

► Desarrollar la conciencia (inter)cultural en un curso de idiomas en línea

Developing (inter)cultural awareness in an online language course

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RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga cómo las actividades asíncronas de una clase de alemán en línea fomentan la conciencia cultural y el aprendizaje en los estudiantes. Analizando las actividades asíncronas de la clase en línea y examinando su potencial para fomentar la conciencia y aprendizaje (inter)culturales, el presente estudio aplica una encuesta y entrevistas para responder a la pregunta de investigación. Los resultados muestran que las actividades que tratan específicamente de la cultura, los videos y textos sobre la cultura meta, fomentan el aprendizaje y la conciencia intercultural. La investigación muestra, además, cómo se puede hacer una integración de la cultura en clase *online* para fo-

mentar la conciencia y el aprendizaje (inter)cultural en los estudiantes. Así, este estudio a pequeña escala contribuye al debate actual sobre la enseñanza de la cultura en la lengua en un entorno en línea, demostrando cómo añadir un componente cultural a la enseñanza.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Conciencia intercultural · aprendizaje intercultural · enseñanza de idiomas en línea · aprendizaje de idiomas en línea

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the asynchronous activities of an online German language class foster cultural awareness and learning in students. To







THE ONLINE

language class is
divided into

1

Online live sessions

2

An asynchronous,
autonomous part.

do so, the asynchronous activities of the online class were analyzed and scrutinized for their potential of fostering (inter)cultural awareness and learning. In the present study, a survey and interviews were applied to answer the research question. The findings show that activities that deal specifically with culture, such as video and text about the target culture, foster—to a certain degree—intercultural learning and awareness. The research furthermore shows how an integration of culture into an online class can be made to foster (inter)cultural awareness and learning in students. In that way, this small-scale study contributes to the current discussion of teaching culture in language in an online environment as it demonstrates how a cultural component can be added to teaching.

KEYWORDS:

Intercultural awareness · intercultural learning · online language teaching · online language learning

INTRODUCTION

As is widely known and accepted in the language teaching community, culture constitutes a big part of language learning. By some teachers and authors, it is even considered the *fifth skill* of language learning (see e.g., Altun, 2019). As Barrett (2014) observes, «language learning is not only the process of improving linguistic and communicative competency but also a process of learning the culture of the target language» (p. 145). When my colleague and I developed the asynchronous activities of the German online class under investigation a couple of years ago, we did not specifically design the course with the focus on fostering (inter)cultural communicative competence, neither cultural awareness nor learning. We are teaching separate sections of the course under



LANGUAGE LEARNING IS NOT ONLY THE PROCESS OF IMPROVING LINGUISTIC AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCY BUT ALSO A PROCESS OF LEARNING THE CULTURE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE» (BARRETT, 2014, P. 145).

investigation each semester to beginning learners of German. In this way, we are not only the teachers of this online course but also insider researchers of the course under investigation.

The first design objective of the asynchronous activities of the online class was to provide students with as many activities as possible to offset the time that students did not have in the synchronous part of the online class due to time and curriculum restrictions. Since students did not receive the hours required to become proficient in the target language (see e.g., Knight, 2008 and Blake, 2008), additional practice was provided on a Learning Management System as an asynchronous online part of the class. Beneficial focus on form (colloquially also known as *kill and drill* and habit formation) was the primary focus of the asynchronous online part of the language class (see e.g., Chapelle, 2001 and 2003), as there was no *explicit* goal of fostering cultural awareness via the asynchronous activities.

The online language class is divided into online live sessions and an asynchronous, autonomous part. The online live sessions take place twice a week for a duration of one hour and forty minutes for a period of four months,

which amounts to 33 hours for the entire semester of live online sessions. As we felt that there might be some component missing, namely the cultural one, we added activities to the asynchronous activities over the years which we thought might help students learn about the target culture (with a focus on Germany, Switzerland, and Austria).

The purpose of the present study is to determine whether these asynchronous activities of the online class foster (inter)cultural awareness, seeking to answer the following research question: To what degree do the asynchronous activities of our online German language course foster cultural awareness in students, if at all? The research design used to answer the previous question consists of a survey and interviews. Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (2006, 2009) was used as a theoretical framework for data analysis.

