French Language Studies in New Caledonia Despite COVID-19: The Emergency Response Move from In-Country to Virtual Program

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Highlights

- An international short-term language course was transformed into a virtual program for university students in times of a global pandemic.
- A sense of community amongst learners and teachers in online language teaching programs was achieved with the help of online platforms, multiple communication channels, and informal language.
- Online immersive cultural experiences were ensured through cultural experts, authentic materials, and interactions with local students.

1   Introduction

Triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and international border closures in Australia from March 2020 onwards, previous student mobility programs came to a rapid halt. The move by higher education institutions to online delivery at short notice, described as 'online triage' (Gacs et al., 2020) was unprecedented and highly disruptive (Crawford et al., 2020). As all universities worldwide, we at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) were faced with the immediate challenge to move teaching online including providing programs for students who had previously travelled internationally to experience the languages and cultures of other countries.

This chapter presents a case study of the swift design and delivery of an online synchronous French language course by a language college in New Caledonia for Australian students from UTS. The French language college in Noumea, New Caledonia is the Centre de Rencontres et d'Echanges Internationaux du Pacifique

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(CREIPAC) and affiliated with the Université de Nouvelle Calédonie. In past years, students from UTS travelled to New Caledonia for a 3-week immersive and intensive French language program including homestay opportunities and cultural activities. In order to provide our students with similar opportunities for learning French language and cultural facets of New Caledonia, an intensive 3-week course was created in July 2020 with 2 h of synchronous online classes delivered by CREIPAC teachers every morning supplemented by a variety of blended and cultural activities. Eight UTS students participated in two language classes of each four students on a B1 and B2 level. While we are not involved in the teaching of the French classes, we coordinate a subject students take at UTS that prepares them for the international program and guides them through a range of reflective activities and assessments to maximise the learning afforded by the language course so they can receive academic credit for the short-term program.

This chapter explores how five of the CREIPAC staff members adapted to the emergency online delivery of their previously face-to-face (f2f) delivered language program, their experiences and perspectives in facilitating learning, building relationships and interacting online, and effectively immersing students into the cultures of New Caledonia. The teachers' experiences are supplemented by the students' evaluations of the interventions. Overall, three questions guided this project:

- How did the teachers respond to the need for online delivery in response to the COVID restrictions?
- How did the teachers build an online community?
- How did the teachers create immersive linguistic and cultural experiences and how did students evaluate their impact?

Through the data collected, a key finding was the teachers' focus on establishing and maintaining community and creating immersive experiences, relevant for all kinds of teaching but particularly for language and culture programs. Additionally, their use of language, learning activities, and multimedia platforms will also be presented in the findings section.

To provide theoretical framing to interpret the experiences of students and teachers in our study, the following review of literature from the fields of teacher professional practice and virtual/online teaching will provide an overview of currents trends.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Requirements of Online Language Teaching

In the field of language teaching, there has been ongoing expansion over the past decade in online delivery (Hall & Knox, 2009; Shelley et al., 2013) and like all content areas, online and blended teaching has presented challenges to language

teachers (Shelley et al., 2013). Baran et al. (2013) warn against trying to replicate face-to-face (f2f) practices when teaching online, while Thomas and Thorpe (2019) argue that the ability to create collaborative, transformative online learning processes is largely dependent on the course facilitator's presence and their pedagogical expertise, not just the adoption of the latest technological tool. In this sense, Collie and Martin (2016) stress the importance of the teacher's emotional, behaviour and cognitive adaptability for effective teaching. However, these new skills and demands do not automatically develop and not all teachers find it easy to cope with the change of moving from f2f to online delivery (De Paepe et al., 2019; Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2020; Shelley et al., 2013). The assumption that a teacher who is good at teaching in a f2f class can easily teach in this new medium is a common myth (Compton, 2009). Tudini (2018) expands on the multitasking skills required by language teachers to balance synchronous instruction, interaction opportunities, monitoring students, while also understanding linguistic and intercultural concepts. Thus, teachers become producers of media resources, workflow managers and online tutors (Bañados, 2006) which can put additional strain on their ability to deliver courses successfully.

