



Examining teacher dispositions and high-leverage practices in university Spanish courses

Rebecca Borden, The University of Oklahoma

Abstract

The quality of instruction in introductory language classes can be widely variable. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to uncover the teacher dispositions and high-leverage teaching practices (HLTPs) enacted by five highly rated university Spanish instructors at a doctoral-level university in the southwestern United States. A series of classroom observations and in-depth interviews were conducted to reveal detailed accounts of introductory language instruction in real time. The findings indicate that highly rated instructors establish meaningful connections with students personally and academically in the target language (TL) and employ a number of HLTPs in their introductory language courses. The findings have implications for language program development, as specific dispositions and HLTPs may contribute to positive language-learning experiences.

Keywords: *high-leverage practices, teacher development, higher education, Spanish*

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Introduction

Since the 1980s, the study of Spanish at the university level has continued to grow, with enrollments consistently surpassing the study of all other languages combined (Lacorte & Suárez-García, 2014). The ability to speak and effectively communicate in Spanish in the workplace is viewed as a highly desirable quality, affecting hiring needs and salary potential for college graduates (ACTFL, 2019; Cortina et al., 2009). On a global scale, developing linguistic and intercultural competence has the potential to move far beyond its utility in the workforce, as language learners not only develop their own voices, but also “develop an ear for the voices of others” (Kramsch, 2014, p. 309). The increasing importance of Spanish in the United States contributes to it being the country’s de facto second language. As a result, the way Spanish is taught and learned in U.S. universities requires further examination.

A recent and more holistic view of foreign language (FL) teaching, learning, and assessment has, in part, influenced the creation of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012), World-Readiness Standards (The National Standards Collective Board, 2015), and NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-do Statements (NCSSFL, 2017), which provide frameworks for understanding learner goals and outcomes. However, these frameworks do not endorse specific methodologies or curricular materials, resulting in a wide interpretation of language teaching practices. Despite the epistemological evolutions in the last century, many K-12 and postsecondary FL programs continue to subscribe to older models of FL teaching, learning, and assessment (Brown & Thompson, 2018; Neuman, 2017). A survey of 22 R1 university language programs revealed that only 20% of the Spanish language faculty had expertise in linguistics, language acquisition, or language teaching (VanPatten, 2015), potentially contributing to the perpetuation of an outdated paradigm and one

that is lagging behind current research in the field on teacher effectiveness (Sandilos et al., 2019; Stronge, 2018; Stronge et al., 2011).

It is clear there is a compelling need to update and examine the way FLs are taught (Bell, 2005; García et al., 2019; Huhn et al., 2021; Martel, 2015). To respond to current trends in FL research and education, the program examined in the present study, comprised of instructional staff with a wide range of professional backgrounds outside language teaching, was committed to reforming its curriculum, instruction, and assessment approaches. Of particular interest was understanding which dispositions (i.e., a person's inherent qualities and character) and high-leverage teaching practices (i.e., those that impact student learning and enhance teaching skills) enacted by these instructors in a Spanish language program (SLP) at a doctoral-level university in the Southwest. The study thus responds to the following research question: What dispositions and high-leverage teaching practices are employed by highly rated instructors in a proficiency-based Spanish Language Program?

Literature Review

Foreign Language Teacher Effectiveness

A synthesis of research around proficiency-oriented, communicative language teaching suggests that a broad range of characteristics contribute to what is perceived as effective FL instruction, both from the perspective of teachers and students (Mehrparvar & Karimnia, 2018). Numerous research findings on teacher effectiveness within the field of FL education have uncovered that effective language teachers possess common dispositions, have a high level of content knowledge, and deliver instruction in an organized and clear way (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Borg, 2006; Brosh, 1996). In general, empathy and accessibility are the most consistently mentioned elements of effective teacher dispositions, encompassing a vast number of the descriptors of good teaching mentioned in the literature that connect to student interest, understanding students, and staying relevant in trends and topics relating to current student life to connect deeper to student backgrounds (Brosh, 1996; Glisan & Donato, 2017; NBPTS, 2010). Thus, getting to know students may invite empathy and is key to being an effective teacher.

Accessibility encompasses many of the dispositions and characteristics discussed in the literature, including providing feedback, being available to provide that feedback, demonstrating organization, and providing timely information related to assignments, among others (Brosh, 1996; NBPTS, 2010). According to Dewar (2002), students view accessibility as a major aspect of effective teaching.

Foreign Language Teacher Practice

Contributing to the research around language teaching effectiveness, several notable publications to support language educators in the implementation of high-leverage teaching practices (HLTPs) have appeared in the past decade (e.g., Clementi & Terrill, 2013; Glisan & Donato, 2017, 2021; VanPatten, 2017). Responding to a call for practice-based teacher education, Hlas and Hlas (2012) drew from the research on HLTPs in mathematics to develop an initial framework that could be applied in FL education. The researchers identified four HLTPs that could connect to FL teaching: (a) anticipating student errors and misconceptions during planning, (b) making connections between multiple representations, (c) leading a classroom discussion, and (d) teaching through problem solving. The authors also recognized that integrating HLTPs requires further examination to verify their impact on learning and that implementing HLTPs would be improved by opportunities to deconstruct and rehearse the practices in teacher education programs.