We begin our article by defining a number of critical terms and concepts. Next, we present the theoretical framework as well as the study's methods and methodology followed by a presentation of the results of our data analysis. We then conclude our article with a discussion of the study's implications for online language teaching.

◆◆ LITERATURE REVIEW

What is culture and what is (inter)cultural learning?

There are many different definitions of the term *culture* in the literature, depending on the discipline. DesBiens and Morong (2016) specifically focus their research on *culturally responsive online learning design*, resonating most with the topic being presented in this paper. The authors lean on three different and complementing definitions of the term *culture*. One defi-

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PRESENT STUDY IS BASED ON GARSON'S (2013) DEFINITION OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING AS LEADING TO AN «INCREASED AWARENESS OF ONE'S OWN AND OTHER CULTURAL PREFERENCES» (P. XV).

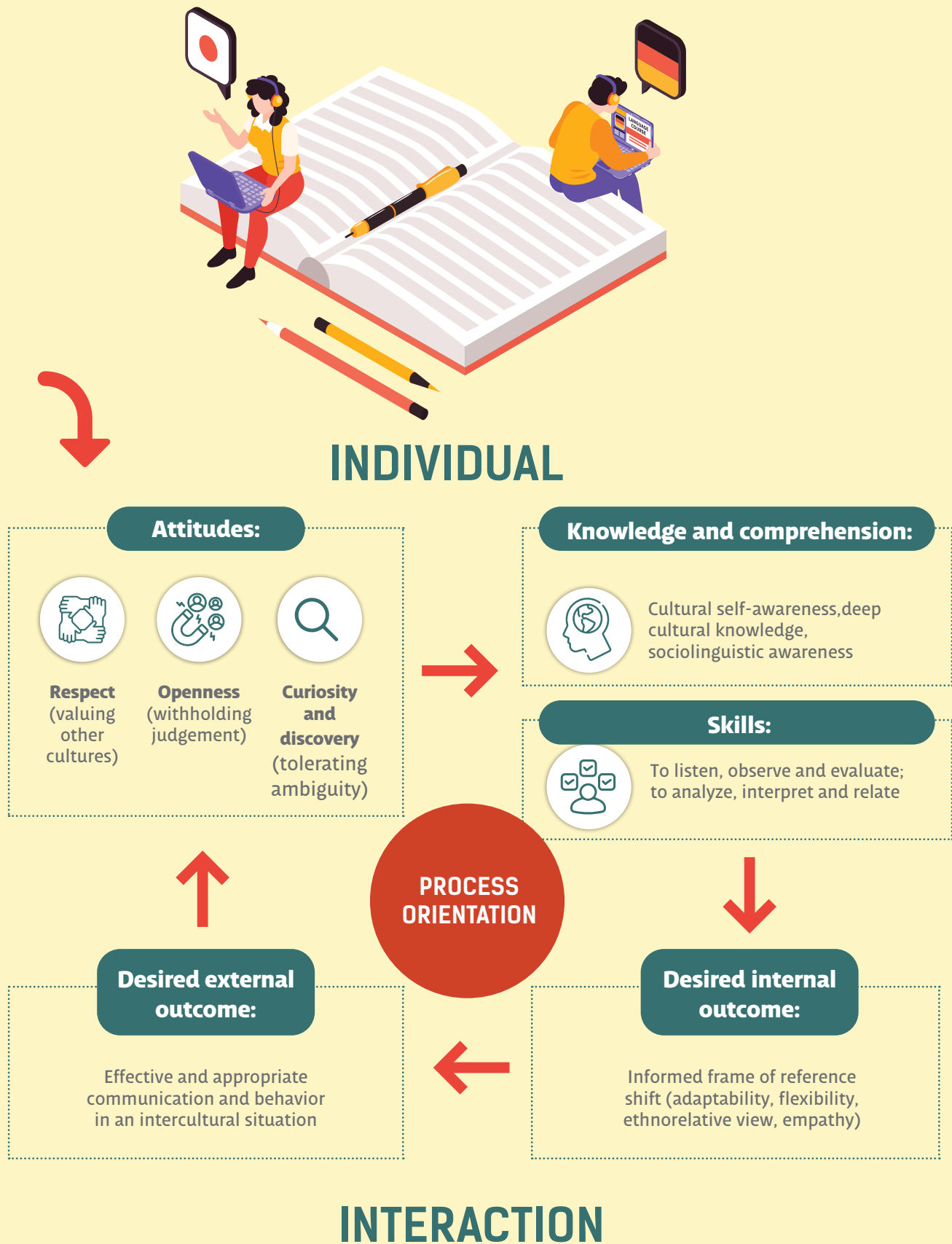
inition derives from Hudelson (2004), which is an anthropological view on culture: «Culture is an evolving socially-constructed reality based on shared values, ideas, concepts and rules of behavior» (DesBiens and Morong, 2016, p. 3, cited in Hudelson, 2004). The idea of culture as not being static and being a social construct is also mentioned in the definition of Ess and Sudweeks (2006). The authors add yet another component to their definition of culture, the pluralist view. The authors believe that there is diversity, multiplicity, and fluidity in cultural groups and that people may belong to different or several cultural groups at the same time (DesBiens and Morong, 2016). Like Hudelson (2014), the authors believe that culture is not static but fluid or evolving, and that there is not just one single culture one belongs to. The third definition is provided by Goodfellow and Hewling (2005, 2008) and Gunawardena (2014). The authors believe that online learning cultures, such as our online class and its participants, are «social and cultural phenomena in its own right» (DesBiens and Morong, 2016, p. 3), as values, ideas and concepts are being shared within the group. Intercultural learning is, according to Gar-

