Communication during public service encounters: Spanish L1 immigrant consumers and English L1 employees

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Communication during public service encounters: Spanish L1 immigrant consumers and English L1 employees

by

Robin L. Hinders

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Specialty: Literacy

Program of Study Committee:
Dr. Roberta Vann, Major Professor
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Dr. Joanna Courteau

Iowa State University
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2005
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Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Robin Lanae Hinders

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** ........................................................................................................... v

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................... vi

**CHAPTER 1 – Introduction** .......................................................................................... 1
  Background of the study ................................................................................................. 4
  Research questions ......................................................................................................... 7

**CHAPTER 2 - Literature Review** .................................................................................. 9
  Cross-cultural communication ......................................................................................... 9
    Pragmatics ..................................................................................................................... 12
    Politeness ..................................................................................................................... 14
    Transferability ............................................................................................................. 15
    Length of stay and proficiency .................................................................................... 15
  Nonverbal communication ............................................................................................. 16
    Kinesics ....................................................................................................................... 17
    Paralanguage ............................................................................................................... 17

**CHAPTER 3 – Methods** ............................................................................................... 19
  Pilot study ....................................................................................................................... 19
  Community description ................................................................................................... 20
  Hispanic participants ....................................................................................................... 21
  Retail/Service agency participants ................................................................................ 26
  Data collection process .................................................................................................... 28

**CHAPTER 4 – Results** ................................................................................................. 35
  Hispanic perceptions of communication ......................................................................... 35
    Comfort ......................................................................................................................... 36
    Politeness ....................................................................................................................... 39
    Cultural knowledge ........................................................................................................ 40
  Anglo perceptions of communication ............................................................................. 43
    Politeness ....................................................................................................................... 44
    Cultural knowledge ........................................................................................................ 45
  Role of nonverbal cues ................................................................................................... 46
    Kinesics ......................................................................................................................... 47
    Paralanguage ................................................................................................................ 49
  Limitations ....................................................................................................................... 51

**CHAPTER 5 – Conclusion** ........................................................................................... 54
  Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 54
  Recommendations .......................................................................................................... 55
  Immigrant NNS consumers ............................................................................................ 56
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1 – 20 highest ranking Hispanic/Latino populations by percent in Iowa ........20
TABLE 2 – Hispanic participant’s English proficiency ratings ................................23
TABLE 3 – Retail/Service employee participant’s self-rating of Spanish proficiency ...28
TABLE 4 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #1 .............36
TABLE 5 – Hispanic participant’s linguistic comfort when speaking English ..........37
TABLE 6 – Hispanic raters’ comparative perceptions of politeness between Hispanic customers and Anglo employees .................................................................39
TABLE 7 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #2 .............43
TABLE 8 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #3 .............47
TABLE 9 – Hispanic raters’ comparative perceptions of smiling and eye contact between Hispanic customers and Anglo employees ...............................................48
ABSTRACT

As the state of Iowa continues to see an influx in ‘new immigrants,’ English speaking retail and service agency employees often assist consumers who are nonnative speakers of English on a regular basis. This mismatch between language and culture can sometimes cause misunderstanding and discomfort in cross-cultural relationships.

Six Hispanic Spanish L1 adult consumers and 13 White English L1 employees from one rural Iowa community participated in this study. Both groups were asked a series of interview questions to share their perceptions about their ability to communicate with people in the other group. The participants were also asked to consider how nonverbal cues and signals might enhance or distract from verbal communication. All but one of the interview responses were audio recorded and analyzed to search for patterned themes as well as divergent but noteworthy thoughts.

The results indicate that the Hispanic immigrants, at various proficiency levels feel some success conducting basic personal business such as shopping, dining out, and making simple transactions at the bank. Feelings of success are usually related to friendly service from employees who smile, listen patiently, and help the immigrant consumer feel comfortable. Anglo employees want to assist the immigrant consumers but when a language barrier exists, feelings of frustration are commonplace. Many employees remain in the store after assisting an immigrant hoping they have provided the correct product or service. Nonverbal cues play a significant role in cross-cultural communication. Smiling and eye contact indicate friendliness and comprehension and hand gestures often fill linguistic gaps.
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

As an adult ESL teacher, I sometimes hear immigrant language learners’ stories about communication breakdowns. As a White native speaker of English (NS), I also hear comments from other White NS residents which are not always positive or favorable toward their Hispanic neighbors. Sometimes I have tried to defend my Hispanic students and friends, but often the enormous scope of the issues causes me to be silent. I fear I cannot adequately represent the voice of the Hispanic immigrants or help the NSs fully understand their role in the immigrants’ story, but it is a task worth trying. As many others (Davis & Henze, 1998; Bailey, 2000; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991) who have undertaken cross-cultural and intercultural research have discovered, understanding the intricacies of communication is not always possible without close analysis. Part of this analysis means that individuals be allowed to have a voice with the hope that they can be seen as a valuable part of a community.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theorists have been criticized because they have not fully “[conceptualized] the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not developed a comprehensive theory of social identity which integrates the language learner and the language learning context.” (Norton Pierce, 1995: 9) This has serious implications for language learners because success in the classroom often does not equal success in authentic communication in the second language (L2). Fortunately, recent developments in SLA have created a new emphasis on factors, such as social identity, which are nonverbal, but yet are not unattached to verbal communication to help create a more complete picture of the language learner experience. However, very few SLA studies exist
that investigate how physical nonverbal cues, such as hand gestures and facial expressions, affect authentic communication between NSs and non-native speakers of English (NNSs).

One aspect of the social environment which influences identity involves the tendency for humans to view interactions with others through an ‘us and them’ lens. As Duszak (2002) points out, each individual constructs her own identity which is managed “through discourse and by means of various linguistic mechanisms and strategies” (p. 1). Often, in developing that identity, the individual does so through a compare/contrast method which establishes the thought that “I” am different from “them.” However, Duszak (2002) also explains that one language does not equal one community or one world-view. Rather, each individual has multiple identities which are constantly shaped by factors such as gender, age, employment, geography, social class, lifestyle choices, ethnicity, kinship, nationality, and ideology. As a result, ‘us and them’ attitudes can be variable among individuals and dependent upon context (Duszak, 2002). In other words, a Hispanic immigrant can feel like an outsider while conducting a bank transaction, but he may feel a sense of belonging while attending church in the same community and perhaps among some of the same people.

Somewhat related to identity are the issues of social power and social distance. Social power refers to the unequal roles between two people who are engaging in communication. The person in the power position typically has the ability or authority to “control the behavior of the other” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 32). Social power can be real or perceived and may vary as the interlocutors change. In some cases, such as those reviewed in Davis and Henze (1998) and Gumperz and Roberts (1991), social power is easily identified because the NS is a job supervisor or counselor, or the NS is an employee who has knowledge about a product or service and the NNS is a consumer who must rely on the
employee to supply a want or need. In this study, the NSs are in power positions as employees at retail/service agencies because of language, ethnicity, and, in most cases, product knowledge.

Social distance is a term used to refer to the relationship between two interlocutors and can be affected by features such as “...social similarity/difference...frequency of contact...length of acquaintance...sense of like-mindedness...” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 34). To further define social distance, suppose that a customer frequents a store so the retail/service employee takes the initiative to build a friendship with the customer. If both interlocutors perceive this as positive, the power relationship may appear to become more balanced, thereby decreasing feelings of social distance. Or in a negative example, if the employee and/or customer are unable to overcome differences in language, ethnicity, or class, the social distance may increase and perhaps cement the uneven power relationship.

Often social distance is established by preconceived notions about those involved in the conversation. For instance, when Bailey (2000) investigated tension between African American customers and Korean immigrant shopkeepers, social distance had been established by years of miscommunication between the two groups. Each culture has its own pragmatic norms, which are often interpreted only in terms of what is verbalized or in terms of the speaker’s own cultural norms. Because of this, members of these groups felt negatively about the other even before initiating a conversation. This negative social distance had many negative effects, including the murder of an African American customer by a Korean shopkeeper.

Although communication tensions between Anglos and Hispanics in Hampton, Iowa are nothing like the severe conflicts between African Americans and Koreans in Los
Angeles, communication problems exist. Using research in cross-cultural communication, and nonverbal communication, this study will investigate the differing perspectives of the communication norms between Hispanic NNS immigrant consumers and Anglo NS retail service employees during public service encounters in rural Iowa. The term public service encounters will be used in this study as a general phrase that incorporates common retail and service functions within a community such as grocery shopping, making doctor appointments and performing banking transactions.

Background of the study

Hampton, Iowa is a small town with a population of 4,200. The 2000 Census reported that about 11% of the residents are Hispanic. This figure is probably lower than the actual count. Despite the fact that the Census Bureau made their best effort to assure residents that the organization is in no way affiliated with any type of immigration service, I suspect that many residents without legal documentation to be in the US did not complete or return the US Census forms. Regardless of the actual percentage, even the reported 11% represents a diversity which has, until recently, been unusual in rural Iowa.

Hampton began seeing its first Hispanic immigrants, who come primarily from Mexico, as early as 25 years ago, with numbers increasing slowly. The change in population means that currently at least 11% of the people consider Spanish to be their first language (L1). Since the native Anglo residents are primarily monolingual in English, communication issues exist, especially in the public arena. For instance, I have observed NS retail/service employees give exasperated sighs or roll their eyes when assisting NNSs because of the
strained dialogue. Or, in the case of the NNSs, they will avoid doing business in some places because of the poor treatment they or other NNSs had received on previous occasions.

As members of the community, the Hispanic residents need to conduct the same type of business as long term residents, such as paying taxes to the county treasurer, sending packages at the post office, and picking up prescriptions at the pharmacy. However, nearly all of the employees at these retail/service agencies are White NSs. As a result, traditional methods of verbal communication used between and among NSs while conducting business often seem to be altered when the immigrant NNSs are involved in the public service encounters.

Many of the immigrants try to learn English, some in traditional classroom settings and some by various other means (audio tapes, videos, conversation partners, etc.). In general, the immigrants believe that learning English is vital to their success at work and in the community, but acquiring language skills is a different process for each individual. At one end of the spectrum I have witnessed some of my ESL students learning the language with apparent ease, and at the other end, some of the students seem unable to master more than a few key phrases and have remained at the beginning proficiency level throughout the seven years I have known them.

