Intercultural learning and motivation in the second language classrooms: Exploring language teacher and student perspectives

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Abstract

The integration of cultural topics into second language (L2) teaching is widely acknowledged as a crucial component of effective pedagogy in enhancing learners' motivation and construction of their multicultural and multilingual selves. Scholars have emphasised the embedded presence of culture in language education. However, explicit incorporation of cultural topics in formal L2 contexts often presents challenges, including potential misunderstandings, overgeneralisations, and the risk of perpetuating stereotypes. In this regard, recent research supports the use of nuanced teaching approaches that respect the cultural complexity presented by speech communities. Drawing on the concept of intercultural communicative competence acquired in the formal learning environment, this study aims to (a) investigate the way L2 teachers and students conceptualise intercultural teaching and learning and (b) examine the motivational role of cultural practices in language instruction in a range of European languages. Findings demonstrate that cultural topics, e.g., history, literature, cinema, etc., in the L2 classroom uphold a strong motivational force which is often dependent on the methods used to introduce such topics and their related resources. This study also sheds light on the multiple obstacles faced by teachers and students ranging from lack of adequate time to curriculum and study plan constraints.

Practitioner Notes

1. This study investigates teachers' choices regarding intercultural teaching in the second language classroom to expose students to multiple cultures and peoples who speak their second language.
2. This research benefits from both teachers' and students' accounts of their conceptualisation of intercultural learning and teaching and the constraints which limit their actions.
3. First-hand examples from the second language classroom shed light on the motivational power of intercultural teaching and learning discussed by teachers and learners.
4. This article offers a space for language educators to integrate the pedagogical implications of this study into their language course curriculum with the final aim of motivating their students.
5. Given cultural knowledge is a source of motivation, language educators find inspiration when teaching cultural topics in their own authentic cultural experiences as native but also as non-native speakers.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, Intercultural language teaching, Second Language learning motivation, European languages

Introduction

That intercultural learning and teaching increase students' motivation is not strange to second language educators. More than thirty years ago, Claire Kramsch (1993) recognised the critical role of culture in L2 teaching and learning, powerfully stating that "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 1). Hermes (2007) considers "culture as more of a process than a product" (p. 56), which mirrors a genuine, dynamic and fluid co-interpretation of culture by teachers and learners as they discovered in an Indigenous language immersion school in the USA. Moreover, Lee (2015) proposes a parallelism with Butler's (1993) construct of 'doing gender' to provide evidence for the argument that teachers 'do culture' in their talking, actions and way of being independently from their own language-specific teaching practices. Lee (2015) also reiterates the presence of culture in all human beings' actions and expressions.

Although culture permeates L2 teaching by its nature, the explicit integration of cultural topics and activities in formal L2 learning contexts is not necessarily always problem-free, given, for instance, the intricate and complex discussion(s) cultural topics might trigger. Crozet and Liddicoat (1997) also caution that teaching culture in L2 classes does not necessarily mean teaching literature, as is still commonly and widely perceived in L2 teaching contexts. The reflection on events and topics related to culture can often lead to misunderstandings and heated debates, in addition to the risk of misrepresenting ethnicities, communities and even broader beliefs and values. As Kramsch (1993) notes, "classroom teaching is a juggling act that requires instant-by-instant decisions based on both local and global knowledge and on an intuitive grasp of the situation" (p. 3). It is not surprising therefore if Leward (1968) emphasises that many dangers underpin the discussion of cultural values as a result of which educators tend to avoid explicit reference to culture. By way of example, Noble and Watkins (2014) lament the presence of overgeneralisations when presenting cultural differences across communities. The literature confirms that it is not unusual to observe L2 classes focused on cultural stereotypes belonging to the countries in which a language is spoken while overlooking the diversity characterising their speech communities (see Crozet et al., 2021). As a result, Motschenbacher (2019) invites language educators to marry more inclusive teaching practices by representing the complexity of cultural diversity and incorporating the analysis of a large number of cultural components.

This current study explores teachers and learners' conceptualisation of intercultural learning and the effects teachers' classroom practices have on learners' motivation, starting from Byram and Golubeva's (2020) reflection on the crucial vocation of language education to promote intercultural communication among peoples. The scarcity of comparative studies about teachers' and students' attitudes towards intercultural language learning obliges researchers to identify differences and similarities between these two cohorts. This study was inspired by the authors' interest in discovering how to boost students' ingrained motivation to learn an L2 despite the well-known decline in L2 student enrolments over the last decade in Australia and in other English-speaking countries more broadly (cf. Martín, Jansen & Beckmann, 2016). In this regard, the authors define motivation as a complex and dynamic desire for language proficiency. Based on the authors' research results, language proficiency encompasses a series of communicative competences which allow effective and successful interactions among speakers/learners of a specific language across communities.

The purpose of this study is therefore to fill the gap in the literature on comparative studies which investigate teachers' and students' experiences and understanding of the L2 classroom. To do so, two research questions will guide the analysis of L2 teachers' and learners' narratives:

1. How do L2 students and teachers conceptualise the use of intercultural learning in the L2 classroom?

2. What is the motivational role of cultural topics in beginner level European language courses?

Literature

Available research demonstrates that the explicit discussion of cultural topics in academic environments facilitates L2 socialisation and acculturation processes. In their study on international students' intercultural contacts in Australia, Pekerti et al. (2020) define acculturation processes as the psychological and socio-cultural changes that individuals make to embrace values, beliefs and behaviours of a host community. Zhang and Tsung (2021) found that international students' integration processes in local communities in China were accelerated by classroom discussion about local culture. In so doing, learning about culture appeared to foster the formation of (a) new identities, (b) positive emotions, and (c) a sense of belonging to a specific community. Yu and Watkins (2008) noticed that migrants to China integrated themselves into the new society thanks to formal Chinese (Mandarin) lessons. Nguyen and Ton-Nu (2024) engaged with the teaching of intercultural pragmatics to allow their students to successfully interact in culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia. McConachy (2022) highlighted how the acquisition of intercultural pragmatic competence, language awareness and intercultural communicative competence allows students to appropriately and meaningfully use linguistic resources and repertoires when navigating intercultural contacts. To do so, D'Orazzi and Enomoto (2024) found that students need to develop analytical skills, in order to be able to unpack cultural concepts and appropriately use linguistic resources in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. More specifically, they found that students needed to be equipped with critical thinking and digital literacy to uncover cultural biases and stereotypes affecting their use of ChatGPT for language learning purposes. Taken together, teaching and learning about culture in the L2 classroom contributes to learners' acquisition and development of essential skills needed to successfully and appropriately communicate in a wide range of scenarios.