son (2013), «learning that leads to the development of intercultural competence and increased awareness of one's own and other cultural preferences» (p. xv). Yet, while we do agree with all definitions above, we are not focusing on the third definition of culture by Goodfellow and Hewling (2005, 2008) and Gunawardena (2014) in this study since we are not focusing on online learning cultures. The important components relevant to our study are *cultural fluidity* and belonging to diverse cultures at the same time.

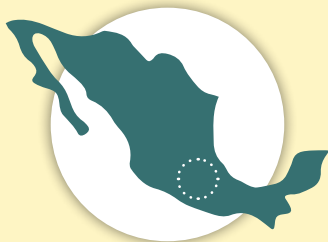
Culture in the language classroom

Culture is part of the language (see e.g., Kramsch, 2015) and by some researchers, language and culture are seen as integrated into the language and therefore, culture should be taught as an integrative part of language learning (see e.g., Byram, 1988, and Byram and Wagner, 2018). Authors such as Canale and Swain (1980) agree that language learners need to be taught in three areas of competence, of which one is culture, to reach proper communicative competence. In that way, teachers should include a cultural component into their teaching as an exclusive focus on form (e.g., grammatical structures) is not enough to become a competent foreign language user. According to Liu (2019), language teachers should «reimagine and reconceptualize the goals and tasks of foreign language education» (p. 51) to account for culture in language teaching. Like DesBiens and Morong (2016) she asks the important question of *how* to implement «the insights into pedagogical practices» (p. 51). Although language and culture are inseparable, they can also be presented separately and the focus can be put on one or the other (Byram's so-called *middle ground*) (Byram, 1997, 2012, 2014; Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013; Byram & Wagner, 2018).

Figure 1. Process model of intercultural competence by Deardorff (2006, 2009).



DATA COLLECTION



The present study took place at a renowned private university in central Mexico.



The language class under investigation was a beginner's German class taught online.



The students were between the age of 18 to 23.

◆◆ THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on Garson's (2013) definition of intercultural learning as leading to an «increased awareness of one's own and other cultural preferences» (p. xv). We are also following Dear-dorff's (2011) division of evidence for (inter)cultural learning and awareness. She divides evidence for (inter)cultural learning, compe-tence, and awareness into two categories: di-rect evidence (e.g., observation of students performing in an authentic situation) and indi-rect evidence (e.g., surveys) (Deardorff, 2011). For this study, we are choosing the indirect evi-dence approach, namely a survey and inter-views to find out about the learners' *perspec-tive* of (inter)cultural learning and awareness in the asynchronous activities of our German online class.

