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Dissonance and Self-Reflections: Decentering Assumptions to Foster Learners' Cognitive Flexibility



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Abstract

The process of developing intercultural competence requires students to decenter from their existing frames of interpretation. Dissonance creates opportunities to question assumptions by challenging the primacy of perspectives, fostering skills to grapple with new knowledge and the ability to think more dialectically about the world. The present study examines how reflecting on dissonance engages skills and dispositions that support the development of cognitive flexibility, the ability to switch between emic and etic perspectives. In an advanced French course focused on marketing and communication, embodiments of economic patriotism in advertising and marketing practices in France aimed to disrupt and destabilize assumptions about the impact and role of globalization on local product consumption and consumer behavior. The analysis of students' self-reflections collected in two sections of the course shows that dissonance acted as a sensitizing device, signaling to students the limits of their own perspectives. The juxtaposition of multiple perspectives through the angle of marketing prompted reinterpretation, questioning, and awareness of the subjectivities of interpretation, fostering dialectical thinking skills. Imagination, interest, and curiosity were key in sustaining the decentering process and developing a readiness for cognitive flexibility.

Keywords: intercultural competence, decentering, dissonance and learning, French

Introduction

The various definitions and models of intercultural competence can make it challenging for language educators to figure out an approach to cultivate the attitudes, skills, and knowledge vital to cope and

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interact with difference. Despite variations, researchers concur that perspective shifting is central to the development of the cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2008; Byram, 1997; Crane & Sosulski, 2020; Deardorff, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The circular nature of Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence emphasizes the interconnectedness of these dimensions, which should be attended to concurrently (Chao, 2013). The knowledge acquired through cognitive skills (interpreting, relating, listening, observing, analyzing, and evaluating) "ideally lead[s] to an internal 'frame of reference shift' in which adaptability and flexibility play a central role" (Deardorff, 2008, p. 38). This shift can support further openness to and respect of differences (attitudes) and equip students with the ability to handle "both apparent sameness as well as often bewildering difference" (Solsulski, 2013, p. 92). However, the term "ideally" signals that this shift is not guaranteed because the natural tendency is to process difference through one's own cultural frames of reference and past experiences (Chen, 2013; Sercu, 1998). Interpretation of meaning anchored in one's own existing cultural framework might hamper students from decentering "from their taken-for-granted and unquestioned world perspectives in order to see how others see the world and "how others see us"" (Byram & Wagner, 2018, p. 145).

Researchers have emphasized the role of dissonance in creating conditions for perspective shifting to occur (Kiely, 2005; Mezirow, 1991). Dissonance and contradiction "defamiliarize this world and problematize communication across borders" (Kramsch, 2010, p. 19) providing a context for discovery. When explored within local contexts, "familiar" concepts, products, and practices can reveal alternate perspectives tied to different values and expectations. Encountering divergent or contradicting modes of thoughts and behaviors can stimulate the decentering process because "the borders between the self and other are explored, problematized, and redrawn" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 29). Dissonance exposes one's mono-culturally centered assumptions. Questioning how these assumptions are informed and situated within one's own realities and experiences is potentially transformative because it fosters a cognitive readiness to reconsider one's existing framework of interpretation. Out of the process of questioning and rethinking viewpoints can emerge the ability "to switch frames from etic to emic and back again" or cognitive flexibility (Deardorff, 2006, p. 250), which stems from a better understanding of self and others' cultural subjectivity.

This article aims to further understanding on how to nurture the dispositions and skills that promote cognitive flexibility in the context of the foreign language classroom. The study's data come from an advanced French course focused on marketing and communication. This course was selected for the purpose of this study because the curriculum offered opportunities to disrupt the familiar concept of globalization. In-class guided analysis and discussions of the embodiments of economic patriotism in advertising and marketing practices in France enabled the exploration of French perspectives and attitudes regarding the constraints and tensions created when global and local forces interact. Before further justifying the choice of globalization as a dissonant concept, the article discusses the link between dissonance, decentering, assumption shift, and reflections. The method section provides information on the study's participants and approach and further describes the segment of the course focused on globalization. Data analysis reveals that experiencing and processing dissonance can activate the skills to decenter from existing frames and stimulate a readiness for cognitive flexibility through imagination, curiosity, and interest.

