



Using Virtual Exchange with LinguaMeeting to Address the Cultures Standards in the Foreign Language Class: Cultural Products, Practices, and Perspectives

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In the age of globalization, Virtual Exchange (VE) has become an equitable, high-impact tool because it provides direct communication between foreign language students and native speakers without the need to travel abroad. It also addresses the problem of having limited class time to practice the target language. Commander et al. state that VE “offers great promise as a practice that helps students explore cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own” (12).

VE is an umbrella term used to refer to different contexts in which students from different cultures and countries meet online. Although its definition varies according to context, a generally accepted definition comes from O’Dowd: VE is the “engagement of groups of learners in extended periods of online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programmes and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (“From Telecollaboration” 5).

Because of the various models or types of VE and the different terminology, there is some confusion about what VE is and does.

The modality or context of VE discussed in this article is based on the telecollaboration model (where students meet each other to practice the target language and learn about culture) but with three different characteristics than the VE used between students from different educational institutions. In the present modality, there is a fee-paying service provider rather than a free service; the role of the instructor is less intrusive than in models with facilitators; and students do not meet with peers, but rather with native speakers hired for that job.

This modality has been called *service-provider VE* or *SPVE* (Klimanova and Vinokurova 121; Marull and Kumar 630; Tecedor and Vasseur 761), *open-source platform* (Fernández-Cuenca and Muller 2), *third-party provider* (Risner 9; Stevens Initiative 4), or *external-provider VE* (Varo Varo 1). In this modality, students (individually or in groups) discuss with their interlocutors the topics their course professor or instructor selected. These interlocutors are called coaches in the LinguaMeeting platform (also *amigos*, partners, *compañeros*, or instructors in other platforms). Students pay a fee, and the company takes care of all the logistics. The coaches are patient native speakers who have been

trained to adjust their speech rate and use modified input, problem-solving techniques, and corrective-feedback techniques. According to O'Dowd, this "'outsourcing' of virtual exchange takes a considerable organizational and technical burden off the teachers who no longer have to look for appropriate partners for their students" ("What do students learn" 2). A growing number of companies have emerged in the 21st century to provide these services, such as TalkAbroad (created in 2004), LinguaMeeting (in 2007), Conversifi (in 2007), Platica (in 2011), and Boomalang (in 2014), among others. These service providers should not be confused with platforms or Apps that offer language classes or tutors for a fee, or with companies that offer virtual conversations for free. A basic description of some of these and the previous five can be found in Henshaw's webinar.

VE seems to be a promising tool in the foreign language class because, according to Altstaedter, it can target all five goal areas of the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project or NSFLEP) (1). These goal areas are informally known as the 5 Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Therefore, VE has the potential to help students address the eleven *World-Readiness Standards*: During online conversations, students communicate in the target language and exchange information (Communication), compare their respective cultures (Cultures, Comparisons), discuss topics about various disciplines (Connections), and interact with members of the Hispanic community beyond the classroom (Communities). Ceo-Francesco claims that "a virtual synchronous interactive program can integrate the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages in deliberate and meaningful ways" (41). The two Cultures Standards, for example, require students to "use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and

perspectives of the cultures studied" and "between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied" (NSFLEP 3). These two Standards contain the three elements that will be examined in this study: cultural products, practices, and perspectives (informally known as the 3 Ps). The term '*products*' refers to tangible or intangible creations, such as environmental laws or castanets. The term '*practices*' refers to behaviors and patterns of social interactions, such as taking a siesta after lunch or kissing on the cheek to greet someone. The term '*perspectives*' refers to the values and beliefs that underlie the products and practices of humans, such as patriotism or machismo.

These 3 Ps are not only present in the *World-Readiness Standards*, but also in the elements associated with Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), namely, awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Byram defines ICC as the ability "to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language" (71). The description of one of the objectives of Attitudes states: "willingness to question the values and presuppositions in cultural practices and products in one's environment" (50). Knowledge is defined as "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country" (51). One of the objectives of Skills of interpreting and relating is "identify ethnocentric perspectives in a document or event that explain their origins" (52). The definition of Skills of discovery and interaction is the "ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices" (52). And finally, the definition of critical cultural Awareness/political education is "an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (53). The 3 Ps are also mentioned in the Can-Do Statements for Intercultural Competence (National Council for State Supervisors for Language – American

Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages), where students can identify products and practices or make comparisons between those two elements to help them understand perspectives in their own and other cultures. Thus, the 3 Ps are a fundamental part of both the concept of ICC as well as the Standards in the field of foreign language education.

Therefore, this study focuses on those basic yet essential elements—cultural products, practices, and perspectives—in the context of a VE experience in a second-semester Spanish foreign language class at a university in the United States. To the researcher’s knowledge, there are no studies that quantify the presence of the 3 Ps in the context of VE. Thus, the present study aims to fill a gap in the research literature and expand this unexplored area by investigating whether second-semester university students of Spanish can connect the 3 Ps in a course that integrates VE using the LinguaMeeting platform. This investigation is guided by the following research questions:

1. Were the 3 Ps included in the VE experience?
2. Does VE help students address the Standards in the Cultures goal area?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review has three subsections: 1) studies that investigated the cultural benefits of service-provider VE via video conference, 2) the theoretical framework behind the use of VE, and 3) the role of the 3 Ps in a foreign language course. Studies that investigate telecollaboration between partner institutions have been excluded because the setting is different from the present one. Also, studies that explore issues related to language proficiency improvements are not included, since it is beyond the scope of this project.