Not only does technology impact on teacher practices, Comas-Quinn et al. (2012) point out that the adoption of technology-mediated teaching approaches has subverted the traditional roles of teachers and the kinds of relationships that develop between teachers and learners. This can change the perception learners have of the teacher and challenge the identity of the teacher themselves, which can be unsettling and demanding. Shelley et al. (2013) point out that this shift may also evoke emotions which teachers might find difficult to regulate, and as Mendieta and Barkhuizen (2020) argue, can impact on a teacher's sense of ownership in relation to their technical abilities. Faced with many unknowns and the readjustment of their own roles and identity in the classroom, teachers might employ specific strategies to overcome these issues which are relevant to teaching any cohort. These include building a collaborative community of inquiry and a strong sense of belonging of all group members which will be explored in the following.

2.2   Community Building in Online Language Teaching

Community is a key consideration in all teaching and in online delivery the development of social presence in communities of language learners is crucial to maintain a sense of connectedness (Lomicka, 2020). It has long been established in foreign language pedagogy that building a sense of community and belonging in f2f classroom contexts is essential to support learning (González-Lloret, 2020) and it can be argued that this is even more crucial in online modes where interaction is not physically possible (Du et al., 2010; Lomicka, 2020). In investigating this group of teachers' experiences of suddenly delivering a French language program online, 'teaching presence' (Richardson et al., 2015) is particularly significant in understanding how effective online learning communities can be created. Teaching presence is also

referred to by some scholars as 'instructor presence' and research has shown the value students place on teachers who are responsive to their needs (Hodges & Forrest Cowan, 2012; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010) and where the instructor projects him−/herself as a real person (Richardson et al., 2015). A sense of community also facilitates language learners' sense of security, and willingness to participate, interact and engage with the teacher and other students (Lomicka, 2020).

Interactivity is seen as a key feature of online learning that can contribute positively to students' sense of belonging and their confidence to express themselves and with others in the target language. The value of interactivity and the need to create this emotional connection when facilitating learning in online environments is a feature of Salmon's (2011) model of teaching and learning online which identifies learner needs and the support teachers can provide to achieve higher levels of interactivity. She argues that learners' motivation can be enhanced by the choices of technologies a teacher chooses and emphasises the use of activities to address learners' needs for socialisation and connectedness. The intersection of technology plus pedagogy is again foregrounded and the necessity for teachers to learn how to integrate both. Additionally, teachers have to be able to then personalise these strategies and technologies for individual students and adapt them to different language levels and specific requirements of the program. While online learning can often include synchronous interactions and communication with instructors and peers, it also provides for asynchronous learning in which space and time are not barriers (Means et al., 2014). These benefits are often obtained at a cost, as the online mode may also result in reduced opportunities for student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions and communication if not blended and scaffolded sufficiently. As a focus point of this study, the strategies and platforms that teachers used to establish and maintain their presence and a sense of community in their emergency response teaching and how teachers and students perceived these shifts will be further discussed in the data findings section.

2.3   Cultural Immersion in Online Teaching

Where traditional international programs offer the invaluable opportunity for students to immerse themselves in the languages and cultures of the host country, the lack of this possibility in online programs is often perceived as one of the biggest drawbacks of online programs. To overcome this, virtual exchanges (VE) are an innovative practice in international education designed to bridge this gap and still contribute to globally competent students (O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). VE is defined as the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with students from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of course work and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

However, Garcés and O'Dowd (2020) remind us that virtual exchange is not the same as virtual learning. In contrast to many forms of virtual learning, which are

based on the transfer of information through video lectures and online content, VE uses collaborative, student-centred approaches where intercultural understandings and knowledge are constructed through learner-to-learner interaction. On the positive side, VE has been found to have positive impact on students' linguistic, intercultural development, and digital competencies (De Wit, 2016; Garcés & O'Dowd, 2020). However, Richardson reminds us that many VE programs 'reflect the face-to-face assumption that if students interact with those different to themselves, they (the students) will somehow be transformed by the experience. We know that this is not the case, so a very careful design of online learning activities is essential' (Richardson, 2016, pp. 123–124).

