

# Spanish Teachers' Communication Competence as It Relates to Student Performance on the National Spanish Exams

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## Abstract

Educational policy today advances the notion that effective teachers must be highly qualified. While teacher candidates must pass various exams and have strong content knowledge, today's tool to measure teacher effectiveness is clearly how K-12 students perform on various state and national assessments. While research shows that there are other qualities that effective teachers possess such as a strong sense of efficacy, this article reports on the relationship between Spanish teachers' ( $N = 370$ ) socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility, and their students' ( $N = 10,973$ ) scores on the National Spanish Exams. This study is framed conceptually in the notions of clear teaching and communicative competence. Teachers' data were divided into four different communicative types (Competent, Aggressive, Submissive, and Non-competent) for analysis and their students' mean scores on the exams were compared across the groups. Multivariate analyses suggest that there is a positive relationship between Spanish teacher socio-communicative orientation, cognitive flexibility, and students' scores on the exams. This research has implications for multiple stakeholders, highlighting the importance of developing communicative competence and versatility in teaching Spanish.

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## 1 Introduction

For more than 50 years, researchers have been investigating teachers' beliefs about their capacity to impact student learning and motivation. Over the past several decades, the literature shows that teachers play one of the most important roles in having an effect on student achievement (Akbari & Allvar, 2010; Goldhaber, 2002; Hunt, Simonds, & Cooper, 2002). Traditionally, research suggests highly effective teachers are those who have the necessary certification, content area knowledge, and strong verbal and cognitive abilities (Goodwin, 2010).

While *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* address certification and content area knowledge by mandating that all teachers become highly qualified in their content areas in order to bring students to high levels of learning, such a focus is a restricted approach to foreign language (FL) teaching and learning (Rosenbusch, 2005; Rosenbusch & Jensen, 2004). Swanson (2012) argued that while FL teacher proficiency in the target language is essential, there is much more to language teaching than just knowing how to speak or write a language.

Language teaching is a thorny endeavor in which individuals must navigate a labyrinth of complexities such as overloaded classrooms sprinkled with false beginners, student perceptions of irrelevant authentic language applications, feelings of isolation, and a lack of support from administrators (Borg, 2006; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Ro-

mano, 2007; Swanson, 2013; Walker & Tedick, 1994). Additionally, today's high stakes testing environment continues to overwhelm language teachers as instructional time is lost due to working around testing schedules in the required content areas (Zellmer, Frontier, & Pheifer, 2006). While few would not support the philosophical notion of high educational standards and expectations (e.g. teachers' subject matter competence) for every student created by *No Child Left Behind*, state and federal policy prioritizes instruction in and the allocation of resources to the core areas of mathematics, reading, and science, consequentially narrowing the curriculum (Swanson, 2010).

In order to be effective in the classroom, FL teachers need a breadth of knowledge and skills in order to facilitate instruction. While there is debate as to what exactly constitutes an effective instructor (Meyers, 2014), a review of the literature suggests that there is "no single accepted definition of effective foreign language teaching" (Bell, 2005, p. 259). Nevertheless, there are movements to determine if a teacher is deemed effective or not by examining students' test scores on standardized tests. A review of the literature supports the notion that effective teaching should be measured more broadly than just examining students' test scores. Research has shown that effective teaching is characterized by a variety of other qualities such as dedication, enthusiasm, grit, motivation, and perseverance as well as a strong sense of caring, efficacy, and humor (Brown, Morehead, & Smith, 2008; Duckworth, Quinn, & Seligman, 2009; Farr, 2010; Goldhaber, 2002; Goodwin, 2010; Steele, 2010; Swanson, 2013, 2014). However, in today's society, policymakers and educators tend to focus on more measureable attributes of teacher effectiveness such as teacher credentials (e.g. level of degrees, type of certification) and most recently, teachers' test scores for certification (Meyers, 2014).

In an effort to determine if teachers' communication competence, one's ability to communicate effectively with different people on different topics and at different times (Richmond & McCroskey, 1992), is a factor associated with effective teaching as it relates to students' test scores, the author reports on a large-scale study of Spanish teachers who administered the National Spanish Exams to their students in 2013.

## 2 Review of the literature

As mentioned earlier, in addition to having necessary certification and strong content area knowledge, effective teachers also must have strong verbal and cognitive abilities (Goodwin, 2010). In addition to performing a variety of major functions in the classroom such as facilitating instruction, managing the learning environment, and making professional decisions about curricula (Hunt, Simonds, & Cooper, 2002), language teachers add to the complexity of teaching by providing content and instruction in a new language. That is, students learn a new language while acquiring the necessary tools to use that language.

Additionally, the role of the language teacher has changed from drill instructor to conversation partner and source of comprehensible input in the target language (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Following best practices as outlined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2010) and others (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983; VanPatten, 2003), language teachers are encouraged to use the target language 90%<sup>+</sup> of the time for classroom instruction. Using the five goal areas of Communication, Cultures, Connections, Communities, and Comparisons developed by the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (2006) as a structure for teaching and learning, instructors must be able to communicate successfully in order to help language learners not only acquire new grammatical formations and vocabulary, but also be able to communicate how the target language connects to other cultures, disciplines, and communities by making comparisons between the learner's native language and the target language(s).

Beginning in language teacher preparation programs, curricula tend to focus on content knowledge, pedagogy and assessment, classroom management, and the integration of technology into instruction while placing pre-service teachers in multiple field experiences in order to meet state certification guidelines. Additionally, pre-service language teachers in the United States (US) must pass a variety of examinations such as the Writing Proficiency Test (Language Testing Inter-

national, 2015) as well as individual state's basic skills and content area competency exams. Regardless of calls to include oral communication competencies for teachers (Hunt, Simonds, & Cooper, 2002), many teacher education programs in the US do not require coursework in speech communication even though national associations such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2013), Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC, 2011), and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) list various communication goals for teachers.