In our study, we argue that proposing cultural topics requires a certain level of openness to diversity by teachers and students. Menard-Warwick (2009) examined how cultural knowledge is co-constructed by students and teachers based on their own life experiences and attitudes. In her classroom observations in Chile and in the USA, she demonstrated that "images of culture" are very dynamically modelled by teachers' and students' understanding of cultural phenomena and artefacts. Therefore, moderating open and genuine discussions with students becomes pivotal in scaffolding them when navigating different (often contrasting) cultural understandings and interpretations. However, these discussions are not always easy to entertain.

Naidu (2020) conducted research with teachers of Indonesian in Australia, who lamented not possessing the relevant skills and tools, e.g., resources and time, to teach culture without falling into simplistic approaches, such as relying on banal national representations (see also Lee, 2015). With the same purposes in mind, Meadows (2020) interviewed English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in different countries asking them how they integrated cultural content into their syllabi. Some teachers sought to transcend cultural stereotypes, in order to trigger critical discussions about nationalistic ideologies. Conversely, other teachers relied on referring to cultural generalisations and comparing the students' 'home' culture to the culture of the target language, e.g., when making references to American festivities such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, etc. Within this context, our research expands on the current understanding of how teachers address such generalisations in their everyday language teaching practices.

A solution to avoiding generalisations was found by some of the teachers interviewed by Lavrenteva and Orland-Barak (2022) in Israel. They integrated cultural components they developed into their ESL courses while mostly disregarding coursebook materials which often offered very simplistic views of culture. They utilised authentic resources acquired from multiple online sources to present students with current debates of different nature, for instance "the

influence of technology, cyber-bullying, talk shows, reality shows, etc." on more established cultural traditions (Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2022, p. 660).

The positioning of teachers as a medium to accessing a culture often appears to be heavily influenced by the idea of nativeness and non-nativeness. Ennser-Kananen and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2022) shed light on the importance of understanding immigrant non-native language teachers' legitimate professional identities. Examples are offered on how teachers negotiate their identity as competent speakers of a language in order to respond to students' often racialised expectations. The constant 'othering' dynamic experienced by teachers who do not 'fit into' preconceived stereotyped images indicate "the urgency of professional communities becoming spaces where cultural knowledge is discussed in ways that invite cultural self-reflection, and acknowledge the complexity of multicultural education" (Ennser-Kananen & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022, p. 12).

Students' perceptions of teachers as competent and legitimate ambassadors of cultures are also affected by textbook and audio/video resources in which characters' personal traits respond to stereotypes based on national ideologies and clichés. Motschenbacher (2019) compares two ESL textbooks, which mainly use images and characters from the UK and to a lesser extent from the USA. Their research demonstrates a widespread underrepresentation of cultures and ethnicities, which are not mainstream while failing to represent speakers of English outside of white Anglo circles. Within this context, Motschenbacher (2019) believes that "teachers […] play an important role as guardians of inclusive language policies, as shapers of communicative norms in the classroom and as agents of change more generally" (p. 305).

Empirical evidence has shown that intercultural teaching motivates L2 learning and brings forth positive emotions. For instance, in-class activities can foster what Li et al. (2018) define as Foreign Language Enjoyment-atmosphere (see also D'Orazzi, 2024b) and intrinsic motivation (D'Orazzi, 2026). The attraction to culture also motivated Pavelescu and Petric's (2018) high school ESL learners in Romania. Activities related to cultural events and products typical of English-speaking countries such as the UK triggered positive emotions which in turn motivated students to overcome learning difficulties. Similar dynamics were reported by Tran and Nguyen's (2023) Vietnamese high school ESL learners. Students found in-class exposure to culture very motivating to effectively manage multicultural interactions. In the same vein, students of French, German, Italian and Spanish across universities in Australia appeared to be strongly motivated by intrinsic and integrative motives, intended as students' interest in the language itself and in the people who speak their target language (D'Orazzi, 2024a; 2026).

Method

Study design and procedure

Drawing on the constructivist tradition, this study investigates the role of intercultural learning in the L2 classroom departing from teachers' and students' "informed and sophisticated reconstructions" of first-hand experiences and practices of teaching and learning culture(s) (Denzin et al., 2023) at a major Australian university. All participants were given a Plain Language Statement to read and a consent form to sign in light of the guidelines stated in the ethics approval (ID 1750200.3) for this research project.

Research instruments and data collection

A group of teachers (T) of French, German, Italian, and Spanish (*N*= 15), varying in experience and years of service, took part in four language-specific focus groups at the very end of the academic year (see Appendix 1 for the initial questions asked to teachers). Students who volunteered to take part in the project were interviewed about their perceptions of the pedagogies used in the classroom. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2) fulfilled the purpose of following a series of questions related to the main goals set up for this research and, at the same

time, enjoy more flexibility when exploring dynamics that students spontaneously decided to discuss (Denzin et al., 2023). Individual interviews with students (S) took place at the end of each of the two semesters under consideration (*N*= 37 in S1 and *N*= 25 in S2). All students were in their first year of language studies at the time of the data collection. The longitudinal nature of this study added empirical support to the understanding of any changes in students' motivation and perception of intercultural learning in the classroom departing from Byram's (2021) definition of intercultural communicative competence as a set of skills useful to entertain peaceful relationships among people from different cultural backgrounds. No biographical questions were directed to teachers before taking part in focus groups to guarantee maximum anonymity when expressing their opinions, particularly in relation to university regulations. Conversely, students completed an online questionnaire before their interviews (see D'Orazzi, 2020).

Participants

The number of participants varied based on the language taught – 15 teachers, or learnt – 37 students. The French cohort was the largest with five teachers – two non-native (NN) and three native (N) (T.1_NN, T.2_NN, T.3_N, T.4_N, T.5_N), and ten students (S.1, S.2, S.3, S.4, S.5, S.6, S.7, S.8, S.9, S.10). The Italian cohort was the second largest cohort with four teachers (T.9_N, T.10_N, 7.11_N, T.12_N) and ten students (S.20, S.21, S.22, S.23, S.24, S.25, S.26, S.27, S.28, S.29) This cohort was followed by the German cohort with three teachers and nine students (T.6_N, T.7_N, T.8_N and S.11, S.12, S.13, S.14, S.15, S.16, S.17, S.18, S.19), and the Spanish cohort with three teachers and eight students (T.13_NN, T.14_N, T.15_N and S.30, S.31, S.32, S.33, S.34, S.35, S.36, S.37).

