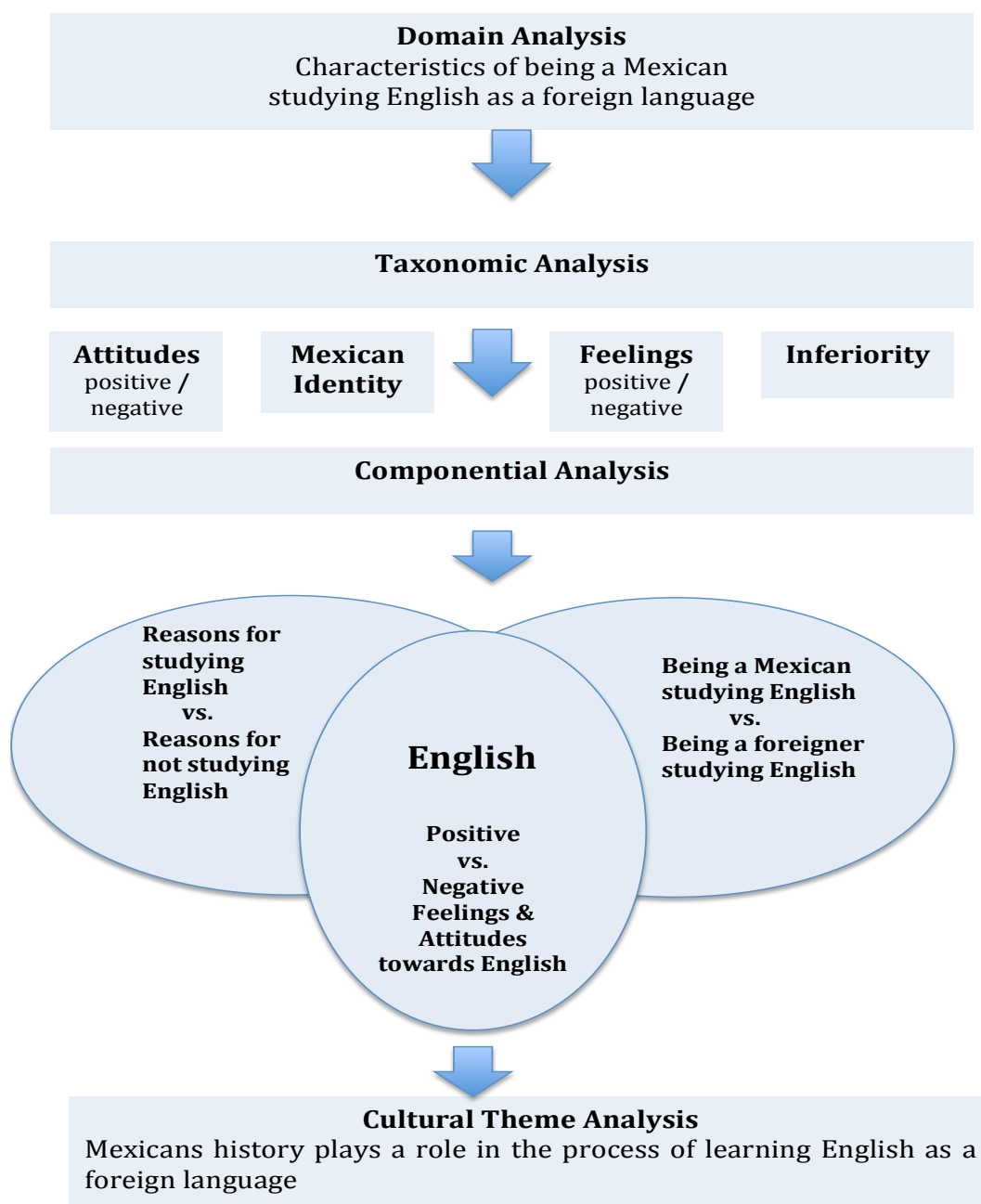


#### 4.4 Discovering Cultural Themes

“Cultural themes serve as a relationship among domains... and how they are linked to the culture as a whole” Spradley (1979:94, 195). DRS provides a mechanism for describing and articulating the language and culture of participants in a way that is anchored in their own self-expressions and experiences. Comparing and contrasting domains allowed me to find relationships and to evidence the picture of the cultural scene. Some of the themes that emerged from the data, which tackle this paper concerns, are displayed in the list below:

- \*Globalization of English is a reason for studying it.
- \*English is an imposed foreign language in Mexico.
- \*English language learning involves appropriating a culture.
- \*Malinchismo is involved in the process of learning English.
- \*Anxiety expressed through different feelings is experimented when learning English.
- \*Mexican English language learners feel a sense of inferiority.
- \*Mexicans’ history plays a role in the process of learning English.

Figure 4 in the following page depicts the process of developing the theme called *Mexicans’ history plays a role in the process of learning English*, to display how DRS was applied to the study.



*Figure 4 Cultural Theme: Mexicans' history plays a role in the process of learning English*

#### 4.5 Validity and Reliability

In trying to guard against threats to the reliability and validity of the research, I followed Nunan's (1992:60-63) suggestions, displayed in table 6, to the extent this study allowed. The list below addresses issues taken into consideration regarding validity and reliability.

<b>Internal Reliability</b>	<b>External Reliability</b>	<b>Internal Validity</b>	<b>External Validity</b>
Low inference descriptors	Explicit researcher status	Maturation changes did not affect outcomes	Comparable & non-comparable phenomena - Unique to a particular group
More than one collaborator	Detailed description of subjects	Careful selection of informants to avoid bias	Outcomes were not affected by the presence of the researcher
Cross-site corroboration	Detailed description of the context	No growth/attrition of informants	Cross-group comparisons validated
Mechanically recorded data	Explicitly defined Constructs and premises	Alternative explanations for phenomena were examined	Abstract terms and constructs shared across groups and sites
	Data collection & analysis methods presented in detail		

*Table 6 Validity and Reliability, Adapted from Nunan 1992*

- Low inference descriptors: DRS allowed for external observers to easily identify descriptors such as key folk terms and relationships among cultural symbols. For example, a statement like “I don’t like it” can be easily categorized in the Attitudes towards the English language domain.
- External corroboration: I asked two external people to look at a portion of the data and to record it. This triangulation process allowed for confirming the domains and themes that emerged, giving the analysis a degree of internal reliability. The themes found by an external corroborator were: inferiority, identity, Malinchism, power and history, social culture, power and imposition, cultural roots, fear, discrimination, and social-economic-labour competence.
- The use of mechanically recorded data was done through audio recordings, which were completely transcribed.
- I attempted to present a description of the context, data collection and analysis methods as detailed as possible.
- Ethnographic analysis incorporates a process of continual data analysis and comparison to refine constructs, attaining high internal validity. Informant interviewing and participant observation permitted natural settings that reflected the reality of the life experiences of participants in an accurate way (Nunan 1992:62).

- To guard against external validity, further research should be carried out to compare the results of this ethnographic research with other groups of Mexican students. The concerns of this ethnography might be considered a replication of other ethnographic studies done, where the same cultural themes arose (Méndez 2011; Despaigne 2010; Despaigne 2011; Despaigne 2013; Clemente *et al* 2005; Narváez 2006).

#### 4.6 Limitations of the Research

“Because of the non-representativeness of the typical samples, qualitative data cannot inform us about how widely what is discovered exists in the rest of the world- examining the distribution of a phenomenon in a population is a typical quantitative objective” (Dörnyei, 2007:171-172). Caution will be required when attempting to make generalizations of the findings to larger populations and different contexts.

When researching our workplace, Holliday (in Narváez, 2006:76) warns that “over-indulgence can be a problem...To be able to examine the world of the participant the (researcher) must not take this world for granted, but must question his or her own assumptions and act like a stranger to the setting.” I am a non-native Mexican English language teacher and as a Mexican, I might hold the same cultural meanings that my informants. I attempted to detach from the world I was examining by using the DRS, which allowed me to compile the verbal descriptions of my informants in a more objective way.