Nevertheless, while emphasis is made to train pre-service language educators how to implement various methods in order to connect to students and motivate them to acquire a new language, many times language teachers report that their perceived confidence (i.e. efficacy) to engage and motivate students is low when compared to their abilities in instructional strategies and classroom management (Swanson, 2010, 2012). Thus, if teachers' perceived sense of efficacy is high in the four communicative skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening, and speaking), the instructor may be more likely to engage learners in mastery experiences, which can lead to increased communication in the target language (Chacón, 2005).

In order to become a competent communicator, teachers must develop a bond and familiarity between themselves and their students, referred to in the literature as immediacy, relationships, and affect-for-you (Worley, Titsworth, Worley, & Cornett-DeVito, 2007). That is, in order to create a common identity between the teacher and the students, the instructor gains student attention and combines appropriate slang and non-verbal behaviors (e.g. eye contact, gestures, smiling) to help students identify with him or her. The creation of such an interpersonal relationship fosters a two-way process in which teachers must be able to perceive and respond to the students' reaction to his or her communication. Unfortunately, while it has been noted that a teacher's communication skills are applied in all aspects of teaching (Saunders & Mills, 1999), there are few studies examining how language teachers' socio-communicative skills and characteristics are related to student outcomes. For that reason, it is important to understand and measure qualities (i.e. assertiveness and responsiveness) that make teachers communicatively competent using the Socio-Communicative Orientation Scale (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990).

A review of the literature on language teacher communication reveals that researchers have studied various areas such as instructors' use of the students' first language and exclusive use of the target language (Auerbach, 1993; Duff & Polio, 1990; Macaro, 2001; Phillipson, 1992; Polio & Duff, 1994; Turnbull, 1999; Turnbull & Arnett, 2002), code switching (Ellis, 1984; Gearon, 1998; Wong-Fillmore, 1985), teacher talk (Hall, 1995; Nunan, 1991; Wong-Fillmore, 1985), rates of speech and teachers pauses (Griffiths, 1990; Hakansson, 1986; Wesche & Ready, 1985), teachers' difficulties using the target language for instruction (Morris, 1998), and language teachers' beliefs about fundamental concepts underlying the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (Allen, 2002). However, there is a complete dearth of research focused on language teachers' self-perceptions of their communication competence and how teacher communication affects student performance. Thus, the author examined the communication literature.

## **2.1 Clear teaching**

It is not enough for the instructor to possess only strong content knowledge when addressing students because simply being proficient in the target language does not necessarily equate to being an effective teacher. Teachers must be excellent communicators regardless of the language of instruction. Chesebro (2002) suggests that one of the main purposes of instruction of any type is for students to grasp a similar understanding of the course material that the instructor has. While depth of understanding may take years to develop, Chesebro's (2002) research on clear teaching – "the ability to effectively stimulate the desired meaning of course content and processes in the minds of students through the use of appropriately-structured verbal and nonverbal messages" (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, p. 262) – can be used to show how teacher communication affects student achievement in general. It can be hypothesized that teachers not only strive to have their

students understand the subject-specific information accurately, they also want learners to be able to recall certain information during assessments. Killen (2009) notes that recall is “particularly important when the language of instruction is not the students’ first language” (p. 124). Therefore, it seems that clear teaching is essential in today’s test-crazed society.

Clear teaching is a two dimensional construct: verbal clarity and structural clarity (Chesebro, 2002). Also referred to as cognitive clarity, verbal clarity consists of fluency and the use of explanations and examples. As advanced by Chesebro, fluency is concerned with a clear and uninterrupted manner of speaking. For example, when students appear to be confused and not understand what the instructor is saying, a lack of fluency is determined as he or she tries to think and deliver a better explanation while not stammering and uttering things like “um, what I mean to say is...” or “uh, well, a better way to think about this is ...”. In terms of language learning, it can be equated to negotiation of meaning. In addition to being a fluent communicator, teachers also need to approach topics and be able to speak to students at an appropriate level. Again, in terms of language learning, such communication can be contextualized through Krashen’s (1985) notion of comprehensible input as language teachers use the target language in way that learners can understand what is being communicated. In general, Chesebro (2002) advanced the idea that effective teachers are able to avoid using terminology that is too advanced or that students have not encountered yet, and can explain concepts in such a way that makes it easier for students to assimilate the information.

While verbal clarity is certainly an important factor of clear teaching, structural clarity – an instructor’s use of “previews, reviews, transitions, organization, and the use of visual aids or skeletal outlines” (Chesebro, 2002, p. 97) – is vital. Teachers must be able to tap into students’ cognitive schemata and make connections early in order to improve learning by the use of advance organizers. Once the preview is concluded, a sound organization of the lesson is needed whereby students participate actively in several activities centered on the day’s objective(s). During instruction, teachers should remain focused, avoiding tangential discussions. Staying on task is essential and transitioning from one activity to another must be as seamless as possible. Following instruction and practice of new information, instructors need to take the time to review what was learned because students tend to remember information that is presented first and last (Chesebro, 2002).

By providing students with skeletal outlines that contain major points and subpoints for units of instruction, students are less likely to miss something important, thus reducing interpretational errors. Additionally, by providing rich visual aids such as video and realia, instructors can reach visual and tactile-kinesthetic learners and increase student motivation (Pegrum, 2000). Following instruction, Killen (2009) advocates for requesting student feedback in order to determine the effectiveness of the day’s lesson in order for the instructor to reflect on his or her practice, a critical aspect associated with effective instruction and improved student outcomes (Freeman & Richards, 1996; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003).

