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Introduction

Second language instruction in the communicative classroom has as its core a dedication to the ideals and the practice of developing learner proficiency in the target language. Many factors work collectively to promote second language competence and performance, including a teacher's knowledge and skills as well as his or her ability to successfully create and maintain a positive learning environment. Research on second/foreign language (S/FL) teacher identity indicates that effective language teachers have a strong command of the target language, an ability to organize, explain, and clarify elements associated with language learning (Brosh, 2008) as well as a strong sense of confidence in their ability to teach languages (Swanson, 2010a, 2012b). In addition, research shows that effective teachers are social, responsible, cooperative, creative, independent, adventurous, and enthusiastic (Swanson, 2008, 2012a): the highly qualified S/WL teacher is able to create an optimal learning environment in which students enjoy learning and are able to move to deeper levels of cultural understanding and increasingly higher levels of linguistic proficiency. In sum, research shows that teachers who create highly effective learning environments articulate and have high expectations for learning, communicate effectively with their students, design and implement engaging lessons and units of study, and demonstrate an ability to manage large class sizes (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011; Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Wong & Wong, 2009).

In addition, research on teacher effectiveness shows that S/WL teachers not only “recognize the presence of foreign language anxiety in language learners but also help learners acknowledge, cope with, and reduce their anxiety” (Huang & Eslami, 2010, p. 32). In order to moderate student perceptions of anxiety, which threatens student achievement in the target language (Horwitz, 2001; Krashen, 1981, 1985; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b), research suggests that teachers’ sense of humor can play a role in reducing language learner anxiety as well as increasing student achievement. The following study explores the relationship between Spanish teachers’ self-reported sense of humor and their students’ scores on the National Spanish Exams (NSEs).

Review of the Literature

For decades, researchers have investigated people's sense of humor (Berk, 2003; Johnston, 1990; Martin & Dobbin, 1988; Richman, 1995) by viewing it from a multidimensional perspective. One’s sense of humor — a style of and a means by which one gets along and protects oneself (Thorson & Powell, 1993a) — is comprised of various elements. Due to its multidimensional construction, an individual's sense of humor can be highly pronounced in some areas and be less prominent in others. A person's sense of humor contains the following elements: the recognition of oneself as a humorous person, the recognition of others' humor, an appreciation of humor, laughing, perspective, and coping humor (Thorson & Powell, 1993a). These components of a sense of humor are interrelated and can be developed to various degrees.

Previous researchers have found that having a well-developed sense of humor is beneficial to students and teachers alike. While the literature does not indicate a causal link between humor and learning (Huss, 2008), research does indicate that humor as a pedagogical tool can enhance self-esteem, increase self-motivation, reduce classroom anxiety, and promote

higher level thinking skills, which are factors that can facilitate learning (Berk, 1996; Evans-Palmer, 2010). Additionally, research about teacher enthusiasm shows a strong relationship to student success (Cabello & Terrell, 1994) and that using and/or having a sense of humor is associated with long term retention of course material and better information recall (Glenn, 2002; Hill, 1988).

Additionally, research supports the notion that teacher use of humor has been found to improve classroom climate, increase student-teacher rapport and student motivation, and reduce tension (Aboudan, 2009; Fisher, 1997; Kher, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999; Loomax & Moosavi, 1998; Provine, 2002). In fact, Hill (1988) noted that “one of the most important functions of humor is to create a positive learning environment” (p. 20). The use of humor in the classroom can ease nervousness, particularly concerning difficult topics or in situations that are commonly perceived by students to be anxiety-producing such as exams (Berk, 1996; Kher et al., 1999). Furthermore, teacher humor has a positive effect on student enjoyment (Garner, 2006), can give a humanizing effect to the image of the teacher (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004) and can facilitate student motivation, attention, and even comprehension of the course material (Pollak & Freda, 1997). Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999) suggested that the use of humor during lessons can allow students’ brains to take an educational break so that students can process and internalize information. The use of humor in the classroom can also lead to a reduction in study anxiety and stress (Cousins, 1991) as well as increase class attendance and student attentiveness (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

Students in S/WL classrooms often suffer high levels of anxiety “due to the discrepancy between their cognitive abilities and their linguistic skills” (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011, p.

