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"Business Spanish Certification Program and the Concept of Test Validity"

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Engaged Learning Report:
"*Business Spanish Certification Program* and the Concept of Test Validity"

ABSTRACT:

This Engaged Learning Project culminated in the production of a study guide titled

"México: Entorno cultural y de negocios, guía práctica para entender las relaciones bilaterales

entre México y Estados Unidos" ["Mexico: A Cultural and Business Environment, Practical

Guide for Understanding Bilateral Relations between Mexico and the United States"] and a

complete exam. First, this report explains the project's purpose and goals. Second, the report

explores the important concept of "test validity" in creating and organizing the project's study

guide and exam. Finally, the author discusses various conclusions regarding the project's

outcomes. The project's members include Pamela Nickell and Bryce Johnson with Dr.

McDoniel from the World Languages and Literatures department serving as faculty mentor. The

support from Southern Methodist University and the US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce in

Dallas fomented the development of the exam and study guide.

I. Introduction

This project focuses on international commerce between the US and Mexico. Since the

enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the business interaction

between the two countries has benefitted from the elimination of protectionist measures such as

tariffs and quotas. For businesses in the United States, this signifies greater access to the

Mexican market, a valuable consumer base. Not only does Mexico represent a large consumer

market with a dynamic economy, but the domestic Latino or Hispanic population (of which, Mexicans constitute the greatest percentage) represents a substantial and vital sector of the market.[1] The Mexican population as well as those of Mexican heritage residing within the US comprise an ever-growing and promising consumer base. The importance of this certification program stems from the idea that it could facilitate individuals' access to this valuable market by evaluating potential success for negotiating the Mexican business world in terms of dominance of the Spanish language and knowledge of Mexican business nuances.[2]

The goals for the *Business Spanish Certification Program* included the creation of a study guide and exam that when combined would form a sustainable and valid certification program. This program would respond to the unmet need of business professionals with an advanced level of Spanish for certifying their capacity to navigate the Mexican business environment in addition to that of the United States. While other countries such as Spain offer a type of certification program related to business and foreign language proficiency here in the United States, a similar program focusing on international commerce between the US and Mexico does not exist. This project seeks to fulfill this need by offering a certification program that the Dallas US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce would have the opportunity to use and promote among the local business community. Ultimately, the project's members would like to see this certification program spread to the other US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce locations across the US.

The completion of the study guide constituted the primary goal for this project since it serves to justify an adequate exam to test the target audience. The writing of the exam quickly

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[1] The Nielsen Report , *State of the Hispanic Consumer*, stated in 2012 that if compared to other countries' economies, "the U.S. Hispanic market buying power would make it one of the top twenty economies in the world" having garnered "significant buying power, despite perceptions to the contrary" (pg. 3).
[2] A variation of this paragraph in Spanish appears in the study guide's preamble.

followed the conclusion of the study guide although they remain in a stage of continuous editing until recently. Both the study guide and exam are written entirely in Spanish since the certification program targets individuals that possess an advanced knowledge and command of the Spanish language.[3] Specifically, the study guide consisted of nine sections altogether: preamble, culture, geography, politics, treaties, vocabulary, business correspondence, glossary, and bibliography. After concluding the study guide, the exam incorporated the six main categories: culture, geography, politics, treaties, vocabulary, and business correspondence. To ensure that our goals and objectives were met, a pilot testing of the project was done. This pilot testing consisted of SMU students, native and non-native Spanish speakers, that reviewed the study guide and completed the examination material. After finishing these two tasks, they were compensated for their participation using funds secured from a grant from the Engaged Learning program. The participants' feedback provided insight for revising the exam and study guide. The final versions of the exam and study guide were completed during the course of the fall 2012 semester.