With appropriate curriculum implementation and opportunities for students to interact and co-construct knowledge online with peers internationally, VE has been shown to be effective for developing intercultural competence (Guth & Helm, 2017). As part of their intercultural learning, students' ways of thinking about themselves and others and their behaviours can be transformed (Mueller, 2021). New capabilities, often referred to as transferable or generic skills, however, can also be acquired in classroom settings and online learning experiences, provided that students have to overcome challenges to adjustments and meaningfully engage with others in project- or problem-based learning (Mueller & Oguro, 2021). Further, O'Dowd (2019) links linguistic skills to employment in the digital age. Many challenges of emergency online learning and the cultural interventions that students experienced triggered the development of these transferable skills, that students might also need in their future workplaces, and we will look at them in the section below.

While our program was not an exchange program, elements of VE were incorporated into the program CREIPAC developed for our students. We will examine two cultural interventions created by the program directors that facilitate exchanges between students and local experts to provide the UTS students opportunities to meaningfully engage with others in French as a key component of intercultural learning. Students further reflect on these experiences by linking them to transferable learning outcomes and employability development.

3   Methodology and Participants

The study design adopted a case-study approach exploring our three questions through various semi-structured interview prompts based on the literature and features of emergency and online learning under investigation. With approval from the university's research ethics committee, we interviewed the first two participants together (one teacher and the program director) and then each of the three main teachers individually approximately 1 month after the program finished. These in-depth interviews lasted between 45 and 80 min and were recorded. The primary motivation was to give teachers a voice and understand how they saw their changing role and adaptation of teaching activities in the emergency response teaching

Table 1 Teacher profiles

Teacher pseudonym	Age bracket	Years as French teachers	Years at CREIPAC	Language level taught in program
Amelie	30–40	10	4	B1
Philippa	40–50	20	3	B2
Bianca	40–50	N/A	4	N/A (coordinator)
Emma	40–50	23	2	B1
Rebecca	30–40	19	8	B2

because listening 'to teachers' stories of practice can contribute to our understanding of how teachers construct emerging language teaching contexts' (Mendieta & Barkhuizen, 2020, p. 180). A summary of the teacher participant profiles is in Table 1.

In addition to the teacher participants, all eight students were also invited to participate in interviews and three of them accepted. Student interviews took between 45 and 60 min and the question prompts covered the same categories as the teacher questions, but from the students' evaluation perspective. All students were undergraduate and aged 20–25. They had been learning French for between 3 and 5 years and were upper intermediate level.

The data analysis followed Hancock and Algozzine's (2006) qualitative content analysis stage model for case study research. Though the research and interview questions were set, we wanted to leave room for a grounded approach in finding reoccurring and salient new categories. These categories were determined after several rounds of data analysis and interpretation. Although we only had a handful of interviews, we were able to identify patterns among the teachers, between teachers and the research literature and between teachers and students. Drawing on the review of research literature, we found recurring notions in the teachers' initial reactions and subsequent innovations and adaptations, how they built a community in the online classroom and the cultural interventions they created.

4 Pedagogical Interventions

4.1 Initial Responses and Adaptability

New, unfamiliar, and potentially uncomfortable teaching demands, as those resulting from the COVID-19 situation, can create emotional and behavioural responses in teachers which impact on their ability to adjust to the circumstances, engage with learners, and support the achievement of learning outcomes. According to Collie and Martin (2016), adaptability is crucial to teachers' work and entails being able to emotionally, behaviourally and cognitively respond to and manage these changes in everyday circumstances, and particularly in 'emergency' teaching contexts.

