

Student-Professor Interactions in Spanish vs. American Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

The research looked at classroom formality, classroom format (i.e. lecture, discussion, etc.), and language reflecting the relationships between students and professors among other aspects of classroom interaction in classrooms in Spain and the U.S. The research took place during three classes a week during the fall semester of 2007 at the Universitas Castallae in Valladolid, Spain, and two class periods a week for the spring semester of 2008 at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. Data was collected solely through observation during class times. Interestingly Spanish classrooms I observed proved to be more laid back and informal in regards to language used between students and professors. I concluded that some of the observations would be helpful for international students, but that more research would have to be completed to provide an accurate study of Spanish versus United States classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Education has always been a process of interaction. The teacher conveys information to students who then convey back their understanding or lack of understanding of the proposed concepts. Interaction between teachers and students acts as the medium of education. According to Anne Malamah-Thomas (1987), classroom interaction serves an enabling function, in that its only purpose is to provide conditions for learning. These conditions provided through the use of interaction directly correlates to how and what students learn. Understanding these dynamics of classroom communication is essential for teachers, considering that how students talk and act greatly influences what they learn (Lutz, 2007).

In second language classrooms, like the class this study will occur in during fall 2007, language and interaction play an especially important role because the "second language is not only the content of instruction but the medium of instruction" as well (Chaudron, 1988). This can have an extreme effect on classroom success, for instance if a student does not feel connected to the lesson that student could miss out on classroom interaction, thus missing out on that day's lesson. One article written by Geoffrey Maslen (2000) appearing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* discusses the Spanish University system. Maslen (2000) wrote that lecturing provided professors with their only means of conveying information; and he described the professors and students as feeling "adrift." One student in the article described the professors as only wanting students to "listen and take notes on what they say" and stated that "class participation is practically nonexistent" (2000). Whether this stems from lack of professor enthusiasm or student cooperation has not been fully studied, but one would think that in a classroom where interaction provides the key to education, interaction would be more important. Understanding this aspect of the Spanish classroom could greatly improve a student's education who studies in this atmosphere.

With so many students studying internationally, researching classroom interactions of foreign classrooms can prove extremely useful for understanding and improving classroom dynamics for those student travelers. One Chinese student upon coming to America could not understand why a certain "percentage of her grade was allocated to something called 'class participation'" (Johnson, 1995). She had assumed that listening quietly and taking notes during class *was* class participation, which surprised American students who know that in order to fulfill 'class participation' requirements had to "raise questions or share their ideas during class discussions" (1995). These students had no idea about the other's culture or school life, proving the need for research on this topic. According to Sara Delamont (1983), good "all-American teachers" should be integrating and democratic, not authoritative and domineering. American teachers generally encourage discussion and value students' opinions, even though many students do not feel this way (Lutz, 2007). Unique from the more traditional classroom, American classrooms have tried to incorporate a more interactive style to classroom behaviors, some of which include: "turn-taking, question and answering, negotiating of meaning and feedback" (Chaudron, 1988). Over the last decade this style has become the American classroom. Even though teachers encourage students to speak out and voice their opinions, the teacher

"typically assumes a dominant and directive role in classroom interaction," guiding and helping students along, but generally educators encourage interaction (Malamah-Thomas, 1987). Because this concept seems so foreign to many unfamiliar with American classrooms, my study will provide and explore classroom dynamics to aid those studying in the unfamiliar.

Because this study will attempt to provide useful information to future International students, research will be conducted throughout the entire semester to account for interactive changes between teachers and students. It is only natural that the interaction within a classroom will change as students and teachers become more familiar and comfortable with one another. In the case of college students calling professors by first names Joan McDowell, (2005) professor at Eastern Michigan University, stated that "new students would be less likely to use first names" than upper classman students at the college. From analyzing observations from one class period, one could not come to any conclusions of how interactions may change, like in the study conducted by McDowell. In order to provide students with the most advantageous information, the study will include observations of an entire semester.

Although much research has been conducted on interaction within American schools or Spanish schools, no comparative research could be found between the two.

