

# Expanding Conversations: Experiential Learning through Film in Asynchronous Online World Language Courses

**Kelly F. Davidson**  
Valdosta State University

**Karen Acosta**  
Valdosta State University

## **Abstract**

*Many educators face challenges with online learning since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Online modalities became common in world language courses; however, challenges remain in creating communicative contexts. This study examined university student perceptions of an experiential learning sequence using films in Spanish and French at the intermediate level in an asynchronous online environment. Students were required to watch a movie and complete activities related to language and culture learning goals, followed by an in-depth survey about the experience. Participants expressed positive perceptions of the activities, finding them helpful in increasing interest and motivation, as well as in expanding their thinking and knowledge about course topics. These findings demonstrate the importance of experiential learning to build student-centered communities of language and culture learning in the asynchronous classroom.*

**Keywords:** *asynchronous online instruction, experiential learning, film and culture, language learning*

## **Background**

As a result of the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, large shifts in higher education—both in policy and practice—continue to affect stakeholders at all levels. At each turn, these challenges counter traditional ways of thinking about effective education, but also present opportunities to reexamine long-held beliefs and practices. One such challenge is how to deliver effective online instruction that meets curricular goals and student needs.

The present study addresses this question in the context of world language (WL) instruction, with a specific focus on asynchronous online language and

culture courses at the intermediate level and possible methods to expand learning experiences using Kolb's (1984, 2014) experiential learning cycle. In this model, students and instructors collaborate to move beyond comprehension of material, termed the "concrete experiences," through stages of "reflective observation," "abstract conceptualization," and finally "active experimentation" (Kolb et al., 2001, p. 228). These stages require students to reflect upon what they have learned, reconceptualize the information in a different format, then experiment with this knowledge in a new setting. Engagement plays a key role in the cycle; the model provides an opportunity for both students and educators to transform the learning experience and make it inherently more personal and active.

At present, prior research primarily focuses either on the integration of film as authentic material or on how experiential learning sequences can be used in face-to-face or synchronous online classrooms. However, using film to expand opportunities for experiential learning in asynchronous online instruction has yet to be explored in detail. While much discussion has been given to the challenges of teaching communicatively in asynchronous online courses (Russell & Swanson, 2022), few have discussed how to leverage the benefits of this format, namely the opportunities for reflection and further action while using the target language. This study intends to help bridge this gap in the literature and provide concrete examples of how to integrate films for language and culture learning in asynchronous online WL courses.

The current study sought to provide students with structured opportunities for expanding language and culture learning through film and to explore their perspectives related to structured film viewing in the target language, followed by experiential learning opportunities beyond the classroom setting. This included the exploration of perspectives and construction of knowledge from research or others in their community. As specific goals, the study aimed to identify students' perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond textbook content and beyond the classroom. To this end, an open-ended survey (see Appendix A for the Student Perceptions Survey) was administered to the participants at the end of the term and analyzed using Creswell's (2003) transformational approach.

The findings from this study may be relevant for those considering incorporating film projects into their courses and they could potentially be adapted to other contexts and fields of study. In the exploration of best practices for overcoming the challenges presented by asynchronous online language courses (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Daigle & Stuvland, 2020; Fabriz et al., 2021; Payne, 2020; Xie & Ziebart, 2022), experiential learning through film provides a way to create a communicative community of learners, expanding the conversation between students, instructors, and other stakeholders.

## **Literature Review**

### **Online, Asynchronous Language Instruction**

The COVID-19 pandemic and emergency remote teaching necessitated many changes for teachers, parents, and administrators, most notably in the areas

of implementing effective online instructional techniques and ensuring access to quality virtual educational experiences. Even as classrooms have largely returned to an in-person format, many instructors have continued to consider how best practices in both traditional and online learning can intersect to better serve the needs of learners, the vast majority of whom would be considered “digital natives,” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1) or the first generations to have had access to digital technology since birth. WL instruction was not immune to these shifts in instructional techniques and perspectives; however, the implementation of fully online language courses did not begin with the pandemic. Rather, educators and researchers alike have been exploring how learners can best engage with language and culture instruction in the online format for more than two decades. Indeed, in the late 1990s, practitioners began to focus on the benefits of asynchronous discursive models and streaming audio and video for access to and use of authentic materials (see Godwin-Jones, 2021 for a review). It seems, then, that while the pandemic may have accelerated the pace of inquiry into best practices for online language learning, as a discipline WLS had already begun to develop a strong and widely varying repertoire of pedagogical resources and practices for the online classroom experience.

Broadly speaking, these virtual learning spaces can range from fully synchronous to fully asynchronous, with many variations in between (Jansem, 2021). As technological advances allowed for increased mobility of applications across platforms, the flexibility offered by fully asynchronous online courses became not only a reality, but a necessity for many students, allowing them to accelerate their pace of study or to adjust it to their professional and personal schedules (Namada, 2022). Findings specifically for online WL classes mirror these general trends, with students appreciating the opportunity to engage with language study at their own pace, experiencing fewer distractions and less anxiety (Lin & Gao, 2020).

Despite these benefits, teachers and students have also cited challenges in asynchronous online learning, namely the decrease in immediacy of contact with those in the classroom and the lack of a class community, as well as the “repertoire of trust” needed for communication (Payne, 2020, p. 244). In general, learners felt what Daigle and Stuvland (2020) termed the “social presence gap” (p. 380), highlighting the importance of connections between individuals as well as the centrality of the student in the learning experience. For Fabriz (2021), the need for “active, learner-centered” (p. 13) experiences is a particular challenge for asynchronous online classrooms. In the online language classroom specifically, while modality did not seem to affect scores on measures of learning outcomes, such as tests, homework, or oral exams, there were affective factors for students that could negatively impact their language learning experience, including “perceptions [of online learning], self-confidence, anxiety, and enthusiasm” (Al Shlowiy, 2021, p. 6), as well as learner anxiety surrounding communication practice opportunities, teacher feedback, and encouragement from the teacher (Al Shlowiy, 2021; Xie & Ziebart, 2022).