Kearney (2015) examined the ways in which two novice FL teachers enacted one HLTP: leading an open-ended group discussion. Their analysis uncovered a number of micro-practices and offered additional insight on the impact of HLTPs on classroom discourse. Several implications from this work influenced the premise of the current study, including the importance of a focus on relationships between classroom discourse, teachers' practices, and student learning. However, continued research linking programmatic

goals (e.g., developing communicative proficiency), practices, and micro-practices at a granular level is needed to enrich our understanding of classroom interactions in real time.

Following the preliminary work on HLTPs in FL education, Glisan and Donato (2017) outlined seven HLTPs that encompass a range of second language acquisition (SLA) research findings from theoretical and practical perspectives. Several of the HLTPs echo standards set forth by NBPTS (2010) and ACTFL/CAEP (2013), such as using target language (TL) and facilitating TL comprehensibility, creating opportunities for interaction and interpersonal communication with and between students, and providing feedback to support learner performance. In addition, Glisan and Donato (2017) presented HLTPs to promote interpretation and discussion of authentic texts, a contextualized and dialogic focus on form through PACE, the teaching of products, practices, and perspectives in a dialogic context, and an iterative cycle to deconstruct, reflect, rehearse, enact, and assess these HLTPs in language classrooms (Grossman, 2011; Lampert et al., 2013).

Similarly, VanPatten (2017) provided specific considerations for communicative language teaching that encouraged educators to frame classroom practices from a stance that supports SLA. Nevertheless, these considerations do not provide a framework for enacting specific practices in a classroom setting. Glisan and Donato (2021) expanded the work on HLTPs in FL education by introducing an additional set of core practices which include: (a) establishing a meaningful and purposeful context for language instruction, (b) planning for instruction using an iterative process of backward design, (c) engaging learners in purposeful written communication, (d) developing contextualized performance assessments, and (e) embracing and reconstructing the practices. At present, Glisan and Donato's (2017, 2021) work provides the most complete synthesis of earlier research on core practices and their impact on student learning in FL teaching. In addition, the proposed steps of deconstructing, rehearsing, and evaluating HLTPs can be easily integrated into language teacher preparation and professional development programs due to their clear guidance and opportunities for peer interaction and practice.

Foreign Language Teacher Evaluation

Although the aforementioned dispositions and core practices specific to effective FL teaching expand on the existing professional literature, it is prudent to consider the perspective of those responsible for evaluating FL teachers. In general, evaluators seek to identify specific effective teaching behaviors during the evaluation process. Program director evaluations of instructional staff often encompass a set of characteristics that go beyond teacher knowledge and skill, such as measuring affective considerations like teacher-student interpersonal relationships and a caring attitude toward students (Harris & Sass, 2009). Ideally, such evaluation would be preceded by instructor professional development (PD) around a range of HLTPs (instructional and relational), which would then serve as a basis from which program directors could match assessment of teaching with the pedagogical approaches that reflect the program goals.

In some postsecondary FL programs, evaluations are administered by language coordinators or faculty with varying degrees of background and formation in FL pedagogy, or by faculty whose focus of study is literature (VanPatten, 2015). Thus, language activities that include conjugating verbs and translating sentences may appear impressive to the observer/evaluator even though these may not effectively help students develop communicative competence (Wallinger, 2000). Because these teacher evaluators may possess outdated or ill-informed notions of what teaching for successful language learning looks like, teaching evaluations may in some cases have the washback effect of reinforcing practices that are not central to developing communicative proficiency or intercultural competence (Sandilos et al., 2019; Stronge, 2018; Stronge et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, several frameworks have been developed for administrators and teachers to help guide the evaluation process (e.g., Colorado State Model Educator System, 2016; TELL Project, 2019). These frameworks suggest that observers should watch the students as much as or more than the teacher. Additionally, the frameworks' checklists and guidelines suggest that teachers use the TL most of the time,

facilitate TL comprehensibility, consider spatial factors that foster participation and classroom management, actively engage all students, and manage instructional time.

Specifically, many teaching evaluation tools prescribe that classroom activities should be student-centered, whereby students are given opportunities to practice the TL through paired or small group work. Administrators are directed to pay attention to clear and comprehensible instructions given by the instructor, as well as follow-up activities or concluding tasks that justify the paired or small group work. Glisan and Donato's (2017, 2021) HLTP frameworks address these aspects of teaching by promoting the facilitation of TL comprehensibility and building a classroom discourse community. During an observation of a learner-centered environment, an evaluator would look for the use of the TL in these activities, participation in paired or small group work, and demonstrable comprehension of the completed activity. The rubrics that Glisan and Donato (2017) suggest following the description of each HLTP are tools intended for observation and evaluation, carried out by oneself or other observers and may therefore offer another option to administrators, language program coordinators, or faculty tasked with evaluating language teaching within programs.

Finally, FL classroom observers are also encouraged to focus on the instructor's integration of interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communication in culturally appropriate ways. Conversely, students are expected to be able to use these communicative modes as prompted by the teacher. The structure of these elements should occur in a safe classroom environment that encourages students to experiment and create with language (Glisan & Donato, 2017).