A review of the FL teaching and learning literature reveals that researchers advocate in favor of both teacher clarity and structural clarity in general educational contexts (Hines, Cruickshank, & Kennedy, 1985; Land, 1981) as well as when teaching a new language (Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Oxford, 1990; Richards & Bohlke, 2011; Shrum & Glisan, 2009). However, there is a dearth of empirical research on the effects of clear teaching in both general and FL teaching contexts. From a theoretical standpoint, Chesebro and McCroskey (1998) posit that clear teaching may likely reduce student receiver apprehension by making material easier for students to integrate into their cognitive schemata. From the language learning perspective, clear teaching may lead to a reduction of students’ affective filters, which in turn increases both comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and comprehended input (Gass, 1997), which can lead to improved language learning.

In order to address the lack of empirical research on teachers’ socio-communicative orientation, one’s perception of his or her own skill in initiating, adapting, and responding to the communication of others (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994), with regard to student outcomes, this article presents findings from an exploratory study that investigated the relationship between

Spanish teachers' perceptions of their communicative competence as measured by one's socio-communicative orientation and how their students scored on the National Spanish Exams.

## 2.2 *Conceptual framework*

It can be assumed that school leaders want teachers who embody a constellation of characteristics, one of which is communicative competence. These individuals possess the "ability to make ideas known to others by talking or writing" (McCroskey, 1984, p. 263). Richmond (2002) posits that such communicative competence relies on three elements: (1) a cognitive understanding of the communication process; (2) the psychomotor ability to generate necessary communication behaviors; and (3) a positive affective orientation toward communication itself. Thus, in order to attain basic communicative competence, an individual must develop an understanding of what is needed to be done, develop the physical behaviors required to do it, and ultimately want to do it.

Grounded in the field of instructional communication, socio-communicative orientation frames this study because of its direct relationship with teacher clarity (Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997). As noted by Richmond and McCroskey (1990), "communicating effectively with different people on different topics and at different times requires flexible communication behaviors" (p. 86). In order to measure such communication, two concepts have been identified as basic elements of communicative competence: socio-communicative style and socio-communicative orientation (Cole & McCroskey, 2000; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). While both constructs may seem similar at first glance, socio-communicative style refers to the perceptions that others have of one's teaching style (i.e. how students view the instructor's teaching style). However, socio-communicative orientation represents how the instructor views himself or herself. It is a self-measure of one's communicative competence. That is, how that person initiates, reacts, modifies, and concludes the communication with others via two primary domains, assertiveness and responsiveness (Dilbeck & McCroskey, 2008; Paulsel, Richmond, McCroskey, & Cayanus, 2005; Teven, 2005).

Assertiveness deals with requests, active disagreement, expression of personal rights and feelings, the defense of those rights and feelings, the initiation, maintenance, and disengagement from conversations, maintaining self-respect, the satisfaction of personal needs and personal happiness, statements of opinion with conviction, and standing up for oneself without attacking others (Klopf, 1991; McCroskey, Richmond, & Stewart, 1986). Thompson and Klopf (1991) suggest that assertiveness is "a person's general tendency to be interpersonally dominant, ascendant, and forceful" (p. 65). These individuals tend to be rather competitive in confirming their overall self-expression while recognizing others (Dilbeck & McCroskey, 2008). Assertive communicators tend to talk faster and louder, using more gestures and eye contact than responsive communicators (Richmond, 2002). Infante (1988) and others (Rancer, 1998; Wiggley III, 1998) argue that assertiveness is one of several traits of aggression, which can be considered constructive or destructive. Constructive elements of aggression tend to improve interpersonal relationships whereas destructive forms tend to undermine and ultimately damage the relationship. With respect to teachers, assertiveness refers to teacher control in the classroom. Kearney and McCroskey (1980) suggested that assertiveness can be demonstrated by the teacher's ability to maintain student attention toward instruction, to create a welcoming learning environment, and to promote student activity and productivity.

Responsiveness, however, refers to a person's capacity and willingness to be sensitive to the communication of other people by recognizing the others' needs and wishes (Thompson & Klopf, 1991). In order to be considered a responsive educator, individuals have good listening skills, making others comfortable in speaking situations, mindful of the needs of other people, and have the willingness to be open to ideas of others. Such individuals can be described as "empathetic, friendly, helpful, sympathetic, warm, and understanding" (Dilbeck & McCroskey, 2008, p. 258), which is consistent with literature spanning several decades (McCroskey, Richmond, & Stewart, 1986; Mottet & Beebe, 2006). Dilbeck and McCroskey (2008) contend that responsiveness allows for people to collect information regarding alternatives in communication. They also note that

while these individuals are “responsive to the rights of others, they are not so submissive as to give up their own rights and defer readily to others” (p. 258). While these two factors tend to oppose one another, Richmond and McCroskey (1990) suggested that they are slightly positively correlated at best.

While assertiveness and responsiveness represent the two primary domains constituting one’s socio-communicative orientation, research suggests that there is a third factor, flexibility or versatility. While balancing assertiveness and responsiveness in order to initiate and sustain effective interpersonal communication, competent communicators must have a high degree of flexibility (Parks, 1994; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990; Rubin & Martin, 1994). Cognitive flexibility refers to a person’s (a) *awareness* that in any given situation there are options and alternatives available, (b) *willingness* to be flexible and adapt to the situation, and (c) *self-efficacy* or belief that one has the ability to be flexible (Martin & Anderson, 1998). That is, before people decide to modify their behavior, they “undergo the social cognition process and become aware of their choices and alternatives” (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998, p. 532). However, such awareness is not enough to be flexible; people must be willing to change, which in turn leads people to have the confidence with which to carry out the behavior (i.e. self-efficacy). Cognitively flexible individuals are willing to try new communication strategies, encounter new situations, and adapt behaviors contextually.