Another constraint of the research is that it is possible that a learner holds a feeling of fear or anxiety that might be masked with a series of rationalizations, or that participants lie in order to talk about what the researcher wants to hear. As Ellis (2008:13) suggests, “learners may not always report their beliefs accurately... self-report assumes that learners are aware of the beliefs they hold... and it possible that some beliefs lie below the threshold of consciousness or cannot be easily and directly expressed.”

My attempt to contextualize EFL learning within Mexican culture will hopefully lead to describe culturally specific factors that might affect the language learning process, yet this exploration is far from having a complete picture.

## CHAPTER 5 Discussion of Findings and Implications for Practice

### 5.1 Findings

“The Mexican is not an essence, but a history...” *Octavio Paz (1969)*

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings that emerged from the DRS presented in the previous chapter, relating them to the research concerns and the literature review, while considering possible implications for practice. The first section addresses issues that emerged from domain analysis, contrasts and exclusions found in componential analysis, and two cultural themes that arose. The second section reflects upon possible implications and recommendations on what we, teachers of Mexican learners, can do to prevent our students from having negative attitudes towards English that might affect their process of learning it.

To start with, I would like to explicitly state my specific approach to this ethnographic study: I believe that the purpose of ethnography is interpretive, aimed at developing insights into the symbolic meanings of experiences for participants. Therefore, the emphasis was placed on participant attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and practices as main objective of the present study, as an attempt to come to a better understanding of how learners in this Mexican context experienced their socio-historical and cultural worlds.

**a) Domain Analysis:** During participant observations and purposeful conversations as well as during interviews, students mentioned *Malinchismo* (Malinchism) as an important concern regarding EFL. It is “a pejorative term derived from the name of Hernán Cortés’s Indian mistress La Malinche, which refers to a deep-rooted Mexican inferiority complex expressed in a preference for all things foreign” (Butler, 2004:83, in Wikipedia). It arose in different domains, such as characteristics of being a Mexican studying EFL, reasons for studying EFL, and attitudes towards English. We can see comments that make reference to this *Malinchismo* in the next extracts:

“Malinchism, what comes from the outside is the best, what is worth...”

”It is a matter of being Malinchista. We do not have a feeling of belonging, we have been taught to reject what is ours, to denigrate, the dialects, the indigenous.... the Spanish language is not ours, it is the Spaniards’...”

“Mexicans are uprooting themselves from their culture... We go back to MALINCHISMO, because before people would see Spanish as the best and our stuff as ugly and now we see English as the best and what we have here as ugly...”

Malinchista... yes, it is like apart from Mexico, o harm to Mexico... it is.... Malinchista, and it has something to do with this patriotism... that reminds me of a historical mark... then it is NO, NO and NO...”

The important thing here is not to act as “the modern incarnation of *La Malinche*,” as Clemente (2006:14) says, but to act from a critical point of view, as empathetic teachers who are aware of all the complexities of our students’ socio-cultural context, helping them to uncover “the hegemony hidden in languages,” as she continues to say, and to afford ideal conditions to learn the language.

In finding the semantic relationships while doing *Domain analysis*, participants mentioned attitudes and feelings of imposition, dominance, dependence, oppression, prejudice, imperialism and capitalism ideologies, as important issues or *folk terms* concerning their Mexican identity as English language learners. Excerpts below address some of those semantic relationships:

“That prejudice (USA as icon of capitalism), stopped me from going into... not wanting to fall into this other foreign identity, the imperial identity, the hegemony... not wanting to get contaminated... to participate in that language....”

“That possession that Americans have towards Mexico, I mean that oppression maybe I could even say”

“...to be receiving that cultural load from another country... It might bother a patriot...”

“...the “chip” that the Mexican has.... of feeling, well, maybe inferior, or the “I can’t”...”