Overall, research on defining and evaluating HLTPs is quite complex due to the nature of varied teaching styles and teaching contexts. However, there is some consensus on what defines effective teaching, and the field relies on this consensus to evaluate current language programs and teaching faculty (Bell, 2005; Burroughs et al., 2019; Klassen & Kim, 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019). It is noteworthy to mention that evaluation of teaching effectiveness is best approximated when the instrument is designed and developed for the specific purpose of evaluating FL teaching (Beaudrie et al., 2004).

Rationale for Research

To encourage instructors to fully incorporate HLTPs, it is prudent to analyze how particular practices are integrated into the entirety of instruction (Grossman & McDonald, 2008). The present study thus aimed to uncover the ways in which instructors in a first-year Spanish language course employed and demonstrated HLTPs and dispositions and to inform future directions for successful language programs. Suggestions for professional development and teacher support may also prove beneficial from the findings, as programs move toward aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ways that support the development of language proficiency and intercultural competence.

Methods

Drawing on methods from previous research on HLTPs among high-performing language teachers (Kearney, 2015) and Glisan and Donato's (2017, 2021) rubrics for evaluation of HLTPs, a descriptive case study method was chosen, as its purpose is to develop a document that brings to light all the parts of an experience; in this case, the dispositions and HLTPs employed in the classroom by highly rated Spanish teachers (Stake, 2010).

Context

The lower-division Spanish Language Program (SLP) in the present study serves approximately 4400 students per academic year. The instructional staff consists of 20 adjunct instructors, and 19 graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Most instructional staff, including GTAs, have no formal FL pedagogical training and hold (or are in pursuit of) Master of Arts degrees in Spanish literature, art, and other areas outside the field of applied linguistics.

To improve and update teaching practices as the language program transitioned from a traditional grammar-oriented curriculum toward a proficiency-oriented program, the SLP provided several professional development sessions and workshops conducted by ACTFL experts. Some of the training included: an understanding of the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), workshops on teaching communicatively, sessions on performance assessments, and working in the three modes of communication.

Participants

Participants were selected for this study through criterion sampling to select only instructors and GTAs who were considered highly rated, a classification determined by a 4.0 or better average on the combined score of Student Teaching Evaluations (STEs) and by teaching evaluations conducted by the language coordinators. Specifically, a single-item question rating the instructor's overall effectiveness was utilized from STEs. The language coordinator evaluations consisted of observed practices using a rubric from a single yearly observation (see [Appendix](#)). This technique allowed for a review of cases that met this predetermined standard, as it is the criterion that distinguished highly rated instructors from their peers.

Five instructors (two male and three female) teaching the same introductory Spanish course met these criteria and consented to participate in the study. Two of the five participants were native speakers of English (one male and one female) and three were native speakers of Spanish (one male and two females) who taught Spanish as a FL. Additionally, two were GTAs (one male and one female) and the other three were by-the-course instructors (one male and two females). The identities of the study participants were not disclosed to anyone other than the researcher, and participants are referred to with pseudonyms throughout. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality when informed of the research protocol and the safeguard of this confidentiality was maintained throughout the course of the research.

A GTA from Colombia, Pablo, began teaching Spanish to native speakers of English at another institution while pursuing his first graduate degree in Spanish. He had two years of prior teaching experience, but no previous training in language pedagogy prior to the start of the current study. Christina, a GTA and non-native speaker (NNS) of Spanish, was pursuing a PhD in Spanish literature and began teaching Spanish as part of her graduate studies without any prior training. At the time of the study, Christina had been teaching for three years. Esther, a by-the-course instructor from Spain, received her undergraduate degree in English from Spain, where she also studied language pedagogy. Esther had one year of experience at the time of this research. Originally from Bolivia, Carolina, a by-the-course instructor, received her undergraduate degree in music and her master's in human relations. Carolina did not receive any formal pedagogical training during her time as a student in either program but had a variety of teaching experiences in music and language prior to the start of this study. Drexler, a by-the-course instructor and NNS of Spanish, studied Spanish Literature during his undergraduate and graduate work and began teaching during his graduate studies without any preparation. Drexler was in his seventh year of teaching at the time of the current study.

Data Collection

Data were collected from two different sources: classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Permission to carry out the study was obtained by the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

Observations

Four 50-minute classroom observations were conducted for each participant beginning at the midpoint of the semester. Instructors and their students were well acquainted, the courses well established by this point in the semester, and the participants were able to focus on instruction as opposed to the plethora of administrative responsibilities present at the beginning of the course. Four observations of each participant provided sufficient opportunity to get a general sense of instructional approach. The purpose of the observations was to examine how each of the participants enacted instruction within the natural situation of everyday classroom instruction. Hancock and Algozzine (2017) suggest that observations, unlike interviews, may present more objective data that allow researchers to verify if participants do what they recount during interviews.