When asked for their initial reactions to the need to teach online, the teachers expressed reactions ranging from apprehension to enthusiastically seizing the opportunity. Two staff members admitted that they were initially cautious and somewhat overwhelmed about the prospect of moving to teach fully online in a short time frame, but also to adjust to our program requirements and creating a new curriculum that included cultural immersion activities. They described it as a task they '*have to do*', adjusting to '*the unknown*', and as '*feeling stressed*' as increased preparation and organisation was necessary. They also anticipated issues with internet connectivity and felt it could potentially negatively impact on the engagement with students and building of relationships. Other teachers with more experience in online teaching did not express such strong reactions. They shared their worries around the impact of unstable internet connections for effectively teaching especially in lower-level classes, but as they previously taught online, they saw this as an opportunity to test new tools and platforms. Teaching in a location with connections to smaller offshore islands, online teaching already existed in New Caledonia.

It was interesting to note that several teachers mentioned that they perceived the shift to online teaching and the necessity to explore different platforms and technologies as a natural part of their lifelong learning as teachers and professional development. They expressed a sense of normalcy in adapting to technologies such as: '*it's always been available, and I have always used it*' (Emma). Some even showed excitement at being able to explore new ways of teaching and wanting to enhance their online teaching practices: '*we need this kind of thing [*pandemic*] to put it into practice* (Philippa)'; '*it generated more interest in me to learn about new teaching technologies'* (Emma); '*I was quite happy …to try to see how it can work with different levels and to test different tools for real'* (Emma).

While teachers' initial reactions to the emergency differed, all mentioned that the experience overall was very '*enriching and interesting*' (Emma), that they were '*happily surprised*' (Amelie) how well it worked and enjoyed teaching this course. This suggests they were able to transform their initial fears or excitement and use cognitive and behavioural strategies, such as creativity, flexibility, and collaboration to deal with unforeseen issues and to identify new approaches and pedagogical methods to fit the circumstances and learners. The teachers express this as not only being a part of their professional identity, but also of their personality: '*I'm quite resilient, I could work anywhere'* (Emma). Overcoming issues of restrictive internet connectivity for their initially chosen platform (Skype), they quickly moved to use Zoom and familiarised themselves with its functions, in so doing demonstrating their behavioural and cognitive ability to learn and change initial plans (Collie & Martin, 2016). For this group of teachers, their needs and desire for innovation and change was embraced as a natural part of lifelong learning. Their embracing of personal and professional development might also be due to the experience of this group of women that had undergone extensive changes in their lives, including changing careers, moving to new countries, and adapting to new lifestyles.

4.2   Building Relationships and Engaging with Students Online

This section explores teachers' strategies and feelings around meaningfully connecting with students, in building strong relationships with them and creating a sense of belonging in the online classroom. Building a community and a sense of belonging is essential for any group-based learning activity, and while it might be initially more challenging online, it can be done successfully (Hampel & Stickler, 2015). In our study, all teachers acknowledged that it is important to them to connect with students in creating a trusting atmosphere. The teachers described previous in-person classroom teaching as tangible experiences, being able to '*breathe them*', '*feeling information sinking in*', perceiving physical responses and overhearing conversations which are important feedback mechanisms for teachers to know students' progress and understandings. Physical presence, the ability to feel the energy when students talk over each other was also mentioned by Blum (2020) as a feature that contribute to making sense of interactions in a classroom. However, all our teachers thought that the online classroom offered many of these aspects at least visually, and they felt similar levels of connectedness with not much difference between how they connect with students in the classroom or online. They attributed this mostly to the small group sizes that allowed them to get to know the students on a more personal level and to be less formal with them. The teachers referred to our students as '*disciplined*' in this regard emphasising that they followed the rules that were initially given, and all tried to engage with all materials and tasks. This was further linked to command and functionality of technology as also stressed by Salmon (2011). Several teachers mentioned that a stable internet connection, turning on their cameras and microphones, and general digital competencies contribute to building good relationships.

In getting to know their students better, all teachers included personalised approaches to students to talk about their lives, experiences, and opinions, showing them that they listened and retained the information. One teacher mentions that she paid particular attention to students' personalities and individual qualities to achieve this. Several teachers agreed that much about building relationships online depends also on the students' personalities and openness of sharing as well as their level of language command with more proficient language users naturally able to share more personal insights and be more spontaneous and interactive. This illustrates the importance of the concepts of 'social presence' and 'teacher presence' as theorised within the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999) and as a key to facilitating online community and supporting learning (Lomicka, 2020).

