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Learning Culture & Language through Community Engagement:

A Model for Foreign Language Educators

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### Abstract

This study was conducted with a community college class and a university class of German as a foreign language, where the students were conversation partners with ESL students for service-learning projects. It was influenced by foreign language and culture pedagogy, intercultural communication and competency, and service-learning literature. It drew on the notion that language and culture can be taught without coming directly from the target language and target culture, but rather from more of an international culture, according to a culture general approach. A criterion sample of 12 student reflections were collected, and qualitatively analyzed using grounded theory. The major emergent themes were culture learning, language learning and service-learning, with several subthemes. The German students compared and contrasted their American culture with their conversation partners' cultures. Surprisingly, only a couple of students discussed German culture. They did, however, reflect on the language learning process in general, and more specifically on how their conversation partners struggled with English, and related that to their own struggles with learning German. Finally, they reflected on the service experience. All discussed positive aspects and a few discussed negative aspects of the experience. The variability in their experiences may have been due to their cultural competency or lack thereof, which was discussed in terms of Bennett, Bennett and Allen's (2003) Developmental Model for Intercultural Competency. This study offers a model for language educators to adopt in which to engage students in their own learning and thinking about language, culture, and community engagement, and to meet course and institutional goals in these and other areas, such as internationalization, without requiring the students to travel abroad.

Learning Culture & Language through Community Engagement:

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“Most people do not normally take the time to reflect upon their own cultural values since culture to a native person is like water to a fish. It surrounds people but they do not see it.”

This quote is from a student reflection on his service-learning experience as an English conversation partner with a Vietnamese student. One may wonder what talking in English with someone from Vietnam had to do with him learning German. Culture is something we experience everyday, but which we rarely take the time to think about.

Even in the foreign language classroom, which seems a natural place for culture to be thought about and discussed, instructors often find it difficult to balance this along with developing the grammar, speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of their students. When culture is incorporated, it is often then only limited to the target culture, and taught through the target language. This may not capture the larger picture of culture and language learning, which encompasses intercultural communicative competence.

Similar to the stereotypes we all initially hold of those who are different than we are, when first confronted with an opportunity to teach culture and language in a new way, many foreign language educators may initially be wary. Yet, if they change how they teach culture, they may provide a space for their students to positively change as well. In such a learning environment influenced by critical pedagogy, students are transformed when they leave the classroom and are exposed to larger linguistic and cultural issues in the real world.

Literature Review

This paper stands at the intersection of several bodies of research: foreign language and culture pedagogy, intercultural communication and competency, and service-learning, which is

also known as civic or community engagement. According to Learn and Serve America, service-learning is

an exciting, hands-on approach to education taking place in a wide variety of settings.... by combining service objectives and learning objectives, along with the intent to show measurable change in both the recipient and the provider of the service, the result is a radically-effective transformative method of teaching students. (2009, ¶ 1)

The literature is reviewed in the following sections: Cultural Competency in the Foreign Language Context, Cultural Competency in the Service-Learning Context, and then discussed with the current study in Rationale: Learning Culture and Language through Service-Learning.

#### *Cultural Competency in the Foreign Language Context*

Traditionally, and to a great extent still currently, culture teaching in the foreign language classroom has focused primarily on the teaching of the target culture. But this does not necessarily lead to greater (inter)cultural competency, especially when the notion of culture is more abstract and not personalized for the students. Intercultural competence is “the general ability to transcend ethnocentrism, appreciate other cultures, and generate appropriate behavior in one or more different cultures” (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003, p. 237). It can be achieved through exposure to and experience with different cultures, is often a goal of foreign language classes, and can be met through study abroad programs. But not all students who study a foreign language in the U.S. study abroad. How then are they able to gain intercultural competency without this experience? Foreign language educators and scholars in the field of intercultural communication offer several models for teaching language and culture beyond the target language and the target culture, both for domestic and international programs.

Reagan and Osborn (2002) suggested the foreign language classroom as a site for critical pedagogy. As such, the role of the foreign language educator is “not merely that of a guide to the target language, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of a mentor and colleague in the

students' development of critical language awareness" (p. 2). In this way, the teachers and the students are more aware of the larger sociocultural, political, and economic issues surrounding the language learning. Reagan and Osborn's text is geared toward pre- and in-service foreign language teachers, and they wrote from their experiences as foreign language educators. They clarified that they "are not suggesting that foreign language educators cease to teach the target language" (p. 138), but they did state the larger "metalinguistic content" that students should be learning in the classroom. Reagan and Osborn addressed the "real world" applications of language and culture learning. They aptly claimed that "students should become cross-culturally communicative, not simply communicatively competent" (p. 91). Thus, speaking the language in isolation is not as important as being able to communicate with people from other cultures. Similar to Reagan and Osborn, Byram (1988) also discussed foreign language and culture teaching, and was critical of the "consumer-tourist approach" (p. 29) to teaching culture. He suggested that language and culture learning is a process (p. 29). He also stated the importance of comparing one's own culture with the target culture and offered a model of culture teaching for language educators using social anthropology, ethnography, and sociology.

Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003) aligned their Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) with students' language proficiency levels and found that language students became more interculturally sensitive with greater language proficiency. In their model, there are three ethnocentric stages: denial of difference, defense against difference, and minimization of difference; and there are three ethnorelative stages: acceptance of difference, adaptation to difference, and integration of difference (Bennett, 2009). The stages are on a scale from least interculturally sensitive with denial to most interculturally sensitive with integration. In the denial stage, one may not see cultural differences at all. In the defense stage, one may see cultural differences, but through a "polarized us/them distinction" (Bennett, 2009, p. 3). The minimization stage is where one believes that cultural difference does not exist, and that

everyone is the same. In the acceptance stage, one sees his culture as “truly distinct from other cultures” and does not judge this difference to be negative (Bennett, 2009, p. 5). The person is becoming an interculturalist in the adaptation stage, and the “premier skill of an interculturalist is empathy, that capacity to take the perspective of the other culture” (Bennett, 2009, p. 6). In the integration stage, one may become bicultural, and have a complex cultural identity, which is a process that takes several years (Bennett, 2009, p. 7). It is important for language educators to keep these DMIS stages in mind as they teach culture in their classes.

Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003) differentiated culture-specific and culture-general approaches to language teaching. Culture-specific approaches aim to develop competency in the target culture, whereas, culture-general approaches aim to develop more universal competence, as they are not focused on teaching a particular culture (p. 244). The DMIS is culture-general, and is a useful model for teaching. Students think about their own culture, and are then able to learn about other cultures, in addition to the target culture.

McKay’s (2002) ideas of teaching culture in the context of English as an international language could be transferred to other languages. McKay cited Kramsch (1993) in highlighting the ideas of a “sphere of interculturality” and “teaching culture as difference” (pp. 82-83). This idea is related to the ethnorelative stages of the DMIS, and is relevant based on the hypothesis that when culture is taught as difference, students become better culture learners, and reflect on their own cultures, even if their culture learning comes more from an international rather than the target culture. Both the international and the local culture and language varieties need to be considered.

Cultural competency can be accomplished for foreign language students without the target culture and without the target language. In an article about his experience with 18 college students who achieved cultural competence through their two week course in Berlin, Wolf

(2007) described how this was achieved not in the target language, German, but, rather, in English. Before taking this course, the American students knew little about Berlin and held stereotypes. Wolf oriented them pre-departure with cultural reading and viewing materials. The students reflected on their cultural learning experiences in group discussions and personal observation journals while in Berlin, and wrote an 8-page paper after returning to the United States. They “addressed how the program helped them to achieve a certain measure of cultural competence and sensitivity, while helping them overcome their ethnocentrism” (p. 145), and they also presented their papers.

The students’ culture learning took place through English discussions with Germans, and Wolf’s goals were, following the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) Task Force on the Teaching of Culture, “developing cross-cultural sensitivity and tolerance, lessening of ethnocentrism, instilling cultural understanding, and developing positive attitudes toward the target culture” (Schulz, et al., 2005, as cited in Wolf, 2007, p. 144). Wolf saw his program as less than ideal because it was not done in the target language. Nonetheless, his program is a good model for developing cultural competency in college students, regardless of the language of instruction. Again, with the movement away from ethnocentrism, it is evident that his students also became more interculturally competent according to the DMIS. Their attitudes shifted and their culture learning occurred based on their pre-departure orientation, in-country experiences and interactions, and written reflections. Culture learning can also occur through service-learning, in both local and international contexts. A discussion of this literature follows.

### *Cultural Competency in the Service-Learning Context*

Service-learning enables a “transformative experience” and “this transformation occurs when students interact with various groups of people...and then reflect critically on the meaning of those interactions” (Myers-Lipton, 1996, p. 660). Myers-Lipton claimed, “advocates believe that service-learning, especially when performed in a cross-cultural setting, encourages students

to have a greater appreciation of different cultural traditions” (p. 659). He sought to measure this quantitatively and investigated the effects of service-learning on college students’ attitudes toward international understanding over two years. There were three groups of participants in the quasi-experimental design: the experimental service-learning group, the control group that did service without the academic context, and the control group that did no service. The service-learning students volunteered both in their local communities and for a month in Jamaica for development agencies. Myers-Lipton found that the service-learning students’ attitudes were transformed based on their volunteer experiences, specifically that their international understanding increased, and that these changes supported critical education theory (p. 667).