Our questionnaire results indicate that almost 85% of the student interviewees were younger than 25 years old and spoke English as their first language. The large majority of them were female (67.6%), domestic students (75.7%), had studied an L2 in the past (81.1%), and chose French, German, Italian or Spanish as their optional/elective subject at university (75.7%). Only three students (8.1%) had a cultural background from a country where the languages considered for this study are spoken (Italian- and Spanish-speaking countries), while 48.6% were Australian without one of the four languages cultural background. Of the 37 interviewees, 23 students were first-year undergraduate students.
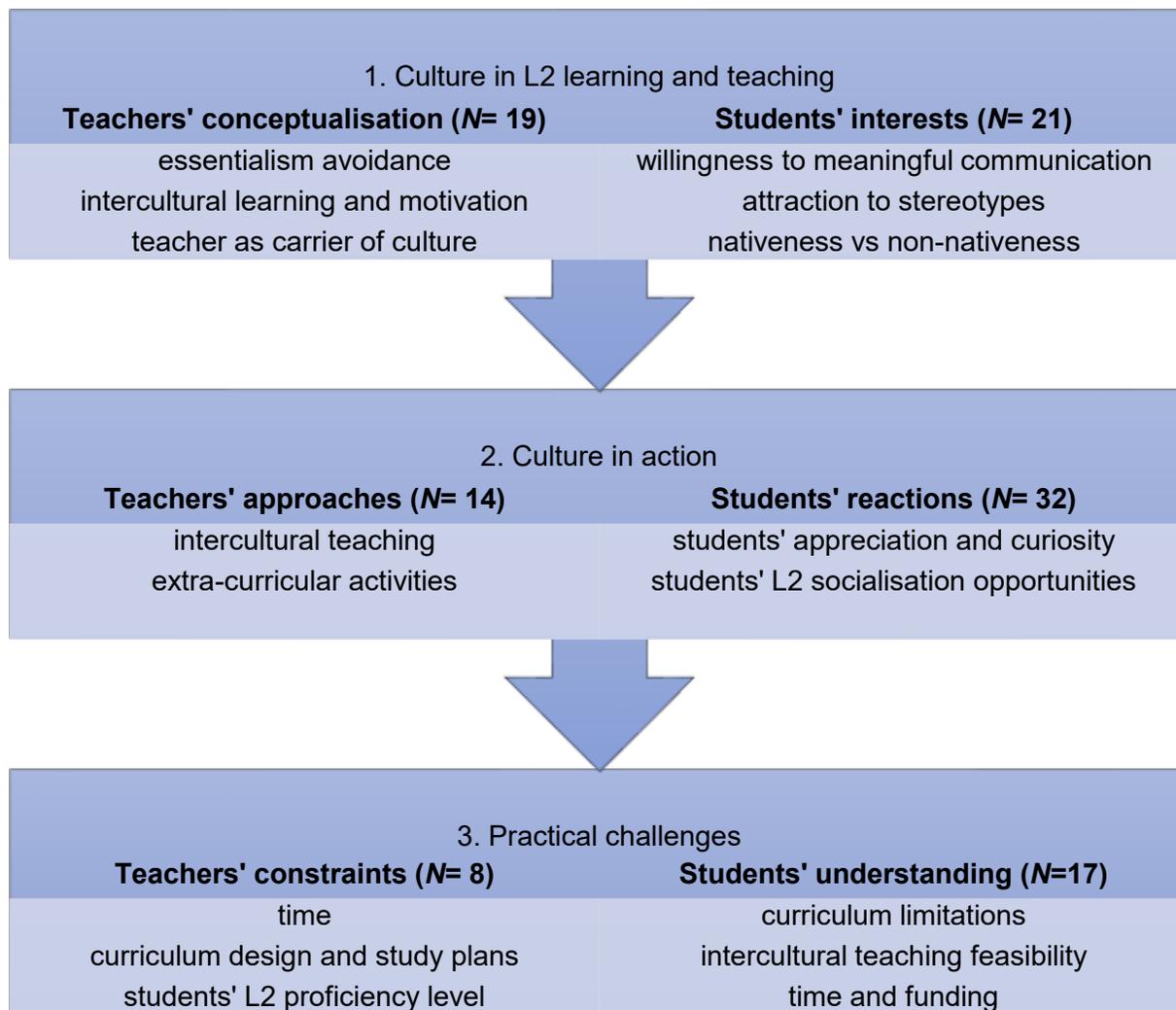
Data analysis

A thematic content analysis of narratives elicited from focus groups with teachers and individual interviews with students was undertaken to categorise common themes (Vamos & Zhou, 2009). This is an approach particularly appropriate to examining "context of discussion, word choice and participants' comments throughout transcripts" (Vamos & Zhou, 2009, p. 198). Due to the very similar results obtained across the four language cohorts, they are reported together. This technique of analysing data was chosen to enable the reporting of salient themes identified across different participant cohorts while also guaranteeing anonymity to all participants.

Results

The content thematic analysis of both interviews and focus groups revealed the presence of three interconnected major themes per group as shown in Figure 1. The conceptualisation of what culture means in L2 learning and teaching (theme 1) was found to be connected to concrete intercultural practices in the classroom (theme 2) which, to some extent, were not always carried out as wished by teachers due to administrative and curriculum-related constraints (theme 3).

FIGURE 1

Summary of the macro umbrella themes and sub-themes emerging from the thematic content analysis.

1. Culture in L2 learning and teaching	
Teachers' conceptualisation (*N*= 19)	**Students' interests (*N*= 21)**
essentialism avoidance	willingness to meaningful communication
intercultural learning and motivation	attraction to stereotypes
teacher as carrier of culture	nativeness vs non-nativeness

2. Culture in action	
Teachers' approaches (*N*= 14)	**Students' reactions (*N*= 32)**
intercultural teaching	students' appreciation and curiosity
extra-curricular activities	students' L2 socialisation opportunities

3. Practical challenges	
Teachers' constraints (*N*= 8)	**Students' understanding (*N*=17)**
time	curriculum limitations
curriculum design and study plans	intercultural teaching feasibility
students' L2 proficiency level	time and funding

Overall, teachers were found to have a clear idea of what their students expected from their L2 courses in terms of cultural representation and content. They attempted to address students' desires within the time and resource constraints they operated.

Student participants displayed a large variety of reactions to the cultural content presented to them by teachers. These reactions appeared to influence how teachers incorporated (or avoided incorporating) intercultural learning in their lesson plans.

