

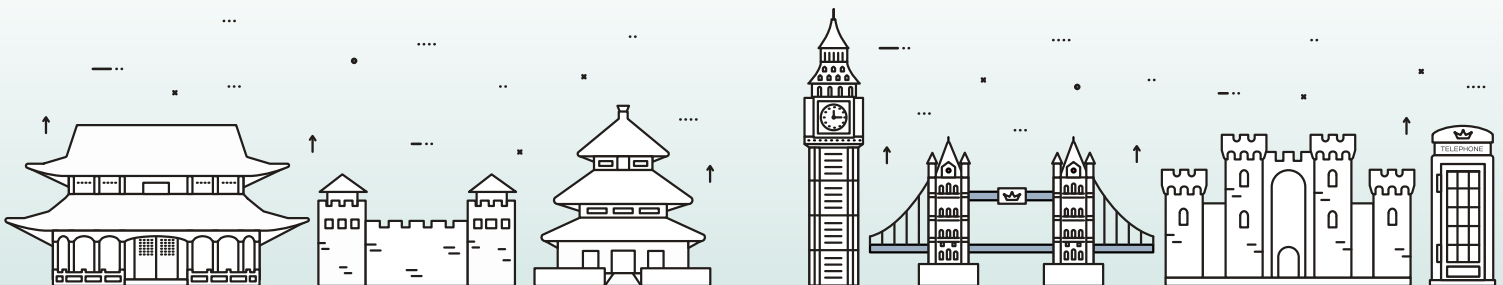
A LITTLE *bonjour* GOES A LONG WAY:

Language Preparation for International Programs

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Universities and schools are increasingly highlighting the importance of community service for their students and making an experiential learning component a requirement for an undergraduate degree. Professors, administrators, and advisors extol the virtues of an experiential learning course for the student's résumé and future job prospects. As a result, it is incumbent on the institution to create new programs both at home and internationally, and reevaluate existing ones to best serve today's student population who is relying on such experiences not only academically, but also as an investment in their professional future. My relationship with experiential learning has been extremely positive, and has evolved through lessons learned, and a need to meet the changing dynamics within my university over the six years I have been offering such courses. This article will describe three international programs that I have led or co-led at the University of Cincinnati where my role was to prepare non-language students for a program in a French speaking country where they would engage with the local population.

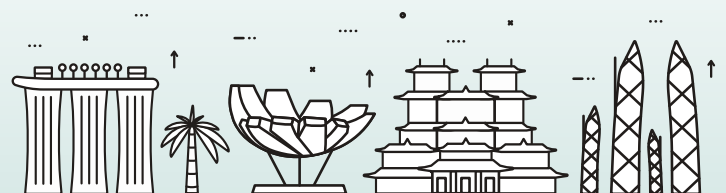
As a language instructor for more than 20 years, it has always been a primary goal to provide authentic environments for my students to speak French. During these periods, I have witnessed different pedagogies and technologies that endeavor to fill the growing demand for better fluency, both cultural and linguistic, for students. Much of the second language acquisition literature speaks to the need to connect students' language learning to real world settings. In this way, a study abroad or service learning opportunity is tailor made for the language student and is often a required or recommended component of the major. I have been involved with the development and leadership of both of these types of programs, but it is through my work with non-language students that I have been the most challenged and rewarded. As a result, it has become increasingly clear to me that language-teaching methodologies must respond to a different, more targeted need for students to use their language skills in specific settings that do not always correspond to the traditional categories and themes generally found in beginner language textbooks.



Many articles and studies have been written about the importance of pre-departure preparation for study abroad programs. Students complete reflective assignments, cultural awareness readings, team building exercises, and other training to prepare themselves to study outside of their home country. Similarly, for an international service learning program, students prepare their projects, research the country, its needs and its people, among other tasks in order to prepare for the international experience where they will engage with the local population. However, usually little, if any time at all, is spent on language preparation for students who are not studying the language(s) spoken in the country where they will visit. While students who will study their target foreign language in an immersion setting often have a prerequisite of a year of college level language classes before going abroad, a student enrolled in a service learning program, often has no foreign language experience and must therefore rely on faculty members, group leaders or in-country translators to communicate with the community they are serving and living with, thus creating a distance or barrier between the two groups; a sense of “otherness”.

