Online Intercultural Exchanges in a French for the Professions Course

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Online Intercultural Exchanges in a French for the Professions Course

Cover Page Footnote
A warm thank you to my France-based collaborator, Samantha Mureau, who has been flexible, creative and rigorous as we have worked together across the Atlantic. Thanks also to Duke Service Learning, who provided our project with two wonderful service learning assistants that facilitated our student exchanges: Zach Moore, who supported the pilot project, and Nour Cherradi El Fadili, who worked with us throughout the current research study.

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Online Intercultural Exchanges in a French for the Professions Course

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Online Intercultural Exchanges (OIE) have been integrated into world language instruction for over 25 years, but the recent COVID pandemic made their implementation worthy of closer attention. As students experienced limited informal interactions with peers and faculty during this time, world language faculty searched for alternative ways to engage students in language and cultural immersion. Given the mandated online learning environment of post-secondary courses during this time period, OIEs offered a readily available opportunity to engage students in new ways. This article explores a recent OIE conducted in the context of two World Languages for Specific Purposes courses at the advanced level in the United States and in France.

According to O’Dowd and Lewis (2016), OIE “involves instructionally mediated processes such as collaborative tasks, collective inquiry, and opportunities for social interaction between internationally distributed partner classes” (11). Over two decades of research have shown that OIE contributes to the development of world language skills, intercultural competence, learner autonomy, and digital literacies (O’Dowd and Lewis 2016, 16). Likewise, research in L2 learning suggests that CALL and social media in particular have the potential to enhance language learning (Arnold and Ducate 2006). Finally, more research in genre-based OIE shows promising applications for WLSP, although “little work to date has been done regarding the intersection of telecollaboration and content-based instruction” (Cunningham 2019, 162). A recent publication of the 2021 AELFE-TAPP conference proceedings (Arnó 2021) indicates growing interest in this topic; the topic of the conference, “Multilingual Academic and Professional Communication in a Networked World,” showcased numerous presentations on OIEs in the WLSP context.

While there is considerable research and interest in OIE, including the new Journal of Virtual Exchange launched in 2018, some researchers continue to note that these exchanges can reinforce cultural stereotypes (Flowers, Kelsen, & Cvitkovic, 2019; Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2012). Others researchers have questioned its effectiveness in developing critical cultural awareness and deeper levels of intercultural understanding (Ware and Kramsch 2005, Helm 2016). Given these critiques, it is important to consider ways to develop pedagogical structures and activities that can guide students into deeper reflection that takes these concerns into consideration.

Building on both best practices and critiques noted in earlier studies, the goals of this research project were to assess the impact of an eight-week content-based (WLSP) OIE on 1) the development of learners’ intercultural communicative competence (including cultural self-awareness, curiosity and openness toward the other culture), 2) nuanced knowledge of business-related practices in both countries, and 3) students’ perceived gains in language competencies (specifically interpersonal modes of communication) based on their experiences in the OIE. The researcher was also interested to learn whether students were able to disagree about difficult subjects, and whether they reported increased interest in learning about the other culture, in furthering their studies abroad, or in continuing to take classes in the language (French).
Research findings take the form of data points from quantitative surveys, an analysis of coded blog reflections, and quotes from student reflections.

**Background**

During the pandemic, courses at the researcher’s university were taught online for the 2020-21 academic year, with students taking classes from their home or their dorm room. Because the researcher believed the online nature of classes might make it challenging to develop class community, and because she wanted to create additional opportunities for conversation and cultural exchange, she contacted a colleague in France – a Business English professor in Aix-en-Provence – who agreed to pilot a semester-long exchange between their students. As the France-based professor noted, while US-based students were isolated from one another, this isolation was relative to the situation in France, where lockdown measures meant individuals could venture outside for only one hour per day. Amidst these strict measures, there was growing concern about the toll of this isolation on students’ mental health. The two professors decided to situate the OIE in the context of the US professor’s online WLSP course (an advanced 300-level course called “Working in French”), and the France-based professor selected students from a number of different courses she was teaching. Like many OIEs, these exchanges involved two groups of language learners in geographically distant locations engaging in bilingual exchanges, and in this particular setting, these groups focused on specific content.