Overall, the development of the study guide and exam required constant analysis of the study guide in terms of organization, content, and objectives. In sum, this project dealt with the concept of test validity. The concept of validity was of major importance for both, the

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[3] The ACTFL Proficiency Guidlines from 2012 define an advanced speaker according to the following description:

> Speakers at the Advanced level engage in conversation in a clearly participatory manner in order to communicate information on autobiographical topics, as well as topics of community, national, or international interest. The topics are handled concretely by means of narration and description in the major times frames of past, present, and future. These speakers can also deal with a social situation with an unexpected complication. The language of Advanced-level speakers is abundant, the oral paragraph being the measure of Advanced-level length and discourse. Advanced-level speakers have sufficient control of basic structures and generic vocabulary to be understood by native speakers of the language, including those unaccustomed to non-native speech. (pg. 5)

In addition, the ACTFL Guidelines divide the advanced category into three more descriptive sub-sections: High, Mid, and Low.

development of the study guide and the creation of the exam. Therefore, its implications will be explored in the following section of this report.

II. Considering Test Validity

This report explains the project members' efforts to validate the use of the study guide and exam by involving "both subjective analysis of test content and empirical analysis of test score and item response data"[4] in order to determine their validity. In 1989, Samuel Messick defined validity as "an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment".[5] According to Messick, evaluating test validity concerns two areas: science and ethics.[6] A test must be a good measure of "the characteristics it is interpreted to assess", and its use must be justified "in terms of social values".[7] Since a "theory of validity represents both a philosophical perspective and a set of conceptual tools that shape our thinking and action",[8] writing the study guide and exam required much analysis in order to determine each item's appropriateness for the end goals of the project's components, the study guide and exam, that were created.

Once the project began, it became clear that the study guide and exam would focus on material that dealt with Mexican culture and business practices. The project members identified individuals with an already proficient level of Spanish to represent the certification program's target audience. This reflects an understanding of the inseparability of language and culture

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[4] Sireci p. 481.
[5] Messick quoted in Sireci p. 479.
[6] Messick p. 1012.
[7] Messick p. 1012.
[8] Moss et al., 2006 quoted in Moss, 2007, p. 474.

because one cannot fully immerse oneself in another culture without knowledge of the native language. The study guide does not repeat knowledge that a Spanish language class would cover such as subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, or non-specialized vocabulary. Nor does the exam focus on these elements except in an indirect manner. The study guide and exam move away from linguistic competence, which isolates learning a foreign language from its social context, and instead toward sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence.[9] The project's two components (study guide and exam) take for granted the subject's ability to read, write, and speak Spanish in order to evaluate his or her knowledge of Mexican culture and business practices.

Test researchers face the dilemma of proving that a test is valid by "presenting evidence that the information provided by the tests that [they] study and help create is useful and scientifically sound" even though it is impossible to prove this.[10] Test writers cannot anticipate how to prove the validity of an exam, nor can they guarantee that it will measure what they expect it will measure. In spite of this problem, the certification program attempts to counter-act problems of validity by providing a study guide which details all the necessary information needed for a test-taker to be successful on the exam. Even though the comprehensive test does not serve as an exhaustive source for business knowledge and Mexican culture and cannot predict future success; it evaluates what constitutes essential knowledge as determined by the

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[9] These terms defined by Mislevy, Steinberg, and Almond in their discussion of Task-Based Language Assessment. First, linguistic competence refers to the "knowledge of vocabulary and grammar" (p. 477). Second, sociolinguistic competence is applying that knowledge to "the social context of language use" (pgs. 477-478). Third, strategic competence involves the reasoned application of language to achieve one's goals (p. 478). Fourth, discourse competence constitutes one's "familiarity with forms, customs and standards of communication above the level of sentences" (p. 478).

[10] Sireci p. 477.

creators of the study guide and exam.[11] Ultimately, the validity of a test rests in the validation of the "use of the test for a particular purpose".[12]

Since the exam has not been distributed publicly, it is impossible to predict its ethical ramifications, but the project's members hope that this exam develops into a reputable method for assessing one's knowledge of cross-cultural business practices between the US and Mexico. After the public has access to the test, this can be confirmed or denied.

Finally, the concepts of test validity and validity theory continue to evolve and inspire discussion among experts in the field of education.[13] It follows that making a valid test requires constant updating and analysis to make sure that it adequately evaluates the test-takers' knowledge. The creators of the study guide and exam understand that the two items will need to be revised continuously in order to remain valid. The following section outlines the data taken from the pilot testing program performed by six participants, and it also includes the author's interpretations of the data.