4.2.1   Communication Platforms

Numerous online platforms are now at teachers' disposal to facilitate communication with and between learners in online learning contexts. Specific strategies that our teachers developed in response to teaching the classes remotely include the use of additional social media platforms for communication which also facilitated less formal interactions. Gacs et al. (2020) remind us that 'a community atmosphere and personal connections have to be carefully crafted in online environments' (p. 382) especially when visual means are missing. Although the teachers had 2 h of synchronous teaching daily where they saw students in the online classroom, the additional media platforms needed more cautious use to really connect with students, especially because of the added hurdle of communicating through a foreign language.

Emma acknowledged that '*it's important as a group to get to know each other outside the classroom to get a sense of community*' which in f2f teaching would happen informally during break times or after classes. One of the teachers reported using Facebook messenger to connect with her cohort. First, it was used as an emergency response during the first class where the internet connection did not allow for much synchronous teaching time. They instantly discussed the issue on Messenger where students suggested alternatives to Skype. Through an authentic situation and the use of instant messaging the group connected and bonded using French to solve the problem. The teacher explained that this way of communicating on smartphones was much faster and more informal and allowed for further relationship building and discussions after class. She felt that she bonded faster with this cohort than with f2f cohorts because of the more informal way of sharing personal insights through social media. Another example included following up on a personal matter one student had raised during class time. Using social media communication platforms, the teacher could connect with the individual student in an informal and personalised way and extend her presence beyond class time and place restrictions (Means et al., 2014).

Our findings around communication platforms support Dixon's (2010) research which found that learners are more engaged in online programs when multiple communication channels are used. It also echoes Guillén et al. (2020) findings that Zoom fatigue can be prevented through the use of additional mobile technologies. Students' evaluations show that they enjoyed using informal channels in addition to the already informal Zoom classes. Students welcomed teachers using additional communication platforms to supplement traditional emails. They felt this made teachers more approachable and that they could continue their language learning beyond the structured class time.

4.2.2 Informal Communication

Another strategy identified which was often undertaken less consciously is teachers' reports of being more informal with the online students compared to larger f2f groups in classrooms settings where they normally establish more of a professional distance. All teachers reported using the personal pronoun 'tu' and first names as opposed to the formal 'vous' and encouraged students to do the same. Several teachers mention that this choice is not necessarily deliberate but comes from a less formal working atmosphere in the language school (as opposed to working at a university) and due to the small group size where classroom management or discipline was unnecessary. Using informal language could bridge the gap created by communicating through computer screens. Reflecting on her status, one teacher acknowledged that she adopted a more informal approach with this group without losing her authority, because the group was small and disciplined. She did not think a similar approach could be used in a f2f classroom though. The more individualised approach also enables teachers to continuously ask students for feedback and their input on content and methods.

Lomicka (2020) argues that it is important for teachers to be authentic in the classroom and that students value when teachers share something of themselves, including their own interests and stories. Gacs et al. (2020) echo this sentiment: 'many students enjoy seeing the human side, which includes mistakes and even intrusions from real life' (p. 388). Indeed, our students, though they were all surprised about the relaxed atmosphere, welcomed the informal approach and believed this contributed to relationship building and in making the learning more enjoyable. Students acknowledge this specifically, comparing this experience to the similarly "laid back" atmosphere in Australia as opposed to their study experiences in France and Canada where they perceived the teaching approach as more formal.

4.3 Innovations and Adaptation Strategies

In terms of changes to their normal approach, the program directors needed to create a new curriculum that took into account the absence of f2f opportunities and the requirements of our university to immerse students into language and culture learning to acquire knowledge and transferable skills for use beyond the language classroom context. This process led to a number of innovations by CREIPAC with regard to communication processes, teaching modes and platforms, content, and teaching and learning activities. These new approaches are introduced here with a focus on the integration of cultural immersion activities. Each teacher faced the challenge of incorporating this into their daily teaching and to find suitable platforms and methods for their cohort.