The pilot’s structure was somewhat uneven, with US students outnumbering French students 2:1, and some students not participating in all of the exchanges. These challenges are a common complaint in OIEs (Basharina, 2007). Still, paired groups of students met three times during the semester for 30-minute intervals, and the American group participated in short structured reflection sessions during class and wrote three reflective blog entries about their experiences. In these short writings, in whole group discussion sessions, and in end-of-semester evaluations, the US-based students were extremely enthusiastic about the exchanges, noting in particular they now felt less intimidated about talking to French students, and were also more confident about their ability to converse in French, as well as more likely to work or study abroad in the future. The structured conversations about sustainability and marketing also revealed stark differences in cultural beliefs that led students to question their own culture’s approaches to issues like climate change, policy and law, and cross-cultural communication. Faculty were surprised to learn of such positive benefits after just three conversations, and so they decided to develop a study in a subsequent semester that would be more structured and that would address the challenges encountered in the pilot, which included uneven participation and unintentional but reinforced stereotyping (O’Dowd 2006). That study and its results forms the bulk of this article.

**Research design**

The spring 2022 study was intentionally designed to be more balanced between the two groups, one in the US and one in France. The US researcher obtained a small grant to pay her counterpart a stipend for her work on the project. Fourteen French-speaking students from a class of 32 at the ESSCA school of management in Aix-en-Provence elected to participate in the exchange. On the US side, the researcher, whose WLSP class was smaller, made this a mandatory but ungraded assignment for all 14 students enrolled in the course, which was the same course as the one...
featured in the pilot OIE. At the beginning of the semester, the two instructors met virtually to place their students in small, heterogeneous groups composed of students from both countries; groupings were made based on schedules, professional interests, and demographic information (mixed genders and ages, for instance). During the third week of the semester, both classes met together over Zoom, where the faculty introduced the project and presented students with the program’s objectives of improving understanding about cross-cultural business-related content, developing confidence in the L2, and building relationships. During the 75-minute session, students were placed in breakout rooms where they were tasked with answering a series of introductory questions (name, location, field of study, etc.), followed by a number of “this or that” ice-breaker questions designed to build community as students identified commonalities (e.g., “Snapchat or Instagram?,” “Passion ou stabilité?”). Students were asked to use English for the first half of the session and French for the second. At the end of the session, faculty explained that small groups would meet on 4 separate occasions during the semester, at two-week intervals; an undergraduate teaching assistant from the US university would help coordinate the meetings and would send out all project-related correspondence. For each occasion, which took place synchronously outside of class time, students were expected to discuss a topic that was loosely related to themes in the textbook used by the US students (Affaires globales, Reisinger et al, 2021). Groups received a list of 5-8 questions the week prior to the assignment, translated into both languages. Unlike most OIE tasks, which are often structured around relatively neutral topics, these questions were written to elicit cultural differences; in this way, they respond to both Kern’s (2014) and Kramsch’s (2014) critiques that OIE prompts are unlikely to pose any significant conflict and thus any meaningful cultural exchange. Researchers thus drew on issues where there were known cultural differences, including the job search, workers’ rights, advertising laws, and international diplomacy (Appendix A includes all subquestions).

For each of the four exchanges, the OIEs were slated for 30 minutes, with the first 15 minutes taking place in one language and the second 15 minutes in the other. Students could select their preferred platform (e.g., Zoom, Google Hangouts, Facetime). Following each discussion, US-based students were asked to complete a short (250 word minimum) structured reflection in English through the course management site, citing any shifts in their perspectives, any knowledge gains, and any changes in perception of the other culture (Appendix B contains reflection prompts). The teaching assistant also led two whole-class reflection sessions of 30-minutes.

At the end of the semester, students in the US were administered an IRB survey of blended qualitative and quantitative question related to their experiences in the exchanges. Survey questions asked students to select which topic generated the most discussion, which elicited the most differences of opinions, which was the most challenging for their group to discuss, and which exchange led them to change their opinion or perspective about something. Using a five-point Likert scale, participants were also asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about their perceived gains in language competencies, their comfort interacting with native speakers, to what degree they challenged their personal perspectives, and whether they learned to adjust their personal interactions with persons of another culture. They were then asked to what degree they learned about the other culture and to what degree they could now recognize and explain business practices in the other culture. They were also asked whether they were more likely to continue their studies in French, and whether they were more interested in living or working abroad. Finally, participants were asked to identify the biggest challenge they
experienced related to the OIEs, as well as the most positive experience or outcome of the exchanges.

**Results**

Eleven of the 14 students enrolled in the US course responded to the survey; respondents included seven females and four males. Eight students identified as white, two as Hispanic, and one as Black. There were two first-year students, four sophomores, three juniors, and two seniors. Four of the students had spent more than six weeks in France, one had lived in Senegal for a semester, and three had spent six weeks in a non-French speaking country, while three had never been abroad for more than three weeks. The majority of participants (65%) used Zoom for their OIEs, while the remaining 35% used either Instagram or WhatsApp.