The data generated from observations were collected through field notes, which served to denote the implementation of HLTPs at a granular level. At the start of the current study, it was not possible to anticipate which dispositions and HLTPs specific to FL teaching might surface. However, the researcher entered the observations having considered the literature surrounding the range of core practices as a base. Extensive field notes documented descriptions of contexts, both temporal and instructional, student and teacher-directed interactions, and classroom actions as related to instructional approaches. As activity patterns surfaced over the course of the classroom observations, a streamlined focus on specific practices was developed, using Glisan and Donato's (2017, 2021) end of chapter rubrics as a guide. For example, during Esther's first observation, the lesson was focused on a central theme of making future plans. Similarly, during Esther's third observation, the lesson was anchored in searching for apartments to rent and deciding with whom to share a flat. Observing the use of thematic foci illustrated the way Esther regularly created contexts for comprehension, which led to communicative interpersonal tasks later in the same lessons (both HLTPs among those that Glisan and Donato discuss). The process of making notes and identifying patterns over time related to instructional practice allowed for direct interpretation of the events and aggregation and refinement of patterns and categories that were defined during observations (Stake, 2010). Using direct interpretation facilitated the questioning of each instance, which led to understanding and explaining the data in relation the literature on HLTPs in FL teaching. The observation data produced 20 sets of field notes for the Spanish classes observed.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The immediate result of observation is description, but not understanding. A 30–45-minute semi-structured interview thus provided instructor perspectives and additional information that was missed in the observations that could also be used to check their accuracy (Maxwell, 2013). A portion of the questions was generated based on the collection and preliminary analysis of field notes. In this way, individual experiences were put into dialogue with each classroom observation. The ability to pose open-ended and follow-up questions granted a deeper understanding of the complex behaviors of the case “without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 653). The importance of this qualitative information served to triangulate the data alongside the observational data.

Data Analysis

All of the observation field notes, memos, and interviews were recorded and then transcribed with the help of transcription software. Coding of instructor practices rooted in HLTPs was guided by Glisan and Donato's (2017) work for two reasons. First, these HLTPs are supported by substantial research, and second, detailed rubrics facilitated data collection to better capture rich descriptions of instructor practices.

Data analysis was an interactive, cyclical, and reflective activity (Davidson, 2009). Coding was used to construct concepts with and from the data. Constant comparison was then used to discover commonalities in the data that reflected relationships between the coding constructs. The following example, taken from one of Esther's classroom observations in which she discusses renting an apartment, illustrates the coding process used for field notes, which utilized the major categories of Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubrics for guidance on HLTPs employed by the participants:

Primero hablamos de nuestras casas y ahora vamos a buscar un apartamento para alquilar en Madrid
[First we talked about our houses and now we're going to look for an apartment to rent in Madrid.]

The above excerpt was assigned three major codes and an interpretive memo in the following manner:

1. *Creating Context for Comprehension*: Esther stated the topic for conversation.
2. *Comprehensible Interactions*: Esther signaled a connection between one activity and the next.
3. *Contexts for Interaction*. Esther started with an activity in which students could talk about themselves and their immediate surroundings, then moved to a task involving the same

topic.

4. Interpretive memo: Esther took today's topic from the course the calendar provided to her and personalized as a springboard to the activities that followed. The students' faces showed excitement and interest in apartment hunting in Madrid. Question for Esther: What made you enact the activity in this way?

In the same way, participants' dispositions were extracted through both coding and interpretive memos to arrive at an analysis of those employed by the participants. For the purpose of this study, it was deemed appropriate to consider five codes that embodied a variety of dispositions repeated in the literature in both general education and FL teaching.

The following example, taken from part of Esther's in-depth interview, illustrates the coding process used in the identification of dispositions present during interview transcripts and represents the typical length of each coded segment:

I have had some really good teachers, and I remember having some teachers that I felt like didn't really want to be there. When I started teaching and I liked it, I realized that a very big part of it was engaging students in different ways. Like, I know that maybe I was supposed to explain something in a certain way, but I knew that some students were not going to be able to get it if I only explained it in that way.

The above data excerpt was assigned two codes and an interpretive memo in the following manner:

1. *Building Relationships*: Esther expressed enjoying the engagement with her students.
2. *Knowledge of Students*: Esther discussed how she may need to engage her students in different ways depending on their needs.
3. Interpretive memo: Esther appears to use her experiences to anticipate how students will react and what they will need. She also appears to empathize with her students needing to feel connected to the lesson and the teacher in some way.

Findings

Teacher Disposition Among Highly Rated Instructors

The most common dispositions exhibited throughout the in-depth interviews were caring and empathy, whether specifically stated or not. Overwhelmingly, the five participants recalled their own language learning and other personal experiences, which were at the forefront of empathy toward teaching their students. Carolina referred to a conversation with her mother about a study abroad experience in the following way:

And my mom told me I needed to feel what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land. I didn't feel that way so much in Bolivia but in Japan I did. I think all of that made me empathetic and compassionate to my students. I know that it's scary, I know that it's overwhelming, and exciting at the same time. You have to be able to be sensitive to that energy. It's an exchange. And I know that in learning another language, it forces you to understand another perspective, and it encourages humility. That feeling of not knowing is teaching you something, and I tell my students that; let that feeling teach you something!

Carolina elaborated on her sense of empathy during a later segment of the interview, stating:

As a musician and language learner myself, I think I am able to understand when, and have empathy for my students when they make the same certain mistakes over and over again. I can understand that their approach is a very 'English' way of speaking, and that's fine. We can still work on it, and I tell them that, which I think is helpful for them.

Similarly, Drexler expressed a recurring influence in his teaching gleaned from a talk he had attended at the start of the semester:

And he said, don't forget what you didn't know. I really think sometimes as teachers we don't realize how little students know. So, I try to put myself back in that place to give them what they need.

