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## Optimizing Multicultural Competence: Influence of Language Programs on College Students

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# OPTIMIZING MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE: INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE PROGRAMS ON COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Building on concepts of cross cultural awareness, the current study examined the impact of foreign language learning on increasing the cultural competence on college students who persisted in learning the language to the advanced levels. Qualitative data collection tools were used to examine aspects influencing learners' cultural awareness of speakers of other nationalities especially those where the foreign language is spoken. Classroom observations; open ended interviews with students and instructors; and document analysis were used to obtain relevant data. Triangulation, inter-coding, and participant feedback validated the trustworthiness of findings. The study findings filled in a void in the literature about the impact of foreign language learning on college student multicultural competence.*

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the establishment of several cognitive, academic, personal, and societal benefits of foreign language learning, there is a scarcity in empirical studies addressing the relationship between multicultural competence and advanced foreign language studies in the college level. "With the new tendency for globalization and no-border economy, it is essential for American students not only to be knowledgeable of other cultures but to be able to communicate with people from these cultures as well" (Awad, 2013, p. 97). Language learning gains its social importance from the aptitude to expose learners to cultures other than their own (Byram, 1989). Such process usually increases student understanding of the foreign culture and develops positive attitudes and appreciation of the speakers of the foreign language and their home cultures.

This study aimed at utilizing qualitative tools to explore the relationship between college students' multicultural competence and their advanced level in studying a foreign language. Therefore, to achieve the aforementioned purpose, the study endeavored to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How does advanced foreign language study influence the multicultural competence of college students?

2. How do college students in advanced foreign language program perceive their cultural awareness?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Although most college students in the United States stop foreign language studies before reaching a considerable communicative proficiency (Hayward, 2000; Lambert, 1999; Panetta, 1999), Byram (1989) argued that the origins of social importance of language teaching lies in its aptitude to introduce learners to cultural norms other than their own. The direct results of this exposure is an increased cultural competence manifested in an understanding of the foreign culture and developing a positive attitude and acceptance of the speakers of the foreign language and its cultural norms (Byram, 1989).

#### Cultural Competence

Several researchers tried to offer an analytical perspective of cultural competence relevant to foreign language learning (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2003; Jurasek, 1995; Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2003; Yesil & Demiroz, 2017). Jurasek (1995) suggested that cultural competence has two phases: 1) raising awareness in regard to perception and perspective, and 2) a growing ability to identify what ideas, objects, and concepts may look like from the perspectives of the community of another culture. Paige et al. (2003) described culture learning as including three basic learning processes, starting with learners' investigation of their culture, passing through their discovery of the relationship between language and culture, and culminating in the ability to analyze and compare cultures. Byram et al. (2003) offered a more comprehensive explanation of intercultural competence as a series of savors: *savoir apprendre*, *savoir comprendre*, *savoir s'engager*, and *savoir être*. Each of these savors represents a certain level of cultural knowledge and the individual's abilities to utilize the cultural information to communicate effectively. The *savoir* starts with cultural understanding, to cultural comparison, to cultural utilization, and finally to the ability to reconsider stereotypes and preconceived cultural notions.

Magosa and Simopoulos (2009) argued that foreign language learners should be able to see the intercultural competence in their instructors before acquiring it. Then, they would utilize the consolidated knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for the desired intercultural communication that encourages mutual acquaintance, productive coexistence and cultural exchanges. Likewise, Fox and Diaz-Greenberg (2006) argued that cultural competence need to exceed the learners' knowledge of cultural feasts, clothes, or foods to the learners' abilities to engage in culturally current and sensitive conversations. Therefore, learners' culture skills should include: ability to show respect for the culture, potential for being self-sustained culture learners utilizing various resources, tolerance at cross-cultural encounters, and control of emotions utilizing the culture knowledge to show appreciation and understanding (Drewelow, 2013; Lustig & Koester as cited in Paige et al., 2003).