The level of English language proficiency impacts communication practices in public service encounters, but it does not necessarily prevent the immigrants from conducting personal business. For example, this study focuses on six NNS participants at various levels of proficiency and all of them are able to tend to basic needs such as grocery shopping and sending packages at the post office. They all indicated, however, that they need a translator for more complicated transactions such as obtaining a loan.
Language competency is an important factor in the successes and challenges immigrants face, but as many researchers (e.g. Davis & Henze, 1998; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991; Sundaram, & Webster, 2000) acknowledge, words cannot stand alone. In addition to addressing issues related to language proficiency in cross-cultural communication such as pragmatics, politeness, L1 transferability, and length of stay, this report will also discuss the role of nonverbal communication (hand gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and vocal quality). This study, then, is a multifaceted investigation into how communication happens between adult NNS Hispanic immigrant consumers and NS Anglo resident employees in rural Iowa.

As an eight-year resident of Hampton, I have taught adult English as a Second Language classes for seven of those years. Because I am a White native speaker of English, I am not a member of the group of Hispanic participants. However, although I am Anglo and actually grew up in a town fairly close to Hampton, I do not feel completely part of this group either; in small-town USA, not being raised in the town places any newcomer to the town in a position similar to the immigrants.

Although I feel like an outsider with both groups, I still possess eight years of background knowledge that comes from living within a community. Many students have attended my classes for seven years and some have become friends. Additionally, I conduct much of my personal business in Hampton, and have also made acquaintances with many local NSs. This knowledge has allowed me to employ some aspects of the participant-observer techniques affiliated with ethnographic research necessary for description and analysis. The words of the participants will be used as much as possible to represent their
perceptions but those words will be interpreted by me and my pre-established knowledge will have an affect on the analysis.

Research questions

This study was undertaken to explore how communication currently happens when NSs and NNSs in a particular community interact. This study is a comparative analysis of the participants' perceptions and attempts to address the following research questions:

- How do NNS Hispanic immigrants living in rural Iowa perceive their ability to perform in English during common public service encounters?
- How do NS retail/service employees perceive the ability of the immigrants to perform during common service encounters?
- What role do non-verbal cues play during public service encounters?

The results of this study reflect what happens among certain residents in one community, but it is possible that other rural communities in similar positions may be able to apply the findings to their own situation. Perhaps both immigrant consumers and Anglo retail/service employees will be able to see reflections of themselves in this study and make conscious decisions about improved communication choices with the other group. In addition, ESL teachers, particularly those affiliated with Adult Basic Education programs, may be able to use this information to better address the daily needs of their students.

This chapter has provided an overview of the study. Chapter two reviews literature about cross-cultural communication and nonverbal communication as it relates to the study at hand. Chapter three explains where the study took place, who participated, and how the data
were collected with findings from the data reported in chapter four. Chapter five highlights some recommendations and implications based on the results of the analysis.
This chapter presents theoretical insights from researchers devoted to various aspects of communication between speakers from two distinct language groups. First, I will present an overview of cross-cultural communication as it relates to linguistic use. This discussion will include background information about pragmatics and politeness, transferability of the speakers’ native language and culture, and the effects of the amount of time a person has lived within the second language culture as compared to the person’s L2 proficiency. Since communication is affected by more than linguistic competence, this chapter will also explore the nature of nonverbal indicators such as hand gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and vocal quality, and how these signals interact with verbal communication. This chapter is not intended to be an all-inclusive overview of communication. Rather, I have selected aspects of communication which appeared to be the most relevant to my analysis of the communication patterns of the participants of this study.

Cross-cultural communication

The first step in addressing the communication issues involved with this study is to establish an understanding of the term ‘culture.’ This task is challenging in itself because the term has been formed and reformed by researchers in a variety of disciplines. Often definitions of culture mention topics such as geographic location, language, ethnicity, beliefs and values, artifacts, and institutions. All of these features of culture are important, and can provide a foundation for discussion with somewhat distinct boundaries. For the purpose of my study I found Spencer-Oatey’s broader definition most adequate: “Culture is a fuzzy set
of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behaviour and each member’s interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 4).

This definition is appropriate for this study because it allows room for variation among individual members of a cultural group. The “fuzzy” lines are important since, for example, one of the Hispanic participants is a native Guatemalan and the other five are Mexican. The argument could be made that the Guatemalan does not share the culture of the Mexicans. It could further be argued that the three Mexican participants from Mexico City do not share the culture of the two Mexican participants from the more rural state of Vera Cruz. However, if we take into account the fact that all six of the participants are native speakers of Spanish, they all share stereotypical physical features of Hispanic peoples, and they are all immigrants currently living in the same community, their ‘culture’ does seem to be rather similar. At least the shared language and physical features provide a backdrop for comparing and contrasting this group of people to the other primary group within the community: L1 speakers of English who have physical features that are stereotypical of descendents of White Europeans (referred to in this study as Anglos).

A compare and contrast study is normally referred to as either cross-cultural or intercultural. The difference between cross-cultural and intercultural studies occurs through the obtaining of the data. This study is cross-cultural because the data was collected primarily by interviewing the participants as individuals. In contrast, intercultural data is obtained by observing members of the two groups while they interact with one another (Boxer, 2002; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Spencer-Oatey, 2000).
A reoccurring theme in cross-cultural research, both explicitly and implicitly, is the “us and them” perspective that is implied through communication (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1991; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Cabral Bastos, 2002; Duszak, 2002; Nayar, 2002; Singh, 2002). It seems nearly impossible to avoid thinking about and speaking about one another in other ways because of a human instinct to interpret what we see and hear according to our own perspectives. These perspectives are shaped by the cultural groups we belong to which can be determined by age, gender, social status, ethnicity, employment, etc. Belonging to a group, or multiple groups, brings both positives and negatives to cross-cultural speech communities, as explained by Duszak (2002):

The sense of belonging to a group fulfills the human desire for solidarity, rapport, safety, or psychological comfort that comes with sharing things with other people. However, by aligning with some we also detach ourselves from others. This, in turn, may generate feelings of anxiety, distance or even hostility to the alien (p. 2).

Such mixed emotions and opinions can greatly influence how people of two different cultures interact and communicate with each other. These emotions and opinions can shift as quickly as a change of setting, interlocutors, or topic of conversation, for example. Categorizing all of these types of variations are important in cross-cultural studies because we have a “human need of organizing experience” (Duszak, 2002: 2). Cross-cultural communication can be examined to search for tendencies and common practices to help us better understand the world in which we live.

Since cross-cultural communication takes place when an individual projects an identity, either real or perceived, which is different from the conversation partner during the time of interaction, some researchers look for the common practices that are considered
appropriate language use by the two individuals and their groups. In other words, identifying pragmatic norms can be useful to cross-cultural research.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is another term which has been defined in a variety of manners, but essentially it is “the study of speaker and hearer meaning created in their joint actions that include both linguistic and nonlinguistic signals in the context of socioculturally organized activities” (LoCastro 2003: 15). This definition places importance on the feature of ‘meaning’ as being constructed, not pre-determined. The speaker and hearer shape this meaning based on a potentially unlimited number of factors (setting, social status of the interlocutors, goal of the dialogue, etc.) that exist in that particular situation. A second feature of this definition places linguistic and nonlinguistic signals at equal status.

When in the interlocutors’ first languages and cultures are different, cross-cultural pragmatics (CCP) is used to describe how the speaker and hearer backgrounds affect the meaning of the message. One approach to explaining CCP is that it is a two way street. In other words, both cultural groups must work together to understand the other’s norms (Boxer, 2002; Davis & Henze, 1998). These norms can include both ‘micro-level’ (pronunciation, word choice, etc.) and ‘macro-level’ (social identity, L1 transferability, etc.) choices made during communication (LoCastro, 2003). A simplistic view of pragmatics indicates that speakers are successful when they choose words and actions that appropriately match the conversational situation. When the notion of language and cultural variation is considered, understanding pragmatics becomes a complex issue.
Current research studies in CCP present a debate about whether any universals – common rules – exist in all languages. Evidence is not conclusive, but through their book *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) try to establish “certain regularities underlying requestive and apologizing behavior” (p. 9) in the seven languages that are investigated. However, although the highly structured process used in the studies of the book appears to be successful in finding pragmatic universals, the data came from sanitized laboratory studies. Many researchers (e.g. Gumperz, Norton Pierce, Scollon & Scollon) believe that a more pure understanding of CCP can happen only when authentic and naturally occurring communication is studied.

Often when cross-cultural communication takes place in authentic settings, misunderstanding, or pragmatic failure, becomes a very real problem because the interlocutors are unable to interpret the intended meaning. Most misunderstandings can be identified by one of three types of pragmatic failure: pragmalinguistic, sociopragmatic, and faulty assessment (LoCastro, 2003). Pragmalinguistic failure happens when a NNS transfers an utterance from the native language, but that utterance does not carry the same meaning or force. Sociopragmatic failure takes place when an utterance does not match the social context. For example, in the Midwestern states, if an elementary student calls his teacher by her first name rather than Mrs. Jones, he has experienced sociopragmatic failure. The third category of pragmatic failure occurs when the “other participants’ intentions, competence, and background knowledge” is wrongly assessed (LoCastro, 2003: 231). In this situation, the individuals often place blame on personality flaws or rudeness.
Politeness

Determining what is rude or what is polite, as Spencer-Oatey (2000) points out, “is so confusing” (p. 2). She makes this claim by highlighting a statement made by Fraser and Nolan (1981) who wrote “no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. We often take certain expressions to be impolite but it is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgment of politeness.” (quoted in Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 3) This indicates that politeness ultimately is a matter of appropriateness, thereby linking it to pragmatics.

Most studies in politeness (for example: Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Le Pair, 1996; Spencer-Oatey & Wenying, 2003) make reference to Brown and Levinson (1987) which established the theory of face and politeness. This theory, explains the need people have to give and receive respect during conversation. To earn that respect, a speaker must act in a way that is respectful of the other person, or in other words, “respect for the face wants or needs of the conversational partners” (LoCastro, 2003: 111). When that respect is compromised or is perceived to be compromised, one or both speakers use strategies to save face or repair face if necessary.

