

# Perceptions of Gender Differences in High School Students' Motivation to Learn Spanish

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**Abstract:** *Little research has been conducted in the United States to explore male motivation to learn Spanish. In response, we conducted a study to investigate gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish among students in a southeastern United States high school. Building upon Gardner's (1985) influential model of second language (L2) motivation, we employed a mixed methodology to investigate gender differences in motivational factors. Sixty students studying Level 1 Spanish completed a questionnaire. We further explored the findings of the questionnaires in interviews. Although the results indicated that the boys perceived themselves to be less motivated than their female peers, gender differences were less dramatic than in previous studies. The study's results also suggest that males and females have opposing preferences with respect to L2 classroom management.*

**Key words:** *Spanish, classroom management, gender differences, mixed methodology, motivation*

Since publication of *The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis* (Simon, 1980) there has been growing interest in second language (L2) education in the United States. In today's era of globalization and multiculturalism, the need to speak more than one language has become even more evident. In addition to the cognitive benefits of L2 instruction (Foster & Reeves, 1989), there are clear employment- and cultural-related reasons to develop proficiency in another language (Graddol, 2004). The events of September 11 and the subsequent

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launching of the federal government's \$114 million National Security Language Initiative in 2006 (Graham, 2006) have also brought attention to reasons related to national security for learning additional languages in the United States.

While there is a growing interest in instruction in numerous second languages across the country (Draper & Hicks, 2000), the rapidly changing demographics of the U.S. population draw specific attention to the need to learn Spanish. The Spanish-speaking population in the United States is more than 35 million, making it the third largest Spanish-speaking country in the world (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, p. 1). To better prepare American youth to compete and thrive in such a diverse and international forum, greater emphasis and importance must be placed on L2 education.

Data from the past 10 years indicate that American schools are beginning to respond to the call for greater L2 education. For example, a survey conducted in 2000 by the ACTFL revealed that from 1994 to 2000, the number of students enrolled in an L2 program in public secondary schools in the United States increased by almost 1 million (Draper & Hicks, 2000, p. 1). Further indicative of growing interest in L2 education, the Center for Applied Linguistics recently reported that 8% of elementary schools and 17% of secondary schools not offering L2 instruction in 2008 hope to do so in the near future (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2009, p. 1). It appears that American schools are also responding to the growth of the Spanish-speaking community. From 1994 to 2000, the number of students studying Spanish in grades 7–12 jumped by 800,000 (Draper & Hicks, 2000, p. 1).

Despite increasing enrollment and popularity in L2 programs, there is growing angst amongst L2 educators in the United States that a large percentage of American youth lack motivation to learn another language. Amidst growing international concern about the underrepresentation of males in L2 programs across English-speaking countries (Carr & Pauwels, 2006;

Kissau, 2006; Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002), attention has also been drawn to the lack of participation of American males in advanced-level L2 programs.

Recent evidence has emerged that supports the cause for concern over the lack of male motivation to learn languages other than English in the United States. A large-scale study by Heining-Boynton and Haitema (2007) investigating student attitudes toward L2 learning involved thousands of elementary-age students studying French and Spanish in North Carolina. Results demonstrated that the male students had more negative attitudes toward L2 learning than did their female counterparts. A recent survey by Scripps Howard News Service and The Ohio State University of more than 1,000 American adults also suggested that males are less interested in pursuing L2 studies (Hargrove & Stempel, 2007). The results of the survey revealed that 17% of women had four years of L2 instruction, compared to 10% of men (Hargrove & Stempel, 2007).

As the need to communicate in other languages increases in this era of multiculturalism and internationalization, and as interest and enrollment in L2 programs continue to rise, the need to explore the state of male motivation to learn second languages in the United States becomes even more important. Representing the first phase of a two-part study, in this article the researchers describe the results of a study investigating possible gender differences in student motivation to learn Spanish in the United States.<sup>1</sup> To situate the study described in this article in an international context, we first provide a summary of related research<sup>2</sup> conducted in other English-speaking countries.

## Review of Literature

Research on motivation and foreign language study has been shaped by several influential studies. These studies continue to provide the framework for a variety of different explorations of gender differences

as related to the study of foreign languages, especially the study of French. In 1999, a seminal study investigating the state of French as a second language education in Canada first drew attention to the issue of male underrepresentation in L2 classes (Netten, Riggs, & Hewlett, 1999). The results of the study revealed that adolescent boys do not often enjoy the study of French and that they are less likely to study advanced-level French courses in high school than their female counterparts (Netten et al., 1999).

In a British context, similar results were reported in studies by Jones and Jones (2001) and later Williams et al. (2002). In both studies, involving hundreds of students in the United Kingdom, motivational differences were investigated between adolescent males and females toward the study of second languages, specifically French and German. The girls expressed a significantly higher degree of desire to learn the languages than did the boys, and they also put forth more effort to learn them.

Going beyond simply reporting the general lack of male interest in learning second languages, the two studies explored possible reasons behind this lack of interest. The boys were reported to be highly critical of the repetitive and teacher-centered nature of their L2 classes. The results of both studies emphasized that boys crave greater control in L2 classrooms and resent being so dependent upon the L2 teacher (Jones & Jones, 2001; Williams et al., 2002).

A change in pedagogy was also suggested by Pavy (2006) and Carr (2002). According to both researchers, to make language learning meaningful for boys, classes need to offer content relevant to their daily lives (Carr, 2002; Pavy, 2006). The researchers suggested that to increase male interest in L2 studies, the L2 classroom must become more "boy-friendly." Boys want relevant, purposeful tasks; frequent use of the target language and authentic materials; and anxiety-free, student-centered teaching (Carr, 2002; Pavy, 2006).