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## Research on Culture

Studying the relationship between classroom activities, student persistence, and the teachers' role warrants further examination into foreign language students' culture-awareness and identity with regards to their cultural competence (Abreu, 2016; Smith, 2013; Vázquez, 2012). Following their study of Malaysian foreign language learners, Thang, Nor, Gobel, and Suppiah. (2011) suggested the investigation of the influence of culture on student attributions with regard to effort and achievement in other countries. Examining the role of foreign language learning in developing student cultural competence, Muira (2011) called for further investigations of reasons of changes of a learner's perceived self. Muira (2011) also asserted the lack of research on the relationship between these changes and learners' motivation to persist in studying the foreign language.

The foreign language curriculum plays an essential part in the learning process through shaping learners' perceptions of the target language (Tikiz & Çubukçu, 2013). Although instructors of foreign languages usually have the freedom to modify the curriculum, the textbook is still an important roadmap for instructional practice. Raising the issue of cultural components in foreign language curricula, Colarossi (2009) stressed the need for content analysis of popular foreign language textbooks to reveal their potential for conveying a positive cultural component that meets the expectations of the National Standards and raises the cultural competence of foreign language learners. Therefore, an examination of the curriculum cultural components may shed some light on whether these are enough to bring about a transformation of student cultural perceptions or not.

Stressing teachers' beliefs about culture and their influence on their instructional practice in the foreign language classroom, Colarossi (2009) asserted the need for qualitative and quantitative studies assessing the influence of teachers' background on their teaching of cultural knowledge in the classroom. Calling for more deliberate research on the cultural components, or the lack thereof, in teacher education programs, Hesar, Konca, and Zarfsaz (2012) pointed out that teacher candidates barely receive any formal training in how to raise their students' awareness or how to teach cultural components in their foreign language classes. Colarossi (2009) also called for an examination of whether teacher preparation programs include cultural components that have a positive impact on teachers' beliefs and practices regarding culture teaching. Studying the interconnectedness of culture, language and gender and their role in the transformations of academic communities, Morita (2009) called for qualitative studies that would target not only students, but all stakeholders involved in foreign language teaching including instructors, administrators, and teacher educators.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative case study design was utilized in this study to explore the cultural aspects relevant to college students studying foreign languages. The choice of the case study was justified due to its focus on reality as it is perceived in the context of participants' life experiences inside and outside of the classroom (Creswell, 2007). A deliberate effort was made to create an understanding of the case from the perspectives of the student participants (Merriam, 1998). As the study explored complex beliefs, feelings, and perceptions of the learners, the qualitative approach was the most appropriate especially given the dearth in literature about the relationship between advanced foreign language learning and multicultural competence.

### **Participants**

The study participants fell under four language programs at the Midwest University: Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish (See Table below). 18 college students at different academic levels: two graduate students, four juniors, and 12 seniors. The ten female students and the eight male students were at the advanced levels of the language programs. Two of the participants were recommended by one of the professors while the rest volunteered to participate in the study. Eleven students had the opportunities either to study abroad or being in the countries of the foreign languages they were studying for different reasons. It is also noteworthy that four interviews were conducted with Modern language instructors. These four interviews were not the main source of data. However, they provided the instructors' perspectives on several essential constructs in this study including: technology utilization, culture integration, and motivation optimization.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected over three academic years. The initial data collection tool constituted of a series of observations conducted in the modern language classrooms to provide a structural approach to the study. Right after each observation, interaction with the students in the advanced modern language classes allowed for scheduling interviews with students who volunteered to participate in the study. Interviews continued for two academic years. The location of the interviews varied. The choice was given to the participants to decide on the meeting place. After conducting interviews with student participants, four instructors of the languages included in the study were interviewed to seek their input about the emergent themes of culture, motivation, and persistence in advanced modern language study. Following instructors' interviews, a sample of textbooks was obtained to provide more input on the aspect of culture in the curriculum as an emergent theme that was developed based on student participants' feedback.

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## Data Analysis

Patterns and themes emerged from analyzing verbatim transcriptions of the taped interviews. Patterns and themes were organized into tentative categories and assigned a list of codes. The codes were later categorized under the emic list of themes that emerged throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Initial themes that did not offer pertinent information to the topic of cross cultural awareness were eliminated. Categorization under the final emergent list of themes was instrumental in chunking the data into relevant portions that revealed the multiple dimensions of the case.

