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Elements Of Culture in Language Teaching – Textbook Analysis

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Abstract

The teaching of foreign languages is inseparable from the integration of the target language's culture. However, teaching culture remains a persistent challenge for language teachers: What cultural content should be included, how much, and how should it be presented? The cultural distance between the learners' native culture and the target culture often influences these decisions. Traditionally, language instruction has focused on developing four core skills — listening, reading, writing, and speaking — typically in an integrated manner. Recently, a growing number of scholars and educators have emphasized the importance of a "fifth skill": cultural competence. Yet, defining culture and identifying appropriate pedagogical strategies for teaching remains complex. Textbooks, as central tools in language instruction, adopt varying approaches to cultural content. Some align with intercultural and multicultural frameworks, as recommended by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while others fail to reflect modern perspectives or do so inconsistently. This study presents some theoretical aspects of developing cultural competence, and compares two 7th-grade language textbooks used in Romania: one for teaching English, and the other for teaching Romanian to Hungarian minority students in Transylvania. In a qualitative comparison of selected cultural sequences, the English book foregrounds international examples, while the Romanian book also offers local, national and minority references. The analysis identifies opportunities to make comparison and mediation more explicit in classroom tasks.

Keywords: language teaching, intercultural competence, textbook analysis, minority education

1. Culture in Language Teaching

1.1 Evolving Approaches

To teach culture and develop cultural competence, it is crucial to understand the complex and multifaceted nature of the term "culture." Various disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and intercultural studies have proposed numerous definitions, but no single, universally accepted one exists.

According to *The New Encyclopedia Britannica (1992)*, culture is defined as the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior. It comprises elements like language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, art, and rituals. Culture develops through learning and the transmission of knowledge across generations. Every human society has its own specific culture or socio-cultural system, which may overlap with others. Differences between cultural systems are influenced by geography, available resources, social development, and patterns of behavior. An individual's values and attitudes are largely shaped by the culture in which they live, and they may also encounter or navigate multiple cultural environments.

Language teachers have traditionally served as cultural mediators, being students' primary source of the target language culture. Over time, the role of cultural content in language education has evolved alongside teaching methodologies. Bárdos (2004) observes that culture is now interpreted more broadly – as anything shaped by human activity.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) promotes this broader understanding. Influenced by research in pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, the CEFR considers that general competences – such as factual knowledge, sociocultural understanding, existential competence, and learning ability – along with communicative, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic skills, all contribute to effective communication. Cultural competence is not separate but interwoven with these abilities.

Several scholars highlight culture's significance in language education. Rivers (1981) emphasized selecting meaningful content and designing tasks that help learners engage with deeper levels of culture. Byram (1997) warned against neglecting cultural elements in skill-focused teaching, while Seelye (1993) stressed that knowing linguistic structures alone does not provide access to social or cultural realities, such as norms of appropriateness in speech.

In today's globalized world, it is essential that learners understand what is culturally acceptable in different contexts.

1.2. Intercultural Competence and the "Third Culture"

Bianco, Crozet, and Liddicoat (1999) emphasize that intercultural competence is not about fully assimilating into the target culture, nor about clinging rigidly to one's own. Rather, it entails navigating between the two and discovering a "third place" where learners can actively explore and reflect on cultural differences. These researchers trace the history of cultural teaching through several stages. The traditional approach relied heavily on literature, offering limited preparation for real-life interaction. The cultural studies approach of the 1970s placed greater emphasis on factual knowledge about the target country's history, geography, and institutions. In the 1980s, the functional-pragmatic approach encouraged learners to observe and interpret the behavior of native speakers, though it often remained static and led to stereotyping. More recently, the intercultural approach has emerged, viewing culture as dynamic and interactional rather than fixed.

Within this paradigm, the classroom is no longer simply a space to acquire grammar and vocabulary, but a place where students learn how language reflects and shapes relationships, identities, and worldviews. Teaching therefore includes highlighting the links between language and culture, encouraging comparisons between the learners' own cultural background and that of the target language, and creating opportunities to reflect from a neutral "third place." Kramsch (1993, 2009) describes this reflective zone as the learner's "third culture," characterized by three dimensions: popular culture is explored through role-play and simulations, critical culture challenges dominant assumptions and fosters reflection, and ecological culture connects the classroom to real-world issues and contexts.

