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Service-provider virtual exchange: Student expectations and perceptions of cultural learning

Maripaz Garcia

Yale University, USA

maripaz.garcia@yale.edu

This study analyzes the expectations of university students of Spanish from the United States before participating in five service-provider virtual exchange (SPVE) sessions on the LinguaMeeting platform and compares them to their perceptions of cultural learning after the experience. A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the data from a pre-survey ($n = 45$), a post-survey ($n = 37$), and 255 reflection assignments. Results show that before the sessions, most students had high expectations for learning about cultural products, practices, and perspectives, and believed culture would be an important aspect of the sessions. However, they had low expectations of becoming more aware of their own country's values or their cultural biases (e.g., stereotypes, prejudices). After the sessions, students were satisfied with their learning of culture and the experience in general. The means for perceptions of learning were lower than those for expectations, but the difference was not statistically significant, except for the item related to learning about cultural products. Additional findings are also discussed in the context of the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Content analysis of the reflection assignments shed some light on the cultural benefits and challenges of SPVE.

Keywords: virtual exchange, expectations, Spanish, culture, telecollaboration

Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE) is an umbrella term that encompasses several different modalities of online communication where “groups of learners are engaged in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts” (O’Dowd, 2021, p. 1). VE between partner institutions is also known as telecollaboration. Videoconferencing VE has become a widespread practice in many higher education institutions around the globe for its potential to enhance student skills in various areas.

Service-provider virtual exchange (SPVE), often used in foreign language courses, is a type of VE that utilizes a paid commercial third-party provider instead of a free partner institution. In exchange for a fee paid by the student or the school, these providers offer a variety of session packages of different lengths (typically 15-minute or 30-minute conversations) and arrangements (one-on-one or in small groups) so that students can communicate through video with native speakers using exclusively the target language. The provider trains these individuals, who are usually described by students as “patient and supportive” (Sama & Wu, 2019, p. 92), who typically “adjust their speech rate and use modified input, problem-solving techniques, and corrective-feedback techniques” (García, 2023, p. 9) so that students can practice the target language and learn about the target culture in a relaxed environment. These native speakers “may also behave with a certain level of professionalism”, are “more accepting of their lack of skill” (Martinsen & Thompson, 2023, p. 115), and support students by using techniques and strategies, such as repeating and rephrasing (Echevarría, 2019). A great advantage of SPVE is that these providers take care of the logistics, reducing the time and effort that instructors need to invest in finding partner institutions and compatible courses. Some experts, however, believe that it is unclear if SPVE provides the same type of benefits as inter-institutional telecollaboration since this setting is “un-mentored and often decontextualized” (O’Dowd, 2021, p. 2) and under-researched.

Since the inception of videoconferencing in the early 21st century, several of these providers have launched their platforms to support foreign language learning (e.g., TalkAbroad, Boomalang, LinguaMeeting, Conversifi, WeSpeke). Synchronous videoconferencing, compared to asynchronous communications, has been found effective in terms of strategies, vocabulary, linguistic skills, content (Conboy et al., 2017; Hetrovicz, 2021; Kessler et al., 2020; Tecedor & Vasseur, 2020; Warner-Ault, 2020) and lead to “friendlier relationships, more fluent communication and fewer intercultural misunderstandings” (EVOLVE Project Team, 2020, p. 12). The platform used in the present study is called LinguaMeeting, created in 2007, and besides offering a user-friendly website where instructors can register their courses and students can schedule their sessions, it provides the great advantage of recording the video sessions. This particular feature has been found very useful by students (Echevarría, 2019; García, 2023; Tecedor & Vasseur, 2020).

Numerous studies have investigated the actual benefits and perceived benefits of VE in several areas (Commander et al., 2022; EVOLVE Project Team, 2020; Lee & Song, 2019; O’Dowd, 2021; O’Rourke & Stickler, 2017) and a few studies have been emerging in the last years in the context of SPVE (Conboy, 2019; Cuervo Carruthers, 2017; García, 2023; Hetrovicz, 2021; Klimanova & Vinokurova, 2021; Martinsen & Thompson, 2023; Marull et al., 2023; Saito & Akiyama, 2017; Sama & Wu, 2019). All these studies praise this tool’s overwhelming advantages over its very few challenges for the foreign language class, especially when analyzing the data qualitatively. These findings are not surprising, since Gen Z students “do not know a world without

technology” and “expect digital learning tools to be deeply integrated into their education” (Matus-Mendoza, 2023, p. 19). They also embrace the promotion of cultural diversity more than previous generations. These beliefs and values are likely to affect their opinion of any tech tools used in the classroom, particularly those designed for social interactions. According to Horwitz (1988), students “arrive at the task of language learning with definite preconceived notions” (p. 293). Therefore, it is important to see the degree to which expectations match the actual outcomes or even the perceptions of learning once they have used the tool.

There is a small number of research studies that have investigated student expectations before using VE between partner institutions, but the researcher did not find any in the context of SPVE. Some studies have investigated students’ affective factors (anxiety, confidence, etc.) or current knowledge and abilities before using SPVE (e.g., Hetrovicz, 2021; Martinsen & Thompson, 2019), but those are not expectations. An expectation is an anticipation or a strong belief that something will happen. The present study intends to fill that gap in the research literature by examining second-semester Spanish students’ expectations of cultural learning before using SPVE and comparing those with their beliefs on perceived learning afterward. Results will show if SPVE meets, exceeds, or falls short of these students’ expectations. The research questions that drove this study are the following:

- RQ1: What are students’ expectations of cultural learning before using SPVE?
- RQ2: What are students’ perceptions of cultural learning after using SPVE?
- RQ3: Do these perceptions meet student expectations?