Viewed collectively, results from a series of three validation studies of the Cognitive Flexibility Scale show that communicators who are cognitively flexible are also assertive and responsive (Martin & Anderson, 1998). The authors stated that “the assertive communicator seemingly would be willing to make the necessary communication changes to achieve a goal. Likewise, the responsive individual would be adaptable to the relational needs of others in a situation” (p. 4). Furthermore, they reported a low correlation between assertiveness and responsiveness and the correlations of assertiveness and responsiveness with cognitive flexibility, which supports the notion that it is not enough for a person to have assertive and responsive skills. The individual must also know when it is appropriate to be assertive or not as well as when to be responsive or not in order to be an effective communicator (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Thus, it can be speculated that a competent communicator who is flexible would be more successful than the competent communicator who is less flexible.

In an effort to investigate how Spanish teachers’ communication is related to their students’ performance on the National Spanish Exams, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How did Spanish teachers who administer the NSEs to their students self-rate their perceived socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility?
2. Is there a relationship between the teachers’ perceived socio-communicative orientation in teaching Spanish and their students’ scores on the NSEs?
3. What is the relationship between the teachers’ perceived cognitive flexibility and their students’ scores on the NSEs?

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 Procedure

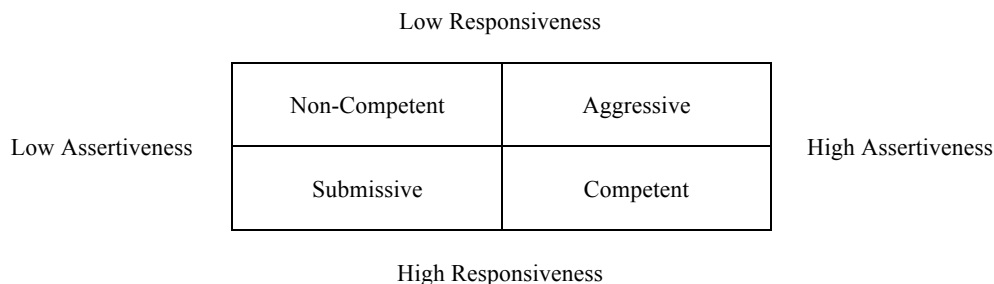
In 2012, the researcher initially contacted the Executive Director of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) to discuss a series of research projects designed to explore different characteristics of Spanish teachers. Following Institutional Review Board and AATSP approval, the researcher placed the *Socio-Communicative Orientation Scale* and the *Cognitive Flexibility Scale* along with a participant demographic sheet online. The instruments were tested prior to data collection in order to ensure that the data collection system functioned properly. Next, the researcher worked with the Director of the National Spanish Examination to send emails to teachers who administer the National Spanish Examinations to their students and to request their permission to participate in the study.

### 3.2 Instrumentation

#### 3.2.1 Socio-Communicative Orientation Scale

Based in part on the work of Merrill and Reid (1981), Richmond and McCroskey (1990) developed and validated this scale (see Appendix A). It is composed of 20 personality characteristics in terms of adjectives that measure respondents' assertiveness and responsiveness using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Participants are asked to work quickly and record their first impressions. Scores are calculated for both the assertiveness (10 items) and the responsiveness (10 items) dimensions. Items measuring assertiveness include defends own beliefs, independent, forceful, dominant, competitive, and acts a leader. Those measuring responsiveness include helpful, sympathetic, compassionate, sincere, gentle, and friendly. The scores obtained by the instrument have been shown to be valid, and researchers have reported reliability coefficients ranging from .83 to .91 for the assertiveness dimension and from .83 to .96 for the responsiveness dimension (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Martin & Anderson, 1998; Myers & Avtgis, 1997; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990).

Using the Socio-Communicative Orientation Scale, people can be categorized into four different communicative types: Competent, Aggressive, Submissive, and Non-competent (Martin & Anderson, 1998; Merrill & Reid, 1981; Richmond, 2002). As shown in Figure 1, the Competent communicator self-rates high in both assertiveness and responsiveness. These individuals are considered social specialists and have some expressive tendencies that make them more instructionally-interpersonally competent communicators (Richmond & McCroskey, 2001). They can be described as friendly, creative, ambitious, imaginative, manipulative, dramatic, and highly inspirational. They tend to have less regularity in their routines and are quite flexible in their behaviors. They are very goal-oriented, value relationships, and subsequently use those relationships in order to attain personal goals (Richmond, 2002).



**Fig. 1. Socio-communicative orientation**

However, individuals scoring high in assertiveness and low in responsiveness are categorized as Aggressive. These people are control specialists. They tend to be action-oriented and lack patience. They know what they want and they do whatever it takes to accomplish their goal(s). Described as strong-willed, efficient, pushy, and dominating, they want proof before making decisions and prefer to take hold of a situation in order to influence others to see things from their perspective.

The third group is the Submissive, people who self-rate low in assertiveness but high in responsiveness. These individuals are considered relationship specialists and can be described as supportive, respectful, accommodating, agreeable, and conforming. They tend to be emotional individuals largely driven by what they feel. They are highly sensitive to others and value relationships highly. Acceptance is essential to them, and they are not motivated to lead.

Finally, the Non-competent grouping is comprised of individuals who self-identify low in both assertiveness and responsiveness. People in this group are considered technical specialists and tend

to be critical, indecisive, picky, and even unenthusiastic. They are not risk-takers and do not welcome challenges. Much like the Submissive, Non-competent people are most content when guided by another. Additionally, these individuals tend to be slow to make decisions, and they may be apprehensive about communication, and therefore may be more withdrawn, which may lead to them to “be less effective communicators than those with other styles” (Richmond, 2002, p. 110).

### 3.2.2 *Cognitive flexibility scale*

Martin and Rubin (1995) developed this instrument to measure an individual’s awareness of communication alternatives in any situation, one’s willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation, and a person’s self-efficacy in being flexible (see Appendix B). While described in a multidimensional fashion, researchers treat flexibility as a unidimensional construct (Martin & Anderson, 1998; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999; Martin & Rubin, 1994, 1995; Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011). The scale consists of 12 items that participants rate on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). Sample items include statements such as *I am willing to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem* and *I can find workable solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems*. Four items that are stated negatively must be reverse-scored (items 2, 3, 6, and 10). The instrument is valid (Martin & Anderson, 1998) and has obtained reliability coefficients range from 0.79 to 0.84 (Cayanus, 2005; Martin & Anderson, 1998; Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998; Martin & Rubin, 1995; Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011).