In her article on showing the relevance of French through service learning, Jacqueline Thomas (2013) states that language connects human beings in the most basic of ways and connects students in all disciplines. With language at the heart of meaningful communication, it certainly stands to reason that some kind of deliberate and focused preparation be included in a

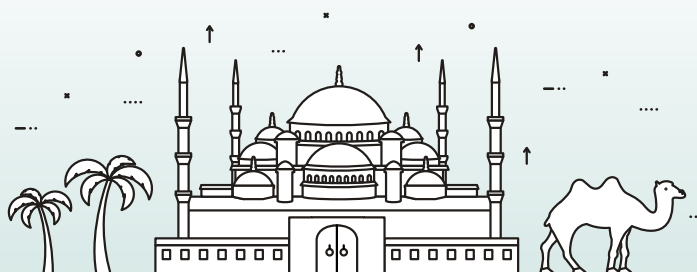
program where students will be working alongside, serving, and connecting with an international community. Indeed, when traveling as part of a service program, we are given an access to the local population that students studying at a university or average tourists do not have. Many studies have been published, in particular in the health and medical fields, about experiential learning programs where students travel internationally to serve local communities. While most of these programs discuss overwhelmingly positive and transformative benefits to students and genuinely valuable work in the community, some researchers point out a challenge of students not having even a basic knowledge of the foreign language. Aditi (2013) outlines a program where dental hygiene students travelled to Morocco to provide oral health to the underserved in health clinics, hospitals and orphanages. According to the study, participants expressed a “universal sentiment about the difficulties presented by a language barrier”, it was “a challenge” that divided the group from the local doctors and other medical professionals (238). Likewise, George and Shams, in their 2011 article about an international service multi-constituent collaborative in sub-Saharan Africa to promote sustainability in the processing and marketing of the local product, shea butter, indicate that language barriers between groups often resulted in confusion and misunderstanding about project deliverables (74-75). As I read more of these kinds of studies and talked with colleagues involved in these kinds of programs, it seemed clear to me that this was an important area for growth.



My own experience with international service learning began in 2011 when I was invited to be the second faculty leader of a service group to Haiti, a Francophone region in dire straits after the then recent earthquake. There were twenty-four students in the program at a wide variety of stages in their academic career (freshmen through graduate students) and in a wide variety of disciplines of study. They were all united by a profound desire to help in a meaningful way. Originally, I had been asked to go along on the trip because of my fluency in French. However, at my suggestion, it soon became evident to my colleague, who spoke no French, and to me that we would be doing a disservice to our students if we didn't prepare them, at least minimally, to communicate with the local population they so genuinely wanted to help. My eyes were immediately opened to the possibilities. But there were also many challenges that lay before me in my task of teaching some kind of basic French to twenty-four students of varied backgrounds, in twenty minute intervals, once per week over a ten week term, while they were simultaneously working on developing their service projects, a research paper and completing weekly readings for the course. I could not rely on my years of teaching beginner French where we would start in a logical way with the present tense, progress through other grammatical structures and thematic material outlined in the textbook so that by the end of the year students were ready for their second year of French. In this program, students were not taking French as a subject; clearly another methodology was in order.

I began by designing a skeleton curriculum that would allow students to acquire and practice only the structures they would need while in Haiti engaging with the community. I therefore turned to a pragmatic approach to introducing French to my students. Rachel Shively (2010) defines pragmatic competence as 'the knowledge and skills needed to use and interpret the meanings, assumptions and actions expressed by language in its sociocultural context' (106). Applied linguists have labeled this kind of language instruction as "language for specific purposes" which promotes a targeted, context based curriculum. For my method, I chose five areas of concentration: greetings, introduction and description of self, question and answer formation, polite requests and replies and vocabulary specific to the service projects the students were working on (this ranged from a birthing clinic, working with orphans, women's health care and taking survey assessments of clean drinking water after the earthquake). Rather than design lessons in a top-down approach, I enlisted the students to help in the lesson process by tasking them to brainstorm in groups about the language structures they felt they would need. I then formed mini lessons around these topics, allowing for some practice time in class and some searching through resources outside of class. This eventually led students to compile a targeted, useful dictionary and phrasebook that they brought with them to Haiti.