Literature review

The theoretical framework behind using VE in the classroom is based on social constructivist theories, which claim that people construct new understandings through experience and social interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). In the 21st century, many of these interactions happen online. The framework also takes into consideration Allport’s (1954) Intergroup Contact Hypothesis, which claims that intercultural encounters reduce prejudice and promote tolerance under certain conditions— notions that we recognize now as elements of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC is defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in various cultural contexts using a foreign language (Byram, 1997). To develop ICC, one must improve the five *savoirs*, as Byram (2021) calls them, namely, *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting/relating), *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir apprendre/faire* (skills of discovery /interaction), *savoir être* (attitude – curiosity/openness), and *savoir s’engager* (critical cultural awareness). However, to improve these areas, one must recognize and understand the cultural products, practices, and perspectives (also known as the 3 Ps) of a culture. The National Standards Collaborative Board (2015) defines cultural products as tangible and intangible artifacts created by humans (e.g., crafts, laws, songs), cultural practices refer to patterns of behavior (manners, customs, etc.), and cultural perspectives refer to

the beliefs and values behind those products and practices (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Therefore, these social constructivist theories support the idea that students who communicate with native speakers through VE are embarking on a journey to improve not only their cultural knowledge but also their linguistic and communicative skills.

In this literature review section, I will describe some studies that examined expectations in the context of VE between partner institutions, followed by studies that explored cultural learning in the context of SPVE. As previously mentioned, no studies were found that examined expectations in the context of SPVE.

Expectations when using VE between educational institutions

Gimeno (2018) carried out a study comparing expectations ($n = 24$) with levels of satisfaction ($n = 16$) after using the e-tandem modality of VE between students from Spain and the United States. In this modality, students must split their time to be able to practice both languages. Results showed that most students (90%) expected to improve their cultural skills and become closer to other cultures. Their attitude and cultural awareness towards interacting with people from other cultures were very positive and open from the start. After the experience, although there was a decrease in means, the author claims that “expected benefits correlated with their stated benefits after carrying out the project” (p. 34).

The EVOLVE Project Team (2020) investigated 248 students involved in 16 VE projects between 34 partners from higher education institutions around the globe. In Chapter 5, the authors compared expectations and outcomes in terms of ICC. Data revealed that “students perceived themselves as being more confident in communicating and working in a culturally diverse environment and more able to engage in open, appropriate and effective interactions” (p. 51). However, there was “no significant increase in students’ perceptions of their empathic abilities” (p. 51), the ability to notice politeness or their interest in understanding others’ cultural perspectives. They explain this lack of improvement by arguing that the pre-test scores were very high.

Nissen et al. (2021), using data from the EVOLVE Project Team report, found that the category concerning cultural or intercultural aspects had the highest value as an expectation (24%)—even higher than gains in language competence—and also as an outcome (29%). In addition, it was the most frequently met expectation (67%) and was regarded as an unforeseen benefit by the highest number of students.

These three studies suggest that social interactions via VE (or telecollaboration) meet students’ cultural expectations, which are usually high from the start.

Perceptions of cultural learning after using SPVE

García (2023) investigated the presence of cultural products, practices, and perspectives in the SPVE sessions that her second-semester Spanish students carried out. A frequency count revealed that products and practices were very

present in assignments and conversations, but perspectives were less abundant, particularly during conversations. She concluded that SPVE is a valuable and innovative tool to improve students' cultural learning, particularly if students are provided an opportunity to explore perspectives in writing or during class discussions.

Cassidy and Xu (2022) also found SPVE to have good potential in the foreign language class. The comparison between the pre-survey and the post-survey indicated that their 11 advanced French students' ICC increased after eight 15-minute sessions using Boomalang. The analysis of students' journal entries and in-class conversations corroborated that their students reflected on three aspects of ICC—knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The authors stated that “the more they participated in online exchanges, the more the students perceived the benefits and their progress” (p. 353).

Varo Varo (2021) also investigated ICC development in 35 advanced Spanish students using an SPVE platform to communicate with nine Colombian *amigos*. Students carried out four 30-minute sessions throughout the semester and wrote blog entries about their experiences. The means of awareness, skills, and knowledge were higher after the sessions (with skills and knowledge being statistically significant), but the mean of attitudes was lower. Video calls helped students feel more confident about their communication skills. In addition, the reflection blogs helped them comprehend Colombian life and culture and gave them insights about their own country and life.

Marull and Kumar (2020) used LinguaMeeting with 288 first- and second-semester Spanish students enrolled in a virtual course. Post-survey results revealed that 85% of students believed that SPVE had contributed to their cultural knowledge. Different benefits are mentioned, including that the sessions “improved their opinion of the coach's home country” (p. 632).

Tecedor and Vasseur (2020) examined ICC development in two sections of fourth-semester Spanish students who used TalkAbroad to have four 30-minute exchanges. Qualitative analysis of their reflection journals revealed that students “displayed ICC in all six domains under investigation” (p. 768), namely, interest in other people's way of life, ability to change perspective, ability to cope with interaction, knowledge about another country and culture, knowledge of the intercultural communication process, and critical awareness. Despite that, they also found that “slightly over half of the comments displayed an ethnocentric mindset” (p. 774). The domain of critical cultural awareness became more noticeable in the last two sessions. This finding seems to support Cassidy and Xu's (2022) comment about the progress of ICC development as the sessions increased in number. Like Author (2023), Tecedor and Vasseur recommend bringing serious cultural issues to the classroom to be explored more in-depth.

Warner-Ault (2020) investigated intercultural learning and linguistic gains with two sections of intermediate Spanish students who carried out five 30-minute sessions using TalkAbroad. The third and fourth sessions focused on cultural products and practices, and the fifth on cultural perspectives. The author compared her data with those of another researcher who used VE

between students from different cultures, and she found identical results in the category of ‘better understanding of the other countries’ culture and life-style’. The author concludes that SPVE helps students develop critical cultural awareness, just like inter-institutional VE does.