“A language is like the culture: the figure of U.S. in general and along years, how it has been imposed; and this is maybe, what is “high”. Then, well, we hope to get there...”

All the feelings and attitudes that surfaced from the analysis, uncovered that students in the context examined do hold attitudes towards English, which might affect in a negative way their language learning experience. The stories students had to tell, narrated the reality of English that I assume exists in Mexico. We can easily see the connection between ELL and the socio-historical reality prevailing, which is tied to Mexico's past and to the relationship of the country with the U.S.

Our concern should be how we, as teachers, can creatively adapt our teaching, helping our students to raise awareness and to consider how their own attitudes and socio-cultural context towards English might negatively impact on their language learning process. "If beliefs – and I add attitudes, and historical and socio-cultural context- influence the actions that learners perform to learn English, they cannot be ignored by the teachers. There is a need to help our students to become aware of all the circumstances that might obstruct their language learning process, a need for a more contextual approach" (Ellis 2008).

**b) Componential Analysis:** The conflicts and inconsistencies that were mainly found occurred between students feelings and attitudes about the English, their concept of being a Mexican studying English and the reasons they expressed for studying it.

Students' discourse vividly illustrated the complex relationship among their Mexican identity and their attitudes towards English. There were contradictions in the way they perceived reasons for studying English and the attitudes they held. Those contradictions were made evident through a disjuncture between a lack of investment in English as a foreign language and the reasons they gave to study it. Norton (1997:411) frames the construct of investment when conceiving the language learner "as having a complex history and multiple desires... and also an own social identity." This complex relationship was revealed in the interviews and in participant observations, as we can see in the extracts below:



“We are a product of BOTH CULTURES... It has been a constant in HISTORY, always looking outside, then the foreigner, the other, whatever is outside... it's been imposed, you see it as a model... and everything that is yours, all your roots... we are denying all of that, we are uprooting ourselves, those traditions that are present in your own language, in SPANISH itself...

“One example is my brother, my brother hates English... he despises it... even though it may be good, he hates it... it hits his Mexican pride and it has a lot to do with that, he is a super patriot, but like a blind patriot, he feels... seeing how... the conquest really hits him hard, it like they embargoed us, the took away our roots”

**c) Cultural Theme Analysis:** Two of the cultural themes that can be drawn from this micro-ethnography are the themes called *Mexicans' history plays a role in the process of learning English* and *Mexican English language learners feel a sense of inferiority*. The former tackles the second question of this paper, “What are the origins of the feeling of anxiety which Mexican learners have reported/report?” while the later addresses the first question, “Do Mexican learners hold attitudes towards English, which might negatively affect their learning experience?”

The role that students' history plays in their language learning process was constantly found. The following quotes clearly describe it:

“Mexico is... Malinchista and it has to be with this patriotism... that reminds me of a historical mark... then it is “no, no and no”...

“And it is not only that historical remembrance, that has impacted Mexicans, since Santa Anna sold the land, it is the way we live off U.S.”

“Yes, there are a lot of Mexicans that have this feeling... like inferiority, like a historical grief, maybe like anger...”

“Yes, yes, history is important and there is like a historical resentment in all this...”

When listening to students claims about their feelings and attitudes towards English language, one can perceive a strong feeling of inferiority, that comes from “the identification of the Mexican people derived from both Mexican history and the comparison with its neighbours, especially the USA,” paraphrasing Paz

(1990). Ramos (2002, in Hurtado, 2011) believes that the comparison with foreign models is what generates feelings of inferiority, creating therefore imitation of forms that are strange to us. Thenceforth, this feeling of inferiority produces exaggerated patriotism. Thus, imitation and patriotism are product of a feeling of inferiority (Ramos, 2002 in Hurtado 2011). These feelings of inferiority, comparison and patriotism were constantly found in the data and the following quotes clearly report them:

“Mexican culture tends to be quite compared to the one from the U.S.”

“Mexicans tend to not to value each other. It is a reality instilled by society.”