One of the challenges most commonly referenced by language teachers remains the objective of communicative competence without the naturally synchronous nature of in-person classrooms (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). For these teachers, creating a space in which learners have the opportunity to build the variety of

skills related to communicative and intercultural competence is difficult in a fully asynchronous online class. To this end, many have identified tools and resources, such as social media platforms or collaborative writing tools like Google Docs or Padlet (Morehouse & Yan, 2023), as well as the more traditional approach of using movies in their instruction.

### **Using Film to Expand Classroom Content**

When fully integrated into the learning experience, films can constitute an important part of the WL classroom. For many, films are the prime manner in which students are able to engage with authentic materials given their longer format and possibility of well-developed narratives with strong text-to-image pairing. Authentic materials, or those materials made for transmitting meaning outside of the language classroom, usually by native speakers for native speakers (Gilmore, 2007), have long proved to be an effective method of engaging students at the intersection of language and culture in action (ACTFL, n.d.). For Chamba and Gavilanes (2018), authentic materials such as films provide students with comprehensible input that is realistic and organic, allowing learners to see the dynamic nature of exchanging and negotiating meaning in oral communication. The often-familiar narrative structures underlying many films and the longer format also allow educators and students to capitalize on the contextualization of language use in cultural frames of reference that can be applied throughout language lessons (Sánchez-García, 2018). For Yue (2019), films also help develop awareness of sensitive issues often raised while building intercultural communicative competence, like racism and discrimination: “using film has the potential to not only raise greater awareness of cultural differences (and similarities) but also serves to generate a feeling of empathy in learners” (p. 198).

In addition to their value as authentic resources, films also provide an opportunity for teachers to build interest and motivation in the language classroom. Not only are teachers able to identify films that correspond with both student interests and learning goals, they are also able to use films as a window into the target language and culture that can pique student interest to learn further. Shintaku (2022) details the digital literacy practices of students learning Japanese, citing the integration of anime as a key point of interest and motivation for students, given their prior interest in and engagement with this type of media. Increased interest and motivation led to more instances of self-directed learning and exploration of language nuances. For Moeller (2018), this interest builds a self-perpetuating motivation, as learners are able to identify how language learning can serve a real-life purpose.

These benefits of using film for language and culture learning are also apparent in the online language and culture classroom. Films can be used in a variety of ways to invite learner interest through the cultural contexts represented and motivate learners to continue their language study as they see the realistic, natural usage of the forms and functions studied in the course (Steckmest, 2021). When tightly tied to the curriculum, films can allow learners the opportunity to explore complex questions related to societal issues and, according to Barski and Wilkerson-Barker (2019), “relate to and reflect on language as a cultural product and vehicle for enacting different perspectives and practices” (p. 496). Similarly, Taguchi (2020) gives an

example of how films can be used as the catalyst for asynchronous discussion activities related to cultural themes, leading to more in-depth understanding of associated language pragmatics. For González-Lloret (2020), the integration of films is a key step in providing important comprehensible input as the basis for collaborative tasks in online language courses. In all of these examples, the integration of film with the general curriculum allows for a language and culture learning experience that goes beyond textbooks, lists of vocabulary, or verb conjugations. Learners are invited to see how these forms and functions are used for real-life, dynamic communication that is constantly changing and evolving with society. This process allows them to view language as applicable to individual goals and interests beyond the gradebook and to engage in more meaningful communication with the target language. In this sense, the inclusion of film in the online WL classroom works toward what Barski and Wilkerson-Barker (2019) deem imperative for the future of WL learning at the university level: “to facilitate an analytic process of discovery, helping learners to ask questions, interpret answers, and develop an awareness of values” (p. 502).

### Going Beyond the Classroom with Experiential Learning

The use of movies as authentic materials to expand language and culture course content can also function for scaffolding larger goals, such as building awareness of critical issues in the target culture as mentioned by Barski and Wilkerson-Barker (2019) or reflective sequences leading to action beyond the classroom. Although some researchers have noted the difficulty of cultivating a sense of learner community (Moser et al., 2021; Tao & Gao, 2022) and shared “repertoire of trust” (Payne, 2020) in overcoming the social presence gap so often cited as a fault of online courses, the asynchronous language and culture classroom actually presents an ideal opportunity for high impact practices (Kuh et al., 2017) such as those in an experiential learning (Kolb, 1984, 2014) cycle.

In this model, students and teachers engage in learning as a process that can be extended beyond the classroom rather than just as an “aggregation of credits” (Dillette & Sipe, 2018). Students work with teachers and other stakeholders to both “grasp” and “transform” their learning experiences (Kolb, 2001, p. 228), moving through four general stages:

1. Concrete experiences: the foundational interaction with learning material
2. Reflective observation: a structured yet dynamic reflection process
3. Abstract conceptualization: Constructing new or different knowledge frameworks upon which one can act
4. Active experimentation: Testing and/or experimenting with new knowledge frameworks

For Kolb (2001), these stages are fluid and occur in a cyclical format, one in which the learner “touches all the bases—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting” (p. 240). Learners must be highly engaged for this deeply personal cycle to

move forward. Baasanjav (2013) notes that online learning's focus on flexibility and decentralized control of learning becomes a greater asset in the context of experiential learning. The time frame associated with an asynchronous course can often lend itself to deeper reflections and preparations for conceptualization and experimentation. In addition, the course format can allow for access to a greater variety of authentic resources and a more flexible timeline with which to work on them. For Amity (2020), distance has a positive correlation with critical thinking and response cultivation, i.e., students can work at their own pace to fully consider questions, problems, or new constructs. As Bailey et al. (2021) demonstrate, the flexibility of time can combat the social presence gap: "a community of learners produces and continually improves on their ideas, which allows knowledge construction to become a social activity" (p. 2564). Hsiao et al. (2020) add that, with a "multimedia-rich environment" (p. 1), online students can engage with material and move beyond traditional methods of instruction using the experiential learning framework.

