

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION WITH A FOCUS ON UNIVERSITY-LEVEL STUDIES

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Abstract:

This article examines the critical role of culture in teaching foreign languages, with a particular focus on university-level instruction. It stresses the inseparability of language and culture for achieving communicative competence. Effective FL teaching involves balancing cultural content, exposing learners to target culture norms, and values. The article reviews historical shifts in cultural education and suggests strategies like simulations and project-based learning to overcome challenges. It emphasizes integrating cultural studies in higher education, especially in Slovakia, to enhance intercultural competence and language learning. The article also presents a case study on integrating project-based learning into the course on Canadian realia, demonstrating how this approach enhanced students' understanding of Canadian culture and improved their appreciation for practical applications in foreign language education.

Keywords: foreign language education, culture, communicative competence, intercultural competence, pluricultural competence, cultural integration, higher education, Slovakia.

Introduction

The debate over integrating culture into foreign language (FL) education has generated diverse opinions. While some scholars (Alptekin, 2002; Solgi and Tafazoli, 2018; discussed further in the following chapters) argue against its necessity, the majority stress its importance in tandem with FL instruction. Language and culture are inseparable, as highlighted by Henle's (1959) assertion: *“language and culture are intertwined. A particular language usually points out to a specific group of people. When you interact with another language, it means that you are also interacting with the culture that speaks the language. You cannot understand one's culture without accessing its language directly.”*

The significance of intercultural competence and communication has been underscored in language policies such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), influencing curricula in countries like Slovakia. The CEFR distinguishes between *multilingualism*, the coexistence of different languages in social or individual contexts, and *plurilingualism*, which refers to the dynamic and evolving linguistic repertoire of an individual. The term pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures refers to didactic approaches which involve the use of more than one or several varieties of languages or cultures simultaneously during the teaching process (see ECML's Framework of reference for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures).

A key aspect of plurilingualism is its integration with pluricultural competence, recognizing that language learning inherently involves cultural learning. This approach emphasizes that learners do not merely acquire linguistic skills but also develop the ability to navigate and mediate between different cultural contexts. Introduced in the mid-1990s and developed through bilingualism studies at the CREDIF research centre in Paris, these concepts have become central to modern language education. Plurilingual and pluricultural competences involve the ability to switch between languages, understand and express oneself across different cultural contexts, and utilize paralinguistics such as gestures and facial expressions. This holistic approach has been supported by psychological and neurological research, highlighting cognitive benefits like enhanced executive control.

The CEFR promotes these competences not just as educational goals but as socio-political aims to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity. Educational frameworks, such as the Guide for

the Development and Implementation of Curricula for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education, provide detailed guidance on integrating these competences into curricula, thereby fostering deeper intercultural understanding and communication skills (see CEFR, Companion Volume, pp. 30 – 31).

The Role of Culture in FL Teaching

Defining culture is often more challenging than simply using the term. One of the early contributors to British cultural studies Raymond Williams declared in 1976 that “*culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.*” The concept of culture is used daily in different forms and ways. Generally, it is believed that culture has the following five common attributes recognized by most researchers (Reisinger, Turner, 2003, p. 5):

1. culture is of human origin,
2. culture is holding human groups together,
3. culture is a way of life of a particular group of people,
4. culture serves as a design for living,
5. culture sets standards for the perception of the world around us.

In the academic study of interculturality, the term culture may have a distinct meaning from that in everyday use. Therefore, culture may be described as a *floating signifier* – its meaning related to the context in which it is used. For example, if we talk about the consequences of ‘a growing drug culture’ in a particular city, or ‘internet culture’, these carry different connotations to someone who expresses their appreciation of the ‘culture’ of a particular country. Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, pp. 22 – 23) state that the reasons for inability to grasp the concept of culture are *i. diachronic* (the concept of culture has been changing and evolving over time); *ii. synchronic* (the word “culture” expands to several disciplines, e.g. sociology, cultural studies, history, political sciences, psychology and many others) and *iii. methodological* (methodological approaches to the research of culture vary according to the selected discipline so it is essential to provide a thorough system of methodology necessary to examine the term in debate).