OBJECTIVES/HYPOTHESES

The objective of this project is to explore and analyze differences and similarities in teacher-student interactions between Spanish and American classrooms. The research will explore various classroom interactions and the importance and significance of each. Observations of classrooms will provide useful information to students interested in studying internationally. This study will provide students with a stronger background on various teaching methods and classroom dynamics, ensuring that their education experience in a foreign country proves successful and beneficial. The research will offer a connection for students of different ethnicities helping them to understand one another and aid them in international studies.

I hypothesize that while each teacher may follow certain patterns and styles, classroom participation and interaction will be an important factor for students' educations in both Spain and America. I hypothesize that Spanish classrooms will have a higher level of formality than American classrooms in the way teachers and students address each other and in regards to the language used in class, but that in general classroom language will support the traditional power structure of the teacher as the central authority throughout Spain and America.

METHOD

Research will be obtained through voice recorded observation as well as some written observation of the classroom. Throughout my semesters in Spain and La Crosse I will be observing and analyzing the ways that students in my classes interact with the Professors. Many different ways of interaction will be looked at such as: raised hands, formality of address, format of the classroom (i.e. discussion, lecture, etc.), actual language used when the professor addresses students or vice versa, language in relation to power structure, written versus verbal notes, teacher feedback (negative or positive), error correction, and differences in how a the professor addresses the large group versus one on one interaction. Data will be collected in three different class periods a week, once a week per class period. Analyses of the data will look for similarities and differences from the two different countries in relation to the interaction between professors and students that takes place during the specific class periods.

RESULTS

This study illustrated some interesting similarities and differences between the Spanish classes and classes in the United States that were observed. One of my main observations was that Spanish classrooms did not typically have a strict concept of time. Many days class would not start on time and the professors themselves were often late. This was a big difference between the time-driven classrooms of the U.S. The language use in Spanish classrooms was also more informal, with the students addressing teachers by their first names. This greatly contrasts with the formal speech used in United States classrooms between students and professors, and the use of formal titles such as Professor or Dr. when students address their professors. There was also an interesting difference between how professors corrected student errors. Spanish professors tended to simply tell the student that he/she was wrong and move on, whereas American professors tended to be more subtle in their corrections. For example, if a student responded incorrectly the Spanish professor would simply tell him/her that the response was incorrect, but the American professor might tell the student that he/she is a little off base but getting there and thank them for trying.

One thing that remained a constant at both the universities was that each professor had his/her own specific teaching style. The three classes observed in Spain had class formats that ranged from all lecture and note taking, to

some lecture/some discussion to classes consisting of only discussions. Also, the way in which students responded to questions varied; in two of the Spanish classes no hand raising was required, in fact it was discouraged, whereas the other Spanish class required raised hands for the most part. In the U.S., I found similar results, one of the classes observed was mostly lecture and note taking, and the other class worked mainly in small groups with a large group discussion towards the end of the period. Also in the U.S. classes, hand raising requirements varied as well. They also varied with the activity planned for that day's class.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main conclusions I came to was that the Spanish classes observed were typically more laid back in terms of the formality of interactions between students and professors than the American classrooms, especially in regards to calling professors by their first names rather than formal titles. Also, the Spanish classes had a much more relaxed sense of time than the American classrooms.

I also concluded that the cultural differences observed were not as significant as the differences between the individual teachers. Each teacher has his/her own preferred method of teaching and I concluded that this factor resulted in the more significant differences that were observed, like the class format.

This study would be of value to students who are interested in studying at Universitas Castellae because it portrays some of the differences between a United States school and this specific international school, but because the research didn't encompass observation of an actual Spanish university where Spanish students attend, the value of the research is somewhat limited. Even though the research looked at Spanish professors' interactions with students, it cannot accurately represent the interactions of student and professors at a Spanish university because Universitas Castellae was an international school with a majority of United States citizens attending.

FURTHER STUDY

In the future if this study were to be continued, it would be essential to research in classrooms with students who are native to the country in which one is researching in order to provide results and conclusions that would help and benefit future international students. It would be beneficial for students to see how native students and teachers interact with each other rather than native teachers with international students.

Also, the research could look at multiple countries rather than one specific one and compare all the results. This could possibly be a long-term goal, with the idea being that a list could be created that would illustrate these similarities and differences of the classroom in order to provide a useful tool for students to gain an awareness of the classrooms in which they would be studying.

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