Toward Cognitive Flexibility: Subjective Explorations for Decentering

To gain the cognitive flexibility to switch between emic and etic frames of reference involves recognizing the existence of differing (and perhaps contradicting) worldviews and grasping the cultural subjectivities

of interpretations. Developing such understanding requires opportunities to question the primacy of one's own viewpoints to decenter or step "outside one's existing, culturally constructed, framework of interpretation" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 58). The interaction of multiple perspectives can reveal how cultural and social realities (informed by past experiences) connect with local frames of references, providing a context to realize that we are all the other of someone. However, research has shown that students may dismiss differing perspectives that do not fit with their worldview as "an aberration or impossibility" (Johnson, 2015, p. 19) or practice selective perception, rearranging the information to fit their existing frames of reference (Drewelow, 2011). Therefore, when pondering new information, students must resist the impulse to make sense of it through the prism of their own assumptions and beliefs. They must look within and examine their intraculturality to make sense of their own viewpoints while also attempting to connect "the intraculturality of others to [their] own" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 57). To make such connections engages students interculturally across languages and cultures, cultivating their dispositions for dialectical thinking. As they move past their monocultural and monolingual narrative about otherness, they gain cognitive flexibility through the discovery that emic and etic perspectives are not opposed but rather complementary.

Dissonance to Cultivate a Disposition for Dialectical Thinking

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) explain that "when different ways of understanding the world are brought together" (p. 58), dissonance can emerge. Experiencing dissonance signals that one's existing worldviews might not be universal, disrupting hitherto unchallenged perspectives. A path to investigate and compare multiple interpretations across time and space is thus opened. Liddicoat and Scarino point out that consonance can also provide a point of departure to engage with "power differentials and conflict within and between cultures" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 244). The exploration of potential discrepancies or conflicts between frames of reference can challenge intracultural positioning and trigger a shift in how one think about something, or at the very least a rereading of one's perspective and connections (Zarate, 1993). According to Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2012), a frame of reference shift is initiated by a disorienting dilemma, followed by reflections and questioning that eventually leads to a rethinking and alteration of one's taken-for-granted viewpoints, which will guide future actions. For perspective transformation to occur on such a deep level, the discomfort experienced has to be significant. However, as Crane and Sosulski (2020) point out, dissonance doesn't have to be as intense or unsettling as prescribed by Mezirow. They contend that the major shift in frames of reference necessary for perspective transformation can result from a series of several small shifts in an assumption.

Reflections, Dissonance, and Decentering

Scarino and Liddicoat's (2009) *Interacting Processes of Intercultural Learning* depicts a circular process when engaging with perspectives: noticing leads to comparing differences and similarities, which becomes a source of reflection. The latter frames future multidimensional interactions with and between the intracultural and the intercultural, which can promote more noticing. Structured activities can guide noticing in the classroom, however, as Lomicka and Ducate (2021) remark, students might not engage in reflection on their own. Asking students to recollect their experience promote reflections by focusing their attention and "making mental 'energy' available for processing" (van Lier, 1996, p. 11). Through self-reflection, students can examine how others' perspectives and opinions affect or touch them personally, enabling them to recognize dissonances, unpack their meaning, and relate the information to their existing assumptions (Crane & Sosulski, 2020; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Lomicka & Ducate, 2021; Rogers, 2001). As a connection-making device (Crane & Sosulski, 2020), reflection empowers students to retrospectively interact with their dissonant experience by deconstructing what they know and reframing or broadening their understanding in connection to

the new. This process, by engaging skills such as relating, evaluating, questions, and interpreting stimulates thinking “dialectically about the world” (Hunter, 2008, p. 98). As students actively examine their attitudes and assumptions, they are better positioned to decenter from their existing framework of interpretation and grow as self-aware cultural beings.