Conboy et al. (2017) conducted a study that examined linguistic benefits and intercultural awareness in students of French and Spanish at different levels of proficiency enrolled in three colleges—two of which used Talk-Abroad, whereas the other used virtual dual immersion, which is a regular e-tandem telecollaboration between two students from different universities learning each other’s language. Results revealed statistically significant differences between the pre-survey and the post-survey results regarding culture, as well as high values in the category of ‘development of intercultural awareness and ICC’, corroborated by qualitative analysis of students’ testimonials. The authors concluded that communication using either SPVE or VE can improve students’ cultural awareness, skills, attitude, and knowledge.

All these studies suggest that SPVE sessions improve most students’ cultural knowledge and other aspects of ICC (attitudes, awareness, etc.), even though *not all* students perceive the benefits, or they only perceive *some* of the benefits. Fernández Gutiérrez et al. (2022) noted that “learning outcomes may vary considerably from person to person,” and what is important is that “each individual can come to their own conclusions as to what skills they have developed or acquired during the experience” (p. 163). The studies described in this section used qualitative methods to support quantitative data to explore in-depth the process of learning about culture. Most of these studies, however, dealt with small participant samples, which may have caused inflated statistical results or reduced generalizability. Regardless, they are valuable for showing the cultural impact of SPVE in the foreign language class.

Methods

Procedure

The study was designed using a mixed methods approach, where qualitative data complemented the quantitative results by providing a more comprehensive insight into certain findings. Combining the generalizable aspect of quantitative data and the descriptive aspect of qualitative data provides a robust examination of the research topic, particularly when the sample size is small. Also, since the study’s main objective was to examine whether expectations were met, having a control group with no treatment or a different treatment was not an appropriate design for the present study.

The study was conducted at a private university with 52 participants of various majors enrolled in seven sections of the second-semester Spanish course. Over 93% of students were between the ages of 17 and 22, with 29 females and 23 males. Most students (80%) had never had synchronous or asynchronous communications with native speakers.

This course met in person four days a week for 50 minutes, and a fifth day was designated asynchronous so that students could work on projects or other

assignments, such as SPVE sessions. In this course, all students (participants and non-participants) carried out five one-on-one 15-minute sessions on the LinguaMeeting platform on specific weeks and wrote a reflection entry per session on the Learning Management System, Canvas. This assignment was worth 7.5% of their final grade. It was suggested that these entries include a summary of their discussion, a comparison with their own culture, and a reflection. The length of the assignment was from one paragraph to one page. Conversations started in week five of the semester, and the topics aligned with the textbook theme for that week (e.g., the house and daily chores, environmental issues, etc.).

During the first three weeks of classes, students received instructions about registering on the LinguaMeeting platform. They also learned to identify cultural products, practices, and perspectives in both the target culture and their own. Before the first session, one day of class was reserved to explain to students how the platform worked and prepare them for the first session, including communicative strategies. After the third session, another day of class was reserved to discuss in groups, and as a class, the cultural issues that came up during their sessions. Although students' entries were not corrected in terms of grammar or vocabulary, some feedback was provided regarding content. These entries were graded on a 100-point scale based on content and depth.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected after obtaining the green light from the Institutional Review Board. Data included a Qualtrics pre-survey ($n = 45$) sent two weeks before the first session and a Qualtrics post-survey ($n = 37$) sent two weeks after the last session. Both surveys were in English and can be found in Appendices A and B. For triangulation purposes, 255 written reflection assignments written in Spanish were collected to corroborate quantitative findings and serve as evidence of the student learning process. In total, of a population of 52 participants, 7 did not complete the pre-survey, 15 did not complete the post-survey, and 5 students did not complete one of their five written assignments.

To measure expectations, the pre-survey 5-point Likert scale items were phrased using the future tense (e.g., I will learn about cultural...). The post-survey contained the same cultural items, although phrased in the past tense (e.g., this experience improved my knowledge of...). Since García (2023) found that perspectives were commonly absent in students' SPVE conversations with native speakers, a follow-up question in the item regarding cultural perspectives was added for both positive and negative/neutral ratings so that students could explain further.

Descriptive statistics were used for both surveys, and content analysis was used for the open-ended follow-up questions of the post-survey, looking for emerging themes and common patterns. Manual color-coded content analysis was also performed on the 255 written reflection assignments to verify that students were discussing cultural products, practices, and perspectives during the sessions. One single rater was used for the content analysis.

Results

Research question 1: What are students’ expectations of cultural learning before using SPVE?

Results show that means are very similar for items 1 through 4 (culture, products, practices, and perspectives), but are lower for awareness of one’s own country or cultural biases (see Table 1). These last two items also have higher values of uncertainty (Neither/Nor: 27% and 42%, respectively) and disagreement (Disagree: 9% and 11%, respectively). None of the students selected “Strongly disagree” for any of the six items. There is good internal consistency on items 1 through 4 ($\alpha = 0.875$) and acceptable internal consistency on items 1 through 6 ($\alpha = 0.783$). In Figure 1, the data can be visualized by the number of students for each item.

Apart from expectations, the researcher was interested in establishing initial student interest levels. Determining interest is important because interest and motivation can significantly influence students’ expectations, approach to the experience, and willingness to engage with it (Ketsman, 2012). When students are genuinely interested in learning about other cultures or talking to foreigners, they are more likely to have positive expectations and be open and motivated to learn from that experience. Therefore, two items were created for that purpose in a separate block of the survey. Figure 2 shows that most students were interested in learning about other cultures and talking to people from other countries ($M = 4.56, SD = 0.54$, and $M = 4.47, SD = 0.58$, respectively). None of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements, and only very few selected a neutral rating (2% and 4%, respectively).