Culture also plays a role in FL teaching. Valdes (as cited in Baker, 2006) states that “*every language lesson is about something and that something is cultural.*” Thus, every FL lesson taught in class contains a cultural message. There are at least three fundamental reasons that stress the importance of incorporating cultural matters in FL teaching (ibid.):

1. Culture and language are inseparable.
2. Since language and culture are inseparable, teaching language inherently involves teaching culture.
3. The central goal of a FL instruction is the mastery of communicative competence, and to achieve this, a learner should be able to perceive native speakers of the target language as real people.

However, it is necessary to balance what, how much, and how to teach. It is also essential to bear in mind that learners of a FL need to be exposed to the cultural context, norms, and values of the target language in order to accept and adapt to its differences, and to maximize their communicative effectiveness. Mastery of the linguistic elements of a FL alone does not guarantee successful communication. According to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993): “*the goals of teaching culture helps students to develop their understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours, that social variables such as age, social class, and place of residence influence how people behave to become more aware of the conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture. All this can increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language, develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalisations about the target culture, develop the necessary skills to locate and organise*

information about the target culture, and can stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture."

As Coudhury (2014) states, FL teachers need to understand the extent to which cultural background can influence FL learning and teaching to grasp the importance of culture in teaching a FL. In their publication, *Promoting Intentional Teaching*, Kidd, Burns, and Nasser (2018) assert that *"cultural responsiveness is not a burden on teachers, but rather a way to enrich the experiences of everyone in the learning situation."*

Nevertheless, some teachers may fear teaching culture or ignore it completely. Strasheim (1981) conducted a study and found that FL teachers spent approximately 10% of teaching time on culture. However, this situation has changed over time. A study conducted 25 years later by Moore (2006) found that at least 80% of the FL teachers surveyed indicated they were teaching culture more than half of their instructional time. There are many reasons why FL teachers avoid teaching culture in FL classes. Some FL teachers are hesitant because they believe they do not know enough about the cultural themes. However, the most prominent issue FL teachers may face is an overcrowded curriculum (Omaggio, 2001).

As mentioned earlier, the most common questions FL teachers have are what to teach and how to teach it. Kramsch (2013) presented three specifics of culture in language education:

1. the general popularity of culture – the teacher creates such playful situations (for example, role-playing, simulations) that help students understand the meaning,
2. critical culture that supports critical view of the cultural content of language teaching,
3. ecological culture, which (in terms of content) responds to environmental problems and needs.

It is clear that teaching culture merely as information or facts does not meet the needs of the present world. This approach is ineffective for several reasons (Omaggio, 2001, pp. 361–362):

1. Facts are in constant flux, especially when they relate to current lifestyles.
2. Specific data may not hold across time, location, and social strata.
3. A facts-only approach to culture may strengthen stereotypes rather than diminish them.
4. Mastering facts does not necessarily help students when they face cultural situations not previously studied.

Damen (1987) comes with a precise characterisation of culture in the educational process. According to him, culture is learned; it is constantly changing and is a universal fact of human life. Pesola (1991) displays cultural elements for the elementary school FL classroom under the three headings: i. *cultural symbols* (identified with good and bad luck symbols, heroes from history or myth or flags), ii. *cultural products* (visual, musical arts and artists, currency, stamps or traditional and holiday foods); and iii. *cultural practices* (concerned with gestures, forms of greetings, eating practices, home or school life).

Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011) analysed the number of cultural themes in textbooks used for teaching English as a FL. A shift in topics appearing in older and newer textbooks may be observed. Pop culture and the cult of personality is replacing literature and art (the culture is replacing Culture), and contemporary topics are included in the cultural sections of textbooks, such as environmental issues, rights and laws, communication, and more. The textbooks are expected to emphasize pop culture, as many students are familiar with and interested in this area, which can boost their motivation to study the language and enhance their enjoyment of the lessons. According to Niederhauser (2012): *"bringing cultural content into the language classroom is one of the best ways of increasing motivation. In a society in which the conflict between globalisation and nationalism remains unsolved, many members of the younger generation greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn about life in other countries and exchange ideas with teachers who are sensitive to both cultures. Students like activities based on culture, including singing, dancing, role-playing, skits, doing research. The study of culture increases*

students' curiosity about the target countries, people, and language, at the same time equipping them with intercultural competencies."