In a study by Carr and Pauwels (2006) that examined possible reasons behind male underrepresentation in advanced-level L2 programs, the researchers contested the biological argument that males are simply less able language learners. Instead, they claimed that societal perceptions of male-appropriate behavior influence males to pursue areas other than second languages. The researchers also claimed that for many males L2 study is perceived as overly difficult and irrelevant to future career aspirations.

The findings of a study by Kissau (2006) also emphasized the influence of societal perceptions on male L2 enrollment. In this study investigating gender differences in motivation to learn French, motivational differences were reported in regard to numerous variables believed to influence one's L2 motivation, all in favor of females. Echoing the earlier reports by Jones and Jones (2001) and Williams et al. (2002), in the study by Kissau (2006) the boys perceived themselves to have less control in the L2 classroom. They also believed that they are less able than girls to learn French and receive less encouragement to study the language. Kissau (2006) concluded, however, that many of the reported gender differences in his study were influenced by societal perceptions. Traditional views of male-appropriate behavior were influencing the boys to shy away from the study of French due to its feminine connotations.

Noticeably absent from the above list of studies is the mention of any research conducted in the United States. It is also noteworthy that the above literature review uncovered no research focusing specifically on Spanish. Given that the study of Spanish accounts for almost 70% of the L2 enrollment in the United States (Draper & Hicks, 2000, p. 1), it is crucial that American L2 educators have a better understanding of the state of male motivation to learn the language. In response to this need, the researchers set out to investigate gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish in the United States.

## Model of L2 Motivation

Similar to the model used in a previous study investigating the impact of single-sex instruction on motivation to learn Spanish (see Kissau, Quach, & Wang, 2009), the model of L2 motivation used in this study also builds upon the seminal work of Gardner (1985). According to Gardner, L2 motivation is a broad concept that consists of three main components: motivation (motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward the L2), language learning orientation (integrative and instrumental orientations), and attitudes toward the learning situation (teacher and course evaluations). While still incorporating these basic components of Gardner's influential model (1985), the model used in the present study incorporates additional motivational factors such as classroom anxiety, self-efficacy, and societal perceptions of Spanish. The following section provides a brief overview of the factors that we examined in order to better understand why they are important in a study investigating gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish.

### *Motivational Intensity, Desire, and Attitudes Toward the L2*

According to Gardner (1985), L2 motivation is the combination of effort expended to learn the language (motivational intensity), the desire to achieve the goal of learning the language, and favorable attitudes toward the language. Numerous studies have found these three factors to influence whether or not students choose to continue L2 studies (Gardner, 1985; Kissau, 2006). In other words, students who report high levels of motivational intensity, desire, and favorable attitudes toward the L2 are more likely to pursue L2 studies than those who report lower levels.

### *Integrative and Instrumental Orientations*

Gardner (1985) categorized students' reasons for studying an L2 as either integratively

or instrumentally oriented. Integratively oriented students choose to study a language primarily for conversational purposes or to better understand the L2 culture and community. On the other hand, instrumentally oriented students choose to pursue learning an L2 for practical reasons, such as to get a job. Gardner, Smythe, Clément, and Gliksmann's study (1976) supported Gardner's categorization by finding that the primary reason for students deciding to pursue L2 studies appeared to be their language learning orientation.

### *Teacher and Course Evaluations*

According to Gardner (1985), student attitudes toward the learning situation in the L2 classroom are influenced by their general reactions to the L2 teacher and their evaluations of the L2 course. Student-participants in several studies have stated in a matter-of-fact manner that when they like their L2 class and in particular their L2 teacher they are more motivated and try harder (Diffey, Morton, Wolfe, & Tuson, 2001; Jones & Jones, 2001). One such student stated, "When I know I like the teacher I try to work harder to impress them, but if I don't like the teacher I just don't care, so I won't even try" (Diffey et al., 2001, p. 174).

### *Self-Efficacy and Anxiety*

According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment of his or her capabilities to successfully carry out the action required in various tasks. Individuals who feel they have the ability to successfully complete tasks are more likely to put forth the necessary effort than those who do not (Schunk, 1991; Wang & Pape, 2007). According to Oxford (1999), self-efficacy is closely linked with anxiety, another important factor influencing one's motivation to learn a language. People who feel they lack the skills to successfully learn an L2 may be more anxious in the L2 classroom and, as a result, may be less motivated to pursue language studies.

### *Student Perceptions of Spanish*

Several studies have provided evidence suggesting that societal perceptions of male-appropriate behavior may be discouraging boys from pursuing the study of certain languages (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Williams et al., 2002). For example, in Kissau's 2006 study examining gender differences in motivation to learn French, the researcher found that societal perceptions of French as an effeminate language were largely responsible for reported gender differences in 15 factors influencing L2 motivation (Kissau, 2006).

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A large urban high school in the southeastern United States with more than 2,100 diverse students was the focus of this study. At the time of the study, approximately 70% of the students were African American. The remaining 30% consisted primarily of Caucasian (14%), Asian (6%), and Hispanic (8%) students. All students enrolled in Level 1 Spanish, as well as their Level 1 Spanish teachers, were invited to participate in the study.

