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Assessment of Social Skills of Students of Social Education

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Abstract

In the present work, the influence of the subject of *Social Skills (SS)* on the capacity of improvement of Social Skills (SS) was investigated, as well as the reduction of Social Anxiety (SA) of the undergraduate students of Social Education. The differences and evolution of students' SS during the course was also analysed, as a function of whether they had received previous training in SS or not before starting the course. For this purpose, a quasi-experimental pretest/posttest/follow-up research was designed, with a control group. Measures were taken by means of self-assessments to explore socially skilled behaviours and degree of SA. The results suggest the need for new ways for college students to improve their SS, show the effectiveness of SS training and support the appropriateness of including and controlling for the variable "*prior SS training*".

Keywords: social skills, social anxiety, Social Education, quasi-experimental research, university students.

Resumen

Durante el presente trabajo, se investigó la influencia de la asignatura *Habilidades Sociales (HHSS)*, en la capacidad de mejora de las Habilidades Sociales (HHSS), así como de la reducción de la Ansiedad Social (AASS) de los estudiantes de Grado en Educación Social. Además, se analizaron las diferencias y evolución de las HHSS de los estudiantes durante el curso en función de si habían o no recibido entrenamiento en HHSS previamente al comienzo de la asignatura. Para ello se diseñó una investigación de corte cuasi experimental con un diseño pretest-posttest-seguimiento con grupo de control, en el que se tomaron medidas a través de autoinformes que exploran las conductas socialmente habilidosas y el grado de AASS. Los resultados sugieren la necesidad de nuevas vías para que los estudiantes universitarios mejoren sus HHSS, muestran la eficacia de los entrenamientos en HHSS, y avalan la conveniencia de incluir y controlar la variable "*entrenamiento previo en HHSS*".

Palabras clave: habilidades sociales, ansiedad Social, educación social, investigación cuasi-experimental, estudiantes universitarios.

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Introduction

Nobody doubts the importance of social interactions in our life. Social skills are behaviour “through which we express ideas, feelings, opinions and affection; we keep or improve our relationships with others, and; we resolve and reinforce a social situation” (León, 2009, p. 67). The study of Social Skills (SS) has experimented a significant increase in recent decades. What is included in the SS category nowadays has its origin in the initial proposals posed by social psychology in the 30s (Phillips, 1985) laying the foundations for its study. SS and their training techniques are a widely used approach. Several studies addressing all scopes of social sciences and especially, clinical and educational psychology, have been published (Gil, Cantero, & Antino, 2013).

In Spain, after the 80s, a significant volume of research appeared, aimed at the assessment and design of intervention programmes in order to perfect these skills (Eceiza, Arrieta, & Goñi, 2008). Some clear examples of the interest the research on this particular matter has arisen with university students are found in: Caballo (1993b); Caballo et al. (2014); García-López, Díez-Bedmar and Almansa-Moreno (2013); García-Rojas (2010); Gismero (2000); León, Felipe, Mendo and Iglesias (2015); Letussi, Freytes, López and Olaz (2012); Muñoz and Rodrigo (2014). Despite these stud-

ies focus mainly on the construction of instruments or the assessment of SS, only a minority focus their attention on SS training and their efficacy.

Fernández and Fraile (2008), and Pades (2008) state the success of SS training in nursing university students. However, very few have paid attention to the specific study of SS by education professionals, let alone by Social Educators. In this sense, in a study conducted with Primary Education Students, Bueno, Durán and Garrido (2013) achieved improvements in social interaction skills during the training carried out in the subject “*Family, School, Interpersonal relationships and Social change*”. Rosa, Navarro-Segura and López (2014) also found positive results in an experience conducted during a course on “*Social Skills*” and reported student satisfaction during the experience. The purpose of the course was to improve professional SS of Social Education and Social Work students.

A persons’ interpersonal skills are related to their personal and social success, as well as with their professional success and competence, sometimes even leaving technical, cognitive and intellectual skills as a secondary element (Monjas, 2014). Interpersonal skills are considered one of the competencies of the 21st Century in the learning of the new millennium (Ananiadou & Claro, 2010).