However, some voices do not agree with incorporating culture into FL education, especially English taught as a FL. For example, Alptekin (2002) states, the concept of communication competencies based on mother tongue standards is idealised, utopian, does not reflect the status of the lingua franca of English and sets narrow frameworks for both teachers and students.

Solgi and Tafazoli (2018) similarly state that *"there should not be any teaching of the 'target language culture' together with English in the countries where English is an institutionalised variety."* One of the reasons they state is that English is a lingua franca, and the learners use or will use it for this purpose, so *"it should be taught in a culture-free context."* The authors further contemplate that many non-native speakers *"have no desire to acquire the culture of native speakers of English because, unlike immigrants to English-speaking countries, they will not be living and interacting in a native-English-speaking context."*

On the other hand, Klink (1980, p. 4) points out that *"research on second and FL learning suggests that students learn better in contact with the target language and culture. Classroom experiences alone cannot fulfil this need."* Salim (2017) claims that if culture is not included in teaching a FL, there will be a lack of understanding of the language itself. A similar opinion was presented by Deutscher (2010), who stated that *"culture is an integral part of FL teaching and learning. As long as there are speakers, there is culture, as culture resides in the users of the language."*

It is essential to state that opinions against incorporating culture into teaching and learning English are from scholars from former British colonies or countries whose relationships with the UK or the USA (or both are problematic). It is often argued that the global status of English was first established by the reach and status of the British Empire. That position was then consolidated by the emergence of English-speaking America as a key global power, just as Britain's own influence was waning. As the historian, Yuval Noah Harari (2011, p. 228) writes: *"...all human cultures are at least in part the legacy of empires and imperial civilisations, and no academic or political surgery can cut out the imperial legacies without killing the patient."* Given the inherent connection between language and culture, educating philologists entails specific considerations, which will be outlined in the subsequent chapters.

Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Higher Education Context

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary subject that integrates information from many fields of research, such as sociology, politics, economics, geography, history, the arts, literature, linguistics, philosophy, law, photography, gender studies, and many others. Byram (1989, p. 48) believes that the study and acquisition of culture includes information gathered consciously (by learning, practising) but also subconsciously (by experience and imitating). Byram further writes that mastering culture reaches *"from the commonest greetings through use of public services [...] non-verbal behaviour and the expectations of conversation turn-taking, rules of politeness and the maxims of normal communication"*, and is as significant for successful communication as the native speakers' conscious knowledge (historical, geographical, sociological, and many others) about their society along with linguistic knowledge. The aforementioned cultural contents are wrapped up under an umbrella term, "minimal content" (ibid.), which should be mastered by anybody who wishes to be knowledgeable about the culture of the target country and function in it smoothly.

In the 1990s, course content for philologists was heavily focused on the study of the "realities" of the target country. These courses covered Byram's "minimal content," including geography, primary institutions and systems (politics, law, education, religion), and significant achievements, events, and personalities in culture, literature, and art. With the advent of the Internet, cultural studies courses evolved, no longer serving as the sole source of information,

which influenced their structure and methodology. Scholars Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020) cite three specific examples from other sources on the topic:

1. Hall (1997, p. 6). defined post-2000 cultural studies as “a discursive formation, that is, ‘a cluster’ (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society.”
2. Bennett (1998, p. 28) defined cultural studies as “concerned with those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in population particular values, beliefs competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct”.
3. Barker (2000, p. 5) viewed the nature of modern cultural studies as “a discursive formation [...] constituted by a regulated way of speaking about objects (which brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns”.

The content and the methods of acquiring knowledge in cultural studies have also been subject to transformation. Mark Chenetier in his study “New” American Studies: Exceptionalism redux? (2008) presented a course of cultural studies model based on a comparative platform. It is based on comparing the learner's own culture with the target culture of a FL. Class, race, religion, and even sexual orientation distinctions permeate daily life. Advancements in technology afford individuals exposure to a diverse range of information and firsthand insights into countries and events that would have likely remained obscure prior to the 1990s.