### *Questionnaire*

We collected quantitative data from the student-participants through the use of a questionnaire (see Appendix A). Students circled a number on a 7-point Likert scale that best represented their response to statements pertaining to the motivational factors (7 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree). The Attitude Motivation Test Battery (AMTB; Gardner, Clément, Smythe, & Smythe, 1979) provided the majority of the items included in the questionnaire. We chose this battery for a variety of reasons. It is intended to specifically gauge student motivation to learn another language, has been reported to have high internal consistency and test-retest reliability coefficients, and has been used in several other related studies. We adapted additional measures from the Grade 9 French Survey (Netten et al., 1999) and the Motivation

to Learn French Survey (Kissau, 2006). With respect to both of these surveys, we changed the language of focus from French to Spanish. Information pertaining to each measure, including Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients (in parentheses), appears below.

### **The AMTB**

The AMTB, designed by Gardner et al. (1979), provided the measure for motivational intensity (0.82), desire (0.89), attitudes toward the L2 (0.94), integrative orientation (0.86), instrumental orientation (0.83), teacher evaluation (0.92), course evaluation (0.88), and Spanish class anxiety (0.77).

### **Grade 9 French Survey**

The Grade 9 French Survey designed by Netten et al. (1999) provided the measure for self-efficacy (0.84). This measure was specifically designed to investigate attitudes in an L2 classroom and was intended to be administered to adolescent students, ensuring its suitability for the present study. We slightly modified items included in this measure to reflect a Spanish classroom. In essence, each time the word *French* appeared in the measure we replaced it with *Spanish*.

### **Motivation to Learn French Survey**

The Motivation to Learn French Survey designed by Kissau (2006) provided the measure for student perceptions of Spanish (0.82). This measure was also designed for adolescent learners of an L2 and was intended to explore possible differences between how males and females perceive the target language. We slightly modified Kissau's (2006) measure as well to reflect a Spanish classroom.

### *Student and Teacher Interviews*

Following the quantitative phase of the study, we collected qualitative data via student and teacher interviews. The researchers conducted the interviews separately and tape-recorded them, and they lasted approximately 30 minutes each. Interview

questions addressed the three main components of Gardner's model of L2 motivation: motivation (motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward the L2), language learning orientation (integrative and instrumental orientations), attitudes toward the learning situation (teacher and course evaluations), and the additional motivational factors (anxiety, self-efficacy, and student perceptions of Spanish).

### *Data Analysis*

The researchers entered all the survey responses into SPSS 15.0. We ran descriptive statistics to classify and summarize all numerical data. We explored the data using frequency distributions, and we used *t* tests to test differences between male and female students. In addition, we obtained the effect size for each *t* test using Cohen's *d*. According to Cohen (1988), an effect size less than 0.20 is considered small, an effect size larger than 0.80 is considered large, and an effect size between 0.20 and 0.80 is considered medium. In all cases, in order for differences to be considered significant, we set the conventional significance level at .05.

Following analysis of the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires, the researchers analyzed the data provided by the interviews. We coded the data obtained from the interviews following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992). In other words, we made comparisons between the data obtained, looking for emergent themes.

## **Results**

### *Demographic Data*

Sixty out of a possible 105 students enrolled in the four different Level 1 Spanish classes offered at the participating high school chose to participate in the study. Of these 60 students, 26 were male and 34 were female. Sixteen of the student-participants were taught by a female teacher, and the remaining 44 students were evenly distributed amongst three separate classes taught by a male teacher.

From the 60 students who completed the questionnaire, we selected 16 (8 males and 8 females) to participate in interviews. In order to ensure that boys and girls were equally represented in the interview process, we used stratified random sampling to select students.

Both Level I Spanish teachers at the participating school also took part in the interviews. One teacher was a male native speaker of Spanish from Mexico and the other was an African American female who had spent time living and studying in the Dominican Republic. Besides these obvious differences, the two teachers were quite similar. Both were approximately 30 years old and had each been teaching Spanish for 5 years in the United States. During several classroom observations prior to administering the questionnaire and conducting the interviews, the researchers also noticed that both teachers used similar teaching strategies, had their students complete the same activities and assignments, and spoke comparable amounts of Spanish in the classroom. The teachers also had very similar classroom management styles. Both teachers felt it was beneficial to create a relaxed environment in the classroom to reduce student anxiety and seemed to accept similar levels of student talking and noise in the classroom.

### *Quantitative Data*

Using Gardner's model of L2 motivation, we examined how males and females responded to the questions that measured motivation on three main components: motivation (motivational intensity, desire, and attitudes toward the L2), language learning orientation (integrative and instrumental orientations), and attitudes toward the learning situation (teacher and course evaluations). Expanding on Gardner's model, we also measured male and female responses to the three previously mentioned additional factors (self-efficacy, anxiety, and student perceptions of Spanish). In total, we analyzed 10 different factors influencing L2

**TABLE 1**

**Gender Differences in Motivation to Learn Spanish**

Construct	Sex	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
Motivation total	Male	26	5.05	.75	.361
	Female	34	5.24	.86	
Motivational intensity	Male	26	4.80	.79	.020*
	Female	34	5.34	.91	
Integrative orientation	Male	26	4.85	1.29	.002*
	Female	34	5.87	1.16	
Instrumental orientation	Male	26	5.00	.92	.041*
	Female	34	5.55	1.07	
Desire	Male	26	4.88	1.28	.019*
	Female	34	5.62	1.09	
Attitude	Male	26	5.14	1.13	.177
	Female	34	5.56	1.26	
Anxiety	Male	26	4.93	1.05	.798
	Female	34	4.85	1.08	
Teacher evaluation	Male	26	5.76	.77	.011*
	Female	34	4.83	1.68	
Course evaluation	Male	26	5.17	.899	.777
	Female	34	5.25	1.10	
Self-efficacy	Male	26	4.08	1.08	.428
	Female	34	4.30	1.11	
Perceptions of Spanish	Male	26	5.41	1.00	.640
	Female	34	5.54	1.11	

*Note:* Asterisks indicate differences that are significant.

motivation. The means and standard deviations of responses for both sexes, as well as their significance levels, are provided in Table 1.