Varying the sources of data to include: classroom observations, students' interviews, faculty interviews, and document reviews achieved triangulation. Once participants' interviews were analyzed, participants received an email inviting them to review the analysis and email back with changes they would like to add. Several participants responded that they have no changes to suggest while three participants added comments on the areas of cultural competence and stereotypes and support. Another qualitative researcher, a graduate student at the College of Communication, was asked to code one interview of each language to check inter-coder reliability.

## FINDINGS

Cultural competence themes that emerged from the data analysis asserted the direct relationship of advanced foreign language studies and the multicultural abilities of college students. Student touched about concepts of the others, appreciation of differences, revisiting one's preconceived stances, and assuming a third person's perspective to look at one's own self. Cultural competence was also an area that participants wanted to gain more knowledge about.

## CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Cultural competence would occur in several manifestations. At its simplest form, it encompasses the ability to interact with people from the culture of the target language. In a more complex form, cultural competence challenges preconceived notions and common misconceptions about a certain culture or a cultural group. Participants shared a genuine understanding of the differences among cultures and the deep meanings of various cultural practices of the target language and its people.

Klay asserted this definition of cultural competence, which includes the ability to interact effectively with people of the target culture saying, "You definitely have to be a culturally oriented person if you're going to do language ... So, you can communicate with people. If you have a language in your head, but you just keep it to yourself, it is worthless". Jacob also talks about his experience with the Spanish culture saying: "One interesting thing that I learned is that as long as you attempt to embrace the culture, people from that country will be a lot more welcoming to you, instead of you trying to impose your beliefs on them".

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On the other hand, Sam, speaks about his Arabic conversation partners from Saudi Arabia and how this partnership assisted him in learning the language in addition of developing his culture awareness of the Arabic language. He articulates:

I had two Saudi guys that I would go and talk to every Sunday. We would just sit there and talk about where they came from where I came from. Things that they heard other guys say, me explaining it to them. Explaining to them basketball and American football, them explaining to me the kind of cars that they drive, the movies that they like the music that they like and that was one of the coolest parts of the whole experience.

Throughout this experience, he learned about the culture as well:

During this, I learned about the culture if I would go there to where they were I would know so much just by base. I would know how to react to things I would know where to go what to do things like that which you can't get that from a textbook you can't get that from reading an internet article. So, learning about the culture was an eye opening.

Moreover, Leah is now aware of different people perceptions and stereotypes of other culture. Now, she is definitely conscious when culture misconceptions and stereotypes happen in front of her. She talks about her experience in learning Spanish and how the relationship with her Spanish boyfriend helped enhance her culture awareness. She says, "Knowing my boyfriend, I've learned so much about even how he stereotypes other races which is really interesting, because I'm an American looking at how a Spaniard categorizes other races and ethnicities".

Because of learning French, Annie ended up not only appreciating the foreign language and its culture, but also started realizing the value of her own culture as an American and the English language as well.

My opinion changed, so, at first, I never really liked French people. I never really understood why they did certain things. But now, I appreciate them more, now I want to get to understand them why they are how they are. The language is so beautiful. I have an appreciation for that as well. It's grown my opinion. I have more facts to back up why I feel...how I feel about the French. So, also after learning about another culture and language, you appreciate your culture and language even more. So, I've not only started to appreciate French more but I've appreciated being American too.

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I thought they were arrogant, I thought that boys were kind of sissies and not very strong. I thought that the women were not very intelligent but very beautiful. I thought they were really skinny, I really didn't think they did anything. But once you learn about how the schools are so competitive and how the men are actually not sissies they're just different they're not like the bagel eating beret wearing people that you picture by the Eiffel tower. They're people just like us they're just different.

Therefore, learning in the advanced levels of foreign languages helped the students be more culturally competent when dealing with native people of the target language. Part of that competence is understanding of the target culture. Another essential part is understanding one's own culture and how it differs from the target culture.