Cultural benefits of SPVE

Several studies claim that VE helps improve ICC or at least some type of cultural knowledge. These studies cover different proficiency levels from beginning to advanced. Marull and Kumar used twelve sessions of VE via LinguaMeeting with online beginning I and II Spanish students. Results showed that 85% of students believed they had increased their cultural knowledge and improved their opinion of the native speaker’s home country, among other benefits (634). Native speakers were found to be “supportive, not intimidating, patient, and kind” (633).

Mathieu et al. examined the integration of TalkAbroad sessions in fourth-semester Spanish and French courses. These experiences enabled “students to uncover a world of non-English products, practices, and perspectives broadening their horizons, and enriching their intercultural competence” (75).

Tecedor and Vasseur investigated the development of ICC in eighteen fourth-semester students of Spanish who had four 30-min exchanges with native speakers on the TalkAbroad platform. Results showed that SPVE “may be effective in increasing the amount of cultural content and fostering ICC development in traditional language programs” (779). According to them, SPVE can help beginning-level students identify cultural practices and make cross-cultural connections (780). Students displayed ICC in all six domains, although at times they manifested “an ethnocentric mindset” (768). The researchers emphasized the importance of the instructor’s role to tailor activities to their specific needs (780).

Varo Varo investigated 35 university students’ ICC gains after using SPVE in two advanced Spanish conversation classes. They met online four times during the semester via videoconference on Google Meet to discuss cultural aspects. Results showed an increase between pre- and post-survey results on all five areas of ICC, although attitude

and awareness were not statistically significant. However, qualitative results indicated that students' awareness had improved (9).

Warner-Ault investigated critical cultural awareness in thirty-nine intermediate-level students of Spanish who engaged in five 30-min conversations on the Talk-Abroad platform. Survey results showed increased critical cultural awareness. Open-ended responses suggested that students believed that VE improved their cultural knowledge. Observational data from the recordings, class presentations, and class discussion "suggest that the conversations helped students to see multifaceted aspects of individual identity that transcend simplistic conceptions of culture" and "see complex aspects of their own identities as well [as] to question the origin of their values and beliefs" (9).

Videoconferencing is superior to chat or email communication because students can see gestures and expressions. Helm found that videoconferencing was popular among students, increased motivation, and promoted interaction and participation (206). The ability to record the sessions has also been found very helpful in previous studies for evaluation purposes and for selecting speech samples to provide context and feedback (Echevarría 173; Trego "Learning" 166), and, of course, for research purposes. Recordings have also been found useful for students to review communication strategies, identify misunderstandings, or notice vocabulary and content (Kessler et al. 13; Tecedor and Vasseur 771).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical underpinnings behind the use of VE in the foreign language classroom include three major theories that work together. This applies to both SPVE and telecollaboration between students of different institutions:

- a) Allport's Intergroup Contact Hypothesis: It claims that contact between

members of different groups can help reduce prejudice and promote a more tolerant and integrated society under certain conditions (Commander et al. 4). Thus, by offering students the opportunity to interact with native Spanish speakers, we are increasing their chances to positively influence their attitudes and views of Spanish-speaking societies.

- b) The Interaction Hypothesis (Long 275): It states that the negotiation of meaning that occurs during an interaction (through modified input, corrective feedback, and other strategies) facilitates language uptake and therefore acquisition. Research findings on the negotiation of meaning during VE corroborate that claim (Saito and Akiyama 68).
- c) Vygotsky's social constructivism theory: It postulates that learning originates in social interactions. Applied to the context of VE, by interacting with native speakers, students create knowledge and develop their cognition through actions and social relationships, albeit virtual.

Cultural products, practices, and perspectives

Although studies that investigated the benefits of VE show positive results in terms of cultural benefits, Page and Benander found that achieving cultural perspectives in the foreign language class is "challenging" (3). These authors believe that cultural perspectives are "the gateway to students being able to advance their intercultural development" (1), hence the importance of this particular P. They suggest scaffolding the process even though it is not assured that students will include perspectives in their interactions (3). The process asks students to describe what they observe, explain why native speakers engage in certain practices, and cre-

ate insight into the values behind those practices. This three-step process will help students achieve “the goal of reflecting at all levels of abstraction” (5), but they also recommend doing the reflection in English to allow students the opportunity to share their cultural insights (4). Tecedor and Vasseur also agree that learners should be given the opportunity to explore the target culture through VE “even at early stages” (780).

In-class activities should also promote that three-step process. Instructors can scaffold the process during these activities, and they can also guide students properly by providing feedback on their written activities. Ceo-Francesco agrees that cultural perspectives should be discussed during in-class discussions (41), particularly if students do not have the chance to do so during the actual conversations with native speakers.

Tools that promote the interaction between students and native speakers are supported by strong social constructivist theories and research findings from several studies. These studies contribute to research by showing the cultural benefits of VE in a foreign language course, particularly in improving ICC. While these studies have made substantial contributions, none of them particularly quantified the presence of cultural products, practices, and perspectives in the setting of SPVE to be able to claim that students address the Cultures Standards through VE. The present study intends to fill that gap in research.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The study took place at a large private university in the United States where 91 second-semester students of Spanish were asked to participate anonymously and 57.1% agreed (N=52). Of these participants, 29 (55.76%) were female and 23 (44.23%) were male. Students either came from a first-semester course at the same institution or were

placed into the second-semester course via a placement test. Over 93% of participants were between the ages of 17 and 22. LinguaMeeting was selected over other external providers because it was already being implemented in different courses and instructors were satisfied with the quality of their services. All students at this level of proficiency held five one-on-one 15-minute conversations during the fall semester of 2022 with native-speaking coaches from various Spanish-speaking countries. Each student paid \$35 for the sessions, which started in the fourth week of the fall semester. The coordinator of this second-semester course decided that 15-minute sessions were more appropriate than 30-minute sessions due to the belief that the cognitive load that 30-minute sessions would require could be overwhelming for second-semester students. Data from a pilot study carried out during the fall semester of 2021 suggested reducing the sessions from six to five due to attrition on the last session. Thus, only five sessions took place in this course.

