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CULTURAL CONTENT AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE TEACHING OF SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL PARADIGMS AND A DIDACTIC INTERVENTION

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Abstract:

Intercultural competence has emerged as one of the most important components of teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language (ELE). This is evident in contexts where students are expected to interact with natives of different Spanish speaking countries. Each of these countries has the same language but speakers originate from a variety of cultural backgrounds. We cannot separate the process of language learning from cultural nuances that help in forming and understanding meanings, interaction, and also pragmatic norms. Thus, instruction in ELE requires the inclusion of cultural and intercultural characteristics in a manner that is both practical and reflective. In this study, we identify the existing paradigms and the implications that these paradigms have in the development of intercultural competence. We also delve on the representation of culture and interculturality in three widely used ELE textbooks.

A distinction was proposed by Miquel & Sans (1992) between *Cultura con mayúscula* (Culture with a capital "C"), referring to institutionalised, as well as academically legitimised knowledge which has been traditionally associated with formal education. It includes disciplines such as history, literature and fine arts. On the other hand, *cultura con minúscula* (culture with a lowercase "c") refers to the implicit, everyday cultural practices that govern social behaviour and communication. This includes customs, traditions, social conventions, rituals, politeness strategies, non-verbal communication, pragmatics, interpersonal distance, and ways of expressing emotions, food habits, dress codes, and behaviour in routine situations. The analysis reveals a clear predominance of Culture with a capital "C", particularly in the literary, historical, geographical, and artistic domains, with a marked bias towards Spain over Latin America. The culture with a lowercase "c", which encompasses characteristics such as daily living, social traditions, and pragmatic sociocultural aspects, is, on the other hand, less usually discussed. In addition, the textbooks provide learners with limited opportunity to compare the culture of the target with their own, which has the effect of constraining the explicit development of intercultural awareness.

This study finally proposes a task-based didactic unit that is aimed at being beneficial for adolescents and University students of India who are learning Spanish at the A2 level. This research has been carried out to resolve the problems that were found in the analysis of ELE textbooks. Language goals, and an introduction of the simple future tense, are incorporated into the unit, along with cultural and intercultural elements from the Hispanic world. The purpose of this didactic unit is to make students aware and also reflect upon cultural aspects of the language through resources with practical exercises that help in improving all four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The research will contribute to the existing ELE pedagogy by incorporating intercultural competence. At the same time, it will encourage settings where a pan-Hispanic, inclusive and a learner-centred approach is available for students.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Spanish as a Foreign Language (ELE), *Cultura con mayúscula*, *cultura con minúscula*, task-based didactic unit.

1. Introduction

In this section, we look into the key concepts and go into depth about the different theoretical and practical ways that have been designed to teach culture in the foreign language classroom. This will help the students get a full and deep understanding of the subject. We also critically look at the different points of view that are already out there, pointing out their strengths and possible weaknesses, to make the classroom a more interesting and helpful place to be.



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Teaching Spanish as a foreign language (ELE) is not just about grammar and vocabulary. It also includes cultural, social, and communicative aspects that make learning the language more interesting. In the last few decades, many well-known researchers have stressed how important it is to effectively include cultural richness in all its forms as a key and necessary part of the complex process of teaching and learning. Learning a new language also means getting to know the people who speak it really well, including how they think, act, and relate to others. This makes our view of the world much broader and makes it easier for us to understand and communicate with people from other cultures. As a result, the promotion of intercultural competence has acquired fundamental importance in the field of foreign language teaching.

Historically, ELE textbooks have addressed culture from a very restricted perspective, focusing mainly on historical, artistic, and literary aspects. This type of approach generally tends to present a partial and, at times, simplified and stereotypical view of the broad and diverse Spanish-speaking world. It is essential to highlight and analyse the conceptual distinction that was proposed by Miquel & Sans (1992), who clearly differentiate between Culture with a capital “C” and culture with a lowercase “c”. The first refers to major cultural manifestations which are widely recognised and valued within a society. The second, on the other hand, refers to the values which guide our behaviour, to the implicit rules governing social relations and to the everyday behaviour which shapes daily life.