Similar anecdotes from each of the participants' personal experiences present in the interview data affirmed a need for the teacher to remember the feelings of discomfort, cognitive dissonance, and novelty throughout the process of acquiring a new language and culture. By and large, examples of the participants' caring and empathy were displayed throughout the classroom observations as they regularly employed eye contact, head nods, smiles, and encouragement as students were speaking or interacting. Explicit error correction, for example, was not observed as students made mistakes. Instead, each participant utilized recasts or ignored the error altogether as the meaning was clear during classroom interactions.

A second shared disposition among the participants evident across the data sources was a strong knowledge of students and their needs. In each of the participants' classroom observations, they engaged in a period of personalized questions and answers between the student and teacher about a variety of topics throughout the lesson. The format of these interactions ranged from general to specific, and always included follow-up questions to elicit TL output from the students. This appeared to serve two purposes: to use the TL to build relationships and to contextualize lesson topics (Hlas & Hlas, 2012).

Pablo displayed knowledge of his students and their needs during each observation, as he personalized each lesson topic to encourage interaction with and between students. This was further exemplified during his in-depth interview, as he stated:

I try to start with an interesting topic. I listen to my students' answers and opinions about their real lives and I try to use that information to catch their attention.

Esther commented during her interview on the need for her students to feel comfortable speaking with each other and other people. She added that by getting to know them personally, they feel more comfortable doing that with one another. It was evident throughout Esther's classroom observations that students were willing to communicate in the target language and appeared to feel comfortable doing so. Similar to Esther, Carolina expressed her personal philosophy of fostering relationships with her students as follows:

I try and I listen. I am genuinely interested in my students. I remember and I don't forget. I always remember things about my students. I ask them what they are passionate about. I believe that you can't lead people if you don't love them.

In terms of knowing students' needs, one of Christina's classroom observations suggested she knew exactly what her students could do based on the independent or guided practice activities she created. During an authentic listening segment, Christina's students were given time to read the questions independently before hearing the audio played twice. Rather than comparing answers in pairs before reviewing as a class, she called on students individually to share their answers. Christina had spent a great deal of time scaffolding the content and had informally evaluated her students twice before completing the activity via paired interviews and sharing information about them. The choice to enact the listening activity as independent practice suggested that Christina was aware of her students' capabilities in this task. When asked about this particular episode during the interview, Christina confirmed this assertion by stating:

Students find they're naturally better at different skills and I think it's helpful when they are working on solving a task because their strengths and weaknesses complement each other, and they see what they're good at and what still needs work.

During Esther's interview, she discussed her knowledge of students' needs in this way:

Sometimes I think about the activities in my daytime class and nighttime class and have to consider my group of students. Maybe for the night class I stop to think about an activity I didn't do during

the day that would be better for the students at night. Maybe this other group of students is not in love with this type of exercise and are not going to grasp what I need them to, so I find one that deals with the same topic and do that one instead.

Instructional moves like Christina and Esther's were observed across all participants' classes, as clear choices were made in response to students' needs, strengths, and interests.

Finally, all of the participants shared enthusiasm for language teaching overall. In classroom observations, this was demonstrated corporally (e.g., laughter, smiling, eye contact) as well as through what appeared to be authentic and organic teacher-student interactions in the TL. In this way, the sensation of each participants' enthusiasm for teaching was palpable.

During the in-depth interviews, participants mentioned their fondness for language teaching frequently. As she recalled a successful interview for her first university Spanish teaching position, Carolina stated:

I found I loved it. I found I could incorporate music, culture, dancing, and excitement. I could incorporate my own cultural heritage and my love of the language. And, knowing that you never stop learning and if you can make that contagious, you can make people excited about learning language.

Similar to Carolina, Pablo expressed his enjoyment for teaching languages in the following way:

I think I like teaching because I like languages. When I started teaching, I started to enjoy it and really liked it. You know, I think I am good at it too. I feel comfortable in the classroom, and I believe I have the skills to teach.

Like Pablo and Carolina, the remaining three participants expressed their enjoyment of language teaching by way of a love of language learning. In Esther's case, this discovery was made early on in her language studies, as she recalled a realization that she was skilled at tutoring her friends and received substantial feedback about her ability to explain difficult concepts in more comprehensible ways.

The above examples show how each of the participants demonstrated effective teacher behaviors of empathy, knowledge of students and their needs, and passion for language teaching across the data sources. Taken together, these behaviors appear to have contributed to creating an inclusive and welcoming classroom community for students. As suggested in the literature (Weimer, 2012), a classroom space where learners feel safe and encouraged lays the groundwork for language acquisition to occur.

High-Leverage Teaching Practices Among Highly Rated Instructors

The findings across data sources additionally revealed the use of several HLTPs and integrated practices suggested in Glisan and Donato's (2017) framework among the participants. Specifically, these practices included: (a) facilitating TL comprehensibility, (b) building a classroom discourse community, (c) guiding learners to interpret and discuss authentic texts, and (d) focusing on form in a dialogic context through PACE. [Table 1](#) summarizes the HLTPs observed across the data sources.

