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Strangers in a Strange Land: Perceptions of Culture in a First-year French Class

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Abstract

This paper investigates perceptions of culture as expressed by first-year French students in a Midwestern high school based on information gleaned from a survey. The survey asked for students to write their perceptions of similarities and differences between French and American culture in terms of food, daily life, housing, shopping, sports and entertainment, music, transportation and school. The survey found that although the majority of students were naturally curious and receptive to these similarities and differences, others maintained stereotypes and distance. In order to further develop a sense of cultural discovery and analytical thinking, instructors are encouraged to employ dialogue as a sociocultural tool to facilitate the construction of the perspectives aspect of cultural knowledge in congruence with products and practice in order to provide an integrated and critical approach to culture and to encourage more active development of student learning.

Introduction

Why are their shopping carts so much smaller than ours?" This was a question posed by a first-year French student in a Midwestern high school upon inspection of the enlarged photograph projected on the screen at the front of the classroom. The photograph was of a shopping cart from a French grocery store and in the

basket were various food items, which the instructor intended to use as an opener for a vocabulary review. Instead, she was taken aback that the student's question had to do with the size of the cart and not its actual contents. She turned this into a teachable moment by explaining that the French typically shop for smaller quantities of food due to their practice of shopping daily for fresh ingredients. Because they shop for fewer items, they do not need as large of a cart. In addition, the size of the store itself tends to be smaller than the typical American superstore. The student seemed satisfied with this response, and the vocabulary review ensued.

This incident highlights the all-too-common disconnect between the intentions of the instructor and the conception of those intentions on the part of the students. In this instance, the instructor's intention was to provide a visual image of food in order to review vocabulary, not to initiate a dialogue about the size of grocery carts. Since intention is constructed rather than transferred, "the same basic task can be conceptualized differently by different people" (Coughlan & Duff, 1994, p. 185).

This incident prompted the issuance of a survey designed to ascertain these students' perceptions of the similarities and differences between the French and American cultures in terms of food, daily life, housing, shopping, sports and entertainment, music, transportation and school. Where were they in terms of their cultural competence? What did they perceive as having the most influence on these views: the teacher, the textbook, or other? What are some resulting implications for the teaching of culture? As Chavez wrote, "researchers and teachers appear to have very specific ideas about what learners understand by foreign language culture and how they value it in the language classrooms...students frequently fail to validate these perceptions" (2002, p. 131). This paper investigates these questions based on information gleaned from the survey and makes suggestions toward the further development of cultural awareness and critical thinking skills in the early levels of foreign language learning.

Review of the literature

The teaching of culture has long been stressed as a goal of foreign language instruction (Brooks, 1968; Heusinkveld, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Moran, 2001; Nostrand, 1978; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Seelye, 1993; Shrum & Glisan, 2010). According to *The Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* (1999), knowledge of culture is critical to effective foreign language acquisition: "Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language and, in fact, cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs" (p. 3). The national *Standards* created a much-needed framework for the teaching and study of culture, particularly by the focusing on the relationship between practices, products, and perspectives. Standard 2.1 emphasizes cultural practices and perspectives; Standard 2.2 emphasizes cultural products and perspectives, and Standard 4.2 emphasizes cultural comparisons. Practices typically describe daily living and are often referred to as "little" culture (little c). Products ("big" culture or Big C) consist of tangible representations of

culture, such as art, literature, and monuments (Herron et al., p. 519). Perspectives refer to the pattern of thoughts, beliefs, and values within a group which is reflected in the ways the group adapts to its environment (Peterson & Coltran, 2003). The *Standards* thus provide a means through which to examine the inextricable link between practices, products, and perspectives, forming the foundation for intercultural communication and comparison.

Even with the guidelines proposed by the national *Standards*, Garrett-Rucks (2013b) writes that, “fostering and assessing language learners’ cultural understanding is a daunting task, particularly at the early stages of language learning with target language instruction” (p. 1). Although the *Standards* emphasize the teaching of culture to include products, practices and perspectives, instructors often struggle with how to effectively integrate all of these into their foreign language program (Durocher, 2007. p. 144). Keeping these factors in mind, this paper investigates the responses of early language learners concerning their perceptions and construction of culture at the end of their first academic year of French and, based on the findings, proposes additional ways to foster the simultaneous integration of products, practices, and perspectives and deepen cultural understanding.