4.3.1 Blended Learning and Multimodal Approach

In their emergency response, the move to blended learning options was a logical step for the teachers in this course. Two teachers mentioned how they immediately switched to a blended learning approach embracing the opportunities that this posed for their cohorts. Having all files and documents in a single place to access for teaching enabled easy sharing of them with students. Teachers adopted a system where they sent students homework or post-class activities, so students could prepare for the following day and dive deeper into the content matter. Homework was also shared via the Zoom chat during class and other platforms such as shared folders, email, LearningApps.org, and Facebook Messenger after class which allowed students to further follow up and access the information after class ended. Through the same channels, student submitted their homework tasks and received feedback daily. The teachers describe this as an extension of the immersion from the normal class hours where students would normally log out and go about their life in their home setting. Instead, through blended learning and connections through communication platforms, they continued being immersed in French and learnt more about New Caledonia in their own time similar to what might happen if students were in-country.

Teachers in both levels of French classes commented that the blended learning modes helped them to individualise their teaching, to give responsibility to students in their learning process and to involve them more into the actual teaching time as they would present homework tasks they prepared beforehand. The multimodal approach was kept during class times too, making use of Zoom features such as screen sharing for slides and videos, the annotation whiteboard for joint and group activities, and the chat for vocabulary listings and questions. Another benefit that the multimodal teaching afforded was the distribution and personalisation of assessments. For listening and speaking tasks, teachers usually had to find different classrooms to assess students individually, whereas here they could meet students privately in breakout rooms and send them different audio links for their listening tasks, therefore avoiding the inconvenience of rigid exam supervision and room bookings. Students also had to asynchronously prepare presentations alone and with other students. These types of project-based learning activities are considered especially suitable for online learning (Link & Li, 2018) and in this case required higher levels of language use, collaboration, and regulation of emotional and behavioural processes by the students.

Students perceived the blended learning approach very positively and reported finding it easy to adjust to the new ways of accessing their language course. One student mentioned that it was much easier to stay engaged during classes as the interactivity kept them more engaged than in f2f classes where they often drift off. This was partially attributed to the interactivity possible through the small class size. They saw the ability to access different platforms synchronously as advantageous to help with understanding the subject matter, looking up vocabulary or accessing information.

4.3.2 Immersion Activities

One of the main drawbacks of an online program could be the lack of immersion into the languages and cultures of New Caledonia as the course is usually held in-country. As mentioned above, culture learning does not automatically happen in a language classroom or by being in another country. The teachers thought that physical presence in the country opens many more immersion opportunities after and in-between classes; however, they also critically acknowledge that students can be in the country without interacting with locals, instead merely observing local cultures. Interactions during breaks from class with other school staff, or with the students' homestay families are important opportunities that would usually help to develop their cultural understandings. In response, the program directors for the online program developed two innovative activities to creatively incorporate virtual immersion and exposing students to different cultural arenas of New Caledonia by facilitating contact with other students and locals. As all the teachers had moved to New Caledonia later in their lives, they felt the need to bring students together with various local community members to share others' experiences and insights.

Culture Experts
The first innovation included structuring each week around a cultural topic that an expert was invited to talk about and that many learning activities during the week aimed to prepare for linguistically. All teachers wanted to give students as much specifically New Caledonian vocabulary as possible to familiarise them with the local vernacular. The talks were described as linking 'the past with the present and future' and help students draw connections to their own situations with a critical view on various contemporary issues. As Emma commented: '*we showed them the beautiful things about New Caledonia, but also the plastic pollution*'. For the online program, the focus of each talk was as follows:

- An expert in the history of New Caledonia presented an overview of the country's rich pre- and post-colonial history and also spoke about contemporary issues such as the independence referendum. Classes were enriched by introducing essential vocabulary and grammatical points beforehand and giving students additional talking points and documents on the history after the class.
- The second expert introduced environmental aspects of New Caledonia's unique location and situation and discussed topics such as maritime life, and issues of pollution and degradation. In a f2f setting, students would see these aspects on tours of the islands and surrounding waters, but in the online mode, they viewed videos and were provided materials by the expert and the Tourism board and were then able to ask questions to engage with these aspects and reflect on their home environments further.
- The third expert was an Indigenous (Kanak) artist, musician and storyteller who was invited to read his creation tales and play a traditional flute. Preparation activities included videos to introduce students to the local Kanak dialects and vernacular and introduce Kanak voices on the referendum and post-colonialism (Image 1).