Globalization as a Dissonant Concept

As Kramsch (2014) explains, the mid-1980s saw the increase of globalization, defined as the exchange, circulation, and dissemination of “capital, goods, people, images, and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 13). Today’s university students have grown up in a globalized sociocultural and political context. They may bring to the classroom perspectives on globalization they presume universal. To turn globalization into an unfamiliar concept requires problematizing its impact on everyday lives in local contexts. Economic patriotism, which reflects consumers’ and producers’ preference for home country (local) goods and services, can be considered a response to globalization. As such, economic patriotism provides an excellent avenue to generate dissonance and destabilize assumptions about globalization. The juxtaposition of these two divergent concepts creates a space to explore underlying reasons guiding local product consumption and consumer choices. Observing and evaluating polls on attitudes and opinions toward globalization can reveal how people feel impacted in their everyday life, which may contradict or conflict with students’ assumptions. Advertisements constitute another rich source to explore otherness as they reflect a certain cultural and social reality (De Iulio, 2016; Martin, 2012; Simon, 2019). To be successful, advertising must be attuned with what attracts or detracts consumers, with their fear and desires, revealing the subjectivity of cultural context, codes, and frames of reference. Exploring how and why advertising and marketing practices capitalize on local emotional reactions can become the source of questioning and problematizing one’s (perhaps unconscious) assumptions about the impact and role of globalization outside of one’s cultural narrative.

Methods

This study followed a qualitative approach to explore the dissonances participants reportedly experienced, the skills they used to process them, and the impact on their cognitive flexibility. Considering the subjectivity of dissonance and assumption and the vital role of reflection in the developmental process, a self-reflection paper was used to capture the students’ understanding of their experience. The following research questions guided this investigation: 1) What supported the development of student’s ability for dialectical thinking? And 2) How did students express a readiness for cognitive flexibility? The self-reflections were collected at the end of the semester in two sections of the same course over two consecutive academic years. Participants, although advanced learners of French, wrote their paper in English, their native language. Using the latter enabled them to concentrate on processing dissonance and identify potential shifts in their frames of reference without the added challenge of adequately expressing their thoughts in French. A handout with information regarding the reflection paper was presented to students at the same time as the study was introduced on week 11 of a 16-week semester. Eight open-ended questions guided them in unpacking what they found meaningful in their learning experience. Three questions were related to the course simulation and the projects, two inquired about skills and competence development, and three focused on how course content challenged assumptions and created interest. Students did not have to address all the questions. However, they had to consider at least one in each category. The paper length was limited to four double-spaced pages. Students submitted their reflection electronically (uploading their paper to the university learning management system used in the course) one week after the last class session. Their grade was based on completion of the paper.

Participants

The participants in this study, all native speakers of English, were 17 undergraduate students at a large public university in the United States. Ten students were enrolled in Class 1. Two were French majors (with one minoring in anthropology and one in business). The other eight students were French minors. They were majoring in a variety of fields: apparel and textiles (two), public relations (one), biology (one), global studies (one), finance (one), economics (one), and elementary education (one). Seven students were enrolled in Class 2. Five were majoring in French while also majoring in international studies (two), communicative disorders (one), theater (one), and chemical engineering (one). One student was minoring in French and majoring in hospitality management. One, majoring in economics, enrolled in the course as an elective.

As approved by the Institutional Review Board, a colleague in the same department presented information on the study without the instructor's presence because the latter was also the researcher. Consent forms were distributed and collected at that time. Students were asked to give consent for their reflection paper (worth five percent of the final grade) to be used for research purposes. They were informed that whether they gave consent or not would not impact their course grades or their relationship with the instructor because the latter would not receive the consent forms (kept under lock and key in the main departmental office) until after final grades had been submitted. In Class 1, one student did not give consent and was not included in the study. All of the other students enrolled in Classes 1 and 2 gave consent, for a total of 17 participants.