Building on this, Peterson and Coltrane (2003) warn against treating cultures as monolithic entities. Instead, they suggest that learners should examine acceptable behaviors across varied contexts, reflect critically on them, and ultimately develop their own voice within target language communities. Similarly, Moeller and Nugent (2014) stress that intercultural competence equips learners not only to analyze their own customs and compare perspectives, but also to adapt their language use effectively when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) further enriches this discussion by distinguishing between multilingualism and plurilingualism. Multilingualism refers to the coexistence of multiple languages within a society or an individual, while plurilingualism highlights the evolving and uneven linguistic repertoire that individuals draw upon in communication. Plurilingual competence enables learners to switch flexibly between languages and dialects, to make themselves understood even with partial knowledge, and to recognize international vocabulary in unfamiliar forms. It also allows them to mediate between speakers who share no common language and to combine linguistic and paralinguistic resources in creative ways.

1.3. Teaching Culture of World Languages Versus Smaller Languages

In the case of dominant world languages – especially English – the situation of teaching culture is more complex. Alptekin (2002) critiques the focus on native-speaker norms, arguing that such an approach is idealized and narrow, failing to reflect the global use of English as a lingua franca. With hundreds of millions speaking English as a second language across nearly 100 countries, interactions are more likely to occur between non-native speakers. Therefore, using British politeness conventions or American informal styles may not be relevant for Turkish and Japanese professionals communicating in English. Alptekin calls for new teaching paradigms that reflect English's global status and help learners become successful bilinguals – capable of operating both locally and internationally.

However, when teaching less widely spoken languages – such as Romanian – as a second or foreign language, the sociolinguistic landscape differs significantly. Romanian does not function as a global lingua franca, nor is it commonly used for international communication outside specific diaspora communities or regional contexts. As such, the emphasis on native-speaker norms and local cultural conventions remains more justified and relevant. In contrast to English, learners of Romanian typically study the language to integrate into Romanian-speaking societies – whether for professional, academic or personal reasons – rather than to use it in intercultural interactions with other non-native speakers.

Therefore, cultural competence in this context should be more aligned with the target culture, enabling learners to navigate real-life situations in Romania with linguistic and pragmatic appropriateness. This includes understanding formal and informal address forms and culturally specific expectations in professional, educational, or everyday interactions. In this setting, the goal is not global intelligibility, but rather local acceptability and integration. Consequently, teaching paradigms must focus more on authentic cultural practices, local communication styles, and the sociolinguistic norms of the Romanian-speaking world.

1.4. Culture in Language Textbooks

Zhang, Li, Chen and Yan (2024) review research on cultural representation in foreign-language textbooks published from 2012 to 2022. They show why analysis should attend to the selection and framing of cultural material as well as the relationship between textbooks and classroom practice. Their review provides a useful context for distinguishing what the books contain from what learners are asked to do with that content.

Recent classroom research adds an important distinction between printed opportunities and actual participation. In a South Korean secondary English project, pupils collaboratively wrote for an international online audience and developed intercultural and collaborative practices (Jung, 2022); this is an illustrative ELF classroom case, not evidence that other textbooks produce similar outcomes. In the Romanian minority-school context, Nagy and Kovács (2024) examined the suitability of seventh-grade Romanian textbook texts for Hungarian learners, underscoring the importance of linguistic accessibility alongside cultural representation. The CEFR Companion Volume likewise supplies descriptors for mediation and plurilingual/pluricultural competence that can guide classroom tasks and assessment (Council of Europe, 2020).

1.5. Teacher Awareness and Critical Selection of Materials

For language teachers, the challenge lies in integrating cultural learning into classroom practice in a meaningful way. One effective strategy is the use of authentic materials, including television programs, films, websites, blogs, forums, newspapers, photographs, or even restaurant menus. Such resources allow cultural learning to become experiential rather than abstract. When carefully adapted to the learners' proficiency level, these tasks can open discussions about social norms, values, and behaviors, and can provide opportunities to observe and practice culturally appropriate strategies in simulated interactions.

Attention should also be given to culture-specific language elements. Collocations such as *make friends* or *take a nap* cannot be translated literally, and idiomatic expressions like *he spilled the beans* often remain opaque to learners without cultural explanation. Proverbs, too, may lack direct equivalents but offer valuable insights into similarities and differences between cultures. Role-plays and simulations are particularly useful for practicing both language and culturally appropriate behavior in context. Likewise, incorporating realia – objects from the target culture such as photos, clothing, food items, or musical instruments – can enhance learners' understanding of everyday practices and routines.

