



“Frustrated” or “Surprised?” An Examination of the Perspectives of Spanish Teacher Candidates Regarding the Praxis II Subject-Matter Tests

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Researchers (Sandarg & Schomber, 2009; Wilkerson, Schomber, & Sandarg, 2004) have urged the profession to develop a new subject-matter licensure test to reflect the best practices in the foreign language classroom. In October 2010, the Praxis II: World Language Test joined the Praxis Series. Given that this standards-driven test differs significantly from its previous versions, the Content Knowledge and Productive Language Skills tests, it is unknown how teacher candidates will respond to its unique challenges. This qualitative study examines the perspectives of five prospective foreign language teachers who took one of the versions of the Praxis II subject-matter test. The data revealed that two groups, Surprised Prevailers and Frustrated Forgoers, perceived the Praxis II differently. Their test experiences may provide foreign language teacher educators with strategies to overcome test challenges and improve curricula.

Keywords: praxis test, licensure tests, foreign language, certification, standards, NCATE, teacher education, assessment, qualitative research

Through the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), (referred to herein as National Standards), the foreign language profession identified what students should know and be able to do following a sequence of language instruction. Consequently, similar standards for teachers were developed in order to assist students in reaching the goals, or the 5 Cs (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities), of the National Standards. One such effort includes the *Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* (ACTFL, 2002) (referred to herein as Program Standards), developed by the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Specialized Professional Association for

foreign languages. At the core of the Program Standards, which focus on the requirements of foreign language teacher education programs, are the National Standards (ACTFL, 2002). Therefore, teacher candidates who successfully complete a teacher education program according to the requirements of the Program Standards should be able to deliver standards-based instruction by: communicating in the target language, addressing the products, practices, and perspectives of target cultures, connecting to other disciplines, comparing the second language and culture to their own, and understanding the importance of lifelong learning and interacting with target language communities (Abbott, M., personal communication, October 2011).

Regardless of this emphasis on standards-based curriculum design, Cheatham (2004) argued that the structure of language courses has changed very little to

reflect this paradigm. Other researchers (Ricardo-Osorio, 2008; Welles, 1999; 2000) have also cited the resistance of post-secondary educators to use the National Standards to modify curricula. Departmental insularity plays a fundamental role in this dilemma (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010; Pearson, Fonseca-Greber, & Foell, 2006; Schulz, 2000; Tedick, 2009). According to Tedick (2009), “the lack of thoughtful coordination between the two camps [colleges of education and foreign language departments] that are jointly responsible for preparing teachers is evident” (p. 265). Regardless of this dilemma, given the reciprocal relationship between the teacher and student standards, the failure to use the student National Standards at the post-secondary level has several implications for foreign language teacher education programs. One such challenge, which directly impacts at least 40 states that rely on the *Praxis Series* for teacher certification, involves licensure testing.

The *Praxis Series*, one of the series of educational tests offered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), consists of the Praxis I, a test of basic reading, writing, and mathematics, and the Praxis II, tests that evaluate the pedagogical knowledge of teacher candidates as well as content-specific knowledge (ETS, 2012). Following the ratification of the Program Standards, ETS and ACTFL began making significant changes to the Praxis II foreign language subject-matter licensure tests (Glisan, 2001). This standards-based Praxis II: World Language Test (French #5174, German #5183, and Spanish #5195) was added to the *Praxis Series* in October 2010. This new test was developed to replace previous foreign language Praxis II tests, the Content Knowledge Test (French #0173, German #0181, Spanish #0191) and the Productive Language Skills Test (French #0171, German #0182, Spanish #0192), which did not reflect the best practices as identified by the standards (Abbott, M., personal communication, October 2011).

Establishing a clear connection between the Program Standards and the World Language Test, McClendon (2004) asserted,

As post-secondary departments of education begin aligning their courses of study with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards and guidelines, the prospective foreign language teacher will be on track for successfully passing tests that may be required by the state as part of the licensure process and for performing successfully in the classroom as well. (2004, p. 2)

Thus, assisting teacher candidates in meeting the expectations of the World Language Test depends on the program’s familiarity with and inclusion of the student National Standards and the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards.

Problem Statement

The effects of the World Language Test on teacher preparation and licensure are not yet known. The failure to modify curricula and use the profession’s standards at the post-secondary level may impose additional challenges to World Language Test-takers who are unaccustomed to standards-based instruction and assessment. Although previous research (Bowen, 2002; Sandarg & Schomber, 2009; Wilkerson, Schomber, & Sandarg, 2004; Zigo & Moore, 2002) highlights faculty members’ perspectives of licensure tests, there are few studies (Albers, 2002) that provide teacher candidates with a voice regarding their own test-taking challenges. Additionally, given the novelty of the World Language Test, studies that delve into the perspectives of teacher candidates as they relate to this test, their performance, and the teacher preparation program are warranted.

The World Language Test is a complete departure from both the Content Knowledge Test and Productive Language Skills Test. Whereas the Content Knowledge Test, a paper-based multiple choice test divided into four sections (e.g., Interpretive Listening, Interpretive Reading, Cultural Knowledge, and Structure of the Language), often focuses on factoids devoid of meaningful contexts, the Productive Language Skills Test consists of two sections (e.g., Presentational Speaking and Presentational Writing) one of which requires the use of a tape recorder. According to Wilkerson et al. (2004), these tests, which are very different in both content and format, fail to reflect the best practices of language teachers given their focus on discrete items, a lack of connection to the National Standards, and failure to incorporate language production in meaningful contexts.