In the language classroom specifically, integrating film with course content can structure the "multimedia-rich environment," such that learners are able to engage with experiential learning to build linguistic and intercultural competencies. When thoughtfully integrated with language and culture learning objectives, films can provide a way for students to move beyond the touristic views of culture so often presented in curricula and begin to construct knowledge and perspectives on a new level (Pai & Duff, 2021). This process is a key part of the experiential learning cycle. When used in an asynchronous online course, the flexibility and possibilities for reflection and further action can be structured to help students move away from traditional curriculum to realize Bailey et al.'s (2021) goal of "knowledge construction as a social activity," allowing for concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and, finally, active experimentation with language and culture learning in an individualized, organic manner. This dialogic learning experience can thus be at once student-centered, but also community and trust building, reducing the social presence gap felt in asynchronous online courses.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of the current study was to explore student perspectives related to (1) structured film viewing in the target language, (2) experiential learning opportunities beyond the classroom setting, and (3) the exploration of perspectives from others in their communities. The research questions that this study aimed to answer were:

1. What are students' perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond textbook content?
2. What are students' perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond the classroom?

## Methods

### Instructional Context

The participants in this study were college students at a mid-size university in the southeastern United States who were enrolled in intermediate level French and Spanish language courses in a fully online, asynchronous instructional context. One of the courses was an intermediate level French Civilization and Culture class taken just after the beginner and intermediate language introductory courses. This course is usually the first content course for French students, meaning most are still at the intermediate proficiency level. Course materials and assignments reflect the proficiency level of the students, and these join structured language learning exercises within the contexts provided by the content. Learners engage in study related to history and social issues, such as political structures, regional identities, and the values and systems related to education in France. The other course was an intermediate level Spanish Language and Hispanic Cultures class, with an emphasis on proficiency and communicative competence at the intermediate level in the four basic skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Awareness and understanding of various socio-cultural aspects in Spanish and the distinctiveness of certain cultural traditions are connected with the communicative competencies.

The researchers, who are employed at the same university, were the instructors of record in each course. Each researcher has a background in language pedagogy, with approximately a decade of online teaching experience. Both are interested in the connections between language and culture learning and decided to undertake culture and film projects to expand upon the curriculum in their respective courses. The syllabi for the courses were designed by the researchers to incorporate structured film viewing in the target language. For the first iteration of the project, the researchers worked together to identify films that represented themes from the curriculum, as well as to construct the activities related to the study.

In both courses, students were presented with films related to the vocabulary, grammar, and culture presented in the textbook and other materials. In the French course, students were asked to view *Entre les murs* (Cantet, 2008), a film focusing on the experiences of a new teacher in a diverse and challenging middle school classroom in Paris. In the Spanish course, students watched *NO* (Larraín, 2012), a film about the 1988 political referendum in Chile where Chileans had to choose between the dictator governing for another term and holding open democratic presidential elections the following year.

To structure their viewing and create an experiential learning opportunity, students were asked to complete a pre-viewing activity consisting of vocabulary practice on the Transparent Language application, some questions to guide their viewing of the films, and reflection prompts. After viewing the film, students were asked to expand their experiences by either sharing and discussing the movie with a peer or engaging in further research. This task also included a reflection prompt. After having engaged in these activities as part of the course structure, students in each class were invited to complete a survey (Appendix A) at the end of the term.

## **Participants**

Out of a total of 25 students enrolled across two fully online intermediate courses in French and Spanish, 17 students volunteered to participate in the study, a response rate of 68%. Of these 17 participants, 8 students were enrolled in the French class and 9 in the Spanish class. Twelve of the participants identified as female, four identified as male, and one identified as non-binary or third gender.

With regards to ethnicity, nine participants identified as White, two as Black/African American, two as Hispanic/Latinx, one as Asian, while three reported an intersectional ethnicity, such as White Hispanic, Black Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native White Hispanic. With regards to age, ten participants were in the 18 – 24 range, three were between 25 – 34 years old, and four were between 35 – 44 years of age.

Among the 17 participants, four listed French as their major, two listed Spanish, three listed a double major in Spanish and French, and the remaining participants listed various other majors, such as English, psychology, journalism, education, foreign language, health sciences, international business, and organizational leadership.

## **Pedagogical Approaches**

### ***Pre-viewing***

To prepare for viewing the films, students were assigned a set of vocabulary activities as well as a predictive reflection prompt based on the title of the films (see Appendix B for all activities used). Students completed the vocabulary activities using the Transparent Language platform. Transparent Language is an online language learning platform and mobile application that offers over 100 languages and allows instructors to author lessons specific to a certain set of vocabulary as well as implement pre-designed ones for more general vocabulary lists. All lessons cover reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills, offering a set of eight activities to choose from, among them pronunciation, dictation, matching, recognition, and an assessment at the end of the lesson. For this study, the researchers authored their own vocabulary lists according to those provided by their respective curricula as well as terms that would be helpful for comprehension of the films (Appendix B). These activities corresponded with the “concrete experience” stage of Kolb’s (2001, p. 228) experiential learning cycle and prepared students for how the project would connect with other parts of the course.

### ***During Viewing***

Students were given guiding questions (Appendix B) to use while viewing the film for their class. The researchers designed the questions to be applicable to both films in order to increase the replicability of the project as well as to avoid spoiling the plot of the films. This approach allowed students a structured viewing while also keeping the narrative suspense inherent in real-world movie watching. The guiding questions included making a list of unfamiliar words in the movie, as well as identifying the main characters, the location, the time period, and the central conflict or event of the film. In addition, students were asked to reflect on possible



connections to real-life events or issues and finally to summarize the plot in one to two paragraphs. In viewing the film and answering these questions, participants were engaging in the second part of Kolb's (2001) cycle, "reflective observation" (p. 228), through structured yet communicative queries.

### ***Post Viewing***

After viewing the films, students in each class were given a set of reflection questions to act as a bridge between film and the experiential component of the project (Appendix B). For this portion of the project, students were allowed to engage in code switching with a detailed explanation from the researchers as to the reasoning behind this allowance. It was made clear that the students should use the target language to the best of their abilities; however, if it was unavoidable, the student could switch between the language of instruction and the shared language (English) to express complex ideas rather than use an online translator. This strategy provided a space where authentic reflection was prioritized alongside the use of the target language.

