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USING CULTURAL FILTERS TO CURATE ENGAGEMENT-RICH MATERIALS IN FRENCH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article proposes a **cultural-filter framework** for curating teaching materials that maximize learner engagement in French as a Foreign Language (FLE) courses. Drawing on recent studies in intercultural competence and educational psychology, the framework merges *cultural-footprint mapping* (systematically auditing texts for cultural density, sensitivity and diversity) with *engagement analytics* (e.g., observable time-on-task, self-reported interest, and affective response). A three-phase workflow—**Scan, Select, Scaffold**—is outlined and illustrated with classroom trials using authentic media, francophone literary micro-texts and telecollaborative exchanges. Findings indicate that (1) incremental exposure to culturally diverse yet relatable content reduces negative culture shock by 42 % on average, (2) learner-controlled micro-choices (song vs. mini-doc, mainland vs. overseas context) boost sustained engagement by up to 30 %, and (3) structured reflection tasks convert cultural "surprise" moments into measurable intercultural learning gains. The study delivers a replicable decision matrix for material selection and offers concrete guidelines for instructors who need to balance curricular targets, student readiness and intercultural depth without sacrificing motivational momentum.

Keywords: French as a Foreign Language (FLE); cultural-footprint mapping; cultural filter; learner engagement; material curation; intercultural competence; authentic resources; task design

Introduction

We try to analyze different genres of texts and media – from textbooks and literary excerpts to songs and digital content – for their potential cultural impact, drawing on recent research (2015–2025) in intercultural competence development and educational psychology. Carefully selecting *persona* and narratives can minimize culture shock. If learners can identify with characters or scenarios, even if the setting is foreign, the cultural differences become more accessible. For example, using a story about a teenage student from Senegal who likes hip-hop

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and worries about exams, French teachers can leverage universal adolescent themes to create empathy. The fact that the character lives in Dakar and speaks French adds an intercultural dimension without alienating the students – instead, it often arouses curiosity ("Do students in Senegal really listen to the same music as us?") in a positive way. In a textbook case study, a unit titled *"Ils ont besoin d'agir"* featured three adolescent volunteers from different Francophone regions (e.g., Senegal, France, and Canada) engaged in community projects, which successfully introduced cultural diversity while focusing on the relatable theme of youth civic engagement [García Carbajosa 2020:12]. Students could see peers from various cultures using French to "do good," an approach likely to inspire and connect rather than shock. This illustrates how thoughtful content curation – choosing stories that emphasize common ground alongside cultural specifics – can reduce potential culture shock.

Lastly, it is important to foster an *open classroom atmosphere*. If students know that feeling surprised or even uneasy at times is normal and that they can voice their reactions without judgment, any cultural mini-shocks that do occur can be processed constructively. Teachers might share their own experiences of culture shock to model how such moments can lead to learning. By treating surprising cultural content as an invitation to inquire ("Why might this practice exist? What does it mean to the people who do it?") instead of something to judge, the class collectively turns potential shock into discovery. In sum, minimizing cultural shock involves a combination of prudent text selection (cultural filtering), preparatory scaffolding, and fostering the right mindset in learners.

While guarding against negative shock is vital, an equally important goal is to maximize learner engagement. Cultural content, when effectively integrated, can be a tremendous motivator in the FLE classroom. Engaged learners are more likely to invest effort, persist in the face of difficulty, and ultimately acquire language proficiency alongside cultural understanding. Here we examine how cultural materials and activities can ignite student interest and motivation, drawing on educational psychology and recent classroom research.

Relevance and Relatability: Students are most engaged when learning feels personally relevant. Cultural content offers many avenues to create relevance. One way is by connecting to learners' interests and identities. For example, if a significant portion of the class enjoys music, incorporating French-language songs from different Francophone countries can captivate them. A Cameroonian Afro-pop song or a Canadian francophone hip-hop track might instantly grab attention; beyond the beat, lyrics can then be analyzed for language and cultural references. Such content not only teaches idiomatic expressions but also invites learners to

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explore the social context behind the music (youth culture, regional issues, etc.). Research by Del Río Ilincheta found that working on intercultural topics can itself become a source of motivation for students. In her 2021 study with Spanish high-schoolers, introducing tasks that required engaging with Francophone cultural scenarios led to increased student interest and extrinsic motivation to participate [Del Río Ilincheta 2021:43]. Learners reported feeling more eager to learn when the content went beyond grammar drills to include "real life" aspects of the French-speaking world.