Deardorff, herself leaning on Fantini (2009), remarks that «it is essential to arrive at a defi-nition of intercultural competence before pro-ceeding with any further assessment endeav-ors» (Deardorff, 2011, p. 66). As both terms *awareness* and *competence* are used inter-changeably in some of the literature about cul-ture (see, for example, Liu, 2019), we decided to use the term (inter)cultural *awareness* rather than *competence* in the sections that follow. To us, the two terms do not constitute the same and we do not agree with them being used in-terchangeably. Some authors decide to not use either of the two terms, just referring to the term *culture*, leaving it to their readers to decide which term they are referring to (e.g., Qayyum, 2016, Guanawardena and Jung, 2014). While we consider *competence* to be *savoir-faire* (skills to interact), *awareness* is simply *savoir* (knowl-edge of self and others) (Byram and Zarate, 1997). As we are not investigating whether our students can *do* something or *perform* in the for-

eign language concerning culture (namely *cultural competence*) but whether they have *knowledge (savoir)* about the foreign culture (namely *cultural awareness and learning*), we are using the terms *awareness* and *learning*.

As a point of reference for interpreting our data (surveys and interviews), Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (2006, 2009) was used for data analysis, which can be seen in figure 1.

As can be seen in figure 1, Deardorff divides the development of intercultural competence (in this paper referred to as *awareness* and *learning*) into the individual process and interaction. The individual process starts with the student and consists of attitudes (such as *respect, openness, and curiosity*) and knowledge and comprehension (consisting of *cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness*); interaction is the performative part of intercultural competence. For Deardorff (2009), the development of intercultural competence is «an ongoing process» (p. 479); hence her model is being presented as a circle.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The present study took place at a renowned private university in central Mexico. The language class under investigation was a beginner's German class taught online. To answer the research question, the study used a mixed-methods design, like Tsagari and Vogt (2017), in which qualitative interview data were collected to gather additional insights into the quantitative data collected via a survey. Due to time constraints, we decided to prepare semi-structured interviews, unlike Corbin and Strauss (2015) who are in favor of unstructured interviews. Instead, we prepared the questions in advance, leaving space for follow-up questions if needed.

For the survey, an invitation email with a link and instructions on how to access the survey was sent to students in the German language beginners' class. Twenty-six students answered the survey. For the qualitative component of the present study, interview questions were formulated and students were asked to participate. However, the students were given the option to opt-out if they preferred not to partake in the interviews. The interview meetings were held on Microsoft Teams and permission was obtained to record the meetings. In addition, notes were taken during the interview. In total, seven interviews were held which lasted from 15 to 20 minutes each.

Participants

The participants of this study were beginning German learners who took the German online class as part of their study plan. The students were between the age of 18 to 23. A consent form to inform the participants in the interviews about this study was used. All names, questionnaires, and interviews were anonymized, to not pose any ethical issue for this study.

Trustworthiness and quality of the data

To assure the quality of the interview data, we assessed our study for its trustworthiness, according to Houghton *et al.* (2013). In that way, we reviewed our data for the following criteria: completeness and triangulation (member-checking and semi-structured interviews), peer-review, prolonged engagement (the participants were our own students), and reflexivity (providing detailed steps of our research design for other researchers).

Ethical issues

Ethical issues can pose a problem to a qualitative study (see Kubanyiova, 2008). To minimal-

ize any ethical issues with the interview data and the participants, we leaned on Brinkmann and Kvale (2017) and Kvale (1996). The following steps were taken to ensure the minimalization of any ethical problems: confidentiality (the recordings were stored in a password-protected folder and securely deleted once the recordings were not needed anymore), informed consent (participants were informed about the study and its aims), explanation of our role as an insider-researcher (we made sure to make the participants felt comfortable to talk to us about our own class, so participants would answer the interview questions about our class as honestly as possible).

Instruments

For the survey, a questionnaire of two questions was designed. The questions were formulated in Spanish. We used the survey tool *Qualtrics* for our survey. A link to the survey was sent to 36 students via e-mail, of which 26 took the survey. The student's participation in the survey was entirely voluntary. The following two questions were asked in the survey:

QUESTION 1 (5-point Likert Scale question):

How much did the following activities help you learn about German culture?
.....