“The “chip” that the Mexican has... of feeling, well, maybe inferior or the “I can’t”

“A language is like the culture: the figure of U.S in general and along years, how it has been imposed; and this is maybe, what is “in”. Then, well, we hope to get there...”

“There come other people, trying to conquer or to impose. Then, you, instead of confronting them or facing them, what you try to do is to get on well with them... that is, to do what they do.”

## 5.2 Implications for Practice

Implications for practice should address my concern of how we, teachers, can prevent our students from having the negative impact of all those socio-cultural deep-rooted attitudes and beliefs. If I want to empower students’ voice with the analysis done in this ethnography, I have no option but to quote their thinking:

“In the beginning, yes, it bothered me what I felt for the US.. in connection with my English language learning, but now, I can separate it a bit more...”

“The rest (of Mexicans) start to see it like.... they cannot separate it...”

“You start to get that culture and you appropriate it and you start to, to transmit it, to generate it, to change your way of being, but from the inside”

“Well, I feel that one ... is rejecting... from history to your own parents, even though one can’t believe it, it is unconsciously assumed...It lies in you to understand how the dynamic is...”

“This type of empire, or better yet, this, this prejudice that in the beginning I... now I consider it a prejudice: It kept me from... how do you say it? Well, from going into English. Actually right now, I am “seeing”...”

Most of us, Mexicans, are aware of this complex socio-historical background that is present in Mexico, as was evidenced in the data gathered. The important thing here, as students have mentioned, is to raise awareness of how this past interferes with their language learning process, taking into consideration Paz remark when he mentions that “the people of Mexico must know and understand their history so that they will know and understand their present” (Paz, 1990). I suppose that by uncovering this complex relationship, students will be able to “separate” the withdrawal from this present-past, offering them a new way to look at the language and therefore taking responsibility of their English language-learning process.

“Besides their overt contents aiming at the acquisition of standard knowledge in society and culture, textbooks and their hidden curricula also play an important role in the reproduction of dominant ideologies, such as those of race, gender and class” states Van Dijk (2004, in Cortez 2006:43). I am, as a non-native, Mexican English teacher who shares the same cultural background, in a position that allows me to better understand and adapt my teaching practice, looking critically at cultural patterns and ideologies presented in ELT materials, adjusting and comparing them to my learners` reality, as Canagarajah (in Lethaby, 2006) suggests. These foreign ideologies are sometimes clearly identified by learners, as a student mentioned,

“I consider that beyond content, well... there is an ideology. I`m going to give an example: market dynamics, cosumerism, eh... travel... language without content cannot be presented, then there is always content in language, and that content is very ideologic.”

To sum up, if I am able to modify my teaching practice, acknowledging Mexican learners` context, I assume that I will empower the reality of Mexicans socio-cultural heritage, allowing language learning to occur in a more contextualized manner. The following adjustments to improve learning conditions regarding the micro and macro context this paper addresses could be done:

- Awareness-raising activities at the beginning of the course, as an attempt to untangle and to uncover Mexican socio-historical and cultural context.
- Affective strategies training, aimed at lowering learners' anxiety, promoting self-encouragement, and the acceptance of confusing situations or tolerance of ambiguity.
- Detailed textbook inspection to adapt the content to the students and to the Mexican reality, using it as a "starting point for negotiating culture" (Lethaby 2006:56).

### 5.3 Further Research

Further action research must be done in order to find out if by implementing raising-awareness strategies, affective strategies training and a "Mexicanized" content in the EFL classroom, we might promote change in the way Mexican learners look at the English language.

## CHAPTER 6 Conclusions

The data analysis revealed an in-depth cultural picture of the complexities of Mexicans investment in English as a foreign language. These interpretations allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the socio-historical problems students face in the EFL classroom. In a Mexican context where learning English as a foreign language is a must for undergraduate students, there is a need to understand all the possible hindering reasons existing in the students' realities, if we want to help our them to be successful English foreign language learners. The most meaningful experience I draw out of this study is an understanding of how people with different cultural backgrounds have their own way to invest in foreign language acquisition.