In numerous incidents, the study participants shared their awareness of the differences between their own culture and the target language culture. Susan talks about the differences she learned during the Arabic classes, "The differences between everyday practices like between religions, marriages ... have to do with the different laws and politics". She understood that every culture might have its own needs, "There is such a need in our society that we get educated about sex education and protection and that might not necessarily be something important over there".

Ryan were surprised by the differences between the French culture and the American culture. He explains how he was one of the typical American kids that did not want to examine other people, "I was just the typical blooded American kid. I did not want to examine other people's cultures on their own terms". However, his experience with learning French changed that attitude as he does "really enjoy learning about the differences of French culture, French tips and so on". He continues to explain,

Cultures need to be learned and examined on their own terms. Just throw everything out the door and just figure out why they want to do certain things, why they eat cheese that's moldy, what do they find enjoyable in wine. So, it's just my experience at the university has made me more curious as to why people do the things that they do in other cultures. ... So, I think being able to put the two cultures side by side you have to understand both of .... But, then, as I said earlier, you have to kind of throw out all your preconceived notions and that's something that I learned.

Even though Amanda does not like some of the aspects in the French culture, she shows enough appreciation to it. She explains how we have to accept others as they are if we want them to accept us as we are. Moreover, she says that we should not hate each other because of being different. According to her, all of us should only be aware of the differences and appreciate it.

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The language study did not only help Jacob recognize the culture of the target language but rather helped him understand the fine differences amongst the speakers of the Spanish language with their different national origins:

There is so much culture stuff. It's interesting, when you see the difference between Latin Americans, those, Mexico, down South, in comparison to Spanish Americans, and there's a real cultural difference even just between Mexico and Spain. Where it is similar to somebody being from northern United States, somebody being from southern United States, there is a different cultural aspect to it. I have come across people that are from Mexico and do not like Spaniards. I have come across Spaniards that do not like Mexicans. It is a real interesting dynamic, in that some, not all, some Spaniards claim to be more European than Spanish, so it's, "I'm part of the European culture."

As a result of the language study, Jacob was able to identify the fine line differences even within the people of the same country where he shares what he noticed about Spain as an example:

I was surprised at how unique Spain was in the sense that northern Spain, you have very heavy Catholicism in northern Spain, then you go to southern Spain, and it's very influenced by Arabic culture, especially in Andalusia. It's a region down there, a city, and it's had to do with the invasion in 711 and the Arabs taking over countries for seven centuries. That was interesting, because I did not realize how Spain became Spain, how it is a big melting pot of cultures. You learn that because of their open coastline, how all these invaders came in and influenced in some ways. You had the Germanics tribe come in; you had Hebrews come in at some point in time. You had all these different cultures come in and have a piece of Spain and leave their mark. I found it fascinating that this small little country reminds me of New York; in that, it is a big melting pot

While learning Chinese, Abbie notice that the Chinese classroom behavior is different than the American.

They do a lot of repeating in class really loud and the whole class would loudly repeat it back. We do not have this where I grew up here. And, so, just learning how they learn and how we learn and how it collides or how we can work together, I think that was an

aspect. Then, sometimes the teachers will invite you into their homes or let you meet their family and see how they operate as families and that teaches you a lot about the culture as well.

Similarly, Annie points out the differences of the educational system.

Their school system is completely different. ... They focus on history and art more than we do. They do not focus on math and science like we do. Their schools are way more advanced and difficult and competitive than we are. How they look at other nations and stuff like that too.

Alex talks about the difference in the educational system as well. “The way they’re taught is different”. She explains how they learn basic math skills, “They don’t practice division, they memorize the multiplication table and then by that they can divide”.

Agreeing with other participants, Annie now is aware of how the French are more involved in politics and government more than people in the United States.

They are definitely more involved in politics and government than we are. Everybody, all of my pen pals that I met there, know way more about American government than we do. They know about what is going on worldwide. Whereas, I do not even know what is going on in my country. I do somewhat but not comparatively to them at all. They know not only about the US but they know about France, they know about Spain they know about everything going on.