Table 1*Summary of Observed HLTPs from the Five Instructors*

HLTP	Observed Elements	Facilitation Used by Instructors
1	Facilitating TL comprehensibility	Using real-life comprehensible contexts, signals, tone of voice, spontaneous chit-chat, IRF, personalization of the task, gestures, visual aids, interactive tasks to engage learners in oral communication with interactive tasks.
2	Building a classroom discourse community	
3	Guiding learners to interpret and discuss authentic texts	Engaging authentic materials (e.g., music, articles, phone conversations) and establishing a personal context prior to engaging with the text to help learners interpret and make inferences of the authentic texts.
4	Focusing on form in a dialogic context through PACE	Using a story-asking strategy to present target grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context, reinforcing the target structure in the attention phase, co-construct a summary of the story, and extending by retelling the story in detail.

HLTPs 1 and 2: Facilitating TL Comprehensibility and the Classroom Discourse Community

Each of the participants enacted the practices of facilitating TL comprehensibility and building a classroom discourse community simultaneously by creating contexts for both comprehension and interpersonal communication while using the TL almost exclusively. For example, during Christina's in-depth interview, she explained how she used real-life comprehensible contexts to enhance comprehensibility and contexts for communication in her teaching with the following example:

Even small tasks like writing yourself a grocery list and taking it to the store with you. You use reading and writing, and you might even have to interact with someone at the store. It's a normal everyday thing if you go to the store and you have a question, you have to be able to ask the question and listen to the response and possibly answer back if you know how to get that information.

Drawing on Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubrics for HLTPs 1 and 2, Christina was observed using a movie clip to create a comprehensible context with subsequent tasks that occurred within a meaningful and engaging context. In this lesson, Christina had students act out a possible dialogue between the two people from the movie clip. To engage learners in oral communication between students, Christina helped the learners prepare for the task by asking them to imagine receiving a phone call, followed by a group brainstorming of possible reasons why someone would not be able to talk or answer the phone. Throughout this phase of her lesson, she alternated between student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction. Christina explained:

I try to show them how this thing they are learning can be applied to a real-life situation, and I think that's the best thing for them to understand.

She went on to say that she perceived her students see value in real-life contexts, as they help students to comprehend, focus, and engage in the activities. Esther's lesson about apartment hunting mentioned earlier was enacted fully in the TL, used comprehensible language through signals and tone of voice, displayed an engaging context, and used spontaneous chit-chat to create a safe and encouraging space for her students.

In addition, she activated prior knowledge by personalizing the task to scaffold into authentic two-way communication as students asked and answered simple questions about their apartment finds on the Airbnb website.

In his classes, Pablo used gestures, visual aids, and classroom routines to communicate messages to students, moving between elements of HLTP 1 and 2 by providing context and routines. Similarly, Esther explained her process for making input comprehensible in this way, which was affirmed throughout each of her classroom observations:

I use certain expressions to transition into commonly used activities. So, for example when I say *vamos a ver* (let's look at/see), or *vamos a practicar* (we are going to practice), the students have an expectation of what we are going to do. And, even when they don't totally understand, I am very physical (gesturing) and I think that helps. I try to use anything I can to help them understand what they are supposed to do.

From creating a context for TL comprehensibility to engaging in classroom discourse, an example from one of Drexler's observations describes his integration of the two HLTPs. Drexler created a task in which students were asked to find out about and describe what they look for in a roommate. The pre-task phase required finding out about students' current living situation to create a context for the activity that included personalization, a scaffolding of necessary grammar and vocabulary, and modeling how to ask and answer questions. The steps involved with the pre-task phase mirror Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubric with regard to creating a meaningful context for communication, incorporating a real-world task to motivate learners to communicate, and activating background knowledge in preparation for the task. Next, Drexler provided an authentic context to complete the task. Students were told they had just arrived in a Spanish-speaking country to study for a year and had to find a roommate. An extension of the pre-task involved time for students to create questions that help them determine the best fit for becoming roommates. During the task, students were instructed to interview one another and record answers to present to the class, thus determining which of their classmates would be well-suited or ill-suited for becoming roommates. These instructional moves again aligned with Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubric, whereby students were set up for two-way communication in an authentic environment. The post-task phase in this case required students to report on their interview results and tally the highest-rated potential roommates from the class. Following Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubric, the subsequent activity encouraged learners to share information in a creative and engaging way.

Like the above example of Drexler's observed lesson, each of the participants incorporated multiple opportunities for their students to engage with new vocabulary by re-entering words into meaningful contexts over the span of a series of lessons. None of the observed interpersonal interactions were focused on form, and the TL was used 90% or more throughout each lesson in conjunction with strategies to increase comprehension and elicit TL output with and between students.

HLTP 3: Guiding Learners to Interpret and Discuss Authentic Texts

Although the use of real-world contexts was expressed as an important component of the participants' approaches to teaching, the explicit and intentional use of authentic resources was only discussed in one participant's in-depth interview. Specifically, Carolina mentioned the inclusion of music and written texts as an integral part of her teaching. Nevertheless, four of the five participants were observed engaging with authentic materials and guiding their students to interpret and discuss them.