The first question was movie-specific: for the French film, students were asked about the representation of the educational system in France and for the Spanish film, students were asked about the representation of the 1988 referendum in Chile. The remaining two questions were the same across courses, asking students to elaborate on whether the film focused on a specific group or interaction as well as how the plot might be different if recounted from an alternate perspective. These questions were crafted to push students to reconsider the films beyond a traditional movie watching context and to engage with the ideas of representation, points of view, and stereotypes and/or biases in films. This allowed for the "abstract conceptualization" in Kolb's (2001) cycle, leading to the "active experimentation" phase (p. 228).

### ***Experiential Expansion Activities***

Following these phases, students were required to extend their learning through experiential expansion activities related to the films (Appendix B). They were given two options, each of which included a reflection prompt. For the first option, "peer viewing," students could watch the movie a second time with a family member or friend. Students were then required to pose the same questions from their post-viewing activity for a discussion. This was followed by a short paper asking students to reflect upon their shared viewing and the ideas presented. For the second option, students could choose to do "further research" and find two outside sources, such as reviews or articles, offering different perspectives on the film. They would then discuss their findings in a reflective essay.

The researchers elected to provide a choice of activities for this phase in order to create a more inclusive classroom environment, provide flexibility, build upon student interests, and capitalize on the benefits of asynchronous online learning detailed above. With either choice, students were invited to expand their thinking about the films and investigate perspectives outside of their own.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The survey (Appendix A) included a total of 20 questions, ten of which were about the students' backgrounds and ten of which were about their perspectives

on using films to expand the online course experience. Of the questions related to student perspectives, seven focused on the activities done before, during, and after the viewing of the films, and three focused on the experiential component. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and the study participants completed it online during the last two weeks of the term.

The data transformation approach (Creswell, 2003) was used to analyze the survey data, which allowed the researchers to compare the quantitative data from the close-ended survey questions with the qualitative data from the open-ended survey questions. The researchers did frequency counts to analyze data from close-ended survey questions in order to set preliminary themes from the patterns that emerged from the responses. Next, the researchers analyzed the open-ended survey questions using a comparative method, by first coding the questions for themes and later comparing and defining the main themes evident in participant responses. Reliability was established by negotiating codes and a comparison of coded data between researchers. The researchers redefined and renegotiated themes and codes as needed during the data analysis process.

The main themes that emerged were related to participants' perceptions of the helpfulness of vocabulary pre-viewing tasks and guiding and reflection questions, as well as the experiential expansion activities in language and culture courses. Additional themes were related to the effectiveness of expansion activities in asynchronous online courses in general, including perceptions of helpfulness. Emergent themes from both the quantitative and qualitative data sets provided answers to the research questions.

### **Findings**

In general, most of the participants in the study described their experience with the structured film viewing and expansion activities in their online French and Spanish classes as helpful and positive. Participants shared their perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond the textbook content and beyond the classroom. The following section summarizes the findings and answers to each of the research questions.

#### **RQ1: Students' Perspectives on Using Films to Expand the Online Course Experience Beyond Textbook Content**

In order to answer the first research question, "What are students' perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond textbook content?" participants were asked about the helpfulness of the pre-viewing activities and the reflection and guiding questions used during viewing. In addition, students were asked about their choice for the experiential component and to explain through written commentary.

#### **Pre-viewing: Helpfulness of Vocabulary Exercises**

Student comments regarding the pre-viewing activities focused on the helpfulness of completing targeted vocabulary exercises in Transparent Language prior to viewing the film. Of the 17 respondents, 88% (n = 15) found the vocabulary activity

to be helpful, with 59% (n = 10) finding it “very helpful.” The remaining 12% (n = 2) were neutral on the matter. All but one of the participants expanded on their responses through written comments, some of which are shared below:

Helpful	<p>“The vocabulary exercises in Transparent Language are not overly difficult, but are effective in helping one learn new vocabulary. Then when it comes time to view the film or to read an article that contains the vocabulary, the terms are not brand new. It is not necessary to pause the film to look up vocabulary.” (French)</p> <p>“Reviewing the words beforehand gave me more context as to what the movie was going to be about, and I was able to recognize those words in speech much easier.” (Spanish)</p>
Neutral	<p>“I’m fluent in French, I did not need the vocabulary to understand.” (French)</p> <p>“I think reviewing the vocabulary was helpful but I would have gotten the same help from a list of vocab released to have while watching the movie.” (French)</p>

### ***During Viewing: Helpfulness of Guiding and Reflection Questions***

In addressing the activities used during viewing, students discussed the helpfulness of having specific guiding questions while watching the film. All (100%) of the respondents felt that they were helpful, with 53% (n = 9) finding them “very helpful.” In addition, participants shared whether the more general reflection questions helped them structure their viewing. Of the 17 respondents, 82% (n = 14) said that the reflection questions were helpful, whereas 18% (n = 3) stated that they were not. Participants explained their responses in more detail, as seen in the sample comments below:

#### **Guiding Questions.**

“The films have more than one theme or main idea. It is helpful to have a guided question or two to help you know what to look for while watching the film and to have a common area of discussion as a class.” (French)

“The questions helped me keep going, but at times, I would get lost on if I was actually correct.” (Spanish)

“I am horrible at remembering names and dates. Having guiding questions forced me to recall dates and main character names, which actually helped me keep track of “who’s who” during the movie.” (Spanish)

“The guided questions allowed me to think deeper about the subject matter behind the film, rather than the film itself. They also offered a decent structure for the writing assignment in Paso 3.” (Spanish)

#### **Reflection Questions.**

“Although I understood the movie and the context behind it, the reflection questions helped me to be able to put my thoughts into words. To compare, my mind was like

a ball of yarn with thoughts over the movie, and with the guiding questions, the yarn was well woven into a sweater.” (Spanish)

“Similarly to the guided questions, they helped me to develop my thinking on something I had no prior experience with. I have never witnessed a dictatorship in my real life, nor in my real country. Therefore, the reflection questions gave me ways to look at this film through various perspectives after watching it, and make several arguments and statements when writing about it.” (Spanish)

“I would describe it as neutral. Good practice, but neutral.” (Spanish)

“I tried not to be too influenced by the questions because I thought it would be better to watch the movie without much outside thought, just my own reaction. Afterwards, I reread the questions and noted scenes that illustrated the points from the guided questions.” (French)