The second-semester Spanish course met Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday in person for 50 minutes, so most students carried out their LinguaMeeting conversations on Wednesdays, which was selected by the department as the asynchronous day. One instructor and the teacher-researcher taught two sections each and three other instructors taught one section each for a total of seven sections of second-semester Spanish. There were between five and twelve students per section. The coordinator provided students and coaches with the same written instructions for each conversation and the subsequent written assignment. These documents were also available on the Learning Management System, Canvas. The topics to discuss during the LinguaMeeting sessions aligned with the themes of the textbook for each of those weeks: 1) introduction and celebrations, 2) health, 3) housing and house chores, 4) nature and the environment, and 5) well-

being and the final cultural project. The reflection assignment focused on two aspects: linguistic observations (communication difficulties, new vocabulary, etc.) and cultural reflections (knowledge learned about the coach's country, comparisons, etc.). Because the Spanish department at this institution expects the use of the target language at all levels for all assignments, the written reflection assignment was done in Spanish, even though scholars tend to favor the first language at beginning levels (Crane 55, Maxey par. 6, Page and Benander 1). After each LinguaMeeting session, students had to upload their assignments onto Canvas before the following Monday. The five assignments were worth 7.5% of the final grade. Those students who were no-shows for a session were allowed to have a limit of one free-of-charge makeup session. An example of the instructions for these LinguaMeeting sessions can be found in Appendix A.

Before the course started, the teacher-researcher obtained the other instructors' consent so that she could access their students' written assignments at the end of the semester. Permission was also obtained from LinguaMeeting to access those students' recordings at the end of the semester. The teacher-researcher was the only one who kept a journal to record field observations during the in-class discussion that occurred after the third session.

Although cultural products, practices, and perspectives were explained and showcased from the beginning of the course during regular classes, before the VE sessions started, one class day was reserved precisely to guide and prepare students for their first session as well as to explain what was expected from their reflection assignments. After the third VE session, another class day in the syllabus was reserved to go over their experiences, clarify misconceptions or misunderstandings, re-direct students who were not following instructions, and explore cultural perspectives that emanated from the products and practices they discussed in

their sessions. An example of an activity performed during this in-class discussion can be found in Appendix B. This type of in-class discussion has been extensively recommended in the literature (European Commission et al. 24; Fernández Gutiérrez et al. 157; Trego "Integrating TalkAbroad" 00:15:20-00:17:32) to provide students an opportunity to "make sense of their experiences cognitively and affectively" (Crane 53).

Data collection

Data were collected from various sources for triangulation purposes during the fall semester of 2022 and include 256 video-recorded one-on-one 15-minute conversations, 255 written reflection assignments that varied in length between one paragraph and one page, the teacher-researcher's field notes during the in-class discussion, and a survey (N=45) to collect demographic data that was distributed one week before VE sessions started.

Data analysis

Content analysis was selected as the qualitative method to analyze the written assignments and the conversations. Both types of content analysis described in "Content Analysis" were performed: Conceptual analysis was done to determine the existence and frequency of the 3 Ps and relational analysis was done to examine the relationship among the Ps. Video recordings were partially transcribed—only culturally relevant comments were transcribed—using Express Scribe transcription software. Both video recording transcriptions and written assignments were coded and the frequency of the 3 Ps was tallied. To increase trustworthiness, once all the data were tabulated and coded, the researcher reviewed them for accuracy adjustments. Only eleven corrections were made, which shows a high intracoder consistency.

According to O'Connor and Joffe, having only one coder is an acceptable practice (4).

A priori, three categories were selected: products, practices, and perspectives. The unit of analysis varied depending on the information provided. For example, the unit of analysis was sometimes a word if a cultural product was mentioned, or a sentence if a practice was explained. These units mentioned by either interlocutor were color-coded and assigned to one of the categories using the highlighter tool in Microsoft Word: yellow for products, blue for practices, and purple for perspectives. Examples of the 3 Ps in a student's native country were also counted as evidence of that student's ability to identify the 3 Ps, which is part of the definition of ICC. General statements and cultural statements had to be differentiated and only the latter were coded. An example of a general practice would be 'She washes the dishes and cleans her room every week,' activities that do not necessarily show a particular cultural trait. An example of a cultural practice would be 'They wash clothes by hand in a washboard placed on the patio,' where a product or practice seems to be particular to that culture. The 3 Ps were counted if they came from students or coaches indistinctly. If the perspective mentioned was too short to determine whether a belief was identified or understood, it was not counted, such as 'That was interesting.'

A posteriori, a fourth category was identified: factual knowledge. This term refers to information about a country's natural elements, which contributes to the student's general cultural knowledge (and it is part of the concept of ICC) but technically does not fit into any of the 3 Ps categories, like 'There are 37 volcanos, but only four are active.' This category was not included in the data analysis unless the comment implied human action, in which case, the comment was tallied for its cultural value. For example, the comment 'In Guatemala, there are lots of stray cats and dogs' implies the cultural practice of not controlling pets, not taking

care of them, or not keeping them in the house -which is different from culture to culture and therefore should be counted.