Also, a deficit in SS was found among the factors causing social

anxiety (SA) and, in turn, some people with SA show difficulties when faced with social situations. This has probably encouraged including SS training as part or the treatment for Social Anxiety Disorder (Caballo, Salazar, Iurrtia, Olivares, & Olivares, 2014). Since the appearance of the term *social phobia* in 1966 (Marks & Gelder, 1966), numerous studies have related SS with SA, pointing towards the existence of an —inverse linear— relation between SS and socially skilled behaviour (Burkhart, Green, & Harrison, 1979; Caballo, 1993a; Hollandsworth, 1976; León et al., 2015; Orenstein, Orenstein, & Carr, 1975).

Thus, SS training programmes do not only achieve improvements in SS but also an indirect reduction of SA (Amezcuca & Pichardo, 2002; Chambless, Hunter, & Jackson, 1982). Some researchers, such as Clark and Arkowitz (1975) and Clark and Wells (1995), suggest that inadequate social behaviour is the direct product of SA and excessive attention paid in social interactions. From this perspective, people with social phobia may have the adequate SS, but their anxiety would prevent them from making social interactions and, therefore, using their skills appropriately (Beidel, Rao, Scharfstein, Wong, & Alfano, 2010). The existence of these relations between SS and SA shows the appropriateness of including the SS variable as a limiting factor of social interaction skills and competen-

cies during SS training. Becoming useful adults for the community will depend on the ability or inability to interact with others during their development, or it would be an important factor in many psychological disorders (Felipe & Ávila, 2005). It can, therefore, be affirmed that the way life develops is determined, at least in part, by the scope of our social skills (Caballo, 1993a).

Nevertheless, up until a few decades ago, in students' training, more and more emphasis was given to the acquisition of technical skills rather than to the improvement of interpersonal skills. This also happens regarding professionals, where interaction with others is an essential part of their role, affecting performance and professional relationships (Gismero, 2000). If we accept the fact that socially skilled behaviour is an essential element of social life and the well-being of people that regularly interact with others in "standardised" situations and spheres, we can further affirm that the absence or presence of SS in professionals, whose task is performed with a clear interpersonal contact, would be even more critical.

Often, the professional activity of a social educator is carried out with multidisciplinary teams, as well as in contexts and situations with particular codes and behavioural rules, thereby multiplying the settings where being socially skilled is essential. It is with good reason that one of the benchmark works in

Social Education, "*Manual para el educador social*" (Costa & López, 1994), could be regarded as a SS manual in practice.

Nobody is born being socially skilled. SS are learnt behaviours (Caballo, 1993a) and the contexts where this learning happens are necessarily social ones. Accepting that SS are learnt implies that everything that can be learnt can also be taught and/or modified. Learning specific SS by social professionals requires social learning contexts where these skills are present (Rosa et al., 2014). Hence, methodologies that facilitate and reinforce learning interpersonal skills, transcending the strictly academic part, become necessary. In this sense, the course on SS in the Social Education Degree (SED) at the University of Extremadura (UEx) contains a key skill qualification aimed at developing students' interpersonal skills. The syllabus of the subject seeks to provide a systematic knowledge of SS, developing a set of behavioural, cognitive and emotional habits crucial to their professional success.

Now that all Spanish universities have concluded the adaptation process to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), teaching processes no longer attract as much interest as the learning process through which students achieve the objectives of each subject (Palacios, 2004).

Accordingly, and bearing in mind the interpersonal and social

nature of the action carried out by social educators, it is necessary to analyse to what extent students acquire the necessary skills to forge their professional future. Assessments should not be limited to memory and the repetition of information on pencil and paper tests but more complex and varied instruments are required instead (Ion & Cano, 2012).

Therefore, in an attempt to provide information that exceeds classic assessment methods, the main purpose of this research was to study the effectiveness of the course on SS in improving SS and reducing SA of 3rd-year students of the Degree on Social Education at the UEx. The differences and evolution of students depending on whether they had received SS training or not before starting the SS course were also analysed in this study.