Although we noted no statistically significant differences between male and female students on the total score for L2 motivation, we noted interesting differences for some of the individual factors. The male students ( $M = 4.80, SD = 0.79$ )

had significantly lower scores on motivational intensity than female students ( $M = 5.34, SD = 0.91$ ),  $t(58) = -2.39, p = .02, d = 0.93$ . In other words, the males perceived themselves as putting forth less effort in Spanish class than did their female peers. With respect to integrative orientation, the males ( $M = 4.85, SD = 1.29$ ) reported significantly lower scores than did the females ( $M = 5.87, SD = 1.16$ ),  $t(58) =$

– 3.23,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.83$ . The males ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) also had lower scores than the females ( $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(58) = -2.09$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = 0.55$ , for instrumental orientation, indicating that the males were less interested in learning Spanish for both the cultural and employment-related benefits than were their female counterparts. Pertaining to desire, the males again ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) had significantly lower scores than the females ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $t(58) = -2.42$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $d = 0.62$ . On attitudes toward the L2, however, the males ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were not statistically different from the females ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(58) = -1.37$ ,  $p = .18$ ,  $d = 0.35$ . Both groups appeared to have equally positive attitudes toward Spanish. Similarly, the males ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) were not significantly different from the females ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) with respect to Spanish class anxiety,  $t(58) = .26$ ,  $p = .79$ ,  $d = 0.08$ , nor did the males ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) perceive themselves to be less able than the females ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(58) = -.79$ ,  $p = .43$ ,  $d = 0.20$ . Pertaining to perceptions of Spanish, the males ( $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) were again not significantly different from the females ( $M = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(58) = -.47$ ,  $p = 0.64$ ,  $d = 0.12$ . In other words, neither sex perceived the study of Spanish to be more appropriate for one sex than the other. Although male ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ) and female ( $M = 5.25$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) responses were not significantly different with respect to course evaluations,  $t(58) = -2.87$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ,  $d = 0.08$ , the same could not be said pertaining to their evaluations of their Spanish teachers. The male students ( $M = 5.76$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) gave significantly higher evaluations to their teachers than did the females ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ),  $t(58) = 2.62$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $d = 0.71$ .

### *Qualitative Data*

We used responses from students generated during the interview process to support the initial findings from the questionnaire. During the interviews, students responded to questions that specifically addressed

the three components of Gardner's (1985) motivation construct (motivation, language learning orientation, and attitudes to the learning situation), as well as the three additional motivation factors examined in the questionnaire (anxiety, self-efficacy, and student perceptions of Spanish).

### *Motivation*

According to Gardner (1985), attitude is an important component of one's motivation to learn another language. Students with positive attitudes toward the L2 tend to be more motivated to learn it than those who have negative attitudes. Both males and females who participated in the interviews reported similarly positive attitudes. All 16 students said that they enjoyed learning Spanish, and no one felt it to be a waste of time. In fact, an equal number of males and females (4 of each) reported that they planned to take Spanish throughout high school.

Only when questions progressed to address the next subcomponent of motivation did gender differences surface. Seven of the 16 student-participants reported that males in Level 1 Spanish had less desire to learn Spanish than their female peers. This perception was, however, more common amongst females, as only 2 males reported that boys, in general, had less desire to learn the language than did girls. The remaining 9 participants felt that both sexes were equally interested in learning Spanish. When asked to explain why they felt males had less desire to learn Spanish, female comments ranged from boys failing to see the importance of learning another language to boys being less mature than girls and not looking ahead to the future.

While results were split pertaining to desire, gender differences were more apparent with respect to the third and final subcomponent of motivation, motivational intensity. Eleven of the 16 students (7 girls and 4 boys) felt that females in Level 1 Spanish tried harder, paid attention, and participated more and in general put forth



more effort to learn the language than did their male counterparts. When asked why she felt boys in her Spanish class put forth less effort to learn the language, a female student responded without hesitation, "Because I think that male students sometimes just sit there and just goof off all the time and the females are more interested to actually learn the language." This sentiment was echoed by another female student who also suggested that lack of male effort was not specific to Spanish class: "Okay, like from my experience in my classes, like, some females are like more than dudes are [sic]. Some females seem to be more like wanting to be good and work hard and stuff."

Neither the male nor the female teacher perceived one sex to be more motivated to learn Spanish than the other. To support her belief that males and females are equally motivated, the female Spanish teacher commented that in her more advanced and optional Spanish classes, males and females were equally represented. The male teacher also stated that both males and females participated equally in his Level 1 Spanish classes and put forth a similar amount of effort.

### *Language Learning Orientation*

Language learning orientation is the second main component of Gardner's (1985) influential motivation construct. According to Gardner, students study a language for integrative or instrumental reasons. The 16 students interviewed were aware that Spanish could lead to future jobs and that L2 study is a requirement to get into university. Although both sexes reported in equal numbers (7 boys and 7 girls) that they were studying Spanish in part for instrumental reasons, there were some interesting differences between the sexes. Of the 7 instrumentally oriented boys, 5 reported that they were studying Spanish because foreign language study was required for college admissions. Only 2 of the boys actually had a career in mind for which an understanding of Spanish would be helpful. The females, on the other hand, had specific

careers in mind for which they felt knowledge of Spanish would be beneficial. One particularly career-oriented female stated, "It's important to learn Spanish for me because I want to be a lawyer when I get out, and like if you're, what is that called, bilingual, then it gets you further."