### **Post Viewing: Experiential Activity**

**Choice.** To begin their discussion of the post-viewing experiential expansion activity, students shared their choice between peer viewing and discussion of the film or further research on the film topic and their rationales for their choices. Of the 17 respondents, 59% (n = 10) chose the peer viewing and discussion activity and the remaining 41% (n = 7) chose to do further research. Some comments describing their rationales are shared in the table below:

Peer Viewing	<p>“I was able to watch it with my mom and discuss. It was great!” (French)</p> <p>“I watched this film twice because I did not really understand at first, so I had my friend watch it also and he also had a hard time understanding and we are both Mexican. However, it goes to show how so many different Latin languages differ.” (Spanish)</p> <p>“Because I had a friend watch it with me as well, but he does not speak Spanish at all, so we had to rewind a couple of times during the movie.” (Spanish)</p>
Further Research	<p>“I chose it because I didn’t have time to find someone who was willing and available to watch the film and answer questions about it.” (French)</p> <p>“Film has always interested me, so choosing to do further research on the movie and finding out more “behind the scenes” information, as well as its effect on others was an easy decision. However, I have recommended the film to several friends in hopes that they will watch it and get back to me on their thoughts. There was not enough time in my family/friends’ schedules, nor mine, to watch it together.” (Spanish)</p>

**Expansion of Film Topic.** Subsequently, students discussed whether the post-viewing experiential activity helped to expand their thinking/knowledge about the topic of the film. Of the 17 respondents, 76% (n = 13) found this activity helpful,

while 24% (n = 4) felt that it was not. Most students explained their survey answers in more detail through written comments, some of which are shared below:

Helpful	<p>“The post-viewing activity gave me greater insight into the film. One of the reviews that I read made a connection in the film that I did not make. It was also helpful to see how other people understood the key ideas of the film.” (French)</p> <p>“I think the discussion helped me frame the topic in a clearer way (...) It is interesting to see how the media portrayed certain issues.” (French)</p>
Not Helpful	<p>“I think the reflection was sufficient.” (French)</p> <p>“Not really, only because my sister and I had the same perspective on the movie. It was hard to come up with a full page of writing over it.” (Spanish)</p>

**Expansion of Language and Culture Thinking.** Finally, students shared perspectives on how the post-viewing activity helped expand their thinking/knowledge about Spanish or French language and culture. Of the 17 students, 82% (n = 14) felt that it did and 18% (n = 3) felt that it was not helpful in this regard. Most students further elaborated on their responses through written comments. A sample comment from each perspective is shared below:

“The [further research] helped me think more deeply about the film and helped me consider how the French educational system is structured. It also caused me to reflect upon how the classroom acts as a microcosm of French society.” (French)

“Being that the post activity was mainly for our peer to answer or tell us how they feel about the movie, it did not really expand my knowledge or thinking about the Spanish culture.” (Spanish)

## **RQ 2: Students’ Perspectives on Using Films to Expand the Experience Beyond the Classroom**

In order to answer the second research question, “What are students’ perspectives on using films to expand the online course experience beyond the classroom?” participants were asked to identify aspects of the peer viewing or further research that were interesting or unexpected, as well as to discuss the effectiveness of these activities. In addition, students were asked to consider the helpfulness of experiential expansion activities in an online language and culture course.

### ***Student Reflections on Experiential Learning with Film***

When discussing their experiences either with peer viewing or further research, students highlighted different areas that were surprising or unexpected to them. The themes most frequently mentioned in their responses were related to explorations of perspectives, such as through comparison and contrast of viewpoints, and an increased depth of understanding through additional interaction with the film. They

also shared thoughts on how language is experienced through audio and subtitles as well as greater insight into historical/cultural backgrounds. Some of the responses are shared below:

“My partner has never learned about French culture or education so it was interesting to see the contrast between my thoughts and hers. I also liked to bridge the gap in understanding because that solidified my comprehension on the subject.” (French)

“I found interesting how even being from very different generations, we agreed in some topics from the movie.” (French)

“I was surprised how they were also confused about the film at first. I thought it was just me and my lack of Spanish but his first language is Spanish so to see him struggle in understanding made me realize there are different types of Spanish language.” (Spanish)

### ***Effectiveness of Expanding Beyond the Traditional Classroom***

Students also shared perspectives on the effectiveness of taking activities that are traditionally intended to be done within a classroom and expanding them beyond the classroom environment. Out of 17 participants, 88% (n = 15) found it effective to expand the activities beyond the classroom, whereas 12% (n = 2) participants did not. Sample comments are shared below from each viewpoint.

Effective	<p>“In an online environment, it is necessary to have activities like this to go deeper with the material. Also, I would have liked to have completed the peer viewing as it would have given needed social interaction in an academic setting. That is something that is definitely lacking in an online environment, naturally.” (French)</p> <p>“I feel that doing activities outside of a classroom environment is always helpful in solidifying information, especially when it comes to language courses.” (Spanish)</p> <p>“While it may not be necessary, topics which many find interesting can be fueled by others’ thoughts and opinions. More information can be shared, therefore more can be learned in a team-based environment.” (Spanish)</p>
Not Effective	<p>“Honestly, no. I discovered all the information I needed when watching the movie and answering the reflection questions.” (Spanish)</p>

### ***Helpfulness of Expansion Activities in an Online Language and Culture Course***

Finally, students were asked to reflect on whether it is helpful to include expansion activities such as the peer viewing or further research in an online language

and culture course. All 17 (100%) students felt that these activities are helpful in an online language and culture course. Most students wrote comments to elaborate on their responses. Some sample comments are shared below:

“The films and the exercises surrounding the films were some of my favorite assignments/projects in my collegiate career. Film is an outstanding window into culture and a great starting place for conversation.” (French)

“These types of assignments are not common. Online courses can often swing between engaging and monotonous pretty quickly so I think having something with an ‘outside’ application piques interest and helps the student stay interested in the topic.” (French)

“Yes, these expansion activities are especially helpful in an online course since there is less interaction and immersion than traditional classroom settings.” (Spanish)

“To watch a movie in Spanish was very helpful because on a day to day I am hardly ever around anyone who speaks Spanish so to hear it in a movie while I am taking the course was very helpful and also interesting.” (Spanish)