Method

Participants

The UEx was chosen because, although SS is a key skills qualification in Social Education Degrees taught in Spain (Sement, 2012), a compulsory subject is taught (6 ECTS credits) in the UEx aimed at training and coaching SS for Social Education students. The selection of the sample was performed trivially, ensuring to have access to the largest pos-

sible amount of students. 132 students (120 women and 12 men) with ages ranging from 18 to 55 years old ($M = 21.63$, $SD = 5.30$) participated in the study. The participants were 63 (47.7%) students of the 2nd year of Social Education (control group) and 69 (52.3%) of the 3rd year of Social Education (experimental group).

The selection criterion for the experimental group (EG) was to be enrolled in the SS course. In seeking the highest equivalence possible between both groups, students in the 2nd year of Social Education studies were chosen as the control group (CG), thereby reducing the possibility that the estimates of the results were due to intergroup differences (Cook & Campbell, 1986; Hedrick, Bickman, & Rog, 1993).

From the total number of participants, 38 (28.8%) students — 18 in the CG and 20 in the EG — reported having received SS training at some point of their education before starting the course on SS, regardless of the type of training received (Compulsory Secondary Education = 3; Baccalaureate = 9; Courses = 11; Advanced vocational education = 15).

Not all the students participated in the three measures: 132 completed the pretest, 125 the posttest and 115 the follow-up. This led to 12.88% of missings between the first and last measure. The missings were excluded from intragroup comparisons.

Instruments

The following assessed and adapted instruments were used on and for Spanish university students:

Social Skills Scale, SSS (Gismero, 2000). This questionnaire explores the usual behaviour of individuals in specific situations of day-to-day life and assesses to what extent SS modulate these attitudes. The questionnaire is formed by 33 items, scored on a four-point Likert scale from one to four, where 1 is “Not representative at all” and 4, “Totally representative and I would feel or act that way in most cases”. A higher overall score indicates that the individual has more SS in different contexts. Concurrently, the items are grouped in six components or scales: 1 (*self-expression in social situations*); 2 (*defence of one's own rights as a consumer*); 3 (*expression of anger or disagreement*); 4 (*rejection and interaction cut-off*); 5 (*request making*); and 6 (*interactions with persons of the opposite sex*).

Alfa indexes ($\alpha = .87$), Compound Reliability (CR = .98) and McDonald's Omega ($\Omega = .93$) indicate a good overall reliability of the SSS scale with an Average Variance Extracted (AVE = .63). The six factors of the scale present an adequate reliability, with an $AVE \geq .50$ in factors 1, 4 and 6 [F1 ($\alpha = .76$, CR = .88, $\Omega = .93$; AVE = .51); F2 ($\alpha = .73$, CR = .79, $\Omega = .74$, AVE = .44); F3 ($\alpha = .72$, CR = .77, $\Omega = .73$, AVE = .42); F4 ($\alpha = .80$,

CR = .86, Ω = .83, AVE = .50); F5 (α = .70, CR = .77, Ω = .70, AVE = .42; F6 (α = .76, CR = .84, Ω = .79, AVE = .53)].

Social anxiety questionnaire for adults, SAQ-A30 (Caballo et al., 2010), is a SA assessment instrument. It contains 30 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 = "Nothing or very little discomfort, tension or nervousness" to 5 = "A lot or too much discomfort, tension or nervousness". The SAQ-A30 assesses five dimensions of SA: 1 (*Speaking in public/talking with people in authority*); 2 (*Interactions with strangers*); 3 (*Interactions with the opposite sex*); 4 (*Assertive expression of annoyance, disgust, or displeasure*); and 5 (*Criticism and embarrassment*). The higher the score indicates the higher degree of SA.