The World Language Test addresses several of the concerns pinpointed by Wilkerson et al. (2004) given its direct connection to the National Standards and Program Standards in the introductory section of the Test at a Glance (ETS, 2010). This computer-based test is divided into five main sections: (a) Interpretive Listening, (b) Interpretive Reading, (c) Cultural Knowledge, (d) Interpersonal and Presentational Writing, and (e) Presentational and Interpersonal Speaking. Additionally, several questions that assess the knowledge of linguistics are embedded in various sections. For additional information regarding the test content and expectations, please see Moser (2010; 2012).

Literature Review

Faculty Perspectives

Much of the research (Bowen, 2002; Sandarg & Schomber, 2009; Wilkerson et al., 2004; Zigo & Moore, 2002) on subject-matter licensure tests relies on the perspectives of faculty members who prior to their personal experience with the tests often relied on the anecdotal recollection of students. Research highlights

the problematic nature of defining the knowledge and skills required of prospective teachers since faculty members failed to reach a consensus on identifying the subject-matter knowledge in their disciplines. A study by Zigo and Moore (2002), in which faculty from English collaborated to take and discuss the Praxis II, underscored this specific challenge. According to them,

When those of us who are involved in English education, whether in colleges of education or colleges of liberal arts, compared our experiences taking the test and our perceptions of what content knowledge was being tested, we were unsettled by the range of disagreement among us concerning the appropriateness of the content being tested and the format of the questions themselves. (2002, p. 143)

Furthermore, Zigo and Moore argued that the Praxis II tests were based on “questions leaning toward theoretical stances that are inconsistent with the theories that undergird NCTE’s current professional standards” (p. 141).

Similarly, Bowen (2002) questioned the theoretical nature of the questions on the Praxis II and concluded that it would be difficult to ascertain whether teacher candidates were adequately prepared following a sequence of English coursework. She asserted that content area faculty are unsure of what prospective teachers need to pass licensure exams. According to Bowen (2002),

To be honest, we often do not think about [teacher preparation]; we assume that the courses and requirements that make a good English major also make a good secondary school English teacher. When our students fail the Praxis exams—and too many do—we do not know what they need. (p. 128)

As demonstrated in the studies by Zigo and Moore (2002) and Bowen (2002), faculty are often unsure of how to prepare their prospective teachers for the expectations of the Praxis II. Although fewer studies are related to the tests used for initial licensure in foreign languages, similar themes emerge. Two such investigations include those of Wilkerson et al., (2004) and Sandarg and Schomber (2009). Both descriptive studies highlighted the challenges of the Praxis II: Content Knowledge Test and Productive Language Skills Test. The authors described in detail both foreign language subject-matter tests and cited several obstacles for test-takers. For example, specific to the Content Knowledge Test, Wilkerson et al. (2004) identified three of the four sections as problematic: Interpretive Listening, Structure of the Language, and Cultural Perspectives. They highlighted that in order to respond to test questions in the Interpretive Listening section, test-takers are only allowed to hear a passage one time. Wilkerson et al. (2004) argued that this finding differs significantly from classroom instruction which usually includes multiple attempts to interpret global meaning. The Structure of the

Language section requires students to search for errors which the authors asserted is “a task inconsistent with current teaching practices, which encourage students to speak, errors and all, as they develop proficiency” (p. 34). Additionally, Wilkerson et al. (2004) defined the Cultural Perspectives component area as a game of Trivial Pursuit. They affirmed that “specialized vocabulary and low-frequency idioms limit students’ ability to make inferences or educated guesses” (p. 34).

Wilkerson et al. (2004) also highlighted the problematic nature of the Productive Languages Skills Test given the testing conditions which appeared to be stressful and distracting for test-takers required to speak simultaneously in a crowded space. Furthermore, they stressed, “the proficiency requirements of many of the tasks surpass what is reasonably expected of entry-level teachers, according to ACTFL recommendations” (p. 35). This finding makes it improbable that teacher candidates can be successful on a test based solely on their productive language skills unless faculty members know how to assist students in achieving high levels of proficiency. Sandarg and Schomber (2009) responded to this quandary by providing concrete suggestions to assist faculty in this endeavor.

Student Perspectives

Although research that examines the Praxis II subject-matter tests is relatively scant, only one known study has relied on the perspectives of prospective teachers. From Albers (2002), we obtain a glimpse into the teacher candidate’s perspective, specifically the testing issues that led her to claim that the “Praxis II nearly destroyed the qualities in them that we most value in teachers: confidence, knowledge of content, and a desire to work with students in a culturally responsive way” (p. 123). Based on these test-takers’ experiences, all of whom were African American, Albers underscored several areas of concern. First, teacher candidates were unaware of how to study for such a broad test. This finding corresponds to the research on teachers’ perceptions given their concerns regarding how to prepare their students. Second, the candidates were academically prepared and were considered to be high achievers. Thus, as affirmed by Wilkerson et al. (2004) with regard to foreign language licensure tests, there appears to be a disconnect between coursework and the Praxis II test expectations. Third, the author identified that the test produced both economical and emotional burdens for teacher candidates. For example, not only did prospective teachers suffer economically as a result of the cost of repeated attempts, but they also reported feeling embarrassed, incompetent, and unworthy following the outcome of the high-stakes testing experience.