Course Curriculum: Globalization and Economic Patriotism

The course is offered every spring semester and meets twice a week in face-to-face sessions of 75 minutes. The curriculum, articulated around a simulation spanning 15 weeks, aims to engage students' reflections on issues of global versus local markets by connecting them with current marketing practices in France. Kolb's (1984) model for experiential learning informed the design of the simulation, which guides students into creating a product or service and a company intended for the French market. By the end of the semester, students produce a website and advertising related material (a banner ad and a 45-second television advertisement) to present their product or service. Course content explores brand identities on global and local markets (with case studies on McDonald, Air France, Michel et Augustin), marketing and advertising strategies (e.g., Frenchwashing, greenwashing, street marketing, sponsoring, tradeshow), SWOT analysis, characteristics of French consumers, and the French market. Three sessions during weeks 2 and 3 of the semester are devoted to in-class activities designed to engage reflections on attitudes toward globalization and marketing and advertising practices of economic patriotism in France. The three case studies covered in three sessions (weeks 3 and 4) explore localization, new market strategies, and branding global vs local images.

Data Analysis Procedures

An interpretive approach was adopted to analyze the reflection papers to allow exploration of the "subjective meanings and understandings that participants create about their own social and their personal worlds" (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 8). Analysis did not start until all data had been collected at the end of the second spring semester. Investigating decentering and dissonant experiences and their potential impact relies on the participants' subjective understandings as well as the researcher's own interpretations. In an initial line-by-line reading of each reflection, all instances referring to globalization were extracted and coded. Two subsequent close readings expanded the corpus for analysis: any comment referring to advertising and marketing practices, cultural differences, questioning of beliefs and perspectives, cross-cultural comparisons, and subjective positioning were

included. All the segments isolated in the initial coding phase were examined to identify links between dissonant experiences or decentering episodes and rethinking of assumptions. The researcher looked for patterns and similarities within these instances to determine what stimulated students to think dialectically about their own and others' subjectivities (RQ1). With one exception, the participants whose comments revealed an ability to think dialectically did not show evidence of cognitive flexibility. Therefore, the initial assembled corpus was reexamined to identify any instance of emic perspectives with the objective to determine the behavioral or affective dispositions that supported students' ability to alternate between emic and etic perspectives (RQ2).

Findings

Data analysis revealed that eight participants (four in Class 1 and four in Class 2) took a descriptive approach to the reflection task. They focused on the performative (e.g., oral and writing) and the technical skills (e.g., web design) they had gained from the course projects. These participants reported having learned a great deal about cultural differences, one (in Class 2) mentioning cultural respect as an outcome of taking the class. However, they did not mention any dissonance and their reflections do not show instances of decentering. A student in Class 1 identified a dissonance that was not tied to the course content but to his classmates' mindset. Although his reflection suggests an opening up of perspectives, his case is not reported in this article. The analysis of the other eight reflections offers insights into the decentering process and the transformation of thinking patterns toward the familiar, capturing different aspects of the development of cognitive flexibility. Considering this study's qualitative nature, the interpretation of the participants' words and comments presented below reflects theirs and the researcher's choices and perspectives.

Building up a Dialectical Frame of Mind: Stepping Beyond Existing Interpretations

The data analysis revealed that dissonance stimulated three cognitive skills. Reinterpreting, questioning, or noticing prompted students to decenter from the primacy of their assumptions and develop a more complex appreciation of variations in perspectives. Their broadening realizations promoted a deeper engagement with cultural subjectivity, propelling their ability to think dialectically.

Reinterpreting the Meaning of Business

When commenting on the "sections about made in France and globalization," one student noted that these topics "made the class less intimidating and more enjoyable" because it "took business and turned it into something cultural." This statement suggests that exploring cultural values through the lenses of marketing and advertising related to globalization altered how she thought about business. The dissonance experienced expanded perspectives to include an understanding of business not just as a practice but also as a cultural endeavor. Further elaboration found in the comment below illustrate how this (re)thinking elicited new connections between existing interpretations and new realities. A dialectical approach emerged from considering or processing differences through an engagement with multiple perspectives, not just the self. While the data are not sufficient to establish cause to effect, the comment below nevertheless points to a connection between developing openness and engaging in a more dialectical way of interpreting and relating to one's own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others.

