TOWARDS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: ZOOM EXCHANGE BETWEEN U.S. AND FRENCH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

In the absence of an authentic immersive setting for language learning and exposure to the host cultures, virtual interactive exchanges have been demonstrated to be appropriate substitutes for such skill development (Conboy, Ugalde & Reuber, 2017). Learners of French at a U.S. university conducted virtual dual-immersion (VDI) interactive exchanges, over Zoom, with students of English at a French University. In each session, students spent 15 minutes speaking in French and 15 minutes speaking in English and answered questionnaires prior to and following each of the exchanges. Reported levels of student confidence improved. Self-reports indicate that, in the conversations, students learned new concepts, both linguistic and cultural. We address (a) advantages and disadvantages compared to the use of proprietary interactive exchanges; (b) assess the possibilities and challenges of setting up an independent VDI exchange and; (c) demonstrate that the use of VDI in the foreign language classroom enhances language learning and integrates 21st century skills and the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL).

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, VDI exchanges, French as a second language.

1. Introduction

O'Rourke and Stickler (2017) defined synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) as "dialogic communication that proceeds under conditions of simultaneous presence (co-presence) in a shared communicative space, which may be physical or virtual" (p. 2). The authors espoused the pedagogical utility of such technology. Such tools can be used to supplement in-class learning through, for example, virtual dual-immersion (VDI) language exchanges with native speakers of the target language. The utility of proprietary software for this effect has been shown to be effective in enhancing learning outside of the classroom, contextualizing and consolidating knowledge from the communicative classroom, and facilitating the building of community relations (Conboy, Ugalde & Reuber, 2017). One popular SCMC application is Zoom, whose use has skyrocketed since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Phillips and Abbott (2011) describe the 21st Century Skills Map, which results from the collaboration between the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21). The map integrates key skills for 21st century learners and the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. It incorporates the ACTFL standards and "the five C's" (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Communities and Comparisons), as well as the three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) recommended by the Council. The pedagogical use of SCMCs can require students to exercise initiative and responsibility, agency and autonomy, become "doers" and "creators" in a personalized and real-world environment, mimicking the immersion experience, as desired for 21st century learners (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Language-learning research demonstrates that different forms of SCMCs can provide multiple opportunities for teachers and students, as they create an interactive and authentic setting for learning (Wu, Marek & Chen, 2013; Terhune, 2016). At this moment in history, many language programs are being cut across the United States (Lusin et al, 2023), and AI may be threatening the future of individual language learning, interpretation and production. The implementation of international collaborations via SCMCs is vital for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and citizenship in our students.

Intercultural communicative competence implies honing a set of knowledge, skills and behaviors that allow an individual to navigate complex intercultural situations and communicate effectively and

appropriately in specific contexts. It comprises, therefore, not just linguistic elements, but also empathy, openness and adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 2021). The pedagogical challenge SCMCs present to language students is in line with social constructivist theories of education: Encouraging students slightly beyond their level of comfort, into the zone of proximal development, supports long-term, effective learning (Silver, 2011).

The main objective of the project is to assess the viability of organizing an interactive language exchange with a partner school in France, evaluate its benefits and challenges and judge how it enhances ACTFL standards and learning of ICC. The study followed the previous use of a pedagogy-specific proprietary software in earlier iterations of FREN211. Though effective, high costs made the program unsustainable. Contacts at the University of Strasbourg led to a decision to experiment with a SCMC in fall 2019. This presentation focuses on students' perceived levels of anxiety and confidence prior to beginning the project and after the first conversation. We also look specifically to student-reported learning of linguistic and cultural elements from the conversation partners. Considering Terhune's suggestion (2016), the intervention was structured with specific and scaffolded tasks and goals. We demonstrate how students of foreign languages, through VDI exchanges, were able to learn from each other, linguistically and culturally, but also to cultivate the human experience through connection and cross-cultural relationships.