Often the very first rules of politeness that are taught/learned in the second language classroom, as well as in child L1 learning, is when to use the words ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’ For instance, Parents magazine includes ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ in their list of “magic words” that all preschoolers should learn because “when a person is nice and helpful…it’s important to be nice in return” (“Raising polite preschoolers”). Understanding and using ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ is valuable for people of all ages, and languages in the United States when attempting to project politeness.
Transferability

Although the primary focus of this study falls under language in practice, or contrastive pragmatics, the issue of second language acquisition cannot be ignored. The process of acquiring pragmatics in the process of language learning is referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (IL) which “investigates how L2 learners develop the ability to understand and perform action in a target language” (Kasper & Rose, 2002: 5). Another way of understanding IL is associating it with language learning which is distinct from language use. Giving some attention to IL helps in understanding how the first language might influence a person’s acquisition of, and therefore performance of, the second language. This issue is tied to transferability.

Transferability in second language studies investigates the correlation between a person’s L1 and the language being learned. It takes into account direct linguistic correlations and the various degrees of difference. Positive transferability, as Takahashi (1996) summarizes, is often attributed to frequency and similarity; the more frequently a linguistic variable occurs and/or the more similar it is to the L1, the higher the transferability rate. This notion applies to linguistics, but Takahashi (1996) found that pragmatic transferability may work differently. In fact, the results of his study showed that language proficiency had little effect on a person’s pragmatic competency (Takahashi, 1996).

Length of stay and proficiency

A factor which influences transferability, and therefore L2 learning, is length of residency. For instance, L2 learners who lived in communities where the target language is
spoken are able to notice both pragmatic and grammatical mistakes more often than those in a foreign language environment. In fact, even if L2 proficiency is factored into the situational context, length of residency still has a stronger impact than language competency on the language learner. (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Souto Silva, 2000)

This section of the chapter addressed issues under the broad category of cross-cultural communication. Most of the literature reviewed thus far is closely affiliated with linguistical features of language rather than on communication that is nonlinguistic. In large bodies of work, particularly textbooks (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Kasper & Rose, 2002; LoCastro, 2003) brief mention is made about contextual aspects of nonverbal communication such as the setting (time, location, purpose, topic), participants (role and identity), message form (speaking, writing, silence), and sequence (set or open agenda) (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Rarely does second language literature address the physical non-verbal actions and behaviors that can greatly affect and influence the communicative interaction between two people. The following section will review some types of nonverbal communication and the effect they have on communication.

**Nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal cues can be a key element in communication, especially among low proficiency NNS. In fact, researchers in the area of nonverbal communication have estimated that it can “account for nearly 70 percent of all communication” (Sundaram & Webster, 2000). Therefore, this section will highlight some nonverbal contributors to
communication, specifically kinesics (body movements) such as smiling and eye contact as well as paralanguage (vocal quality).

**Kinesics**

Body movements can be a very complex area of study, especially when comparing cultural interpretation of these nonverbal actions, so to simplify a bit, this section will focus on research regarding smiling and eye contact.

Smiling, in general, has been determined to universally indicate happiness (Otta, Lira, Delevati, Cesar, & Pires, 1994). That being said, smiling can also affect the interpretation of other personal attributes such as a person’s sincerity, competency, independence, and attractiveness. In a study specifically focusing on nonverbal communication of public service encounters, Sundaram and Webster (2000) claimed that “smiling emerged as the most effective indicator of interpersonal warmth.” This statement was made with the intent to encourage service/retail employees to use smiling as a method of projecting a positive atmosphere for customers.

Eye contact was also mentioned by Sundaram and Webster (2000) as being an important part of conveying trust between employees and customers. This conclusion indicated that their study was conducted in the United States where our traditional custom is to view eye contact positively.

**Paralanguage**

Paralanguage can involve a variety of vocal qualities such as rate of speech, volume, fluency, pitch, and accent. Some generalities highlighted by Sundaram and Webster (2000)
include the perceptions that a faster rate of speech or a louder voice shows confidence, fluent speech is more credible, and pitch variation indicates competence. Based on these perceptions, Sundaram and Webster (2000) suggested that retail/service employees use a slower rate of speech, lower pitch, and moderate pauses to “enhance customers’ perceptions of friendliness and credibility.”

Another aspect of paralanguage involves accent. Several studies (Dailey, Giles & Jansma, 2005; Giles, Williams, Mackie, & Rossell, 1995; Derwing & Munro, 1997) found that accent, particularly Hispanic accents, were perceived less favorably than Anglo accents. This was true among both Hispanic and Anglo raters. Derwing & Munro found that the difficulty that the Anglo participants of their study felt in comprehending a Spanish accent increased as the rate of speech increased. Additionally, they claimed that the more familiar a person was with Spanish or with listening to a Spanish accent, the easier it was for the participant to understand accented speech.

This chapter has reviewed terms and literature that provide a foundation for investigating cross-cultural communication in more depth. The following chapter will introduce the methods used to create this study.
CHAPTER 3 – METHODS

This chapter will provide details about the structure of the study. After a brief description of the pilot study, I will describe the community of Hampton, Iowa. Next, the participants will be introduced. Six Hispanic Spanish L1 consumer participants will be described with individualized details since they are the primary focus of this study. Thirteen Anglo employee participants will be described as a group according to the attributes of age, education, and amount of contact with immigrant customers. Then, the interviewing process and the types of questions asked to obtain data for comparative analysis will be explained.

Pilot study

I conducted a pilot study during the summer of 2004. In the pilot, I asked one Hispanic female if I could observe her while she shopped at six stores in Hampton. During this observation process, the participant and I entered and exited the stores at different times. Inside the stores I was listening for how the employees used language with a perceived NNS, and more specifically how both the employee and participant used ‘please,’ ‘thank you,’ and modals. An additional point of interest was the amount of smiling by both the employee and the participant. Following each store visit, I asked the participant a series of questions quite similar to those on the ‘After-service Encounter Form’ (see Appendix B) and compared her answers to my observations. The results of the pilot study indicated that there was a difference between the participant’s perception and my perception about how communication happens during public service encounters. The pilot helped me make choices about how to structure this study.
Community description

Hampton is located in north central Iowa. The 2000 Census calculated a total population of 4,218, with 88.2 percent of the people claiming White as their only race and 11.0 percent indicating Hispanic or Latino (other races combined – Black, Asian and American Indian – equal less than one percent of the population). While Hampton has not received much media attention as a high Hispanic/Latino population, Census figures indicated that it ranks among the top 20 settlements in Iowa, by percentage, as highlighted in Table 1. Of the 463 Hampton residents who marked Hispanic or Latino on the Census forms, 433 are of Mexican heritage (all figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Table 1 – 20 highest ranking Hispanic/Latino populations by percent in Iowa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Hispanic Population by Number</th>
<th>Hispanic Population by Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conesville</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. West Liberty</td>
<td>3,332</td>
<td>1,349</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Columbus Junction</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Columbus City</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fredonia</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Chelsea</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>31.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Perry</td>
<td>7,633</td>
<td>1,873</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Nichols</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Storm Lake</td>
<td>10,076</td>
<td>2,121</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Postville</td>
<td>2,273</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Latimer</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Ainsworth</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Lenox</td>
<td>1,401</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Marshalltown</td>
<td>26,009</td>
<td>3,265</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Muscatine</td>
<td>22,697</td>
<td>2,791</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Ellsworth</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Hampton</td>
<td>4,218</td>
<td>463</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Sioux City</td>
<td>85,013</td>
<td>9,257</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Alta</td>
<td>1,865</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Clarion</td>
<td>2,968</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As NNSs move to a NS location, local schools, governing bodies, and businesses often are not adequately prepared for the communication breakdowns and misunderstandings caused by the new immigrants (Gumperz & Roberts, 1991). Some school systems, governments, and businesses can be credited with making positive efforts to welcome the new residents because the immigrants bring with them a work force as well as a consumer base which helps support local economies. In fact, Marshalltown, Iowa leaders have credited the Hispanic immigrants with revitalizing the economic growth of the town because the new immigrants are being employed at Marshalltown-area industries and they shop locally (Baker & Hotek, 2003). In contrast, few Hispanics are employed within the city limits of Hampton, so business and industry leaders rarely speak out in support of its immigrant population. However, the Hispanic immigrants have made their home in Hampton, thereby becoming important contributors to the local economy through their purchasing power. This results in quiet acknowledgement of the input to local capital by retail and service business owners and managers in Hampton. As the community begins to see the next generation of US-born, fully bilingual Hispanics, a sometimes tense tolerance still exists between NS and NNS of English leading to an ‘us and them’ mentality within this rural community. For instance, one Anglo participant, the child of a German L1 immigrant, placed herself in the category of ‘us’ when she explained, “They should learn the language...English is the common language. We all understand it” (emphasis added).

Hispanic participants

Six Hispanic immigrants were asked to participate in this study. The four women and two men have lived in the United States between six and ten years with only two of the
women living someplace other than Hampton. (Sylvia lived in another Iowa town for two years and Hilda lived in California for six months.) I selected these participants because of their familiarity with Hampton and because they represented several levels of English proficiency ranging from beginner to low advanced. The differing levels of proficiency were important because of my interest in investigating how that affects public communication. All of the participant’s names have been changed to establish confidentiality.

Each participant had attended my ESL class at some point during the past seven years and I observed and analyzed their English proficiency levels based on the guidelines adopted by the North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC) Adult Basic Education (ABE) program. The guidelines offer nine levels of proficiency: pre-literate, beginner, high beginner, low intermediate, intermediate, high intermediate, low advanced, advanced, high advanced, and are designed specifically for ABE students, not university students.