Research question 2: What are students’ perceptions of cultural learning after using SPVE?

Table 2 shows the six items’ mean and standard deviation values on a 5-point Likert scale after participating in the five 15-minute SPVE sessions. Results now are more varied, and three items stand out from the rest. Most students found that learning culture was important during these interactions (87%) and that the sessions improved their knowledge and understanding of cultural

Table 1. Students’ expectations values (n = 45)

	M	SD
1. Learning the target culture will be an important aspect of these interactions.	4.2	0.62
2. I will learn about cultural products (e.g., foods, handicrafts, laws, clothing).	4.09	0.69
3. I will learn about cultural practices (e.g., celebrations, behaviors, customs).	4.2	0.62
4. I will learn about cultural perspectives (e.g., beliefs, values, reasons).	4.13	0.72
5. The experience will make me more aware of my own country’s cultural values and beliefs .	3.78	0.89
6. The experience will make me more aware of something about myself (e.g., prejudices, stereotypes).	3.56	0.93

EXPECTATIONS



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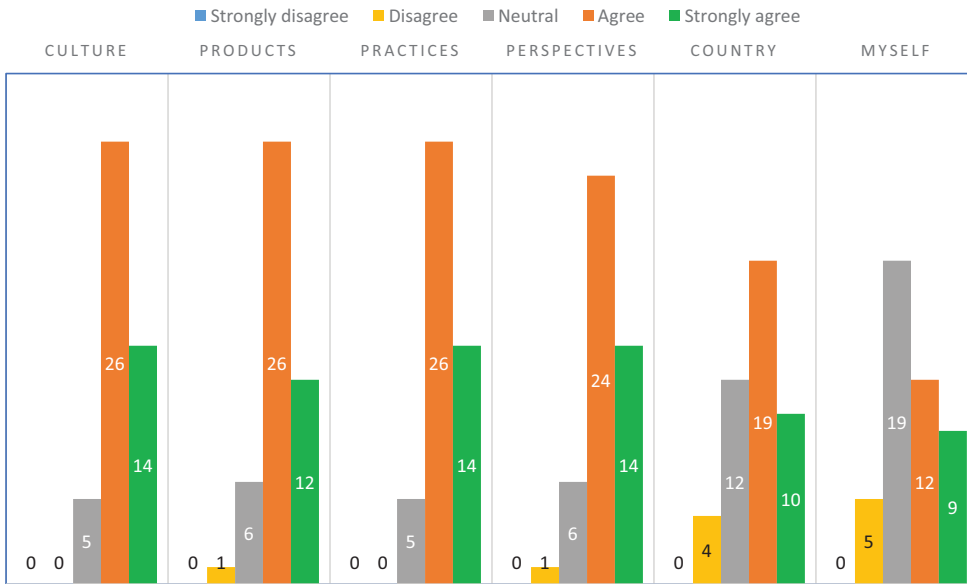


Figure 1. Students' expectations, by number of students ($n = 45$)

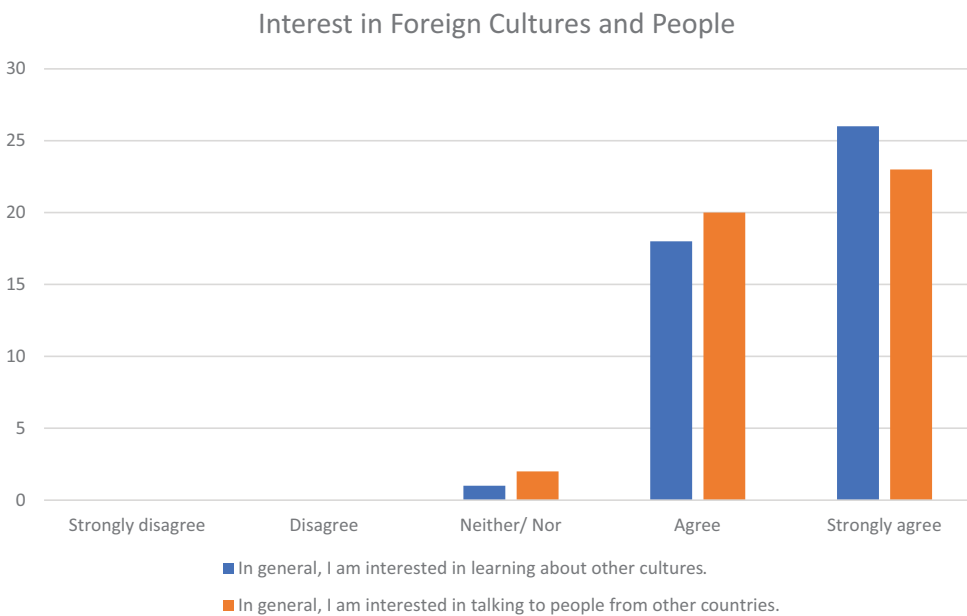


Figure 2. Students' interest in global cultures ($n = 45$)

products (65%), practices (89%), and perspectives (70%). Item 2 (products), when compared to practices and perspectives, clearly stands out with a lower mean, fewer students strongly agreed with the statement (19% compared to 38% and 27%, respectively), and more students disagreed (11%, compared to 3% and 0%, respectively) and strongly disagreed (3%, compared to 0% and 0%, respectively). Items 5 and 6 show lower mean values, just like they did for expectations, particularly item 6 about students' awareness of their

Table 2. Students' perceptions after the SPVE sessions ($n = 37$)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Learning the target culture was important during these interactions.	4.14	0.93
2. This experience improved my knowledge of the products created by the target culture.	3.68	0.99
3. This experience improved my knowledge of the practices Spanish speakers engage in.	4.24	0.71
4. This experience improved my understanding of the cultural perspectives of people from Spanish-speaking countries.	3.97	0.75
5. This experience improved my understanding of my own country's values and beliefs .	3.54	0.89
6. This experience taught me something about myself that I wasn't aware of (e.g., beliefs, stereotypes).	3.14	1.14