A. Topic-related results

The results of the end-of-semester quantitative survey are shared here, alongside comments from the bi-weekly structured reflections that followed the OIE related to each topic.

Table 1.

Thinking back on the 4 virtual exchanges you participated in this semester, which of the following topics ...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The c.v. and the job market</th>
<th>Workers’ rights</th>
<th>Marketing and advertising</th>
<th>International Relations</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>... generated the most discussion?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... elicited the most differences of opinion?</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... was the most challenging for your group to discuss?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... led you to change your opinion or perspective about something?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants reported that the first exchange, which involved questions related to the c.v. and the job market, generated the most discussion within their group (five of 11 students), but no student selected it as the topic most likely to change their opinion of perspective. Some students spontaneously shared their c.v.s with one another, and there was considerable discussion about the different formats. As one of the students wrote, “Their resumes were unique, colorful, and not nearly as compact and exhausting as one we would see here at [US University].” Another student wrote that “While everyone agreed that there are inequities that exist in the hiring process, the French students didn’t seem to be as aware of particularly racial and social discrimination that could exist.” Another elaborated on this idea, writing

> During our conversation, one of the questions we discussed was about the process of job searching and if it is fair and equitable. After offering their thoughts, both Thibault and XingFen [names changed] said that their answers were based on previous knowledge or things they had heard or read because they both hadn’t had a real formal job. This really surprised me because I would have thought that one would have experienced some form of work at our age, whether it be an internship, a supermarket employee, or even a camp counselor. They also said the only actual interview they’d ever had was when applying to schools. I wondered if this was normal in France and if the pressure to find work or experience as a student or young adult is much more present in America than in other countries.”

Several other students noted this distinction in work experience as well, expressing surprise that so few of their peers had work experience or had applied for multiple jobs.

The second exchange, which related to workers’ rights, was the topic that most led US participants to change their opinion or perspective about a subject (five of 11 students); this topic was also selected as the second to generate most discussion (four of 11 students), following the c.v and job market. One participant wrote,

> I’ve come to learn through conversation and this general unit that French working conditions and laws surrounding workers are much better and more comprehensive than in the US (in terms of parental leave, paid days off, other kinds of bonuses or pay for extenuating working conditions, etc.). To make this comparison I’ve also had to learn a lot about laws in the US, which is something that I wasn’t really previously aware of (for example, that technically, there is no federal parental leave, for either parent). This is one of the first times that I have noticed more of a difference than a similarity between the two sides.

Another US student shared a similar reaction to his own culture, writing

> Before our discussion, I had not thought that the American government could better the lives of people by regulating businesses, but their insights on this topic made me consider this opinion in ways I hadn’t previously.” Several students also demonstrated interest in the topic of strikes.
Another participant noted, “Discussing strikes vs. protests was an interesting discussion that explored why the role of the unions has reduced -- with new workplace rules and regulations also helping to reduce the need for them -- and also extended to talk of the French and American political spheres.”

The third exchange, which focused on advertising, was not selected by a majority of students for any of the four categories. Two students noted it was the generated the most discussion, and two selected it as the topic that most changed their perspective. One wrote, “The conversation we had changed some of my views on what and how we should advertise to children. It was interesting to consider each person's viewpoints and experiences about what they saw advertised to them as children, often before they were old enough to know what it is.” In his reflection, one participant wrote,

Another thing that we discussed was the pink tax. I was curious to see if they were aware of it in France, since I didn't know what it was until I watched the documentary. The girls also weren't aware of the pink tax, but they were equally as frustrated as I was. It's upsetting to know that problems like this exist across the world, but also comforting to have people in other countries that we can bond with over it.

Another simply noted, “I was surprised to learn that France has nowhere near as much pharmaceutical advertising as the US, and laws restrict it. For Americans, drug commercials are ubiquitous.”

The final exchange on international diplomacy was the most challenging to discuss for students (six of 11 students selected this option); this topic was also the second most selected topic to spark a shift in opinion or perspective (four of 11 students). Several participants reported discussing the Ukrainian War, which had just broken out when they began their exchanges. As one wrote,

Y. [sic] said that they saw lots of refugees in airports, and told us how one of her friend’s parents was trying their best to help them. It was difficult to think about how close France is to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. We sat in thought for a little bit after talking about this.