The SAQ-A30 presents a good overall reliability, α = .91, CR = .97, Ω = .92, with AVE = .63. The five factors of the questionnaire present an adequate reliability, with an AVE < .50 in factors 3, 4 and 5 [F1 (α = .88, CR = .89, Ω = .85, AVE = .58); F2 (α = .83, CR = .87, Ω = .82, AVE = .58); F3 (α = .83, CR = .84, Ω = .80, AVE = .48); F4 (α = .73, CR = .79, Ω = .75, AVE = .40); F5 (α = .70, CR = .77, Ω = .74, AVE = .37)]. Indexes similar to those reported by Caballo et al. (2010).

Design

A quasi-experimental design was used with the control group,

where the participation of the individuals was not random (Campbell & Stanley, 2005). The intention was to keep the classroom as real as possible and only allow it to be manipulated by the intervention of the syllabus of the course on SS with pretests, posttests and follow-up measures. The type of design that uses non-equivalent groups is a valid alternative in research where a higher control can simply not be attained due to the idiosyncrasy of the educational situation (Hedrick et al., 1993).

A pretest measurement of the dependent variables (SS and SA) was conducted in both groups. Then, independent variables (SS subject) were added to the EG and the dependent variables were measured again for both groups. Lastly, a new measurement was taken to verify the consistency of the possible changes occurring after training.

Procedure

This research forms part of a larger project called "*Development of Work Skills in Teams*" and was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the UEx. The procedure followed the ethic guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2009) with regard to the informed consent of the participants. Before distributing the questionnaires, the participation of the individuals was sought, ensuring anonymous answers, confidentiality of the data obtained and that such data

would solely be used for research purposes, with an emphasis on the voluntary nature of the participation. Once their consent was obtained at the beginning of the classes, the participants completed the questionnaires, employing between 20 to 25 minutes to do so. The procedure developed in four phases.

The first (pretest) was conducted at the beginning of the year 2013/2014. The pretest was distributed to the EG and concurrently to the CG, coinciding with the beginning of the SS course. The SS course was taught during the second phase (intervention). The syllabus was structured in 39 sessions. Only students from the 3rd year of the Social Education Degree participated in these classes on the basis of two sessions per week. From them, 32 took place in a large group (60 to 70 students) where the theoretical basis of SS was assimilated and training was given (1. Conceptual framework of social skills and their components; 2. The most relevant Social Skills in the Social Educator profile; 3. Assessment and training techniques for Social Skills). Activities were also performed that permitted more flexibility when adapting to the needs of large groups (identification of assertive behaviour, debates and viewing cases, cognitive errors, etc.).

However, it was during the seven group seminar sessions (30 to 35 students) where the classic assessment for SS was used (instructions, modelling, behavioural re-

hearsal, feedback, reinforcement and generalisation). The students rehearsed their SS skills (making and receiving criticism, rejecting petitions, asking for favours, praising, showing their own criteria and feelings) by using different techniques (role-play, broken record, fog bank, etc.).

The third phase (posttest) coincided with the end of the second phase (intervention). At the end of the SS classes, the posttest was carried out with the EG and concurrently, to the CG.

The questionnaires were given to both groups 10 weeks after the end of the SS classes, in the fourth phase (follow-up).

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis techniques were used and statistic techniques applied (student *t*, ANOVA and ANCOVA) through the SPSS statistic packet (Version 21). Tests on the effect size (*Cohen's d*) and the binomial effect size display (*BESD*) were also conducted. EQS (version 6.2) was used to assess the reliability of the factorial structure of the SSS scale and the SAQ-A30.

Data was subjected to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Runs and Levene's tests, where $p > .05$ was found in all of them. This way, the assumptions of normality, randomisation and homoscedasticity, respectively, were contrasted, thereby justifying the use of parametric tests.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Intergroup Comparisons Pretest/Posttest/Follow-up, Effect Size and Binomial Effect Size Display