The Survey

With IRB approval, the researcher spent five days observing a first-year French class at a rural Midwestern high school during third period, three weeks before the end of the academic year. Twenty-five students were in the class--12 females and 13 males; the average age was 15.7 years. Thirteen of the students were freshmen; six were sophomores, and six were juniors. Two of the students had previously studied French in elementary or middle school; the rest were taking it for the first time.

The instructor, who at that point had been teaching at the school for four years, has an advanced degree in the French language and has spent significant time living and working in France. In an informal discussion with the instructor (B.M., personal communication, May 17, 2013), she described her cultural teaching style as one that encourages the integration of products, practices, and perspectives. She counts the textbook as her primary resource, supplemented with personal experience and education. Additionally, she readily consults with native speakers, colleagues, and the internet for continuous information. She believes in both explicit and implicit integration of authentic cultural materials. She uses the textbook *C'est à toi* (Fawbush et al., 2006) which, according to the textbook website, posits that “in-depth coverage of various francophone cultures gives students a solid understanding of and appreciation for the language within its multicultural, diverse context” (EMC Publishing, 2013). The observations took place during instruction on the chapter, *La santé*, or health. Like the instructor, the researcher also has an advanced degree in the French language and has spent time living in France.

At the beginning of each observed class period, the instructor provided the researcher a brief summary of what was to take place in class each day.

The unit's daily lesson plans were similar in structure and set-up: bell-ringer, homework return/collection, warm-up/review, introduction and explanation of topic, individual and group activities, review, and conclusion. The cultural topics during the observation period dealt with food, eating habits, and health in general. The researcher merely observed and took notes until the end of the class period. Other than the previously noted informal conversation where the instructor described her cultural teaching style, there was no other discussion or intervention. The researcher observed a total of five class periods, at the end of which she administered the survey in the form of a questionnaire (Appendix) to the students and collected the results. She then spent time answering questions from the students about her experiences in France. At the end of the observation period, the researcher reviewed her notes and collated the responses on the survey to look for any emergent or salient points.

Results and Discussion

The majority of students (90%) indicated that they took French because it was “different” and “interesting.”

None had previously traveled to France; however, all but four students expressed a desire to visit one day. Several indicated that they wanted to “speak French really well” and “that it would be cool to be bilingual.” Other reasons for taking the language included a family connection, college aspirations, and the avoidance of taking Spanish or Chinese. These results indicate that the vast majority of students had intrinsic motivation to study the language.

When asked to circle on the survey that which has had the most influence on their cultural knowledge, most cited “teacher” while a few selected “other.” They explained “other” as their own research or as prior study. One student wrote, “When I was in 2nd grade I took French and there are still some things in my brain.” Remarkably, only two students named the textbook as having had the most influence, although the instructor stated to the research that she relied on the textbook as a primary resource for cultural information. The survey then asked students to list similarities and differences in several cultural areas, including food, daily life, housing, shopping, sports and entertainment, music, transportation and school. The questions were open-ended and therefore were generated by the students themselves. The students answered the bulk of the questions on the surveys; their responses appeared to be genuine and thoughtful in nature.