Students shared with me their nervousness about travelling to a foreign country where they would

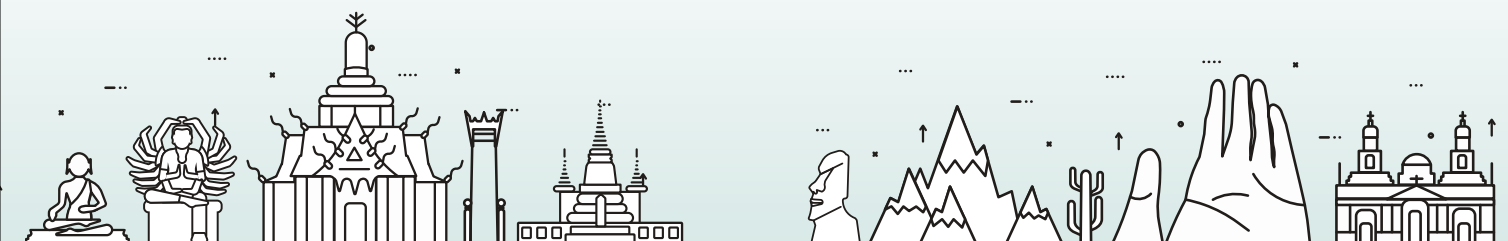


not be able to speak the language, and how this would make them feel like outsiders. I took these comments very seriously; I had heard them before from my study abroad students who were looking at spending time in a foreign country. Well-known linguist Stephen Krashen (1981) developed the notion that people have an “affective filter” which blocks language and learning in the presence of anxiety or low self-confidence. Furthermore, understanding one’s own anxiety leads to also understanding the anxiety of others when in an unfamiliar setting. I realized that part of the preparation I needed to give to my students was to instill a confidence in their abilities to still be themselves, recognize their own identity and self, while outside of their own country.

It was easier to do this with students who already had some language training — a year or so of college level French is generally enough to allow students to feel that they have a base. The students going to Haiti had nowhere near this time to develop a confidence in French. It wasn’t until we were in Haiti that students felt their confidence emerge out of the contexts we were in. Fortunately it did not take very long before “*bonjour*” made a huge difference and opened the doors to meaningful communication. Students were able to negotiate meaning by helping each other, using hand gestures and pointing, drawing pictures and circumlocution. Once they realized they had made themselves understood and that they in turn could understand, there was no stopping them. My students went from asking me to translate for

them into French to asking me how to say something in French so they could say it themselves. I witnessed a most poignant exchange when I was in the birthing centre in the middle of the night while two of our pre-med students were helping to deliver a baby. When the baby was born, the students asked me how to say “congratulations” in French. When they said “*félicitations*” I felt proud of what they had done, and of how they had thought in that frenzied moment of activity to want to communicate with the new mother in her own language. This was one of many moments that profoundly affected me as a person and as a language professional. I knew then that this work was powerful and that I wanted to continue. My students and I had experienced authentic human interactions, more poignant and profound than any glossy textbook story.

After working with the Haiti program again in 2012, I was approached by a colleague in sociology who was interested in developing an international service learning program to the French speaking Caribbean archipelago of Guadeloupe, where the remoteness of one of its islands has dramatic effects on the education, workforce and well-being of the inhabitants. The course took a similar structure to the Haiti program where students from multiple disciplines were invited to explore contemporary social problems in Cincinnati and compare them to Guadeloupe. They designed appropriate service activities according to the needs of the population while engaged in academic coursework to analyze social structures and