III. Exam Data & Interpretations

A. Exam Contents

The exam consisted of eight sections:

1)   The first section comprised a reading passage accompanied with eight (8) reading comprehension questions.

2)   The second section was a reading passage that contained underlined spaces that participants had to complete by choosing the applicable term from three multiple choice options to complete the passage. Originally, this section had twenty (20) questions, but one was thrown

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[11] "Creators" refers to Pamela Nickell, Bryce Johnson, and Dr. McDoniel.
[12] Sireci p. 477.
[13] Sireci p. 477.

out because of an error in how the question was written. The participants' answers were analyzed only for the nineteen (19) valid questions.

     3)   The third section included multiple choice questions that evaluating participants' understanding of Mexican culture and business. Originally, this section had eighteen (18) questions, but one question was thrown out because of an error in how the question was written. The participants' answers were analyzed only for the seventeen (17) remaining questions.

     4)   The fourth section was a matching section that connected pertinent economic sectors with their corresponding description. Originally, this section had ten (10) matching questions, but one was thrown out due to an error in how the question was written. The participants' answers were analyzed only for the nine (9) valid questions.

     5)   The fifth section consisted of three (3) sentences with spaces that had to be completed by writing in the appropriate term in the blank.

     6)   Students had to match five (5) concepts using a word bank of 5 terms to be matched with 5 definitions for the sixth section.

     7)   For this section, participants had to write a one-page professional business memorandum based on a given prompt. For this writing section and for the following one, participants' writing samples were categorized as either "satisfactory" or "not satisfactory" depending on whether they met the minimum criteria of appropriate form, formal language, few grammatical mistakes, and adherence to prompt.

     8)   The last section participants had to write a two (2) page essay based on a prompt. Participants could choose from two prompts. The first prompt involved writing about migrants and international treaties and business agreement while the second one entailed outlining recommendations for a successful business meeting between a US executive and a Mexican

executive. It was noted that all of the students selected the second prompt. They commented that the second prompt was much easier to write about than the first prompt.

   B. Exam Data

A total of six students participated in the pilot program of the project to review the study guide and take the exam.   All of the students had taken at least one Spanish course at SMU. For each student, the eight sections are divided up and a raw score is given for each as well as the total time needed to complete the section. A formalized grading scale has not been developed yet for this exam since a final version has not been written.

Student A
Profile: Reviewed study guide for about 1 hour

    Section 1- 14 min; 7 out of 8 correct (88%)
    Section 2- 10 min; 15 out of 19 correct (79%)
    Section 3- 7 min; 15 out of 17 correct (88%)
    Section 4- 3 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)
    Section 5- 1 min; 3 out of 3 correct (100%)
    Section 6- 3 min; 5 out of 5 correct (100%)
    Section 7- 8 min; not satisfactory
    Section 8- 24 min; satisfactory
    TOTAL TIME: 70 minutes

Student B
Profile: Heritage speaker (grew up in Spanish-speaking home) and had taken Business Spanish course (Commercial Spanish 4391); reviewed study guide for about 1 hour

    Section 1- 11 min; 6 out of 8 correct (75%)
    Section 2- 2 min; 18 out of 19 correct (95%)
    Section 3- 5 min; 16 out of 17 correct (94%)
    Section 4- 2 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)
    Section 5- 2 min; 1 out of 3 correct (33%)
    Section 6- 2 min; 5 out of 5 correct (100%)
    Section 7- 6 min; satisfactory
    Section 8- 9 min; satisfactory
    TOTAL TIME: 39 minutes

Student C

Profile: Reviewed study guide for about 2 hours

    Section 1- 8 min; 6 out of 8 correct (75%)
    Section 2- 7 min; 15 out of 19 correct (79%)
    Section 3- 5 min; 15 out of 17 correct (88%)
    Section 4- 3 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)
    Section 5- 2 min; 2 out of 3 correct (67%)
    Section 6- 1 min; 5 out of 5 correct (100%)
    Section 7- 19 min; not satisfactory
    Section 8- 27 min; satisfactory
    TOTAL TIME: 72 minutes

Student D
Profile: Currently enrolled in Business Spanish course (Commercial Spanish 4391); reviewed study guide for about 45 minutes