Evolving societal dynamics and contemporary research call into question conventional cultural studies paradigms, previously centred on presenting "facts" about target countries. Javorčíková and Dove (2019, pp. 7–10) note that cultural studies, as an academic discipline, fundamentally differ from other academic fields. Firstly, the subject of research in cultural studies is interdisciplinary and tailored to the purpose of the study. Secondly, unlike other disciplines, cultural studies delve into both conscious and unconscious cultural knowledge of the target country and its inhabitants. Thirdly, the focus of research in cultural studies is dynamic, requiring constant updating to remain relevant in evolving societal contexts.

Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, pp. 219 – 229) outline a range of effective methods for teaching culture in higher education, applicable across philological and non-philological faculties. These methods are adaptable to various aims, objectives, and expected learning outcomes.

1. lectures (one of the most common methods of instruction in higher education in Slovak schools),
2. case studies (the aim is to learn from the situation and suggest the possible solution of the problem),
3. critical incidents (present a brief description of situations in which a misunderstanding, a problem, or conflict arises as a result of cultural differences),
4. simulations, role plays, drama (provide an opportunity for students to experience in the school setting a situation of cross-cultural encounters, a new cultural environment, a feeling and experience of culture shock, other situations in intercultural relations),
5. project method (it is necessary to think of a proper cultural content and focus, such as exploration of a cultural topic, organization of a cultural event, attendance of a culture/country specific event with assigned roles),
6. exploration methods (according to Zelenková (2014, p. 149), they contribute to the development of students' autonomy, encourage their self-study, motivation, curiosity and interest in the studies of culture),
7. comparing and contrasting (through comparisons of opposing characteristics students develop better understanding of their own culture, are able to look at their own culture from somebody else's perspective (Byram, 1997), which is one of the aims of cultural competence),
8. out-of-school activities (e.g. field trips),

9. use of audio-visuals: film and video.

The subsequent chapter will explore the nuances of the Slovak educational system concerning the cultivation of philologists, with a particular focus on how cultural studies are integrated and navigated within this framework.

Cultural Studies in Slovak Higher Education

In the Slovak context, cultural studies are referred to as *realia*, area studies, or country studies, with Javorčíková and Zelenková (2019) also mentioning the term *Lebenskunde*. University course titles in Slovakia often include these terms or more neutral ones such as "culture of," "life and culture," and similar variations.

In former Czechoslovakia during the pre-internet era (i.e. prior to the 1990s), "realia" at philological faculties were usually a part of history courses of the target country. These courses presented what was believed to be the "high culture" of the target country; an assumption based on the fact that the study of culture was initially part of the study of literature (Badinská, 2011; Kačmárová, 2012). As was already established, globalisation and the Internet era that started in the 1990s caused many academic courses to face new challenges. These challenges combined the changes in the scope of the courses with the change in teaching methods.

The new millennium marked a shift in cultural studies for both philological and non-philological studies in Slovakia. As Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, pp. 4 – 5) state, "*studying cultural studies in the era of migration, Americanization, and, above all, globalization requires mastering many more skills and competencies than were sufficient prior to the 1990s, a pre-turbulent era in many of the Eastern-Bloc countries in Europe.*" The post-2000 nature of cultural studies has been redefined by opinion-shapers, who generally agree on the instrumental and interpretative nature of the corpus of information and skills presented in cultural studies (Javorčíková, Zelenková, 2019).

Courses now offer a comprehensive approach to the cultures of target language countries while also incorporating a global perspective on cultural goals. However, Slovak FL teachers face significant challenges in this new landscape. The two primary obstacles are:

1. In Slovakia, no framework would set cultural studies' methodical and curricular requirements. Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, pp. 36 – 37) point out that CEFR does not say explicitly how intercultural competence should be taught or developed. According to the authors, teachers are often unskilled in the means and methods to accomplish it. Thus, teachers often struggle to determine which cultural aspects to teach and are unaware of the importance of cultural orientation.
2. No framework would suggest which literature is suitable either – that is why instructors often use high-quality FL literature. This literature, however, often does not correspond in structure and format of higher education textbooks, which are suitable for the Slovak higher education context – there are differences in the information presented, the availability of the materials and the cultural reliability. Therefore, there are many domestic publications created by long-term instructors who know the domestic cultural environment and students' initial language and cultural skills (based on, for example, CEFR).