NIACC’s ABE Instructor Training Manual provides level descriptors that incorporate the four common areas of language learning – reading, writing, speaking, listening – in determining the appropriate level. For instance, the beginning ESL student “can follow simple oral directions (stand up, shut the door, etc.),” “can read and understand times and dates,” and “can provide personal information” whereas the advanced student “can understand conversation containing some unfamiliar vocabulary on many common subjects, but may need repetition, rewording, or slower speech,” “can write descriptions and short essays,” and “can comprehend abstract concepts in familiar contexts.” Here, proficiency will refer only to an individual’s speaking and listening ability and will exclude reading and writing abilities, since those are not relevant to the current study (and might alter the overall level classification).
Although I have labeled the proficiency level of each participant based on their performance in the ESL classroom, they were also asked to rate themselves, so each individual’s summary will include my combined (speaking/listening) standardized proficiency rating as well as the individual’s personal rating. Each participant was asked to rate his or her ability to speak English, to understand (listening comprehension) English, and to pronounce English. The scale used for self assessment was a six-point scale with one and two falling under the heading ‘beginner,’ three and four under the heading ‘intermediate,’ and five and six under the heading ‘advanced.’ (See Table 2.)

Table 2 – Hispanic participant’s English proficiency ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Beginner</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elvira</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomas</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilda</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Speak</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pronounce</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher’s Rating</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elvira is a 28 year old female from Mexico who has lived in Hampton for six years. As a young person in Mexico, Elvira completed the government’s six-year standard requirement for school attendance. She is the mother of three children and is not employed outside of the home. I rated Elvira’s oral English proficiency as beginner (1), and she placed herself as a beginner as well.

Rosa is a 42 year old female from Mexico who has lived in Hampton for seven years. As a young person in Mexico, Rosa attended school for only three years. She is the mother of five children and is not employed outside of the home. I rated Rosa’s oral English proficiency as high beginner (2). Rosa’s self-rating shows a large difference between her ability to understand English (3) and her ability to speak and pronounce English (1). Possibly this is attributed to the fact that her five children (ages 9 through 19) are bilingual and often speak English to one another in the home.

Daniel is a 30 year old male from Mexico who has lived in Hampton for six and a half years. As a young person in Mexico, Daniel graduated from high school and then attended a three-year technical school. He is the father of three children and is one of the few first generation Hispanic immigrants who currently work within the city of Hampton. I rated Daniel’s oral English proficiency as low intermediate (3), and he rated himself as intermediate in both speaking (3) and listening/understanding (4).

Tomas is a 30 year old male from Mexico who has lived in Hampton for seven years. As a young person in Mexico, Tomas attended school for nine years and received a high school diploma. He is the father of two children and is employed outside the city limits. I rated Tomas’s oral English proficiency as intermediate (3), but he gave himself slightly higher ratings with ‘intermediate’ (4) for ability to speak, ‘advanced’ (5) for ability to
understand, and ‘intermediate’ (3) for ability to pronounce. The difference in our ratings could have many reasons, but one may be the fact that Tomas is a highly extroverted person who is not easily intimidated by mistakes or misunderstandings.

Hilda is a 38 year old female from Guatemala who has lived in Hampton for eight years. As a young person in Guatemala, Hilda attended school for nine years and received a high school diploma. Hilda also attended half-day ESL classes for six months while she lived in California. She is the mother of two children and is not employed outside of the home. It is also important to note that Hilda is married to an Anglo, so unlike the others in this study, she has an English language and US cultural resource available at all times. I rated Hilda’s oral English proficiency as high intermediate (4), and she rated herself as intermediate (3). Interestingly, Hilda is the only participant who rated her ability to understand English as being equal to her ability to speak and pronounce English. All other Hispanic participants rated their ability to understand English higher than their ability to speak or pronounce English.

Sylvia is a 29 year old female from Mexico who has lived in Hampton for eight years and in another Iowa town for an additional two years. As a young person in Mexico, Sylvia completed the government’s six-year standard requirement for school attendance. She is the mother of two children and is currently not employed outside of the home. I rated Sylvia’s oral English proficiency as low advanced (5), but she rated herself much lower with ‘beginner’ (2) for ability to speak, ‘intermediate’ (3) for ability to understand, and ‘beginner’ (1) for ability to pronounce English. Although many factors probably affect the differences in our ratings, one reason might be that Sylvia is a modest person about many of her personal attributes.
Retail/Service agency participants

Before describing the retail/service agency participants, it is first important to provide a clear description of the term because its use in this report may differ from other uses. A retail/service agency can be any business or organization that offers products and/or services to consumers. This term was selected because it seemed general and inclusive. As a small town, several businesses provide a variety of products and/or services so places like the local hardware store, for instance, offer clothing, kitchen products, and office supplies as well as Xerox copying, equipment rental, and glass repair all in addition to selling traditional hardware products. Such diversity of products and services means an inclusive term was necessary for referring to the places where Hispanic immigrants conduct personal business in rural Iowa.

During an initial interview with the Hispanic participants, I asked them to indicate which retail/service agencies they frequented within the city limits of Hampton. After tabulating the responses, I focused my attention on the retail/service agencies with the highest reported number of visits during a month and began to contact those managers and owners to request interviews with their employees. Thirteen people who represent five different retail/service agencies in Hampton responded to my interview questions. Some of the retail/service agencies preferred to have the company name withheld from this study, so I will only summarize the types of products provided by the five participating agencies: food, clothing, household products, electronics, hardware, gifts, and medicine.

Of the 13 retail/service agency participants, all were Anglo and natural born citizens of the United States. Seven were female and six were male. Each person was asked to identify an age range with results showing fairly even distribution: 4 people (18-25 years), 2
people (26-35 years), 3 people (36-45 years), 2 people (46-55 years), and 2 people (56 or older). These figures show that about half of the Anglo participants are under and about half are above the town’s median age of 40.6 years (Census 2000).

The highest level of education obtained was fairly reflective of Census Bureau statistics from the town: 1 person (less than a high school diploma), 4 people (High School diploma), 4 people (two-year Associates degree), 2 people (Bachelor’s degree), and 2 people (Master’s degree or higher).

Most of the retail/service agency employees indicated that they assisted Hispanic clients/customers an average of 4-10 times per week, although three individuals estimated that they assisted as many as 20-60 Hispanics during the week. These figures show that communication with English L2 customers occurred regularly.

The nature of this study did not require me to perform a formal assessment of the Anglos’ proficiency with oral Spanish, but I did ask each of them to do a self assessment of their ability to speak Spanish, to understand (listening comprehension) Spanish, and to understand English when spoken with a Spanish accent. (See Table 3 for an overview.) This scale was different from the Hispanic participant scale because I added a seventh option: ‘none.’ All thirteen people said that English is the only language they are able to speak, but eight of the participants added that they can speak some very basic Spanish such as greetings, numbers, and employment-specific phrases. However, only three of those eight people indicated that they sometimes attempt to speak Spanish while in the workplace.

Eight employees also indicated that they can understand some very basic spoken Spanish as long as it is related to their job. For example, several employees said they know
certain product names in Spanish so when a customer asks for it, they understand what is
being requested.

The participants rated their ability to understand English when spoken with a Spanish
accent much more confidently than they rated their ability to speak or understand Spanish.
This issue will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Table 3 – Retail/Service employee participant’s self-rating of Spanish proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to:</th>
<th>None (0)</th>
<th>Very Little (1)</th>
<th>Somewhat (3)</th>
<th>No Problem (5)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speak Spanish</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand Spanish</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand English with a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish accent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary, the previous snapshot of the Anglo participants is fairly reflective
picture of the Hampton community. Awareness of the ages, the levels of education, and the
knowledge of Spanish by the Anglo participants should provide for a better understanding of
findings that will be reported later in this study.

Data collection process

Often a researcher notices a phenomenon among the people who experience language
variation within a community and then must go to the community and try to integrate, to
become a trusted and accepted member of the community (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Other
times, as in my case, the researcher already lives there and belongs to the community. To
gather information in an organized and useful manner, I applied some techniques commonly
practiced by ethnographers. Scollon & Scollon (2001) highlight four common types of data
collected from ethnographic research which historically have been used and which are
currently used by researchers across disciplines. While the boundaries of this collection process are often blurry, these four steps in the data collection process guided this project: 1) the researcher asks members of a group to characterize their own behaviors; 2) the researcher objectively observes the group members’ actual behaviors; 3) the individual member explains how he/she is different from the group so the researcher has a better understanding of the range of behaviors among the group; and 4) the researcher reports the results of her findings to the group for feedback (pp. 19-20).

To conduct this study, I focused most of my attention on step one, asking members to characterize their own behavior, with some effort on step two, observing the behaviors myself. I should like to note here that I have, in fact, been observing public service encounters unofficially in Hampton for eight years, though I have not done so systematically or objectively. Step three occurred indirectly as participants shared stories about personal experiences. I plan to incorporate step 4 at a later date by sharing the final report with the participants. In a true ethnographic study, the researcher would: spend more focused time taking more field notes about observations, more directly elicit information from individuals about how their personal identity might be different from the group, and not publish the findings until after step four was completed with the report revised accordingly. Time constraints prevented me from fulfilling these requirements more completely.

To complete step one, members from two groups – Hispanic immigrant customers and Anglo employees – were asked a series of questions that required the participants to reflect on their communication practices during public service encounters. As a member of the community, my observations of the group members ‘actual behavior’ will also be part of the study. Such observations may include members of the groups who were not participants
in the study. My personal observations will not be referred to as much as the participants’ responses because this study is intended to give a voice to the Hispanic consumers and the Anglo employees. These are the people who are most capable of describing their cross-cultural communication. However, my thoughts and interpretations will undoubtedly shape the manner in which their stories are told.

Another reason my observations will not be emphasized much is because when the methods of the data collection process were created, I had intended to observe each Hispanic participant during at least one public service encounter. During the initial interview, I asked each participant to notify me when he or she would be setting out on an errand. Although each person agreed to call, none of them did. As a result, any observations of public service encounters between NS and NNS that are referred to in this study are those that I observed outside of the structure of this study.

A goal of this research was to compare perceptions of communication between adult Spanish L1 customer/clients and English L1 employees during public service encounters. It seemed obvious that people in both of these groups would claim that their primary problem with communication is the language, but I wanted to probe further to investigate how other factors such as cultural background, politeness, gestures, etc. might affect perceived successes and challenges of cross-cultural communication.