Although Bennett, McWhorter, and Kuykendall (2007) investigated the Praxis I test, their qualitative study examined issues that may be present in subject-matter licensure tests. The authors investigated how

concerns related to racial bias in standardized testing and ethnic and cultural identity affected the perspectives of 18 African American and Latino Praxis I test-takers. The data revealed three categories of test-takers: (a) Nervous Achievers, (b) Passionate Persisters, and (c) Frustrated Resisters. Bennett et al. (2007) highlighted that the Nervous Achievers were good test-takers and were disciplined regarding the steps they needed to take to be successful at the Praxis I. The Passionate Persisters did not prepare for their first Praxis I attempts, but they studied for their repeated attempts. Furthermore, this group expressed feeling anxious during the testing experience. The Frustrated Resisters resisted the strategies that the authors suggested to pass the Praxis I. These test-takers were angry, frustrated, and criticized their teachers who they believed failed to provide them with the appropriate preparation. Additionally, time constraints and inadequate lexical knowledge contributed to the test-takers' failure to complete the Praxis I tasks.

Based on previous research, it is clear that content faculty play a pivotal role in preparing teacher candidates for the challenges that they will face on subject-matter licensure tests. Clearly, when faculty are unaware of the test expectations or the standards involved in developing such tests, it is likely that teacher candidates will have difficulty obtaining initial certification.

Purpose and Gap

Given that the standards-driven Praxis II: World Language Test differs significantly from its previous versions, the Content Knowledge and Productive Language Skills tests, it is unknown how teacher candidates will respond to its unique challenges. Since research (Cheatham, 2004; Ricardo-Osorio, 2008; Welles, 1999; 2000) has underscored that post-secondary faculty often fail to use the profession's student National Standards or Program Standards in curricular development, one may assume that the outcomes of this

new test may adversely affect foreign language teacher licensure resulting in the certification of fewer language educators even when the demand for these teachers is rather high. This study examines the perspectives of five prospective foreign language teachers, two of which were required to take the Productive Language Skills Test and the remaining three were required to take the World Language Test for licensure in Mississippi. The study fills a gap in research in two fundamental ways. First, it addresses the perspectives of teacher candidates regarding mandatory licensure tests. Current research regarding foreign language licensure tests has not used qualitative methodology to do so. Second, it examines if and how the teacher candidates' perspectives differ given their experiences with either the Productive Language Skills Test or the World Language Test.

Method

Setting and Participants

This study examined the perspectives of five teacher candidates who were all part of a larger qualitative dissertation study that included six teacher candidates and four faculty members at the same institution. The teacher candidates in this study were purposefully selected based on several criteria: (a) they were Spanish language learners; (b) they were seeking licensure in the state of Mississippi; and (c) they were undergraduate students. All teacher candidate participants were required to take a minimum of 40 credit hours in professional education courses and 32 credit hours in Spanish. There were no program requirements specifically related to foreign language methodology, target language linguistics, or target culture. Thus, it may be assumed that this university did not prepare teacher candidates according to the requirements of the ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards. None of the teacher candidates was required to study abroad; however the university advertises at least one opportunity for all Spanish students. Additionally, the oral proficiency of

Table 1
Teacher Candidate Information

Name	Praxis II Test	Attempts	Most Recent Test Date	Most Recent Score	GPA
<i>Initial Interview February 2010</i>					
Alison	PLS	2	June 9, 2007	Passed (177)	4.00
Jackie	PLS	2	June 23, 2003	Passed (168)	3.83
<i>Initial Interview: February 2011</i>					
Colleen	WL	1	October, 19, 2010	Not Passed (144)	3.95
Kelsey	PLS/WL	3	June 29, 2011	Not Passed (122)	3.58
Rachel	WL	1	February, 15, 2010	Not Passed (137)	3.50

PLS denotes the Productive Language Skills Test (required score = 155)
WL denotes the World Language Test (required score = 160)

teacher candidates was never assessed using the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the only assessment used to gauge oral proficiency according to ACTFL. All teacher candidates were assigned pseudonyms. Table 1 provides additional information about the five teacher candidates.

Data Collection

Interview protocol. This qualitative study included interviews and the collection of relevant documents. Interviews were semi-structured since the researcher relied on predetermined questions but was allowed the freedom to digress (Berg, 2009). Examples of research topics and questions included: When you think about the test, what stands out to you? What would you tell a friend about this test? If you were on a committee to redesign this test, what would you change or leave the same? Follow-up interviews were used to delve deeper into the issues that emerged from initial interview sessions. Additionally, these guided conversations assisted in examining the teacher candidates’ foreign language coursework and experiences (Tell me about the tests that you took in your foreign language classes; Tell me about your foreign language learning experience; How did you learn a foreign language best?). All participants were interviewed at least twice and were encouraged to provide additional information via email following interview sessions. Interviews were approximately 50-minutes in duration and were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Documents. In addition to interview data, the researcher collected both public and private documents which included (a) the Test at a Glance (ETS, 2010), (b) Praxis II Score Reports, and (c) academic transcripts. The Test at a Glance was used to prepare the researcher regarding the format of the test and to develop potential questions or topics that might be helpful during the interview. Additionally, it should be noted that the researcher registered for and took the Productive Language Skills Test and Content Knowledge Test years prior as a prospective Spanish teacher and the World Language Test at the beginning this study.