In a domestic context, Mullaney (1999) integrated service-learning into her community college Spanish class. Her students were paired with English as a Second Language (ESL) students whose first language was Spanish, and they participated in language exchange as conversational partners. Mullaney had the goals from the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* that her students would “progress” in the areas of “communication” and “communities,” which were two of the five “interconnected” Cs of foreign language education, the other three being cultures, connections, and comparisons (pp. 50-51). These goals related both to linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. The communication goal was to “further the linguistic development of all students”, and the communities goal was to “integrate the ESL students” into the community college (p. 49). Mullaney shared why her service-learning project was successful due to second language acquisition and educational theory. In fact, she claimed it met four of the five goal areas: communication, cultures, comparisons, and communities. The comparisons goal “relates to developing insight into the nature of language and culture” (p. 57). One of her students reflected that ““it was equally educating just to see how hard it is to learn the English language”” (p. 60). Some unintended results of Mullaney’s students’ experiences were “heightened cultural awareness” and a “deeper appreciation of the difficulties of learning a new language” (p. 56). In my study, I specifically intended to investigate these outcomes, rather than

only having greater cultural and linguistic awareness as unexpected benefits. I wanted to discover if my students thought more about their language and culture learning from their service experiences.

*Rationale: Learning Culture and Language through Service-Learning*

In the discussion of the literature above, I cited models of how cultural competency can be achieved in the foreign language context and through service-learning. While there is a great deal of literature on culture teaching in the foreign language context, often the actual teaching of culture, especially beyond that of the target culture, could be more effective and lead to greater intercultural competency. Culture may also be learned outside the classroom through service-learning within the community. Service-learning or engagement is also one way for students to take responsibility for their own learning (Learn and Serve America, 2009).

In this study, my American students of first-year German participated in a service-learning project in which they met as English conversation partners with ESL students at their respective college or university. As conversation partners, their project was similar to what Mullaney's students did, but differed in that it was not the same kind of direct language exchange, as most of the students did not speak their partners' languages. I used a methodology similar to Wolf's and Mullaney's studies, in which I analyzed my students' learning about culture and language from their written reflections. Unlike Myers-Lipton's study, my study differs in that I was not focused specifically on attitudes, but I was interested in discovering if the experience was transformative in terms of the students' own language and culture learning. My students completed their service and had their intercultural connections without traveling out of the country, which again, is similar to Mullaney's study, but differs from Wolf's and Myers-Lipton's.

To frame their service experiences the students in this study read, reflected on, and discussed a chapter from a guidebook for those engaged in service-learning projects (Reitenauer,

Cress, & Bennett, 2005). This chapter clearly explained the link between service-learning and culture learning using the DMIS.

This study offers a new model of how foreign language students can achieve cultural competency without traveling abroad. In addition, a service experience involving foreign language students conversing with ESL students may be transformative for them in terms of language and culture even though it is not directly tied with the target language or target culture. In this project, each American student of German was thrust into a situation in which she was forced to meet with a student from another culture, whose first language was different, and with whom she was required to converse in English. Because of these linguistic and cultural barriers, the service-learning project clearly created contact zones, which, according to Pratt (1996) are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (p. 444). In this study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Does the contact zone of German language students doing service-learning projects as ESL conversation partners promote reflection with respect to their own cultural identity?
- 2) Does it promote reflection of culture-general knowledge and language learning? If so, how and in what way? If not, why not?

I investigated these questions using aspects of a grounded theory approach to methodology.

### Method

This is a qualitative study of the reflections American college and university students of German wrote after engaging in a service-learning project as ESL conversation partners.

#### *Context*

For this study, I incorporated service-learning into my two intermediate-low German classes, one at a community college and one at a public urban university in the northwestern U.S. during winter quarter 2009. These courses were the second term of a three-term sequence of

first-year German. The community college was a two-year college located in the suburbs not far from the city center. Students took German to meet the language requirement for their associate's degrees and/or for their transfer degrees to four-year colleges and universities. High school students, working professionals, and retired community members, as well as those who were learning the language for travel, studied German there. First- and second-year German courses were offered.

The other site was an urban university. Students took German to meet the language requirement for their bachelor's degrees, to fulfill their prerequisites for graduate programs, and for general interest. While high school students took German classes in the summers, the majority of students in the first-year German classes were regular-admitted university students. The age demographic varied, although most students were close in age to traditional university students. German courses were offered through the master's-level.

