

Capstone Project

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I originally enrolled in the Certificate in International Learning (CIL) program because, thanks to my coursework as a linguistics major and Spanish minor with a couple years of Korean classes thrown into the mix, I had already completed many of the requirements. Furthermore, I thought the CIL would be a nice way to hone my intercultural communication skills and boost my resume as I was considering a career in teaching English as a second language. My actual experience with the CIL went far beyond that, though. It fundamentally changed the way I think about culture, it challenged the assumptions I make about others and even myself, and it shifted my approach to both the use and the teaching of additional languages.

Like other CIL students, my CIL journey began with the orientation. The online modules laid the foundation for how I would think about culture during the rest of the certificate's components and in my life in general. In particular, one idea that stuck with me was how intertwined culture is with our everyday lives, to the point that we often don't even notice it until we come across alternative cultural practices. How had my own sense of culture been subconsciously shaping my actions and perceptions? How would these influences become clear to me as I participated in the other CIL components? These are the questions that I was eager to find the answers to as I continued my CIL journey.

I began to answer some of these questions during the in-person portion of the intercultural communication training workshop. Specifically, it was during a conversation with another student where we realized that we'd both gone to catholic high schools that I began to see how much my own cultural experiences had informed my assumptions. When the conversation began, I was excited to find out that we had a shared high school experience that we could talk about. However, it quickly became clear that our supposedly "shared" experience wasn't that "shared" after all. Whereas I had lived at home while attending a co-ed high school in

Canada that only had mandatory masses every couple of months, the other student had gone to an all-girls boarding school - the norm where she grew up - that had multiple masses every week. What's more, she mentioned that most of the discipline at her school came from the older students, not from the teacher. This was something that I'd never experienced at any of my schools in Canada and consequently had never even considered as an option. Overall, the conversation really revealed to me how many assumptions I'd made about the other student's high school experience based on my own. In hearing her personal stories, though, I realized how much variability can actually exist behind a seemingly straightforward statement like "I went to a catholic high school." Clearly, the CIL program was going to ask me to develop a much more multifaceted worldview than I had held before.

My worldview continued to be challenged during the six weeks I spent studying abroad in South Korea during the summer of 2024. This time, however, it wasn't my assumptions about someone else that were getting challenged; it was assumptions about myself. Growing up in Canada, I've often been told that I'm a quiet person. I'm rarely the most talkative person in a large group, and I often struggle to project my voice when speaking in loud environments. Because of this self-perception, I wasn't overly concerned when, prior to going abroad, I heard that in South Korea the cultural expectation is that you're quiet in shared spaces, such as on public transit. Then I got to South Korea and was told - not just once, but *twice* - that I was speaking too loudly. I was suddenly a loud person! This complete one-eighty in how I was being perceived really prompted me to reflect on the extent to which our culture determines our perceptions and opinions. Me seeing myself as a quiet person wasn't really an objective truth; it was just something that I'd learned and internalized because I'd grown up in a culture that values

extroversion. By learning how to adapt to the cultural norms in South Korea, I got the chance to challenge my self-image and see the world from a different cultural perspective.

During my time in South Korea, I also noticed a shift in how I use Korean, one of my additional languages. Prior to going abroad, my main goal whenever I used my additional languages, whether Korean or Spanish, had always been to avoid making mistakes. In South Korea, however, I stopped paying quite as much attention to forming completely accurate sentences and started focusing more on producing effective sentences, that is, sentences that allowed me to communicate my intention and keep the conversation moving, to actually participate in *dialogue* rather than just a series of one-off statements. The key moment I noticed this shift was when I was trying to figure out where to buy baseball tickets. I wasn't sure if I was in the right spot, so I turned to someone and asked. The exchange that followed just naturally flowed out of me. It was one of the first times I really felt like I had embodied the language, even if it maybe wasn't fully correct.

Having this more embodied and naturalistic experience with one of my additional languages reinforced for me just how central language is to identity. Languages, like culture in general, are something you live, not objects you just use. They're ways of expressing yourself, of engaging with the world and connecting with other people. Of course, I knew this intellectually before going to South Korea, but having the chance to actually be immersed in a language that I was learning and to experience this breakthrough firsthand allowed me to integrate this knowledge more deeply. Since coming back to Canada, I've tried to maintain this more expressive and interactive approach to language use in my Korean and Spanish classes. Consequently, I've felt my communicative ability in my additional languages, especially in Spanish, the language I'm able to use more often in Canada, skyrocket.

My personal experience using additional languages has also built on the more explicit language knowledge I've gained through my CIL-approved linguistics classes. In taking classes like *LING 204: Syntax of the World's Languages* and *LING 310: Phonology*, I've gained an appreciation of the structural complexity and diversity of the world's languages, making me realize that English offers just one small sliver of insight into the forms that languages can take. However, of the linguistics classes I've taken as part of the CIL, the one that has had the biggest impact on me is *LING 320: Second Language Acquisition*. This course, and in particular the section on bilingualism, helped me understand the importance of maintaining young bilingual students' first languages for academic success. When combined with my deeper sense of how language relates to self-expression and identity, this knowledge has helped me to develop what I feel is a much more well-rounded understanding of the inherent value of all languages. In the future, I hope to apply this understanding to the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. That is, I want to create a classroom environment that honours and promotes students' first languages in addition to English, that makes it clear that all languages are equally worth maintaining. This might take the form of explicit instruction on the value of maintaining first languages for academic success or more implicit activities that, though done in English, ask students to reflect on their personal connection to their first language. Especially in the modern world where there's an increasing use of international languages like English, I think this approach to teaching ESL is more important than ever.

Participating in the CIL program has had a profound impact on how I see myself in relation to culture and how I want to go forward as a member of the international community. The program has led me to question the extent to which culture influences my worldview, to recognize that the way I perceive certain experiences and even how I exist in relation to other

people is not pre-determined. Rather, it is culturally informed and therefore capable of evolution. Furthermore, it has provided me with direct experience in the use of additional languages that has expanded on the knowledge I've gained through my linguistics classes and fundamentally altered the way I plan to teach languages in the future. By taking part in the CIL program, I have experienced firsthand how language is a part of culture, how culture is a part of who we are, and how by engaging with other cultures, we not only gain access to new ways of seeing the world, we gain access to new ways of seeing ourselves.