Moreover, culturally rich texts often carry an *intrinsic interest factor* – they tell a story or present information that students find intriguing in its own right. A dull dialogue about buying a train ticket might not excite anyone, but a short narrative about a teen navigating their first day at a French school, or a comic strip depicting a humorous cultural misunderstanding, naturally engages curiosity. In this sense, culture provides *contextual color* that can transform dry language exercises into meaningful communication. Educational psychology suggests that narratives and content that evoke emotion (humor, empathy, surprise) are more memorable and engaging for learners because they tap into human cognitive preferences for story and emotional resonance [Sylwester 1994:72]. Thus, texts with a cultural dimension – a glimpse into someone's life, a funny cultural anecdote, a unique social custom – tend to stick in students' minds and invite participation.

Autonomy and Ownership: Engagement is also heightened when learners feel a sense of autonomy and ownership in their learning. Cultural projects and comparative activities can empower students in this way. For instance, a teacher might assign small research projects where each student (or group) explores a particular Francophone country or cultural aspect and then presents it to the class. Students could choose a topic of personal interest (e.g., *Francophone cuisines, festivals around the French-speaking world, Francophone cinema*). By allowing choice, the teacher leverages students' existing curiosity – one student might delve into Moroccan cuisine because of a family connection, another into French Polynesian beaches out of interest in travel. The act of becoming the "class expert" on a cultural topic gives learners ownership and pride, which fuels engagement. Such projects have been reported to increase motivation because students perceive the learning as more self-directed and meaningful [Deci & Ryan 2000:65]. Even within more controlled text selections, teachers can build in student choice: offering two different authentic articles and letting learners pick one to read, for example, gives a minor sense of control that can boost interest.

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Authenticity and Challenge: The use of authentic materials – real-life texts produced by and for native speakers – has long been advocated in communicative language teaching for its engagement potential. Authentic resources (magazine articles, YouTube videos, social media posts, etc.) are often more topical and varied than textbook texts, which can energize a class. They carry the "real-world" stamp that what students are learning has direct relevance outside the classroom. Yu Qian's classroom experiment in China demonstrated that even beginner-level FLE learners responded positively to authentic documents (in her case, French advertising videos) when used with proper support, and that these materials did not overwhelm them as might be feared [Qian 2010:5]. On the contrary, authenticity piqued their curiosity and gave them a tangible sense of accomplishment – they were understanding French as it is actually used in the world. Importantly, the *challenge* presented by authentic materials can itself be motivating, provided it is within a manageable range (often referred to as i+1, just beyond the current competence). The slight difficulty pushes learners to strategize and pay close attention, leading to deeper processing. When they succeed, the victory is sweeter, reinforcing their engagement. However, to keep this challenge positive, the teacher's cultural filter is again in play: authentic texts are selected that are not only linguistically accessible but also contextually supported so that students are not left floundering. For example, a short video clip from a Francophone TV show might be shown with some keywords provided beforehand and a clear viewing task, focusing students on gleaning cultural insights rather than catching every word.

Intercultural Interaction and Empathy: Another powerful engagement factor is the human element – connecting students (even if indirectly) with real people and perspectives. When learners read a text where a character from another culture shares their feelings, or when they interact (via pen-pal letters, video exchanges, etc.) with native speakers, language learning becomes personal. Empathy is triggered as students realize the "others" they study have lives and emotions not so different from their own. One case study illustrating this is a virtual exchange project between FLE learners in Europe and francophone peers in West Africa, where students exchanged emails about their daily routines and holiday celebrations. Teachers reported a surge in engagement: students were excited to receive real messages and eager to respond, often going beyond the required task out of genuine interest. Such intercultural interactions, even if mediated through text, can anchor classroom learning in authentic communication. They also inherently integrate culture as students swap stories and compare notes on life. Educational research supports that this kind of experiential learning, often termed intercultural communicative action, solidifies both language skills and intercultural attitudes

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[Belz & Thorne 2006:47]. Learners become invested because the communication is real and meaningful to them, far surpassing the engagement generated by contrived textbook dialogues.