Despite the relevance of this distinction, many teaching materials continue to give priority to culture with a capital “C” and neglect social and everyday aspects of language use. This trend can pose considerable difficulties for pupils, especially when the culture studied is very different from their own, for example, Indian students learning Spanish. If students are not able to relate with the cultural content taught in class, they might not be very interested or only understand the language at a surface level.

The main purpose of this study is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how cultural diversity and intercultural interaction are addressed and represented in three widely used Spanish as a Foreign Language (ELE) textbooks: *Prisma*, *Aula Internacional*, and *Gente Joven*. Based on this thorough analysis and reflection, the design and development of a complete teaching unit specifically aimed at students from India at an A2 language proficiency level is proposed. The main objective of this proposal is to achieve a harmonious balance between language teaching and the integration of a profound, relevant, and highly meaningful cultural approach for the students. The proposal is primarily based on the “culture with a lowercase c” approach and a deep analysis of intercultural comparison, with the aim of fostering not only the development of communicative competence but also a more critical, reflective, and profound intercultural awareness.

This analysis is situated within a pedagogical vision that conceives culture as a constantly evolving phenomenon and not as a static collection of information. In this way, it seeks to contribute significantly to a more inclusive and dynamic teaching of the Spanish language that effectively adapts to the real needs of students acquiring this language.

2. Culture and Interculturality in teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language

The theoretical framework is essential for understanding how culture and intercultural perspectives impact the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. In this study, we explore and emphasise the importance of cultural differences as well as intercultural communication in the learning of a foreign language. For a long period of time, cultural instruction focused mainly on the transmission of encyclopaedic knowledge about the territory or territories where the target language is used. This pedagogical approach conceived of culture as a compendium of objective information that the student had to learn by heart, such as relevant historical dates, emblematic monuments, prominent literary authors, and significant national holidays. However, this pedagogical approach has been the subject of numerous criticisms due to its lack of effectiveness in preparing students to face real-world situations. As indicated by Miquel & Sans (1992) study, it is essential to bear in mind that a student's mastery of a language's grammar is not entirely effective if they do not adequately understand how this grammatical knowledge should be applied in concrete, real-world situations.

Undoubtedly, the concept of intercultural competence has gained relevance in the last few years. Experts, such as Byram (1997), argue that the process of acquiring a foreign language not only involves mastering linguistic skills but also



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developing an open mind, demonstrating genuine interest in and showing consideration for diverse cultures, while simultaneously possessing the ability to draw parallels between one's own culture and the target culture. From this broader and more enriching perspective, the student is not conceived solely as a passive recipient of cultural information, but is recognised as an active agent and fundamental mediator in the exchange and integration of diverse cultures.

In the field of teaching Spanish as a foreign language, interculturality involves addressing not only the diverse cultural aspects that exist in the Spanish-speaking world, but also promoting critical reflection on the part of students regarding their own cultural identity. This is particularly relevant in international educational contexts, such as in India, where the cultural differences with Spanish-speaking nations can be notably significant. If instructional materials do not take this cultural difference into account, the learning process risks becoming superficial, limited, or mechanical. It is fundamental to consider and address this cultural gap to ensure meaningful and enriching learning. When students are able to relate new knowledge of culture about the target language with their own experiences, learning becomes meaningful. (Fantini, 2000)

Despite all these theoretical and methodological advances, it is important to note that numerous contemporary academic textbooks still give a privileged position to Culture with a capital "C." The culture with a lowercase "c," is often presented subtly or as secondary, without activities that guide students to analyse, understand, or compare it with other cultures. Consequently, it is imperative to conduct a thorough analysis of educational resources from a critical perspective and propose pedagogical strategies that incorporate cultural diversity in a more reflective way and in accordance with students' needs.

3. Analysis of ELE textbooks through a cultural perspective

In this section, we analyse how the representation of culture and interculturality is addressed in three widely used Spanish as a Foreign Language textbooks. The different cultural representations present in the teaching materials are examined, with the aim of identifying how aspects such as the traditions, customs, and values of Spanish-speaking countries are addressed.