Students could choose one of the following five categories:
(1) Not at all; (2) only a little; (3) neutral; (4) rather much; (5) very much

Question 1 was entirely anonymous.

The following activities were chosen by us to be evaluated by students in the survey. The activities were chosen due to them potentially fostering (inter)cultural awareness and learning. Activities focusing on habit formation and the practice of grammatical structures (such as conjugating verbs, re-assembling sentences, and sentence structure practice) were not included in the selected activities presented to students (figure 2).

QUESTION 2 (open-ended question, with the option to leave their e-mail addresses, if students were willing to be further interviewed):

Share any additional comments on how the asynchronous online component of your German course helped you learn more about German culture.

Qualitative data was collected from interviews. Based on the answers of students in the open question (question 2) and their willingness to participate by leaving their e-mail addresses, we contacted nine students asking for a semi-structured interview. Of those nine, seven students were willing to be interviewed. Since the interviewers felt more comfortable using English, the interview questions were formulated in English and the interviews were also conducted in English. The participants had the choice to respond either in English or Spanish. All seven interviewees decided to respond in English. The questions for the semi-structured interview, which were prepared in advance, were:

Figure 2. Activities.

Activities



Flipgrid: a video tool; students must upload a video responding to a prompt of a native speaker



Reading about the target language countries (called *Kultur*): a text chosen by the teacher with specific information about the target language countries (e.g., the auto industry in Germany, the political system in Switzerland, etc.)



Reading comprehension: a semi-authentic text provided by the publisher of the German textbook in use



Listening comprehension: semi-authentic audio by the publisher of the German textbook in use



Video: a semi-authentic video provided by the publisher of the German textbook in use



Writing activity: students must write a text following a prompt (e.g., respond to an email from a friend, etc.)



Activities from the Workbook: activities provided by the publisher of the German textbook in use

1. On a scale from 1-10, how much do you think you learned about German culture in the asynchronous activities of our online class?
2. Which activities — in our asynchronous online part — helped you the most with learning about German culture and why? Name your top three activities.
3. What could be done to increase the learning about German culture in the asynchronous online part of our online German class?
4. Did you learn anything new about German culture? If so, what did you learn?
5. What was the most surprising information about German culture to you?

It is important to mention that we are using the term *German culture* as an umbrella term for German, Swiss, and Austrian culture. All three countries were represented in the asynchronous activities of the online class and the German textbook in use.

◆◆ DATA ANALYSIS

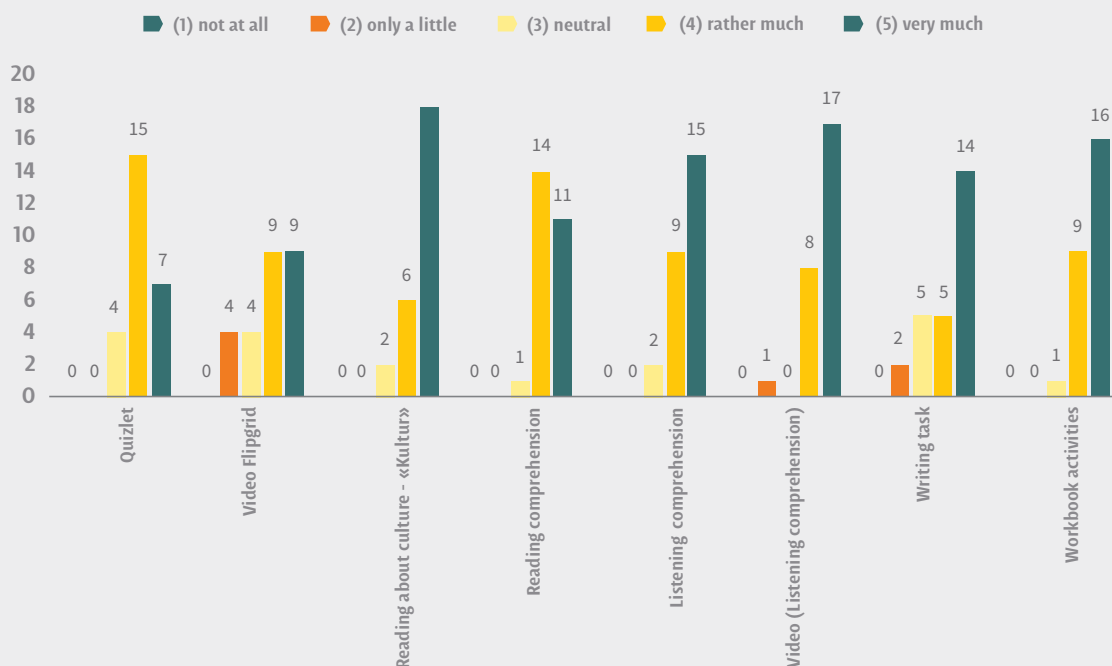
Once the survey closed, the quantitative data report was obtained in the form of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and the results were visualized in a bar chart (chart 1). All respondents answered all questions.