To conclude, I strongly believe it is important to give our students the opportunity to look at their attitudes and the affective side of learning a language, at the role their culture and history play in that process, giving them the opportunity to decide if they want their cultural-historical heritage to affect it or if they can be able to put apart all these conditions that might hinder it. As Zea (1952, in Hurtado 2011) claims, teachers and students might keep in mind the point of view that "historical awareness means freely assume responsibility for our past in our present... a past that we have not done."

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1 - Letter of Consent

Please read and sign this consent form to show that you understand what the study is about and that you agree to participate in the study.

You are invited to participate in a study on English language learning. This research investigates the identity and cultural values of Mexican students studying English as a foreign language at University level, as well as the beliefs they hold about language learning. This study is in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a master's degree. You need to be aware that if you agree to participate, the information might be used in the dissertation for a master's programme which could be published in the future.

You are asked to participate in a recorded interview. This interview usually takes about 30 to 50 minutes total to complete. These are anonymous interviews, so you won't be individually identified. All data will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain anonymity. Data will be stored on the researcher's personal computer (password protected) and will be destroyed within 12 months of the completion of the research. You are free to withdraw your consent at any time without adverse consequences, and any data provided will be destroyed should you request it.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts anticipated. You may withdraw at any time if you choose to not to participate in interviews. You are under no obligation to participate in the study. You may contact me if you would like information regarding results of the study.

The benefits you will receive from participating in this study are to reflect upon what you believe about English language learning as well as your identity as a Mexican English language learner.

Many thanks for taking the time and trouble to read this.

### **Consent declaration:**

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time, for any reason. I agree to the anonymized data that will be used for the purposes of the research. I give my consent to the possible use of the research data in future publications or academic presentations.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher:     Guillermina Arias Sais

Appendix 2 - Domain Analysis Worksheets

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Rationale	Cover term:
	is a reason for	studying English as a foreign language.
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the reasons for studying English?		

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Strict Inclusion	Cover term:
	is a kind of	feeling when communicating in English.
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the kinds of feelings you experience when communicating in English?		

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Attribution	Cover term
	is a characteristic of	being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language.
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the characteristics of being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language?		

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Attribution	Cover term
	is a kind of	attitude towards the English language..
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the attitudes you have towards the English language?		

## Appendix 3 - Ethnographic Interview Guide

<p><b>Opening &amp; Ethnographic Explanations</b>  <b>Explicit Purpose</b>  <b>Native Language Explanation</b></p>	<p>I am here to learn from you. The goal for this conversation is an open exchange of experiences, opinions and beliefs about you as language learners.          As I am interested to describe a cultural scene, I will ask you to speak in Spanish to allow for clarification and to be better able to add comments and ideas without language being a limitation.</p>
<p><b>Descriptive Questions</b></p>	<p>I'm especially interested in the relation of this identity with your role as an English language learner/user.          +Could you describe your experience as an English language learner and user?          +Could you describe a typical situation where you would feel fearful/anxious to use English?</p>
<p><b>Structural Questions</b>  <b>Free list Questions</b></p>	<p>+What do Mexican students studying English as a foreign language feel when using it to communicate? How do you feel about it?          +Could you tell me what you would say "fear" to communicate in English is?          + What are some other situations you could say involve a "fear" to communicate in English?          +What other feelings related to the use of English as a foreign language can you recall?</p>
<p><b>Structural Questions in context</b></p>	<p>+ I've learned from other students that they have experienced a feeling of "fear" to use English, a "fear" to commit mistakes. Is that right? Is that a common feeling among ITESO students?          + Have you ever had a feeling of "fear" or "anxiety" to use English?          + Is there a relationship between your attitude towards English and your language learning experience?</p>
<p><b>Creating a hypothetical situation</b></p>	<p>+ If you had to describe the perceptions Mexicans (or ITESO) students hold towards the English language, how would you describe them?</p>
<p><b>Contrast Questions</b></p>	<p>+ Is there a difference among Mexicans learning English and Americans or foreigners learning a foreign language, let's say Spanish?</p>
<p><b>Taking Over</b>  <b>Expressing Interest</b></p>	<p>+Thank you very much. I've really learned a lot today.          +Is there anything that we missed?          +Is there anything that you came wanting to say that you didn't get a chance to say?</p>
<p><b>List of Prompts:</b>  <u>Expressing Interest:</u>          I'm interested in...  <u>Asking for an expansion:</u>          Can you give a more detailed description of...?          Could you please give an example of that...?  <u>Verification Question:</u>          Would you say that.....</p>	<p><u>Expressing Cultural Ignorance:</u>          I've never thought of that... known about that... felt...          I don't have much of an idea of what ...it's like...  <u>Explaining a Question:</u>          I'd like to ask a different kind of question.. .  <u>Restating:</u>          You've mentioned ... Let's go back to my earlier question...          Then you would say that.... Is that right?</p>