### 3.3 *National Spanish Exams*

The National Spanish Examinations (NSEs) are the most widely used tests of Spanish in the United States that “recognize student achievement and promote language proficiency in the study of Spanish” (National Spanish Examinations, 2013, p. 1). A subsidiary of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), the NSEs are standardized assessments for grades 6-12 administered online. Developed in the mid-1950s, they have become popular among school administrators, Spanish teachers, and their students. Each year new exams for each of the seven levels are constructed by a team of world language experts. In the spring, approximately 4000 teachers and school officials voluntarily administer the NSEs to hundreds of thousands of students studying Spanish in order to measure student competency in using the target language.

According to AATSP, the purpose for developing and offering the exams annually is to promote proficiency in interpretative communication, to recognize achievement in the study of Spanish as a second language, to assess the national standards as they pertain to learning Spanish, and to stimulate lifelong learning in Spanish (National Spanish Exams, 2013). The NSEs are inexpensive (\$3/student) and educators register their students online for the exams by the last day of January each year. Teachers or school districts are under no obligation to join AATSP in order to participate in the NSEs.

Based on the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006), the NSEs measure student ability in two domains: achievement and proficiency. The Achievement section examines student knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. The Proficiency section assesses students’ interpretative skills by measuring student performance in reading and listening comprehension. In order to calculate a total score for each of the seven NSEs, the student’s score on the Achievement and Proficiency sections are combined. Once the exams are taken, the organization calculates total scores and percentile rankings, which are then returned to participating teachers to show each student’s individual performance.

The NSEs are recognized by various teaching and administrative organizations and associations at local, state, and national levels. According to the Director of the National Spanish Examinations, teachers report using the NSEs to prepare students to take other standardized exams such as Advanced Placement, College Level Entry Placement exams, and International Baccalaureate (Kevin Cessna-Buscemi, personal communication, July 8, 2013). Furthermore, school administra-



tors have reported using data from the NSEs to provide evidence of student improvement over an academic year. More information about the examinations and copies of old examinations are publicly available (<http://www.nationalspanishexam.org/>).

### 3.4 Subjects

Three hundred seventy Spanish teachers volunteered to participate in this study. Females (87%) outnumbered males and the mean age was 46.80 years. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (71%) followed by Latinos (23%), Multiracial (4%), Asian (1%), and Native Americans (1%). The majority held graduate degrees (68% master's degree, 5% doctorate) and most (81%) of the participants reported having studied overseas. Twenty-five percent reported that Spanish was their native language.

The majority of the teachers participating in the study reported teaching either in public (53%) or private (31%) schools. About one in five of the participants view the National Spanish Exams as a motivational contest (22%) while slightly fewer view the NSEs as an assessment that provides valid scores of students' abilities to use the Spanish language (18%). The remaining 60% of the participants viewed the exams as both motivational and as providing valid scores of students' abilities to use Spanish. Most of the teachers (91%) reported that they planned to continue teaching the following year while 4% reported that they would be leaving the profession.

With regard to whom teachers administer the exam, almost half of the participants (46%) reported administering the exams to all of their students while 35% reported giving the exams to only those students who volunteer to take it. The remaining 19% of the participants stated that they administered the exams only to their best students. Because it can be assumed that students' scores in the last two groupings could inflate test scores and subsequently the means on the exams, multivariate analysis of variance tests were conducted to examine differences in mean scores for each of the three groups of students' scores. No statistically significant differences were found so the entire sample of teachers and students are included in the study.

The sample's demographics reflect the demographics for the national teaching population regardless of content area specialty for age, ethnicity, and gender (Coopersmith, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). The sample's demographics are also comparable to the demographics of language teachers in terms of age, ethnicity, and gender (Swanson, 2012, 2013, 2014; Swanson & Huff, 2010).

Demographic data about the students ( $N = 10,973$ ) of these instructors were not collected. Student data only included the scores on the seven NSEs and the level of the NSE. Specific differences on each of the seven exams were not sought for this exploratory study. Scores from students who signed up for the exam, but never took the exam, were removed from the dataset because their scores were displayed as zeros, and a score of zero was not necessarily indicative of student knowledge and ability in Spanish. The inclusion of such scores would skew the accuracy of the findings of the study.

## 4 Findings

Data from the online survey were entered into a statistical software program (SPSS 20.0). The data met all of the methodological and statistical criteria in order to conduct all of the calculations reported here. Additionally, to minimize Type 1 testing errors, a statistical power analysis was calculated and the results indicated that the sample size was adequate for interpreting the results with a 95% confidence interval. To begin the data analysis process, participant responses to the four items of the Cognitive Flexibility Scale were reverse scored (items 2, 3, 6, and 10). Then, the researcher calculated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the Socio-Communicative Orientation Scale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and its two subscales: Assertiveness ( $\alpha = .83$ ) and Responsiveness ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Afterward, the reliability coefficient for the 12-item Cognitive Flexibility Scale was calculated ( $\alpha = .80$ ). The coefficients for each of the instruments were similar to those reported in the liter-

ature and each of the instruments' reliability coefficients indicated satisfactory consistency for research purposes (Henson, 2001).