To analyze the qualitative data, the notes taken during the interviews were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. The notes were organized by questions following Giraldo's (2019) grounded approach, identifying patterns across participants' answers. The qualitative data were then matched to the survey questions to provide further information. The section below presents and discusses the results.

◆◆ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We divided the results of our data collection procedures into the two parts below: survey data and interview data. The discussion of our data is integrated into each part.

Chart 1. Impact of activity on awareness and learning about target language culture.



Survey data

Chart 1 summarizes the results of the online survey. The numbers in chart 1 show how many students — out of 26 — chose the according category (*not at all ... very much*) for each of the eight activities presented in the asynchronous part of the online class.

Category 1 (*not at all*) has not been chosen for any activity presented. The activity with the lowest impact on learning about German culture is *Flipgrid* (upload of a video responding to a native speaker) with four students choosing the category *a little*. The activity with the highest impact on learning about the target culture (category 5 - *a lot*) is the activity called *Kultur*, a text which presents facts about the target language countries. This is followed by the video activity and the activities in the accompanying workbook. The data in this table suggest that learning about German culture is taking place and (inter)cultural awareness is being developed to a certain degree with the activities presented in the asynchronous part of the online class. The data furthermore indicate that *knowledge* and *comprehension* — following

Deardorff's process model — were acquired to some degree.

Interview data

The interviews were analyzed for themes and compared to the survey. Prominent themes that emerged during the interviews are presented below.

Question 1 (*How much did you learn about German culture?*) was answered by students with a range from 4-9 (on a scale from 1-10, 10 being the highest), 9 being the most common answer.

Question 2, which asked for the top 3 activities that helped the most with learning about the target culture, the following activities were chosen: The activity *Kultur* was chosen by a majority of six out of seven students. The audios and videos provided follow in second place and the writing and reading comprehension follow in third place. Compared to the survey data, the results of the interview data show the coincidence of the two data sets concerning the top 1 activity for learning about the target culture, namely *Kultur*.

	Top 1	Top 2	Top 3
Participant 1	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Quizlet (flashcard application)	Activities in the workbook provided by the publisher
Participant 2	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Audios	Videos
Participant 3	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Audios/Videos	Texts for reading comprehension
Participant 4	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Videos	Writing task
Participant 5	Videos	Audios	Texts for reading comprehension
Participant 6	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Videos	Writing task
Participant 7	Activity <i>Kultur</i>	Videos	Audio

Table 1. Results of an interview about the top 3 activities that helped learn about German culture.

For question 3, which was asking about what could be added to the asynchronous online part of the class to increase the learning about German culture, the following answers were given:

- More videos and short clips (e.g., YouTube videos) specifically presenting German/Swiss/Austrian culture (e.g., holidays, customs, etc.)
- Music
- More text/readings about culture
- Images and visuals in general of German/Swiss/Austrian life and lifestyle
- Recommendations for films and TV series
- A forum in which students can exchange comments and opinions about German culture and what they learned about it
- Modified exercises to contain more information about German culture

All seven students mentioned the term *interactivity* to help learn more about the target culture, like Liu's (2019) observation.

When asked whether they learned new information about German culture (comparing before and after class), all seven participants answered the question with *Yes*.