The content and instruction from the class has furthered my ability to think critically about different subjects. Learning marketing strategies from a different culture has helped me to be more aware of my present culture. It has also taught me how to critically tie in aspects of two different cultures to my own perspective. In this way [this course]

has altered my world perspective to include not just cultural differences from France, but also business differences as well. In all, this course has pushed me to have a greater understanding of the world around me. (Student E, Class 1)

The word business can evoke negative connotations reflecting shortcomings in how one sees the self or one's abilities. For one student, examining business through the prism of marketing and globalization pushed her to decenter from a rather mathematical view of business (statistics and numbers). Stepping outside her existing narrative led to the discovery that business can also be about people and ideas and a humanistic frame of mind should not be limited to the study of the humanities. Although the dissonance experienced was unexpected, it appeared to have a welcoming effect because it unveiled hitherto unsuspected cultural facets and perspectives. The comment suggests that engaging with these new considerations opened up the ability to engage dialectically with the study of business as well as with French culture.

I know that I do not have a brain for business. My fairy godmother failed at blessing me with a mind for statistics, facts and marketing. Instead, I enjoy studying people, ideas, language – the humanities in sum. (...) The idea of having to struggle through a business class in a second language was repulsive. (...) This class took my ideas of business and turned them upside down, showing me that I can use my humanities paradigm to view other fields and take away useful lessons. (...) Learning not only French marketing skills but also French opinions on globalization challenged my assumptions of globalization and taught me about people through an unwarranted way. I took away a greater understanding of French culture from a side I never thought to look at – the business side. (Student H, Class 1)

Questioning Assumptions about Globalization

Defamiliarizing the concept of globalization disrupted existing views that had “never before” been challenged. Encounter with differing perspectives and reactions to globalization “prompted” one student to question the effects of globalization on her own life and the life of others. The material presented in class as well discussions with “other people” (although not specified it may be presumed that other people refer to members of the class as well as the people she surveyed as part of an assignment in week 2) exposed a disconnect between lived realities. The dissonance shifted the student's focus away from the personal (how globalization benefited her) to include perspectives anchored in different subjective positionings. The realization that globalization might be perceived more negatively enabled a decentering from the taken-for-granted assumption that globalization was “anything but good” and put on her on a path toward a more dialectical frame of mind.

One subject that I found very interesting to discuss was the French viewpoint on globalization. I'd never before thought of globalization as anything but good, considering that it was because of globalization that I got to learn about other countries and their cultures without having to leave home. However, after discussing why the majority of the French population did not favor globalization, I was able to discover other viewpoints. I hadn't really thought about how globalization could be to a threat to other cultures, especially when one considers the large presence that countries such as the United States and Great Britain have. Talking with other people about their viewpoints on globalization prompted me to think of all the possible effects that globalization could have, not just the benefits that it brought for me. (Student O, Class 2)

Questioning and problematizing one's assumptions was not limited to the four walls of the classroom. One student continued her reflection while "walking home from class" and was able at the end of the semester to recall her thought process. Her comment suggests that, as contradictions within her own assumptions about cultural groups' reactions and attitudes toward globalization emerged, she experienced dissonance. Repeating "I am assuming" twice seemed to help her identify what assumptions were being challenged and to decenter from her interpretation. As she problematized her own reality, she acknowledged the necessity of rethinking her ideas ("an assumption I needed to check"). Her use of the past tense "needed" points to a realization that her viewpoints may have been problematic. In her reflection, she didn't disclose what was altered or changed in her perspectives on globalization. Nevertheless, her comment underlines her attempt to connect the unfamiliar or new with her existing interpretation and her acceptance of other possibilities, suggesting growth.