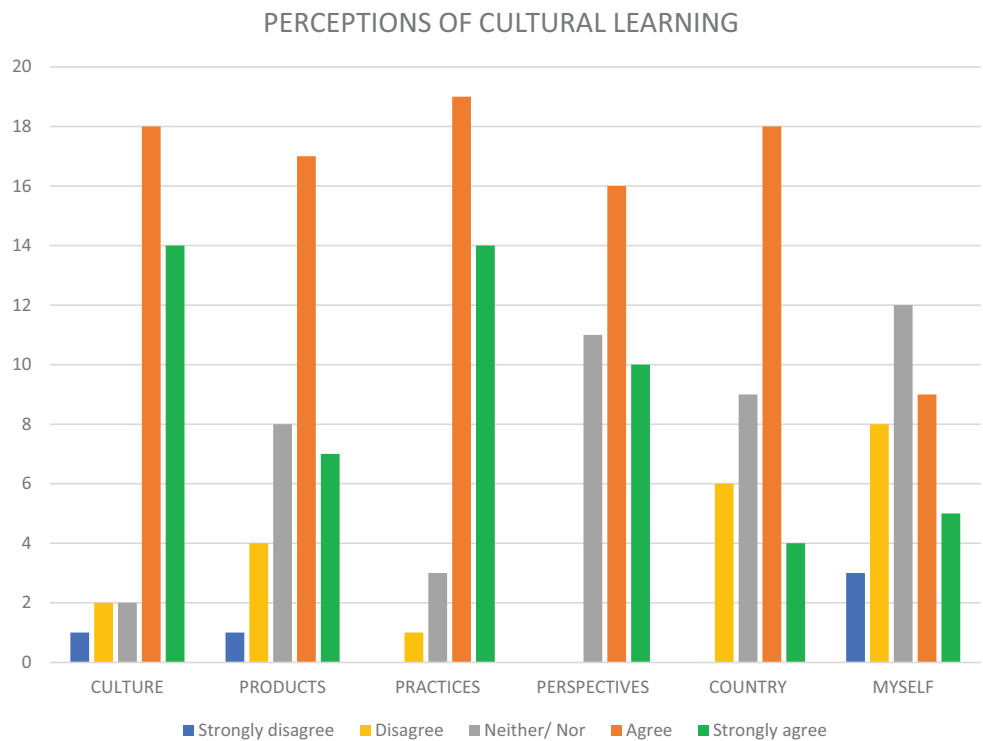


Figure 3. Students' perceptions, by number of students ($n = 37$)

own cultural biases. This item shows the lowest mean ($M = 3.14$), the highest uncertainty level (32%), and the highest disagreement (22%) and strong disagreement (8%). Internal consistency was acceptable for items 1 through 4 ($\alpha = 0.724$) and 1 through 6 ($\alpha = 0.726$). Figure 3 shows the data according to the number of students.

The results regarding item 2 (products) were unexpected, and unfortunately, no follow-up questions were set up in the post-survey to explore this issue further. However, since García (2023) found that cultural perspectives

rarely appeared during SPVE conversations, in the present study, some follow-up questions were included in the post-survey for both students with negative (0%) and neutral ratings (30%), and also for those with positive ratings (70%).

Eleven participants gave a negative or neutral rating to item 4 (perspectives). Ten of them selected a reason from a list of five non-exclusive, predetermined choices to answer the question *Why do you think this experience did not improve (or you are not sure it improved) your understanding of the target cultural values?* They also had an open-ended section to explain further or add any other reason not listed. This list of five reasons was obtained from open-ended comments provided during previous iterations of the course, and it includes the following five reasons (also found in Appendix B):

1. We did not have enough time during the 15-minute encounters.
2. I feared my Spanish was not good enough, so I did not ask.
3. We discussed the target cultural values, but I did not learn anything new or insightful.
4. The cultural information I received was enough. I did not care about why or the beliefs behind it.
5. Values, reasons, beliefs, etc., did not come up naturally in the conversation.

Figure 4 shows the results. Lack of time and the fact that perspectives did not naturally arise during the conversations were the most frequently selected choices.

Although none of the students completed the open-ended question regarding item 4 (perspectives), the researcher found comments regarding time constraints in some of the answers from students who provided a positive rating,

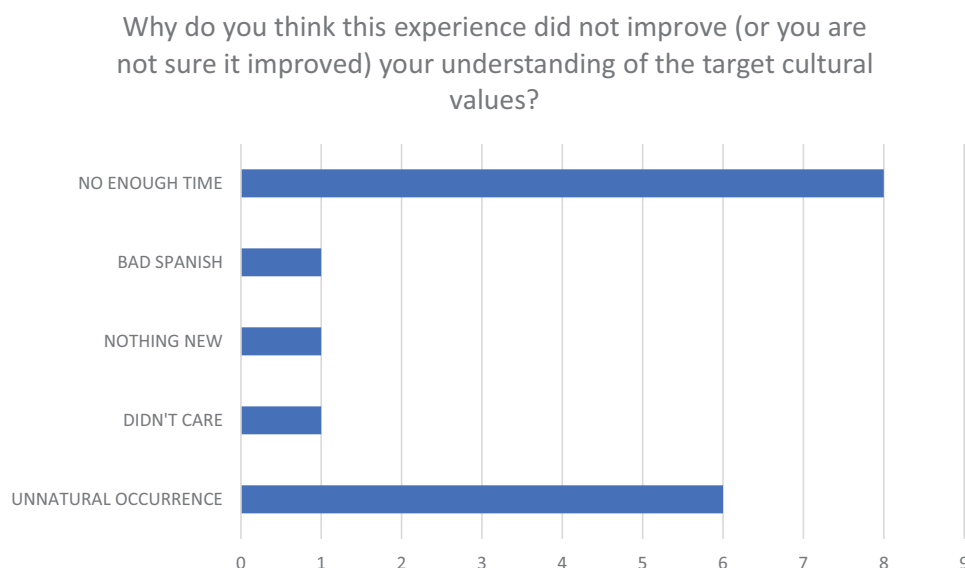


Figure 4. Reasons behind negative or neutral ratings for item 4 ($n = 10$)

confirming that lack of time, for example, was an issue experienced by many students. Here are two verbatim samples (underlined by the researcher):

“These were interesting glimpses of another person’s life, but also inherently superficial given the brevity of our meetings.”