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility**

<i>Socio-Communicative Orientation</i>	M	SD
(1) Helpful (R)	4.58	.83
(12) Sincere (R)	4.50	.70
(17) Friendly (R)	4.44	.64
(8) Compassionate (R)	4.43	.67
(4) Responsive to others (R)	4.41	.64
(3) Independent (A)	4.39	.71
(10) Sensitive to the needs of others (R)	4.35	.67
(7) Sympathetic (R)	4.33	.71
(18) Acts as a leader (A)	4.18	.72
(14) Willing to take a stand (A)	4.15	.73
(2) Defends own beliefs (A)	4.12	.76
(15) Warm (R)	4.09	.84
(9) Assertive (A)	3.91	.85
(6) Has Strong Personality (A)	3.73	1.04
(13) Gentle (R)	3.61	.91
(16) Tender (R)	3.57	.98
(20) Competitive (A)	3.50	1.12
(5) Forceful (A)	3.13	1.04
(11) Dominant (A)	2.94	1.12
(19) Aggressive (A)	2.49	1.10
R – Responsive subscale item, A – Assertiveness subscale item		
<i>Cognitive Flexibility</i>	M	SD
(11) I am willing to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem.	5.32	.60
(7) I am willing to work at creative solutions to problems.	5.25	.75
(8) My behavior is a result of conscious decisions that I make.	5.21	.77
(1) I can communicate an idea in many different ways.	5.19	.85
(10) I have difficulty using my knowledge on a given topic in real life situations.	5.14	1.00
(4) In any given situation, I am able to act appropriately.	5.12	.81
(12) I have the self-confidence necessary to try different ways of behaving.	5.10	.85
(9) I have many possible ways of behaving in any given situation.	4.93	.99
(6) I seldom have choices to choose from when deciding how to behave.	4.87	1.23
(3) I feel like I never get to make decisions.	4.77	1.09
(5) I can find workable solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems.	4.71	.82
(2) I avoid new and unusual situations.	4.47	1.19

In order to answer the first research question about teachers' self-ratings of their socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility, means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the items for both scales. With respect to participants' socio-communicative orientation, Table 1 shows in rank order that participants perceived themselves highest as *helpful* ( $M = 4.58$ ), *sincere* ( $M = 4.50$ ), *friendly* ( $M = 4.44$ ), and *compassionate* ( $M = 4.43$ ). They rated the following qualities the lowest: *competitive* ( $M = 3.50$ ), *forceful* ( $M = 3.13$ ), and *dominant* ( $M = 2.94$ ). Turning to the Cognitive Flexibility Scale, the teachers rated themselves highest in *willingness to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem* ( $M = 5.32$ ) and *willingness to work at cre-*

*ative solutions to problems* and lowest in the *ability to find workable solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems* ( $M = 4.71$ ) and *avoidance of new and unusual situations* ( $M = 4.47$ ).

With respect to the second research question about the relationship between the teachers' socio-communicative orientation and their students' scores on the NSEs, it was necessary to compute the median splits for both assertiveness and responsiveness and create the four categories for the participants per the literature (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). With respect to assertiveness, participants with a score lower than 43 were considered low while participants with a score of 43 or higher were considered high. With regard to Responsiveness, participants with a score lower than 35 were considered low while participants with a score of 35 or higher were considered high. For example, the group labeled Competent consisted of those teachers who had scores 43 or higher in assertiveness and 35 or higher in responsiveness. The median split scores were then used to classify teachers for each socio-communicative category: Competent ( $n = 3440$ ), Aggressive ( $n = 2957$ ), Submissive ( $n = 2961$ ), and Non-competent ( $n = 1885$ ).

Once the four groups were created, the researcher conducted a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine if there were significant differences between the four socio-communicative orientations as they related to students' scores on the NSEs. The four orientations served as the independent variables while the total score and the achievement and proficiency subscales of the NSEs served as the dependent variables.

**Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility scales and student performance on the NSEs**

Socio-Communicative Orientation	Total Exam		Achievement Subtest		Proficiency Subtest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Competent ( $n = 3440$ )	243.32*	63.33	114.82*	37.85	128.50*	31.89
Aggressive ( $n = 2957$ )	229.51	62.87	107.60	37.63	121.91	31.71
Submissive ( $n = 2961$ )	231.71	62.76	108.64	37.33	123.07	31.59
Non-Competent ( $n = 1885$ )	220.73	64.06	103.61	38.53	117.12	32.54
Cognitive Flexibility	Total Exam		Achievement Subtest		Proficiency Subtest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Competent ( $n = 3440$ )	237.84*	63.66	108.91*	37.99	128.93*	32.04
Aggressive ( $n = 2957$ )	232.56	63.47	107.24	37.93	125.32	31.91
Submissive ( $n = 2961$ )	230.46	63.11	107.89	37.47	122.57	31.80
Non-Competent ( $n = 1885$ )	224.70	64.58	103.58	37.56	121.12	32.73

$p < .001$

Results from the MANOVA in Table 2 show that, of the four categories of Spanish teachers for the total exam, students of Spanish teachers termed as Competent significantly outperformed students of teachers in the Non-competent grouping. Examination of the output from the statistical tests showed that there was a significant 22.59 point mean difference between students of teachers categorized as Competent and Non-Competent, a 5.6% increase for the total exam score. Students of Spanish teachers classified as Submissive scored higher than students of teachers termed as Aggressive and Non-Competent; however, the difference was not statistically significant. When examining students' scores on the two subscales of the NSEs, similar results were found where students of those categorized as Competent outperformed students of teachers in the other three categories on both the Achievement (vocabulary and grammar) and Proficiency (reading and listening comprehension) sections of the exams. Regardless of the scores for the total exam or scores for the

two subscales, students of those teachers classified as Non-Competent scored the lowest on the NSEs. There was a 5.6% difference on the two subscales between the students' scores for the Competent and Non-competent groupings.

Turning to the third research question about the relationship between the participants' Cognitive Flexibility and their students' scores on the NSEs, similar results to those just reported were found when comparing the four groups of teachers on the Cognitive Flexibility Scale and their students' scores on the NSEs. Students of those Spanish teachers in the Competent group scored significantly higher on the exams than those students of teachers in the Non-competent group. Specifically, the students of teachers in the Competent group scored 3.2% higher on the total exam than students of teachers in the Non-competent grouping. Gains of 2.5% and 4% were found for the Achievement and Proficiency subscales respectively.