The academic transcripts and Praxis II Score Reports were collected to provide an additional source of data related to the testing experience and foreign language classroom experience. These documents also provided a way to verify that participants were accurately reporting their Praxis II results and Spanish language success during interviews. Furthermore, the score report allowed for comparisons to be made on a case-by-case basis with regard to test sections.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was inductive and occurred simultaneously with data collection. Merriam (2009) underscored that “without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that

have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating” (p. 171). The data were analyzed by use of the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Strauss and Corbin (1990) asserted that this method relies on two analytic procedures that are basic to the coding process: making comparisons and asking questions.

An initial list of codes was created based on the research. Among others, these included test anxiety, misalignment between course expectations and the test, test preparation, test challenges, and program deficiencies. Codes were then collapsed in some cases whereas others were expanded. For example, test anxiety became anxiety while listening and anxiety while speaking.

Validity and Reliability

Merriam (2009) identified several ways in which a researcher can establish internal validity including triangulation. Collecting relevant documents such as the Praxis II score report, the Test at a Glance, and academic transcripts provided an additional data source for triangulation purposes. The inclusion of faculty members in the larger dissertation study addresses triangulation as well. The incorporation of follow-up interviews assists in establishing validity as well. Internal validity was further established through member checking procedures. According to Merriam (2009), member checking “is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation rings true” (p. 217). Each participant was granted access to her transcribed interview. None of the teacher candidate participants chose to alter any comments.

Merriam (2009) also underscored the importance of reliability in qualitative research. Given that human behavior is dynamic, qualitative researchers are not concerned with isolating human behavior to yield the same interpretations (Merriam, 2009). As Merriam explained, “The question then is not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 221). In addition to the above strategies to ensure reliability, the researcher employed an audit trail. Merriam (2009) described the audit trail as “a log as in what a ship might keep in detailing its journey” (p. 223). This log included a detailed description of how data was collected and how teacher candidate categories were formed. I also included reflections throughout the research process.

External validity is concerned with generalizability or the extent to which the results can be applied to other situations. Merriam (2009) asserted that “probably the most common understanding of generalizability in qualitative research is to think in terms of the reader or user of the study” (p. 226). In order to assist the reader or user, external validity was established by providing a detailed description of the context

including the participants and research site.

Findings

The data revealed that two groups of teacher candidate test-takers emerged and experienced the Praxis II in divergent ways. The *Surprised Prevailers*, Alison and Jackie, took the Productive Language Skills Test twice before receiving passing scores whereas the *Frustrated Forgoers* never passed the World Language Test. This section will provide interview and document data that reveal how the *Surprised Prevailers* and *Frustrated Forgoers* perceived the Praxis II licensure tests including their preparation strategies, test challenges, and the subsequent consequences of the test. The following section will be divided into these three main sections and will provide qualitative data that identify how these teacher candidate groups differed.

Preparation

Surprised Prevailers

The *Surprised Prevailers*, Alison and Jackie, offered examples of their Productive Language Skills Test preparation that produced either successful or unsuccessful outcomes. Before their initial Praxis II attempts, they emphasized that it was a situation of “not knowing what to expect” (Jackie, Interview 1, February 11, 2010) and “not knowing how to prepare” (Alison, Interview 1, February 10, 2010). Although they recognized that their teachers were not aware of what the Productive Language Skills Test entailed, both Alison and Jackie were proactive in their preparation. Following suggestions “to look it up online” (Alison, Interview 1, February 10, 2010), the *Surprised Prevailers* began initial preparation by mimicking the activities completed in class. Alison stated, “I just tried to review myself on vocabulary and things like that” (Alison, Interview 1, February 10, 2010). Echoing the same sentiments, Jackie affirmed, “I think I just brushed up on some verb tenses and vocabulary and things like that” (Jackie, Interview 1, February 11, 2010).

Focusing primarily on grammar-based and vocabulary-related preparation did not benefit Alison or Jackie, however. Both expressed surprise with the format of the Productive Language Skills Test. As emphasized in the study by Albers (2002), their experience with the test produced emotional consequences since Alison and Jackie reported feeling useless following initial failure. Additionally, it was difficult for these teacher candidates to understand why they were unsuccessful on the Productive Language Skills Test. Like participants in the study by Albers (2002), both teacher candidates were successful in their classes. According to their academic transcripts, neither had received a grade lower than an A in any Spanish course, and Alison had never obtained a B in her academic history.

Frustrated Forgoers

Similar to the *Surprised Prevailers*, the

Frustrated Forgoers, Colleen, Kelsey, and Rachel, were surprised by the format of the World Language Test; however they blamed their language teachers for this lack of awareness. According to Colleen, “my teachers didn’t know about the Praxis [II]” (Interview 1, February 20, 2011). This is consistent with research (Bowen, 2002; Zigo & Moore, 2002) that underscores faculty unfamiliarity regarding the expectations of licensure tests in their disciplines. Like the *Surprised Prevailers*, the *Frustrated Forgoers* relied on grammar-based and vocabulary-related preparation for the World Language Test. Kelsey reiterated, “I found a tutor, and we went through the subjunctive and everything. We did the book, chapter 12 through 16. We did six weeks of review material. It was a lot of grammar. I treated it just like a class” (Interview 1, February 22, 2011).