Interview and questionnaire data were collected during the first three weeks of February 2005. A three week time frame was selected because I felt that it would allow enough time for the Hispanic participants to make the three to six public service encounters that I had requested they make.
First, the Hispanic participants were asked some preliminary questions designed to gather personal attributes and inquire about their service encounter routines (see Appendix A for a sample form). More specifically, during this meeting the Hispanic participants were asked to rate their ability to speak and understand English, as seen earlier in this chapter in Table 2, and to rate their comfort level with speaking English in different settings. They were asked to share information about where they experience public service, who is with them, and when they use interpreters. I also wanted the participants to begin thinking about how public service might be similar to or different from their country of origin and to direct their attention to issues such as eye contact, smiling, and politeness. These question and answer sessions were audio recorded and a translator assisted me and the participants whenever necessary. Each of these interviews lasted between nine and sixteen minutes.

Before concluding the initial interview, each Hispanic participant was asked to complete between three and six ‘After-service Encounter Forms,’ upon the conclusion of public service encounters that would be initiated at their convenience. (See Appendix B for a sample form.) For example, if a participant stopped by the pharmacy to pick up a prescription, she could then complete a form, which was provided in both English and Spanish, during the following three weeks. The number of forms to be completed by each participant was selected under the assumption that even if only the minimum were completed by each participant, I would have 18 completed forms which would be enough to notice some possible patterns. I also selected this amount because it seemed to be a reasonable and achievable expectation to ask of the participants during the time frame.

Five of the participants were able to fulfill the requested three to six forms, but Elvira completed only one ‘After-service Encounter Form’ because her infant son had a long-term
illness during that time frame which prevented her from being in public much. A total of 22 ‘After-service Encounter Forms’ were completed by the Hispanic participants. This form asked the Hispanic participants to summarize the nature of the public service encounter and to rate its success. Participants were also asked to indicate how much they themselves smiled, made eye contact, and used polite phrases such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you,’ and they rated the employees who assisted them for the same types of verbal and non-verbal communication. Additionally, they rated the retail/service employee’s friendliness, helpfulness, knowledge, and Spanish proficiency. It is important to note here that the self-assessing nature of this step provides unreliable data because we cannot be confident of the participants’ awareness of the complexities of communication. Nonetheless, such self-assessments can be interesting and useful in understanding perceptions of communication.

After the three weeks in which the Hispanic participants were completing the ‘After-service Encounter Forms,’ I again met with each participant to conduct a final interview about the experience. My hope was that the participants would be more aware of their communication practices with English L1 employees during public service encounters as a result of participating in this study, so they might have more observations to share. I had a list of questions (see Appendix C) to start the process, but also asked additional questions based on the responses provided. Some of the questions required the Hispanic participants to share how much their native language and culture plays a role in their communication choices, to explain how nonverbal cues (gestures, smiling, eye contact) enhance communication, and to indicate what could be done to improve communication between Hispanic immigrants and Anglos in public service encounters. Once again, these final
interview sessions were audio recorded and a translator assisted me and the participants whenever necessary. Each interview lasted between 20 and 28 minutes.

The translator was a 19 year old bilingual Hispanic college student from within the community. As my assistant in the ESL classroom for two years I selected her with confidence because I had witnessed her ability to interpret accurately on numerous occasions. She is well known by the six participants in the study so they were comfortable with her presence and assistance and we all trusted her to handle confidential information appropriately. Three of the participants were able to understand and respond to some questions adequately using English. At all other times, the translator was called upon. All oral interviews were conducted in her presence and they were all audio-recorded so I was able to review the translated questions and answers multiple times, take notes, and transcribe comments as needed for inclusion in this report. However, it is likely that some of the nuances of the Spanish responses may have been lost in translation. On a more positive note, the translator made it possible for lower English proficiency participants such as Elvira and Rosa to have a voice.

During the three week data collection period, I interviewed the thirteen Anglo employees at five different retail/service agencies in Hampton about their perceptions and attitudes regarding communication with Hispanic immigrants (see Appendix D for a sample interview form). In addition to collecting the personal attributes as presented in the Retail/Service Agency Participants section, the retail/service employees were also asked about their perceptions of communication with Hispanic immigrants at their place of employment. More specifically, the questions asked the employees to explain how communication happens when a customer/client is not a native speaker of English, and to
identify or acknowledge any noticed differences in eye contact, smiling, and politeness between Hispanic and Anglo customers. The retail/service employees were also asked to indicate what could be done to improve communication between Hispanic immigrants and Anglos during public service encounters.

All participants except one Anglo agreed to let me audio record the interview so I was able to review most responses multiple times. These interviews lasted anywhere from 3 minutes and 20 seconds up to 12 minutes and 30 seconds.

The interviews and forms provided nearly four hours of recorded oral data as well as written data from 22 ‘After-service Encounter Forms’ that needed to be reviewed, analyzed, and then selected for inclusion in this report. The results from this data will be presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4 – RESULTS

This chapter presents and discusses the data used to answer the three research questions that were posed in Chapter 1. When the data collection questions were created, I was probing for information to help me learn what the respondents perceived as being important to their cross-cultural communication situation. Because I was not seeking a specific answer, I tried to address several different aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication, but not all of the questions generated much commentary or insight into the real situation. Therefore, this chapter will not provide a discussion of every question that was asked. I followed common ethnographic practices by reviewing responses to look for similarities and differences and then tried to highlight reoccurring themes and noteworthy deviations (Davis & Henze, 1998). The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

Hispanic perceptions of communication

The first research question asked how NNS Hispanic immigrants perceive their ability to perform during typical public service encounters. A variety of questions (26 total) were asked during both interviews and on the ‘After-service Encounter Form’ so the participants would think about different features of public communication. Some of the questions were similar to one another but worded differently. For example, question 2 from the preliminary interview asked the participants to rate their comfort level when speaking English in public service encounters and questions 2 from the final interview asked how the participants feel when they must use English in public. Because of the cross over in
responses, themes and interesting comments will be highlighted rather than reviewing
answers to each individual question.

Table 4 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Utilized</th>
<th>Method of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1 - How do NNS Hispanic immigrants living in rural Iowa perceive their ability to perform during typical public service encounters?</td>
<td>From preliminary interview: Questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 (see Appendix A)</td>
<td>Clustered responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From After-service Encounters forms: Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 (see Appendix B)</td>
<td>Searched for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From final interview: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 (see appendix C)</td>
<td>Noted divergent responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comfort

In the early stages of this study, I was curious to know if the Hispanic participants get nervous during public service encounters because I assumed that this might affect how they perceive their ability to perform. I had suspected that an individual’s English proficiency would affect the level of comfort when speaking in various situations; however, my findings indicate that this was not necessarily true. I asked the Hispanic participants to rate their comfort level when speaking English in three different situations: with friends and family; in an ESL classroom; and in public. A pattern in the responses was not identifiable, but the comfort during public service encounter responses are worth noting. (See Table 5.)

Using a scale from one (much discomfort) to six (very comfortable) the responses varied from 2-4. Tomas and Hilda, the two most extroverted participants both feel somewhat comfortable (rating of four) when speaking English in public. Tomas’ rating is interesting because his language proficiency is intermediate, but he stated that he sees public interaction
as language practice and does not worry about mistakes. Although Elvira rated her public speaking comfort level at three (somewhat comfortable) she shared Tomas’ view of using each interaction as a learning tool. In fact, Elvira’s public speaking comfort received her highest rating.

Table 5 – Hispanic participant’s linguistic comfort when speaking English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate your comfort level when speaking English during public service encounters</th>
<th>Much discomfort</th>
<th>Somewhat comfortable</th>
<th>Very comfortable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elvira</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rosa</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Daniel</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tomas</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hilda</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sylvia</strong>:</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sylvia and Daniel, the two most introverted participants both feel discomfort (rating of two) when speaking in public. Sylvia’s rating is the most interesting for the opposite reason as Tomas; she is the participant with the highest English proficiency yet her preference is to speak through an interpreter whenever possible. Daniel stated that he sometimes gets nervous in public and when he is nervous, Spanish comes out of his mouth by accident, causing increased discomfort. The pressure of public discourse caused him to give this situation the lowest rating.

It is possible that most of the Hispanic participants are somewhat comfortable during public service encounters because all of them have lived in the United States for six to ten years. Their length of stay may provide them with the pragmatic competence needed to feel comfort. Only Hilda vocalized the fact that as the length of her stay increases, the more her confidence grows. “When I first arrived, I was more nervous because English was difficult.
Now I feel good.” Hilda also explained that she conducts much of her business alone because she feels proficient enough to do so. Even Elvira, whose English proficiency is quite low, feels comfortable conducting basic business alone because she has been here long enough that she knows where to go, what to do, and to whom she should speak. She explains, “When people are patient, I feel more comfortable and I think, ‘I did it.’” In other words, her confidence in language proficiency increased with each interaction, or with the length of stay.

The length of stay may also be the reason the Hispanic participants had very few comments to make about cultural differences. They perceived the methods in which public service encounters are performed to be “the same” as in their native country, also adding to increased levels of comfort.

Hispanic respondents reported that a positive communication experience during public service encounters often happens when the Anglo employees help them feel more comfortable. This can happen when an employee attempts to speak Spanish. As Rosa explained, “At [the grocery store], a man said, ‘Hola! That’s all I can say.’ It made me feel good because at least he tried. It makes me feel more comfortable going into that store.”

The other five Hispanic participants also stated that the small attempts made by Anglo employees to communicate in Spanish are appreciated because it indicates that the immigrants are welcome and valued as customers and as members of the community. Comfort can also be established with polite words.
Politeness

A common belief among many of the participants (both Hispanic and Anglo) was that politeness depends upon how the person’s parents educated him or her about being polite and that ethnicity and cultural background is not a determining feature of politeness. In this study I asked participants to comment about perceptions of politeness and specifically about the use of ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ since they are most commonly credited in US culture as being indicators of politeness (“Raising polite preschoolers”).