When asked which information they still remembered after class, students mentioned the following topics:

- Way of addressing each other (the *du vs. Sie* dichotomy), geography, food, cars, history of Germany/ Switzerland/ Austria, inven-

tions and inventors, working hours, how to tell the time (24-hour clock), export and import.

When asked about what the most surprising information about German culture was, all seven interviewees mentioned the way of addressing each other (*du vs. Sie*) and that the German way of addressing each other is more formal than in their own Mexican culture.

Students' answers in the interviews suggest that — relating to Deardorff's model presented above — students became culturally and socio-linguistically self-aware (individual component). Furthermore, the responses suggest that students could also effectively and appropriately *react* or *perform* in an intercultural situation, which is the *desired external outcome* in Deardorff's model. Deardorff herself cites Bok (2006) saying that «developing skills for thinking interculturally becomes more important than actual knowledge acquired» (Deardorff, 2011, p. 68, cited in Bok, 2006).

In conclusion, comparing the results of the two sets of data with Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence*, the data reveal that our students — to a certain degree — gained knowledge about *affective* and *appropriate* communication (see, for instance, the difference between addressing someone in the formal vs. informal way (*du vs. Sie*), how to address someone that you do not know or who is older than you, and by that became culturally self-aware (Mexican culture of addressing someone and German culture of addressing someone do not match).

INTERVIEW DATA

QUESTION 1

(How much did you learn about German culture?) was answered by students with a range from

4-9

(on a scale from 1-10, 10 being the highest), 9 being the most common answer.

QUESTION 2

which asked for the top

3
ACTIVITIES

that helped the most with learning about the target culture, the following activities were chosen: The activity *Kultur* was chosen by a majority of six out of seven students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

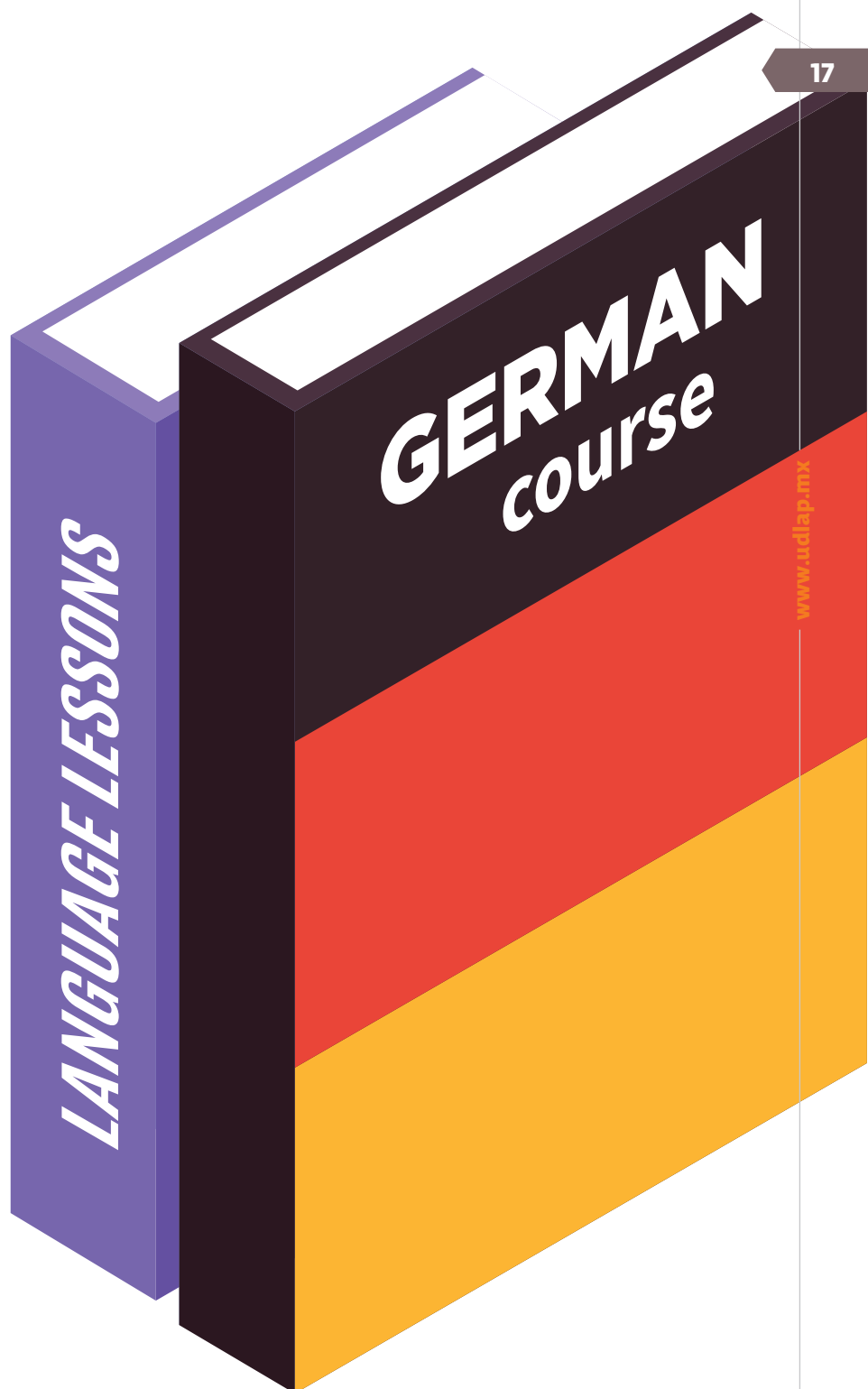
The purpose of the present study was to determine to what degree the asynchronous activities of an online language class foster intercultural awareness and learning in students. The answer to our research question is that the activities presented to students do indeed foster intercultural awareness and learning, even though most activities only represent surface-level knowledge (Deardorff, 2011, p. 68.) such as knowledge about food, political systems, customs, etc.