The World Language Test’s focus on using the language in authentic contexts frustrated Colleen and Rachel who expected a test measuring discrete grammatical knowledge. Colleen indicated,

I just thought it was going to be grammar. I thought this because I took a test in [one of my classes] and it was all about grammar. It gave you a score and that was how good your language was. Then I saw on the website that it was about listening and other stuff and nothing about grammar. Obviously grammar, but not testing straight your grammar knowledge, so I freaked out. (Interview 1, February 20, 2011)

Rachel expressed feeling equally frustrated, “I thought I would be tested on what I know. This test just frustrated me” (Interview 1, February 22, 2011).

Kelsey, on the other hand was not as surprised with the structure of the test, since she had experienced it previously. Kelsey had been unsuccessful on her first two Praxis II attempts (first with the Productive Language Skills Test and then on the World Language Test). Prior to her third attempt, Kelsey still focused on grammar and vocabulary since her teachers were unaware of the Praxis II and did not tell her how to prepare differently. She explained, “When we got the scores the second week of November [from my second attempt], my momma and I, we scheduled an appointment with my adviser at the time to talk to her about it, and she didn’t know what to say. We were upset that she didn’t know what to say, what we should do” (Interview 1, February 22, 2011).

Test Challenges

Surprised Prevailers

Alison and Jackie were surprised and unprepared when they arrived to take the Productive Language Skills Test. By preparing solely through grammar-based and vocabulary review, these two teacher candidates were overcome by the test format and testing administration. In several instances, Alison and Jackie commented that the Productive Language Skills Test was “inaccurate” and

“did not test what [they] knew” based on the specific challenges that impeded their Spanish production during tasks. Jackie highlighted,

It was intimidating because they’re [the proctor] staring at you, and you’re supposed to be sitting there and the tape recorder, I think it malfunctioned twice. It made me nervous, and I had to start over, and the fact that the test and the recorder, the recording, you could not stop it at all. So if you got messed up and you were flustered then, it was a timed thing. I wasn’t prepared for the time. I just couldn’t get it out fast enough. (Interview 1, February 11, 2010)

Alison also expressed a similar frustration regarding temporal constraints. “It was just nerve-wracking. I’ve never been timed while speaking before” (Email Follow-Up, March 14, 2010). The difficulty to overcome time constraints as well as other testing-related challenges adversely affected the anxiety level of both Jackie and Alison. Alison indicated that her anxiety made it impossible to speak in Spanish.

When I first, when I first took the test, when I first sat down and I went through the first section of the test, I was completely, I just felt completely unprepared to the point that in some portions of it, I hardly said anything because I was so nervous. I was just surprised with the format of the entire test. (Alison, Interview 1, February 10, 2010)

Combined with the inappropriate preparation, these *Surprised Prevailers* possessed only a modicum level of communicative competence at best. Alison described the Praxis II test:

I was expected to, for six of the nine questions, you had to perform different tasks. What I mean by that is you had to basically speak into a tape recorder, um, in different situations that the booklet gave you. It was like a sequence of pictures and you had to say what was happening or something to that effect. But, you had to be specific. If you did not know the exact word, you couldn’t do it. (Interview 1, February 10, 2010)

Alison’s debilitating testing anxiety made it difficult for her to employ communicative strategies to transcend her linguistic deficiencies and complete the speaking tasks. Similarly, Jackie was unable to ignore equipment malfunctions and time constraints to produce Spanish through speaking and writing.

Following additional exposure via study abroad and coursework in the target language, these *Surprised Prevailers* opted for a second try at the Praxis II test which they ultimately described differently. Although Jackie was again afflicted by tape recorder malfunctions, this time her testing anxiety did not consume her. She explained, “The second time I took it, I did pass, but again, they had malfunctions with the cassette recorder which I thought was a really big problem” (Interview 1,

February 11, 2010). Similarly, Alison reacted differently to the Praxis II tasks when compared to her first experience. She remembered,

I just wasn’t as silent. Sure, I didn’t know all the words, but this time I was able to work around it and do other things. I guess, describe or whatever. I know now that they call that circumlocution. And, I used my time more efficiently. I knew what to expect so I knew that I would be timed, and I knew I needed to think of things to say and jot those down quickly before speaking. (Email Follow-up, March 14, 2010)

The descriptions of the Praxis II tasks, especially Alison’s comments, allude to an increased level of communicative competence. The ability of both *Surprised Prevailers* to overcome testing anxiety, time constraints, and other hurdles allowed them to pass the Praxis II. In fact, Alison increased her Praxis II score by approximately 20 points when comparing her first and second attempts. She obtained a 177/200 (speaking: 57/72; writing: 38/48). Jackie also performed much better by obtaining approximately 15 points higher on her second Praxis II attempt (168/200).