399). Performance anxiety — the feeling of uneasiness, worry, nervousness, and apprehension experienced by non-native speakers when learning or using the target language — can inhibit student performance in the target language and is often reported as one of the most influential factors that impedes language learning (Horwitz, 2001). Krashen's (1981) Affective Filter Hypothesis suggests that performance anxiety has an adverse effect on learning and performance in the target language, and that for language acquisition to take place, learners need to be in an anxiety-free state. When learners' affective filters are heightened, they may experience anxiety, stress, and lack of self-confidence that interfere with comprehensible input during the language acquisition process. Conversely, a low affective filter is conducive to second language acquisition because learners will seek and obtain more input and be more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior with regard to practicing and using a second language (Krashen, 1981, 1985).

Decades of research suggest that the reduction of performance anxiety is a strong indicator of academic success (Buttaro, 2009; Gardner, Smythe, Clement, & Glikzman, 1976; McIntyre & Gardner, 1994a, 1994b; Sharma & Mishra, 2007), and the use of humor in the classroom can relax second language learners and make learning more enjoyable (Berwald, 1992; Schmitz, 2002). However, while the literature provides encouragement that humor can have a positive effect on student learning, there is no empirical research measuring the impact of humor on actual learning (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Jie-Liu, 2010). The following study investigated the relationship between Spanish teachers' self-reported sense of humor and their students' scores on the NSEs.

Methods

Subjects

One hundred eighty-three Spanish teachers who were all members of AATSP volunteered to participate in this study. Of this total, 127 filled out the survey and demographic information sheet. The majority of the participants were female (92%) and the mean age was 46 years. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (79%) followed by Latinos (14%), Native Americans (1%), and African Americans (1%). The remainder of the sample self-identified as Multiracial (4%) and Asian (1%). The majority having earned graduate degrees (78% Master of Arts degree, 2% doctorate degree) and 88% of the participants reported having studied abroad for an average of seven months over the span of their careers as Spanish teachers, which ranged from one year of service to 34 years in the classroom. Nine out of every 10 indicated that they teach only Spanish in their schools while the remainder reported teaching Spanish and French. Fifty-eight percent of the teachers who responded to the survey taught in public schools (58%); the remainder taught in private schools. Thirty-eight percent of the participants reported administering the NSEs to all of their students while 40% reported giving the exams to only those students who volunteer to take it. However, the remaining 12% of the participants stated that they administer the exams only to their best students.

Because it can be assumed that these students' scores could inflate test scores and subsequently the means on the exams, student scores from this latter group of teacher were excluded from the dataset prior to data analysis. Thus, the final number of teachers included in this study was 102; their demographics mirror the demographics of the original sample of 183 teachers and of the national teaching population in general in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity (Coopersmith, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006) and are comparable to language teachers in the US and Canada (Swanson 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a; Swanson & Huff,

2010). No demographic data were collected about the students ($n = 5419$) of these Spanish teachers.

Instruments

Data were collected using two different instruments.

National Spanish Exams. The NSEs are a subsidiary of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), and are only available to teachers who are AATSP members. These online standardized assessments (grades 6-12, seven levels) are the most widely used tests of Spanish in the United States (National Spanish Examinations, 2012), given voluntarily by more than 3800 Spanish teachers. The NSEs measure student ability separately through two subtests: Proficiency measure and a measure of Achievement. The Proficiency section assesses part of the national standards in the area of student performance in the interpretative domain (reading and listening comprehension) for a total of 200 points. The Achievement section assesses the content standards by measuring student knowledge of vocabulary and grammar for a total of 200 points. A student's total score is calculated by combining student scores on the Proficiency and Achievement sections (400 points). The staff at the NSE office calculates percentile rankings and provides participating teachers data regarding each student's performance. Detailed information regarding the examinations, as well as copies of old examinations, is available on the NSE website¹.