Nowadays, when considering the position of culture in FL education, the *essential aspect* is stressed – the aspect is marked by the possibilities of travel and the unlimited approach to information (see for example Magalová et al., 2020; Štefková et al., 2023). This approach is based on the idea that culture cannot be omitted in FL education, as it is often the reason for the mistakes in communication even when the speaker is perfectly capable of the linguistic aspect of communication. The framework set by the CEFR identifies intercultural and pluricultural competence as essential communicative competencies, highlighting the need to integrate new approaches to cultural studies. Consequently, the selection and creation of study materials for

cultural studies courses, particularly for students in teaching programs, must be re-evaluated due to these considerations.

Unfortunately, the situation for in-service teachers teaching at primary and secondary schools is not good either. Ritlyová (2009) stated that: *“most textbooks used in Slovakia do not include any information about [target] country as there is no national textbook of English [or any other FL] available yet [this statement is still valid in June 2024]. Due to the lack of material regarding Slovakia in the textbooks, the teachers have to work very hard and prepare the topics on their own as at most schools. [...] Although at our schools are taught many humanity subjects where students can get information about the target country when they are to speak about history, geography, culture etc.; they have specific problems mainly with vocabulary and grammar structures, and they are not able to use the knowledge they have acquired.”*

The author further contemplates (ibid.) that this may be partly since Slovak FL teachers do not use the inter-disciplinary approach very much and suggests including cultural studies in the FL instruction. It is not clear whether this is the real reason or whether teachers are fully aware of the importance of learning a FL through culture. However, there are some obvious reasons why Slovak teachers choose to omit teaching culture in their FL classes – the lack of time, limitations in curriculum, not clear guidelines on how intercultural competence should be taught, lack of teaching materials, and excessive attention towards grammatical and linguistic structures. Although it is understandable why they do so, above stated facts underline the importance of the need to include cultural studies, not to exclude as it is usually the case, cultural studies into FL taught at secondary schools (at least).

The Slovak National Curriculum, as outlined by The National Institute for Education, states that secondary school students should be familiar with the culture of various English-speaking countries by graduation. Consequently, English language teachers are expected to prepare students for this cultural understanding. However, considering the current university syllabuses in Slovakia, it is evident that teachers are not adequately equipped during their studies to meet this requirement and must develop these competencies later in their teaching careers. The presented case study focuses on the importance of preparing future teachers during their university studies, as this stage significantly shapes their pedagogical skills and understanding.

Case study

Given these gaps in teacher preparation and the growing emphasis on intercultural competence, a case study was conducted to explore these issues in greater detail. The study explored Slovak university students' perceptions of Canada using a questionnaire adapted from Yankova and Andreev's (2018) research on non-Canadian students' views. The questionnaire was tested with 12 students to ensure it was appropriate for the Slovak context and then distributed to students from the Teacher Education Programme at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University Bratislava. Participants were asked to provide personal information and respond to 20 questions assessing their knowledge and perceptions of Canada, covering geographical, political, and social aspects, as well as their attitudes toward Canada and its people. Due to the focus of the present article and the limitations of space in this journal, detailed findings and conclusions on the factual knowledge questions are not discussed here; these aspects are covered in a separate article (Kováč, 2023).

The research unit consisted of 108 undergraduate students, all of Slovak or Hungarian origin, collected over two academic years (2019/2020 and 2020/2021). The majority had no direct experience with Canadian studies or culture, although some had visited Canada or knew someone who currently lives there. The data collection was conducted using both paper-based and online (due to the pandemic) questionnaires. The study aimed to analyse students' background knowledge, experiences, and attitudes toward Canada to understand their perspectives better. The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. H1: Future Slovak teachers of English will have sufficient knowledge about Canada from their previous studies.
2. H2: Future Slovak teachers of English will present a favourable and somewhat idealized perception of Canada.
3. H3: Future Slovak teachers of English's answers will reflect a positive attitude towards Canadian realia.