Not surprisingly, the topic of food generated the most interest among the participants; one student wrote, “I am curious to try and experience the broad taste of flavors and exotic dishes!” When asked which food they associated with the French, the majority of the participants listed specific food items, some with more frequency than others. Eighty-four percent (84%) listed bread/baguette/croissant as the most common food item; twenty percent (20%) cited *crêpes*; sixteen percent (16%) mentioned cheese; another sixteen percent (16%) mentioned bouillabaisse, and twelve percent (12%) noted quiche. Some items received two mentions—crabs, fish, pastries, dessert, and *le hot-dog*, while other items only received one mention—*pâté*, snails, and mushrooms. Only two students mentioned wine. Twelve percent

(12%) saw French food as “fancy” or “gourmet” and said that they were likely to enjoy the food if they were to visit the country. Equally, twelve percent (12%) said that they would not enjoy the food, since French food seemed “strange,” and “nasty.” Others indicated they were more accepting of the fact that differences exist and viewed French cuisine as more of a preference: “I would much rather eat American food” and “I don’t think I would like the food, but that’s because I’m picky.” Interestingly enough, eighty percent (80%) were intrigued by the healthy eating habits of the French, taking note of the fresh fruits and vegetables and smaller portions. They viewed the French eating habits favorably when compared to those of the U.S.: “their food seems much more appetizing compared to our restaurants and fast food.” One person associated these eating habits with “a more laid-back, healthier way of life.” In this regard, the student clearly linked the product (food) to the practice (healthy eating) and the perspective (way of life).

This notion that the French live a more laid-back, healthier ways of life was reflected in the students’ views on daily life, seeing it as “more calm,” “healthier,” and involving “more time with family and friends” and “more leisure time.” When asked on the survey what aspects of French culture they were most interested in learning more about, an overwhelming majority (90%) wrote that they were very curious about the day-to-day life of the French, particularly of those in their age group.

About half (47%) indicated they felt the quotidian life of the French was “different” (vacations, mealtimes, etc.) but, as one student wrote, “I think I’d prefer their lifestyle.” Others imagined what life would be like; one wondered what it would be like to sit at a café “eating bread, cheese, and drinking coffee all day.” Another concluded, “I think they live kind of normally, like us.” The survey indicates that the students have a natural curiosity and motivation in knowing more about the daily existence of a typical French teen.

When asked about housing, a few (12%) believed that the housing was similar to the U.S.; but many (80%) saw the houses as “smaller,” closer together,” and “more crowded” and typically urban. Of note, one student wrote that in France there is no “in between” in housing; “it’s either small or huge, like a castle.” Twenty-four percent (24%) perceived the housing as “older” but with “newer insides” and “expensive.” A few of the students admitted to not knowing much about the housing; “we never looked at a normal house before, so I have no idea.” Another student imagined having “friendly neighbors” and another thought the French were “warm.” This was countered by others, one stating that he “would not enjoy some of the people,” another heard that they were “mean.” One believed that “they’re people just like you and I but they are more subtle than us.”

Shopping was an aspect of day-to-day life that attracted many students, as one put it, “shopping seems to be very big and popular there.” Several participants cited that they “would love to shop in France” at the “high-end” and “designer” stores. They felt that shopping in France was “kind of like” shopping in the U.S., but the French had much more to offer, such as “different brands, different stores, and many shops.” They perceived the French as being more “choosy and selective” compared to their American counterparts. The appeal of “luxurious” and “elegant”

stores also brought up a tinge of anxiety; sixty-four percent (64%) felt that it would be “expensive.” However, one participant resigned herself to this by stating: “I heard there are a lot of expensive clothing stores but since I love shopping I would probably just spend all my money.” It is possible that the rural background of the students may have had an influence on their perceptions of the expense and selection they associated with shopping in France.

While shopping constitutes a form of entertainment for some, so do sports. Almost half (45%) mentioned that they were aware that soccer is a major sport in France. However, twenty percent (20%) noted that the French have “less time for sport,” that “it is not much of a priority,” and that “sports don’t seem like a big deal.” Several were appalled by the fact that schools do not sponsor sport teams...one wrote, “I don’t know what I’d do if my school didn’t have sports.” Others acknowledged that the French still enjoy either playing or watching sports on weekends and saw this as “similar” to Americans but that Americans are “more competitive.” The only other sports mentioned by the participants were “bike riding” (by two students) and “fencing” (by one student). In addition to sports, several other entertainment activities emerged, including an eclectic array of “cinema and French movies,” “art and museums,” “famous landmarks and sightseeing,” “dancing and nightclubs,” “parades,” and “mimes.” A few specifically mentioned certain famous sites such as *The Arc de Triomphe*, *Notre Dame*, *The Eiffel Tower*, and *the Catacombs*. One speculated that, “Experiencing everything would be amazing and the cultural difference would be a beautiful much needed change.” However, another despaired that she didn’t think there was “much” to do in terms of entertainment. Yet another said, “I would enjoy everything; the only thing I wouldn’t enjoy would be the people talking to me in French...but I could adapt.”