The representation of culture and interculturality in three A2-level Spanish as Foreign Language textbooks is analysed, since the didactic unit proposed in this study specifically focuses on this level of linguistic competence. This approach is supported by carefully selected examples of the textbooks studied. It is also important to consider the presence or absence of various activities that promote intercultural reflection, in accordance with the theories and approaches proposed by prominent authors such as Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993).

3.1 Prisma A2

Prisma A2 has become one of the fundamental tools for learning the Spanish language. With its communicative approach and varied activities, this teaching material has been widely used. It stands out for its focus on the detailed presentation of culture through informative texts enriched with activities that promote reading comprehension and critical analysis. In unit two of the book (pages 24-25), Madrid, the capital of Spain is shown with a text and different monuments, museums and well known tourist attractions. This type of content clearly and explicitly addresses Culture with a capital "C" as it focuses specifically on institutionalised and easily identifiable cultural products, as established by Miquel & Sans (1992).

An additional example is found in unit 5 (page 62), where the rich Spanish gastronomy and its emblematic traditional dishes, such as the delicious Valencian paella or the exquisite potato omelette or *tortilla de patatas*, are discussed in detail. Although reference is made to typical meal times, this important aspect of daily life is not explored in depth or placed within its corresponding social context. No activity is provided where students themselves can reflect on and compare these habits and customs with those of their own culture, which can significantly limit the development of cultural awareness and intercultural competence (Byram, 1997).

In general, the *Prisma A2* textbook approaches culture as a set of objective knowledge that students are expected to acquire, without providing the opportunity to explore it critically or to question and debate the diverse cultural meanings it



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encompasses. Interculturality in the educational setting remains implicit and largely depends on the active and committed intervention of the teacher, as well as the collaboration of all those involved in the teaching-learning process.

3.2 *Aula Internacional 2*

Aula Internacional 2 is a widely used textbook in Spanish courses for foreigners. It has a number of exercises which help in improving language skills. It is based on the communicative approach and is made for the A2 level. In the third unit of this book (pages 38-39), various situations related to travelling and hotel stays are given, including both guidelines and expressions with different degrees of politeness. These contents significantly approach culture in its broadest sense, as they reflect a wide range of common social practices and traditions that exist in society.

However, these aspects are sometimes not fully utilised from an intercultural and multidisciplinary perspective. For example, in unit 6 (pages 74-75), the fascinating topic of popular festivals in Spain is addressed in detail, such as the renowned Fallas of Valencia or the emblematic April Fair in Seville. Once again, priority is given to promoting Culture with a capital C, neglecting the inclusion of activities that encourage reflection and comparison with the traditional celebrations of the students' countries of origin, an aspect considered essential for fostering intercultural attitudes (Kramsch, 1993).

The *Aula Internacional 2* textbook includes questions that prompt personal reflection and exercises that promote student engagement; however, the framework for fostering intercultural thinking lacks specificity. Byram (1997) asserts that for the holistic development of intercultural competence, it is insufficient merely to present students with cultural content; it is essential to engage with attitudes, interpretative skills, and comparative abilities. These elements, which are fundamental for cultural enrichment, are presented in a scattered way in this textbook.

3.3 *Gente Joven 2*

Gente Joven 2 has been a success among young audiences. The themes revolve around friends who face different challenges and adventures in their daily lives. The textbook, is designed for teenagers at an A2 language proficiency level. This teaching material focuses on cultural themes that are closely related to what the learners do every day and their experiences, which help them relate to and understand the content better. In the first unit of the book (pages 10-11), various dialogues between students in a school setting are presented, showcasing informal expressions of politeness, detailed descriptions of daily activities, and interaction between classmates.

Another illustrative example can be found in unit 4 of the book (pages 46-47), where various leisure and recreational activities are addressed, such as socialising with friends or enjoying music. Although this content is closer to the students' reality, the cultural environment in which they operate remains predominantly Spanish. Spanish is an official language in 20 countries, but each of these countries have different set of customs, expressions and way of life that makes them unique in their own way but most of the time this fact is neglected. In order to develop an open and tolerant mindset towards diversity in an increasingly globalised world, it is very important for students to know about it. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate activities that encourage intercultural comparison and promote respect for the different ways of life and thought that exist in the Spanish-speaking world. These materials can be highly engaging and adult groups like that of Indian students, but if they don't directly relate to their own sociocultural environment, it may be harder for them to fully develop a meaningful intercultural awareness.