Culture in L2 learning and teaching

Teachers' conceptualisation

All 15 teachers were generally aware of their students' intercultural interests and had previously reflected on the role of intercultural teaching in students' motivation. Nonetheless, teachers flagged the risk of falling into restrictive and simplistic representations of cultures in contrast to more realistic understandings of people's everyday-life experiences and behaviours. The essentialisation of culture was often manifested in cross-cultural comparisons and representations of dominant mainstream cultural ideologies and practices, as well as specific

common places, instead of incorporating, for instance, the experiences of minority groups, immigrant communities and emerging ideologies beyond the widely recognised cultural images of a country.

*"I think it's still really kind of romanticised and idealised and kind of seductive. […] **That kind of allure of French, which goes beyond the language. That's wrapped up in the language**."* T.2_FR_NN

*"I feel a lot of the time **German translates to Bavarian** in Australia."* T.7_DE_N

*"I think **they're fascinated with** French and **the French culture. Anything French.**"* T.1_FR_NN

The large majority of teacher participants observed that intercultural learning activities motivated L2 learners to engage in their learning beyond sheer instrumental gains in an attempt to understand the target language group's cultural values and beliefs.

*"I think they're **attracted to the culture**. That's the[ir] main motivation."* T.5_FR_N

*"I always have students who want to read, you know, **original texts, historical or original texts from German writers or philosophers** so even quite ambitious students that are interested in literature to read the original."* T.6_DE_N

*"I think a lot of them [the students] are **curious about the different cultures** and so like learning […]. I think for a lot of them, that's the main goal to have, like, **access to a different culture**."* T.7_DE_N

Teachers often reflected on how they have considered the factors influencing their students' intercultural interests to design activities and tasks. Students' cultural heritage, prior learning experiences, contact with native speakers, and career aspirations were some of the influencing factors identified by teachers while observing students' reactions to classroom intercultural activities. This also included teachers' understanding that students were often influenced by an idealised idea that only native speaker teachers could fully capture language-specific cultural aspects.

*"If they want to learn Spanish, they maybe think of **someone from Spain or Latin America, who would be their teacher or, if they learn French, maybe, they think of the typical teacher from Paris**."* T.14_ES_N

*"A lot of them that I talk to have **some kind of connection to Germany [e.g., travel plans, cultural interests, job aspirations, etc.] or, yeah, German-speaking people**."* T.7_DE_N

*"Some of my students **have been to Italy** and they have come back. […] Some students studied music, so they want to learn the pronunciation, **the meaning of the songs,** and sing knowing what they are singing."* T.9_IT_N

*"Because most of them would like to travel mainly to Latin America, not to Spain, I think **being in contact with some cultural aspects of our countries is really motivating for them**."* T.14_ES_N

The analysis of poetry, fiction and various forms of the arts represented a springboard to achieving teachers' goals of exposing students to the complex web of cultural elements beyond stereotypical conceptualisations. More experienced teachers acknowledged how the development of students' cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence served as a gateway to accessing new speech communities.

"*It is possible to create **a class based on a cultural aspect or a poem or song or something**.*" T.4_FR_N

"***Music, history, cities, arts, everything about Italy is very interesting for them to know more about Italians.***" T.12_IT_N

Students' interest

Cultural topics introduced in the L2 classroom stimulated students' reflections on their conceptualisation of what intercultural language learning entails, and their expectations when learning a European language at university level. Our data suggest that a large portion of students had a compelling aspiration to communicate with native speakers together with an ingrained curiosity to immerse themselves in unknown contexts.

"*I find it quite interesting **learning about different cultures and meeting new people**.*" S.9_FR_S1

"*We've had dinners and we talked about places in Melbourne where **we can engage with the Italian culture** so that it doesn't take out the time in class. It's important to emphasise engagement with this, like listen to music or go watch this movie, and that is great, to make it integrated into the course.*" S.29_IT_S1

"*I thought that there was **just German but then you learn different dialects** in north Germany, Austria, Switzerland.*" S.16_DE_S1

"*It was **really motivating to continue with it [cultural content]**, because **the culture is so interesting**.*" S.35_ES_S1

"***The stuff of the culture is a big motivator** and, it's **a bit of a break from some of the hardest stuff**.*" S.35_ES_S2

Cultural interest was often fostered by students' stereotyped image(s) of and encounters with cultural elements of the various countries where their L2 is spoken. For instance, French students described France as a country renowned for its luxury industries; German students were attracted by the power of Germany as the world's third largest economy; Italian students noted the cultural traits of the large Italian immigrant community in Australia; and Spanish students enjoyed movies, TV series and festivals picturing Latin American countries.

"*My first encounter with **French products** was with Louis Vuitton.*" S.5_FR_S1

"*When I was a child, **Pixel involved some stuff from South America.** [It] probably attracted me as a kid and that probably continued.*" S.35_ES_S1

"***Few TV series from Argentina**, which I really like. […] We see them with translation so, part of the vocabulary is from the TV series, so this is a motivation for me to study.*" S.37_ES_S1

The interest in the French-, German-, Italian- and Spanish-related cultures also stemmed from students' previous learning experiences, e.g., learning about the French Revolution, the two World Wars, the Italian Renaissance, and Latin American migration to the USA, etc.

"*I did the French revolution in year 12 and then I was learning the ideology behind it, […] its interesting ideas.*" S.7_FR_S1

"*The Italian history is also really cool with figures such as Leonardo Da Vinci. I've been to the town 'Vinci'. It was so cool, and the ancient Romans and stuff…*" S.25_IT_S1

Some students emphasised the crucial role of native speakers as conduits through which cultural knowledge could be passed on. Thus, our data suggest an underlying perception of native speakers as the true bearers of authentic cultural awareness as also highlighted by some teachers. Conversations with native speakers were deemed by students to increase their affinity with and positive attitudes towards their target language culture(s) and communities.

"*It is important to make real connections with people from the culture. It just keeps everything a little bit more real. You've got something to motivate you to keep learning.*" S.9_FR_S1

"*It makes a difference if it's taught by an actual Italian-speaking teacher […]. The teacher is actually from Italy and she makes sure that it's not just the language she teaches but it's also the culture.*" S.26_IT_S2

Culture in action

Teachers' approaches to teaching culture

Students' strong interest in travelling and discovering new cultures led teachers to question how to more systematically include culture in their lesson plans and if this can be done explicitly. Discussions were often focussed on the capacity of students to unpack cultural topics at beginner level and on the use of English to teach some of these cultural components.