Iterations of the 3 Ps were counted for frequency purposes separately if they were different. For example, 'The music is accompanied by traditional clothing and traditional dances' counts as three products because music, clothing, and dances are three different artifacts. On the other hand, when iterations were variations of the same product or practice, they counted as one, such as in 'I learned about music and she shared *ritmo punta*' or 'They eat healthy foods, such as salads, fish, quinoa, and veggies.' And finally, if the same product or practice was compared in both countries, it counted as one, such as in 'There, many people need to wait a long time to see a doctor, but in the United States we do not wait for long.' However, if the comparison involved different elements, all were counted separately, such as in 'To me, the basketball represents working hard; for him, his clothes represent his culture.'

Verbatim examples (including students' errors in Spanish) were extracted to illustrate patterns. A translation into English is included in this article for convenience.

RESULTS

RQ1: WERE THE 3 PS INCLUDED IN THE VE EXPERIENCE?

Analysis of the written assignments showed that all 3 Ps were included in both the conversations and written assignments, although in different proportions. A frequency count yielded a presence of 344 products (40.38%), 326 practices (38.26%), and 182 perspectives (21.36%). That's an average of 1.3, 1.2, and 0.7 cultural products, practices, and perspectives, respectively, per assignment. Of the 52 participants, only three (5.76%) did not include cultural perspectives in their written assignments. The topic as-

signment that produced the most perspectives was the one assigned for the third session (the house and house chores), and the topic with the fewest perspectives was the one assigned for the first session (introducing myself and celebrations). Participants completed their written assignments regularly (96%-100%).

Analysis of the video recordings showed that products and practices were very present in all sessions, but perspectives only appeared 43 times (25 instances from the coach and 18 from students), which is an average of 0.16 perspectives per conversation. A total of 25 participants (48.07%) did not include perspectives in any of their conversations, two of which did not include them in their written assignment either. In the conversations, the topic assignment that produced the most perspectives was the one assigned for the third session (the house and house chores), and the topic with the fewest perspectives was the one assigned for the fourth session (nature and the environment). Participants attended their sessions consistently (98%-100%). These numbers show a big difference in the presence of perspectives between conversations and written assignments (see table 1). The tabulation of perspectives is essential to answer the second research question.

Table 1

Presence of cultural perspectives in conversations and written assignments

| | During conversations | In written assignments |
|--|----------------------|------------------------|
| Participants who never included perspectives | 25 (48.07%) | 3 (5.76%) |
| Session 1: Introduction and Celebrations | 8 | 23 |
| Session 2: Health System | 5 | 33 |
| Session 3: House and House Chores | 14 | 46 |
| Session 4: Nature and Environment | 4 | 41 |
| Session 5: Well-being and Cultural Project | 12 | 39 |
| TOTAL of instances | 43 | 182 |

The following examples will illustrate successful and unsuccessful connections between cultural products, practices, and perspectives. In the first example, the coach and the student were discussing environmental

problems, and the student was able to elaborate on his opinion and the meaning behind a practice:

Coach: **Muy pocas empresas cuidan el medio ambiente.** Entonces yo creo que está empeorando. *[Very few companies take care of the environment. I think it is getting worse]*

Student: Entiendo. **Es una lástima.** *[I understand. It is a pity]*

Coach: Sí, es una lástima. ¿Tú piensas similar? *[Yes, it is a pity. Do you think the same?]*

Student: **Sí, estoy de acuerdo. Pienso que es similar porque el dinero es más importante al gobierno y a... ¿Cómo se dice businesses?** *[Yes, I agree. I think that it is similar because money is more important to the government and... How do you say businesses?]*

Coach: Como los hombres de negocios. *[Like business men]*

Student: **Sí, y para los negocios. Y el medio ambiente no es importante para ellos. Y los negocios olviden de lo mucho que necesitamos el medio ambiente.** *[Yes, and for businesses. And the environment is not important for them. And businesses forget how much we need the environment]*
(Participant 107-Video 5)

Here is another example of cultural perspectives included in a conversation about traditions:

Student: También en mi familia. Una tradición es: todos los años, después de la Navidad, en el Año Nuevo **tomamos un foto familiar con cada persona en la familia.** **Es un tradición sobre el crecimiento y el amor en**

nuestra familia, y me gusta esta tradición. [In my family too. The tradition is: every year, after Christmas day, on New Year's Day, we take a family picture with every member in the family. It is a tradition about the growth and the love in our family, and I like this tradition] (Participant 107-Video 1)

Here is an example of the absence of cultural perspectives (or the inability to verbalize them) during the conversation but the ability to include a comment in the written assignment:

- Coach: ¿Ustedes beben algo, alguna bebida tradicional en América? [Do Americans drink a traditional beverage?]
- Student: Sí, **soda** es muy americano. Pero no me gusta, no bebo. Y el **café**, sí. **Estadounidenses necesitan sus cafés**. [Yes, soda is very American. But I don't like it, I don't drink it. And then, coffee, yes. Americans need their coffee]
- Coach: Yo escuché que necesitas café para funcionar. [I heard that you need coffee to function]
- Student: Sí, **y trabajar mucho. Los estudiantes también**. [Yes, and work a lot. Students too]
- Coach: Claro, para ustedes es muy popular **Starbucks**. [Of course, for you guys Starbucks is very popular]
- Student: Sí, en Nueva Haven hay **ocho lugares para el café**. [Yes, in New Haven, there are eight places for coffee]
- Coach: ¿Ocho? **En mi ciudad hay uno**. [Eight? In my city, there is one] (Participant 101-Video 5)

Written Comment: “El **café** es importante porque los **estadounidenses están obsesionados con trabajar**” [Coffee is important because Americans are obsessed with working] (Participant 101 – Reflection 5)