3.4 Presence of culture in the three teaching materials

Examining the textbooks *Prisma A2*, *Aula Internacional 2*, and *Gente Joven 2* reveals that, even at the A2 level, Spanish as a foreign language teaching materials continue to prioritise Culture with a capital "C." Textbooks meant for foreign languages mostly emphasise visible cultural elements and seldom mention implicit social norms (Hall, 1976). Although examples of cultural manifestations with a lowercase "c" can be found, it is common to observe that these expressions



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develop without a deliberate intercultural approach or the implementation of systematic activities for cultural comparison and analysis.

According to Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993), mere passive exposure to cultural elements is not sufficient to ensure the full development of intercultural competence. Therefore, the development of additional didactic proposals that incorporate culture from an everyday, comparative perspective, and adapted to the specific context of the students, is considered fundamental. In the following section, a didactic unit specifically designed for students from India at an A2 language proficiency level is presented in detail. This proposal aims to effectively address the shortcomings identified in the textbooks that have been previously analysed.

4. Intercultural didactic unit for Indian students of A2 level of Spanish language proficiency

This proposal includes varied activities and teaching resources that will allow students to explore and understand Hispanic culture in a meaningful and enriching way. Based on the analysis of textbooks carried out in the previous section, there is clear evidence of a pressing need to enrich the resources already available with innovative didactic proposals that comprehensively integrate cultural richness and actively promote the development of intercultural competence, especially in educational environments outside of Europe. In this regard, a didactic unit specifically designed to meet the educational needs of adult students of India, and at an A2 language proficiency level, is presented in detail below. In order to achieve an effective and meaningful learning experience, sociocultural environment of students needs to be taken into account. According to Bennett (1993), the development of intercultural sensitivity requires comparison and reflection. Since foreign language teaching has to include cultural aspects, teachers should help students compare, contrast and reflect on their own culture along with that of the target one. It is even more important to make the fact evident that culture can never be reduced to facts and information. It has to be seen as a web of meanings that materialises through different rituals and habits of societal realities in our daily lives.

Furthermore, in this context, the intercultural perspective (Byram, 1997) is actively adopted and promoted. This perspective seeks to promote not only attitudes of curiosity and openness towards other cultures, but also the ability to compare them in a reflective and respectful manner. The teaching unit begins with a careful contextualisation of the subject, giving students an overview that helps them to approach the content with greater understanding. Key elements are introduced to support greater involvement with the theme.

The didactic unit aims to explain the simple future tense and its grammatical structure taught at the A2 level. It takes an alternative approach which focuses on culture that is conventionally not addressed entirely in textbooks. It will help students explore the relationship between things that will happen in the future, about destiny and also existing beliefs. Since horoscopes and astrology are essential in Indian society, this approach can be very helpful. Therefore, this proposal not only has linguistic and communicative objectives, but it also incorporates social and cultural aspects to enrich students' overall learning.

Students are invited to reflect deeply on their own convictions and to carefully compare them with those rooted in the rich and diverse Hispanic culture, which contributes substantially to the acquisition of deeper and more lasting knowledge. The objectives to be achieved with this teaching unit are the following:

- Introduce students to the use and understanding of the simple future tense through the presentation of cultural content from the vast and diverse Hispanic heritage by promoting reflection and comparison with their own cultural identity and ingrained values.
- Comprehensively develop the four language skills in the language learning process: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, oral expression, and written expression.
- Practise the vocabulary of daily activities from an intercultural perspective, by encouraging dialogue and understanding between different cultures.



The initial activity leads to the observation of images of tarot cards, which allows for the activation of vocabulary that the student has already learnt in the previous level. Through the formulation of open-ended and reflective questions, students are encouraged to share their opinions and points of view on the complex topic of predicting future events. The teacher's role is to compare and make students aware of the practice of tarot in countries that have Spanish as native language and the tradition of horoscopes in Indian culture.