“It would occasionally come up in our conversations, or as a response to a question I asked, but because they were very brief sessions I didn’t learn anything too in-depth or nuanced about other cultures.”

Students who provided a positive rating ($n = 26$) to item 4 (perspectives) also had the chance to explain their rating and provide an example (*How exactly did you learn cultural perspectives (values, reasons, beliefs)? Can you think of an example?*). The objective of these questions was to verify that they indeed understood what cultural perspectives are. Here are some verbatim examples:

“I learned cultural perspectives a number of ways, both implicit and explicit. Often times, the cultural practices and products offered direct insight into the perspectives of the people in the target culture, while on other occasions (for instance, when talking about mental health and how it is viewed in public) my coach and I engaged in conversations about the underlying values immediately.”

“When the Lingua Meeting proctor would speak about something she enjoys or holidays that were important in Honduras, like Mother’s Day, I was able to see together that women are an important part of Honduran culture.”

“One example is when my language coach talked about how people in her country typically don’t go to/trust doctors, and it’s more common to practice alternative medicine.”

“I mostly learned about perspectives indirectly based on other things we were discussing. For example, when we were talking about music, my coach mentioned how a popular genre in Peru (Huayno) is typically associated with the indigenous population of Peru and how this impacts people’s perspectives on it.”

“Generally, perspectives came up in the context of practices and discussing why they occur.”

“For example, when I stated that in America, many parents believe that children should not have chores because youth is a time for enjoyment, my coach responded with the perspective in Argentina that hardwork is an acquired trait that must be instilled in people at a young age.”

In sum, these students believed that perspectives were explicitly mentioned sometimes, and other times were indirectly present in the conversations (or students were able to figure them out after the conversation). The examples

they provided indeed concern perspectives, that is, values, beliefs, and underlying reasons behind the products and practices discussed.

In addition to the pre-survey and the post-survey, the researcher collected the 255 written reflection assignments that students had to submit after each session. The results of the qualitative analysis showed that most students could identify and discuss cultural products, practices, and perspectives during the sessions and believed their cultural competence had improved, in addition to other findings, such as increased confidence, decreased anxiety, better linguistic skills, and others that are outside the scope of this study but worth mentioning. Here are some verbatim comments from the fifth reflection assignment (translated by the researcher), where students praise how useful the sessions were, how much they enjoyed them, how they liked connecting with the native speaker, how much they appreciated the opportunity, and how their understanding of others' issues was improved thanks to the conversations:

“En general, las sesiones me han dado mucha confianza para hablar en español. Durante estas semanas, empecé de hablar más no solo con mi coach pero también mis amigos hispanohablantes. Esto fue posible porque ya tenía la experiencia de hablar con algunas coaches. Sentía algunas veces que las sesiones fueron demasiado cortas. Quince minutos no son suficientes para aterrizar un tema en detalle. ¡No obstante, disfrute estas sesiones de Linguaeeting y fueron útiles!”

[In general, the sessions have given me a lot of confidence to speak in Spanish. During these weeks, I started to speak more, not just with my coach, but also with my Spanish-speaking friends. This was possible because I had already the experience of talking to some coaches. Sometimes, I felt the sessions were too short. Fifteen minutes are not enough to land a topic in detail. Nevertheless, I enjoyed these Linguaeeting sessions, and they were useful!]

“Mi competencia cultural definitivamente mejoró un poco porque hablé con una persona con una experiencia completamente diferente de los temas que discutimos. Creo que podría haber tenido más competencia cultural hablando con personas de más de un país, pero me gustaba hablar con la misma persona para conectar mejor”

[My cultural competence definitely improved a little because I talked to a person with a completely different experience about the topics we discussed. I believe I could have had more cultural competence by talking with people from more than one country, but I liked talking with the same person in order to connect better]

“Mi competencia cultural aumentó mucho por esta experiencia, y aprendí que somos similares, no importa de qué país somos”

[My cultural competence increased a lot thanks to this experience, and I learned that we are similar, no matter what country we are from]

“Mis LinguaMeetings mejoraron mis habilidades para ver conexiones entres diferentes culturas”

[My LinguaMeeting sessions helped my abilities to see connections between different cultures]

“Como yo entendí sobre estos problemas de una hondureña, pude recibir un entendimiento más complejo y completo”

[Since I learned about these problems from a Honduran, I was able to receive a more complex and complete understanding]

“Estoy agradecido por la oportunidad de aprender más sobre las perspectivas de un país diferente”

[I am thankful for the opportunity to learn more about the perspectives of a different country]

“porque tengo que tomar Spanish 130, hay una posibilidad que yo debo comprar más Lingua Meetings. Espero que [X] y yo volvamos a trabajar juntos, porque ha sido un muy buen coach. Siento que las sesiones han sido útiles para mi.”

[because I have to take Spanish 130, there is a chance that I will have to buy more LinguaMeeting sessions. I hope that [my coach] and I work together again because he has been a very good coach. I think the sessions have been very useful for me]

Research question 3: Do these perceptions meet student expectations?