During one of Carolina's observations, focused on the theme of clothing preferences, she implemented a lesson sequence anchored around a fashion article about her Bolivian aunt. Examining Carolina's choice of text alongside Glisan and Donato's (2017) rubric, it was clear that its content fit well with the unit theme and the text complexity was age and level appropriate for her novice learners. In preparation to interpret the text, Carolina began by personalizing and contextualizing the topic as a pre-reading activity, which included describing the pictures and making predictions about the focus of the short text. Carolina guided her students to interpret the main idea of the text through the use of comprehension checks and questions

during reading, then elaborated on the main idea during post-reading to facilitate discussion and presentation of information by using a graphic organizer for students to develop their writing skills. By establishing a personal context prior to engaging with the text, Carolina was able to guide her learners to focus on global meaning first (i.e., main idea, headings, and subheadings), use questions to help her learners focus on details, and finally interpret and make inferences about the genre and intended audience of the text. Throughout the lesson, Carolina relied exclusively on the TL in her communication with students and elicited language from students by utilizing images and key words to scaffold output and interaction. Finally, the use of an authentic text anchored Carolina's lesson in such a way to allow for integrated modes of communication in the pre-, during-, and post-reading activities. Akin to Carolina's classes, a variety of texts (e.g., listening to a phone conversation, booking a vacation on Airbnb, reading apartment listings on craigslist) were observed in all the participants' classes, and were framed by pre-during-post activities to integrate the interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational modes of communication throughout.

HLTP 4: Focusing on Form in a Dialogic Context Through PACE

Although all participants approached grammar instruction meaningfully, thematically, and comprehensibly, Christina was the only participant observed enacting HLTP 4 in her classes with relative frequency and demonstrating the phases of PACE (Presentation, Attention, Co-Construction, Extension) with some variance in the co-construction phase. In the Presentation phase, Christina used a story-asking strategy to present target grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful context. During the Attention phase, Christina reinforced the target structures and vocabulary by pausing throughout the story to ask personalized questions with the target structures while signaling them on the board from the story context. Christina approached the Co-construction phase by pairing students together to write a summary of the story. In this segment of the lesson, the students were observed using dialogic practice to co-construct their understanding of the structures through written output. The Extension phase occurred the following day and was discussed during Christina's in-depth interview. Christina explained that she began by asking students to stand up and retell in as much detail what they remembered about the story before sitting down. To conclude the practice, Christina asked the students to form small groups, compare their summaries, and create a final written summary to present to the class. The students appeared to be personally invested in the story because they had ownership in creating it, and the follow-up activities encouraged peer-review and the writing process.

Discussion

Research has provided general guidelines for HLTPs in FL teaching (ACTFL/CAEP, 2012; Brosh, 1996; Glisan & Donato, 2017, 2021; Hattie, 2009; NBPTS, 2010; Stronge, 2018), although specific qualitative examples of how these practices are enacted and through what behaviors have been lacking, particularly at the postsecondary level. The current study reveals how highly rated language instructors enact these dispositions and practices by providing descriptions of language teaching in real time. The focus on teacher behaviors in conjunction with classroom practices advances our understanding of theory-to-practice by viewing the work of language teachers from the rich qualitative lens of classroom observations and in-depth interviews.

This study sought to answer the following research question: What dispositions and high-leverage practices in language instruction are employed by highly rated instructors in a proficiency-based Spanish Language Program? Interview and observation data provided clear evidence that the five participants engaged in key dispositions and HLTPs widely accepted in the field to date, each with their unique approaches.

Interviews and descriptions of classroom observations evidenced that the five participants approached their teaching with a great deal of empathy, knowledge of their students and their needs, and passion for their work. As teacher empathy has been linked to student learning (Hattie, 2009; Meyers et al., 2019; Voelkl, 1995; Wubbels et al., 2016), the participants' overwhelming expression of understanding and care for students contributed to creating a classroom environment conducive to language acquisition. The level of

care for students on the part of the participants extended to thoughtful considerations about students' needs and an intentional engagement in cultivating student-teacher relationships seen in both the interviews and classroom observations. This teacher behavior can yield significant gains in student learning and an increase in student engagement and motivation in early language-learning experiences (Cornelius-White, 2007; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). In addition, the relationship between empathy and deep knowledge of students and their needs contributes to a learner-centered classroom, the ideal setting for the kinds of activity structures and classroom teaching sequences referenced in evaluation frameworks for effective language teaching (e.g., NCSSFL, 2017; TELL Project, 2019).

In terms of teacher practices, the participants were observed enacting a number of HLTPs in their teaching including (a) facilitating TL comprehensibility, (b) building a classroom discourse community, (c) guiding learners to interpret and discuss authentic texts, and (d) focusing on form in a dialogic context through PACE. At the heart of each of these practices, the participants were able to successfully establish meaningful contexts for language instruction, which in and of itself, comprises a relatively new HLTP appearing in the literature (Glisan & Donato, 2021).

An analysis of how these practices were enacted illuminated new findings on their implementation in the language classroom. For instance, facilitating TL comprehensibility and building a classroom discourse community were practiced in tandem throughout the classroom observations and grounded in the teacher-student relationships fostered by the participants. As HLTPs are often presented as isolated practices, the findings in this study reveal how they are enacted in real-time in an integrated way.