"*I think they start also to be much more interested in the culture because they are more committed and so they start thinking about wanting to go there [to German-speaking countries].*" T.6_DE_N

"*Culture cannot be taught, but we just introduce it and some of the assessment is focused on the culture, but I think that has advantages and disadvantages because […] when we are talking about culture in Spanish one [for beginners] we need to speak in English.*" T.13_ES_NN

As previously highlighted, teachers unanimously agreed that cultural knowledge was a very motivating factor for their students. They were also aware that the selection of specific cultural topics appeared to have multiple repercussions in terms of students' motivation and, concurrently, demotivation. Teachers were very careful about considering students' cultural interests when choosing appropriate topics in an attempt to avoid demotivating and disengaging their students.

"*My fear is that if when we introduce the culture, for example, history or literature, it doesn't interest everyone […]. When we do introduce a text or historical aspect of Italian history, some of the students become a bit disengaged or not as interested.*" T.9_IT_N

"*I think also the cultural component of our subjects keep them [students] interested.*" T.14_ES_N

Focus group discussions turned out to be an opportunity for teacher participants to assess and approximately quantify the amount of culture explicitly taught in their courses and reflect on the very different methods they used to teach culture in their courses.

"*I think we do a fair bit of culture. Some students do not know what the culture is about. […] So it has to be integrated.*" T.1_FR_NN

"*I'd say, I don't think we can actually do much more. I think it's very good what we just get by what we do.*" T.6_DE_N

Some teachers encouraged learners, often for practical reasons such as limited time in class, to interact with native target language speakers in their communities outside of the formal classroom environment to make them become aware of the linguistic and cultural diversity of their surroundings.

"*I don't think I've got time in class to do that. So, I just encourage the skilled students to find more opportunities outside the classroom […], find native speakers and interview them.*" T.11_IT_N

"*And some of the students found some migrants there, and they contacted them as well.*" T.13_ES_NN

Students' reactions to cultural topics

The large majority of students reported that their expectations in terms of exposure to culture were met. Culture appeared to concomitantly increase students' motivation and help L2 socialisation processes, while allowing them to imagine and understand how people who speak French, German, Italian and Spanish live and interact with each other in their respective countries and speech communities.

"*What I enjoy was the movie […]. She [the teacher] told us a little bit of things on the French culture to see French as a more interesting class.*" S.5_FR_S1

"*We studied architecture, history and some architects in Paris, the church in Paris, Notre Dame.*" S.8_FR_S1

"*I think uni does a good job exposing us to culture in the classroom.*" S.13_DE_S1

"*My German tutor showed us scenery and cities … Berlin. He just told us about festivals, culture, sites, and that would definitely intrigue certain students to perhaps travel there.*" S.18_DE_S2

*"We watched a movie in the class, I think that **was really interesting to be able to see what you're leaning on the culture**. That would be interesting to have more video in the class."* S.27_IT_S1

Student participants also commented that activities and tasks related to culture, both in the classroom and outside of it, often represented an opportunity to imagine and experience how life looks like in the contexts where their L2 is spoken. Their teachers' mode of delivery was also praised when they successfully conveyed their passion for cultural aspects of the target language.

*"When tour de France is on [and shown in class], **they've got that little segment right at the start,** where they've got the French chef who talks about the regional food. That's great. I love that. The **little differences between each part of France: I find that really interesting.**"* S.3_FR_S1

*"Our tutor would explain some German context so that is why she kept referring to the culture. It was **so interesting** […] because **a lot of us in German 1 class have never been to Germany before. It was like being virtually there**."* S.12_DE_S1

*"It wasn't just the language but also the culture. The way she [the tutor] spoke […]. **She took us closer to Italy**."* S.26_IT_S2

*"We did one project this semester which was **an interview with someone else who was not from the class**, and that was really good because we only spoke Spanish."* S.33_ES_S2

As a direct consequence of such exposure to culture, students reflected on the wealth of cultural representations, including history, arts, food, cinema, music, theatre and geography. Students' critique of some simplistic cultural representations from their textbook signals a deep understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of culture, an element that also emerged from focus groups with teachers (see previous section).

*"I realised that I didn't know there are **so many countries which speak French** […].The course makes me learn many things I didn't know."* S.1_FR_S1

*"**Most of the cultural ideas presented in the book are out-dated,** because the book is outdated. […] Even my teacher told me **that the cultural stuff is usually centred around** Paris and she feels is not enough and she **feels there are more things than just Paris**. That's where I thought it was lacking."* S.10_FR_S2

*"Learning **history is always part of the language** because language is part of the culture, so we were taught **a lot on the culture and a bit on the history as well, and politics**. I think it's an interesting learning. […] It increases your curiosity and you want to learn more."* S.14_DE_S1

*"Occasionally my tutor would go **much in depth with a culture stuff** that wasn't in the textbook because I feel that when we were just following the textbook a lot of stuff were left out and **it was more of a kind of stereotypical** so there was more of **an emphasis on the actual culture and the actual sort of society in different parts of culture**. […] **The textbook is good, but I think it's limiting**."* S.33_ES_S2

*"I feel it was **very 'textbook French'** and although the textbook gives colloquial alternatives, it's very old. […] **I'm not entirely convinced that it is how it is in real life**."* S.10_FR_S2

Students also reported on their participation in extra-curricular cultural events at university which boosted their integrative motivation and willingness to communicate. Despite their acknowledgement of the motivational impact of these initiatives, several student interviewees lamented the scarcity of authentic and stress-free opportunities to communicate in their L2 in some of these events given their (sometimes) formal nature.

*"I do think that **cultural events** are nice in a way they really **encourage people** to either learn the language or just visit the country."* S.5_FR_S1

"*I met a few people [at the French club] who helped me learning French **but it's not as near as having an actual friend you can go to speak comfortably without all the university formalities**. […] yeah, in the place itself [a French-speaking country], everywhere people speak French**, I feel I would get used to seeing things in French and I would get used to hearing people speaking French** … like help me learn the language more […] and **the conversational French is different jargon people use**.*" S.10_FR_S2

"***I just come from a love of learning cultures**. I appreciate **learning new lifestyles, ways of education as well**. […] I really love the cultural learning part in class. I would love to learn more about it. There is always more to learn about culture. We recently **learnt about October Fest and we watched this film called 'Run Lola Run'**, so I think it has been **pretty good exposure to culture**.*" S.18_DE_S2

"*I went to **the Italian ball** which **increased my motivation**. It was very cool.*" S.25_IT_S2

Practical challenges in teaching culture

Teachers' constraints

Time and curriculum constraints represented a major issue for those L2 teacher participants who wished to explore innovative pathways to integrate more cultural activities into their L2 lessons. The need to follow curriculum requirements, e.g., teaching grammar, did not allow teachers to have much control of their syllabus.