The cultural component of Jacob’s language study enabled him to recognize the “culture clashes” as he called it. He realizes the conflicts within a specific culture and the socio-political circumstances that sometimes influence the speakers of the target language. Such realization is rarely acquired without a close understanding of the language and the cultural circumstances that are entangled with it.

You find that everybody has some sort of conflict or dilemma. You have these whenever you have a melting pot. You are always going to have a clash of cultures, ideas, things like that, especially if they have been prevalent in that culture for a vast amount of time. You realize the way people are now, coming out of the Franco regime where it was totalitarian. It was really a hierarchical absolute power type of structure where freedoms were limited and tolerance

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was limited and you see how now they've come about to be a democracy. You still have some of the supporters from ... that era alive and it is amazing to see the change. We got to see in one my classes how they went to democracy and how a lot of people didn't want the democracy. They liked it the way it was. It was interesting how people get programmed into believing a certain way or thinking a certain way and believing that is the right way, like, "I will limit my freedoms as long as I know that we have this structure in place".

Leah shares almost the same experience and how learning the language helped her recognize, appreciate, and seek more knowledge about the culture of the foreign language. She enjoys learning about the world before the existence of the United States and how Florida was part of Spain.

Participants also noted a new understanding of the difference between cultures even in the smallest aspects of day-to-day life of the target culture. Hannah, for example, learns that shopping is different in the Arab countries than in America. "Instead of helping yourself here, you have to ask the owner of the shop for process and help in certain things there". She also mentions that "thing there are a lot cheaper than in America. Besides, you can bargain with owner of the shop".

These small aspects of day-to-day life included several social aspects as well. Ryan shares the difference in table manners between the U.S. and France. "If you're eating dinner in France you have your hands on the table in America you don't it's absolutely rude". Alex shares various aspects of culture difference that she became aware of while learning Chinese and Spanish. She asserted that one has "to be more open minded". She gives the example of the reasons to use chopsticks. "they believe that the chef should cut, use the knives and cut it so that way you don't have to be cutting at the table. Also, the chop sticks are more sanitary than forks because in china they all eat in the big bowl". She contrasts the Asian "culture of eating together" with what happens normally in the United States. "They eat at a big table and all share the same food. Whereas here in America even if you eat all together, you're still eating in your own separate plate. I really liked the whole sharing kind of thing, it brings people closer". Similarly, Emily realizes that family structure is one of the most interesting differences between the American culture and the Spanish culture,

They all come home every day and have lunch together as a family and I can just see the importance there. Whereas, a lot of time in the United States people are so caught up in school, sports, watching TV, and work that they do not come together as much as a family.

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Similarly, Marty sees obvious differences between the Chinese “family dynamic” culture and the American one, “There is a little more pressure on the kids at a very early age to work hard, to work very, very hard, study very, very hard”. He also points out the “hierarchical respect in the family”. He shares that there,

You do not question your parents. You do what your parents say, absolutely. We have that to an extent in the United States and in other countries around the world as well, but it is not as pronounced as it is over there. The amount of respect you give to your parents, your grandparents, and your ancestors.

Alex shares her knowledge about different wedding habits. She uses the bridal dress as an example, “Here, we wear the white dress and in China, they wear the traditional dress”.

Learning a foreign language also equipped students with the capacity to understand the origins of stereotypes. Though admitting that “a lot of stereotypes are exaggerated”, Klay who learns both French and Chinese shares, “Some people jump to the word “Oh! You’re stereotyping”. They just do not realize that certain practices and certain habits; certain philosophies are just cultivated because of the country’s history; because of the way people interact with each other”. He explains,

Like one of the stereotypes about China is that Chinese are so smart and they’re very academic. If someone were to say that, he would be labeled as being stereotypical. But if you look at the population, the amount of competition on all academic levels, regardless, if you’re talking about, even elementary, parents put their kids into extracurricular activities like the whole weekend. So, kids, like even little kids, they have no life. They if are not learning in school, learning ping pong, learning English, learning tai chi or anything. It’s extremely strenuous for them and this is their life. That’s very typical, so they have to be very competitive academically and other domains. So, that way they can one day be prepared well for a competitive job field. So, if you analyze why certain things are said, it is probably based on something.