Language teachers are not expected to research and design every cultural element themselves. However, they should develop a critical and reflective approach when selecting and using officially approved teaching materials. It is essential to choose resources that support not only the four traditional skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) but also the "fifth skill": cultural competence.

2. Methodology

This study uses qualitative comparative content analysis to examine two seventh-grade language textbooks used in Romania: Limba modernă 1: Limba engleză (Modern Language 1: English) Art Klett/Cambridge University Press, Romanian edition 2024, and Bartolf's Limba și literatura română pentru școlile și secțiile cu predare în limba maghiară, (Romanian Language and Literature for Schools and Classes with Hungarian as the Language of Instruction), Editura Didactică și Pedagogică published in 2020. This pair of textbooks was selected because both address grade-seven learners but serve different curricular purposes: English as a foreign language and Romanian as the state-language in Hungarian-medium education. The analysis considers all ten labelled Culture sequences in the English book and one illustrative cultural source sequence from each of the ten Romanian units. This selection offers a contextual comparison rather than a representative survey of approved textbooks.

The analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of cultural content are represented in the two 7th-grade language textbooks?

2. How is cultural content presented: explicitly, implicitly, visually, textually, or through learner tasks?
3. To what extent do the textbooks encourage comparison, reflection, mediation, and intercultural dialogue?
4. How might the observed textbook features support CEFR-oriented intercultural and plurilingual learning?

The reading focused on cultural topics, their presentation and the instructions accompanying selected texts or activities. The English Culture sequences were compared with ten Romanian sequences chosen to reflect national, local minority and wider cultural references. Source texts and images informed the interpretation, while illustrative activities were read in their page context. The inquiry does not measure pupil outcomes or classroom use.

The coding scheme was developed deductively from Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence and from the CEFR Companion Volume descriptors related to sociocultural knowledge, plurilingual competence, mediation, and intercultural communication. The categories were operationalized as follows:

Table 1: Coding categories

Coding category	**Operational definition**	**Examples of textbook features**	**Illustrative prompt (proposed, not quoted)**
Explicit cultural content	Culture is directly presented, explained, or labelled as cultural information.	"Culture" sections, factual texts about countries, traditions, lifestyles, music, laws, school life.	"Read the box on Irish music and name two instruments."
Implicit cultural content	Culture appears indirectly through literary texts, images, names, customs, values, or everyday situations.	Poems, stories, proverbs, illustrations, references to places or traditions.	"Read the story and identify the custom mentioned."
Target-culture orientation	Content focuses mainly on the culture associated with the target language.	British, American, Irish, or Romanian cultural references.	"What does this Romanian proverb mean in its local context?"
International/global orientation	Content includes cultures beyond the traditional target-language countries.	Examples from China, Russia, Finland, Indonesia, Brazil, Alaska, the Galapagos Islands.	"What school routines are described in Moscow and Sydney?"
Comparative cultural task	Learners are asked to compare cultures, practices, values, or experiences.	Comparing school life, traditions, celebrations, or daily routines.	"Compare those routines with your own."
Reflective intercultural task	Learners are encouraged to interpret, discuss, evaluate, or reflect on cultural differences.	Discussion questions about lifestyles, laws, environmental issues, or social practices.	"Why might the pupils' journeys differ, and whose perspective is missing?"
Plurilingual/mediation potential	Tasks encourage learners to use more than one linguistic or cultural repertoire, explain meanings, or mediate between cultures.	Bilingual comparison, explanation of proverbs, idioms, culturally specific vocabulary, or translation-related reflection.	"Explain this Romanian proverb in Hungarian for a younger pupil, retaining its social meaning."
Interactional/pragmatic practice	Activities simulate communication and culturally appropriate language use.	Role-plays, dialogues, discussions, presentations, interviews.	"Role-play a polite request in a Romanian public office and explain your choice of address."

First, cultural references and related learner activities in the selected sequences were examined with the categories in Table 1. Second, the two books were interpreted in relation to the cultural perspectives they make visible and the actions their printed prompts invite. Categories could

overlap; for example, a task might contain cultural information and invite discussion. An explicit comparison was distinguished from a source that merely offers the teacher an opportunity to add one.