Both classes who participated in this project were continuations of the first term, which was a beginner's course for novice learners, and which I also taught in the fall. Most of these second-term students had also been in those classes. In addition, both classes ran on the same 10-week quarter system. Both institutions also had conversation programs for their ESL students. At the community college, the program was run by the student success center. At the university, it was among the activities offered through the intensive English program. The ESL student population was different at each campus. At the community college, the students came from a variety of language and cultural backgrounds. Some were studying in the area for the short term as visiting international students, while others had been residents for several years. Their focus with English may or may not have been academic. At the university, there were also several cultures and languages represented. However, most students were studying academic English in

preparation for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) for regular admission to U.S. colleges and universities.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were the college and university students enrolled in my intermediate-low German 102 classes at the college and the university described above. There were 17 students in the community college class, and 9 students in the university class. The community college class was an evening class that met twice a week for 100 minutes per session, and the university class was a morning class that met three times a week for 65 minutes per session. One student in the university class and three students in the community college class did not complete the course requirements for the service-learning project. From the 22 students who completed the project, I chose 12 reflections to analyze for this study, according to criterion sampling.

This type of sampling is used to select cases based on certain criteria (Cresswell, 2007). The criteria I used in selecting reflections were the following: the completeness of the assignment, the richness of emergent themes, the representativeness of different cultures, and the variety of service experiences, including both positive and negative aspects. From each class, 6 reflections were then chosen for analysis. The 12 participants in the criterion sample had a range of previous language learning and cross-cultural experiences. In the community college class, there were three females and three males, ranging in age from 17 to about 27. In the university class, there were five females and one male, and they ranged in age from 17 to 41. The students in both classes were all native American English speakers and culturally identified as American. Some also identified with their German, Mexican, or Ukrainian heritage. There may have been participants with other backgrounds, but these were not made explicit in the reflections. About

half of the community college students had previous foreign language learning experience, and some had traveled or lived abroad. At least one student had not been outside the country before. All of the university students had language learning prior to studying German, and most had traveled or lived abroad. Table 1 below lists the distribution of the sample according to which class the students were from, the community college (CC) or the university (U), and also according to where their conversation partners were from. The ESL conversation partners were not participants in this study.

Table 1

*Distribution of Criterion Sample Based on Institution and Country of Conversation Partner*

	China	France	Japan	Korea	Mexico	Saudi Arabia	Taiwan	Vietnam
CC	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	3
U	0	1	1	2	0	1	1	0

*Materials & Instruments*

Because this study was conducted as part of these classes, the students were given assignments to prepare them for and to frame the service experience. The assignments and preparatory activities included a description of the project, course and student learning goals, a check-in at midterm, and a chapter from *Learning through Serving: A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning across the Disciplines* (Reitenauer et al., 2005). I wanted the students to reflect on their own cultures, and to have a frame of reference about service-learning in general. In addition, at the end of the quarter, the students did an oral presentation, and wrote a written reflection. The students were also given the institutional learning outcomes when they received their presentation assignment. See the Appendices for examples of these assignments.

The students received the following course learning goals at the beginning of the project:

- To continue to apply language-learning skills to more varied real-life situations; to develop a deeper appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity. (community college class)
- To understand better one's own culture and language learning; to have a greater understanding of culture general knowledge; and to realize the university outcomes of engagement and internationalization. (university class)

The students then submitted their personal learning goals for the project, which were returned to them for consideration when writing their reflections.

#### *Data Collection*

As a requirement for the project, the students completed a minimum of five hours of conversation with ESL students. There was not a limit placed on where their conversation partner came from, or on what conversational topics they would discuss. Each conversation program provided a handout with suggested conversation topics. The community college students met their students on campus in the student success center and the university students met their partners on or close to campus in a public location, such as a coffee shop. As conversation partners and not as tutors or teachers, the experience was set up as more informal. The students were instructed to keep a log of their hours with notes of their sessions. After they completed their conversation hours, they presented, in German, about the experience to their classmates. At the end of the quarter, they wrote reflections in German and in English, which they e-mailed to me. This was the reflection assignment that the students received at the beginning of the quarter:

Write one paragraph in German and 1-2 pages in English reflecting on your service experience this quarter. Be sure to think about and address the following questions: What has this service experience meant for you in terms of how you think about your culture? other cultures? language learning? civic engagement? What does it mean for you to have the filter of German and our classroom to process this service experience? Use a pseudonym when writing about your conversation partner.

### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis involved reading through the written reflections several times looking for themes to emerge. I wrote notes in the margins and coded the data according to the emergent themes from the participants' reflections. Some initial open codes I expected to find were the following: own culture learning, other culture learning, language learning, civic engagement, internationalization, pros and cons. The open codes were put into the categories of culture learning, language learning, and service-learning, which resulted as the major themes. There were also some in vivo codes, which were codes named using language drawn from the students' reflections, such as "at first" and "the same" (Cresswell, 2007). The reflections were also coded using Bennett, Bennett, and Allen's (2003) DMIS stages when appropriate. Not all stages were represented, but defense, minimization, and acceptance were evident.