	Pretest (n = 132)						Posttest (n = 125)						Follow up (n = 115)									
	CG (n = 62)			EG (n = 70)			CG (n = 59)			EG (n = 66)			CG (n = 55)			EG (n = 60)						
	M	DT	p	t	p	% success	M	DT	p	t	p	% success	M	DT	p	t	p	% success				
Total SSS	91.81	16.59	89.71	16.53	.175	.861	89.56	14.79	91.83	16.49	-.861	.338	0.15	54.0%	88.64	14.12	93.28	14.20	-1.474	.206	0.30	57.0%
F1 SSS	22.49	4.68	21.28	4.61	.920	.361	22.11	4.88	22.20	5.04	-.164	1.717			21.64	4.78	22.78	5.43	-1.183	.262	0.22	55.5%
F2 SSS	14.77	3.10	14.20	2.63	.356	.725	14.14	3.35	14.58	2.50	-.825	.352	0.15	53.7%	14.08	2.85	15.15	2.50	-2.018	.154	0.38	59.4%
F3 SSS	12.17	2.57	12.05	2.32	-.278	.782	11.71	2.40	12.17	2.31	-.994	.324	0.19	54.6%	12.08	2.38	11.94	2.42	.678	.801		
F4 SSS	16.31	4.02	16.28	4.29	-.331	.741	16.25	4.42	16.71	4.21	-.685	.580			15.47	4.09	17.09	4.20	-1.625	.185	0.30	57.2%
F5 SSS	13.64	3.25	13.85	2.95	-.485	.629	13.38	3.30	13.82	3.04	-.881	.409			13.42	2.42	13.75	2.19	-.631	.425		
F6 SSS	12.43	2.36	12.05	3.04	-.249	.804	11.97	3.53	12.35	3.21	-.775	.453			11.95	3.60	12.57	3.50	-.937	.378	0.17	54.5%
Total SAQ	91.27	15.66	91.70	18.89	-.751	.455	91.47	18.82	90.20	19.35	.674	.889			91.09	17.27	86.40	19.60	1.354	.195	-0.25	56.0%
F1SAQ	19.45	5.40	20.57	5.13	.096	.924	19.36	5.72	20.12	5.50	-.864	.392			19.66	5.85	18.57	5.68	.996	.324	-0.19	54.6%
F2SAQ	14.57	4.55	14.41	4.57	-.048	.962	14.97	4.49	14.73	4.46	.273	1.038			15.35	4.32	14.82	5.04	.720	.420		
F3SAQ	20.27	4.85	20.17	4.62	.158	.875	19.93	5.20	19.24	4.86	.543	.419			19.06	5.93	17.97	5.27	1.001	.312	-0.19	54.7%
F4SAQ	17.40	3.60	16.70	4.52	.123	.902	17.00	4.23	16.65	4.32	.289	1.093			16.78	4.43	16.00	4.33	.853	.348	-0.16	54.0%
F5SAQ	19.58	3.63	19.85	4.08	.306	.760	20.21	3.56	19.46	3.74	1.090	.293	-0.20	55.0%	20.24	4.12	19.04	4.27	1.491	.207	-0.30	57.3%

Note. SSS = Social Skills Scale; SSS factors: Factor 1. Self-expression in social situations Factor 2. Defence of one's own rights as a consumer Factor 3. Expression of anger or disagreement Factor 4. Rejection and interaction cut-off Factor 5. Request making Factor 6. Interactions with persons of the opposite sex.

Note. SAQ = Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults; SAQ Factors: Factor 1. Speaking in public/talking with people in authority; Factor 2. Interactions with strangers; Factor 3. Interactions with the opposite sex; Factor 4. Assertive expression of annoyance, disgust, or displeasure; Factor 5. Criticism and embarrassment.

Results

In first place, with the purpose of ascertaining the possible differences between the control and experimental groups, a comparison of the mean scores yielded in the SS and SA was carried out during the pretests, posttests and follow-ups (Table 1).

Even while noting an upward trend of the SSS scores and a decrease in the SAQ-A30 scores in the EG, and the opposite in the CG, no significant differences were noted between the groups in any of the comparisons (Table 1).

The size of the intergroup effect was calculated using Cohen's statistical d (1977) (Table 1) to improve and complete the information yielded by applying the signification tests. By considering the magnitude of the effect, one can decide whether the results are really poor, or on the contrary, are useful or significant. Sometimes a "non-significant" result may have a practical signification (Kirk, 1996).