Much like the previous findings, students of Spanish teachers categorized as Submissive and Aggressive scored lower than those of the Competent grouping yet above those in the Non-Competent grouping. On the total score for the exams, students of teachers in the Competent category scored an average of 13.14 points higher than students of teachers in the Non-competent grouping. Similar results were found for the two subscales of the NSEs where there were significant differences between the Competent and Non-competent groupings. Post hoc tests (Tukey HSD, Scheffe, and LSD) confirmed the findings for both instruments.

## 5 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between Spanish teachers' socio-communicative orientation, cognitive flexibility, and how these two constructs were related to students' test scores on the NSEs. As noted earlier, the participants' demographics reflected those for the national teaching population regardless of content area specialty for age, ethnicity, and gender (Coopersmith, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) as well as the demographics for language teachers (Swanson, 2012, 2013, 2014; Swanson & Huff, 2010).

With respect to the first research question about how the participants self-rated their socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility, inspection of the rank order of means first for the Socio-Communicative Orientation scale (see Table 1) showed that of the 20 items, the participants rated six items from the Responsive subscale the highest overall, suggesting that the sample sees themselves as sensitive to the communication of other people (Thompson & Klopff, 1991). Such a finding supports earlier research indicating that these teachers can be appropriately described as friendly, helpful, and compassionate (Dilbeck & McCroskey, 2008; McCroskey, Richmond, & Stewart, 1986; Mottet & Beebe, 2006), which are qualities that one would expect to facilitate learning. Likewise, examination of the means also shows that the participants rated four of the items from the Assertiveness subscale the lowest, which supports earlier findings in that they tend to be less interpersonally dominant, controlling, and forceful in their communication (Thompson & Klopff, 1991).

When examining the results from the Cognitive Flexibility Scale, the means tended to be on the higher end of the 6-point Likert scale, suggesting that the participants are able to adapt to the demands of a situation and adjust accordingly, which is characteristic of competent teachers (Martin & Rubin, 1994). Data from the scale showed that the participants are willing to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem and work at creative solutions to problems, the two highest rated items of the 12-item scale. Such high ratings of their cognitive flexibility advance the notion that this group of teachers may have a higher tolerance for disagreement (Rubin & Martin, 1994) and be less verbally aggressive with their students (Martin, Anderson, & Thweatt, 1998), again which are characteristics of competent communicators that have an influential effect on student learning (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999; Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011; Parks, 1994; Richmond & McCroskey, 1990; Rubin & Martin, 1994).

Viewed collectively in relation to students' scores on the NSEs, the second and third research questions, results showed that students of those teachers categorized as Competent scored the

highest on the NSEs for the entire exam as well as the two subscales. The MANOVA showed that there are no statistical differences between the scores for students in the Submissive and Aggressive groups. Evidently, being higher in one area (e.g., responsiveness) and lower in the other (e.g., assertiveness) does not significantly affect an outcome on the NSEs. However, it matters if the teachers are strong in both areas.

Students of Competent communicators significantly outperformed students of those categorized as Non-competent by 22.59 points, which equates to a gain of almost 6% on the total exam score. Such a difference of test score can be very important because in many classrooms teachers use a 10% differential grading scale. That is, students who score between 90 to 100% on assessments receive an A in a class. Students who score between 80 to 89% receive a B and so forth. Thus, a difference of 5.6% on the total exam score can be the difference between receiving a B (86%) and an A (91.5%) or a B and C in a Spanish class at the end of a grading period.

The differences found among the four groups on both scales with relation to the NSEs, especially between those categorized at Competent and Non-competent, provide support to the notion that those in the Competent grouping can be considered effective teachers when examining teacher attributes in relation to test scores. Perhaps the difference in test scores stems from the teachers in the Competent grouping being able to co-create an identity with their students, which can lead to increased achievement (Worley, Titsworth, Worley, & Cornett-DeVito, 2007). They learn to use a common language and are able to use appropriate terminology and can explain concepts in such a way that makes it easier for students to assimilate the information (Chesebro, 2002). Additionally, perhaps these educators teach more clearly and are able to explain unfamiliar ideas such as different rules of grammar and cultural ideas in better fashion than those in the other three socio-communicative groupings. They may also be able to structure their communication better in that they can balance the assertive and responsive behaviors. Research suggests that these individuals are better at maintaining student attention toward instruction, creating a welcoming and low anxiety learning environment, and these teachers have the ability to promote student activity and productivity (Kearney & McCroskey, 1980).

Such findings are important because if the students also view their instructor as being Competent (i.e. highly assertive and responsive), there are additional educational benefits. First, the research on instructors' socio-communicative style (i.e. how students view their instructors) shows that Competent instructors have a higher level of trust between themselves and their students (Wooten & McCroskey, 1996). Moreover, Competent instructors are viewed by their students as being less verbally aggressive than non-competent and even aggressive instructors (Myers, 1997). Third, instructors who are perceived as having greater character, being more knowledgeable and caring, are perceived as more credible. Such perceptions by students can lead to higher levels of motivation (Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997), and ultimately, to higher levels of learning.

Based on the findings, those in the Competent grouping may teach in a clearer manner. Referring to the earlier discussion on teacher clarity (Chesebro, 2002), these individuals may have improved verbal clarity and structural clarity. They may rehearse more which can lead to less stammering when giving explanations and guide instruction better. They may even develop explanations prior to teaching. Moreover, these individuals may have better organizational strategies for instruction and can implement interesting previews, reviews, transitions, and visual aids, which are essential for clear teaching. Additionally, teachers in the Competent grouping may be able to make better connections with students' background knowledge and combine such information with focused instruction free from unnecessary tangential departures. These individuals may be more flexible in their communication with students in order to adapt their assertive and responsive behaviors according to the situation (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey 1994). Overall, these teachers may be better at creating a welcoming learning environment and maintaining student attention toward instruction (Kearney & McCroskey, 1980).