Although this study was small-scale, it does provide insight into the asynchronous activities of a German online class, how they foster intercultural awareness and learning and what can be done to increase learning about the culture of the target language. As we do not assess cultural competence *per se* — and therefore performance — this is a missing component in the asynchronous part of the online class and could be added to improve the course's overall learning about the target culture. Deardorff furthermore mentions that «any assessment of culture-specific knowledge needs to go beyond the conventional surface-level knowledge of foods, greetings, customs, and so on» (Deardorff, 2011, p. 68). Looking at the activities that are being provided in the asynchronous part of the class and at what students mentioned in the data sets, we conclude that students learned both in the asynchronous part of our class: They learned about surface-level knowledge such as food and customs while at the same time they also learned about how to function within the language concerning the formality of greeting and addressing one another. As Deardorff (2011) mentions, using a clear model and clear definitions of cultural competence is a vital part of stating clear objectives and creating an offer accordingly. This must be re-examined and added to the existing asynchronous activities of the German online course presented in this article.

THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY WAS TO DETERMINE TO WHAT DEGREE THE ASYNCHRONOUS ACTIVITIES OF AN ONLINE LANGUAGE CLASS FOSTER INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND LEARNING IN STUDENTS.

Based on the results of the present study, we recommend that when creating an online course, teachers must do both, settle on a definition of intercultural awareness and competence and then assess it to be able to measure the outcome (Deardorff, 2011). What is also desired when creating an online language course is to establish or use an existing intercultural competence model as it helps teachers to follow teaching objectives, such as e.g., Deardorff's *Process Model of Intercultural Competence* (Deardorff, 2006, 2009). Despite Deardorff's statement that «development of intercultural competence does not, unfortunately, 'just happen' through learning about another culture» (Deardorff, 2011, p. 70), a course such as the one presented here can nevertheless add to at least intercultural awareness and learning, if not competence. At the same time, it becomes obvious that more activities must be added to the asynchronous part of the online class under investigation to increase the number of encounters with the target culture to increase students' *competence* and consequently help them become communicatively competent.

The results of our study can be used as an example of how to improve an already existing online class or what to look out for when cre-



ating an asynchronous online class concerning cultural awareness, learning, and competence. Due to the limitations of this study, further work should be done to analyze which specific activities could foster cultural competence, in contrast to awareness, in an online environment.



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