Average/low effect sizes were found in the total score of the follow-up and in Factors 2 (*Defence of one's own rights as a consumer*) and 4 (*Rejection and interaction cut-off*) of the SSS; and in Factor 5 (*Criticism and embarrassment*) of the SAQ-A30. Small effect sizes were found in Factor 1 (*Self-expression in social situations*) in SSS and in the overall score of the SAQ-A30.

The BESD (Table 1) was also calculated to interpret the effectiveness of the interventions. This also allowed creating a success table. A higher percentage of success was obtained for Factor 2 (*Defence of one's own rights as a consumer*) of the SSS with 59.4% and Factor 5 (*Criticism and embarrassment*) of the SAQ-A30 with 57.3%.

To learn the changes that occurred (intragroup) in student's SS and SA at the different stages (pretest, posttest and follow-up), the data obtained was subjected to the ANOVA repeated measures test (Table 2). The residual variation resulting from the differences in the number of subjects between measures was removed.

In relation to the SSS, the ANOVA test (Table 2) found significant differences between the mean scores of the EG in Factor 1 (*Self-expression in social situations*, $p = .040$). Bonferroni's correction test for multiple comparisons shows that the differences found are only significant between the pretest and the follow-up ($p = .049$). Average/low effect sizes were also found in the experimental intragroup comparisons in Factors 1 (*Self-expression in social situations*) and 2 (*Defence of one's own rights as a consumer*). Small effect sizes were found in the total score.

Concerning the SAQ-A30, the results shown by the ANOVA test (Table 2) found significant difficulties in the EG in Factors 1 (*Speaking in public/talking with people*

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics, Mean Differences and, The Size Effect of the Intra-Group

Variables	Control Group (<i>n</i> = 55)										Experimental Group (<i>n</i> = 60)									
	Pretest		Posttest		Follow-up		ANOVA		Pretest/ Follow-up		Pretest		Posttest		Follow-up		ANOVA		Pretest/ Post	
	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>DT</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>
Total SSS	91.61	14.79	89.32	15.32	88.64	14.12	2.75	.077	-0.21		89.68	16.49	91.77	15.83	93.28	14.25	2.04	.145		
F1 SSS	22.43	4.15	22.01	4.67	21.64	4.78	.710	.494	-0.18		21.28	4.71	22.22	5.29	22.78	5.43	3.360	.040		
F2 SSS	14.79	3.21	14.09	3.01	14.08	2.85	1.138	.333	-0.23		14.22	2.80	14.56	2.65	15.15	2.50	.517	.060		
F3 SSS	12.19	2.41	11.71	2.55	12.08	2.38	1.803	.181			12.08	2.22	12.12	2.37	11.94	2.42	.161	.852		
F4 SSS	16.30	4.00	16.15	4.07	15.47	4.09	1.243	.283	-0.21		16.29	4.31	16.75	4.29	17.09	4.20	.743	.483		
F5 SSS	13.67	3.11	13.40	2.91	13.42	2.42	.240	.788			13.78	3.01	13.80	2.74	13.75	2.19	.092	.913		
F6 SSS	12.23	2.61	11.96	3.15	11.95	3.60	1.981	.154	-0.15		12.03	3.06	12.31	3.43	12.57	3.50	1.483	.240		
Total SAQ	91.17	16.43	91.58	17.89	91.09	17.27	.200	.762			91.67	21.56	90.30	19.35	86.40	20.90	3.079	.080		
F1SAQ	19.39	5.49	19.38	5.62	19.66	5.85	.116	.891			20.59	5.35	20.17	5.40	18.57	5.68	10.728	.000		
F2SAQ	14.58	4.47	14.95	4.33	15.35	4.32	1.998	.287	0.18		14.43	4.56	14.74	4.48	14.82	5.04	.916	.409		
F3SAQ	20.29	5.05	19.92	5.60	19.06	5.93	1.632	.212	-0.19		20.18	4.77	19.23	4.76	17.97	5.27	6.555	.004		
F4SAQ	17.43	4.19	17.13	4.31	16.78	4.43	.428	.656	-0.15		16.64	4.49	16.67	4.39	16.00	4.33	.962	.940		
F5SAQ	19.48	3.60	20.20	3.86	20.24	4.12	1.315	.283			19.83	3.18	19.49	3.75	19.04	4.27	2.246	.119		

Note. SSS = Social Skills Scale; SSS factors: Factor 1. Self-expression in social situations Factor 2. Defence of one's own rights as a consumer Factor 3. Expression of anger or disagreement Factor 4. Rejection and interaction cut-off Factor 5. Request making Factor 6. Initiation of positive interactions with persons of the opposite sex.