Frustrated Forgoers

Colleen, Kelsey, and Rachel were all plagued by temporal constraints, as were the *Surprised Prevailers*, but they faced numerous other challenges on the World Language Test than did their Productive Language Skills Test-taking peers. Of all the test sections, these *Frustrated Forgoers* expressed the most concern regarding the listening portion of the test. Rachel recalled how the allotted time adversely affected her,

... it showed you a question for twenty seconds and then the question went away. Then it showed you another question which I hated because some questions I finished in five seconds but others I didn’t even have time to read the whole question. If it is a multiple choice and the (a), (b), (c), and (d) are all lengthy and I’m having to translate in my head quickly and then go back and think of the listening [passage] and choose the right one, it takes more than a couple of seconds. (Interview 1, February 21, 2011)

Their comments regarding this component area also revealed that the *Frustrated Forgoers* lacked experience hearing the target language outside of the classroom given that the speed of native discourse impeded their ability to comprehend. As Rachel explained, “Yes, it was native speakers, but they were speaking way faster than I’ve ever heard in a listening exam. I am not accustomed to that. It was way faster than anything I’ve ever experienced” (Interview 1, February 21, 2011). Colleen affirmed this same obstacle and affirmed, “Well, I feel like when I hear Spanish, like when I am talking to people, I can understand, but the audio it was just so fast. It was real native interviews,

supposedly, it was real interviews or actual things, and I had so much trouble with it” (Interview 1, February 20, 2011).

Unlike previous versions, the World Language Test allowed test-takers to hear passages twice and included preview questions in between listening attempts. Still, these changes did not appear to have a positive impact on the performance of the *Frustrated Forgoers*. In fact, their comments may allude to low levels of communicative competence. For example, Rachel described the test section,

You know, I feel like if they had just played it a second time without seeing the questions, I wouldn't have understood much more. I would even take out the first listening without the questions. I'm sure there was a reason that they do that, but I didn't even listen that time. It was just too much. I was overwhelmed because I had just ran out of my 20-seconds on the previous questions, and then we went right into another passage, and they started speaking again. I just used that time to regroup from one activity to the next. (Interview 1, February 21, 2011)

Her score report reveals that Rachel had difficulty with the listening section of the test as well as the other areas (137/200: listening 14/25; reading 13/24; cultural knowledge 7/11; writing 7/18; speaking 4/18). Colleen also expressed difficulty with the listening section. She recalled,

Hearing the passage twice helped a little. I didn't get much at all the first time. Once I was able to see the questions and hear I a second time, I was able to understand better, but I think if I would have had a third time [to listen], I'm sure they don't give you a third time for a reason, but I'm sure I would have understood more. (Interview 1, February 20, 2011)

An analysis of the score reports confirms that although Colleen may have understood more than Rachel, she had challenges in the other component areas as well (144/200: listening 18/25; reading 15/24; cultural knowledge 7/11; writing 7/18; speaking 2/18). In fact, she was most successful during the listening portion of the test.

In addition to the challenges in the listening section, the *Frustrated Forgoers* also expressed difficulty with vocabulary. Although all three teacher candidates reported preparing for the Praxis II by studying grammar, their lack of linguistic competence may have impeded success on the few grammatical questions on the test. Colleen asserted,

Well, I was thinking that hopefully these language questions would be easier. I'll be able to get those, you know. Some of them I did, but there was one question where I compared two words, and I didn't even know either of the words so I couldn't even

answer the question. I had never heard or seen those words before. (Interview 1, February 20, 2011)

Rachel also described an integrated writing-speaking task which she believed to be extremely difficult given the abstract nature of the vocabulary:

The third task was awful for me. Whatever that word that the article was about, you know, the main word. I didn't know it. So for me, the whole point was lost. It was a really hard article for me to read, and I had a hard time responding. I feel like I wrote 120 words, but it didn't make any sense. (Interview 1, February 21, 2011)

Kelsey's comments are especially noteworthy. Although she considered herself to have mastered the grammatical structure of the language, following multiple Praxis II attempts, she learned that this knowledge was extremely limited. She remarked, “I think it was just rote memorization. It was just memorizing rules on study guides or tests” (Interview 1, February 22, 2011). Kelsey obtained the lowest scores in every component area when compared to all other teacher candidates (122/200: listening 11/25; reading 11/24; cultural knowledge 6/12; writing 4/18; speaking 3/18), 17 points lower than her Productive Language Skills attempt and one point lower than her first World Language Test attempt.

A final concern of the *Frustrated Forgoers* was their lack of cultural knowledge. Rachel and Kelsey expressed concern that these questions were included on such an important test, especially considering the treatment of culture in their classes. Often, they were unaware of the answers and were forced to guess. Rachel declared,

I feel like I might have learned some of those [cultural things] at some point in time. I guess they kind of rang a bell, but it wasn't like, 'oh I really know about this person.' I could have gotten it right based on recall, but I could not tell you about any of those people. I just guessed on those questions, really. It was like a 50/50. (Interview 1, February 21, 2011)

Consequences of the Test

Surprised Prevailers

After the receipt of their initial insufficient Praxis II scores, the *Surprised Prevailers* still believed that they could pass the Productive Language Skills Test. Consequently, as reiterated by successful Praxis I test-takers in the study by Bennett et al. (2009), Alison and Jackie altered how they prepared for their initial Praxis II attempts. Instead of relying on similar strategies which emphasized grammar and vocabulary in isolation, Alison and Jackie focused on practical language application. Jackie asserted, “I practiced with a native speaker with different scenarios to be able to express something quickly because [time] was a major issue” (Interview 1,

February 11, 2010). Alison remembered another strategy, “One thing that I did the second time that helped me a lot was that I looked at either children’s books or coloring books that had really simple pictures and I tried to describe to myself basically what was going on in the pictures in Spanish” (Interview 1, February 10, 2010).