Part of the “After-service Encounter Forms” asked the Hispanic participants to compare themselves to the retail/service agency employees about the frequency of ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ utterances. The forms asked four questions: “How many times did you say please?” “How many times did you say thank you?” “How many times did the employee say please?” and “How many times did the employee say thank you?” The form supplied a scale from 0 to 6 with 0 equaling ‘never’ and 6 equaling ‘always.’ When the numbers from the 22 service encounters are compared for frequency patterns, (See Table 6) it appears as though the Hispanic participants perceived themselves as using ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ more often than the employees. The fact that the Hispanic participants themselves showed more uses of polite phrases could be a result of their parental education.

Table 6 – Hispanic raters’ comparative perceptions of politeness between Hispanic customers and Anglo employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never 0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Sometimes 2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Always 5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Total # of encounters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you say “Please”?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did the employee say “Please”?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you say “Thank you”?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did the employee say “Thank you”?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another possible explanation for the difference points to the fact that in American culture, even though we have a “customer is always right” philosophy, a power structure also exists. That power structure illustrates that the customer needs a product or service and must rely on the retail/service employee to receive that need thereby putting the customer in a subservient role and the employee in a power role. Hence, the customers should be more polite if they want good service. Even though the Hispanic participants may not fully understand this power relationship, they have all lived in the U.S. for six to ten years which may indicate a natural acculturation to this power relationship in commerce.

Participants were also asked if they noticed any differences in politeness between Hispanics and Anglos. Five of the six Hispanic participants shared a similar belief that the Anglo retail/service representatives are somewhat more polite than their Hispanic counterparts in their native countries. Rosa, the participant who was the oldest (35 years) when she immigrated to the U.S. – so she may have the most experience with public service encounters in her native country – stated that in Mexico it was very rare to hear ‘thank you’ from a sales clerk. She emphasized this by explaining that in Mexican grocery stores the “carry out boys expect a tip if they assist a customer, but here, it is part of their job and they even say, ‘Thank you!’” Tomas indicated that customer service is not as important in Mexico and that in Hampton the employees “pay a little more attention to the customer.”

Cultural knowledge

When the Hispanic participants were asked how much Anglos know about Hispanic cultures, they all had the same response, “not much.” Both Hilda and Daniel suggested that
it would be difficult for the people to understand their culture unless the Anglos have lived in Guatemala or Mexico. They also stated that if the Anglos were to visit their countries, they would probably understand why the immigrants have chosen to be here.

The lack of understanding about Hispanic cultures most likely continues to fuel ‘Us and Them’ perspectives in negative ways. One problem that was mentioned by most of the Hispanic participants was an awareness of preconceived negative thoughts that some public service employees may have had about the immigrants which led to discrimination. However, with each comment that was made, the speaker stressed his or her belief that this happens on an individual basis and that discrimination is not widespread within the community.

It is possible that the immigrants’ experience in their native countries influences their perceptions about these negative situations. Several of the Hispanic participants mentioned that customer service is not stressed as much, particularly in Mexico. As a result, consumers in Mexico may be ignored or treated rudely because the public service employee is in a bad mood or having a bad day. Perhaps because service is reportedly more frequently poor in Mexico than in the US, the Hispanic immigrants are more apt to first assume that the retail/service employee is having a bad day, rather than calling it discrimination. However, four of the six Hispanic participants shared at least one story in which they were very aware that they were being discriminated against.

Sylvia told a story about discrimination when she went to a local fast food restaurant and the employee who was waiting on customers was smiling at and friendly toward all the Anglos. Additionally, the same employee asked people who entered the restaurant after
Sylvia if he could help them. When he finally acknowledged Sylvia, he did not smile and acted angry about having to wait on her.

Tomas shared a story about a time he and his nephew were browsing through a movie rental store and the employee called the police because she thought they had stolen something. When the police arrived it became obvious that they had not stolen anything. This incident, coupled with previous treatment received in that store, convinced Tomas that this was an example of discrimination.

Hilda told a story about waiting in a check-out line at a store and when it was her turn to be checked out, the cashier said, “I’m going on break now,” and walked away. Although a different cashier called to her and said she could have her items at no charge Hilda still avoids doing any business at that store. She summarized the experience simply, but clearly when she said, “I don’t like to go there. We can feel when we are being judged.” Hilda’s, as well as Sylvia’s and Tomas’ experiences become even more powerful if we look at them through the words of Gumperz & Roberts (1991) who wrote, “Perceived discrimination can be as damaging as real discrimination” (p. 73). Even if the employees at these businesses did not think they were discriminating, the immigrants perceived that they were and now they choose to avoid those places of business.

Although she did not call it discrimination, Elvira shared a story that points out how strong emotions can appear to increase proficiency. One time when she was charged too much at a restaurant so she complained, in English, to the waitress. “When I came back to the table, my friends said, ‘We thought you couldn’t speak English!’” She explained that she felt angry because she did not want to be cheated out of money and so the English just came
out of her mouth without thinking about it. Rosa and Sylvia also alluded to the fact that anger and fear erase inhibitions, making it easier to speak English.

To summarize the findings in this section, it appears as though the Hispanic immigrants perceive that they are able to communicate well, or well enough, during public service encounters when employees help them feel comfortable by saying simple phrases in Spanish and by being polite. Because each of these participants has lived in the US for six to ten years, their pragmatic competence may also play a part in the confidence they feel.

The two most commonly cited causes for a negative experience during public communication happens when the immigrant lacks the linguistic knowledge to perform adequately and when the employee is "having a bad day" or acts in discriminatory ways.

Anglo perceptions of communication

The second research question asked how NS retail/service employees perceive their ability to perform during typical public service encounters with NNSs. During interviews with the 13 retail/service employees, they were asked ten questions in an attempt to find some possible answers to the question. Many of the questions were similar to or even the same as those asked of the Hispanic participants in an effort to establish a base for comparing and contrasting perceptions. Once again, I will be reporting themes from the responses.

Table 7 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Utilized</th>
<th>Method of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q2 - How do NS retail/service employees perceive their ability to perform during typical public service encounters?</td>
<td>From employee interview: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (see Appendix D)</td>
<td>Clustered responses, Searched for themes, Noted divergent responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the first open-ended questions asked of the Anglo participants was to describe a typical service encounter with a limited English proficiency customer. All of the respondents began describing situations fairly positively. Some of the participants indicated that the nature of their employment does not require much complicated dialogue so they can use nonverbal signals to communicate if language fails to meet the need. However, three of the respondents frequently need to share important information with customers. One of these employees is able to speak enough work-place Spanish that he said, “I almost always ask, ‘Habla Español?’ Then through a combination of Spanish and English and some gestures and body language, I try to communicate as accurately as possible.” The other two Anglos, who do not speak any Spanish, began to show more concern for communication problems as they talked. One summarized by saying, “when communication completely breaks down, it’s frustrating. We have to hope they come back with a translator.” In fact, it seemed that the more time the participants took to answer this and other questions, the more their positive attitudes began to be influenced by feelings of frustration in remembering past experiences when communication had failed.

Politeness

Just as the Hispanic’s perception of politeness led them to conclude that the Anglos were slightly more polite, several (nine) of the Anglo retail/service employees indicated the opposite. In other words, the Anglos perceive the Hispanic customers as being just as polite or slightly more polite than Anglo customers. As one employee summed, “they’re more appreciative, especially when you can bridge that gap [language barrier]. With some of the Anglos, it’s like the service is expected.”
Only two retail/service employees felt that Hispanics were less polite, but these two participants had very different reasons for their perspectives. One stated a fear that I have often heard people outside of this study state. When asked to explain why Hispanics seem less polite, she responded “A few of them come in here together and I can tell they’re talking about me in Spanish. It makes me nervous…it’s creepy.” This comment highlights a fear that can easily arise when people do not share the same language. Sylvia acknowledged this fear when she stated “even when we speak Spanish, facial expressions are important because the Anglos sometimes think we’re talking about them.” She went on to explain that probably the Hispanics are just talking about their work or family or whatever is happening in their life at the moment.

The other employee who felt that the immigrants were less polite suggested that language limitations prevented many Hispanics from showing as much gratitude as Anglos. This belief illustrates how closely pragmatics and proficiency are related.

Cultural knowledge

The retail/service employees were asked to share anything they know about Hispanic cultures and the responses were a bit thin. Most of the employees (11) admitted that they do not know much. There were some brief mentions of Mexican food, knowledge of the Spanish language, the importance of family, and one person suggested that she had observed gender differences between Hispanic women and men during public service encounters. Most of the responses were given a bit sheepishly and some of the participants seemed to be confessing that they think they should make an effort to learn more.
Only one person responded confidently to the question about culture because he travels to Mexico once a year. This particular employee was also the most enthusiastic in sharing stories about interacting with the immigrants because he likes to practice Spanish. Two of the Hispanic participants also made references to this employee because he makes them feel so comfortable when they are shopping at his place of employment. This suggests that, in this case, more knowledge about Mexican culture, led to better communication with people from that culture.

Role of nonverbal cues

The typical ESL teacher and students devote their time to teaching/learning the spoken and written word. This type of practice is perfect for the classroom setting, but sometimes what is taught/learned in the environment of the classroom does not transfer into real world application. As a result, language learners adopt a wide array of nonverbal forms of communication to fill in the gaps of not-yet-acquired language skills. While conducting this study, I discovered that many of the Hispanic language learners and Anglo employees use nonverbal cues when communicating with someone from a different first language culture. However, not everyone was as aware of their non-verbal communication as Hilda who joked, “I always try to speak. I try with my hands, with my feet, whatever!”

The nonverbal cues of gesturing, smiling, eye contact, and vocal qualities are intricately tied to successful and challenging communication. This section of the chapter addresses the third research question: What role do nonverbal cues play during public service encounters? Both groups of participants were asked to address this topic.
Table 8 – Data utilized and method of analysis for research question #3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Utilized</th>
<th>Method of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3 – What role do nonverbal cues play during public service encounters?</td>
<td><em>From After-service Encounters forms:</em> Questions 3, 4, 11, 12 (see Appendix B)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>From final interview:</em> Questions 6, 8 (see Appendix C)</td>
<td>Clustered responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>From employee interview:</em> Question 3, 5, 6, 8, 9 (see Appendix D)</td>
<td>Searched for themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Noted divergent responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kinesics

Responses to questions about body movements revealed that five of the six Hispanic participants and nine of the thirteen Anglo participants believe they use hand gestures with regularity during cross-cultural communication. The most commonly reported gesture was pointing, but gestures were also used by both groups of participants to indicate sizes, amounts, illnesses, etc. In fact, many of the participants indicated that they watch each other very closely because they know that the gestures are often the key for better understanding.