The reflections were numbered for reference and anonymity, and were coded. The codes were listed on a spreadsheet and then marked according to each numbered reflection that they appeared in. Representative reflections were chosen to analyze for emergent themes. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the written reflections are described in the Results section that follows.

Results

*Summary of Findings*

The major salient themes that emerged from the student reflections were culture learning, language learning, and service-learning. The subthemes of culture learning were the conversation partner’s culture, the student’s own American culture, German culture, and similarities and differences. The subthemes of language learning were the conversation partner’s language, English language learning and teaching, German language, and other language learning. There were also similarities and differences noted between the different languages and language learning processes. The subthemes of service-learning were positive aspects, service in general, expectations versus reality, and time commitment. See Table 2 for a summary of these major themes and their subthemes, along with the number of reflections they were present in.

Table 2

*Learning Themes and Subthemes and their Distribution*

Culture Learning	Culture of Conversation Partner (12)	American Culture (11)	German Culture (2)	Similarities (9) & Differences (12)
Language Learning	Conversation Partner’s Language (6)	English Language (12)	German Language (10)	Other Language (4)
Service-Learning	Positive (12)	Service (10)	Expectations vs. Reality (8)	Time Commitment (7)

*Culture Learning*

The most salient major theme was culture, specifically a comparison and contrast of the conversation partner’s culture with the student’s own culture, which they all identified as American. Two students also discussed German culture. Everyone discussed differences, and

some drew on similarities or sameness in terms of their conversation partners. There was a range of understanding of difference among the students, from defense to acceptance, according to the DMIS.

Several students learned something about another culture: “I think one of the greatest things I’ve gotten from this project is an insight into someone’s life and culture; I learned things from K. that I never knew before” (U/Korea). The “U” means this student was from my university class, and “Korea” is where her conversation partner was from. Similarly, a student from the community college class wrote about being both nervous and excited about the experience: “I was really nervous when I found out that service learning projects were required for the class...But I was also excited at the same time because learning someone’s different culture and ideas is [a] very big opportunity to learn about yourself and grow as a person” (CC/Vietnam). This student related the experience to herself, not only in terms of the conversation partner’s culture, but also in terms of herself. Finally, one student succinctly wrote one benefit from the experience: “Teaching others about your own culture also gives you insights on your own” (U/Taiwan). He learned more about his culture from presenting it to his conversation partner.

While most students made comparisons between their culture and their conversation partner’s culture, only a couple included German culture in their reflections. In the following example, the student discussed American, German, and Vietnamese culture:

Indeed, Americans and Germans still have a shared European background, so Vietnamese culture provides a good contrast to both American and German culture. This fact is especially true since Asian cultures usually do not receive as much attention in America as European cultures (CC/Vietnam).

This student wrote about three cultures; several students compared and contrasted various languages and language learning processes in the examples in the next section.

### *Language Learning*

Students reflected on English language learning and teaching, German language, other language learning, and their conversation partner's language. All 12 students wrote about English language learning. Many reflected on the difficulties and struggles that their conversation partners had with English, and were surprised because they had never thought of their first language like that before. This then led most of them to reflect on their own struggles with German and other languages. Half of the students wrote about what they learned about their conversation partner's language.

The language theme is also tied to the culture theme. In the following examples, with the "at first" remark, one can see this as part of the students' initial expectations, hopes and fears:

- At first I had my doubts of how I would learn anything from a Korean exchange student when I was trying to learn German (U/Korea).
- At first, I was hoping to get either a French or a German speaking conversation partner so I could practice speaking in a foreign language (U/Korea).
- It felt very strange at first; trying to help someone learn a language that sometimes I am not even sure about (U/Japan).

With this "at first" remark, the students shared their early thoughts about the experience in terms of their language learning.

The students gained more insight into their language learning processes, and became both hopeful and more patient with themselves from it:

I was able to recognize some of the difficulties I have when learning a foreign language and use that knowledge to provide better explanations to J. There was also an added benefit: I was able to lighten up on myself and realize many people have problems learning foreign languages. The frustration and inadequacy I sometimes experience is normal and I just have to keep at it (U/Korea).

The language learning insights are similar to those from culture: the students learned from their conversation partners, and then reflected on their own situations. Another student had a similar experience: “I also came to realize that language learning does not come overnight...One can’t beat themselves up about not fully understanding every concept after only learning a language for a few months” (U/Saudi Arabia). With this realization, the students became more patient with themselves and their German learning.