Only 2 males stated that they were studying Spanish for integrative reasons. Both mentioned that the United States is very diverse and that, in their words, it would be "cool" to be able to communicate with people who speak a different language. From the responses in the interviews, the female participants appeared more integratively oriented than did the males. All but one female student reported that they were interested in communicating with Spanish-speaking people and getting to know their culture.

The teachers thought that the large majority of their students, both males and females, were taking Level 1 Spanish because two years of L2 study is a graduation requirement and because Spanish was perceived by students to be the easiest of the three second languages offered (Spanish, French, and German) at that school. While they both believed that some of their students were interested in learning Spanish in order to communicate with Spanish-speaking friends, they did not perceive any differences between their male and female students with respect to integrative and instrumental orientations.

### *Attitudes Toward the Learning Situation*

Student comments relating to their evaluation of the course focused primarily on student behavior. Students repeatedly used words like *characters*, *loud*, *attitudes*, and *catty* when describing their classmates. Whether taught by the male or female teacher, female students, in particular, frequently reported that their classrooms were too noisy and that this often prevented them from getting much work done. While describing her class, one female student made the following remark:

My teacher came in and couldn't even talk, it's so loud. I just came from there and it's like scorching loud. You know, it's sometimes hard to concentrate when there's a lot of noise. It's a lot of distractions and you don't get more work done.

On the other hand, 6 of the 8 male students specifically commented on how much fun they had in Spanish class and how they enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere. Only 2 of the 8 females used the word "fun" to describe their classroom's atmosphere.

Not surprisingly, student evaluations of the teachers also emphasized behavioral issues and classroom management. The female students were highly critical of their Spanish teachers for their lack of classroom control. While discussing her male Spanish teacher one female student took the opportunity to vent her frustration: "I just want teachers to have more control over their classes. You know, I don't like it when the students take advantage of the teachers and start talking whenever." While a different female student thought her male teacher was unjust in his punishments, another thought this same male teacher's discipline strategy was highly ineffective. She commented: "But sometimes it's hard to understand when like everybody's talking. And he's just counting, I don't think that counting is working, because it's just stupid to me."

While both the male teacher and the female teacher were subject to criticism, all 4 female students who were taught by the female teacher voiced their displeasure with her classroom management skills. One such student questioned whether the behavior in her classroom might have been different had a male been the teacher. "Yeah, because males sometimes have more authority, and they'll put their foot down. And sometimes students are like intimidated by male teachers."

Male evaluations of their teachers were quite the opposite of those of their female peers. Several of the male students felt that

they had developed a good rapport with their teacher and appreciated the relaxed and fun atmosphere that was created in the classroom. A male student who had previously failed Level I Spanish made the following remark: "My teacher done loosened up a little bit. At first he was a little more strict, but I think he has gotten a little nicer, so I mean it's all good."

While the female students were critical of this same male teacher's behavior management system, the boys actually seemed to think it was effective: "His little counting thing. Like staying back to the bell. It makes people follow directions, because they don't want to stay for like 5 minutes after the bell."

Both teachers acknowledged that inappropriate behavior was occasionally an issue in their classrooms. They also agreed that the noise level was at times elevated, but they argued that in an L2 classroom a considerable amount of noise is a sign of good discussion and often necessary to develop a positive rapport with the students.

Both the male and female teacher felt it was important to establish relationships with their students. The male teacher emphasized the need to have fun with his students and to get involved with them outside of the classroom. The teacher felt his male students, in particular, appreciated that he coached the school's soccer team. In fact, the researchers observed former male students on the soccer team visiting the male teacher in his classroom on more than one occasion. These personal connections allowed this teacher to relate to students differently than the female teacher.

The female teacher also strived to create a relaxed atmosphere in her classroom but felt that she was disadvantaged in this respect, in comparison to her male colleague. While the male teacher had been at the school for 4 years, this was only the second year for the female teacher. As a result, she did not believe that she had the chance to get to know the students as well. Interestingly, when the female teacher tried to be more relaxed, her female

students felt she lacked classroom management skills.

### *Additional Factors*

Only 2 students, both males, perceived males in Level I Spanish to be more anxious in the classroom than their female peers. Both males believed this anxiety stemmed from males not wanting to look foolish in front of their female classmates. While the remaining 14 students did not believe one sex to be more anxious in Spanish class than the other, it is interesting to note that 2 boys and 2 girls did mention that they themselves were nervous when asked to speak in Spanish in front of the opposite sex.

Similar results were reported for self-efficacy. Only one male student perceived females to be more capable in Spanish class. This student reported, "Oh yeah, because it's proven that girls are naturally better than boys at learning languages." The remaining 15 students thought that both sexes were equally capable.

With respect to student perceptions of Spanish, the 16 students unanimously rejected the notion that Spanish is an effeminate language and a more appropriate subject for females than males. Far from Spanish being perceived as an effeminate language, of the two boys who aspired to become a NASCAR engineer and an athletic trainer, respectively, both felt that knowledge of Spanish would be extremely beneficial in these careers traditionally pursued by males.

The Spanish teachers did not perceive there to be any differences between the two sexes pertaining to the three additional motivational factors. Both teachers felt that the popularity of Spanish artists like Shakira and Jennifer Lopez and the growing presence of the Spanish language and culture in the community helped dispel any notion that Spanish is a more appropriate language for girls to learn than boys or that one sex is better at learning the language than the other. The only difference that

surfaced during the teacher interviews with respect to the additional factors pertained to anxiety. The female teacher felt that the girls were more anxious than the boys when students were asked to dance together while learning the salsa.