Note. SAQ = Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults; SAQ Factors: Factor 1. Speaking in public/talking with people in authority; Factor 2. Interactions with strangers; Factor 3. Interactions with the opposite sex; Factor 4. Assertive expression of annoyance, disgust, or displeasure; Factor 5. Criticism and embarrassment.

Table 3

Differences in Measures Depending on Any Prior Training (yes/no) in Social Skills

	Both groups	Training	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Total SSS	Pretest	No	94	87.57	15.04	-4.321	.001	0.84
		Yes	38	100.81	16.40			
	Posttest	No	90	86.08	14.43	-4.995	.001	1.06
		Yes	35	102.52	16.56			
	Follow up	No	83	88.14	12.59	-4.270	.001	0.92
		Yes	32	101.58	16.24			
Total SAQ	Pretest	No	94	93.18	14.24	3.873	.001	-0.70
		Yes	38	80.89	20.14			
	Posttest	No	90	95.82	15.37	4.421	.001	-0.91
		Yes	35	79.48	20.11			
	Follow up	No	83	91.59	15.80	3.994	.001	-0.83
		Yes	32	74.54	24.53			

in authority, $p < .001$) and 3 (*Interactions with the opposite sex*, $p = .004$). Bonferroni's test indicates that the differences found are only significant ($p \leq .05$) for the pretest-follow up comparison. Also, the effect size has been average/low in Factors 1 (*Speaking in public/talking with people in authority*) and 3 (*Interactions with the opposite sex*); and small in the total score and Factor 5 (*Criticism and embarrassment*) of the SAQ-A30. The effect sizes are irrelevant in all the analysed variables regarding intra-group comparisons (pretest/posttest) (Table 2).

A comparison between the total mean scores of the SSS and the SAQ-A30 in the different stages

(pretest/posttest/follow-up) was prepared to verify whether there were differences between students according to whether they had received SS training before starting the course.

Large differences $p < .001$ and size effects were found in all the measures analysed (Table 3), in the sense that students who affirmed having received prior SS training achieved higher average scores in SS and lower ones in SA.

Finally, a covariance analysis (ANCOVA) was performed with the purpose of verifying whether the increase of the SS scores after completing the SS course is regardless of whether the students had or had not received prior SS training. The

effect attributable to variables not included in the design or subject to experimental control was removed from the SS dependant variable. The scores of the pretests concerning the SS dependant variables were used as covariables and the prior training variable yes/no, as a fixed factor.

The ANCOVA test did not find differences ($p \leq .05$) between students with or without prior SS training in any of the pretest-posttest comparisons. This could be attributed to the training carried out during the SS course [$F(1, 57) = .630$, $p = .431$, $\eta^2 = .014$] and pretest-follow up [$F(1, 57) = 3.632$, $p = .064$, $\eta^2 = .085$].

Discussion

The success of SS training in university students has been demonstrated (Bueno et al., 2013; Fernández & Fraile 2008; Pades, 2003). In this study, although positive trends were noted between measures in most of the variables of the SSS in the EG, statistically significant differences were only achieved in the Factor “*Self-expression in social situations*”.

In terms of SA, the results achieved support the tight relationship between SS and SA (Burkhart et al., 1979; Caballo, 1993a; Hollandsworth, 1976; León et al., 2015; Orenstein et al., 1975). This is so, given that the training carried during the SS course reduced anxiety levels in the EG, particularly in

Factors: “*Speaking in public/talking with people in authority*” and “*Interactions with the opposite sex*”.