## 6 Pedagogical implications

This research has important implications for educational stakeholders. First, with respect to teacher education coordinators, perhaps it is time to heed Hunt, Simonds, and Cooper's (2002) calling to include oral communication competencies for teachers. Advisors could strongly suggest to teacher candidates to fill some of the Area F requirements (i.e. usually arts and humanities electives as part of the major) by taking classes in communication in order to promote clear teaching. Such recommendations for courses can be listed on program of study sheets and used during advising sessions. Second, with respect to faculty members in teacher education programs, instructors could collaborate in an interdisciplinary manner to develop curriculum and invite professors specializing in communication to classes as guest speakers. It is important to note that research finds that teachers tend to teach as they were taught (Russell, 1997; Schifter, 1997; Scholz, 1995). A new paradigm must be set forth whereby pre-service teachers critically examine their discourse because it appears that communicative competence is positively related to student outcomes. Moreover, teacher candidates could be asked to self-assess their own socio-communicative orientation and cognitive flexibility. Pre-service teachers and in-service teachers alike would benefit knowing more about their communicative behaviors. In turn, and even more importantly perhaps, their future students may benefit.

As discussed earlier, state and national legislation continues to promote the idea that highly qualified teachers (i.e. those with a degree in the content area) can be considered highly effective teachers by focusing solely on content knowledge, while research continues to show that there are other qualities of effective teaching such as teachers' sense of efficacy (Swanson, 2014), teachers' sense of humor (Swanson, 2013), and developing student motivation (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) which have a positive effect and leads to effective instruction from an empirical standpoint. Clearly, having strong content knowledge is important; however, policymakers need to be aware of other teacher characteristics that lead to improved student outcomes such as a teacher's sense of humor (Swanson, 2013) and sense of efficacy in teaching languages (Swanson, 2014).

In light of these findings, it is important to note that this research has its limitations. First, the data were self-reported, which does not allow for the verification of accuracy. Second, data regarding the students in the study were not requested nor included in the study. Future studies could include student demographic data in order to identify variables of interest that lead to student performance on the NSEs. Additionally, this study only involved quantitative measures, and perhaps a mixed methods approach that includes teacher and student interviews would be informative. Finally, the notion of teacher effectiveness was operationalized as students' scores on a national examination. Clearly, other factors constitute one's effectiveness in the classroom.

Despite the limitations, this research helps broaden the literature base and provides a starting point for studies focused on teacher socio-communication styles/orientations as they relate to student achievement. More research on the elements of effective teachers with relation to student outcomes is warranted. It would be interesting to learn more about the identity of the four categories of teachers in terms of teachers' sense of efficacy, their identity as it relates to vocational satisfaction, and other constructs that have been linked to effective teachers. Additionally, it would be informative to know more about the sources that fuel the socio-communicative orientation in the teachers' in the Competent group. That is, how do these educators communicate in the classroom compared to other Spanish teachers? Finally, future research could include a longitudinal approach to gain knowledge about the developmental process of teachers' socio-communicative styles / orientations.

The past 50 years has shown that teachers are one of the most important factors with regard to student achievement (Akbari & Allvar, 2010; Goldhaber, 2002; Hunt, Simonds, & Cooper, 2002). However, while it has been suggested that highly effective teachers are those who have the necessary certification, content area knowledge, and strong verbal and cognitive abilities (Goodwin, 2010), it is time to move away from such a narrow definition of teacher effectiveness. Other fac-

tors such as communicative competence play a role. Clearly, more research on the factors that can be documented empirically to improve student outcomes is warranted.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Socio Communicative Orientation Scale

**INSTRUCTIONS:** The questionnaire below lists twenty personality characteristics.

Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of these characteristics applies to you while interacting with others by marking whether you (5) strongly agree that it applies, (4) agree that it applies, (3) are undecided, (2) disagree that it applies, or (1) strongly disagree that it applies. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly; record your first impression.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. helpful
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. defends own beliefs
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. independent
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. responsive to others
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. forceful
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. has strong personality
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. sympathetic
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. compassionate
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. assertive
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. sensitive to the needs of others
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. dominant
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. sincere
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. gentle
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. willing to take a stand
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. warm
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. tender
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. friendly
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. acts as a leader
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. aggressive
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. competitive

Scoring:

Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 14, 18, 19 and 20 measure assertiveness.

Items 1, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17 measure responsiveness

Source: Richmond & McCroskey (1990)

*Appendix B*

The Cognitive Flexibility Scale

The following statements deal with your beliefs and feelings about your own behavior. Read each statement and respond by identifying what best represents your agreement with each statement.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6	5	4	3	2	1

- \_\_\_ 1. I can communicate an idea in many different ways.
- \_\_\_ 2. I avoid new and unusual situations.
- \_\_\_ 3. I feel like I never get to make decisions.
- \_\_\_ 4. In any given situation, I am able to act appropriately.
- \_\_\_ 5. I can find workable solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems.
- \_\_\_ 6. I seldom have choices to choose from when deciding how to behave.
- \_\_\_ 7. I am willing to work at creative solutions to problems.
- \_\_\_ 8. My behavior is a result of conscious decisions that I make.
- \_\_\_ 9. I have many possible ways of behaving in any given situation.
- \_\_\_ 10. I have difficulty using my knowledge on a given topic in real life situations.
- \_\_\_ 11. I am willing to listen and consider alternatives for handling a problem.
- \_\_\_ 12. I have the self-confidence necessary to try different ways of behavior.

\* Items 2, 3, 6, 10 are reverse coded

Source: Martin & Rubin (1995)