### **Discussion**

Although the findings support those of a growing list of studies indicating adolescent males to be less motivated to learn second languages than their female peers (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Jones & Jones, 2001; Kissau, 2006; Pavy, 2006), they also indicate some interesting differences. Contrary to the apathetic male language learners reported in the studies by Kissau (2006) and Jones and Jones (2001), the boys in the present study were in general quite excited to learn Spanish and were enjoying their Spanish class. Exemplary of these positive attitudes, on a 7-point scale used to gauge motivation, in which a score of 7 indicated highly motivated individuals, the mean response for males with respect to all 10 factors approached and often exceeded a score of 5. In comparison with the study by Kissau (2006) investigating gender differences in motivation to learn French amongst English-speaking students in Canada, gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish were less dramatic. In Kissau's 2006 study, females reported more positive scores than males with respect to 15 of the 18 motivational variables investigated. In this more recent study, however, significant gender differences, in favor of females, were reported in regard to only 4 of the 10 motivational factors examined. In support of the work of Williams et al. (2002) and Carr and Pauwels (2006), it appears that some second languages are viewed more positively by boys than others.

One possible explanation for why gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish are less striking than those to learn French may relate to how the two languages are perceived by students, and by society in general. Evidence gathered in the study

suggested that Spanish is not victim to the same irrational linguistic stereotyping as was the French language in the study by Kissau (2006). While the French language was reported by boys in Kissau's study to be associated with femininity and even homosexuality in males and thus unsuitable for boys, Spanish was associated by students in the present study with Spanish-speaking musicians and neighborhood friends. Further emphasizing differences in how the two languages are perceived, students in the study by Kissau (2006) thought knowledge of French led to jobs traditionally held by females such as a travel agent or French teacher, whereas knowledge of Spanish was thought by several students in the more recent study to be beneficial for careers in medicine, law, and engineering.

Although societal perceptions may not have played as significant a role in this study investigating student motivation to learn Spanish as they did in Kissau's 2006 study, it would be inaccurate to say they had no impact at all on male motivation to learn the language. The following quote by a 15-year-old male student suggests that it is not studying Spanish that is viewed as inappropriate male behavior, but rather working hard in any subject: "I would probably say guys try less than girls in all classes. I mean, just because they don't want to. Guys don't want to look like they're, because, see guys don't want to look like they're trying hard, because that's not cool." It could then be hypothesized that the significant gender differences reported pertaining to factors such as motivational intensity and desire to learn Spanish may be due to boys not wanting to be perceived by others as too keen in any subject.

As was suggested in the student interviews, gender differences in goal-setting also appeared to have an impact on male motivation to learn Spanish. Oxford and Shearin (1994) reported that "goal setting can have an exceptional importance in stimulating second language learning motivation" (p. 19). In support of Kissau's earlier research (2006), students frequently made

references to gender differences in goal-setting when asked why boys had less desire to learn Spanish than girls and why they were less instrumentally oriented. The following comments by a female student underscore the possible influence of male students not looking ahead to the future: "Yeah, sometimes I think girls think more than boys, because boys like they just think of what's on their mind right then and there. They don't really care about what's smart, what's the next thing."

Another interesting distinction between this study and others that have investigated male motivation to learn second languages is that not all findings reported are in favor of females. The male students studying Spanish reported significantly higher teacher evaluations than did their female counterparts. While all students were exposed to a similarly relaxed classroom atmosphere, characterized by open discussion and lenient classroom rules, it quickly became apparent during student interviews that the male students appreciated the "fun" environment created by their greater freedom in the classroom, and the female students did not. Not being required to always raise their hand before speaking or to work quietly at their seat, the male students enjoyed the greater sense of control they felt in their classrooms. The female students, on the other hand, wanted their teachers to have more control. As reported in numerous studies investigating the lack of male interest in language learning, boys are especially critical of L2 classrooms that are very teacher-centered and that offer very little student control (Carr, 2002; Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Jones & Jones, 2001; Pavy, 2006). At the other end of the continuum, the classrooms that boys most enjoyed in the previously mentioned studies were those that were fun, where the teacher had a good sense of humor, and where the boys felt they had some control over events in the classroom (Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Jones & Jones, 2001; Pavy, 2006). The positive male attitudes toward learning Spanish reported in

the study may be, in part, due to the fun and relaxed atmosphere of their classrooms, where they had the control that many other boys have reported to be lacking in L2 classrooms.

### Limitations

While the data reveal interesting gender differences among boys and girls learning Spanish, there are limitations to this study that should be noted. A larger sample could have strengthened the results. Many students who were invited to participate failed to return the consent forms. Those students excluded from participating in this study could have provided further insight into gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish. That being said, 5 of the 10 *t* tests used in this study showed statistically significant differences with medium to large effect sizes. Moreover, 4 of the 10 *t* tests used in this study did not show statistically significant differences with small effect sizes. In other words, the small sample size did not have any adverse impact on 9 of the 10 findings. Only with respect to attitudes toward the L2 did the *t* test fail to identify a statistically significant difference between males and females with a medium effect size, suggesting that with a larger sample size this difference could become statistically significant.

In addition to sample size, the study would also have benefited from having a control group. The fact that both participating teachers were very similar in their age, teaching strategies, and classroom management style prevented the researchers from being able to ascertain to what level these factors influenced student motivation. Interesting comparisons could have been made had there been a group of male and female students taught by a Spanish teacher with a completely different style of teaching and discipline than that demonstrated by these two teachers.