Image 1

Screenshot of Learning Apps page created to scaffold learning activities on Kanak culture and vocabulary.

Apart from the preparation materials and activities, the expert visits were then used to reflect on aspects of environmental issues, interculturality, and post-colonialism in Australia. Students had the opportunity to ask questions and voiced their views and knowledge on similar aspects in their home country but also assumptions they might have had on New Caledonia and its relationship to France and Australia. Where initially the teachers felt that students did not have much knowledge of New Caledonia, they felt that the three expert visits not only enhanced their cultural knowledge, but also filled the gaps they could themselves not deliver and to give students more encounters with other community members to make the experience more authentic, interactive, and as enriching as possible.

Another strategy to bring a New Caledonian experience to the students was for the teachers to relate their own experiences of moving to New Caledonia and adjusting to local cultures. One teacher shared her experience of living with Kanak communities on a small island and another shared her perspective of being excluded from the independence referendum and the various views on this. While using storytelling methods, key grammar and vocabulary learning were focussed on to enhance comprehension. The teachers found students to be engaged with these experiences, asking many questions, and reflecting on their own life journeys. Through these interactive sessions, the students as well as teachers and experts were able to receive insights into each other's experiences and lives showing that various interactions with different people/instructors can enhance learning on both sides.

Although the students acknowledged that not physically being in New Caledonia was not ideal, they did not see it as a major disadvantage for their cultural learning.

Travelling on their own and especially in times of a pandemic was not something they were willing to do, which made this online program a preferred option. They also mentioned affordability and accessibility as advantages, in times of a crises or border restrictions. Further, they found such a program to be an ideal way to distract from the negative emotional impact of pandemic restrictions and efficiently using their winter semester break to engage in learning something new. Students reacted very positively to the cultural experts, acknowledging the increased learning and feeling of immersion to one of Australia's closest neighbours. It inspired them to travel to New Caledonia once borders re-open and left them broadening their understanding of Francophone countries and other cultures in the Pacific region.

More significantly in terms of intercultural reflection, all students mentioned that the cultural activities triggered their thinking about their own society and its issues. They all admitted their knowledge gaps about environmental issues and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Australia. One student explained how they became aware of the lack of inclusion of Indigenous aspects in Australia. However, this notion was challenged by the French teachers who felt Australia to be more progressive with its Indigenous reconciliation efforts compare to New Caledonia. The cultural talks and reflection activities suggested that students developed their cultural competence further by 'practicing critical reflexivity, awareness of one's own culture and the ability to identify existing cultural bias' (Hyett et al., 2019, p. 390).

Interactions with Local Students

Enabling direct contact with residents of the host country enables authentic language use and contributes to 'diversifying geographically, culturally, and identity-wise their target-language community' (Guillén et al., 2020, p. 321). The emergency situation posed by COVID-19 also provided an opportunity to more intentionally connect with users of other languages virtually (Guillén et al., 2020) and helps to connect people affected by similar isolation processes and restrictions. Building on this, an additional immersive activity was introduced to purposely facilitate contact with other French speakers in two sessions during which the UTS students virtually "met" one-on-one with students from the Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (UNC). The UNC students were training to become French language teachers and therefore the reciprocity of the encounters in terms of language teaching and learning could be ensured. Students on both sides prepared a set of questions ranging from questions about the other's families, studies, jobs, travels, and future plans. The UNC students shared with UTS students' images or videos of New Caledonia, and their favourite food and music. The second meeting was more spontaneous where students were encouraged to freely interact with each other. This offered more opportunities for students to explore aspects of interest and to share experiences of the pandemic. Teachers observed these sessions and offered assistance.