The findings below use selected tasks as illustrations of recurring orientations, without treating them as frequency estimates for either complete book. Recording the pages and prompts supports transparent interpretation, but the choice of sequences and the distinction between a printed task and its possible classroom adaptation remain matters of researcher judgement.

3. Results and discussion: Comparative Textbook Analysis

Both textbooks include cultural material, but the selected sequences foreground different settings and purposes. The English Culture pages make international examples especially visible; the Romanian sequences connect literature, heritage, local institutions and minority experiences. The following discussion distinguishes these source choices from what individual learner prompts actually request.

3.1. Cultural Content in the English Textbook

The English textbook includes a labelled Culture sequence in each of its ten units. These sections make cultural material visible to pupils and teachers, although the label alone does not establish that every accompanying exercise develops intercultural competence.

The textbook includes a broad range of cultural and global topics, such as inventions and inventors, the Olympic Games, schoolchildren's journeys in different parts of the world, school life in Moscow and Sydney, communication through history, Irish music, healthy lifestyles around the world, environmental issues, life in the future, and unusual laws in different countries. The following examples illustrate the range of topics:

Table 2: Cultural topics in the English textbook

Cultural topic in the English textbook	Type of cultural orientation	Pedagogical potential
Inventions and inventors that changed the world	Global / historical	Links language learning to world knowledge and technological change.
The Olympic Games	International/ intercultural	Encourages awareness of shared global events and cultural diversity.
Hard journeys to school in Indonesia, Brazil, and Alaska	Comparative/ global	Encourages learners to compare their own school experience with that of children in other contexts.
School life in Moscow and Sydney	International/ everyday culture	Presents culture through daily routines, education, and youth experience.
The music of Ireland	Target-culture / cultural heritage	Introduces traditional music and national cultural identity.
Healthy lifestyles in China, Russia, and Finland	Global / comparative	Encourages comparison of health-related practices across cultures.
Environmental issues in the Himalayas and Galapagos Islands	Global citizenship	Connects language learning to ecological and social responsibility.
Strange laws around the world	Intercultural reflection	Promotes discussion about social norms, rules, and cultural difference.
Communication through history	International/historical	Contrasts media and the circulation of texts over time.
Life in the future – 100 years from today	Global/speculative	Invites opinions about future social and technological change.

The English textbook therefore presents culture not only as factual information about English-speaking countries, but also as a means of exploring global diversity. This orientation is

consistent with English as a lingua franca pedagogy, where learners are prepared to communicate with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, not only with native speakers of English.

The Culture spreads commonly move from a reading to comprehension, vocabulary and discussion. In the school-journey sequence, pupils choose the journey they find hardest and give reasons (p. 45, exercise 6); in the music sequence, they name Romanian instruments (p. 73, exercise 5). A teacher could extend either prompt into a cultural comparison, but the printed instructions do not explicitly require one.

The selected English examples range from accounts of Irish music to schooling, environmental concerns and laws in several countries. They give pupils material for discussing different contexts. The visible prompts sometimes invite opinions, but comparing answers with classmates does not in itself ask them to compare cultural practices; a further question would be needed to make that aim explicit.

These sources may offer opportunities for intercultural learning when teachers ask pupils to interpret perspectives and explain their reasoning. The textbook analysis cannot establish whether pupils develop such abilities or greater confidence in international communication.

3.2. Cultural Content in the Romanian Textbook

The Romanian textbook combines literary texts and Romanian heritage with references to Hungarian culture, other minorities and wider cultural settings. Culture appears in unit themes, reading passages, images and activities rather than in a repeated section labelled Culture. These features give teachers material for both local cultural knowledge and intercultural discussion.

The unit titles show the thematic orientation of the textbook:

Table 3. Topics in the Romanian textbook

Romanian unit	English translation	Pedagogical potential
1. Călători	1. Travellers	Can connect travel accounts and regional places with pupils' experiences and viewpoints.
2. În România	2. In Romania	Offers material for discussing languages spoken in Romania and for a bilingual school brochure.
3. Pictura	3. Painting	Can invite interpretation of paintings and discussion of Romanian and Hungarian artists.
4. Teatrul	4. Theatre	Can link drama and actors to local theatre practices and imagined interviews.
5. Lumea teatrului	5. The world of theatre	Offers examples of puppet theatre and cultural institutions for presentation or role-play.
6. Albastru	6. Blue	Can connect literary images of blue with the cultural heritage of Voroneț.
7. Cartea	7. Books	Can relate library histories, including the Teleki Library, to access to books and public life.
8. Locuri	8. Places	Offers local traditions and places, such as the Găina Mountain fair, for contextual discussion.
9. Roșu și alb	9. Red and white	Can use Mărțișor texts to explore the meaning and variation of seasonal customs.
10. Copii	10. Children	Offers minority celebrations and traditions for multicultural calendars and explanations.