However, a deeper definition of culture competence embraces reconsidering one’s own misconceptions and stereotypes about other cultures.

One of the definitions of cultural competence is the clarification and the appreciation of values and beliefs of all aspects of a certain culture, most participants shared that studying a foreign language played a critical role in clarifying several misconceptions and allowed them to value and appreciate the culture of the language that they are learning. Participants’ responses ranged from

the simple stereotypes about food and sports to the more complex stereotypes like concepts of masculinity and ideological practices. Marty explains how learning Chinese and its culture has changed his understanding of the world, He states that such learning had made him “a lot more, I guess, aware of our world and the way things are, instead of the way things people tell us they are. It gives me a much, much broader view of the world”.

Marty changed many family misconceptions about China. He talks about his learning experience and visiting China saying, “I thought, Everybody over there knows martial arts. That is not true... I had no idea what Chinese food was like before I was over there. ... Real Chinese food, is nothing like what we have here”. He discusses the stereotype that his family had about China as a dangerous place with hostile people.

I had no idea that people were going to be so friendly and so nice. I know that most of my family, even though they really liked the idea of me learning Chinese, most of them were opposed to me going over there by myself. They were afraid that it was really dangerous and that they wouldn't treat Americans very nicely ... Nothing was further from the truth. I felt safe. I was in Nanjing, which is a big city not far from Shanghai, and I felt safer in that big city in China than I feel in my own hometown.

Unlike Marty, Alva has a different perspective as a very accepting well-rounded family has raised her. “My dad tried really hard to make sure that we did not judge people based off of what society tells us is associated to them. But I'd be lying if I say that I didn't have some of the stereotypes that are prevalent about the Hispanic community”. She describes a stereotype she had that is associated with the Hispanic culture about masculinity saying,

I think one of the biggest things that changed was the idea of machismo. In Spanish, it has to do with masculinity, powerful, being macho men, being tough. In English when we hear it, we incorrectly translate it to being tough and rough with a negative connotation like aggressive. After learning about Latin America and Mexico. I knew that the culture of machismo and macho actually means being a good guy. A strong father, a father that plays with the kids and is there for the family, that's religious, that earns a living. I never thought of it like that.

Alva also shared how she did not think that people from the Hispanic culture are religious. “They're very religious in general. Learning some of the phrases they say and use ... you can see the Catholicism comes out.” Meanwhile, Leah had several cultural misconceptions until she got to college. Although she started learning the language very early, she did not achieve culture

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awareness until she joined college. She had a cultural stereotype about people from the Hispanic culture being laid back. Such stereotype was challenged during her interaction with the Spanish teacher in the composition class.

In my composition class, I had a teacher from Chile, and in Chile, they're very professional ... When addressing teachers and elders, they use a professional form. The first day of the class he said, "You will always call me by the professional title. Like 'We are not equals'. I am your professor. You should address me professionally". I was just really surprised that he was so strict, because I guess you think of ... People from Latin America as laid back, at least compared to Asia, where you think of people from Asia as more strict.

Similarly, Emily realizes some basic assumptions about the Spanish culture, "You realize that it's so much more similar to our society than people realize. You expect them to be poor and not as advanced but it is not like that". Likewise, Sam gained a lot of knowledge about the culture differences and changed his perspectives of the Arab world after taking Arabic classes. He asserted the influence the study had on him to read about the culture. He shares his experience about reading a book about the doctrine of Jihad and Islam. "It was extremely interesting. Had I never taken the class, I would have never read that book, would not have really entered my mind, and would not have really any invested interest in any of it". He also suggested that everyone should try and take a course to understand cultures and conflicts.

I wish people would take a course to understand things like that because many people do not care they just like to live with their biases or their prejudices ....It is extremely rewarding when you talk to someone from the Middle East and you get their perspective. I guess it is from the stereotypes that you get from the news and the media here and it is so different from what you thought you would hear.