The comparison of students' expectations before the sessions and their perceptions of cultural learning after the sessions shows a decrease in the means of all items, except for item 3 (practices), which has a negligible increase. Due to the unequal sample sizes, the correlation between pre- and post-survey results was calculated using Welch's t-test. Data show that the only statistically significant difference in means corresponds to the item about cultural products (pre $M = 4.09$, post $M = 3.68$, $p = 0.038$, $t = 2.11$, $df = 62$) at a 95% confidence interval, which has a moderate effect ($d = 0.483$). These data suggest that some students' expectations regarding learning about cultural products were not met, but they were mostly met for the rest of the items. See Table 3 for a comparison between the pre-survey and the post-survey results.

Although the difference in sample sizes prevents us from comparing results side by side, it is interesting to examine those data as well. For example, the number of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements increased after the sessions (except for perspectives), suggesting that some students believed the sessions had not improved their knowledge of culture, products, practices, their country's values, and something about their cultural biases. See Table 4 for a comparison, by number of students.

Table 3. Comparison of pre-survey and post-survey values

	<i>Pre M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Post M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Diff.</i>	<i>p</i>
1. Importance of learning culture	4.2	0.62	45	4.14	0.93	37	−0.06	.722
2. Learning of products	4.09	0.69	45	3.68	0.98	37	−0.41	.038*
3. Learning of practices	4.2	0.62	45	4.24	0.71	37	+0.04	.775
4. Understanding of perspectives	4.13	0.72	45	3.97	0.75	37	−0.16	.336
5. Understanding my country's values	3.78	0.89	45	3.54	0.89	37	−0.24	.239
6. Learning about myself	3.56	0.93	45	3.14	1.14	37	−0.42	.080

*statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 4. Pre- and post-survey rating comparison, by number of students

Pre <i>n</i> = 45, Post <i>n</i> = 37	Strongly disagree & disagree		Neither agree nor disagree		Agree & strongly agree	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1. Importance of culture	0	3	5	2	40	32
2. Products	1	5	6	8	38	24
3. Practices	0	1	5	3	40	33
4. Perspectives	1	0	6	11	38	26
5. My country's values	4	6	12	9	29	22
6. Myself	5	11	19	12	21	14

Discussion

Before starting the SPVE sessions, students' current interests in other cultures and meeting people from other countries were quite high ($M = 4.56$ and 4.47 , respectively, $n = 45$), as expected from Gen Zs who live in a medium-sized city on the east coast of the United States. This finding is in line with Gimeno's (2018) findings, whose participants were also highly motivated before interacting with native speakers. It is important to know these numbers because a positive attitude toward the use of a tech tool in the classroom is likely to facilitate its integration, and negative attitudes may influence expectations negatively.

Regarding students' cultural expectations, although they expected that culture would be an important part of these interactions and that they would learn about cultural products, practices, and perspectives ($M = 4.2$, 4.09 , 4.2 , and 4.13 , respectively), they had fewer expectations of becoming aware of their own country's values or about cultural biases of their own ($M = 3.78$ and 3.56 , respectively). These last two items are interesting because they relate to Byram's (1997) concept of attitudes in ICC and Bennett's (1986) concept of intercultural sensitivity, which is a process that requires years and numerous encounters. These data suggest that some students (9% for country and 11% for biases) are still in the ethnocentric stages (using Bennett's terminology), denying that the knowledge they would gain in these conversations would

question or change their current knowledge and beliefs. Many students were not sure and therefore selected a neutral rating (27% and 42%, respectively), which makes sense, knowing that 80% of students had never experienced VE before this course. These neutral data also mean that students may be open to the possibility of acquiring new knowledge. Neutral ratings also show that students did not overestimate their expectations—as the EVOLVE Project Team (2020) found.

After the SPVE sessions, most students believed that culture was an important component in the sessions (87%) and that they had learned about cultural products (65%), cultural practices (89%), and cultural perspectives (70%). However, there was an increase in the number of students who were uncertain or disagreed with the statements when compared with their expectations. These findings are consistent with previous studies that examined SPVE's cultural benefits (e.g., Conboy, 2019; Cuervo Carruthers, 2017; Marull & Kumar, 2020; Mathieu et al., 2019; Tecedor & Vasseur, 2020; Varo Varo, 2021; Warner-Ault, 2020) and with the widespread opinions that Fernández Gutiérrez et al. (2022) mention. In other words, even though most students were satisfied with their cultural learning, there were a few students for whom the sessions were not that useful. This finding is elaborated further below. Content analysis of the reflection assignments and the post-survey open-ended questions confirmed that students were able to discuss culture during the sessions, and that the 3 Ps were present; they mostly believed they benefited from the sessions in terms of cultural competence, among other benefits.

When comparing expectations before the sessions and perceived learning after the sessions, the means decreased in general. However, with one exception, the differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that students' expectations were generally met. The only item that showed a statistically significant difference was cultural products (pre $M = 4.09$, post $M = 3.68$, $p = 0.038$). Although 85% of students were expecting to learn about cultural products in these conversations, only 65% believed they had learned about them after the sessions. This suggests that students' expectations in this category were not met. It is also worth mentioning that the mean related to this category in the post-survey ($M = 3.68$) was lower than the one for practices ($M = 4.24$) and perspectives ($M = 3.97$), which is a little surprising taking into account that products are typically objects that can be described using basic, concrete vocabulary available to second-semester students and that they are as present as cultural practices in reflection assignments, according to Author (2023). A possible explanation for this finding could be that although products are mentioned, students spent more time discussing the practice in which the products are used. It is also true that students do not need to spend much time describing products when they can quickly share a picture on the screen. It is also plausible that students did not recognize some intangible products mentioned in their conversations, even though instructors discussed both tangible and intangible products in this course.