Another form of entertainment surveyed was music. Sixteen percent (16%) claimed that they knew nothing about the music in France; another said it “wasn’t that good.” Some students had stereotypical notions of French music, describing it as “romantic music that you would listen to on a boat” or that it was like “old music.” One likened French music to that “in the movie *Ratatouille*.” The class was split in terms of whether or not French music was similar or different from American music. Some felt that “teenagers in France have such different taste in music” while others felt the music was the same “but in a different language.” Twelve percent (12%) identified classical music as French; while other genres such as reggae, jazz, pop, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop received honorable mentions. Oddly, one erroneously identified Justin Bieber as French (actually he is Canadian) while another wrote that he felt French music was “cleaner” than American music.

One aspect of French culture that students did not perceive as cleaner is the transportation. Some described the traffic patterns as “busy” and “crowded.” They were aware of the more varied modes of transportation, including cars, cabs, scooters, bicycles, busses, subways, trains, and planes; summed up by one student as “smaller and quicker.” Sixteen percent (16%) mentioned the prevalence of walking in France. Most were in favor of public transportation, one wrote, “I think a train would be more fun than a car” while many loved the idea of a scooter, “I

don't like that you can't get your [driving] license until you are 19 because I like having the freedom to drive around. It would be cool to have one of those scooters, though."

In addition to not liking the age of licensure, the students were not too keen on the secondary school system either. Forty-four percent (44%) mentioned that they perceive French school as "difficult," "hard," or "intense." Almost all (90%) were aware of the shortened days on Wednesdays and Saturdays and were divided on whether or not they would like that. In general, they indicated that the French focus more on academics and homework compared to their American peers. As echoed in the previous section on sports and entertainment, they could not easily imagine a school without the prevalence of sport teams or clubs: "I would not like that there are no sports every day; I need sports to get through the day." Another surmised, "I like their school schedule but have heard that European schools are a lot harder than American schools" before noting that "but it's good to be challenged."

Frequent adjectives used to describe French culture were "lovely" and "elegant." They see the French as having "good manners" and being "more polite" than Americans; one said he felt that Americans were "rude" compared to the French. Another commented that "we are both the same because we both have a democracy." They saw France as being rich in history and diversity, and cited its linguistic influence on English.

As previously mentioned, when asked what they would like to learn about French culture that they had not already learned, the majority wanted to know more about the everyday life of their peers. They wondered what they do when "they are not at school" and "what they do for fun." They wanted to know about both the good and bad aspects of life there. Another wondered if they have school dances and what their television shows are like. Still others mentioned history, art, music, war, famous people, and literature as areas of interest. Another was curious about life in France in earlier times and their heritage. A few wanted to go beyond the surface information; one wrote, "Why do they buy fresh food almost every day?" indicating an already present level of critical thinking.

In order to better understand these responses, the researcher reexamined the surveys using Hanvey's (1979) four stages of cross-cultural awareness. These are described as Level I, where information about the culture may consist of superficial stereotypes; learners see the culture as bizarre; and culture bearers may be considered rude and ignorant. Level II is where learners focus on expanded knowledge about the culture and contrast it with their own. They find the culture bearers' behavior irrational. Level III is demonstrated as learners begin to accept the culture at an intellectual level and can see things in terms of the target culture's frame of reference. Lastly, Level IV is considered the level of empathy that is achieved through living in and through the culture and where learners begin to see the culture as insiders. Based on the researcher's estimation, eight percent (8%) exhibited Level I awareness, as demonstrated by such comments as "I find their [food] strange," and "I heard they were mean," still viewing aspects of the culture as weird. Forty-seven (47%) percent of the group was deemed to be at