"*It would be fantastic to do more of that because that would be considered more consolidation too, but yes, **it is a matter of time and the overall objectives of the course**.[…] **Grammar is very important**. It sounds very traditional, but we have to get there.*" T.1_FR_NN

"*We often create **a class with a song or a video, but it takes so much time**. You can teach about pronouns, adjectives, etc., or you can describe a poem with the cultural aspects […]. **We're short of time so we have to go straight to the grammar**.*" T.4_FR_N

"*If you try to, like, **blend grammar and cultural topics together**, somehow you still sometimes just need time […], I think that's **a time issue**.*" T.7_DE_N

Furthermore, teachers were aware of the difficulties beginner learners encountered when learning about culture in their first semester of L2 learning; an L2 was often only an elective subject for participants. By the second semester of study, teachers became more confident in teaching culture as students L2 proficiency and engagement increased. However, another barrier was the time available to some students who had to prioritise core subjects needed to progress with their studies.

*"We organised already some German meetups, films and stuff, and the percentage of students who came was not really high so this could either be [because] **it's a movie in German** and […] maybe [they] **feel a bit like discouraged by that**."* T.8_DE_N

*"If you **pick a language as an elective, that is not your focus of your academic course**. It's something a little bit on the side […], then I can understand that it might be a bit quick compared to **how much they're willing to invest in it**."* T.11_IT_N

Some language programs designed specific cultural activities outside of the classroom which fostered students' intrinsic but also integrative motivation as noted before. Extra-curricular activities were meant to trigger the emergence of positive emotions and provide students with the opportunity to use their L2 in a large variety of cultural contexts. However, the lack of substantial funding to support these types of activities often obstructed their design and, consequently, delivery.

*"They had a theatre project and the students are **extremely enthusiastic about it**, and there were a lot of people attending the theatre night to watch it. But **there was no funding for it** [...] or very, very little. So, **it's just not enough**, you know. And that was **something clearly very well accepted and well received and positive.**"* T.6_DE_N

Students' perceptions of structural constraints

Students understood that time and curriculum constraints limited their teachers' ability to explicitly cover intercultural teaching. This aspect was remarked upon by the majority of students who recognised teachers' need to fulfil curriculum priorities especially in a language course at beginner level, e.g., teaching grammar, scaffolding students for assessment, etc. Students also questioned the actual feasibility of teaching cultural aspects at such a low level of proficiency when students did not possess the basic tools to understand the language first.

*"I don't think there was enough time to speak […]. Tutors are doing a great job **in encouraging French people, native speakers, to talk to French students** like the French mentor program."* S.9_FR_S1

*"Personally, **I would like to learn more culture, but then just can't see how you can teach culture at the beginner's level**."* S.17_DE_S2

*"I think **there should be more elements on the culture** and more content related to Italy […]. I would have liked to learn more on culture … [but **there was] not enough time**."* S.26_IT_S2

*"It was meant to be every week but some weeks we couldn't get to it. It's called 'prepare your selfie' and it was part of a project we had to do for the end of the semester. **The idea was that we did 30 minutes of cultural learning every week but sometimes it didn't work, we didn't have time**."* S.33_ES_S1

Travelling to foreign countries was a recurrent theme that often intersected with the role of exchange programs in enhancing cultural awareness and inter-culturality. Lack of funding appeared to be an issue for some students. Nevertheless, other students praised the efforts shown by their university and the Australian government to support their language studies with scholarships and student loans.

*"If I could go to an exchange, I would go to a Spanish-speaking country. **The only reason I wouldn't do it, it's because of money**". S.33_ES_S2*

*"**People can travel now** and not to worry about how about to pay. They'll pay back when they're older and have more money […]. **This gives more people the chance to experience other cultures**." S.9_FR_S2*

*"I think after learning Italian **I would really like to go to Italy and speak more, see the culture [e.g., people's lifestyle, cuisine, pop culture, etc.]**. I am thinking about going overseas to study […], definitely **there are options and there are scholarships**." S.27_IT_S2*

To a lesser extent, some very motivated students complained about the scarcity of direct contact with native speakers which would have given them a more direct and explicit access to authentic intercultural experiences. Nativeness was, nonetheless, not always a problem for students as long as their teachers demonstrated understanding of the culture(s) shared by native speakers, as argued by students like the one quoted below. In the same vein, some students would have enjoyed more attention to cultural teaching.

*"[we could learn about cultural aspects of French-speaking people], while we were learning about the grammar and the language content. Not necessarily [by] a native speaker, but probably **a person who knows what today's France is like. I think that's very important**. […] Even if the person is not actually from France, if the person has **lived in France for quite a long time or they studied in France or they actually learnt their language in the cultural context**, then they would **be able to give us a more realist or accurate understanding** of how the language works **in the daily life for French people**." S.7_FR_S2*

*"Something that was missing was the cultural side of things in class. […] I would have liked to **have a more focused learning on culture**, because **we are not actually in the country**, so it makes hard to learn. I think **part of the actual language itself is the culture**." S.30_ES_S1*

Discussion

This research produces new knowledge about how teachers and students conceptualise, utilise and experiment intercultural learning and teaching in the L2 classroom and beyond. Data show that teaching cultural content in the L2 classroom is perceived as an essential element of language learning and teaching, and ultimately, it motivated students to further pursue their language studies. Not surprisingly, given broader trends in language teaching, there is also evidence for the occurrence of simplistic definitions of culture based on overgeneralisations and stereotypes conventionally attributed to the countries and communities where a language would be historically spoken (cf. Crozet et al., 2021). In Harbon and Moloney's (2013) terms, "teachers' enthusiasm for imparting cultural knowledge and a focus on artefacts and practices can still lead to static, reductive essentialisation of the culture" (p. 144). At the same time, a small number of students expected to know more about mainstream traditions and popular culture of France, Germany, Italy and Latin American countries. Such perspectives however indicate a lack of awareness of the richness of the cultures linked to French, German, Italian and Spanish languages beyond mainstream cultural representations which often stemmed from simplistic overgeneralisations proposed in textbooks. Indeed, some teachers' experiences in the classroom signal a focus on mainstream images of culture which provided opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons rather than a portrayal of the complexity of cultures. This trend also emerged from

some students' opinion that only native language teachers could provide an authentic understanding of cultural components related to the studied L2 (see also Motschenbacher, 2019). At the same time, although only a small number of students considered native teachers as the 'authentic' bearers of cultural knowledge, a large number of them implicitly challenged racialised expectations around non-native language teachers' cultural teaching, (cf. Ennser-Kananen & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2022). Given that most of their teachers were native speakers of the language they were teaching, this study does not offer a comprehensive understanding of how non-native teachers would actually be perceived when teaching cultural topics.