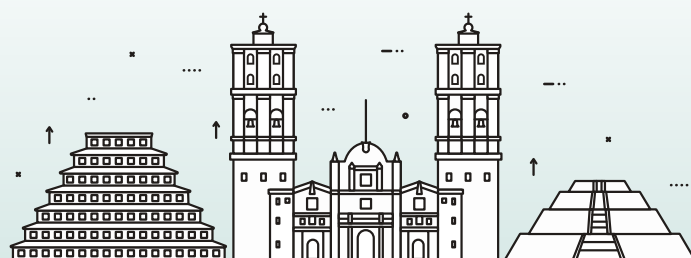


contemporary issues. The international trip would take place over the Spring break, in the middle of this semester long course. Although the class size was much smaller than the Haiti classes, only eight students, I approached the language preparation portion in a similar way, tailoring instruction to what the students needed to complete their service projects, which included: working with local fishermen, teaching English to the school children, helping to repair and clean public facilities and learning and assisting the local “medicine man”. The model I had designed for the Haiti program had worked, and also had the possibility of adaptability. A smaller class size on campus facilitated more speaking opportunities for students within the time allotted for language preparation (a thirty minute segment as part of the weekly three hour seminar). Students again generated their language needs according to their service projects. In addition, there were a few students who had previously studied some basic French, which allowed me to put them into strategic working groups to take advantage of their language experience.

The previous two years with the Haiti program had allowed me to reflect on changes and improvements to my methodology. Student reflection data as well as my field notes and observations led me to incorporate more specifics into my pragmatic categories. For example, I added language structures related to invitations into the category of questions as students had more opportunities for social interaction in this community. In addition, it

became necessary to add some instruction on apologies in French to the category of polite requests and replies as this came out of the students’ desire to be humble about their own *faux pas* in the foreign language and culture. In addition to the language improvements, I also added some specific, targeted cultural instruction to the pre-trip preparation. As part of the Haiti program, in class before the trip, students had guest speakers talking about the historical, political and social issues that had plagued this island nation for centuries. In the Guadeloupe program however, the focus was on contemporary society and its problems, and I felt that students would benefit from knowing more about this former French colony who is still under the umbrella of the French republic as one of its departments. I introduced a novel: *The Tree of Life* by Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé which tells the story of a family through several generations, and *Rue Cases-Nègres*, a popular film about post-colonial life for the indigenous people of the French Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s. As a language teacher, I have always known about the inextricable link between language and culture and felt this to be an integral component of the students’ pre-trip preparation. While we were in Guadeloupe, students were able to make some tangible connections to what they had read, seen and discussed in class.

During their communications with the natives in Guadeloupe, students were eager to speak French, in some ways more so than the students who I had travelled with to Haiti. I think this was



due in part to the small group atmosphere that this program had cultivated before and during the trip. Students were very comfortable with each other, as well as very supportive. In addition, the local population was not under as many constraints to socialize with our group as they had been in Haiti because of the political and economic climate. Students invited some local youth to join us for a meal and often engaged with them in conversations during the day — in broken English and French — about their future plans. These indigenous young people had never met American students, nor had cultivated any relationship with people of their own age outside of their own community. These discussions were very relatable to our students as they saw firsthand the hardships and problems faced by the youth on the island who had to choose between their family and leaving the island to pursue an education beyond the age of 12 years old. As I discreetly overheard some of the conversations, I observed that my students had learned to negotiate meaning in several different ways, one of which was new to me as a tool for language acquisition: social media. They had discovered a common language, one that allowed them to break down the traditional barriers of grammar and syntax. Some of these students still today keep in contact with friends they met in Guadeloupe and they communicate with words that are part English, part French and part text language. Through post trip reflection activities, students were able to appreciate the positive effect that they had on these young Guadeloupeans and how their willingness to start a conversation, at whatever level of French they

were at then, broke down a barrier and led to a new definition of what service to a community can include. It was during this program, that I experienced the best example of the lowering of Krashen's affective filter, by both our students and the local youth in Guadeloupe as the feeling of "otherness" no longer seemed to be there during these interactions.