The topics indicate a strong orientation toward the domains of literature, arts, places, colours, and childhood. This provides learners with access to Romanian cultural heritage and supports

vocabulary development in relation to national and artistic themes. The textbook therefore fulfils an important integrative function: it introduces Hungarian minority learners to Romanian cultural references that are relevant for school, public life, and participation in Romanian-speaking society.

Several Romanian source texts invite pupils to learn about places, institutions, customs and literary works. Some accompanying tasks ask for recall or vocabulary work; others offer discussion, presentation or situated communication. The presence of a cultural reference should therefore be distinguished from an instruction that asks pupils to interpret or compare perspectives.

The sequences on languages spoken in Romania, the painter Imre Nagy and National Minorities Day illustrate the book's attention to multilingual and minority contexts. One project asks pupils to produce a brochure about their school in Romanian and their mother tongue (p. 49, exercise 52). This printed bilingual task offers a concrete opening for plurilingual work, although the analysis cannot establish how it is taught.

Other examples concern local institutions, festivals and artistic traditions. Their potential for intercultural discussion depends on the questions teachers and pupils ask of them. For instance, a presentation about Romanian and Hungarian actors makes both traditions visible but need not become a comparison unless the prompt asks pupils to relate them.

The source selections therefore complicate a simple national-versus-global contrast: Hungarian minority and international references are also present in the Romanian book. Their inclusion matters, even when the accompanying instruction remains primarily descriptive or linguistic.

The Romanian materials can support familiarity with heritage and public life while offering openings to discuss minority perspectives. Whether these openings become intercultural learning depends on classroom mediation and pupils' responses, neither of which could be observed in this study.

3.3. Comparative Interpretation

In the selected material, the English textbook draws more visibly on international settings, while the Romanian textbook foregrounds Romanian literature, heritage and participation in local society alongside minority references. These emphases serve different educational purposes. National-cultural content can help Hungarian-medium pupils understand the institutions and literary references they encounter in Romania; international examples can widen the range of perspectives available for discussion. In both books, a teacher may need to turn a relevant source into an explicit question about comparison, interpretation or mediation.

A brief extension to a Romanian tradition or literary text could ask pupils to explain a custom to someone unfamiliar with it, compare two accounts of a celebration, or discuss whose perspective a text presents. The English materials could similarly prompt pupils to connect international examples with their own Hungarian and Romanian experiences. These are proposed teaching adaptations, not descriptions of additional printed exercises.

A related classroom assessment could ask pupils for a short, evidence-based comparison or a bilingual explanation intended for a specified audience. A rubric could consider accuracy, attention to different perspectives, avoidance of overgeneralization and clarity for the audience. The task and criteria should match pupils' language proficiency and the purpose of the lesson (Council of Europe, 2020).

Overall, the analysis indicates that cultural content alone is not sufficient for developing intercultural competence. What matters is how cultural content is pedagogically framed.

Explicit comparison, reflection, interaction, and mediation are essential if textbooks are to move beyond cultural information toward intercultural and plurilingual competence.

The comparison is limited to two purposively chosen editions and selected cultural sequences. The different ways of selecting English Culture pages and Romanian thematic material may affect what becomes visible. The study examines printed features rather than lessons, teacher adaptation or pupil responses, and its interpretations were not independently checked by another researchers. A larger set of editions, classroom observations and a documented second reading would help test and refine these findings.

4. Conclusion

The selected textbook sequences show complementary cultural emphases: international settings are prominent in the English Culture pages, while the Romanian material offers literary, national and minority reference relevant to Hungarian-medium pupils. The educational value of these sources depends partly on the questions asked about them. More explicit prompts for interpretation, comparison and mediation, together with assessment of pupils' explanations, could connect cultural knowledge to intercultural learning. These suggestions require classroom study before claims about learner outcomes can be made.

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