When the retail/service employees were asked what they do to alter their English when speaking with Hispanic customers, 12 of the 13 participants discussed the role of hand gestures. As one employee explained, “I watch gestures because they [Hispanics] try to show shapes. So, I help them look for whatever they need.” Many of the employees said that they really want to assist the customers so using gestures and watching for gestures is very important if the person does not know much English.

Sylvia was the only Hispanic participant who stated that she rarely uses gestures to communicate. As an advanced English language user, she felt that she has acquired enough language skills so that gesturing is not usually necessary; words are sufficient for her. This is
not to imply that Sylvia sees nonverbal communication as unimportant. In fact, she made it clear that facial expressions play a serious role in her perceptions of successful and challenging public service encounters. Sylvia summarized by saying that “a smile can do a lot of good during communication,” especially in establishing a welcoming environment. This comment was echoed by one of the retail/service employees who said, “A smile goes a long way in helping them feel comfortable.”

Because smiling is an important part of displaying friendliness and helpfulness during communication, the Hispanic participants were asked to indicate how often they smiled and how much employees smiled on the ‘After-service Encounter Form.’ The form supplied a scale from 0 to 6 with 0 equaling ‘never’ and 6 equaling ‘always.’ Table 9 shows that the Hispanic participants perceived themselves to smile slightly more often than the employees. Tomas offered an explanation for this by stating that because he knew he was going to complete an ‘After-service Encounter Form’ he “paid more attention to smiling so [he] could reciprocate.” He also offered the suggestion that the employees were busy doing their work and they were not aware that he was watching for facial expressions.

Table 9 – Hispanic raters’ comparative perceptions of smiling and eye contact between Hispanic customers and Anglo employees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Total # of encounters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did you smile?</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did the employee smile?</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did you make eye contact?</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Did the employee make eye contact?</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9 also shows the Hispanic participants’ perspectives about how often they made eye contact as compared to the Anglo employees who were helping them. Once again, the
Hispanics rated their use of eye contact as slightly higher. To explain this, I would like to refer back to Tomas’ explanation about smiling; the Hispanic participants’ awareness of eye contact was heightened and therefore, they believed they made eye contact more frequently.

It seems safe to conclude that all of the participants would prefer to use language to communicate; however, the use of gestures, smiling, and eye contact helps both customers and employees feel like they are communicating more effectively with the other.

Paralanguage

The Anglo participants were asked to specifically comment about the vocal quality of accent. They were asked to rate their ability to understand Spanish and their ability to understand English that is spoken with a Spanish accent using a scale from 0 to 6 with 0 meaning ‘none’ and 6 meaning ‘no problem’ (see Table 3).

Although the Spanish speaking and listening skills of the retail/service employees were not great, they did not seem to be hindered by a Spanish accent. Four people rated their ability to understand English spoken with a Spanish accent with a “5 = no problem.” Five people rated their ability with a ‘4 = somewhat’, three people indicated a ‘3 = somewhat.’ Only one person rated himself with a ‘2 = very little.’ It seems important to note that later in the interview, this particular employee was one of only three who quipped the common phrase “if they’re going to come here they ought to know our language.” While other retail/service employees and Hispanics addressed the need to know English, this comment phrased as it is indicates a negative perception in general about Hispanic immigrants and the language barrier which I had expected to hear more often while gathering data. It also
highlights the fact that a negative perception about the immigrants may prevent people from believing they can understand accented speech.

An aspect of paralanguage that participants were not specifically asked about, but which was mentioned, involves the rate of speech. As a person who sees every opportunity to speak English as a chance to learn and improve his skills, Tomas requested that, “people should slow down. Sometimes the person gets somebody else to help me without giving me a chance to explain more.” This frustrates Tomas because he feels he can communicate if the other person will slow the rate of speech and be more patient with him.

When the retail/service employees were asked if they do anything to alter their English when speaking with NNS, five people stated that they do exactly as Tomas indicated and “find a co-worker who knows a little Spanish” to assist. Only three employees said that they slow their rate of speech. However, it is interesting to note that when one of these three people was clarifying the question, he first asked, “do you mean, like, speaking louder?” Unfortunately, when a NNS does not understand something, a common initial response of some NS’s is to speak louder (which is usually not helpful) instead of slower.

A third issue associated with paralanguage, which also was not specifically asked about but was revealed during interviews, is silence. As a low beginning English speaker, Elvira shared that she is often silenced in public for two reasons that are closely linked. First, she lacks the linguistic knowledge to be able to say everything she wants to or needs to. Learning the language is difficult for Elvira even though she attends English class and asks her husband and her seven-year-old daughter to help her practice speaking English. Just because her language skills are low, it does not mean that she always ends up in a negative public service encounter. Instead, when retail/service employees are patient and friendly, she
is often able to communicate. But nonverbal features, such as disgruntled facial expressions, lack of smiling, lack of eye-contact, and exasperated vocal tones are easily interpreted and turn into the second reason for Elvira’s silence.

This chapter reviewed specific elements of communication as addressed by the participants of the study in an effort to respond to the research questions. When the verbal aspects of language including comfort, cultural knowledge, and politeness are combined with nonverbal cues such as gestures, smiling, eye contact and vocal qualities, a complicated web of cross-cultural communication develops. While the results do not lead to conclusive answers about communication between the participant groups in this study, the points from this chapter can be used to make recommendations in the following chapter.

Limitations

In hind site, some aspects of the study were affected by choices I made regarding the selection of participants and the data collection process. Consequently, some of the results have been affected by these choices.

First, the method of collecting data had a heavy emphasis on questioning and interviewing the Hispanic participants of which I was aware. They were interviewed twice and completed ‘After-service Encounter Forms’ for three weeks. As a result, the Hispanic participants had a lot of time to think about public service encounters and to employ metacognitive thought processes as they conducted their personal business. During the final interview, many of the these participants commented about how they were watching retail/service employees very closely for smiling and eye contact and they were listening for
the words ‘thank you’ and ‘please’ so they could complete the ‘After-service Encounter Forms’ with greater confidence.

Comments about increased awareness of communication practices made me think about the fact that the Anglo participants did not have much warning about their involvement in the study. Some of them had been informed ahead of time by supervisors that I would be interviewing them, but they did not know what types of questions I would be asking. Other employees were called off the floor and told they should answer my questions right then. Although I encouraged the employees to take as much time as needed to respond to the questions, the time frame was still quite different from that of the Hispanic participants.

An alternative approach would have been to ask the Anglo participants to also complete ‘After-service Encounter Forms’ for three weeks and then do a follow-up interview. Such a procedure may have shown different results, perhaps presenting a more balanced picture of public service encounters between the two groups of people.

A second problem with the data collection process is related to the first. Although the three-week time period gave the Hispanic participants time for metacognitive reflection about how they use language and nonverbal cues during public service encounters, such a long time period also made it more difficult for the participants to remember some of the finer details about their interactions. Consequently, when I conducted the final interview, some of the participants were unable to answer some questions.

The third issue affecting the results of the study involves the actual participants. The Anglo participants were selected by their manager rather than me, and I suspect that in some cases the manager or owner selected employees who may hold more positive views about Hispanic immigrants than other employees. By doing this, the managers and owners
acknowledged the fact that the immigrants are important to local business and so they tried to present their place of business in the best light possible. As mentioned in the introduction of this study, I have heard many negative comments about Hispanic immigrants so I had expected more negative responses from the Anglo participants. I was pleased with the many positive responses received, but cannot avoid mentioning that the results may have been different had I selected a different method of Anglo participant selection.
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

This study was developed to investigate communication practices during public service encounters. It compared the perspectives regarding both verbal and nonverbal features of communication held by Hispanic immigrant NNS consumers and Anglo NS retail/service employees. The results point to some recommendations for English L2 consumers, retail/service employees and ABE-ESL instructors and some implications for future cross-cultural communication studies.

Discussion

The data revealed that the Hispanic immigrants sometimes feel capable of competently interacting with NSs during public service encounters. Aspects of communication which often create a positive experience for the immigrants include the NNS’s confidence in English proficiency, attempts from NS employees to speak Spanish, and perceptions that the employee is polite and friendly. Familiarity, with the people and places of service, which increases as the length of residency increases also improves cross-cultural communication. All of these features help to create a feeling of comfort. Comfort seemed to be the most important component of perceived communication success. Lack of English proficiency and discrimination by employees were the two most frequently stated causes of negative communication experiences.

The retail/service employee participants provided mixed reactions about their experiences during communication encounters with Spanish L1 consumers. In general, employees who work with a small variety of products and services and are required to share
little product information expressed more positive feelings. Conversely, employees who work with a wide variety of products and services and/or are required to share health and safety information expressed more negative feelings because they felt less confident about the NNS's comprehension. Another interesting finding from the employees' interview data indicated that the longer an employee spoke during our interview, the more feelings of frustration were shared. This is interesting because it suggests that the employees wanted to be positive, or they wanted to provide the 'right' answer, but as they offered more detailed information, the more general feelings of dissatisfaction and concern during communication with NNSs became noticeable.

When English proficiency, or a lack of it, is the issue during a public service encounter, nearly every participant indicated that nonverbal cues often fill in the linguistic gaps. Smiling and eye contact are relied on to express and interpret friendliness and comprehension while hand gestures and other body movements are often used to replace unknown or misunderstood words or to feel more confident about achieving a mutual understanding.

**Recommendations**

Nearly all of the participants of this study indicated a genuine interest in improving communication practices between Hispanic consumers and Anglo employees during public service encounters, which I found encouraging. Many of the recommendations that are reported below were made by participants of the study.
Immigrant NNS consumers

The first recommendation is perhaps a bit obvious, but needs to be stated. NNS immigrants should continue to work toward English proficiency, particularly in regards to competency with basic personal business conversations. For immigrants, English proficiency can be the biggest obstacle or the sturdiest bridge to successful communication. Additionally, if immigrants are not enrolled in an ESL class, they should do so, even if it is only for a couple of hours each week. As students, the immigrants should request that the instructor spend time helping them role play various common public service situations if this is not already being done. The student will probably also have to take responsibility for asking the instructor to explain which aspects of nonverbal communication might be important during these public interactions.