In 2015, I was invited to participate in another program, one that was focused differently than the previous two. A colleague, also a professor of French, had developed a European Studies course in cooperation with the Université de Bordeaux in France. During the second year of the program, I was invited to join to help with language and cultural preparation as the majority of the students enrolled in the program were not language students, but did have some very basic French language proficiency. However, two of the nine students had no French at all. What made this program different at the outset is that instead of being a service oriented program, it was a research based course where students would interact with students, professors, citizens and professionals in Bordeaux about the status of the European Union and their particular areas of research which for the nine students enrolled in the course, ranged from the use/overuse of antibiotics, the immigrant crisis, funding for the arts in Europe, language policy and the future of the Union. My involvement with this program came at a later stage than the previous two, so the language preparation was not as robust in the pre-trip planning stage for the course. My work was more concentrated while

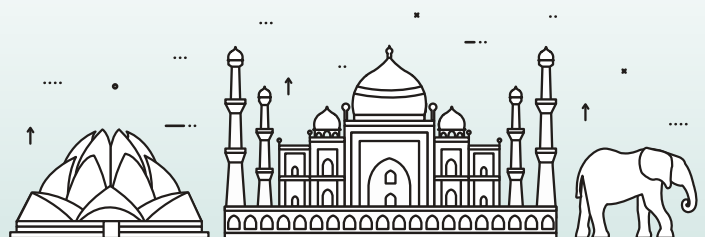


we were in Bordeaux where I encouraged students to adapt the French they knew already to the specific contexts in which they were working. The students with no prior French knowledge were encouraged to use basic greetings, polite requests and simple sentence structure. I was very impressed with the results I saw on a daily basis.

As traditional service projects were not a formal part of this program, the students' focus was on attending academic seminars at the university and pre-arranged field trip opportunities. Local professors and students who were involved in our program spoke English with relative fluency and students were able to find English in the public services in the city. When we held our informal debriefing meetings each day, I asked students in what contexts they were able to use their French and we discussed how they felt about it and what they might add next time they were in the situation. As the days passed during our two-week stay in Bordeaux, I witnessed students more willing to take risks and to engage with their language skills. A fundamental and universal desire to connect with people transformed our students' interactions in this environment, coupled with the friendly and open demeanor of the locals we encountered. Those students who already knew some French, but who had not signed up for this class with the specific goal of improving their French, became very keen on doing just that. Students began to ask me many questions about the nuances of expressions, how to form sentences with more complex tenses and structures and how to word

relevant queries about their research. Those two students who had no previous training in French were very much supported and helped by their fellow colleagues and gained confidence through their shared interactions. The anxiety about having to speak French perfectly before entering in a conversation seemed to melt away with a simple "*bonjour, comment ça va*"? It was obvious that students were empowered in their abilities to communicate in French, whatever their level, and to make friends, conduct research and live in a French-speaking city. A highlight of this program came for me near the end, in one of the final seminars of the program, when our students asked the guest speaker/professor if she could give her talk in French, rather than translate it into English. All of the students agreed with this request and at the end, all reported that this was one of the best sessions of the program, including their own participation in the question period at the end of the talk. I am participating again this year in the Bordeaux program, and plan to include more language and cultural instruction in the pre-trip stage as well as look at providing different contexts for the students to use their French in different contexts while we are abroad.

An essential component of service learning is structured reflection (Wehling 2008) in which the students consciously link what they are learning theoretically in the classroom to their experiences in the community. After my own detailed reflections on my participation in these three programs detailed above, I feel transformed as an educator and as a member



of society. I witnessed students engaged in an international community, impassioned by the work they were doing and stepping out of their comfort zone to speak a language that in most cases they had only studied for a short period of time. As students were empowered in their exchanges with natives, their confidence grew and their sense of engagement was heightened by this intimate connection with local populations. As a language professional, I learned as much, if not more from these exchanges. Language is an ever changing, evolving and fluid part of life that is very much context based. Language teaching methodology therefore needs to reflect this constant evolution. Negotiating meaning became the focus of our interactions; and students were not being evaluated by their instructor on correct grammatical language structures but instead by a real world situation where communication is a tangible product. Familiarity with culture-based expressions, introduction to targeted language structures relevant to their work in the course, focusing on intonation, and recognizing inflection and language rhythms help students and community members grasp the key sociolinguistic elements of the other culture, which should certainly be a key goal of any experiential learning program.

It is clear that our students need, are the tools to prepare for international experiences and interactions that go beyond the surface, beyond the reliance on in-country agencies, translators and infrastructure that while they may simplify communication between locals and foreigners,

ultimately lead to a distance between “us and them”, an “otherness” that can only begin to melt away once we empower our students and ourselves with language tools for that most basic form of human connection.

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