One student chose to elaborate further on this subject in her final reflection, explaining,

After taking my Current Affairs class, it was definitely interesting that Alexa and Ismael [names changed] did not seem interested in/informed about the news. That class, and others I have taken, talk a lot about how French people follow the news closely (more so than Americans), so I was surprised to see such a stark difference after talking to our partners. This difference made me reflect on the differences between class/the real world; sometimes I feel like classes are not necessarily in-touch with how they talk about cultures. On the other hand, just a few conversations are not enough to draw this kind of comparison. In short, though, I thought a lot about this contrast after the exchange.

Another participant also indicated that this topic led her to reflect more deeply. She wrote,
In terms of diplomacy specifically, it was interesting to hear the French student’s view on how France can/should operate on a world scale and how that directly contrasted how the Americans believed we wanted/needed to be at the center of all foreign affairs. Once we spoke candidly about our societies and how they led to our beliefs on these policies, we unlocked a new level of understanding and were able to apply the subject at large to different conflicts, policies, and laws around the world. It was most interesting to learn of their view on the States and how that was impacted by influences such as school in media.

B. Participants’ perceptions of knowledge gains

The survey conducted at the end of the 10-week exchange included a series of statements that students were asked to agree or disagree with, based on a five-point Likert scale. Results showed that a majority of US students agreed with all of the statements; a large majority also noted growth in knowledge of WLSP material and practices. 91% of respondents noted that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that the exchanges contributed to gains in cultural knowledge and business practices. For all of the other statements, which relate to language gains and cultural competencies, 63% of the US participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements. Of note, a greater number of students strongly agreed that they felt more comfortable interacting with native speakers; fewer students noted that they actually improved their language skills.

Table 2.
Based on your experiences in these virtual exchanges, please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>neither disagree nor agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I improved my French language skills</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am now more comfortable interacting with native speakers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I challenged my personal perspectives</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned how to adjust my personal interactions with persons of another culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned about the other culture</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I can recognize and explain French business practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I developed a better understanding of aspects of French business practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I am now more interested in continuing my studies in French

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I am now more interested in living or working abroad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

C. Reported challenges and successes

Following the quantitative questions, participants were asked several qualitative questions in which they could type a response into a text box. The first question asked students to identify the biggest challenge they faced while participating in the OIEs, and to be as specific as possible. There were 10 responses to this question, nine of which mentioned scheduling. Examples included: “Coordinating a suitable meeting time,” “finding a time to meet,” and “finding a time that worked well for all of us was very difficult.” One of these students added an additional challenge: “staying on topic for the duration of the conversation.” She wrote, “I found that my group always began with the referenced questions but followed up with more specificity to often lead the conversation into new directions. We enjoyed adding our own personal experiences as well as ask questions to further understand the experiences of our peers.” Another participant wrote “Letting others monopolize the discussion and not being able to give my input for many subjects.”

When asked about the most positive experience or outcome of the exchanges, and to be as specific as possible, eight of the 11 students described a “friendship” or connections they had made. As one explained, “I felt as if we became friends over our meetings. I had a lot of fun during our exchanges.” One wrote “the new friends;” and another elaborated “Loved talking to other people our age in our same situations with regards to language learning, and also learning about their daily lives and perspectives.” Several students also mentioned hopes for a long-lasting relationship: “I hope to stay connected when I travel abroad next semester.”

Other comments to related language learning. One explained,

Within minutes of meeting the French students, I felt comfortable going out of my comfort zone in terms of using new words and phrases. I asked to be politely corrected, and was met with smiles when I would try to use a new expression or learn a new idiomatic phrase in French. I felt encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them, and was delighted when the French students began doing the same.

Another wrote simply “I loved learning different slang words!!”
The final question asked students to offer advice to future students planning to participate in an online international exchange. A majority of responses (six/10) mentioned scheduling. Suggestions included setting up a recurring time, using an app like whentomeet, and being proactive in scheduling in advance. The remaining four suggestions were related to staying relaxed about the exchanges. One student advised, “Go into these exchanges with an open mind and don't be afraid to ask questions or make mistakes. We are students in French, just as they are students in English, and at the end of the day we are all here to learn about something new!” Another wrote “Be yourself and don't be afraid to reach out to the other students. Have fun with them, they are students just like you.”