Respondents exhibited a notable interest in Canadian culture, highlighting a gap in their current understanding. They expressed a strong desire to learn more about various aspects of Canadian life, including practical information on tourism, history, and daily experiences, indicating areas ripe for curriculum enhancement. While specific factual knowledge about Canada was limited (see Kováč, 2023), respondents demonstrated positive attitudes toward the country. They were particularly drawn to Canada's natural landscapes and national parks, with 46% showing a desire to visit. Their views of Canada were generally favourable, perceiving it as democratic, tolerant, and peace-loving. The primary sources of their knowledge about Canada were mass media and the Internet, including TV shows, films, and music. This reliance on media suggested that their perceptions might have been shaped by popular culture rather than in-depth cultural studies. There was also interest in exploring how media portrayals and stereotypes influenced their understanding of Canadian culture, highlighting a potential area for further research.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that students would have sufficient knowledge about Canada from their previous studies. However, the findings revealed that respondents generally lacked adequate knowledge, struggling even with basic questions about Canada's geography, politics, and culture. As a result, Hypothesis 1 was rejected.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that students would hold favourable and somewhat idealized perceptions of Canada. Analysis showed that many respondents' views were influenced by media and internet portrayals, describing Canada as a wealthy country with a high standard of living, low crime rates, and a welcoming attitude toward immigrants. This idealized perception aligns with the hypothesis, so Hypothesis 2 was accepted.

Hypothesis 3 posited that students would exhibit a positive attitude towards Canadian culture and society. The study confirmed this, showing a positive relationship between respondents and Canadian realia; many expressed admiration for various aspects of the country, and 46% indicated a desire to visit. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was accepted.

These findings led to the incorporation of project-based learning into the course "Life and Culture of English-Speaking Countries (Excluding GB and USA)" at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University Bratislava. Students were given the freedom to select a cultural event of personal interest (areas identified as problematic in the questionnaire), as detailed in Javorčíková and Zelenková (2020, pp. 219 – 229). They employed various exploration methods outlined by Zelenková (2014, p. 149) to produce a final brochure using digital tools, thereby enhancing their technical skills alongside their cultural knowledge.

End-of-term assignments from two consecutive academic years (2019/2020 and 2020/2021) were compared with outcomes from the two preceding academic years. The texts produced by students were notably less superficial and often presented diverse perspectives, which were also reflected in seminar discussions. While some students continued to express stereotypical opinions shaped by media, there was a noticeable improvement in their level of factual knowledge. This was evident from the results of end-of-seminar quizzes (non-graded) and the final test, indicating a deeper understanding of the topics covered.

This approach enhanced students' understanding of the target culture and garnered positive feedback regarding the inclusion of projects. Students appreciated that they had ready-to-use materials that could be directly applied in their future teaching practice, effectively addressing the issue of the lack of available resources. By creating these materials themselves, they not only

deepened their cultural knowledge but also built a valuable collection of teaching aids tailored to their future classroom needs. For a detailed discussion on this development, see Kováč (2021).

Conclusion

Incorporating culture into FL instruction is crucial for achieving true communicative competence. Language and culture are inseparable, and understanding cultural contexts enhances learners' ability to communicate effectively. Despite challenges such as curriculum constraints and limited cultural knowledge, teachers can employ various strategies, including simulations, role-playing, and project-based learning, to integrate cultural content.

Plurilingual and intercultural education, developed by the Council of Europe, emphasizes embracing cultural and linguistic diversity in today's dynamic societies. It integrates all school languages and subjects, fostering respect for diverse cultures while enhancing linguistic and intercultural abilities. By accommodating students' initial repertoires and promoting language interaction, it enriches their cultural understanding and communication skills. Plurilingual education also prioritizes learner autonomy and creative language exploration, preparing them for active participation in multicultural societies (Peroutková, 2024, p. 149). Curriculum development focuses on balancing cultural dimensions throughout students' educational journey, ensuring a coherent and culturally enriching learning experience (Beaco et al., 2016, pp. 15 – 17). Emphasizing cultural studies in higher education, particularly in Slovakia, can better prepare future teachers and enrich the overall language learning experience. As the presented case study demonstrates, the shift to project-based learning in the cultural studies curriculum for future English teachers led to a deeper understanding of Canadian realia, fostered critical reflection on cultural stereotypes, and equipped students with practical materials for use in their future classrooms. Addressing these needs will foster greater intercultural competence and ensure more meaningful and effective language education.

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