In addition to practice with speaking scenarios and description, the *Surprised Prevailers* also recognized the influence of study abroad and additional coursework which led to higher levels of self-efficacy. For Alison, her study abroad and the additional coursework were especially influential regarding her language acquisition and ultimate Praxis II success.

I think what really helped me turn a corner in college was the study abroad experience just because it made me feel more comfortable. Um, and my, actually, my listening skills improved the most from my study abroad experience. And my speaking abilities did as well. And then, the other thing were my, uh, upper level courses, the more specialized courses in Spanish. One for example that helped me a lot was Spanish phonetics. It focused really on how you pronounced the words and that, I think, helped me with my accent and even renewed my passion for it because it made me more confident about how I sounded when I spoke Spanish. (Alison, Interview 1, February 10, 2010)

Like Alison, Jackie attributed her success to similar decisions. “I definitely learned a lot more in my upper level classes. My speaking skills improved, my writing skills improved. My reading skills, um [improved], drastically from before” (Jackie, Interview 2, February 17, 2010). She also underscored the influence of the study abroad experience. “And, I went to Mexico. It was not required. I just did it on my own” (Jackie, Interview 1, February 11, 2010).

Frustrated Forgoers

Unlike the *Surprised Prevailers* who believed that the expectations of the Productive Language Skills Test were within their reach, the *Frustrated Forgoers* considered the World Language Test to be “so far gone” (Rachel, Interview 1, February 21, 2011). In simple terms, the challenging nature of the World Language Test ultimately persuaded these teacher candidates to forego additional Praxis II attempts. Rachel’s experience with the World Language Test made her come to the conclusion that, “. . . it wouldn’t be possible. I didn’t know how to do it or where to begin. That makes it not passable for me” (Interview 2, May 5, 2011). Failing the Praxis II assisted Colleen, who was previously considering an alternate career path. She highlighted, “I wasn’t sure when I took the Praxis [II] if I wanted to be a teacher. After taking it, I knew that I didn’t want to. I was so discouraged” (Interview 2, April 14, 2011).

Kelsey, who was unsuccessful on her first two Praxis II attempts, decided to pursue a summer study

abroad opportunity prior to her third Praxis II attempt. Following this experience, Kelsey continued to disregard the role of practical, communicative preparation by focusing on isolated grammar knowledge. She elucidated, “Well failing the test again made me want to study the grammar more” (Email Follow-up, June 23, 2011). Since Kelsey continued to focus on grammar prior to her third attempt, it is not surprising that she failed the World Language Test again (with a score of 122/200). It was at this point that Kelsey abandoned additional Praxis II attempts and pursued alternate licensure in a different content area.

Discussion

What Can Be Learned from Their Experiences with the Praxis II?

The data revealed that the *Surprised Prevailers* and *Frustrated Forgoers* shared common challenges regardless of the licensure test required of them. Similar to the findings by Albers (2002) regarding the Praxis II tests used for licensure in English, although all were high achievers according to their academic transcripts, all teacher candidates expressed difficulty with the tasks that they believed ran contrary to their Spanish coursework. This raises several questions. Why is there a dislocation between their coursework and the Praxis II? Why do they not receive any preparation for the Praxis II?

Additionally, although the *Surprised Prevailers* ultimately passed the Productive Language Skills Test, all teacher candidates had difficulty with speaking tasks. Ricardo-Osorio (2008) predicted this dilemma given that few institutions assess the oral proficiency of foreign language students. Furthermore, a study by Fraga-Cañadas (2010) underscored that teachers often feel less prepared in the areas of oral communication. Since these teacher candidates were never assessed using the OPI, it can only be assumed that they had not reached the Advanced-Low level, the minimal level of oral proficiency expected on both tests. Additionally, the scores of Colleen, Kelsey, and Rachel may imply that these *Frustrated Forgoers* are not even close to this goal.

The *Frustrated Forgoers* were assessed with regard to listening, reading, and cultural knowledge, which were absent categories on the test required of the *Surprised Prevailers*. Although they were challenged in each area, the *Frustrated Forgoers* reported the most difficulty with the listening tasks. This finding is confirmed by Fraga-Cañadas (2010) who argued that teachers reported feeling less competent with regard to their listening proficiency as well. Why are foreign language teacher candidates not exposed to authentic discourse? Why are the speed and topics of the listening passages so surprising to these test-takers?

Additionally, the *Frustrated Forgoers* recognized their lack of cultural knowledge which resulted in the use of multiple uneducated guesses. Does this imply that culture, one of the 5 Cs of the National

Standards, is a lost component in their courses? Or, is it limited to superficial factual knowledge that impedes their ability to examine the products, practices, and perspectives of target cultures? Why do they not seek opportunities to expand cultural knowledge when they will be expected to teach it to future foreign language students? This proactive behavior is vital considering “that their agency and investment in the learning process is crucial for success. Language learning is a long, complex process and much of language acquisition happens outside the confines of the classroom, therefore candidates must seize every opportunity available to them to enhance competencies” (Veléz-Rendón, 2006, p. 331).