Another recommendation from the retail/service participants to the Hispanic participants was to encourage them to apply for jobs at the local businesses. One manager claimed that he would like to have more Hispanic/Spanish-speaking people working at his place of business, but that very few of them apply.

Retail/Service NS employees

The second set of recommendations is extended to retail/service employees. Learning English takes a lot of practice. It is not an easy task, but nearly all immigrants wish they could speak English fluently. Until they are able to do so, patience and a smile can greatly aid in an immigrant’s comfort with speaking and therefore improve communication during a public service encounter. A smile lets the immigrant know that the employee wants to help and patient listening, along with a slowed rate of speech, may result in a better
communication situation. As Tomas pointed out, it can be discouraging if the employee immediately calls for a translator. Instead, allow some extra time for communication with an immigrant consumer.

Additionally, the managers and owners of retail/service businesses should consider posting signs in Spanish (or other languages spoken by new immigrants of the community). Even though the store may be small, new immigrants might be hesitant to enter if they are unsure about what is sold there or where they should go once they enter the store. Posting signs in languages other than English also sends a message that the business welcomes all people.

Encouraging employees to speak Spanish is also important. As Rosa pointed out, the man who admitted he could only say, “Hola!” was able to make her feel welcome. Some of the employees who were interviewed stated a desire to learn Spanish. Managers and owners should encourage and perhaps even help pay for their employees to take language classes, particularly those offered by continuing education programs because they often focus on teaching language for the workplace.

**ESL Instructors**

The final recommendation is extended to ESL teachers and especially to those involved with ABE programs. Adult students should receive instruction in three areas. First, the traditional language instruction should continue. Second, adult ESL students should learn about the culture of the region and the pragmatics of conducting personal business in the United States, and more specifically, in the community in which they live since each town or city has its own set of norms. Third, nonverbal communication needs to be addressed with
more frequency in the classroom. As this study highlighted, sometimes the nonverbal cues are as important as the words being used.

Implications

The results of this study support the claim that cross-cultural communication is a two-way street (Boxer, 2002; Davis & Henze, 1998). Interlocutors from both groups must put forth effort to communicate satisfactorily. One aspect that will put cross-cultural communication on the right path is for both groups to work as hard as possible to learn and understand the other's culture and language. Acknowledging and accepting cultural differences indicates that one person values the background and heritage of another and that feeling of being valued is important. As I mentioned in the introduction of this report, even though culturally it seems that I would belong to the Anglo group, I do not feel a part of it because I am not a native of Hampton. Imagine how difficult it is for a Hispanic immigrant to fit in. Currently, an “Us and Them” attitude exists in Hampton. As the majority group, the Anglos need to work harder at accepting the newcomers.

Acceptance is important because, just as Bailey (2000) and Gumperz & Roberts (1991) highlighted, discrimination, whether it is real or perceived, causes a lot of damage to cross-cultural relationships. This is an especially important point for rural communities to make note of since most rural towns in Iowa are losing population fairly rapidly. Often immigrants are preventing those numbers from dipping significantly. If small town business owners and managers think about this economically, they cannot afford to run a business or to have employees that are perceived to discriminate. If 11% of Hampton’s Hispanic population avoids doing business in one location, that is a lot of lost revenue.
The last point I would like to make about this study is that more SLA studies need to factor in nonverbal communication. Conversation analysts touch on some nonverbal issues by including pauses, laughter, etc. in the analysis, but gestures and facial expressions need more attention. As my data indicated, nonverbal signals were often instrumental in enhancing cross-cultural communication.

Although this study took place in one rural mid-west community and looked only at Hispanic immigrants and Anglos, it is possible that the results and the recommendations might be useful to other communities with similar circumstances. Cross-cultural communication is complex and there are no simple solutions for improvements. A constant effort to learn from one another and to help one another is perhaps the only way to have a better community.
APPENDIX A - PRELIMINARY HISPANIC PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

These questions were asked during the first interview with the Hispanic participants.

Name: Age:

Gender: Nationality:

Length of time in the US: Length of time in Hampton:

Educational background (include number of years of school in your native country, English classes, etc.)

Languages spoken by the participant:

People living in the same house (Please list name, gender, age, and relationship for each person):

1. Rate your ability: beginner intermediate advanced
   To speak English: 1 2 3 4 5 6
   To understand English: 1 2 3 4 5 6
   To pronounce English: 1 2 3 4 5 6

2. Rate your comfort level with speaking English: much discomfort somewhat very comfortable
   with friends and family: 1 2 3 4 5 6
   in an ESL classroom: 1 2 3 4 5 6
   in public service encounters: 1 2 3 4 5 6

3. When you go out in public do you usually go alone or with other people? If you go out with other people, who usually goes with you and why?

4. Do you usually conduct your own business or do you have someone translate for you? If somebody usually translates for you, who is that person? Please explain your answer.
5. Which retail/service agencies do you visit most often? Estimate how many times per month or per year you go there and briefly explain your purpose for going.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retail/Service Agency Name</th>
<th>Frequency of visits per month or year</th>
<th>Purpose for making the visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: Pamida</td>
<td>2 times per month</td>
<td>buy supplies for the house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. How are retail/service organizations different from those in your native country? How are they the same?

7. When you have a negative experience in a public service encounter, what usually happens?

8. When you have a positive experience in a public service encounter, what usually happens?

9. What do you think you might learn by participating in this study?
APPENDIX B - AFTER-SERVICE ENCOUNTER QUESTIONNAIRE

Each Hispanic participant completed 3 – 6 of these forms after visiting a retail or service organization during a three week time period between the first interview and the final interview.

**Personal Information:** Name:___________________ Date:_____________________
Provide gender, age, and relationship of anybody who was with you during the service encounter: _______________________________________________________

Did this person / these people do any translating? If so, please explain how much translating was done and why?

**Retail/Service Organization Information:**
Name of Store:___________________ Location:_____________________
Types of products/services sold: _______________________________________________________
Employee(s) who assisted: Gender:_____________________
Approx. age:___________________ Ethnicity:_____________________

**Purpose for going to the retail/service organization:**
1a. Locate and purchase a product or service: yes / no
1b. Request product/service information: yes / no
1c. Cost inquiry: yes / no
1d. Other: _______________________________________________________

2. How were you feeling?: _______________________________________________________
(ex: happy, excited, nervous, scared, angry, disagreeable, sad, impatient, other)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>During the service encounter,</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Did you smile?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Did you make eye contact?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How many times did you say “Please”?:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How many times did you say “Thank you”?:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How many times did you ask the employee to repeat words?:</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. Rate your ability to communicate well in English during this service encounter:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate your ability</th>
<th>Nothing</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>No problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Rate your ability to communicate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well in English during this service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encounter:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Rate the employee’s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Ability</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. How well do you know the employee?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Did the employee smile?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. Did employee make eye contact?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. How many times did the employee say “Please”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. How may times did the employee say “Thank you”?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. How many times did the employee ask you to repeat words?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>No problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explain your response to the previous question?

16. Rate the employee’s ability to understand you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>No problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explain your response to the previous question?

17. How successful was your communication in this store?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Very good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explain your response to the previous question?

18. Please describe the interaction. Why was it successful? Why was it challenging? What non-verbal factors may have affected communication (ex – body language like pointing, facial expressions, one person having more power than the other, how well you know the employee, uncertainty about politeness rules, etc.) Be as specific as possible.
APPENDIX C - FINAL HISPANIC PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These questions were asked by the interview at the end of the data collection period.

1. Now that you have completed several ‘After-service encounter’ forms, what have you noticed about communication during public service encounters?

2. How do you feel when you must speak in English in public places?

3. How much do you rely on Spanish to guide your language choices during public service encounters?

4. How much do you rely on your native culture to communicate appropriately (politeness, word choice, etc.) during public service encounters?

5. How important is it for you to be able to communicate in English during public service encounters?

6. Do you think there is a difference between Hispanics and Anglos in how much people smile? Have eye contact? Politeness?

7. Does anyone ever try to speak Spanish to you? If so, how does that make you feel?

8. How much do you or other people use gestures to aid communication?

9. How much do you think Anglos know about Hispanic cultures?

10. Name one thing that could make your situation as an immigrant easier or better during public service encounters?

11. What have you learned by participating in this study?
APPENDIX D - RETAIL/SERVICE AGENCY QUESTIONS

These questions were asked to Anglo employees at their place of employment.

Personal/Professional Information

Name of retail/service organization: _______________________________

Job title: ___________________ Number of years in this position: _______

Types of products/services promoted by the organization:

Number of yrs living in Hampton: ______ Gender: _______________________

Age: 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56 ↑

Highest level of education obtained: □ High School Diploma

□ Associates Degree □ Bachelor’s Degree □ Masters/Doctoral Degree

1. What languages you are able to speak?

2. How frequently do you assist clients whose first language is Spanish?

_______ times per week / month / year (circle best answer)

3. Rate your ability:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To speak Spanish:</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>very little</th>
<th>somewhat</th>
<th>no problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To understand Spanish:</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>very little</th>
<th>somewhat</th>
<th>no problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To understand English with a Spanish accent:</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>very little</th>
<th>somewhat</th>
<th>no problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3  4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. How often do you attempt to speak Spanish at your place of work?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>usually</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How often do you attempt to alter your English if needed?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>usually</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. What specifically do you do if somebody can not understand you or if you can not understand him/her because the first language is not English?

7. Does your knowledge about Hispanic cultures influence how you speak with Hispanic customers?

8. Please describe what typically happens when you wait on people whose first language is not English.

9. Do you notice any differences in politeness, eye contact, or body language between of Hispanic clients and non-Hispanic clients.

10. What could be done to improve communication between Hispanic immigrants and native residents of Hampton?
REFERENCES