Humor scale. The researcher reviewed literature on the development and validation of instruments that measure people's sense of humor and selected the *Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale* (MSHS, Thorson & Powell, 1993a) because it combined a number of unidimensional measures and thus provided a deeper understanding of the construct. The MSHS

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¹ <http://www.nationalspanishexam.org/>

contains 24 items in a 5-point Likert format (0= Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) and has four subscales that measure humor production and social uses of humor (11 items), adaptive/coping humor (seven items), humor appreciation (two items), and attitudes toward humor (four items). The inventory requires about 5-10 minutes to take and scores range from 0 to 96, with higher scores indicating a stronger sense of humor. Tests of internal reliability of the scale range from 0.89 to 0.92 (Köhler & Ruch, 1996; Thorson & Powell, 1993a, 1993b, 1996), indicating satisfactory consistency.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 19.0 and met all of the methodological and statistical criteria to conduct the calculations reported here. To minimize testing errors, a statistical power analysis was conducted, and it was determined that the sample size was large enough to detect specific differences between groups set at the .05 alpha. Preliminary data analysis indicated that both the teacher and student data were normally distributed and met the assumptions for the statistical procedures used for this study.

First, reliability coefficients for the MSHS were computed and a similar coefficient (.89) to that reported by Thorson and Powell was found, indicating satisfactory consistency for research purposes (Henson, 2001). Next, the teachers' scores on the MSHS were divided into quartiles in order to differentiate between groups who reported having a high and low sense of humor, a common practice when comparing high and low achievement scores (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Goetz, Preckle, Pekrun, & Hall, 2007; Peeters & Lievens, 2005). The first quartile (Q_1) represented the lowest 25% of the teachers' scores on the MSHS. The second quartile (Q_2) contained teachers' scores between the 26th and 50th percentiles, while the third quartile (Q_3) included teachers' scores between the 51st and 75th percentiles. The fourth

quartile (Q₄) represented teachers' humor scores at and above the 76th percentile. Thus, means scores of teachers who self-reported a strong sense of humor are in Q₄ and means scores of those with a self-reported lesser sense of humor are in Q₁. These data were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Data from the two middle quartiles were not examined.

Results

Students' mean scores on the NSEs were compared for Q₁ teachers categorized as having a lesser sense of humor and Q₄ teachers categorized as having a strong sense of humor.

Significant mean differences between the students' overall scores on the NSEs and the teacher participants' perceived sense of humor are presented in Table 1. Data show that with regard to collective aspects of sense of humor as measured by the MSHS scale, students in classes taught

Table 1

Mean Differences of Students' Scores on the NSEs and Teacher Perceived Sense of Humor.

	Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale	Humor Production and Social Uses of Humor	Adaptive/Coping Humor	Humor Appreciation	Attitudes toward Humor
Achievement	15.18	30.71*	7.95*	19.64*	19.08*
Proficiency	(8.77)	5.18	12.47*	15.28*	9.32*
Total Exam	6.41	35.89*	20.43*	34.92*	28.40*

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*p<.05

by teachers who reported a stronger sense of humor scored 6.41 higher on the total score of the NSEs than did students of teachers who reported a lesser sense of humor. Table 2 shows that students of teachers with a stronger sense of humor on average scored 242.93 points on the total

Table 2

<i>Raw Score Point Differential (means) between Students' Scores on the NSEs and Spanish Teachers' Sense of Humor.</i>										
	Multidimensional Sense of Humor Scale		Humor Production and Social Uses of Humor		Adaptive/Coping Humor		Humor Appreciation		Attitudes toward Humor	
	Q ₁	Q ₄	Q ₁	Q ₄	Q ₁	Q ₄	Q ₁	Q ₄	Q ₁	Q ₄
Achievement	105.75 (33.56)	120.93 (43.22)	103.24 (35.86)	133.95 (41.87)	104.10 (36.44)	112.05 (46.04)	106.44 (38.72)	126.09 (36.20)	106.59 (34.75)	125.66 (34.95)
Proficiency	131.78 (35.90)	123.00 (36.25)	128.18 (37.66)	133.36 (32.41)	117.71 (38.76)	130.18 (41.01)	121.75 (39.26)	137.03 (37.28)	128.35 (31.06)	137.67 (31.06)
Total Exam	237.52 (61.29)	242.93 (72.35)	231.42 (66.87)	267.32 (66.68)	221.81 (66.26)	242.23 (81.66)	228.19 (69.28)	263.12 (66.74)	234.93 (62.98)	263.34 (60.79)

exam whereas those students whose teachers reported a lesser sense of humor scored 237.51 points. Similar differences were found on the Achievement portion of the exam with significant differences were found on all four subscales, the largest being a 30.71 point difference on the Humor Production and Social Uses of Humor subscale. On the Proficiency subtests there was an

8.78 point difference in favor of the participants who had a lesser sense of humor as measured by the MSHS.