The students tied the experience more to their German language learning than to their German culture learning. Many found that the experience enhanced their language learning and vice versa:

- I feel like I went to my [German] class after speaking with J. with a fresh perspective on language learning. (CC/Korea)
- I was also able to relate my challenge in learning German to my partner’s challenge in learning English. (CC/Korea)
- I imagine this is what it is like with my German (U/Saudi Arabia).
- While we never spoke German to one another, what I have learned in German class came in handy....We are taught to jump right in, not be afraid to make mistakes and just talk (U/Korea).

The previous knowledge from the classroom was applied to the service experience, which then also further facilitated the language learning.

With the language learning theme, students discussed teaching English, learning English, learning German, and the insight gained about the language learning process as a whole. The service-learning experience provided opportunities to experience something both familiar and new.

### *Service-Learning*

The final major theme that emerged in the student reflections was service-learning. All students mentioned some positive aspects about the service-learning project; for example, that they made a friend, and that they would do something like this again. Some noted enjoying helping someone, and others felt like they were the true beneficiaries. A few mentioned the negative aspects of the project, such as the time commitment, or scheduling conflicts, which made the experience difficult for them.

As with the culture and language learning, there was a range of service experiences for the students, from those who felt they did not benefit from it, to others who enjoyed it, and felt like they gained a great deal from it. Some discussed their initial fears, which relate to the “at first” remark and their expectations versus reality:

I didn't know if we were going to be able to keep up a conversation for a long time. I am not a big talker to begin with and knowing that I would have to talk five hours with this person I have never met before, and doesn't speak fluent English, was very daunting (CC/Vietnam).

For this student, the service-learning project provided an opportunity to do something she would not have done otherwise, and she was able to successfully speak for the five hours. Another student shared that he liked how the service project gave him a new perspective:

This project really gave hands on time with someone who is not a person I would have met on my own time...I believe it is a great way to get outside of our “box” and to open up our eyes to all those that are around (U/Taiwan).

Others also noted the bigger picture of the experience, relating it not only to their language and culture learning goals for the class, but also to the institutional learning outcomes:

This project also helps with understanding some of the learning outcomes of the university. We not only learned diversity, but ethics and social responsibility, internationalization, and engagement. We were able to see the world from another perspective, through another culture’s perspective, and become more aware of our own culture and behavior in the world (U/Saudi Arabia).

I will also address this bigger picture for this service-learning project in the following Discussion section.

## Discussion

### *Discussion of Results with the DMIS*

Based on the questions I asked my students to reflect on, it was not surprising to find culture, language, and service-learning as the most salient themes that emerged from the 12 reflections in my sample. The reflections also showed the range of experience that they had, from not benefiting much, to learning something about another culture, and about themselves with respect to their own culture and learning. Several students noted that this service-learning project gave them learning opportunities that they would not have had otherwise.

Interestingly, I did not ask for a comparison, or a discussion of similarities and differences, but everyone addressed differences, and most similarities. They may have included this because that was what many of their conversations with their ESL partners were about: comparing and contrasting each other's cultures, languages, and interests, among other aspects.

The students' various experiences of difference can be seen at several stages of Bennett, Bennett, and Allen's (2003) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Examples from the student reflections follow, which are discussed in terms of the six stages of difference when appropriate: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Several students made statements that placed them at the minimization stage. At this stage, people feel like they are interculturally competent, because they see no difference (Bennett, 2009, p. 4). They think everyone is the same, no matter where they are from. In the following example, the student exhibited both the defense and the minimization stages:

I learned that almost all teens are the same all over the world. We all like to do most of the same things, and listen to the same type of music. It's great to have something in common with them. Not to mention a lot of the Western European countries are "westernized" and have a lot of American influence in their culture (U/France).

The defense part of this statement is the idea that one culture is better than another; in this example, that the U.S. is better than and influenced Europe. The minimization part is in the first two sentences which both have the word "same". By drawing on these similarities, the student minimizes the differences between her culture and her conversation partner's culture.

In another minimization example, the student noted differences, but then included the adjective "same", indicating then a lack of difference: "Although we all have different cultures, I think we are all one in the same, as many ways as you try and divide it up we are all human"

(U/Taiwan). But culture is complex, and just as one cannot be put in a box, the students did not stay trapped in these stages either.

Because culture and cultural understanding is dynamic, one of the students quoted above as being in the minimization stage, in other ways was in the acceptance stage: “I love to learn about different cultures and different people; I just find it so fascinating” (U/France). She was drawn to other cultures and at times was accepting of the differences in others.

There was one student who realized not only that there were differences between her culture and her conversation partner’s culture, but that there were differences within a larger culture as well: “We learned you cannot judge an entire country upon the qualities of one person...[there are] different cultures with a single country” (U/Korea). By recognizing this, she was also in the acceptance stage.