On the other hand, Klay explains the influence of studying a foreign language on students' cultural awareness and different stereotypes, "There are natural stereotypes about different cultures some of these images are accurate and some of these images are not so. You just have to learn for yourself by interaction with local people what the true image is". Susan shares the change in here attitude towards Middle Eastern countries,

Growing up through nine-eleven you definitely have these images in your head of what the Middle East is like. But after I started

taking classes, I fell in love with it and I definitely love to go there and travel and work. Before these courses, I thought that everybody was Muslim and - probably from the media - everybody is hostile, everybody is backwards and uneducated but these classes really proved differently ... It is definitely a major change. Before I started taking these classes, I never would have wanted to travel there. ... Now, it is totally different.

Similarly, John, with some previous stereotypes about Muslim countries, talks about his experience after learning about the hijab in his Arabic classes,

It can definitely change the perceptions of the culture and the understanding tremendously. Just through ...the text book or even just in the classroom discussion... One semester, we did the clothing and explaining the hijab when I said okay, this is why they wear it. ...So, maybe this is not something that these people are forced to do but maybe it is a choice for them.

The same occurred to Susan. It changed her goal of wanting to secure the US from Middle Eastern terrorists to travel to work in the Middle East as a peaceful negotiator. "I take everything [from the media] from a political stand point. But what you would get from the media is so biased. Then when you actually start delving into culture and learning it, you figure out it's so completely different", she states. "They're not backwards, they have internet; they have cars. Look at Dubai it is like incredible. I, also, think it's the oil that is all we think about, Middle East oil," she continues explaining how the language classes changed her attitudes towards the Middle East.

I really fell in love with the Middle East after I started learning about it. Almost all of them are pretty well rounded. Definitely, the language classes mixed with the history and culture classes ... changed my whole perspective. I went from wanting to hunt terrorists under that whole perception wanting to secure the united states to just wanting to go over there and just help just be like peaceful negotiators. It definitely changed me.

Jacob intuition and deep reflection show the high level of culture awareness he has due to learning a foreign language. His response shows that learning a foreign language can open minds; change perceptions and perspectives; develop and enhance culture awareness, not only of the target language, but also of other cultures in the world. Jacob says:

I have a political science background. So, I always find it interesting how during the elections and things of that nature, like,

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“We’re the best country in the world” and then people say that, and I look at people and I go, “Have you been outside of this state?” They go, “No.” Then how do you know? I cannot say that. I have been to a few countries, but I cannot say that. It’s really foolish how people use something that’s not normal to them as evil or as dark, when if you just get you a chance to know it, get a chance to understand it, digest it, it might be something that you love. I always think the fear of the unknown is the shackle to a man’s knowledge, or a person’s knowledge. I think language is a key to overcome the fear of the unknown.

Jacob’s words explains in details one of the exact definition of the term “Cultural Competence” as the “the ability to decenter and take up the other’s perspective on their own culture, anticipating and where possible, resolving dysfunctions in communication and behavior”. He explains how merging the knowledge he gained through his major with the cultural awareness he gained through learning a foreign language helped him widen his perceptions of world events,

Then, you normally would dive into some cultural or historical aspect. So, you can understand the progression. This is what has happened here at point A. This is point B and you can see the change and why it happened that way. I think that sometimes as a society, we get lost in ourselves and do not understand what is going on. Nobody predicted the Arab Spring was going to happen, but it did. I think ...being in a foreign language program, it will tap into all of those things.

Likewise, Leah explains the influence of learning Spanish on her view of the outer world. She states, “I worked with migrant workers for a little bit and understand why they are the way they are, because I have a little bit more insight to their culture”. Moreover, Abbie expresses her feeling in northwestern China,

You almost soak up a lot of the culture and there’s a lot more in there that you can talk about and learn than you realize. It can change you. It can tear down some of the prejudice, some of the stereotypes if they are negative, if they are untrue in positive ways too. It helps others to see that on one hand they are people just like me... Another reason, it changes your opinions because you now have open doors to make friends with them and friends make all the difference in how you perceive other people.