Teachers, without any evident distinction between native and non-native teachers, recognised the importance of exposing students to cultural artefacts, such as songs, advertisements, etc., during their L2 formal learning experience to enhance language awareness (Kramsch, 1993) as well as intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Our data indicate that teachers caught the essence of language learning by indicating that their use of language in the classroom was already charged with cultural meaning beyond their explicit teaching of culture, as also argued by Díaz and Dasli (2017). This was done by overtly bringing their own lived first-hand experience and interpretation of the culture(s) into the L2 classroom (cf. Bateman, 2002) and integrating the content of their textbooks with a wider range of cultural elements (cf. Noble & Walkins, 2014). Some materials used in L2 classes offered learners "the opportunity to reflect on their values, beliefs and attitudes and then better understand how others may view the world" (Fielding, 2022, p. 21). Based on teachers' input, exposure to culture led to positive results in terms of "students' attitudes toward members of the target language community and toward culture learning in general" as underlined by Bateman (2002, p. 327) in the USA. These same teachers attempted to prepare students to critically absorb culture beyond stereotypes and simplistic cross-cultural comparisons between countries capturing the cultural complexity that Menard-Warwick (2009) and Meadows (2020) discuss in their work (see also Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2022).

Holliday's (1999) distinction between large and small culture can assist in avoiding 'over-simplistically' describing the mainstream culture of countries, where "a 'small culture' approach thus attempts to liberate 'culture' from notions of ethnicity and nations and from the perceptual dangers they carry with them" (p. 237). Student participants' appreciation when presented with more niche (and generally less known) cultural topics is testament to their need for more culturally-minded and globally-oriented courses to prepare them to unpack non-mainstream cultural constructs. Previous research conducted by Marangell and D'Orazzi (2023) on students' expectations around university offerings confirms students' interest in a diverse range of approaches to knowledge informed by the inclusion, and not exclusion, of different epistemologies which mirror their context- and time-sensitive conceptualisation of what language and culture teaching entails. Findings from this study are consistent with Noble and Watkins's (2014) empirical research which shows that "it is the complexity of cultural practices and relations that we should investigate in classrooms" where "culture is recognised as a process defined both by a degree of fluidity and stability" (p. 175).

Teachers explored innovative activities and topics to help students acquire intercultural communicative competence "used as a concept to plan and evaluate learning and teaching as part of a more general change to using competences that has taken place throughout formal education" (Byram & Golubeva, 2020, p. 72). Students and teachers appeared to be brought together by a desire to learn and teach respectively an increasing amount of cultural knowledge connected to the language they were involved with. Incorporating culture into an L2 course was considered an essential component by all research participants, confirming de Burgh-Hirabe's (2019) argument that "interest in (popular) culture brings students to learn an L2 [Japanese in her case] and sustain their motivation" (p. 102). Students expected to learn about the different cultural aspects, contemporary and less contemporary literature, traditions, history, politics, and behaviours experienced by people who live in the speech communities where their L2 is spoken,

e.g., cultural events, cuisine, wine culture, customs and traditions, etc., and not necessarily about literature as commonly intended in more traditional language curriculum design practices (see Crozet & Liddicoat, 1997).

The dialogue between teachers and students shaped the type of cultural domains explored in class (see also Menard-Warwick, 2009). Such an interaction between students and teachers helped teachers to co-construct course materials while supporting the view of Canale and Furtado (2021) of considering the L2 classroom as "a space in which knowledge about the social world is constructed, shared and negotiated" (p. 60) independently from the L2 teachers were teaching. This holistic approach to culture teaching boosted students' motivation in learning an L2. In this regard, Naidu (2020) insists on considering culture as a complex construct, and Menard-Warwick (2009) encourages L2 teachers to "prepare learners to use the [target language] in encounters with people from other cultural groups" (p. 43) as requested by our student participants in multiple instances. In this process, teachers were found to be reflecting on new solutions and methods to boost students' understanding of cultural issues and avoid disengaging and demotivating them by choosing uninteresting topics. Hence, teachers demonstrated they were 'practitioners of culture' when accompanying students in their cultural understanding journey and reducing potential 'social distance' between their own communities and their L2-related communities (cf. Tran & Nguyen, 2023). They reported that the introduction of poems, novels, movies, theatre and opera performances, historical events, festivals and other forms of arts and traditions was common practice.

To discover more about the motivational role of culture in teaching and learning European languages in Australia, student data were triangulated with teachers' understanding of the motivational force of their cultural practices in the L2 classroom (see also D'Orazzi [2026] for the analysis of multiple motivational constructs beyond the role of intercultural teaching). This allows for fresh insights about the types of some of the most motivating cultural activities proposed to students. These include numerous initiatives organised by language programs within and outside of the classroom which facilitated students' L2 socialisation processes besides the enhancement of their intrinsic and integrative motivation. Positive emotions were also shared by students validating recent research on the role of Foreign Language Enjoyment-atmosphere (D'Orazzi, 2024b; Li et al., 2018) which relates to student enjoyment triggered by L2 classroom dynamics, especially, in our case, during extra-curricular events and initiatives.

Teachers were aware of their students' intrinsic motivation and integrative orientation which were fostered by classroom activities ranging from the analysis of movies to the introduction of topics related to history and geography as seen above across all four language programs under analysis (see also D'Orazzi, 2026). Teachers accentuated the role of "images of culture" in students' motivation (Menard-Warwick, 2009) often with the support of authentic materials incorporated into their teaching drawing on their real-life experiences. As noted before, they agreed that students needed spaces in which they could meet speakers of their L2 in their own community and boost the construction of multilingual and multicultural selves (cf. D'Orazzi, 2024c; Fukada et al., 2020). As was also found by Zhang and Tsung (2021), students' ability to use their L2 in local communities gave them a sense of accomplishment and new opportunities to contextualise the use of their L2. Findings from this study also suggest that task-based learning stimulated students' curiosity to enlarge their cultural knowledge. Among the most successful activities, students were asked to interview native speakers living in their cities with the purpose of exposing students to the life of their target language speakers, develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Golubeva, 2020) and initiate L2 socialisation and acculturation processes (see Pekerti et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, it is evident that teaching culture was not always easy for teachers. Some teachers were challenged by the difficulties students encountered when learning cultural content at a very low level of language proficiency. The misalignment of cultural interests was also a recurrent