Moreover, the study's data were collected only in Spanish I classes and from a very diverse group of students that ranged

in age from 14 to 19. Some of the differences may have been attributed, at least in part, to age, learning styles, or other factors that were not considered in the study. Therefore, the data should not be generalized beyond the Spanish I classroom and all other contextual factors should be taken into consideration. Despite these limitations, both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in the study did reveal some interesting differences in student motivation to learn Spanish that were specifically attributed to gender.

### Implications and Applications

Although the gender differences reported in this study were less prominent than those reported in similar studies focusing on different languages and despite the fact that the participating males often reported quite positive attitudes toward learning Spanish, there is still room for improvement. When the students were asked what could be done to increase male motivation in their Spanish classroom, the issue of teaching methodology was raised in several interviews. Students, both male and female, suggested that their Spanish teachers needed to diversify their teaching and provide more variety in their teaching strategies to address the needs of both sexes. One male student commented, "Um, maybe more like fun activities with the language, like getting around and more, maybe something like some type of game, or besides just taking notes all day and answering questions. That might motivate us more to learn the language."

To increase male motivation to learn Spanish it was also suggested that teachers further integrate male interests into the L2 classroom. One male student was appreciative of the fact that his teacher discussed soccer, a sport popular in many Spanish-speaking countries, and incorporated cartoons and music videos into instruction. This suggestion is also supported by previous research. Callaghan (1998) for example, stated that gender-

specific topics discussed in L2 and foreign language classrooms tend to further alienate male students.

Frequent references made by boys to activities they found enjoyable in their Spanish classroom would also seem to suggest that teachers integrate more drama and more of the L2 culture into instruction. The boys reported enjoying listening to songs by Spanish-speaking musicians like Shakira, watching clips of television shows from Mexico, and acting out skits. Surprisingly, both Spanish teachers also mentioned that it was the boys and not the girls who were more interested and actively involved in learning to salsa dance.

Other suggestions focused on improving the motivation of all students, not just boys, and included having teachers explain to their students the importance of learning another language and, as demonstrated in the following quote, the need to make language learning more meaningful and in context: "My teacher is inconsistent in the type of work that she gives out. Sometimes she'd have us watch videos, sometimes we'd have a lab, but it was never like leading into each other. She'd just throw it out there."

There is a need for L2 teachers to adjust their teaching strategies to meet the needs of male students in their classrooms. As was demonstrated in the qualitative data, the male students appreciated the fun and relaxed atmosphere created by their teachers and the amount of control they were provided in the classroom. However, a significant contribution of this study to the current body of knowledge in the field pertains to the finding that male and female students do not appear to have the same preferences with respect to classroom management. While L2 teachers may want to create "boy-friendly" classrooms, this should not be done at the expense of their female students. L2 teachers need to create a fun and relaxed atmosphere in their classrooms, while at the same time not abandoning all teacher control. As is often the case, variety may be the answer to addressing the needs of all students in the

classroom. By incorporating games, kinesthetic activities, student interaction, and occasional student choice in activities alongside traditional classroom activities such as copying notes, completing worksheets, and answering questions, L2 teachers may be able to satisfy the needs of both males and females in their classrooms.

## Directions for Future Research

A review of the literature indicated that this is one of the first studies investigating gender differences in motivation to learn Spanish in an American context. Therefore, the need exists for further research on this topic. Similar studies should be conducted in other areas of the country to determine if this study's results are unique to the geographical location in which it was conducted or the demographic characteristics of the student-participants.

The finding that male and female students have different preferences with respect to teaching styles, and more specifically classroom management techniques, also calls for further research. In classes with large numbers of unmotivated boys, tailoring teaching strategies to create "boy-friendly" classrooms may be one way of increasing male interest in language learning. Future research should look at what pedagogical and classroom management strategies are effective at motivating males in L2 classes.

## Conclusion

Despite the international attention drawn to the underrepresentation of English-speaking boys in advanced-level L2 classrooms, very little research has been conducted on the topic in the United States. Further calling into question the applicability of these international studies to the American context, they have either dealt specifically with boys learning French as an L2, or boys learning modern languages in general. None have focused specifically on boys learning Spanish, a language that accounts

for almost 70% of the L2 enrollment in the United States (Draper & Hicks, 2000, p. 1). In both respects, the present study has helped fill a void in the research. Although the American boys in the participating Level 1 Spanish classes were perceived to be less motivated to learn Spanish than their female peers, gender differences were far less dramatic than in similar studies involving other languages, and in general the male students did have positive attitudes toward studying the language. The Spanish language does not appear to be subject to some of the negative stereotypes attached to other second languages like French, and as a result, is viewed more favorably by male students.

In addition to this important contribution to related literature, the study also provides substantial evidence to suggest that while both sexes see the need for modified teaching strategies to motivate males and females to study Spanish, the two sexes do not appear to have similar preferences with respect to classroom management. While the male students enjoyed the fun and relaxed environment of their classroom, the female students wanted their teachers to have more control over the classroom and felt that behavioral issues impeded their progress. L2 teachers need to find a balance between fun, interactive, student-centered classrooms and traditional, teacher-directed classrooms that offer classroom structure, but very little in the form of student control.

In light of the size of the research project and the unique characteristics of the participants, the study cannot be generalized to all L2 classrooms. Further, the researchers acknowledge that in some cases the findings may run counter to traditional expectations of L2 teachers, in particular with respect to the reported differences between male and female classroom management preferences. Nevertheless, the study has generated some very interesting and unique data related to a topic that has received little attention in the United States.