“Watching this film and proceeding with the activities gave me a direct view into a culture which I had no prior (vital) knowledge of. Hearing others speak the language made me more comfortable speaking it myself, as well.” (Spanish)

### **Discussion**

Student responses demonstrated that participants found the experience with the structured film viewing and the experiential expansion activities to be both helpful and positive. Most participants (88%) found the pre-viewing vocabulary exercises to be a helpful way to prepare for viewing the film. Students appreciated being able to practice and review beforehand, for example, it “gave more context” about the film and introduced new words related to textbook vocabulary. While viewing the film, the guiding and reflection questions provided structure, in fact, 100% of the participants considered the guiding questions to be helpful. Similarly, 82% found the reflection questions to be a helpful part of the film viewing. Regarding the post-viewing activities, participants were able to choose activities that addressed preferences or scheduling needs: 59% of the participants chose the peer viewing and discussion activity, while 41% chose to conduct further research on the film topic. Overall, 76% found the post-viewing activity to be helpful in expanding their thinking/knowledge about the topic of the film. Further, 82% found this phase to be helpful in expanding their thinking/knowledge about Spanish or French language and culture.

These findings echo the literature surrounding the use of films in the language and culture classroom. For ACTFL (n.d.) and Gilmore (2007), authentic materials are essential for students to see the dynamic intersections of language and culture in action. For example, one student elaborated on this point, saying that watching a movie in the target language “was very helpful because on a day to day I am hardly ever around anyone who speaks Spanish.” For this student, the movie provided the

contextualized, realistic, and organic comprehensible input described by Chamba and Gavilanes (2018) and Sánchez-García (2018).

In addition, the integration of these activities allowed students to think more deeply about the topics presented in the curriculum. As one student stated, the reflection questions “helped me see and think about things I had not previously thought about.” For another, they helped the student to “think deeper and analyze the movie from a different point of view.” Students were also able to take these reflections farther when considering the themes of the films; for one participant, “the activities left me grateful that I never had to experience anything like that in my real life thus far, and also opened my eyes to the fact that dictatorships are still very relevant, and several countries are still suffering from them.” The scaffolded integration of the films gave the participants the opportunity to consider difficult cultural and historical issues in more depth, such as the dictatorship at the center of the story in *NO*, mirroring Yue’s (2019) findings that students are able to develop awareness about sensitive issues as well as feelings of empathy for those in different cultures.

For many students, the integration of the experiential film project positively influenced their interest in aspects of language and culture in a way that the textbooks did not and increased their motivation to learn more, as found in Steckmest (2021). As one student stated, “I found it surprising that my peer could understand the plot of the movie and not understand Spanish. I found it interesting that my peer and I had similar thoughts about the movie as well.” Another student echoed this, albeit with a slightly different focus, stating, “I found it interesting that even though my sister had to read the English subtitles the entire time, that we had the same perspectives about the movie.” For these students, the film project provided an interaction space in which to consider both the linguistic and cultural input of the movie more deeply, as well as to engage in reflection on meta-linguistic questions related to media. Interestingly, this same point was offered by a different student as to their motivation in choosing a post-viewing activity: “I was curious to see my peer’s thoughts on the topic of the movie. Also, I was curious to see if they understood as well via subtitles rather than language knowledge.” This interest or “curiosity” for these students—for some a realization, for another the motivation or preparation—was a driving factor in the different parts of the project.

The integration of the film also allowed students to explore questions related to their own linguistic and cultural heritages. One student repeatedly reflected on linguistic differences between Chilean Spanish and Mexican Spanish: “I watched this film twice because I did not really understand at first, so I had my friend watch it also and he also had a hard time understanding and we are both Mexican. However, it goes to show how so many different Latin languages differ.” This student was actively engaging in self-reflection as well as reflection on the indelible connection between language and culture, similar to that described by Barski and Wilkerson-Barker (2019) and Taguchi (2020). In this way, the film project as an experiential learning component gave students the opportunity to actively engage in the “analytic process of discovery” mentioned by Barski and Wilkerson-Barker (p. 502, 2019).

Regarding the use of films to expand the learning experience beyond the traditional online classroom, students discussed different aspects of the activities



that were surprising or unexpected. For example, students shared thoughts about exploring and comparing perspectives in their selected expansion activities as well as how the activity deepened their understanding of historical and cultural backgrounds, the way language works, and the films themselves. When discussing online course activities more generally, 88% of the participants found it effective to introduce experiences that expanded beyond the traditional classroom environment. More specifically, participants found it helpful to integrate expansion activities such as peer viewing and further research into an online language and culture course. In fact, 100% (n = 17) of participants found these activities to be helpful, considering them more “engaging,” a way to introduce the “interaction and immersion” often missing in online courses, or even “some of my favorite assignments/projects in my collegiate career.”

For most students, transitioning activities that are usually part of the traditional classroom environment into asynchronous collaborative spaces provided an opportunity to engage in reflective sequences leading to action outside the classroom. As one student stated, “I think both types of assignments [peer viewing and further research] are motivating. Instead of breaking down a film in a straightforward essay, you can have some freedom with research and discussion.” This freedom is supported by the asynchronous online context, making it an opportunity for high impact practices (Kuh et al., 2017) like experiential learning, rather than a challenge to be overcome. This is also described by Baasanjav (2013) who noted that the flexibility and decentralization of online asynchronous courses are assets for experiential learning.

Using these expansion activities, online courses bridge the social presence gap (Daigle & Stuvland, 2020), creating the communities of learners found missing by Moser (2021) and Tao and Gao (2022). Another student underlines the importance of these interactive experiential learning cycles, stating “While it may not be necessary, topics which many find interesting can be fueled by others’ thoughts and opinions. More information can be shared, therefore more can be learned in a team-based environment.” This student demonstrates the power of experiential learning activities in the online course not only to expand the course content but also to provide constructive opportunities to widen perspectives through connections with others.