2. Method

In the fall 2019, 13 students enrolled in FREN211: French Language and Culture II at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSB/SJU, Minnesota, USA), participated in an interactive Zoom language exchange with 21 students of English as a second language, from the University of Strasbourg, France. FREN211 is the third semester in a three-semester language sequence at CSB/SJU and is a part of the general education curriculum for proficiency. The goal is for FREN211 students to reach the Intermediate Low threshold as described by ACTFL. The student population was homogenous in terms of experience with the French language: all were learners of French as a second language, had at least one year of French in high school and were at least in their second semester of college-level French. None had attended an immersion school. Approximately a third of the students had visited a francophone country and approximately a third reported having conducted a conversation in the target language with a native speaker in the past for more than 10 minutes.

Together with weekly TA conversations, the exchanges were worth 10% of the students' final grade. The two instructors organized the pairs and trios of language partners. Students communicated directly with the language partners via email to coordinate the appropriate times to conduct two exchanges over the course of the semester. The language instructors collaborated in the conception of prompts for each of the exchanges. The CSB/SJU students received detailed and methodic prompts which closely followed grammar functions and vocabulary covered in class. Prompts were provided to students two weeks in advance of the scheduled online conversations to allow them time to prepare and to meet with a TA, if needed. Prior to the first exchange, students were introduced to Zoom and worked with the institution's Instructional Technology staff to learn how to set up a meeting, record it and share the recording with the instructors and language partners. Students signed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) consent form prior to the beginning of the study. Students' identities are confidential.

Each conversation was recorded and conducted in two stages: 15-20min in English, and 15-20min in French. Students were informed that it was meant to be a linguistic and cultural exchange, via Zoom, and that it would be a part of their summative oral comprehension evaluation. Students were asked to prepare questions in advance, addressing each of the points in the prompt provided. They were encouraged to seek additional help from the TA and prepare extra questions, in case of time left at the end of the exchange, but these two items remained optional. Students from CSB/SJU were also encouraged to conduct their conversations on their own, though a few opted to have a classmate from FREN211 present for the conversation with their French interlocutor(s). At the end of each exchange, students sent the audio/video file to the instructors for assessment and spot checking.

Students responded to three questionnaires pertaining to the language exchange experience: one pre-exchange, and one after each of the two conversations. Questionnaires were composed of questions using a six-point summative scale as well as open-ended questions about students' expectations and constructive feedback. While the pre-exchange questionnaire included questions about the students' background and experience with French language and cultures, the subsequent questionnaires included questions about students' perceptions following each of the conversations.

3. Results

Figure 1 shows the means (with 95% confidence intervals) of students' perceived confidence and anxiety levels before and after the first conversation. Both demonstrate an improving trend that approaches significance: Confidence increases (one-tailed, paired $t(12) = 1.62$, $p = .07$) .and Anxiety declines ($t(12) = -1.17$, $p = .13$). Observed effect size, with Hedge's correction, was $d = 1.28$ for Confidence; for Anxiety, $d = 1.01$.

Figures 1a and 1b. Students' perceived confidence and anxiety levels (means) before and after the first conversation.


Figures 2 and 3 present the distribution of responses to the question whether students perceived that they had learned cultural and linguistic elements through the conversation. After the first conversation, 9 students (69.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the affirmation "I learned at least one thing about another culture and its heritage," whereas 11 students (84.6%) agreed or strongly agreed with that affirmation after the second conversation (Figure 2). With regard to new linguistic elements, after the first conversation, 5[*] (50%) agreed or strongly agreed they "learned at least one thing about French language," while 7 (77.8%) reported similarly after the second conversation (Figure 3).