Students reported these activities to be very valuable and effective in applying their language skills with peers. They found these meetings gave them unique insights into the life of students in New Caledonia and to hear about their personal circumstances, aspirations, and experiences. One student reported on how they exchanged aspects of multicultural life in their countries and how they took

advantage of it. Another reported how different perceptions of living away from one's family to study and work intersected and at times clashed. Reflecting on the status of language learning, one student found Australia's approach to language education very lacking compared to New Caledonia as the students she interacted with were all at least trilingual. However, the student also mentioned a new appreciation of the opportunities in Australia including not needing to move away to pursue study or work opportunities. These insights show that this activity and the subsequent reflection on it challenged students' initial perceptions and triggered self-reflection, two important aspects of critical cultural competence development (Hyett et al., 2019).

5   Discussion and Recommendations

The teachers' initial reactions to moving to online teaching under pandemic-enforced restrictions surprised us, and we found ourselves being corrected on our initial assumptions. Where it took us a few weeks to adjust our own teaching to the new online world, these teachers had already experience in online teaching and instantly adapted their teaching methods. These teachers in a small island nation showed us that online teaching had been a part of their teaching and mindset for years already and that language teachers have to adjust to new circumstances all the time embracing new opportunities. CREIPAC's innovative approach to incorporating cultural immersion through bringing experts and students into the online classroom effectively helped students engage with the culture topics, practice their language skills, and to feel like they have been immersed and experienced various New Caledonian cultural facets.

Being asked for which recommendations a teacher would give others or what they would do differently, they stated that the blended learning approach requires more consistent preparation of pre- and post-class activities and also the increased and consistent testing of knowledge. In order to build communities online, they recommend teachers listening and stepping back so students can engage more with each other, rather than a teacher-centred approach. An initial "practice run" where the digital tools and platforms will be explained (in English) and clear instructions on classroom etiquette were further mentioned.

Students agreed that taking the class time seriously, preparing for classes, doing homework, and actively collaborating during class all helped them to get more out of the program. Overcoming one's fears of interacting in another language online takes as much effort as f2f but can ultimately bring the same learning outcomes and engagement in classes.

6   Food for Thought: Beyond ERT

From our years of experience in student mobility programs, virtual and online programs never seemed possible or were marked as second-class experiences. Through the interviews with teachers and students we learnt that both groups were way more open to emergency remote learning and teaching than we expected. In fact, none of our participants mentioned that any part of the program felt like a makeshift solution but were well planned and executed. Although Hodges et al. (2020) make the point that learning evaluations in ERT should not be focus due to the short period of time that was provided to develop materials, our study shows that this can be done very successfully with a high level of success and satisfaction for faculty, instructors, and students.

Emergency remote teaching is often perceived as temporary and the return to f2f is seen as inevitable (Hodges et al., 2020); however, the success of this program shows that learning can continue in two forms and online immersive programs may thrive if we learn from the initial emergency response and develop sound curricula for future cohorts (Goertler & Gacs, 2018). The fact that a new group of students has already enrolled into the program half a year after the initial online program, shows that they have already embraced online immersive learning and are more than willing to continue to participate in this more accessible and sustainable program. Though technology is an integral part, a well-developed curriculum and pedagogical practices are the key to the success (González-Lloret, 2020).

As a form of immersive language and culture learning, a scaffolded approach with preparation activities and guided reflection opportunities throughout and after the program remains important so that students can maximise the many learning outcomes afforded by an online language and culture program.

Digital Tools Used

Digital platforms	Methodological use
Zoom (whiteboard, annotations, breakout rooms, chat)	For synchronous learning activities: whiteboard and annotations for grammar learning; breakout rooms for collaboration, chat function for vocabulary and sharing of links
Facebook Messenger	Informal chats after class and for questions on the materials and homework
Email	For homework submissions and feedback
YouTube	To present authentic videos of cultural and language aspects
LearningApps.org	Creation of a sequence of activities such as gap filling, matching, texts, video, and audio

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