In the following example, during the conversation, the student discussed a cultural product (the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia) and hinted at its significance saying that it is a historical artifact but failed to elaborate. When she completed the reflection assignment, however, she did not mention the Bell at all; instead, she wrote about the statue of an Indigenous Chief, explicitly mentioning its significance. It is unknown why she decided to change topics:

- Coach: ¿Tienen algo similar en tu ciudad? [Do you have something similar in your city?]
- Student: Sí, mi ciudad tiene un **campana**. **La campana fue de 200 años atrás**. Todos los días los personas en la ciudad... perdóname, no sé un palabra. Estoy buscando rápidamente... [Yes, my city has a bell. The bell is 200 years old. Every day, people in the city... sorry, I don't know the word...I am looking it up quickly]
- Coach: ¿Y está activa? ¿Siempre está activa? [Is it active? It is always active?]
- Student: No, no. Está rotpido ahora. [No, no, is broke now]
- Coach: Rota. [Broken]
- Student: Rota. Se rompió porque **todos los días los personas sonaban la campana** y un día se rompió. Y por esto está en un museo ahora, porque es **algo muy histórico para la ciudad**. [Broken. It broke because every day people would ring the bell and one day, it broke. And that's why it is in a museum, because it is something

very historical for the city] (Participant 108-Video 3)

Written Comments: “Esto me recuerda de la cara del Indio en Puerto Rico. La cara del Indio se encuentra en Isabella, que está en el parte oeste de la isla. Es la cara de Mabodamaca un cacique Taíno que trató proteger a los boricuas de los españoles que querían sacarles la tierra. La cara de Cacique Mabodamaca representa la fuerza y unidad de los puertorriqueños. [This reminds me of the face of an Indian in Puerto Rico. The face of the Indian is in Isabella, which is in the western part of the island. It is the face of Mabodamaca, a Taino chief who tried to protect Indigenous people from the Spaniards who wanted to take their land. The face of Chief Mabodamaca represents the strength and unity of Puerto Ricans] (Participant 108 – Reflection 3)

Sometimes, cultural perspectives appeared in the form of an opinion, which could be considered a cultural perspective since our opinions are influenced by our values and beliefs. None of the videos showed a discrepancy in opinions between the coach and the student.

During the conversations, the researcher only observed four instances in which students asked ‘why’, which was a strategy suggested by instructors to extract cultural perspectives from the products and practices discussed with the native speakers.

During the semester, after watching the first week’s videos of her students, the teacher-researcher realized that some students made cultural observations and comparisons but did not add a reflection on the possible values or beliefs behind products and practices. Upon re-reading the instructions provided by the coordinator, the teacher-researcher noticed that they were not very detailed nor explained clearly the three categories expected (observation, comparison, and reflection). Page and Benander

label these stages as “description”, “explanation”, and “creation” (4) and are somewhat similar. Data revealed that most participants were able to include all three types of comments, although the last category was somewhat difficult to achieve for a few. This issue was addressed during the in-class discussion that happened after the third session. Here are some examples of each category:

1. Observations:

“En Guatemala, es normal por tres generaciones de una familia vivir en una casa juntos.” [In Guatemala, it is normal for three generations of a family to live together in a house] (Participant 601 – Reflection 3)

“...arquitectura de Honduras es los porches. X explicó que las personas no los llaman ‘patios’ pero los llaman ‘el porch’ ... y las personas usan los porches por aire fresco en los días calientes.” [...architecture in Honduras is porches. X explained that people do not call them ‘patios’, but ‘porches’ ... and people use them for fresh air on hot days] (Participant 109 – Reflection 3)

2. Comparisons:

“Cuidar sobre el medio ambiente no es un tema político, como en América” [Taking care of the environment is not a political issue, like in America] (Participant 604 – Reflection 4)

“También aprendí que el gobierno de Honduras no hace mucho para proteger el medio ambiente. Esto es similar a los Estados Unidos.” [I also learned that the government in Honduras does not do a lot to protect the environment. This is like in the United States] (Participant 108 – Reflection 5)

“discutimos el reciclaje en nuestros países. No tienen la misma práctica cultural de protección ambiental que veo en mi

ciudad en los Estados Unidos. En mi ciudad la mayoría de mi vecinos se preocupa mucho por el medio ambiente” [we discussed recycling in our countries. They do not have the same cultural practice of environmental protection that I see in my city in the United States. In my city, most of my neighbors care a lot about the environment] (Participant 404 – Reflection 4)

3. Reflections (including opinions or judgments):

“Aprendí que en España separan el reciclaje. Hay contenedores específicos para ropa, botellas, papel y latas. Hay multas por ensuciar los contenedores. X también dijo como España implementa las leyes para proteger el medio ambiente. También hablamos sobre cómo los Estados Unidos afirman reciclar, en realidad no lo hacen la mayor parte del tiempo. Me lastima que los Estados Unidos se preocupen más por el dinero que por el medio ambiente” [I learned that in Spain people separate the recycling products. There are specific bins for clothing, bottles, paper, and cans. There are fines for soiling the bins. X also said how Spain implements laws to protect the environment. We also talked about how the United States claims to recycle, but in reality, they don't do it most of the time. It hurts that the United States worries more about money than about the environment] (Participant 106 – Reflection 4)

“el catorce de septiembre, los guatemaltecos corren entre dos lugares y llevan una antorcha para conmemorar una mujer que estaba pidiendo que Guatemala fuera liberada del colonialismo. ...querer conmemorar la lucha contra el colonialismo es una perspectiva cultural, porque significa que los guatemaltecos no quieren olvidar la importancia de la descolonización. Conmemorar una mujer también puede ser una perspectiva cultural, porque indique que los guatemaltecos piensen que algunas mujeres tienen un

papel importante en su historia.” [on Sept. 14th, Guatemalans run between two places and carry a torch to commemorate a woman who was rallying for the independence of Guatemala in colonial times. ...wanting to commemorate the fight against colonialism is a cultural perspective because it signifies that Guatemalans do not want to forget the importance of independence. Commemorate a woman could also be a cultural perspective because it indicates that Guatemalans think that some women have an important role in history] (Participant 603 – Reflection 1)