Another interesting finding is that there were more students in disagreement (Disagree or Strongly disagree) with most of the items after the sessions.

This indicates that the SPVE sessions could have been disappointing for a few students and not met some of their expectations. Data show that the shortness of sessions (15 minutes) and the unnatural occurrence of cultural perspectives may have contributed to having superficial or informal conversations and, in turn, lower perceptions of meaningful cultural learning. Qualitative data also suggest that it is likely that students geared the conversations toward the personal domain to get to know their interlocutors better (“a glimpse of another person’s life”) instead of gearing them toward finding out more about their country, way of living, beliefs, and practices as a community.

After the session, the means of the items related to understanding their own country’s values or learning something about their cultural biases were lower than the other cultural categories ($M = 3.54$ and 3.14 , respectively), just as they were before the sessions started. This finding indicates that many students initially did not believe or were not sure that a few SPVE sessions would change their knowledge in these two aspects. This low expectation proved to be true after the sessions: more students disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statements. It is reasonable to conclude that only five SPVE sessions are not enough to make someone aware of their prejudices or to start questioning their country’s values. As Tecedor and Vasseur (2020) noted, “one single activity is not going to springboard any student to the next level; rather, learners should repeatedly work on identifying, reflecting, and discussing cultural aspects with their peers and instructor to develop ICC” (p. 780). In Bennett’s (1986) scale for the development of intercultural sensitivity, they are still in the ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) and they are moving slowly to the ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration).

Limitations of this study include the lack of interviews or open-ended questions about the item for cultural products, which could have provided a better understanding of why it was rated lower than practices and perspectives. Future studies are needed on this topic. Another limitation is that this study is based mostly on self-reported data, which must always be interpreted with caution, since it is not an objective method of assessment nor indicates actual outcomes. Furthermore, the fact that only one rater analyzed the qualitative data may limit the reliability of the results. In addition, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to other levels of proficiency, since language skills can hinder or enhance the exploration of culture.

Conclusion

The research questions that drove this study aimed at establishing 52 second-semester Spanish students’ expectations of cultural learning before having five Service-Provider Virtual Exchange (SPVE) sessions on the LinguaMeeting platform and comparing them with their perceptions of cultural learning after the sessions. After the sessions, most students believed that culture was an important aspect of the conversations and they had learned about cultural practices and perspectives, although not so much about products. A few students believed that their expectations were not met in one or more areas.

Some possible explanations regarding why students believed that their knowledge about cultural products did not meet their expectations could include the shortness of encounters that led to more superficial discussions, the lack of need to describe products verbally, and the inability to recognize intangible products.

Before the sessions, students were not expecting or were not sure that these SPVE sessions would teach them anything about their own country's values or themselves (e.g., stereotypes, prejudices), and after the sessions, they still believed so. These results suggest that most students are still in the first stages of developing Intercultural Communicative Competence and are far from questioning their own beliefs before or after a few conversations with foreigners. More benefits in this area may be perceived with more sessions per semester, as suggested by Cassidy and Xu (2022), and with the integration of SPVE at all levels of proficiency. Continued social interactions with native speakers will likely develop students' ICC in the long run, although more longitudinal research studies are needed in this area. Also, as suggested by other research studies (e.g., García, 2023; O'Dowd, 2021; Tecedor & Vasseur, 2020), more benefits can be obtained if there is more pedagogical follow-up in the form of in-class discussions, critical thinking activities, and written reflection assignments.

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This manuscript made use of Grammarly to correct grammar, punctuation, or style to improve the clarity of the text. No AI tools were used for the generation of research hypotheses or the writing of conclusions. The final manuscript was authored and reviewed by the listed author without additional AI input.

Ethics statement

All procedures were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines and have been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university with an exemption determination (Protocol #2000031103, under 45CFR46.104 (2)(iii), as of August 12, 2021). Informed consent was obtained for experimentation with human subjects.

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Appendix A

Pre-survey

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Learning the target culture will be an important aspect of these interactions.					
2. I will learn about cultural products (e.g., foods, handicrafts, laws, clothing).					
3. I will learn about cultural practices (e.g., celebrations, behaviors, customs).					
4. I will learn about cultural perspectives (e.g., beliefs, values, reasons).					
5. The experience will make me aware of my own country's cultural values and beliefs .					
6. The experience will make me aware of something about myself (e.g., prejudices, stereotypes).					
7. In general, I am interested in learning about other cultures .					
8. In general, I am interested in talking to people from other countries .					

Appendix B

Post-survey

After having participated in the LinguaMeeting sessions, please indicate your agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Learning about the target culture was important during these interactions.					
2. This experience improved my knowledge of the products created by the target culture.					
3. This experience improved my knowledge of the practices Spanish speakers engage in.					
4. This experience improved my understanding of the cultural perspectives of people from Spanish-speaking countries.					
5. This experience improved my understanding of my own country's values and beliefs .					
6. This experience taught me something about myself that I wasn't aware of (e.g., prejudices, stereotypes).					

Follow-up question after rating 1, 2, or 3 in the perspectives item (#4): **Why do you think this experience did not improve (or you are not sure it improved) your understanding of the target cultural values?** (check all that apply)

- Values, reasons, beliefs, etc. did not come naturally in the conversations.
- The cultural information that I received was enough. I did not care about why or the reasons behind it.
- We discussed the cultural values, but I did not learn anything new or insightful.
- I feared my Spanish was not good enough, so I didn't ask.
- We didn't have enough time during the 15-minute encounters.
- Other: Open-ended

Follow-up questions after rating 4 or 5 in the perspectives item (#4): **How exactly did you learn cultural perspectives (values, reasons, beliefs)? Can you think of an example?** (Open-ended)