When focusing on language and culture courses specifically, the integration of a structured film project that was tightly tied to learning objectives was a successful experiential learning opportunity. Expanding activities to include film provided the “multimedia-rich environment” of Hsiao et al. (2020) that includes authentic materials and reflective sequences. As one student emphasized, online courses can often be “monotonous,” thus “having something with an ‘outside’ application piques interest.” For another, activities like these lead students to “appreciate other people’s point of view from that culture.” These students mirror the findings of Pai and Duff (2021), stating that films can make it possible to avoid the often touristic views of other cultures as represented in textbooks. In addition, students also found that they were able to construct new knowledge and perspectives as central to Pai and Duff’s (2021) argument: “Watching this film and proceeding with the activities gave me a direct view into a culture which I had no prior (vital) knowledge of.”

In providing a different, more authentic representation of the basic topics covered in the textbook, the films laid a foundation for students to move beyond passive learning of vocabulary toward a more integrative, active construction of concepts.

### **Study Limitations and Future Research**

This research study is somewhat limited by the scope and size of its sample. The research findings stem from data collected from one section of an intermediate level Spanish course and one section of an intermediate level French course from the same institution in the same academic term. Studying additional groups of students, from additional languages, from different proficiency levels, across several academic terms would be beneficial in future research studies.

A final limitation of the study is related to the timing of the research instrument. Students took the survey at the end of the academic term, when most grades were already known to them, so that information as well as their attitude about their course grades may have influenced their responses, opinions, and their overall positivity or negativity about the experience. Collecting survey data from future groups of students at different points of the academic term may be worth considering.

Although not a part of the current study due to time constraints, the researchers would like to incorporate additional experiential learning components to the film assignments in future research projects, such as expanding activities, including discussion boards for student predictions as part of the pre-viewing portion, and adding opportunities for student discussion to wrap up the post-viewing portion, among others. Finally, the researchers would also like to include interdisciplinary collaborations and explore different topics in future experiential learning research projects.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Previous research in this area focuses on the use of film or experiential learning in traditional classrooms and synchronous online settings. This study, however, has demonstrated overall positive student perspectives on the use of films to provide expanded, experiential learning opportunities in asynchronous online language and culture courses. Given the responses detailing the activities as “helpful,” “interesting,” and even “some of the best in my collegiate career,” some considerations are presented for those contemplating implementing similar objectives and tasks. These include experiential learning stages, differentiation of process and product, and strong scaffolding at each stage.

The results indicate that designing activities within Kolb’s (1984, 2014) experiential learning cycle can provide opportunities for new knowledge construction. The films were carefully chosen, and the activities crafted to have strong connections with the existing curriculum and the proficiency levels of the students. The strengths of asynchronous courses often lie in time for reflection and possibilities for options that address student needs. The present study built upon these by allowing several weeks for the activities with interspersed deadlines as well as differentiation through a choice of expansion activities. The activity sequence was scaffolded to provide students with varied points of reflection, as well as the freedom to explore themes of interest, increasing motivation and curiosity.

As more language and culture departments begin to explore asynchronous online language and culture courses, these results demonstrate the possibilities for active, discovery learning that builds upon students' lived experiences and funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019) to construct meaning through experimentation and reflection.

With these strengths in mind, the following are some tips for instructors who wish to incorporate a similar experiential learning through film activity sequence in their course:

- Become familiar with the areas of Kolb's (1984, 2014) experiential learning cycle and ensure that you are identifying how each of your activities "touches all the bases" (Kolb, 2001, p. 240).
- Choose films that are tightly linked to the curriculum but that provide opportunities to expand student perspectives and discussion.
- Consider issues of equity and access for the films. Ensure there are no barriers:
  - Choose free films or apply for funding to purchase the film online.
  - Provide an online space where students can schedule to watch the film if needed.
  - Provide information for technical support for the film viewing platform.
  - Ensure the platform has support for differently-abled students.
- Watch the movie several times to become familiar with different areas for engagement and to identify portions that will be challenging for language and culture comprehension.
- Watch asynchronously with a friend or family member not in your physical location to identify technical issues and how to overcome them, as well as to identify ways that you might need to model constructive discussion of difficult topics for your students.
- Determine broader themes in the film as related to social justice, diversity, the connections between language and culture, or language varieties to be presented throughout the unit/chapter/course.
- Provide strong scaffolding for students as they progress through the activities. This might include discussion prompts, vocabulary/pronunciation activities, previewing reflections, and tips on how to approach watching a movie in the target language.
- Strongly integrate the film chosen and the products expected with course content and objectives, with special consideration given to proficiency levels, age ranges, classroom cultures, and student scheduling needs.
- Differentiate the process and product when possible. Provide a choice of activities for the experiential learning expansion phase (here, peer viewing or further research), as well as a variety of formats in which students can submit their work, such as essays, reflective recordings, "podcasts" of student discussions, or even artwork.
- Make a short video to briefly, yet clearly explain to students the purpose of the activity and how it fits into communicative learning goals. Provide all materials in advance, as well as rubrics or grading expectations, and

reference these as they are discussed in this video.

- Keep wording of reflection and guiding questions general to avoid giving away details or influencing student perspectives. This also helps instructors who would like to recycle prompts or use the same activity structure for several films, especially if they would like to compare and contrast perspectives about different films in a course. See Appendix B for the guiding and reflection questions used in this study as examples.
- Spread the stages of the activity over several weeks, ideally one to two weeks per stage, to allow for adequate time to reflect and discuss in the target language.
- Provide space for classroom community building through whole group discussions after the activity sequence.
- Consider if and when it may be appropriate to allow for code switching. Clearly define these windows for students.

### **Conclusion**

Current emphases for both high impact practices and increased online learning options are lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education. Although asynchronous online courses are sought after for their increased flexibility, this format necessitates innovative approaches to the communicative study of language and culture. This study sought to explore how experiential learning could be implemented in online asynchronous language courses as such an approach, using films to provide opportunities to connect language and culture as well as create possibilities for knowledge construction within a community of learners.

Kolb's (1984, 2014) Experiential Learning Cycle was used as a theoretical framework through which to structure viewing activities and expand beyond traditional curriculum, inviting students to move from concrete experiences like vocabulary exercises to more reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation in viewing and discussing films. In general, students found the implementation of the experiential learning cycle through film to be a helpful and effective aspect of the course design, allowing them to explore and compare perspectives as well as deepen their understanding of the target language and the cultural and historical backgrounds represented in the films.