Professor Kadi shares how deep “eye opening” discussions into the culture of the foreign language build more “cultural bridges” getting the students to be more accepting, understanding, and appreciating the target language culture. He shares, “A lot of students really appreciate this culture because they ... understand it now. They not only understand how people deal with each other and what the customs are but they understand the background. They don’t take the headlines as they are anymore”.

As stated above, learning the foreign language and gaining information about its culture empowered the participants with the ability to interact with native speakers of the target language. It also enabled them to challenge the preconceived stereotypes and misconceptions about the target language and its people. It further encouraged some of them to learn more languages. Leah goes on revealing her interest of learning another language and other cultures after having a successful experience learning Spanish and being aware of the Spanish culture, “Since, I understood and learn the Spanish language; going to Spain wasn’t as big of a culture shock to me. I’m even thinking of taking a Chinese class... learning just a little bit about Chinese.”

## DISCUSSION

Cultural competence occurs as several manifestations in the findings of the study empowering the participants with the ability to interact with people from the culture of the target language. This conforms with Paige, et al. (2003) definition of culture learning as the learning process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for successful communication and interaction with people from other cultures. On the other hand, findings showed culture competence manifested in its complex form conforming with Byram et al. (2003) crediting the social importance of language teaching to its ability to introduce people to cultures other than their own. Such introduction resulted in the students’ understanding of the foreign culture and their acquisition of positive attitudes and acceptance of the speakers of the foreign language and their culture. The study also asserted how cultural competence challenged preconceived notions and common misconceptions about a certain culture or a cultural group. The study, also, showed that students had a genuine understanding of the differences among cultures and the deep meanings of various cultural practices of the target language and its people (Byram et al., 2003). Consequently, learning in the advanced levels of foreign languages helped the students be culturally competent when dealing with native speakers of the target language. While part of that competence was understanding of the target culture, another essential part was understanding one’s own culture and how it differed from the target culture. In numerous incidents, the awareness of the differences between self-culture and the target language culture was an outstanding finding of the study. Learning a foreign language also equipped students with the capacity to understand the origins of stereotypes (Smith, 2013).

Cultural understanding as shown in the study findings included the student’s ability to engage actively in sensible cultural dialogues about related and contemporary issues (Fox & Diaz-

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Greenberg, 2006). The essential aim of teaching the foreign languages were not only the acquisition of communicative competence, but also the acquisition of competence in intercultural communication (Sercu, 2006). Accordingly, the definitive goal of cultural competence in learning the foreign language helped students avoid their own stereotypes, accept, and appreciate the differences between their own culture and cultures of the countries where the foreign language originates. Similarly, the program goals were to prepare language learners for openness and a readiness to reconsider stereotypes, prejudice, and negative points of view relevant to speakers of other languages (Magosa & Simopoulos 2009).

### **IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Participants shared their desire to know more about the culture of the language they study. They shared that the knowledge they acquired about the culture not only changed their attitude towards the countries of the target language but also influenced their goals behind studying the foreign language (Magosa & Simopoulos, 2009). As students expressed their enthusiasm to use the knowledge they acquired in the foreign language classroom, engagement activities including guest speakers from the target language, field trips to local communities, and immersion assignments can be integrated in the curriculum. Field experience activities that may require students to reach out to nearby communities of native speakers and share their experiences with their classmates can be beneficial in sustaining their aspiration and keeping them motivated (Matsumoto & Obana, 2001).

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, several limitations are recognized. This study was mainly limited to one university in the Midwest of the United States. Limited choice of the participants and the language studied was the main dynamic that limited the findings of the study. The study results are limited to the student participants solicited from those enrolled in the advanced levels of foreign language classes in the Department of Modern Languages. The outcomes of the study were restricted to four undergraduate programs; Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish. Therefore, the results could only explain the case of these students and cannot be generalized to include students studying other languages or at other institutions.

Future research may utilize findings of this study to generate a survey targeting a larger sample that may yield more generalizable results. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to observe the development of students' cultural awareness in foreign language programs towards the achievement of cultural competence, a necessity in the global age. Furthermore, it would be very beneficial to explore culture classes and the format they are offered in with a closer look especially on the curriculum and their influence on student language acquisition.

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