Large point differences on the NSEs were found for each of the four subscales of the MSHS. The largest point differentials regarding students' total scores on the NSEs were found on the Humor Production and Social Uses of Humor (35.89 points) and the Humor Appreciation factors (34.92 points). For practical purposes, such differences equated respectively to 8.9% and 8.7% on the total score of the exam. The smallest, yet considerable, significant mean difference for the total exam score was found on the Adaptive/Coping Humor subscale (20.43 points), a significant difference of 5%. Other significant differences were found on both the Achievement and Proficiency portions of the exam for each of the subscales with the largest difference for the Achievement portion (30.71 points, measuring student grammar and vocabulary knowledge), which accounted for a 15% point differential on that section (30.71 /200 points total).

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine how Spanish teachers' self-reported sense of humor related to students' scores on the NSEs. Findings from this study indicated that the Spanish teachers' self-perceived sense of humor has an effect on student performance on the NSEs. That is, students of teachers who reported having a higher sense of humor outperformed those who had teachers with a self-reported lower sense of humor.

The extent of student achievement gains on the NSEs might be appreciated by equating the difference in students' scores to differences on a typical grading scale. In a typical language classroom, students who would like to earn an A may need to earn between 90-100% of the total points possible during a grading period. To earn a B, students would need to earn 80-89% of the total points, and so forth. Accordingly, a difference of 35.89 points on the Humor Production and Social Uses of Humor subscale of the MSHS for the total exam score equates to 8.9% of the

maximum score on the exam, which could be the difference between a B- and a B+ or even a B and an A- for a student's grade. Likewise, differences of 20.43 points on the Adaptive/Coping subscale, 34.92 points on the Humor Appreciation subscale, and 28.40 points on the Attitudes toward Humor subscale showed gains from 5% to 9% on the total score of the NSEs, which again are significant differences on grading scales.

By viewing these findings through the Affective Filter Hypothesis, teachers may be using humor in the classroom as a social lubricant to ease student apprehension and to cope professionally with occupational stress in order to foster a much less anxiety-filled learning environment, which in turn resulted in higher scores on the NSEs. Language teaching and learning can be a nerve-racking undertaking where certain emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt interfere with the process of acquiring a second language (Krashen, 1981). As teachers “show they have a sense of humor and [that they] are not afraid to use it, students relax and become listeners” (Hill, 1988, p. 21). Perhaps as these teachers incorporated humor in the classroom, students’ affective filters were lowered. Once lowered, the amount of language input and intake (i.e. the input that is actually processed by learner) that these learners were able to understand increased, a notion that is supported in the literature (Kher et al., 1999; Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Such input and intake could have been internalized and then demonstrated later on the NSEs, which might account for at least part of the achievement gains on the exams.

Notwithstanding the findings, this research has several limitations. First, data were self-reported, which does not allow the participants’ survey responses to be verified for accuracy. Despite the large data set used in this study to support these findings, a mixed methods approach could reveal the impact of additional teacher characteristics on student success on the NSEs. Student interviews could provide an emic (insider) perspective of confounding variables not

identified in the limited scope of the present study. In addition, interviews with Spanish teachers representing both Q1 (low humor) and Q4 (high humor) could offer additional critical information about the ways humor is being used in the S/WL classroom. Such insight could inform best practices in K-16 S/WL teacher training programs and workshops. Notwithstanding these limitations, findings from the present study advance the notion that having a sense of humor is one of perhaps many characteristics high performing teachers possess.

Conclusions

The use of humor in the classroom can make course content more engaging for students and lower their performance anxiety while helping teachers cope with professional stress and anxiety (Richards, 2012). It can even promote group camaraderie and make the most rigorous learning enjoyable (Hill, 1988). Conceivably, by having a moderate sense of humor in general terms, teachers are not only able to improve the learning environment, amplify student motivation, and improve mental and physical health for themselves and their students (Aboudan, 2009; Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010; Provine, 2002), but they can also can improve student achievement. Future studies using other research methods, data streams, and other language learning assessments may provide additional information. More research is clearly warranted because of the many factors that work together to promote second language competence and performance, The dearth of empirical research regarding the relationship between teachers' sense of humor and student achievement indicates that it is time to examine empirically factors that play a role in second language teaching in order to bring students to higher levels of language learning.

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