The range of experience with the service-learning project can again be considered with the DMIS. In the following example, this student seems to be at the defense stage:

To be totally honest I haven’t had this big eye opening experience by doing this service learning project...my experience would have been different if I wasn’t such a well rounded person. If I had been sheltered my whole life, was ignorant and knew nothing beyond The United States of America I could see how this experience would have been a culture shock to me (CC/Vietnam).

According to him, he didn’t need this experience. This reaction offered a perspective different from most of the other reflections, which was one reason why it was included for analysis. This student seemed not to be open to learning and benefitting from the service experience.

There were also three students who felt a certain responsibility to help their conversation partners acculturate here in the U.S. As one noted, “It seems that you almost feel responsible for

bringing this person into your own culture and guiding them into what they should know and how they should be” (U/Taiwan). While this statement seems kind and helpful, wanting to help someone be more like “us” is also indicative of the defense stage. The variability of experience and intercultural competence was interesting to observe in this study.

### *Research Questions*

Considering the data in terms of the stages of intercultural sensitivity also relates to the research questions. With respect to the first research question, “Does the contact zone of German language students doing service-learning projects as ESL conversation partners promote reflection with respect to their own cultural identity?” the answer was yes, it does. Most of the students mentioned something directly about their culture, and some reflected more deeply and personally than others, which can be seen in the quotations from the reflections above.

Considering the second question, “Does it promote reflection of culture-general knowledge and language learning?” the answer was also yes. All the students in the sample reflected on the culture of their conversation partners and on some aspect of language learning. Again, there was some variability as to what extent this was done. However, all thought about both of these aspects. The last part of my research questions, “If so, how and in what way? If not, why not?” are discussed below in more detail.

While all students reflected on culture and language, not everyone addressed all aspects of their culture and language learning. This variability may be due to a variety of factors, such as the ability to tolerate ambiguity, cultural competence, adaptability to new situations, and general personality and attitude. I did not investigate all these factors directly, but they may account for some different experiences. The students could have gained more from the service experience if they were more open to it. Some were ready for it and some were not. In addition, I could have

framed the experience more for them. Some were confused about what to include in their reflections, and did indeed reflect on their own culture in preparatory assignments, but then not in the reflections, which meant it was missing from the data analyzed.

#### *Discussion of the Data in Terms of the Literature*

Even so, this project is a good model for getting students to think about language and culture, and may also be a way for them to overcome their ethnocentrism and to develop greater intercultural competency. My data were congruent with the literature on foreign language and culture pedagogy, intercultural communication and competency, and service-learning. Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003) discussed “intercultural competency” as the ability to act appropriately in one or more cultures. Most of my students were thinking about at least two cultures: their conversation partner’s and their own. Some even made the connection back to our class and reflected on German culture as well. My students’ experiences were very much aligned with Byram’s (1988) idea about language and culture learning being a process. Those who started thinking of their own cultures, beyond only the target culture, were thinking more “culture-general”, which will enable them to be better culture learners overall. Like Myers-Lipton’s (1996) students who were transformed by their service-learning experiences, and whose international understanding was increased, something shifted for many of my students, with just a few hours of contact with someone from another culture.

The students who drew on the language learning process in their reflections showed a kind of metalinguistic awareness, which Reagan and Osborn (2002) had mentioned as an important skill that they should have an opportunity to build when studying a foreign language. By seeing their conversation partners struggle with English, these students thought about their own struggles with learning German. They developed empathy for their conversation partners,

and were able to relate to them as fellow language learners. Relating to their conversation partners may be a way for them to overcome stereotypes and ethnocentrism.

Overcoming stereotypes and ethnocentrism were not specific goals I had for my students, however. Both Wolf (2007) and Mullaney (1999) cited the goals they had for their respective programs. I hoped I would be able to meet the course outcomes of language and culture learning. In addition, I hoped that this project would address some of the institutional learning outcomes. The community college had the following outcomes for their students: communication, community and environmental responsibility, critical thinking and problem solving, cultural awareness, professional competence, and self-reflection. The university had the following learning outcomes: critical and creative thinking, communication, diversity, engagement, ethics and social responsibility, internationalization, and sustainability. While the outcomes from each institution were not the same, there was some overlap. When I designed this study, I was initially expecting that the students would meet the outcomes of community responsibility/engagement and cultural awareness/internationalization, which they did. Critical thinking was not a major outcome I considered, even though I hypothesized that potentially most outcomes could be met through this project. The student reflections showed that they were thinking of language, culture, and themselves in new ways. I did not anticipate that so many students would omit discussing German culture and language in their reflections. This was a limitation in how I set up and carried out my study. In future classes, I will be sure to help the students link their service experiences back to their German learning.