Adding to the work of TL comprehensibility and the classroom discourse community, the practices of guiding learners to interpret and discuss authentic texts and a focus on form in dialogic context through PACE inform our understanding of how language teachers integrate interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication in meaningful contexts. Often referenced as a goal in planning for instruction in teacher preparation standards in K–12 settings (e.g., ACTFL/CAEP, 2013), it has been unclear how teachers effectively do this in their classrooms given that professional standards provide only a framework for effective language teaching rather than specific methods and strategies for doing so. These findings not only support the implementation of the strategies outlined in Glisan and Donato (2017, 2021) with regard to guiding learners to interpret and discuss authentic texts and a focus on form in dialogic context, but also highlight once again the integrated and interconnected nature of HLTPs in classroom practice.

Taken together, the teacher dispositions and HLTPs uncovered in the findings reveal several implications for classroom practice and teacher professional development. The first is that teacher-student relationships ought to be considered the starting point of effective teaching. Numerous studies link the meaningful cultivation of these relationships with empathy, as teachers who have empathy for and with their students are adept at engaging their students academically and emotionally (Sparks, 2019). Cultivating empathy and strong student-teacher relationships in language classrooms may begin with the intentional selection of meaningful curricular materials to create communicative and comprehensible contexts, inclusivity of students' ways of being and knowing, student choice, and pedagogical micro-practices that tap into the needs of the classroom community.

A second implication of this study's findings is that HLTPs can be integrated to facilitate the development of proficiency across modes. Drawing on detailed examples of classroom practices that integrate HLTPs and modes of communication might inform teacher professional development by linking Glisan and Donato's (2017, 2021) work to classroom practice. Additionally, the findings reaffirm that HLTPs focus on meaning over form. Although student outcomes were not included in the write-up of the current study, recent research supports proficiency growth and performance in meaning-based teaching practices at the beginning stages of language learning (Borden, 2022; Vyn et al., 2019).

Finally, despite the wide variety of professional backgrounds represented by the five participants, only one participant's background was rooted in language pedagogy. However, the participants' past experiences as language learners played a key role in their ability to empathize and connect to students. Thus, teacher PD

efforts should include guiding instructional staff to reflect on their learning experiences as a way to foster empathy and student relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the behaviors and practices of highly rated language teachers, however the quality of participants' instruction as they enacted HLTPs was not examined or evaluated. The next step in classroom research concerning HLTPs might include a thorough evaluation of not only the presence and frequency of such practices, but also their quality. Since it is unknown whether some or all of the HLTPs observed in the current study would also have been present in instructors' classes who were not rated as highly effective, program reform and evaluation efforts may benefit from examining a larger cross-section of instructor experiences to inform professional development and training. Additionally, research around HLTPs would be bolstered by a correlation between these teacher practices and learner proficiency outcomes across language levels. Finally, further research should include a measurement of student engagement in and perceptions of the learning experiences through the lens of HLTPs to examine their impact more fully in the language classroom.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that there are a variety of dispositions and HLTPs commonly employed by highly rated introductory-level Spanish teachers. However, the exact manner in which teachers approach instruction varies by instructor. Each of the participants emphasized the importance of knowing their students on both personal and academic levels, as well as creating lessons that were relevant and engaging. During moments in which participants engaged with students and during in-depth interviews and classroom observations, both empathy and knowledge of students were key components. These new understandings of which HLTPs Spanish instructors enact and how they do so can inform language programs as they adopt more holistic, proficiency-oriented curricula, and can support language program directors as they craft professional development experiences for their instructors.

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Appendix. Teaching Observation Report

Instructor:

Course:

Date:

Criteria		Scale				
		1	2	3	4	5
Learning Objectives	Properly described the objectives of this lesson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Met lesson learning objectives by the end of the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teaching Strategies and Activities in Class	Used materials in a meaningful and contextualized way (songs, texts, visual aids, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Used language activities to engage students as active learners	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Used students' prior knowledge in class activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Promoted some or all language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Used grammar explanations to develop students' communicative competence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Designed activities to accommodate different learning styles and class dynamics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Modeled activities when appropriate to facilitate student understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Encouraged student participation/questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Provided students wait-time to reflect on the language questions/activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Paced activities appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Used technology when appropriate to support lesson learning objectives and class activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Used teaching strategies that were appropriate for the lesson learning objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Maintained an atmosphere conducive to learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assessment (Formative)	Summarized or reviewed major lesson points	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Monitored student work during an activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Asked questions or designed activities to check students' understanding of content	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use of the target Language	Use of Spanish during the class	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Adapted language use to student level of Spanish	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	If English was used, there was a well-defined purpose	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other Relevant Criteria						

TEACHING OBSERVATION REPORT

1. Comments about the lesson:
2. Specific Recommendations for Improvement:
3. Overall Evaluation of Lesson:

Fully Meets Expectations ☐ Approaching Target Expectations ☐ Needs Further Evaluation ☐

Language Coordinator:

Date:

Instructor / GTA's Signature:

Date:

About the Author

Rebecca Borden, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of World Languages Education (WLE) at the University of Oklahoma. Her research, teaching, and service involves work with pre-service teachers, graduate teaching assistants in the department of Modern Languages, Linguistics, and Literature, and graduate students in the WLE MEd and PhD programs.

E-mail: rborden@ou.edu