

## **Culinary diplomacy: fostering cultural understanding through gastrodiplomatic initiatives**

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**Keywords** | Gastrodiplomacy, Virtual Exchange, Culinary Tourism, Cultural Understanding, Language Learning

**Objectives** | This micro virtual exchange project focused on advancing English language learning among tourism and hospitality undergraduate students while fostering cultural exchange and promoting culinary tourism between Portugal and Finland. The collaborative campaign aimed to deepen students' understanding of each other's gastronomic traditions, providing a unique context for language proficiency development in English.

**Methodology** | This case study explored the effectiveness of a cross-cultural culinary project in fostering cultural understanding by focusing on food as a vehicle for cultural exchange and appreciation, showcasing the role of gastronomy in fostering meaningful connections between people from different backgrounds. The project involved 9 students from each country and employed a three-phase approach: research, development of promotional video and online meeting.

During the research phase, students conducted in-depth studies on tourism, food habits, and culture in their partner's country, gathering information from various sources, including online resources, travel guides, and local cuisine experts. This phase aimed to equip students with a comprehensive understanding of the partner country's culinary heritage and cultural context.

With their newfound knowledge, students selected a representative starter, main course or dessert from their own country, carefully considering its cultural significance and culinary appeal. They then embarked on the creative task of crafting captivating promotional videos that showcased the dish's unique flavors, preparation methods, and cultural heritage.

To facilitate cross-cultural exchange and foster deeper connections, students engaged in a lively synchronous online meeting. During this interactive session, they shared their research findings, discussed their cultural insights, and engaged in lively discussions about their partner's cuisine.

To assess their learning experiences and evaluate the overall success of the project, students completed an online project evaluation.

**Main results and contributions** | The project's outcomes underscore the pivotal role of food in diplomacy. Students not only gained profound insights into each other's gastronomic traditions, but they also discovered the potential of culinary experiences as a powerful tool for cultural exchange. This heightened awareness not only broadened their cultural horizons but also deepened their appreciation for the unifying power of food. Moreover, the project significantly elevated students' proficiency in English in the context of food-related conversations. They demonstrated a notable improvement in their ability to articulate and discuss culinary topics, showcasing the practical application of language skills in a specific domain.

**Limitations** | While the project achieved its intended objectives, some limitations should be acknowledged. The synchronous online interaction was limited to one session, potentially restricting the depth of cultural exchange. Additionally, the virtual nature of the exchange may have hindered the full sensory experience associated with culinary tourism.

**Conclusions** | The success of this gastrodiplomatic virtual exchange project underscores the profound impact of food as a bridge between cultures. The ability to share culinary experiences virtually has emerged as an effective means of fostering understanding and connection. This project exemplifies the potential for culinary diplomacy to transcend borders and facilitate meaningful cross-cultural interactions. As we navigate an increasingly interconnected world, recognizing the significance of food in diplomacy becomes paramount in building bridges of understanding and cooperation across global communities.

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