Figures 2a and 2b. Frequencies of student responses to the item "I learned at least one thing about another culture and its heritage" after the first (C1) and the second (C2) conversations.
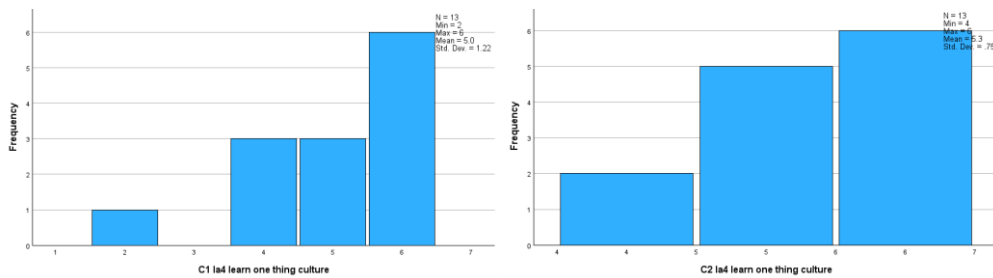
Figures 3a and 3b. Frequencies of student responses to the item "I learned at least one thing about French language" after the first (C1) and the second (C2) conversations.
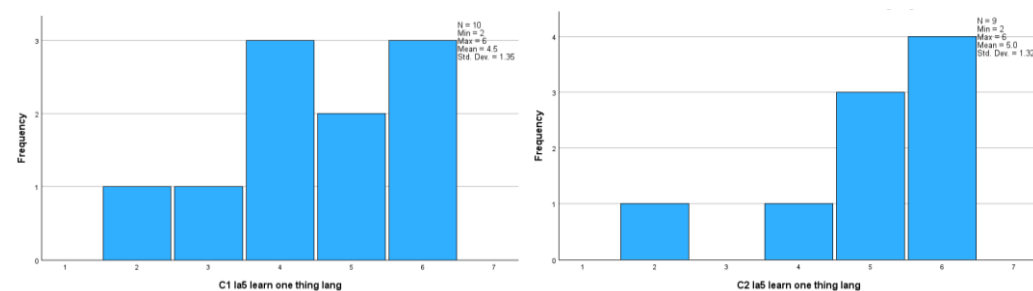
Students' narratives described the project in a generally positive light. When asked what their expectations were for the upcoming conversations, one student summed up the objectives of the research project: "I expect to grow in my oral skills as well as my confidence in my oral skills […] learn new terms that I wouldn't have the chance to learn in class." Another student touched on the goals of ICC, when mentioning the desire to "come away with a better understanding of how people live in the francophone world and how it differs from the ways that I live," while another alluded to "how it will differ from any stereotypes or expectations I may hold."

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[*] Due to a questionnaire error, only 10 students reported this item after the first conversation, and 9 reported after the second conversation.

After the first conversation, these sentiments continued with comments such as, "Overall the conversation was a very cool experience and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Talking with my partner in French helped me to *solidify some of my speaking skills* and *affirm my confidence in my speaking skills*" (author's emphasis), and "It's great to compare your cultural similarities and differences with someone around the world." This last student even noted "talking for about 50 minutes," instead of the 30-40 minutes required. Another student explained, "I had a lot of fun doing it […] I am very excited for the next conversation," while another noted that "overall it went a lot better than expected." After the second conversation, one student reported learning "new cultural aspects along with understood most of what they said," and another expressed how it was "super fun and I really enjoyed it." Students also reported being pushed beyond their comfort zone: "The conversation allowed me to challenge myself with oral comprehension;" "It was very beneficial because it pushed me to actually put my knowledge to the test." As a result, students reported they felt "like [they] improved [their] French from the conversations." After the completion of the experience, a student recommended the project for the class, even though it was "nerve wracking."

The theme of connection with others was present in several of the students' responses. At the end of the exchange, one student noted, "I created a connection with my partner in which we rely on each other with English/French, hope to continue." Another wrote, "I thoroughly enjoyed it and I know [I] have a friend who I can converse with in French. We plan to stay in touch. It was a great way to make connections. Felt like more than just an assignment." Moreover, students elaborated on their sense of gratitude for the project by saying, "now that it's done I see what a cool opportunity it was along with how much I learned," and "it was a very unique and cool opportunity that other students aren't lucky enough to have."

Complaints reported centered mostly around logistical and technical difficulties. Students reported feeling nervous, but "in the end, felt comfortable with [the] partner." Another student noted, "the more we talked, the easier the conversation was." Finally, there were some students who expressed confusion during the conversation since the expectations for the students at CSB/SJU and those at the University of Strasbourg appeared to be different.