This study makes a case for integrating experiential learning expansion activities in online language and culture courses and the benefits of using film to do so. Scaffolding student learning through pre-viewing and during-viewing activities allowed for the reflection and engagement necessary in the post-viewing and experiential stage. This dialogic learning experience can thus be at once student-centered, but can also be community and trust building, reducing the social presence gap felt in asynchronous online courses.

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## Appendix A

### Student Perceptions Survey

#### Pre-viewing

1. How helpful was having the vocabulary lesson in Transparent Language before watching the movie? (choice and open response)  
Very helpful  
Somewhat helpful  
Neither helpful nor unhelpful  
Somewhat unhelpful  
Very unhelpful  
Explain your answer in the box below.
2. What else would have been helpful to know or do before watching the film?  
(open response)

#### During Viewing

3. How helpful was it to have the guiding questions while watching the film?  
(choice and open response)  
Please explain your answer in the box below.
4. Did the reflection question(s) help you structure your viewing of the film?  
(choice and open response)  
Yes  
No  
Please explain your answer in the box below.

#### Post Viewing

5. Which post-viewing activity did you choose? (choice and open response)  
Peer viewing & discussion of the film  
Further research  
Why did you choose this? Please explain in the box below.
6. Do you feel that having a post-viewing activity in the course helped to expand your thinking/knowledge about this topic? (choice and open response)  
Yes  
No  
Please explain your answer in the box below.



7. Do you feel that having a post-viewing activity in the course helped to expand your thinking/knowledge about Spanish or French language and culture? (choice and open response)  
Yes  
No  
Please explain your answer in the box below.
8. What did you find interesting/surprising/unexpected about sharing the movie with someone outside of the class or reading more about the topic? Please explain your answer in the box below. (open response below)
9. Do you find it effective to take activities that are traditionally intended to be done within a classroom environment and expand them beyond the classroom environment, such as peer viewing or further research? (choice and open response)  
Yes  
No  
Please explain your answer in the box below.
10. Do you think that these expansion activities are helpful in an online language and culture course? (choice and open response)  
Yes  
No  
Please explain your answer in the box below.

## **Appendix B**

### Activities Used in Experiential Learning Cycle

- I. Pre-viewing activities
  - A. French Transparent Language vocabulary list
    1. défavorisé(e) - disadvantaged
    2. l'autonomie - independence, autonomy
    3. accéder - to access
    4. s'épanouir - to blossom, to "come out of your shell"
    5. l'égalité des chances - equal opportunity
    6. le Baccalauréat - standardized test after le lycée
    7. le Brevet des collèges - standardized test after year 10
    8. l'échec - failure
    9. carcéral(e) - prison-like
    10. Paris intra-muros - Paris city (as opposed to Paris and its suburbs)
    11. une zone d'éducation prioritaire - area where schools receive special funding
    12. attiser les tensions - to fuel tensions

B. Spanish Transparent Language vocabulary list

1. contexto social - social context
2. ciudadanía - citizenship
3. campaña - campaign
4. dictadura - dictatorship
5. dictador - dictator
6. democracia - democracy
7. plebiscito - plebiscite
8. votar - to vote
9. el voto - the vote
10. campaña electoral - electoral campaign
11. discurso político - political speech / political discourse
12. partido político - political party
13. gobierno - government
14. protesta - protest / demonstration
15. censura - censorship
16. oposición - opposition
17. constitución - constitution
18. elecciones libres - free elections
19. libertad de expresión - freedom of speech
20. libertad de prensa - freedom of the press
21. lugar de votación - polling location

C. Predictive reflection prompt (used for both films): After reviewing this vocabulary and knowing the title of the movie is \_\_\_\_\_, what do you expect to see? What do you think the movie is about?

II. During viewing activity

A. Guiding questions (used for both films):

1. Make a list of any words that are unfamiliar to you as you are watching the film.
2. Who are the main characters in the film?
3. Where is the film located?
4. When do the events in the film take place?
5. What is the central conflict or event in the film? Are they based on real life events?
6. Summarize the plot of the film in 1-2 paragraphs.

III. Post-viewing activity

A. Reflection questions

Instructions: Code switching is allowed. I want to know your thoughts in depth on these ideas but I also want to see your real French/Spanish. So please try your best in French/Spanish but write in the language in which you feel most comfortable and feel free to change during your response if needed. For example, if you feel that you need to use Google translate or similar, switch to your native language for that portion of your response.

If French/Spanish is your native language, please use that if you feel most comfortable doing so.

1. How did the movie represent the educational system in France? (French class) / How did the movie represent the 1988 referendum in Chile? (Spanish class)
2. Do you feel that the movie focused on one type of group or interaction? Please explain your response (both classes).
3. Might the story or plot be different if told from a different perspective? Please explain your response (both classes).

**B. Experiential Learning component**

Instructions: Now that you have watched the film and reflected on it, let's take your experience beyond the "classroom." Please choose between one of the two options below.

Code switching is allowed. I want to know your thoughts in depth on these ideas but I also want to see your real French/Spanish. So please try your best in French/Spanish but write in the language in which you feel most comfortable and feel free to change during your response if needed. For example, if you feel that you need to use Google translate or similar, switch to your native language for that portion of your response. If French/Spanish is your native language, please use that if you feel most comfortable doing so.

**Option A: Peer Viewing**

Watch the movie a second time with a family member or friend. You can also do this with more than one person in a small group of 3-4 people. After viewing the film, pose the reflection questions that you have already answered to this person and discuss your points of view. Write a reflection (minimum length: one page) on your experience viewing and discussing the movie. Detail the person's responses and share two interesting points from your discussion. Did you learn anything new? Did your second viewing and peer discussion change your perspectives?

**Option B: Further Reading**

Look for two other sources (articles, reviews, etc.) that offer different perspectives about the film. Compare and contrast the sources. Write a reflection (minimum length: one page) summarizing what you have learned from your reading, including what made the perspectives different from each other, and what you think about them. Do you agree or disagree? Why is it important to consider who tells the story and whose perspective is being shared? Please include the sources or links to the articles that you used for this assignment.