Also, in relation to the effect sizes, lower values are usually found in the context of educational research compared to other disciplines when dealing with the application of innovative methodologies. Values between $d = 0.30$ and $d = 0.33$ are considered relevant, even when there are no significant differences (Valentine & Cooper, 2003). Hattie (2009) found a mean value for the effect size of $d = 0.40$ in the educational context and considered that effect sizes exceeding $d = 0.60$ must be regarded as large.

Therefore, the intragroup effect size (pretest-follow-up) indicates that the improvements achieved have mostly been small—but significant—, with values $d \geq 0.30$ in Factors “*Defence of one’s own rights as a consumer*” and “*Self-expression in social situations*” of the SSS.

Somewhat higher were the effect sizes in Factors “*Speaking in public/talking with people in authority*” $d = -0.37$ and “*Interactions with persons of the opposite sex*” $d = -0.44$) of the SAQ-A30. Moreover, the intergroup comparisons (experimental-control) show that the group that received the intervention yielded efficiency percentages below 10%.

Therefore, even though it can be affirmed that positive results have been attained after the training received during the SS course, it is not

all that satisfactory, because the SS are a key qualification skill for the proper development of social educators' professional activity. Therefore, new ways are suggested for undergraduate students to acquire more SS bearing in mind the variables that participate in such process: (a) the duration of the training and size of the groups (Cabello, 1993a); (b) the space used and the existence of an assessment (Wilkinson & Canter, 1982); (c) the indiscriminate grouping of subjects in groups (Andanson, Pourre, & Raynaud, 2011; Mueser & Bellack, 2007).

Moreover, the different results observed between the posttest and follow-up scores deserve a more in-depth analysis. We must remember that improvements achieved during the SS training were found, in most part, between the pretest and follow-up scores. While the theory says that SS training leads to results from the onset, the classic SS training method emphasizes the importance of rehearsing socially skilled behaviour (Bueno & Garrido, 2012). Then, the possibility of putting socially skilled behaviour into practice in contexts and spheres different to the university ones during a period of time elapsed between the posttest and the follow-up could explain the differences reflected in the results. The need to not rush into assessing SS training is made evident.

Also, when it was decided to include the *prior training* yes/no variable, the intention —in addition

to verifying the importance of SS training to improve social competencies— was to determine to what extent this variable influences or is influenced in or by SS training.

In this respect, the results obtained in the comparisons between subjects *with/without prior training* leaves no doubt about the efficacy of SS training, at least regarding the data reflected in the self-assessments. Also, the analysis revealed that the results achieved in terms of SS improvements were similar, regardless of how socially skilled an individual was before taking the SS course.

The control of the *prior training* variable is not usual in the different studies on SS. Group training programmes on SS permit and even seek the participation of individuals who have already been trained throughout the process, because they offer help and serve as models in real situations. At the same time, these individuals also benefit when applying the SS acquired beforehand (Caballo, 1993a) rendering the control of this variable ideal. Also, and bearing in mind the considerable percentage of students (28.8%) who affirmed having received SS training, the control of this variable would reduce the possibility the results of the study being attributed to factors that had not been taken into account (Cook & Campbell, 1986). This would extend the appropriateness of this variable to future research.

The main limitations of this research—in addition to those of all quasi-experimental research or those derived from using self-assessments as a method to gather information—are connected to the unbalance between the feminine and masculine samples and the low AVE of some of the scales of the questionnaires used. Generalisation of the results for the masculine population is difficult, because the majority of the students enrolled in Social Education are female. Moreover, one cannot omit the difficulties found when applying a classic SS training with the typical conditions of a university classroom with many students.

Lastly, and based on the above, the need to make an impact on the training for a socially-competent action by social educators and by extension, all education professionals, is made evident and is especially relevant. We must generate changes in the University, making the most of the new educational paradigm (focused on learning) offered by the EHEA, with new and larger quality demands. This determines students' social and professional competencies according to the different contexts, as well as new and better ways of assessing skills that will be critical to their social and professional success.

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