Actividad 1: Se presenta una imagen de las cartas del tarot y se pregunta a los alumnos las siguientes preguntas. Los alumnos pueden responder de manera aleatoria.

1. ¿Crees que se puede predecir el futuro?
2. ¿Has probado las cartas del tarot alguna vez?
3. ¿Sabes de otras formas de predecir el futuro? Si la respuesta es sí, en qué consisten?



El profesor puede hablar del horóscopo que tiene mucha influencia sobre la gente de la India. Después de hablar un poco sobre el horóscopo, se presenta las conjugaciones del futuro simple.

FUTURO SIMPLE			FUTURO SIMPLE verbos irregulares			
-AR	-ER	-IR	querer querré querrás querrá querremos querréis querrán	hacer haré harás hará haremos haréis harán	decir diré dirás dirá diremos diréis dirán	tener tendré tendrás tendrá tendremos tendréis tendrán
trabajaré trabajarás trabjará trabajaremos trabajaréis trabjarán	comeré comerás comerá comeremos comeréis comerán	dormiré dormirás dormirá dormiremos dormiréis dormirán	saber sabré sabrás sabrá sabremos sabréis sabrán	haber habré habrás habrá habremos habréis habrán	poner pondré pondrás pondrá pondremos pondréis pondrán	poder podré podrás podrá podremos podréis podrán
			salir saldré saldrás saldrá saldrémos saldréis saldrán	valer valdré valdrás valdrá valdremos valdréis valdrán	venir vendré vendrás vendrá vendremos vendréis vendrán	caber cabré cabrás cabrá cabremos cabréis cabrán

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In Activity 2, a poem by the renowned Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, titled "El futuro" is used as authentic material for the exercise. The use of short literary texts in the initial stages of learning allows, according to Kramsch's (1993) reflections, for a deeper emotional and cultural approach to the language. Although the content of this text is quite sophisticated and requires an advanced level of comprehension, the proposed activity is perfectly suited to the students' A2 level. It consists of a fill-in-the-blank exercise focused on the conjugation of the simple future tense. The poem, in addition to its profound reflection, offers a subjective and non-stereotypical view of the future.

Actividad 2: *El profesor les da a los alumnos una hoja en la que tienen que rellenar los huecos con la forma correcta del futuro simple a través del audio del poema <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5jG264cDMI>. Es un poema del escritor argentino Julio Cortázar "El futuro".*

Y sé muy bien que no .

No en la calle
en el murmullo que brota de noche
de los postes de alumbrado,
ni en el gesto de elegir el menú,
ni en la sonrisa que alivia los completos en los subtes
ni en los libros prestados,
ni en el hasta mañana.

No en mis sueños,
en el destino original de mis palabras,
ni en una cifra telefónica estarás,
o en el color de un par de guantes
o una blusa.

Me

amor mío
sin que sea por ti,

y bombones
pero no para ti,

me en la esquina

a la que no

y las palabras que se dicen

y las cosas que se comen

y los sueños que se sueñan.

Y sé muy bien que no
ni aquí dentro de la cárcel donde te retengo,
ni allí afuera
en ese río de calles y de puentes.

No para nada,

no mi recuerdo
y cuando piense en ti



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*un pensamiento
 que oscuramente trata de acordarse de ti.*

The third activity introduces the linguistic phenomenon of "voseo" in detail, using a very interesting and educational informative text. This engaging activity aims to highlight and emphasise the linguistic and cultural richness and variety that characterises the Spanish language, thus dismantling the misconception of a uniform and monolithic language. Linguistic diversity is inherently integrated into the cultural fabric, being a fundamental element for achieving a genuine and profound understanding of the language in question. The questions raised stimulate critical reflection and comparison with other linguistic phenomena present in the students' native language.