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## Notes

1. In the second phase of the study, the same students were placed in single-sex classrooms. We then measured their motivation again at the end of the semester to investigate the impact of single-sex instruction on their L2 motivation. For information related to the second phase of the study, see Kissau, Quach, and Wang (2009).
2. Many of the studies mentioned in this article have been previously described in related research by Kissau (see Kissau, 2006, 2007; Kissau & Quach, 2006; Kissau & Turnbull, 2008; and Kissau et al., 2009).

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**APPENDIX A**

*Survey of Student Attitudes Towards Spanish*

Instructions

You have 30 minutes to complete this questionnaire. Please take your time to complete all sections to the best of your ability. All questionnaires will be collected by the researcher.

Section I: Background Information

Please check the appropriate response to each question.

- 1. Your sex: \_\_\_\_\_Male \_\_\_\_\_Female
- 2. Sex of your Spanish teacher: \_\_\_\_\_Male \_\_\_\_\_Female
- 3. Are you or your parents a native speaker of Spanish? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No
- 4. Do you intend to take Spanish beyond level II?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure/Undecided \_\_\_\_\_ No

Section II: Language Attitudes

Directions: For each of the following statements circle the number which best represents your answer.  
1 = strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = moderately agree, 7 = strongly agree

- 1. Learning Spanish is really great. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 2. When I am studying Spanish, I ignore distractions and stay on task. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 3. I wish I had begun studying Spanish at an early age. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 4. I don't bother trying to understand the complex aspects of Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 5. I really enjoy learning Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 6. Studying Spanish is important to me because I'll need it for my future career. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 7. I hate Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 8. Studying Spanish is important to me because it will allow me to be more at ease with people who speak Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 9. Knowing Spanish isn't really an important goal in my life. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 10. I wish I were fluent in Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 11. Studying Spanish is important to me because it will allow me to meet and speak with diverse people. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 12. I want to learn Spanish so well that it becomes second nature to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 13. I would rather spend my time on subjects other than Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 14. I plan to learn as much Spanish as possible. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 15. I really work hard to learn Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 16. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in Spanish class. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17. Studying Spanish is important to me because it will make me a more knowledgeable person.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 18. I tend to approach my Spanish homework in a random and unplanned manner.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 19. As I get older, I find I'm losing any desire I had in knowing Spanish.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 20. Learning Spanish is a waste of time.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 21. I love learning Spanish.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 22. I don't pay too much attention to the feedback I get in Spanish class.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 23. I don't care to learn more than the basics of Spanish.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 24. I would like to learn as much Spanish as possible.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 25. I get nervous and confused when I am speaking Spanish in class.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 26. When I have a problem understanding something we are learning in my Spanish class, I always ask the teacher for help.             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 27. Studying Spanish is important to me because people will respect me more if I have knowledge of a foreign language.                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 28. I sometimes daydream about dropping Spanish.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 29. I tend to give up when a Spanish lesson gets off track.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 30. I never feel quite sure of myself when I am speaking Spanish.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 31. I don't bother checking my corrected assignments in Spanish class.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 32. Studying Spanish is important to me because I will be able to participate more freely in the activities of other cultural groups. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 33. I make a point of trying to understand all the Spanish I see and hear.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 34. I keep up-to-date with Spanish by working on it almost every day.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 35. I always feel that the other students speak Spanish better than I do.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 36. Studying Spanish is important to me because it will someday be useful in getting a good job.                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 37. If it were up to me, I would spend all my time learning Spanish.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 38. To be honest, I really have little desire to learn Spanish.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 39. Studying Spanish is important to me because it will enable me to understand and better appreciate Spanish art and literature.     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 40. I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak Spanish.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 41. Spanish is an important part of the school program.   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 42. I think that learning Spanish is dull.  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 43. When I leave school, I shall give up the study of Spanish entirely because I am not interested in it.                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Section III: Language Classes

Directions: For each of the following statements, circle the number that best represents your answer.

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = moderately disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = moderately agree, 7 = strongly agree

- 1. My Spanish teacher is friendly. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 2. I think girls are better at learning Spanish than boys. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 3. My Spanish class is good. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 4. My Spanish teacher is sincere. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 5. I feel that I am able to understand a conversation in Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 6. I enjoy my Spanish class. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 7. I think my Spanish teacher is polite. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 8. My Spanish class is awful. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 9. My Spanish teacher is good at his/her job. 1 2 3v4 5 6 7
- 10. I find my Spanish class to be unpleasant. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 11. My Spanish teacher is a pleasant person. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 12. My Spanish teacher is considerate of students' feelings. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 13. I feel that I can write well enough in Spanish to describe an event, or a person, or tell a story. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 14. My Spanish teacher is dependable. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 15. I think my Spanish teacher is reliable. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 16. My Spanish teacher runs the classroom very efficiently. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 17. My Spanish class is of little value to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 18. I am afraid of what people will think of me if I study Spanish. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 19. My Spanish teacher is cheerful. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 20. My Spanish class is really rewarding. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 21. I think Spanish is more suitable for girls than boys. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 22. I find my Spanish class to be satisfying. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 23. My Spanish class is not appealing to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 24. The Spanish language is for sissies. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 25. I expect to do well in Spanish class. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 26. I feel that I can identify the main points in a Spanish conversation or passage. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 27. My Spanish class is painful. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 28. My Spanish class is agreeable to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 29. I feel that I can speak well enough in Spanish to make myself understood on certain topics. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7