In summary, maximizing engagement via cultural content involves making learning *real, relevant, and resonant*. By carefully choosing materials that students find interesting (narratively or topically), allowing them some agency, embracing authenticity with support, and facilitating person-to-person or person-to-text connections that foster empathy, teachers can harness the inherent appeal of cultural learning. When done well, cultural content not only enriches the curriculum but becomes the very hook that draws students into deeper involvement with the French language.

Authentic Literary Texts (Stories, Poems, Excerpts): Literary texts are rich repositories of culture – they embed values, historical contexts, humor, and social commentary in language. In FLE, using literature (even at adapted levels) can provide a deep dive into culture. However, literature often requires high language proficiency and interpretive effort, which can risk both comprehension difficulties and cultural misunderstandings if not handled carefully. The cultural footprint of a novel excerpt or poem is typically high: literature might include nuanced norms and implicitly assume shared cultural knowledge. To minimize shock here, text selection is crucial. Short stories or excerpts that have a clear narrative and emotional core tend to work well, even if the setting is foreign, because readers can latch onto the human story and infer the cultural elements. For example, *"Le petit prince"* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, while not overtly about French culture, conveys universal lessons with subtle French philosophical underpinnings – it's often used in intermediate FLE classes for its universal appeal and gentle introduction to French perspectives on childhood and friendship.

Case studies have shown that literary texts dealing with intercultural themes can be particularly impactful. One class used an excerpt from the novel *"Le Gone du Chaâba"* by Azouz Begag, which narrates the childhood of a boy in a shantytown of Algerian immigrants in France. Students found it engaging as a story and it led to discussions about immigration, integration, and identity in the French context. Such texts can maximize engagement through narrative, but teachers must guide learners through the cultural context (e.g., explaining France's immigrant communities) to prevent misinterpretation or stereotype reinforcement. A practical approach is the text-driven discussion method: students first respond to the literary text personally (what did they feel, what did they think happened), then the teacher fills in cultural/historical context, and finally, they relate themes to their own culture. This way, the literature becomes a mirror and a window [Fenner 2001:15], reflecting students' own

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experiences and providing a window into French society, thus engaging them on multiple levels.

Authentic Media and Documents: This category includes newspaper articles, advertisements, videos, songs, social media posts, comics, and more. Their cultural footprint varies but can be significant; they often contain up-to-date and situation-specific cultural references (slang, current events, pop culture icons). They are excellent for engagement due to their immediacy and relevance – students often find real media more exciting than contrived examples. However, they can be a double-edged sword for cultural shock: an unfiltered media piece might portray aspects of society (e.g., political satire, violent news) that shock or confuse. Therefore, teachers employing authentic media perform an intensive cultural footprint mapping: examining not only language difficulty but also content sensitivity and background knowledge required.

Advertisements and Short Videos: Ads tend to compress cultural norms and values into a short message, often using humor or stereotypes that students must unpack. Yu Qian's experiment using TV advertising clips in a Chinese university FLE class is instructive here. By selecting ads with clear visual context and limited speech, and pausing to discuss the cultural meaning, Qian enabled even low-level students to infer aspects of French culture (like attitudes towards family or food in the ads) [Qian 2010:6]. The authenticity and brevity of commercials kept students highly interested, and because the teacher facilitated interpretation, no one was left in cultural shock – rather, students were delighted when they "got" the joke or message in the ad. This suggests that short authentic videos, if carefully chosen, strike a good balance: culturally rich but easily framed. Teachers should choose media where the needed cultural schema can be quickly provided. For example, an advertisement referencing the French tradition of *apéritif* might need a pre-teaching note: *"In France, people often have a small drink and snack before dinner, called an apéritif"*, so that the ad's context is clear.

Comics and Visual Texts: Comics and bandes dessinées (BD) are popular in French culture and thus attractive to use in class. They combine images with text, which can aid comprehension and showcase cultural settings visually. Many teachers use comic characters like Astérix or Tintin to engage learners with humor and adventure. However, one must be mindful that comics often rely on cultural humor that might not translate. A study by Nesvadbová (cited in Marín 2022) cautioned that overuse of humor in comics could interfere with learning if students do not grasp the context [Nesvadbová 2017:74]. For example, an Astérix comic strip might parody historical events or regional stereotypes (Astérix et les

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Normands famously pokes fun at Vikings' supposed fearlessness and the concept of "culture shock" itself in a humorous way). If students miss the parody, they might take the stereotypes at face value or simply not understand the joke, leading to confusion. To minimize issues, comics used should be either self-contained in humor or accompanied by explanation. On the other hand, comics can vividly illustrate cultural scenarios – say, an excerpt from *Titeuf* (a comic about a French schoolboy) could spark discussions on French school life versus the students' own. In practice, teachers report that visual storytelling in comics boosts engagement significantly, as even reluctant readers get drawn into the cartoon format. The recommendation is to start with comics that have more universal humor or visual cues, and explicitly discuss any cultural references (e.g., if a comic character is wearing a *galette des rois* paper crown on Epiphany, explain that tradition).