## Appendix 4 - Domain Analysis

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Rationale	Cover term:
<p>Malinchismo English is the best language What comes from outside is the best It is a general language Universal language Global language English is a language that unifies English is needed To succeed More opportunities English is important To succeed internationally Appropriating of a culture Dominant language To get a better job To earn more money To transcend English is an imposed language Cultural Enrichment USA is our neighbour Globalization You have to To communicate To read books You watch movies You listen to songs State-of-the-art information is in English It is a tool To study For professional development To gain position It's an advantage It gives you status For curriculum</p> <p>CONTRAST: Imperialism hegemony Not wanting to fall into a strange identity if it weren't imposed, I would like it it is imposed... it is different learning a language by decision it is mandatory</p>	<p>is a reason for</p> <p>is a reason for not</p>	<p>studying English as a foreign language.</p>
<p><b>Structural question:</b> What are all the reasons for studying English?</p>		

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Strict Inclusion	Cover term:
Repulsion Embarrassment Mockery Power Higher status I think in what people might say, and that stops me Fear Dislike Hate Nervousness Ashamed Possession Oppression Boredom Obligation Pressure Imposition Unconfident Limited Powerless Proud Frustration Inferiority Ashamed with my language Identified with the oppressor Shown off Discomfort Corrupt Nationalism Impediment Injustice Fear Stuck Desperation Humiliated Discrimination Resilience Enjoyment Worried	is a kind of	feeling when communicating in English.
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the kinds of feelings you experiment when communicating in English?		

Included terms	Semantic relationship: Attribution	Cover term
Imperialism language prejudice Considering E as an ideology Consumerism ideology Imperialism language must not be learned Not caring An imposed language imposition cultural imposition social imposition inferiority being conquered rivalry historical resentment dependence resilience difficulty to learn dislike malinchismo undervaluation	is an attitude of	towards the English language
<b>Structural question:</b> What are all the attitudes you have towards the English language?		



Included terms	Semantic relationship: Attribution	Cover term
<p>Mockery  comparison with USA  a game to rest importance  mispronounce not to feel  pressure  Do not give it its importance  Undervaluation  It is a reality instilled by society  prejudice (USA as an icon of  capitalism)  another identity  imperialism identity  ashamed  nervous  embarrassed  possessed by the USA  oppressed by the USA  nervousness  embarrassment  forced, obligated  fear  pressured  imposed  patriot  bothered  feeling judged  fear to commit mistakes  Inferiority  Unconfidence  An attempt to defend what  belongs to us  Mexicans "can"  "I cannot" chip  Malinchismo  Appraisal for the other  Dislike  We are a product of 2 cultures  History marked  History grief/pain  Seeing outside  Neglecting our history  Proud of being Mexican  Stigmatized  Being angry</p>	<p>is characteristic of</p>	<p>being a Mexican  studying English as a  foreign language.</p>
<p><b>Structural question:</b> What are all the characteristics of being a Mexican studying English as a foreign language?</p>		