I would walk home from class thinking of how business globalization has impacted disdain for America, or other countries, and cultivated a need for groups of people to over amplify their differentness. Going further, as companies globalize they might have the (un)intentional effect of assimilating people who never wanted to be assimilated to that culture. This might then spark a new movement of nationalism or fundamentalism which might take form in protests or violence or an increase in national pride, so on and so on. Conversely I was forced to then question my assumptions. I am assuming that every culture is unique, almost indigenous, and does not want to be introduced to products from around the world. I am assuming that places not already "modernized" by globalization are indigenous and therefore inherently opposed to globalization – which is an assumption I needed to check. (Student H, Class 1)

Noticing Subjectivity

To develop a dialectical frame of mind, where emic and etic perspectives can coexist, requires actively interacting with different modes of thoughts. The comment below points to the importance of targeting the interplay of perspectives. Being "forced" to connect with the intraculturality of "a marketing and business professional" as well as "a non-American consumer" was necessary to gain an emic understanding. However, being pushed to see things from others' "standpoints" was not perceived as burdensome. Experiencing dissonance appeared to be an enjoyable experience, allowing the student to recognize that marketing to consumers involves tolerating unfamiliarity and efforts to understand their perspectives.

What I enjoyed most about the course is that it forced the students to see something through the perspective of not just a marketing or business professional, but a person marketing towards people (specifically French consumers) whom they may have never met or made an attempt to understand. By teaching me how to see things both from the standpoint of a non-American consumer and a businessperson, has shown me, in a nuanced yet comprehensible way, the intricacies of the French consumer's perspective. (Student D, Class 1)

Encounters with new perspectives exposed subjectivities and this noticing became, for one student, a source of reflection. Connecting with the intraculturality of others (business and individuals) triggered a reevaluation of her native culture's perception on the world stage. The comment "just how small my own culture is" points to a capacity to relativize the self and a realization of how substantial is "all the rest of the world." Although the student didn't identify a dissonance, her words suggests that decentering from familiar perceptions about her own culture may have given her an opportunity to reflect on

subjectivities in otherness. More self-awareness seems to engage her disposition for dialectical thinking as she emphasized the value to “recognize and respect,” complemented by a readiness to accept not knowing and, thus, tolerating the unfamiliar.

Learning about French attitudes toward globalization has opened my worldview probably more than any other French course I have taken yet. It helped me gain perspective on just how small my own culture is compared to all of the rest of the world. It is so important to recognize and respect cultures and traditions of others, even if you do not fully understand them at first. (Student C, Class 1)

Skills and Dispositions Supporting Cognitive Flexibility

Students’ reflections revealed that expressions of cognitive flexibility were related to how students imagined the practice of advertising and marketing or guided by an aspiration to deepen their insider perspectives. Imagination and curiosity emerged as central to students’ capacity to shift between emic and etic perspectives.

Future Connections and Imagination

Marketing techniques brought awareness of differences, which enhanced the perception of multiple subjectivities. The comment below suggests that realizing “how diverse our world is” enabled an expansion of the self as an intercultural being, with the use of the pronoun “our” signaling an emic perspective where the student saw herself (and it could be postulated her culture) as part of the diverse construct of the world. She found herself more cognizant of the importance to take into consideration others’ subjectivity when advertising. This observation points to a readiness for cognitive flexibility. As she envisioned future encounters, she expressed tolerance toward difference, noting her ability to empathize with “people of all culture.” The determiner “all” supports her emergent turn toward intercultural openness as she seemed to take into account cultural diversity.

I especially enjoyed learning about international marketing techniques. It made me realize how diverse our world is and how imperative it is to recognize the culture of a market before you advertise in it. I now feel strongly that I can be empathetic towards people of all different cultures. (Student C, Class 1)

The various perspectives that emerged from the documents examined in class provided insights into the intracultural subjectivities of French consumers, laying out a foundation to envision products/services that could be successful on the French market. As shown in the following comment, exposing local realities of “purchasing attitudes and cultural norms” created the opportunity to move beyond the initial perception of consonance and similarities of “marketing principles.” The contrast prompted a reflection on the practices of marketing, requiring imagination, as the student considered what marketing toward others involves. His remark that “you have to pay attention to what others pay attention to” suggests that knowledge is not sufficient for cognitive flexibility to develop. Rather, contextualizing differences within a specific goal or purpose using one’s imagination can reveal the need to balance emic and etic perspectives (in this case consumer-advertiser) and, thus, cultivate a disposition for cognitive flexibility.