    Section 1-15 min; 7 out of 8 correct (88%)
    Section 2- 11 min; 17 out of 19 correct (89%)
    Section 3- 8 min; 13 out of 17 correct (76%)
    Section 4- 3 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)
    Section 5- 3 min; 1 out of 3 correct (33%)
    Section 6- 1 min; 5 out of 5 correct (100%)
    Section 7- 7 min; satisfactory
    Section 8- 20 min; satisfactory
    TOTAL TIME: 68 minutes

Student E
Profile: Reviewed study guide for about 2.5 hours

    Section 1- 14 min; 4 out of 8 correct (50%)
    Section 2- 11 min; 13 out of 19 correct (68%)
    Section 3-7 min; 12 out of 17 correct (71%)
    Section 4- 3 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)
    Section 5- 2 min; 1 out of 3 correct (33%)
    Section 6- 2 min; 3 out of 5 correct (60%)
    Section 7- 8 min; not satisfactory
    Section 8- 21 min; satisfactory
    TOTAL TIME: 68 minutes

Student F
Profile: Reviewed study guide for 2 hours

    Section 1- 12 min; 6 out of 8 correct (75%)
    Section 2- 19 min; 13 out of 19 correct (68%)
    Section 3-10 min; 16 out of 17 correct (94%)
    Section 4- 3 min; 9 out of 9 correct (100%)

Section 5- 3 min; 2 out of 3 correct (67%)
Section 6- 3 min; 5 out of 5 correct (100%)
Section 7- 5 min; not satisfactory
Section 8- 20 min; satisfactory
TOTAL TIME: 75 minutes

   C. Data Interpretation

       In order to interpret the data, we have considering the following: the time it took the

participant to complete its section, the participant's raw score for each section, and the quality

each participant's two writing sections. The average test-taking time was 65 minutes. The

shortest time was 39 minutes for Student B while the longest time was 75 minutes for Student F.

The shortest time could be attributed to the student's status as a Heritage Speaker. However,

being a Heritage Speaker did not signify higher raw scores for individual sections. For the first

section, participants scored an average of 75%. For the second section, participants scored an

average of 80%. For the third section, participants scored an average of 85%. For the fourth

section, participants scored an average of 100%. For future exams, this section should be

modified in order to increase its difficulty. For the fifth section, participants scored an average

of 56%. This section represents the most difficult section for the participants, and its form of

writing in the answer constitutes a more difficult section type in general. For future exams, this

section will include more questions, so that participants have a better chance of earning a higher

score. For the sixth section, the participants scored an average of 93%. On section seven, most

participants scored "not satisfactory". This can be attributed to a lack of knowledge of how to

write a memorandum following a formal structure in Spanish. For section eight, the majority of

participants scored "satisfactory". The average time spent studying was 1.5 hours. To improve

scores, it is recommended that students review the study guide for a longer amount of time.

Also, participants should pay attention to the section devoted to business correspondence.

Interestingly, students of the Business Spanish course were much better prepared to score satisfactorily for both writing portions of the exam. This could mean that students that review the test material in a class setting will perform better on the whole test. This data will be taken into consideration for further revision of the exam.

III. Conclusions

The *Business Spanish Certification Program* completed its original goals of creating a study guide and an exam. Student participants reviewed the study guide and took the pilot exam in order for its writers to receive feedback. The results from the exam showed varied levels of participant readiness. The data showed that conscientious review of the study guide was necessary to perform well on the exam. Status as a Heritage Speaker did not give a participant more of an advantage although the study guide and exam require advanced proficiency in Spanish. Notably, the two students that had enrolled in the Commercial Spanish class were much more prepared for the two writing sections of the test. The project members recommend that future test-takers spend more time carefully studying the guide's contents. Also, it is possible that in the future, small class sessions devoted to covering the material presented in the study guide could complement the certification program. The study guide has reached a final stage of editing while the exam remains in a process of revision. In the future, the project members hope that the US-Mexico Chamber of Commerce will offer this certification program as a way for local businesspersons to document and certify their ability to conduct business between the two countries. Later on, the success of this program could stimulate its spread to other US-Mexico Chambers of Commerce around the United States.

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