4. Discussion

Fewer students reported meeting with the TA ahead of the second conversation than they did for the first conversation. This may be due to busier schedules in the later part of the semester, but it also may imply that students felt more confident going into the second conversation than they did at the beginning of the exchange. This hypothesis can be corroborated by the average perceived confidence level in students after the first exchange (3.46 in the 6-point scale) in comparison to the average perceived confidence level in students prior to the first exchange, when asked if they believed they were capable of leading a 30min conversation with a native interlocutor (2.92); while not statistically significant, it does show an improving trend with student perceived confidence. The observed effect size of about one standard deviation is certainly educationally significant, if replicable. Moreover, it is notable that, even if the majority of students chose to bring notes to the exchange, they reported not reading them directly during the conversation, and rather allowing for the conversation to flow more naturally.

Unlike an exchange whereby students are logging into a proprietary software tool to communicate with interlocutors in the target language, this VDI exchange was mutually beneficial for the two groups of students. Each group had the agency and opportunity to share and teach in their native language. Each group also had the benefit of learning from the other group when communicating in the target language. As one student notes in the final questionnaire, "I was nervous about the idea of talking to a native French speaker, but overall, the conversation was great. It helped that my partners were fun." Student responses in the open-ended sections of the questionnaires suggest that the project is in line with (a) social constructivist theories of education and the creation of a zone of proximal development and; (b) the tenets of ICC, as concerns the learning of cultural elements, the development of linguistic skills, and the openness and connection towards Other. Anecdotally, one of the students reported continuing the exchange beyond the semester of 211 and was still communicating with the partner in Strasbourg nine months later. Another student visited the respective partner when studying abroad in France, in fall 2021.

The independent organization of a VDI exchange has, of course, challenges. There were two main challenges observed in this project: first, for the students, the coordination of schedules with a 7-hour time difference is not simple; second, for the instructors, the preparation and coordination of the exchanges is time-consuming and can be challenging amid all other responsibilities, and in the context of courses that have a set content that needs to be covered during the semester. While the plan had been to continue a similar exchange in future semesters, institutional restrictions on class offerings, limited numbers of students enrolled in classes at the University of Strasbourg, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic precluded its maintenance, at least for the time being. Anecdotally, some of the students who

had taken FREN211 in fall 2019 acknowledged that the experience with Zoom that semester had set them up for success when courses transitioned to Zoom in spring 2020.

5. Recommendations and conclusion

In order to confirm the hypothesis that fewer students chose to meet with the TA prior to the second conversation because of confidence levels, it would be important to include a question in the questionnaires to assess their rational. In terms of technical aspects, since it was the first time everyone was using Zoom, there were the expected "glitches" with recording and audio concerns in the first conversation. These were resolved for the second one. Even though students were guided step-by-step in setting up the Zoom meeting before the project, it is recommended that a trial run of the software be conducted, so students have hands-on experience and can prevent or resolve any problems that may arise.

If a similar study is conducted in the future, it is important that the instructors maintain constant and clear communication with each other throughout the project, to ensure that the students in both groups have similar expectations and similar prompts. Two students indicated that it may be worth increasing the percentage the project counts for in the final grade. While the original thinking centered around limiting student anxiety related to the weight of the assignment, these students reported believing that awarding it a larger percentage of the final grade would increase their motivation. Moreover, even if some students reported the exchange might be better suited to students in higher level French classes, students also reported being challenged and learning from the exchanges ("It definitely made me nervous but I am glad we did it"). We conclude that it is possible and, in fact desirable, to conduct language exchanges at the third semester of college French, provided there is appropriate scaffolding, preparation for the assignment and detailed prompts that guide the students. It may be beneficial to: (a) carve out more time in class with students collaborating on preparation for the language exchanges; (b) explore the option of three language exchanges, since one student suggests, "Maybe more conversations so that we get to know our partners a little bit better." Students clearly appreciate the opportunity to exchange with, and learn from, peers from other parts of the world. Therefore, even though it requires effort, extra time, and organization on the part of the instructors to plan and implement a VDI exchange, it is an effective way for students of language to develop greater intercultural communicative competence.

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