Actividad 3:

Después de terminar este ejercicio, se habla sobre el fenómeno de ‘voseo’ y los alumnos tendrán a su disposición un texto a través de esta página web: [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-36928497#:~:text=El%20vos%2C%20muy%20actual%20\(en%20Am%C3%A9rica%20Latina\)&text=En%20Am%C3%A9rica%20persisti%C3%B3%20el%20uso,es%20por%20la%20%22hidalguizaci%C3%B3n%22](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-36928497#:~:text=El%20vos%2C%20muy%20actual%20(en%20Am%C3%A9rica%20Latina)&text=En%20Am%C3%A9rica%20persisti%C3%B3%20el%20uso,es%20por%20la%20%22hidalguizaci%C3%B3n%22).

Según el artículo, los alumnos tendrán que responder a las siguientes preguntas.

1. *¿El ‘vos’ se convirtió en ‘usted’?*

2. *¿De dónde viene la palabra ‘vos’?*

3. *¿En qué países se utiliza el voseo?*

4. *¿Qué crees que pasará con este fenómeno? ¿Desaparecerá, seguirá formando parte de la habla o extenderá su uso? ¿Por qué?*

5. *¿En tu idioma materno, existe una forma como vos?*



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The presented teaching unit aims to address the deficiencies identified in the analysed ELE textbooks, particularly regarding the prominent presence of culture in their content. By focusing in detail on deeply rooted societal beliefs, every day practices that shape daily life, and cultural comparisons between different communities, the proposal promotes a more enriching, profound, and meaningful vision of the rich and diverse Hispanic culture.

The role of the teacher as a cultural mediator is essential in multicultural classrooms (Sercu, 2005). Although the teaching unit presents some limitations and specific requirements, such as the need for active mediation by the teacher and possible adaptation according to the student group, it is considered a valid and relevant alternative to foster the development of intercultural competence in Indian students at an A2 level of language proficiency.

5. Conclusion

We can conclude, based on the analysis and the proposal presented, that the impact of this phenomenon on teaching foreign languages is significant. More detailed research and analysis is needed to develop effective strategies that can address the long-term impact of this issue. The purpose of this study was to examine how cultural diversity and intercultural interaction are represented in ELE teaching materials for A2 students. Based on this assessment, an alternative teaching unit was designed, specifically tailored to the needs and context of students in India. The analysis of the textbooks *Prisma A2*, *Aula Internacional 2* and *Gente Joven 2* suggests that despite important methodological advances in the teaching of foreign languages, culture, understood in a broad sense, still occupies a secondary place in many didactic resources. As Miquel & Sans (1992) point out, it is essential to approach not only Culture with capital “C” but also culture with small “c”, which includes the patterns of behaviour, values and beliefs that shape everyday social interactions. The study has revealed that materials while referring to everyday life aspects are often presented without sufficient exercises that promote cultural exchange and reflection on differences. Because of this, students still don't know how to work with people from other cultures very well, and it mostly depends on the teacher being involved in the learning process all the time. This problem is worse in some schools, like those for indigenous people, where the cultural gap with Spanish-speaking society is more obvious and harder to deal with. If the cultural content in school books doesn't relate to the students' daily lives, they may get a simple and wrong idea of the target culture and a shallow and limited understanding of the language.

According to the reflections of Byram (1997) and Kramersch (1993), the process of acquiring proficiency in a foreign language goes beyond mastering grammar and vocabulary, as it also involves the ability to understand and manage cultural differences in communication. The teaching unit proposed in this interesting academic work attempts to provide an effective solution to these important educational shortcomings that have been identified in the current context. By focusing specifically on a culturally relevant topic deeply rooted in the worldview of Indian students, such as reflection on the future and destiny, the didactic proposal not only promotes students' intrinsic motivation but also facilitates the construction of meaningful learning.

Ultimately, we can conclude that it is of utmost importance that Spanish as a Foreign Language textbooks incorporate intercultural perspective in more detail and that teachers assume a proactive role as facilitators of cultural interaction. Culture should not simply be presented as a set of cold, isolated facts, but rather as a rich and constantly evolving experience that students can meaningfully connect with their own knowledge, experiences, and prior cultural background. Although this study has a limited scope in terms of its breadth and depth, it can be considered a fundamental and essential starting point for the development of further research and the formulation of innovative and enriching teaching proposals, especially focused on non-European contexts and aimed at students at beginner levels, such as level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

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