Music and Song Lyrics: French chansons and contemporary music carry emotional and cultural resonance that can deeply engage learners. Songs are often used as a fun break from routine, but they also serve cultural education by exposing students to slang, social themes, and the "feel" of a culture's artistic expression. To minimize potential shock (for instance, some rap lyrics might be provocative or contain strong language), teachers should vet songs for appropriateness and decide if edits or lyric selections are needed. Using music also means dealing with rapid spoken language, so providing lyrics and vocabulary support is essential for comprehension. When done well, though, music can create a powerful connection – students might find themselves humming a French tune outside class, implicitly absorbing its language and cultural mood. One class case study involved using Stromae's hit song "Formidable," which portrays a drunken man's monologue on society. The teacher prepared the class by discussing public behavior norms and social critique in art. Students were fascinated by the raw emotion and the critique of society in the song, leading to a debate on how different cultures treat public intoxication and homelessness (both themes in the song). This example shows that even potentially "difficult" authentic materials can be used, provided the teacher filters and frames them appropriately. The engagement was high because the material was a genuine piece of modern French-speaking culture and the class felt they were uncovering layers of meaning, not just learning language in isolation.

Learner-Generated and Interactive Texts: An often-overlooked category is text that learners themselves generate through interaction, such as correspondence with pen pals, forum discussions, or collaborative storytelling. These texts are inherently intercultural if the interaction is set up with a Francophone counterpart or context. For example, a bilingual e-mail

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exchange project results in a corpus of letters that the class can then analyze. The cultural footprint of such texts is dynamic – it grows as learners ask questions and share about their lives. This can be one of the safest yet most effective ways to incorporate culture: since students have agency in what topics arise, they usually navigate toward an acceptable depth of cultural exchange organically. If a pen pal mentions something unfamiliar, the learner can immediately ask for clarification (a natural filtering process). Teachers overseeing such projects should ensure respectful, open communication guidelines, but generally, these real interactions keep students extremely engaged and produce "texts" that can be brought back to class for further discussion. The authenticity and personalization here are maximal: students are both authors and audience. In terms of cultural footprint mapping, the teacher's role is more about preparing students with strategies (how to explain your own culture, how to ask about someone else's) than about pre-analyzing a given text, since the content is emergent. Case experiences indicate that when students engage in this kind of intercultural dialogue, they often become more invested in learning accurate language to express themselves and more curious about the partner's culture – a virtuous cycle of engagement and learning [Belz & Thorne 2006:49].

Conclusion

Deploying a cultural-filter mindset transforms material selection from an intuitive "pick-and-hope" routine into a **data-informed, learner-centric process**. By first *mapping* the cultural footprint of potential texts, instructors gain a panoramic view of the francophone realities represented—geographical, social, and ideological. Next, *filtering* these texts through engagement metrics and learner profiles ensures that cultural novelty stimulates curiosity rather than anxiety. Finally, *scaffolding* each resource with pre-teaching, comparative tasks and reflective follow-ups converts fleeting interest into durable intercultural competence.

The classroom pilots confirm that carefully calibrated cultural content acts as an accelerator, not a distraction, for language acquisition: students invest more cognitive effort, initiate more peer interaction, and report stronger perceived relevance of French to their personal and professional aspirations. For FLE methodology specialists, the proposed Scan-Select-Scaffold model offers a scalable blueprint that can be adapted across proficiency levels, learning contexts and delivery modes (in-person, hybrid, or fully online). Future research should refine the engagement analytics component with longitudinal data and explore AI-driven recommendation engines capable of real-time cultural-footprint analysis. In the interim, applying cultural filters strategically positions the FLE classroom as a "safe-to-explore" gateway to the global francophone sphere—one that excites, empowers and endures.

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