Level II, particularly when examining their comments concerning sports and school. That is, they noticed the differences, but did not understand them. Thirty-seven percent (37%) exhibited signs of Level III awareness in such statements as “I think I would prefer their lifestyle,” indicating the ability to place oneself in the frame of reference of the other culture. Lastly, although none of the students had travelled or lived in France, eight percent (8%) indicated an astute awareness more often associated with Level IV, evidenced by statements such as “they are just like us.” Based on these results, the majority of this particular first-year French class’ statements vacillate between Levels II and III. While these results are encouraging, it is important to consider ways to increase and maximize cultural awareness. The development of intercultural sensitivity is an “ongoing, dynamic process in which learners continually synthesize cultural inputs with their own past and present experience in order to create meaning” (Robinson, 1988, p. 11). It is tantamount that culture is presented as multi-layered, socially practiced, and ever dynamic. An investigation or analysis culture is never complete, nor is it one-dimensional. One way to ensure this is through discussion.

Maximizing Cultural Awareness

This survey indicates that the majority of the students are open and interested in learning about the French culture. Although they have some stereotypes, most expressed a balanced viewpoint, a natural curiosity, and an eagerness for more in-depth analysis. One way to facilitate this is through a sociocultural approach to culture. Based on the work of Vygotsky (2012), a sociocultural approach entails the use of language as a tool for the construction of meaning, suited for an in-depth dialogue about the products, practices, and perspectives inherent in cultural similarities and differences. By placing the construction of meaning in a socially supportive setting, the instructor (expert) engages the students (novices) as active participants rather than passive recipients of their own learning. As indicated by the survey, students see their instructor as having the most influence on their cultural knowledge; thus, it follows that instructors are in a unique position to foster critical thinking and intercultural competence through dialogue both in and out of the classroom. According to Drewelow (2013), instruction needs to be especially attentive to the interconnection between language and culture. The promotion of two-way discussions on perspectives, in tandem with practices and products, serves as an ideal forum for this to take place.

The first step toward this practice is to establish where the students are in their cultural competence and awareness; that is, their zone of actual development. This knowledge can be assessed in terms of Standard 2.1 cultural practices and perspectives; Standard 2.2 cultural products and perspectives, and Standard 4.2 cultural comparisons, or any other combination. One can also determine where they are in terms of Hanvey’s Levels. Surveys, pre-tests, questionnaires, etc. are some ways to establish this knowledge base. Once determined, the instructor can begin to see where students are individually and collectively and can begin to formulate ways to scaffold their understanding for growth within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 2012). Since language provides the necessary

tool for this scaffolding to take place, guided discussion can be the means by which students build upon their prior knowledge toward deeper understanding. For instance, let's consider the teachable moment where the student posed the question about the size of the French grocery cart after seeing the projected image. The instructor immediately responded to the student according to her personal knowledge base and both the student and the instructor appeared satisfied with this exchange. However an alternative approach from a sociocultural perspective would have been for the instructor to turn the question around to the student and to the rest of the class, asking them why *they* thought the shopping carts were small before offering her response. By asking for the students to think about the question and to offer their estimations first, the instructor provides the opportunity for the students to verbalize their ways of approaching and analyzing cultural differences. By searching their own schema and scaffolding with others, they have the opportunity to experience higher levels of thinking and, through consistent and repetitive engagement, deepen and ultimately, internalize these skills. This negotiation can occur between the teacher and the students or within groups of students as a means of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994). That is, students can together discuss in small groups why they think the shopping carts are small and then report their ideas back to the class as a whole. The instructor can then take the ideas posited by the groups, and continue to ask probing questions and/or guiding comments as a means to extend the discussion. In this way, the students are engaged dialogically with the question and its potential reasoning. This also encourages students to be responsible for their own learning as well as that of their peers. It allows for the instructor to witness the thought processes of the students and use her position to further guide, redirect, or scaffold their orientation, approach, or conclusions.