Discussion

Results of the present study indicate that US-based students engaged in course-based OIEs experienced a number of gains that they attributed to the exchanges, including linguistic growth and confidence, business-related knowledge, and significant shifts in perspectives. While these students reported some gains in language proficiency, there was more significant growth in confidence over the course of the exchanges, which bears out in studies about learner motivation. For L2 learners in particular, the ability to “feel comfortable in the language” or at ease in one’s environment is related to a willingness to make mistakes, and in some ways, is a precursor to linguistic growth. As one student explained,

Within minutes of meeting the French students, I felt comfortable going out of my comfort zone in terms of using new words and phrases. I asked to be politely corrected, and was met with smiles when I would try to use a new expression or learn a new idiomatic phrase in French. I felt encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them, and was delighted when the French students began doing the same.

Another student underscored that it was the OIE context that was particularly fruitful. She wrote that she “always froze on the spot when talking […] my brain just always blocked itself for some reason.” Here, the student is referring to conversations that took place in the classroom, either with her teacher or with other peers studying the language. She elaborates more in her final reflection, adding that “through speaking to people our age, I got past this psychological barrier. I think it’s because I finally saw speaking French as a way to just communicate with equal peers, as opposed to doing well in a class.” The structured but casual setting of the OIE, which took place outside of the classroom and without a teacher present, seems to have led this student to see language as meaningful. Two other participants mentioned being exposed to different and more informal linguistic practices, which made them feel like they had a unique access to French culture. One wrote, “It was nice to learn French texting slang as well like tds (tout de suite) and bjr (bonjour), which are very basic but did make me feel more integrated into French culture.”

Looking at the WLSP content that students discussed, most participants reported agreeing on many topics. The qualitative survey showed that advertising, for instance, did not challenge students’ preconceptions, nor did it elicit disagreement. Still, when participants were asked to offer comments following Likert survey questions (e.g., “I challenged my personal perspectives”), this topic was cited by seven students. As one wrote, “There were in fact less points of ‘debate’, but more just curiosity and questions regarding marketing for different genders.
and the future of marketing, which we generally agreed upon.” The frequent citation of this topic indicates that while the topic of marketing and advertising itself may not be challenging or debate-worthy, its accessibility offers students a chance to consider cultural characteristics in a way that helps them notice nuances. Having an “easier” topic may in fact help students establish common ground with one another while also experiencing some ease in linguistic expression. This ease may also lead to students producing more utterances.

While researchers were looking to generate conflict by selecting topics known to reflect different cultural practices, these students, who are the same age, share relatively similar beliefs. As one concluded, “One of my main takeaways from this exchange is that there are more similarities between French and American culture than I realized. Because we are often focused on the differences between the two countries, it is easy to forget that there are also many similarities.”

When participants did encounter differences of opinion, the survey results indicate that these differences were key to guiding students to change their opinion or perspective on a topic. According to Helm (2016), researchers now see conflict as an agent of change. This matches with this study’s findings in the area of international relations, which elicited high ratings in each of these categories. Once students became familiar with their OIE partners, some even elected to pursue controversial topics outside of the prompts on their own, discussing religion and recent politics. As one participant noted in their final reflection, however, these differences of opinion were not problematic.

Through talking to our partners, I found warmth and depth and an equal level of excitement from their part, which was really refreshing to see. And even though we sometimes had differing opinions on marketing, diplomacy, or the job market, I feel like I understand them more as individual humans and less as generalizations about the French people.

Another possible conclusion is that while researchers were looking to generate conflict by selecting topics known to reflect differences in cultural practices, these students share relatively similar beliefs. As one concluded,

Across all of our meetings with the ESSCA students I found that there are a lot of cultural differences between the U.S and France across a broad range of topics from professional life and working culture, to governmental practices. Yet, I also felt that the [French] students and [US] students in our group agreed on more topics of discussion than we disagreed. There are some similarities that might be based on being a similar age. I feel more equipped to work and interact cross-culturally after having this exchange and I really appreciate the social interaction with different students.

Another participant echoed this sentiment, writing in her final reflection that “One of my main takeaways from this exchange is that there are more similarities between French and American culture than I realized. Because we are often focused on the differences between the two countries, it is easy to forget that there are also many similarities.”

Student reflections indicated that the OIE were also useful in dismantling stereotypes. For one student who had already lived abroad, the OIE served to break down ideas she had already formed. She wrote that she “learned a lot about France and was able to do away with a few misconceptions or preconceptions I may have had about the region from American media or my
Another student also wrote about confronting her unconscious stereotypes related to who is “French”. Here she elaborated,

I also was surprised that both J. and R. were French but not what people generally assume French people look like (i.e. white). Though I try to not make assumptions, when the media portrays the majority of French people as white, it is hard. Accordingly, I feel like speaking with two individuals who were French but not white made me realize that, although I try not to have them, I did make implicit assumptions about French people.