Implications

Although the data is merely suggestive at this point and may present more questions than answers, it is clear that these teacher candidates expressed deep concern regarding the misalignment between their classroom experiences and the Praxis II expectations. Furthermore, all teacher candidates in this study emphasized that due to faculty unfamiliarity with the Praxis II, they were left to their own devices. One rationale for these findings may be related to this program’s failure to adjust the curriculum according to the Program Standards. In fact, although these five teacher candidates took different versions of the Praxis II, one that was inconsistent with accepted teaching practices and a second newly designed standards-based test that was developed to ameliorate this issue, the structure of their teacher education program remained unchanged. Clearly at this institution, as hypothesized by Tedick (2009), departmental insularity is indeed evident. At the very least, this study reveals the likely consequences of insular faculty who fail to acknowledge certification demands and the role of standards in altering instructional practices.

Meeting the demands of the Program Standards is required of NCATE accredited foreign language teacher education programs. Programs must show evidence of meeting their six content standards:

Standard 1: Language, Linguistics, Comparisons

Standard 2: Cultures, Literatures, Cross-Disciplinary Concepts

Standard 3: Language Acquisition Theories and Instructional Practices

Standard 4: Integration of Standards into Curriculum and Instruction

Standard 5: Assessment of Languages and Cultures

Standard 6: Professionalism

Standards 1 and 2 are the responsibility of the faculty in foreign languages (McAlpine & Dhonau, 2007; Pearson et al., 2006). When teacher candidates do not pass the World Language Test, it is unlikely that Standards 1 and 2 have been met. According to Abbott, the Executive Director of ACTFL, the Program Standards were designed for multiple purposes: (a) to assist students in reaching the goals set forth in the National Standards,

and (b) to provide language educators and curricula specialists with a template to evaluate the effectiveness of their own programs using candidate data and backward design (personal communication, October 2011). In simple terms, if teacher candidates are unsuccessful on licensure exams, which appears to be the case at this institution, what decisions are made to improve the curriculum based on this data?

Looking more closely at The Program Standards, the role of communication in delivering standards-based instruction is clear. They state,

Candidates are able to communicate successfully in the three modes of communication. . . . Undergirding effective implementation of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (1999) is the expectation that teachers will provide effective oral and written input in the classroom. (ACTFL, 2002, p. 4)

Consequently, the three modes of communication of the National Standards are not only reiterated in the Program Standards but are directly assessed on the World Language Test. Therefore, teacher candidates and faculty should not be surprised with the expectation that candidates must “comprehend and interpret oral messages including face-to-face and telephone conversation, news broadcasts, narratives and descriptions in various time frames, speech, and debates” (2002, p. 4).

Although the Program Standards stipulate that teacher candidates must be able to understand authentic oral and written texts, the comments by Colleen, Kelsey, and Rachel provide evidence that they never heard the target language in these contexts. This has important implications for foreign language teacher education programs. Specifically, in addition to focusing on oral communication at the Advanced-Low level, target language coursework must also incorporate tasks that improve the interpretive capabilities (e.g., listening and reading proficiency) of teacher candidates. Courses must include texts, both written and aural, produced by native speakers so that students are accustomed to rapid, authentic discourse in addition to manipulating unknown target language vocabulary in familiar contexts. By doing so, all language learners will be cognizant of how to incorporate reading and listening strategies to overcome gaps in comprehension.

Regarding cultural knowledge, the Program Standards expect teacher candidates to understand the connections between the products and perspectives as well as the practices and perspectives of the target culture peoples. This requirement forces foreign language teacher candidates to explore the target culture beyond superficial, discrete facts in order to make pertinent connections to other disciplines and to make literary and cultural texts relevant to a diverse body of students. Through cultures, connections, and comparisons,

prospective teachers can communicate with speakers of the target language community to promote empathy and create solutions to problems affecting the entire global society. Although cultural knowledge is a fundamental component of both the Program Standards and National Standards (as are communication, connections, comparisons, and communities), the *Frustrated Forgoers* expressed a lack of awareness in this area.

Although the data regarding the Praxis II: World Language Test is troubling at this institution, it is clear that successful programs using the Program Standards are adequately preparing teacher candidates for the test-related challenges. For example, McAlpine and Dhonau (2007) provided suggestions that led to their program’s success. Ultimately, they urged all faculty members to become involved in NCATE program reporting through training on the Program Standards and National Standards. By following this example, foreign language faculty will have a better understanding of how to better prepare prospective language teachers in reaching the goals of the Program Standards and passing licensure tests like the World Language Test.

Additionally, although Sandarg and Schomber (2009) were referring to the previous versions of the Praxis II, their suggestions may still be useful to prepare both prospective teachers and current foreign language faculty for the World Language Test. Finally, Pearson et al. (2006) emphasized the role of courses that are tailored to meet the specific needs of foreign language teachers. Thus, one course in foreign language methodology is not sufficient. Candidates must be cognizant of how to translate the National Standards into daily and unit lesson plans and develop assessments that monitor the progress of learners regarding the modes of communication.

At the very least, since “the heart of language instruction is the ability to teach students to communicate” (ACTFL, 2002, p. 4), teacher candidates must know how to use the target language effectively. The outcomes of the World Language Test, or any Praxis II subject-matter assessment, should not be a surprise to faculty or teacher candidates. Instead, concrete procedures and policies must be in place, such as the Program Standards, to assist teacher candidates during a course of language study in meeting the challenging goals set by the profession. By doing so, we are answering our call to fill our nation’s schools with qualified language educators.

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“Frustrated” or “Surprised?” An Examination of the Perspectives of Spanish Teacher Candidates Regarding the Praxis II Subject-Matter Tests

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