“los hondureños tienen relaciones más amistosas con sus vecinos que los [mi grupo étnico], a quienes generalmente no les gusta pasar mucho tiempo con personas que no son familiares. Más tarde, le mostré una imagen de un producto cultural, específicamente los edificios de apartamentos... Pude explicar sus orígenes y la razón por la que, aunque no vivo en esos ahora, todavía me representan. Al final de la discusión, supe que, para los hondureños, la historia de sus ciudades es muy importante, como un motivo de orgullo” [Hondurans have more friendly relationships with their neighbors than [my people], who generally don't like to spend a lot of time with people who are not family members. Later, I showed him an image of a cultural product, particularly an apartment building... I could explain its origins and the reasons they represent me, even though I do not live there any longer. At the end of the discussion, I learned that for Hondurans, the history of their cities is very important, like a reason to be proud] (Participant 503 – Reflection 3)

“Por ejemplo, el día de acción de gracias es una oportunidad para comer una cena grande con mi familia y, en general, la comida es un símbolo de amor” [For example, Thanksgiving Day is an opportunity to eat a large dinner with my family and, in

general, food is a symbol of love] (Participant 204 – Reflection 3)

“hay leyes que protegen el medio ambiente, incluyendo leyes que reducen la deforestación. Pero también hay muchas personas que las eluden cuando pagan a los funcionarios; hay mucha corrupción”
[*There are laws that protect the environment, including laws to reduce deforestation. But there are many people who avoid them when they pay the public servants; there is a lot of corruption]* (Participant 704 – Reflection 4)

RQ2: DOES VE HELP STUDENTS ADDRESS THE STANDARDS IN THE CULTURES GOAL AREA?

Data revealed that participants were able to make connections not only between products and practices, which require simpler vocabulary and skills, but also between practices and perspectives (Standard 2.1), products and perspectives (Standard 2.2) y even products, practices, and perspectives. However, as previously stated, the connections that involved perspectives were more commonly found in the written assignments (182 instances) than in the actual conversations (43 instances). Of the 25 participants who did not include perspectives in their conversations, 23 (92%) were able to include them in the subsequent written assignment.

Here are some examples of Standard 2.1: “Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the cultures studied” (NSFLEP 3):

“X dijo que la mayoría de los estudiantes viven en casa con sus familias. Creo que esto es indicativo que la cultura guatemalteca valora la familia más de nuestra cultura en los Estados Unidos.” [X said that most students live at home with their family. I think this is an indication that Guatemalans

value family more than we do in the United States] (Participant 305 – Reflection 3)

“En Honduras, la gente y las organizaciones encuentran soluciones a este problema recogiendo basura y limpiando el medio ambiente sin ayuda del gobierno. Estas acciones representan algunas de las prácticas culturales de las personas porque las personas de la sociedad no aceptan daños al medio ambiente” [In Honduras, people and organizations find solutions to this problem by picking up trash and cleaning the environment without the help of the government. These actions represent some of the cultural practices of people because society does not accept damage to the environment] (Participant 404-Reflection 5)

Here are some examples of Standard 2.2: “Learners use the language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied” (NSFLEP 3):

“hablábamos sobre el salario mínimo en Argentina. Fue muy interesante de escuchar sus opiniones sobre un tema que dijo que era sensible para la gente. Esta emoción de sensibilidad puede ser una perspectiva cultural sobre un producto cultural, el salario mínimo” [we discussed minimum wage in Argentina. It was interesting to hear her opinions about a topic that she said it was sensitive for people. This emotion of sensitivity could be a cultural perspective about a cultural product, minimum wage] (Participant 603 – Reflection 5)

“Una diferencia es que la mayoría del sistema de seguro en Honduras es público. Mientras, en los Estados Unidos, la mayoría del sistema de seguro no es público, y actualmente es muy caro. Por supuesto, a mí me gusta el sistema público en Honduras porque pienso que la salud es una necesidad para la vida” [A

difference is that most of the insurance system in Honduras is public, whereas in the United States, most of the insurance system is not public, and actually it is very expensive. Of course, I like the public system in Honduras because I think that health is a necessity in our lives] (Participant 502 – Reflection 2)

“observó que las casas en los Estados Unidos son más grandes que las casas en Honduras. Pienso que es porque los americanos prefieren que todas las cosas sean más grandes. Los carros americanos son un buen ejemplo” [she observed that houses in the United States are bigger than houses in Honduras. I think it is because Americans prefer everything bigger. American cars are a good example] (Participant 402 – Reflection 3)

“es una vasija de barro... Ella explicó que es como una taza grande que sus antepasados usaban para contener agua. Ella tiene uno en su casa. Es más importante a ella porque representa sus antepasados y cultura” [it is a clay pot... She explained that it is like a big cup that her ancestors used to use to keep water. She has one in her house. It is more important to her because it represents her ancestors and her culture] (Participant 404 – Reflection 3)

Here are some excerpts that show the relationship between products and practices, which do not involve reflection but are also necessary and useful, as well as expected in novice-level learners:

“las iguanas están en peligro de extinción, porque las personas comen iguanas como exquisitez. En respuesta a esto, el gobierno tiene leyes para proteger a las iguanas.” [iguanas are in danger of extinction because people eat iguanas as a delicacy. In response to this, the government has laws

to protect iguanas] (Participant 505 – Reflection 4)