Understandably, as two premiere Western nations, there is quite a lot of overlap between those marketing principles seen in the United States and France. But, (..)we saw the differences in purchasing attitudes and cultural norms to distinguish between the two nations. To that end, the emphasis on French attitudes toward globalization and its

impacts on everyday French culture were enormously beneficial (...) numerous in-class examples (such as McDonald's France and the platform of former French presidential candidate Arnaud Montebourg), and video interviews to demonstrate how widely French opinion on globalization varies as well as how it's implemented in everyday French life. Combined, these facets all created a relatively cohesive idea of the French consumer and which products/services would appeal to them. When marketing, you have to pay attention to what others pay attention to and find that in your promotion. (Student I, Class 1)

The subjective directionality of advertising activated imagination and brought a reflection on the nature of future connections with "individuals from different cultures." Remarking that learning about the French points of view on globalization and advertising had an impact on how she might approach future intercultural interactions, the student below envisioned forming less superficial connections. Her comment suggests that cognitive flexibility might stem more from awareness that different perspectives might exist than from a specific knowledge about what these viewpoints might be. She seemed to realize that to forge intercultural relationships calls for deeper engagement and involves taking emic perspectives.

By creating the opportunity to look at how French citizens react to and think about globalization and advertising, and discover how to attract the client you desire, I find myself taking away from it much more than just a better understanding of french [sic] people. I now feel that I have the ability to create a different type, and perhaps a more profound connection, with individuals from different cultures. (Student K, Class 2)

Curiosity and Interest

Engaging with localized marketing techniques seems to have a strong enough impact ("incredibly eye-opening") to foster curiosity toward otherness and a disposition to move beyond the limits of one's current understanding. One student reported feeling "inspired" to further explore subjective positioning ("the nuances of how individuals operate"), a frame of mind supported by a sense of inquisitiveness toward commonalities in differences. Although his reflection does not point to a shift in his frames of reference, his desire to "explore more of these in person and see them for myself" suggests that curiosity engaged agency toward his own learning as well as for future actions ("finding some ways to capitalize"). His comment revealed an ability to take an emic perspective as he recognized that "across the globe we have different values and beliefs, and different ways that we embrace them." This dialectical thinking approach appeared to push his desire to deepen his insider perspective ("when it comes to the factors that influence their purchasing habits"), suggesting a growth in his disposition for cognitive flexibility.

I loved exploring the various marketing techniques tied to globalization, but I also loved learning about how these methods reflected cultural values. I think addressing stereotypes and common misconceptions about different peoples was incredibly eye-opening from a personal awareness standpoint. The ideas presented in the class would encourage me to explore more of these in person and see them for myself, but I truly believe that while across the globe we have different values and beliefs, and different ways that we embrace them, but there seems to always be something in common, something underlying that links us. Whatever that might be, I like the idea of finding some way to capitalize on that. I feel inspired to continue with learning about foreign language, global cultures, and the world of business in general. I would like to continue becoming familiar with the nuances

of how individuals operate—especially when it comes to the factors that influence their purchasing habits – to the point where it becomes second-nature to me. (Student L, Class 2)

Discussion

This study underlines the importance of reflecting on dissonances to support the development of intercultural competence because the process can stimulate decentering and dialectical thinking. Dissonances can act as a sensitizing device, providing evidence that something is not quite how it is supposed to be. Reflecting on what causes disruptions engages students on a deeper level than observing cultural differences and analyzing the reasons underpinning them because of the interplay of subjectivities. Discomfort and disorientation are generally associated with dissonance (Crane et al., 2017; Mezirow, 1991; Pak, 2007) because it is posited that the potential for transformation resides in how one will handle and resolve conflicts (Clayton & Ash, 2004). The data point to the unexpected nature of experiencing dissonance toward a familiar topic as the impetus for students to question their assumptions and perspectives, suggesting that discomfort and struggle might not always be necessary to facilitate a transformative learning experience. The discrepancies that emerged during the semester created an opportunity to connect with alternate perspectives and engage with the subjectivity of others' lived realities. They rendered visible what had hitherto not been considered. Students became aware of the limits of their own perspectives, through noticing and comparing differences. The reflection paper gave them the opportunity to actively question and problematize their existing assumptions. This willingness to engage, which is vital in transformative learning (Crane et al., 2017; Drewelow & Granja Ibarreche, 2021), suggests that discovering that globalization is not always “good” or that business has a cultural side were dissonances sufficiently intriguing to sustain interest and foster reflections. Students' broadening realizations promoted a more complex appreciation for and a deeper engagement with cultural subjectivity, enabling them to transition from a self-oriented frame of mind to an ability to think more dialectically. The comments do not provide evidence of a deep structural rethinking of values and viewpoints as prescribed by transformative learning theory (Kiely, 2005). However, students expressed several dispositions, such as openness to new information, a dialectical stance when considering perspectives, and a growing awareness of the subjectivity of interpretation.