concern for some of the focus group participants, who found it difficult to cater for such a diverse cohort of students. This struggle was exacerbated by the uncertainty in the choice of cultural topics and appropriate methodologies to be used in class (cf. Harbon & Moloney, 2013; Lo Bianco & Crozet, 2003). Nonetheless, students still reported an increase in motivation when lessons focused on cultural values supporting Harbon and Moloney's (2013) argument that "no longer is a linguistic proficiency the sole aim of teaching and learning, rather a set of intercultural understandings" (p. 143). Teacher and student participants emphasised the role of language in multicultural interactions, confirming research findings presented by Tran and Nguyen (2023) with Vietnamese learners of English and Yu and Watkin (2008) with Asian learners of Chinese (Mandarin). Students persisted with their intention of learning their languages motivated by, among other things, the cultural knowledge transmitted by their teachers regardless of whether they were native or non-native speakers. In this respect, Crozet et al. (2021) invite teachers to reflect on their positionality within cultural groups but also within the student cohort they teach since they are considered "practitioners of both language and culture" (Naidu, 2020, p. 658). In the same vein, our study concurs with Marangell and D'Orazzi's (2023) and D'Orazzi and Marangell's (2025) research with university students who overtly requested the inclusion of non-mainstream epistemologies.

This study also underscores the importance of cultural encounters outside of the formal learning environment and of extra-curricular initiatives such as clubs, reading and movie groups, dinners and small gatherings organised by L2 teachers (see D'Orazzi, 2024b). Teachers and students concurred that activities organised outside of the formal classroom boosted motivation and provided extra support which, for some students, unfolded into independent informal learning opportunities within their own communities. Students' interviews show that the most motivated students participated in extra-curricular activities which inspired them to recreate similar scenarios with native speakers living in their communities, e.g., having coffee in a cafe, going to museums, attending community-based events. Nonetheless, time and resources constraints did not always allow teachers to organise and students to attend extra-curricular activities. This was also the case for curriculum restrictions which impeded teachers from covering as much cultural content as they wished since they needed to spend sufficient time on teaching grammatical rules essential, for instance, for a beginner level L2 course. This was true across all four language cohorts we studied (see more cross-program comparison studies in D'Orazzi, 2026).

Conclusion

This study aims to address the gap in comparative research on teachers' and students' conceptualisation of, attitudes to and discussion about intercultural teaching and learning in beginner-level language courses. In so doing, it provides an avenue for L2 teachers to start a deeper reflection on the motivational role of intercultural teaching and learning. Teachers brought their understanding of culture into the classroom and co-constructed its conceptualisation together with their students. They appeared to be conscious about the importance of cultural exposure "despite the multitude of micro and macrostructural constraints" (Kubanyiova, 2020 p. 390). These were related to lack of time, resources and the achievement of curriculum requirements as just mentioned. Nevertheless, L2 teachers demonstrated a genuine commitment to improve their own teaching practices to foster students' interest in the culture they have experienced – beyond the dichotomy between teacher nativeness and non-nativeness, and the culture portrayed in the textbooks and materials proposed in the classroom.

The challenges faced by teachers', such as the difficulties encountered when choosing cultural topics and deciding on appropriate approaches to teach culture reinforce the need for more personal development opportunities for teachers to reflect on their contextualised and experience-informed cultural curation. In this sense, Noble and Watkins (2014) propose the concept of 'reflexive civility' which brings moral and ethical values together with an intellectual engagement with the concept of diversity necessary to live in multicultural societies. Teachers' narratives have

confirmed that self-reflection could be used as a tool to investigate the cultural values, beliefs and behaviours of L2 practitioners before imparting cultural knowledge to their students. Liberating teachers from biases and the heavy weight of ideologies might hinge on their way of understanding and teaching culture(s). Reflection by teachers on their prior experiences of and their personal affinity with culture might also help them reshape their understanding of cultural pedagogies as investigated by Menard-Warwick (2009). Departing from our student participants' conceptualisation of the role of culture in their L2 learning motivation, we encourage other L2 educators to provide their students with similar opportunities in an attempt to explicitly identify strategies and approaches to integrate a more holistic and less simplistic approach to teaching culture in L2 courses given the innate connection between language and intercultural communication teaching (cf. Díaz & Dasli, 2017).

Future research is needed to expand on the analysis of how such a 'complexity of cultural practices and relations' can be part of L2 courses. Syllabus co-design and consequent classroom observations combine to become a useful mechanism to provide solutions which encapsulate the 'fluidity' but also the concurrent 'stability' of behaviours, beliefs and values belonging to speech communities. Further research on the design and application of activities addressing cultural artefacts would also cater for those teachers who do not fully feel comfortable with the teaching of controversial cultural topics and, as Menard-Warwick (2009) suggests, to "make sure students with unpopular viewpoints are heard" (p. 43). Future research might also investigate the impact of teaching sociolinguistic competence and sociocultural pragmatics on students' motivation (see Nguyen & Ton-Nu, 2024) in order to experiment effective and enjoyable practices. These new research pathways would lead to an increase in cultural understanding and language awareness that would enhance students' empathy and attitudes towards people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Bateman, 2002). In this regard, McConachy (2022) underlines that students develop language awareness not only through the acquisition of linguistic features, but also by taking "into account the relationship between language and culture or the need for the learner to reflect on this relationship in the process of learning" (p. 22). Technology, including Artificial Intelligence-generated activities, might give inspiration to teachers to revamp their syllabi and allow them to engage more critically with cultural topics, as recently investigated by D'Orazzi and Enomoto (2024) in a classroom setting.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1
Open-ended questions for the focus group with teachers of French (adaptable for German, Italian and Spanish):

First part:
Why do your students learn French?
What do you think motivates your students to learn French?

Second part:
Which factors hamper the interest of your students in learning a second language according to your opinion and experience?
Which demotivating factors are stronger than others?

Third part:
Please comment on the data collected through the questionnaires and interviews completed by your and other students at the Group of Eight universities.

Appendix 2
Open-ended questions for the first round of interviews with students of French (adaptable for German, Italian and Spanish):

First part:
Why do you study French?
Do you have any goals related to the study of French?

Second part:
What motivates you to study French?
What demotivates you to study French?
Which strategies do you use to maintain and reinforce your motivation in learning French?

Third part:
Please comment on the data collected through the questionnaires that you and other students at the Group of Eight universities filled in.