“los hondureños se reúnen en el estadio nacional de Honduras para una ceremonia grande y levantan la bandera de Honduras” [Hondurans gather at the National Stadium for a large ceremony and they raise the flag of Honduras] (Participant 402 – Reflection 2)

“del Día de Todos los Santos en Perú. X me mostró una foto de una tanta wawa – un pan parecido con un niño que su familia cocina para esta fiesta” [of All Saints Day in Peru. X showed me a picture of a tanta wawa – a bread with the shape of a baby that his family cooks for this celebration] (Participant 406 – Reflection 4)

And students also included comments that involved all 3 Ps related to the same topic:

“Un objeto muy importante para la cultura de X (y la cultura de Guatemala) es la piedra de moler. Es un producto tangible que representa la cultura. Los abuelos de X usaban la piedra de moler para cocinar” [A very important object for X’s culture (and the culture of Guatemala) is the grinding stone. It is a tangible product that represents the culture. X’s grandparents used to use the grinding stone to cook] (Participant 206 – Reflection 3)

“Carnaval de Pesca representa la importancia de la industria de pescados (para la economía y las comidas tradicionales, por ejemplo)” [The Fishing Carnival represents the importance of the fishing industry (for the economy and the traditional foods, for example)] (Participant 104 – Reflection 5)

“lavan sus ropas a mano en el lavadero, que es un producto específicamente de América Central. Para mí, es interesante que los americanos dependan tanto de

los electrodomésticos para hacer quehaceres domésticos” [they wash their clothes by hand in the washboard, which is a product specific to Central America. For me, it is interesting that Americans depend so much on appliances to do the house chores] (Participant 402 – Reflection 3)

“La Fiesta de Primavera es una celebración el 21 de septiembre con funciones de música, baile, y food trucks. En Argentina el valor de comunidad y unidad es más importante” [The Spring Fest is a celebration on September 21st with music, dance, and food trucks. In Argentina the value of community and unity is more important] (Participant 403 – Reflection 5)

Lack of understanding was expected at this level of proficiency, so instances of this phenomenon were not tabulated. However, the researcher observed misinterpretations, simplifications, and overgeneralizations related to the topics discussed that needed to be addressed either in the in-class discussion or with written feedback on the Canvas assignment. Here are some examples:

“Un cultural perspectiva interesante es cómo las personas no comen muchas comidas rápidas y instead comen muchas comidas saludables. Por esto, la gente en Perú no está afectando para todos la salud epidemias que están sucediendo en el mundo” [An interesting cultural perspective is how people do not eat a lot of fast food and, instead, eat a lot of healthy food. That is why, people in Peru are not affected by all the health epidemics that are happening in the world] (Participant 506 – Reflection 5)

“X dijo que vivía en una casa de concreto lo que me hizo pensar por qué no había muchas casas de concreto en Los Ángeles.” [X said that he lived in a house made of concrete, which made me think why there were no houses made of concrete in Los Angeles] (Participant 303 – Reflection 3)

Instructor Feedback: “Guatemala es un país muy húmedo y construir con madera no es apropiado. Los bloques de concreto son sólidos, previenen muchas enfermedades y duran mucho” [Guatemala es a very humid country and building with wood is not appropriate. Concrete blocks are solid, prevent diseases (website link), and last long]

“En Estados Unidos nosotros despenalizamos la marihuana pero en España es ilegal.” [In the United States we de-penalized marihuana, but in Spain is illegal] (Participant 702 – Reflection 2)

DISCUSSION

Regarding the first research question (Were the 3 Ps included in the VE experience?), the answer is yes. All 3 Ps were included in the VE experience, but data showed that there were major differences between the actual conversations and the written assignments in terms of the presence of cultural perspectives.

In the written assignments, products and practices were present more frequently than perspectives (40.38%, 38.26%, and 21.36%, respectively). This finding was expected, since perspectives usually require higher-order thinking skills, and it is difficult for a second-semester student to express complex thoughts in a foreign language, as other scholars have stated (Crane 68, Page and Benander 9). Another factor that could have affected this low frequency of perspectives was the basic explanation of what was expected in the reflection assignment. In hindsight, this part could have been better designed and practiced including three differentiated tasks or categories (observing cultural phenomena, comparing to own culture, and reflecting on meaning and values). Despite that low frequency, most students (94.23%) were able to include a cultural perspective in one or more of their five written

reflection assignments. This is a very positive finding that speaks of the importance of the written reflection assignment for extracting values and beliefs behind cultural products and practices.

Although Crane claims that “it is difficult to speculate with certainty what, if any, connection-making would have occurred for these students without the existence of the written reflections and their evaluation guidelines” (68), data from this study shows that cultural products, practices, and perspectives were present in the conversations as well. Cultural perspectives, however, were less frequent in the conversations than in the written reflection assignments—43 instances in 256 conversations compared to 182 in 255 written assignments. The fact that 25 students (48.07%) were unable to include a single cultural perspective in any of their conversations is a significant finding and reveals second-semester students’ difficulty to include complex thoughts in their spontaneous oral production. Zimmerman also found that her advanced Korean students of Japanese discussed cultural perspectives in conversations but that not every conversation led to cultural perspectives (37). Apart from foreign language speaking skills, other factors that could explain why perspectives were hardly discussed during conversations may include the nature of the topics (usually, very concrete topics typical of second-semester courses), the tendency to go off-topic and do small talk, lack of critical thinking skills, and the short time allowed for the conversation (15 minutes). These are possible factors, but more research is needed to determine their magnitude. Regarding topics, the topic of housing and house chores produced more cultural perspectives in both the conversations and the written assignments than the other four topics.