Other ways to encourage discussion include the drawing out of their opinions or other affective aspects. Appealing to students' interests can also serve as a motivator for cultural response and acceptance; for instance, one student wanted to know more about the "dirt bike scene" in France. Shopping and food both proved to be popular interests and offer many possibilities for thematic and interdisciplinary instruction. Literature and poetry can provide a unique window into cultural perspectives. Instructors should be mindful that they are fostering students' awareness of the link between products, practices, and particularly perspectives; thus, any materials used should be multi-layered and varied. Open and student-generated discussion of cultural viewpoints and topics allows them to pursue culture in a way that promotes discovery, negotiation, construction, modification, exchange, and reflection while forging deeper ownership of such knowledge.

It is also important for instructors to be mindful that there are multiple conscious and unconscious factors that shape a student's perceptions of culture. Inevitably they are influenced by a variety of sources, including prior background, media, books, advertisements, teaching materials as well as national, community, and personal belief systems. Stereotypes of foreign language cultures are typically the first body of knowledge that early language learners acquire and, despite

their negative association, constitute a valued part of the human information system. That is, stereotypes help to simplify and categorize information (Schulz & Haerle, 1995, p.30) and can also be used as a starting point for further discussion. For example, when considering the question of the smaller shopping cart, the instructor can ask students to brainstorm any stereotypes they associate with the image. This exploration of stereotypes can provide a basis for meta-cognition and meaningful exploration. Ideally, instructors can use this information as a springboard to deeper discussions of practices, products, and perspectives and as a basis for comparative analysis between the students' culture and the target culture. A probing of stereotypes helps students to be able to compare and contrast similarities and differences in an objective manner and can also provide instructors with insight into their students' underlying associations and belief systems concerning the target culture. It goes without saying that the instructors themselves should also be mindful of their own stereotypes and belief systems and how they present or shape the information.

Dialogue prompts can guide students toward meaningful conversation and can be a means for them to explain their understanding of a cultural concept vis-à-vis products, practices, and perspectives. Not only can one use images or student-generated responses to initiate discussion, one can also use true/false statements, debates, or information gap activities. Discussion can be extended by asking students for their responses through initiation, response, and feedback (Shrum & Glisan, p.82). Additionally with the availability of the internet and computer mediated communication systems, these discussions can occur via various online venues, such as message boards, chat rooms, etc. (Garrett-Rucks, 2013b). Post-discussion assessments in the form of internet-mediated projects (Abrams, 2002), web-based inquiry (Altstaedter & Jones, 2009), or portfolios, (2007) can serve as a means to measure growth when considering the links between practices, products, and perspectives and whether a student has reached his or her zone of proximal development. Assessments given at various points in the semester can highlight where students are in their understanding and can demonstrate progression of thought and understanding. Jourdain (1998) supports a student-centered approach to cultural connections by advocating projects and activities where students collect, analyze, and present culturally relevant information; thus, fostering independent thinking and personal responsibility. Such projects can be also be used as a dialogic springboard (Barnes-Karol & Broner, 2010).

Instructors may be hesitant to use this approach for several reasons. First, they may be concerned about more extensive teaching of culture at early language levels due to the learner's lack of proficiency in the target language. However, allowing for limited discussion in the L1 sets the foundation for students to develop their orientation toward culture and develop critical thinking skills. As their language proficiency increases, so will their ability to have these discussions in the L2. Additionally, instructors may be concerned with a lack of classroom time to cover culture in this way (Omaggio Hadley, 2001). However, these discussions can be adapted and interwoven in a variety of formats and settings or can be addressed

as they emerge, as long as the environment supports the setting for such dialogues to take place.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

The study was limited in several ways. First, since the survey was open-ended and allowed for multiple responses, it was challenging to apply any type of statistical analysis beyond percentages; a more quantifiably structured survey could be more readily evaluated. In addition, the observations only took place over a five-day period; a longer observation period could yield more substantive results. A lengthier observation period could also more directly investigate the teacher's role. A longitudinal study of students over the course of their study of French could track the progression and/or transformation in perceptions of culture from the first years to later years. Pre- and post-surveys could illuminate the construction of culture on the part of the students over time. More extensive interviews with the teacher and the students could also expand upon the connection between the teacher's intentions and students' perceptions as well as the ontogenesis of certain stereotypes.