The ability to be cognitively flexible begins with decentering and is sustained by a willingness to turn toward the other and consider their perspectives. The data suggest that imagination and curiosity play a role in developing the disposition to alternate between emic and etic perspectives. French attitudes to globalization, marketing practices, and advertisements provided less abstract images of “the French people.” Imagining how to appeal to a French consumer showed students the necessity to take an insider perspective and that approaching this task with their frames of reference (etic position) might not result in successful advertising. That realization brought a reflection on how this knowledge might be applied to future encounters with people from different cultural backgrounds. Students expressed a readiness for less superficial connections through an increased self-awareness of one's ability for empathy and a capacity for deeper engagement. Imagining what could be fostered interests in others, a willingness to better understand their perspectives and a desire to learn more (curiosity). As Wenger (1998, p. 173) noted, imagination stimulates an expansion of the self as “new images of the world and ourselves” emerge, engaging a reinterpretation of the familiar. The students' comments point to the role of imagination in promoting cognitive flexibility through curiosity and interest and the centrality of empathy in the process. As constructs empathy, curiosity, and interest have been considered essential to transformative learning and for the development of intercultural competence (Bennett, 2008; Deardorff, 2008; Taylor & Cranton, 2013). This study's data suggest that the interaction of perspectives connected to students' existential realities provided a rich source of reflection, which broadened curiosity, interest, and empathy.

Conclusion

Although the small number of participants does not allow broad generalizations, the findings show that situations or circumstances that are either familiar or relevant to students' lives (such as globalization or advertising strategies) are quite well-suited to generate dissonances and trigger decentering because the leap to connect with others' intraculturality might not be as wide as for a topic with which they have little to no experience. Targeting cognitive flexibility as a skill to develop through the valence of dissonance offers a feasible approach to expand student framework of interpretation and foster perspective shifting.

One of the limitations of this study is that half of the students didn't report dissonances. Collecting reflections right after the class sessions discussing globalization or providing end-of-semester prompts specifically addressing the impact of exploring reactions and attitudes to globalization might have yielded more recognition of and reflections on dissonance. However, for ethical considerations, it was more appropriate to collect data at the end of the semester because the researcher was also teaching the course. Furthermore, learning new frames of interpretation through activities of noticing, comparing, and reflecting is a complex and deeply subjective process that may not develop in a uniform manner. Some individuals might need more time to process the impact of dissonances on their thinking patterns, a consideration which motivated the decision to collect reflections at the conclusion of the course.

Considering the connection between dissonance and decentering, future studies could explore what type of familiar issues or concepts can be defamiliarized to create dissonance and engage dialectical thinking. In this study, globalization was examined through a local marketing angle, which, as the students' comments showed, was critical. Attention was focused on local reactions and responses, hampering the potential for an us vs them dichotomy that might hinder gaining an insider view. Thus, both the choice of the issue and the angle from which to treat the topic are important aspects to consider for both teachers and researchers. Finally, the findings underscore the link between empathy, curiosity, imagination, and cognitive flexibility. Further studies should investigate the role these constructs play in facilitating students' decentering from preconceived assumptions and in fostering cognitive flexibility through subjective positioning.

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