#### *Limitations, Validity, Reliability*

As both the teacher and the researcher in this study, considerations were made in terms of validity and reliability. As the teacher of the participants, there was an inherent power dynamic

present. As the researcher, I was directly involved with and orchestrated the project. I had a great deal of control over the study, even though my goal was to frame it, and then to let the students go have their individual experiences.

The participants were informed that they were required to complete the project as part of their course requirements, but could opt out of the study. All students who participated consented to having their reflections used. It is possible that they still felt a certain obligation to participate in my study because I was their teacher and evaluator.

The data represented a variety of perspectives and experiences from students from two different classes. No two reflections were the same. While some students may not have been as candid in their reflections, and wrote more what they thought I wanted rather than their personal answers, there were still multiple perspectives presented, which aided in the reliability. The data analyzed came from a sample, and the quotations selected were only parts of the reflections. I carefully selected representative reflections and quotations to include. Finally, to ensure additional validity, I had a colleague familiar with grounded theory, this population of students, and German, check my codes and analysis. She confirmed my coding, but also coded some themes differently. She also noticed the topics of culture in general and language learning in general, which I did not code separately, but included within their more specific themes, and also discussed above. I was generous with marking the themes; my colleague may have been more conservative.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

For this study, I did not directly compare and contrast my two classes, even though this could be done. I realized after I had carried out my study how different the learning goals of the two classes were, which may account for some variability. Future studies could also consider the

learning and benefits from the point of view of the ESL students. It would be interesting to discover a pre- and post-service experience based on attitudes and expectations. Questionnaires could be given to the students to discover their background on previous language learning, culture learning and service-learning.

### Conclusion

In the fields of foreign language education, intercultural competency, and service-learning, this study offers a new perspective by suggesting that foreign language students can achieve cultural competency without traveling abroad. In addition, a service experience involving foreign language students conversing with ESL students was transformative for at least some of them in terms of language and culture even though it was not directly tied with the target language or target culture. As part of the service-learning project, some students thought about and reflected on their German language and culture learning, which facilitated heightened language and cultural awareness.

Sometimes the most valuable learning experiences happen outside the classroom. Advocates of study abroad have known this for decades, but this learning can also happen outside the classroom in domestic contexts through community engagement. If foreign language educators are able to let go of some control, rethink how to teach language and culture, and provide both a supportive and challenging framework in a service experience like the one modeled in this study, the students will begin to think about their own language learning processes, and will begin to consider culture. As something that at first glance seemed to have nothing to do with the target culture and target language, this service-learning project actually engaged students more in their learning of culture and language. I offer this project as another model and challenge foreign language educators to consider implementing service-learning in

their classes. The benefits far outweigh the work involved. Teachers who are afraid to try something new should leave their pedagogical comfort zones, as my students left theirs. Those who try it will be amazed at the learning and transformation that takes place.

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### Appendix A: Midterm Check-In

During week 4, students were asked the following questions as part of a general midterm check-in for the course, which they responded to in writing: Have you met with your conversation partner yet? How is that going? Do you need anything else from me to help make this project a successful experience for you?

### Appendix B: Creating Cultural Connections

During week 5, the students read the “Creating Cultural Connections” chapter from Reitenauer, et al. (2005), and answered the following questions in German: 1) What is your culture? 2) What did you learn about your service-learning project? About culture? About service-learning? 3) What questions do you have?

### Appendix C: Service-Learning Presentation

You will present briefly about your service-learning experience this quarter in front of the class in German. You may use notes and you may also use visual aids. You should use good public speaking skills, such as extemporaneous speech, be clear, have appropriate volume, don't talk too fast, etc. Your presentation should also be well organized: have a beginning, middle, and end. Include examples when appropriate. It is important that your classmates understand you. This is an opportunity to relate this experience back into German. Also, I believe it may help you with your written reflection, which will be due week 10. Guidelines: the presentation should be short – no longer than 5 minutes. Shorter is fine. Be sure to include the following:

- A brief description of your partner. Where is s/he from? Please use a pseudonym when writing about your partner. (Woher kommt er/sie?)
- Conversation themes. (Was haben Sie diskutiert?)

- What you learned. This is going to be individual, but think about this in terms of your goals and in terms of my goals of language and culture. (Was haben Sie gelernt?)
- Anything else you'd like to add regarding the experience. Were there any surprises? (Was war interessant? Was war gut? Was war nicht so gut?)

Helpful vocabulary

der/die Konversationspartner(in): conversation partner

der/die Muttersprachler(in): native speaker

die Muttersprache: native language

der Akzent: accent

die Aussprache: pronunciation

die Redewendung: idiom/phrase

lesen: to read

verstehen: to understand

sprechen: to speak

diskutieren: to discuss

unerwartet: unexpected