Different surveys could provide additional information, such as insights on other related aspects, such as cultural sensitivity (Durocher, 2007), acculturation attitudes (Culhane, 2004), or ethno-lingual relativity (Citron, 1995). The particular survey used in this study focused on practices more than on products or perspectives; a more inclusive survey could shed light on how students view those aspects as well. A discourse or other type of analysis of the survey responses could also yield more results. A transcription of the dialogue in the classroom could provide informative insights into the nature of student-talk versus teacher-talk, expressions of private speech, and whether such opportunities exist.

Conclusion

The results of the survey provide a unique opportunity into how early language learners perceive and express French culture. In sum, when considering the similarities and differences between the two cultures, many were actually open, accepting, and flexible toward the differences that were acknowledged but not judged. They saw culture as multidimensional and were primed to process the information on a deeper level. For example, many were willing to try the food, and if not, they were sure to characterize it as a result of their personal preference and not a commentary on the culture. Only very few were resistant. Most appreciated the smaller portions, healthier eating, and lack of junk food." One said, "I would enjoy their food and all the different types and where they come from." They were fascinated by daily life, and wanted to experience it for themselves. Another noted, "Their lifestyle is healthier, more laid back; they seem to take time and appreciate things." And, "I would like to know more about the daily life; they do things differently and I would like to know how and why."

In terms of housing, their perceptions seemed a bit limited and/or stereotypical, but in general there was no negativity associated with the differences. They said

they would like to know more about housing; perhaps the survey helped them to realize this. They perceived both housing and shopping as “expensive,” but again, this was stated as matter-of-fact. They also were matter-of-fact when it came to modes of transportation; although many were envious of the teens riding scooters. Generally, their knowledge of music was rather limited and stereotypical; however, they did seem to acknowledge that their music is “just like ours, but in a different language.” They were convinced that school was much harder than what they are accustomed to, but one noted that that was not necessarily a bad thing. The only area that seemed to carry some negative judgment was sports. They seemed to struggle with and ultimately resist the fact that sports are not as big a part of daily school life as it is for them.

The instructor found the results of the survey to be simultaneously confirming and conflicting. While she was encouraged by their receptivity to learning more about the French culture, she was also daunted by some clear misrepresentations. Instructors do have a considerable amount of influence to ultimately guide students toward the learning of languages, the exploration of cultures, and the transformation of lives. This survey provides a sampling of the ways that students are conceptualizing cultural concepts in the classroom. As one student put it: “I really like learning about different cultures; they are so far away and we are the same but different.” By striving to link practices, products, and perspectives through student dialogue, instructors can ultimately help to shape these beliefs away from those of “strangers in a strange land” toward higher levels of understanding and acceptance.

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Appendix
Survey

Gender _____
Age _____
Grade level _____
Length of study of French _____

Background

1. Why did you decide to study French?
2. Do you have any French relatives or acquaintances? Please circle YES or NO

YES NO

If YES, please explain.

3. Have you ever traveled to France? Please circle YES or NO

YES NO

If YES, please explain length of trip and purpose.

If NO, would you like to travel to France someday?

YES NO

4. What do you think of when you think of French culture and the following:

Food:

Music:

Daily Life:

Sports and Entertainment:

Transportation:

School:

Shopping:

Housing:

5. In what ways are the French similar to us? Different from us? Please explain.

6. Circle that which has MOST influenced your knowledge:

Teacher

Textbook

Other

If other, please explain.

7. If you were to go to France and spend time there, what are some cultural aspects you would enjoy? Would not enjoy?

8. Has the study of French culture motivated you to learn more French? Circle YES or NO

YES

NO

If YES, please explain.

9. What would you like to learn about French culture that you haven't already learned?

10. Any additional comments?