This example demonstrates how OIE can help break down preconceptions and stereotypes, even when not explicitly addressed. For others, it allows them to experience themselves differently: “Learning from somewhat of a French version of myself has been really interesting. My eyes have also been opened to more of the cultural nuances of France.”

Conclusion

Results from this study corroborate OIE research and demonstrate gains in student motivation, in content knowledge, and in intercultural competencies. In the context of the pandemic, this study also underscores that the shift to online learning has afforded new ways of developing cultural knowledge. Finally, the ubiquity of platforms such as Zoom and Google hangouts, as well as social media platforms like Snapchat and Instagram, facilitate social interactions, encouraging natural connections across cultures that reflect student’s daily practices. Their ease and ubiquity also makes it simpler for instructors to embed OIEs into post-secondary curricula.

Participants’ comments also suggest that there are long-lasting gains from these exchanges that cannot be quantified in the moment. As one student wrote, “I’m glad we exchanged Instagrams, because through her page I was able to be exposed to current French and African human rights issues with which I was unfamiliar.” A follow up study with participants involved in OIEs could investigate whether in fact students did explore further study or research abroad, and whether their linguistic and cultural gains were lasting.

Bibliography


Appendix A

Exchange 1

• Have you ever participated in a job interview? Discuss your experiences.
• Do you think the job search process is generally fair and equitable?
• What kind of information is commonly placed on a c.v. in your culture? (Photo? Age? Marital status?)
• What kinds of questions can/cannot be posed during a job interview?
• Is graphology used as part of the interview process? What do you think of this practice?

Exchange 2

• We know that France has several measures in place to support its workers; these relate to everything from lengthy paid vacations and comprehensive parental leave to protections related to unemployment and retirement age. The U.S. has many fewer measures in place for its workers, and these often depend on the private sector, business, or organization. Also, it is easier to dismiss workers in the U.S. compared to France.
• Please discuss different laws and measures, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of these various policies. It may also be interesting to discuss the role of strikes and negotiation in both cultures.

Exchange 3

• What laws govern marketing and advertising in your country?
• Are there particular regulations regarding advertising to children or advertising in schools? Do you think there should be more or fewer restrictions?
• What about? What kinds of laws restrict when and where products such as alcohol, tobacco, pharmaceutical products, food can be advertised? Do you agree with these? What kinds of advertising are most effective, in your opinion?
• Other topics: the pink tax, the use of English in French advertising, mangerbouger.fr, new advertising laws for cars (“pensez à covoiturer”)

Exchange 4

• What is the role of your nation-state in international affairs?
• What is the importance of diplomacy in your country?
• What should countries do in the face of global displacement? How should we consider and distribute refugee resettlement efforts? Should there be borders?
• Considering the current situation in Ukraine, what is the role of diplomacy? negotiation? compromise?
Appendix B

Online Reflection Prompts

Exchanges 1-3
Please share your reflections on the exchanges you had with your French counterparts. While you may wish to briefly summarize your conversation to offer context, please focus your comments on your experience and on what you learned from your conversation. Some questions to consider as you craft your response:

- How did you feel during the exchange?
- Were you able to "be yourself" during the interaction?
- Were you able to express yourself adequately? Did you understand your counterparts?
- Did you find more similarities or differences with your counterparts?
- Did something about the interaction surprise you? (could be about interpersonal communication, information exchanged, or other)
- Did you change your mind about a topic or understand something from another perspective?

250 words minimum.

Exchange 4
Here are some questions (some are new!) to consider as you craft your response -- you do not need to answer all of them! Choose which ones speak to you as you consider your experience.

- How did you feel during the exchange?
- Were you able to "be yourself" during the interaction? Has this changed since the last meetings?
- Were you able to express yourself adequately? Did you understand your counterparts?
- Did you find more similarities or differences with your counterparts' perspectives on the topic?
- Did something about the interaction surprise you? (could be about interpersonal communication, information exchanged, or other)
- Did you change your mind about a topic or understand something from another perspective?
- If/When a person from the other culture expressed a different point of view on a topic, how did you feel? (uncomfortable? excited? curious? upset? etc.) What did you do? (ask questions? listen quietly? engage in debate? discuss with your partner at a later moment? etc.)

Global Questions

- Thinking back on the exchanges as a whole, what are your takeaways?
- Do you see French cultures, individuals, or business practices differently than you did before?
- What did you learn?
- What do you still want to know?

300 words minimum