The finding that perspectives were present in the written assignment more frequently than in the conversations reinforces the claim that both the written assignment and the in-class discussion—what some

scholars call “pedagogical mentoring” (O’Dowd et al. 169)—, are essential tools to address the Cultures standards. Ceo-Francesco points out that in-class discussions can provide opportunities for examining cultural perspectives (41), and the researcher must add that they are also opportunities to clarify misconceptions and to teach students how to think critically. Task design has been identified as an essential component for a successful experience (Fernández-Cuenca and Muller 25; Ferreira-Lopes et al. 23) and the researcher admits that the instructions for the reflection assignment in this study could have been better designed. Also, to prevent low proficiency from interfering with the cultural meaning-constructing process, these reflections should be done in the first language, at least at the beginning levels. Sama and Wu found that “individual reflections forced learners to be clearer about their strengths and weaknesses” (93), highlighting their value. This critically oriented approach may compensate for the lack of perspectives present in textbooks (Berti 186). In a video-recorded interview with the founder of TalkAbroad, Trego revealed that his students formed groups to discuss their sessions and even came up with strategies to use for future sessions (00:15:20-00:17:32). This type of collaboration is recommended to improve students’ connection skills. Flowers et al. mentioned that guided reflection is important because it leads to intercultural respect (10) but noted that the process also takes “large amounts of classroom time” (5), which is something instructors need to take into consideration.

Regarding the second research question (Does VE help students address the Standards in the Cultures goal area?), the answer is yes. Evidence shows that students reflected on the relationship between practices and perspectives (Standard 2.1) and products and perspectives (Standard 2.2), particularly in the written reflection assignment. In addition, they also related products and practices as well as the 3 Ps in combination.

However, since perspectives did not appear frequently during conversations, only half of the students (52%) were able to meet the Standards at that moment. Luckily, 94.23% of students met the Standards later in their written assignment. Again, this finding emphasizes the importance of the reflection assignment and in-class discussions to delve into cultural perspectives. Just having students speak to their coaches online but not integrating the experience into the curriculum (with the assignment and the discussion) would have been a lost opportunity. As Chun says, “Simply connecting learners with each other online does not ensure a successful intercultural exchange” (19).

CONCLUSION

Data from this study revealed that cultural products, practices, and perspectives were included in the VE experience of second-semester students that used the LinguaMeeting platform to speak with native Spanish speakers. Although these conversations and the subsequent written reflection assignment contained plenty of discussions about cultural products and practices, cultural perspectives appeared less frequently in written assignments and even less frequently during the actual conversations. Half of these participants were not able to discuss perspectives in their VE conversations, even though most of them were able to include them later in their written reflection assignments. This finding is not surprising given the nature of cultural perspectives and the beginning level of the students. The design of the written assignment needs to be done carefully to maximize its potential and allowing novice learners to reflect in English rather than a foreign language seems logical.

Data also showed that students were able to address both Cultures Standards by connecting practices with perspectives as well as products with perspectives. In addition, they connected products with practices as well as the 3 Ps in combination. The instructor’s

feedback on written assignments was useful to pinpoint misunderstandings or clarify issues. Likewise, the in-class discussion was beneficial to explain misconceptions, guide students in general, and help them think critically about cultural issues.

The findings in this study align with previous literature regarding the cultural benefits and challenges that VE offers in the foreign language class, but this study is unique because it quantifies the presence of cultural products, practices, and perspectives in different parts of the VE experience, evidencing the difficulty of second-semester students in incorporating cultural perspectives in their conversations but not so much in their written assignments. Data in this study show that second-semester students of Spanish can address the Standards if they are allowed to reflect on cultural issues in a subsequent written assignment.

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Appendix A

LinguaMeeting Conversation 3

(The original was in Spanish)

Topic: The house and house chores

Before the conversation:

- Review Chapter 12 and the content studied up until today.
- Prepare three questions to find out what your coach's home looks like.
- Think about the lifestyle in your culture (types of dwellings, neighborhoods, etc.) and create questions to find out more about your coach's country.
- What can you say about the place where you live right now? If you live in a dorm, what does your room look like? What furniture do you have? Who are your roommates? Who does what chore to keep it clean and tidy? Think of the chores that you do and which ones you prefer to do (It is necessary that I..., but I prefer to...).

During the conversation:

Ask your coach what objects or products represent the way of life in their country and why. If you want to, you can show an object or product of your country that represents you and explain why you feel identified with that product. This serves as a model for your coach.

After the conversation:

Watch the recording of your conversation and write a paragraph that includes linguistic and cultural aspects, as a reflection on this week's topic (10 sentences). Did you learn any new words or expressions? Do you and your coach share a similar product? Explain. Remember the 3 Ps:

- Cultural products are things created by humans, tangible or intangible. (*What is it?*)
- Cultural practices are habits, customs, or things they do. (*How do you use it or do it?*)
- Cultural perspectives are values and beliefs. (*Why? What for?*)

Appendix B

In-class discussion starter task

(Participant 107)

En parejas o en grupos, discutan los productos, prácticas, y perspectivas culturales que aparecieron en sus conversaciones de LinguaMeeting 1, 2 y 3. Examinen si tienen elementos en común entre ustedes y también si sus opiniones coinciden. Pueden mirar sus reflexiones en Canvas para recordar mejor. Después van a compartir con el resto de la clase.

[In pairs or groups, discuss the cultural products, practices, and perspectives that appeared in your LM sessions 1, 2, and 3. Examine if you have elements in common and if your opinions coincide. You can read your written assignments on Canvas to remember better. Later, you will share with the class]

