



Cultural Representations in French as a Foreign Language Textbooks[†]

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Abstract: The teaching of French as a foreign language (FLE) and intercultural studies represents a fertile field of research for educational theorists and researchers. As a result, teachers have access to a wide range of teaching resources (both online and in print, such as textbooks). This paper examines how cultural representations are depicted in FLE textbooks published in France. Textbooks serve as the backbone of a lesson, and they are widely used by teachers. In this article, we will focus on the *Alter Ego+* and *Mon Alter ego* textbooks for levels A1–A2, published by Éditions Hachette and used not only in France but also in many other countries. We will conduct a qualitative study of cultural representations specific to France, as well as of lessons dedicated to literature in FLE textbooks.

Keywords: textbooks, French as a foreign language (FLE), intercultural, culture, teachers, literature

1. Introduction

In France, the market for French as a foreign language textbooks is thriving, driven by a strong demand from learners and teachers worldwide. These new methods are successful because they meet two key criteria: they are in line with the requirements of the CEFR and, from an aesthetic perspective, they are appealing to readers, with images playing a significant role in every lesson. For this article, we have selected four methods published by Editions Hachette.

These are the *Alter Ego +* series, which have become a global bestseller, as well as its the follow-up collection: *Mon Alter ego*. The way the teaching programme is structured, together with the quality of each lesson, greatly facilitates the teacher's work in the classroom and

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supports the learning process for students wishing to study independently. A key strength of these four methods is the inclusion of cultural elements in every lesson. Indeed, when teaching a foreign language, language and culture cannot be separated.

2. Some reflections on the concepts of culture and interculturalism

Referring to the broad scope of the concept of culture, Porcher emphasises that, despite the multitude of definitions, the most practical one - the one that can be applied to a variety of contexts is that provided by Pierre Bourdieu :

“Culture is the ability to make distinctions” (...) he explained that culture constitutes the “generative grammar of our behaviour”, that is to say, the specific organisation (both individual and social) that governs, within us and without our awareness, our cultural choices in whatever field, because, as we shall see, there are many rooms in the ‘culture’ house” (L. Porcher, 2004 : pp. 49–50).

The author points out that a foreign culture can only be acquired through external interactions, as it has not been learnt within the family (“that is to say, through osmosis”). It is through the teaching of a foreign culture that we must take responsibility for instilling in learners the behaviours characteristic of native speakers, albeit in a different way (ibid.). A few years later, Porcher revisits the concept of culture in a collective work :

“According to Edgar Morin’s definition, a culture “constitutes a complex body of norms, symbols, myths and images that permeate the individual’s innermost being, shape instincts and guide émotions.” In this sense, mass culture is also a genuine culture that ‘is superimposed upon national culture, humanist culture and religious culture, and competes with [them]’ (E. Morin, *L’Esprit du temps*). This competition establishes a mutual system of exclusions and rivalries. Proponents of the established culture (the culturally privileged minority) tend to view the emergence of this mass culture as an attack on high culture, a means of eroding it, or even of corrupting it. This opposition is not new and is always accompanied, explains L. Porcher, by a sense of dispossession” (F. Barthélemy, D. Groux, L. Porcher, 2011: p. 57).

Cultural diversity is a source of enrichment that enables individuals to grow and open themselves to the world. It manifests itself through the languages, customs, arts and traditions of different ethnic groups. Claude Clanet defines interculturality as “the totality of psychological and intrapsychological, relational, group and institutional processes generated by these interactions as well as the reciprocal changes and transformations that result from them” (cited in Verbunt, 2011: p.132).

Louis Porcher considers that “it is the prefix ‘inter’ that gives the word its weight. Some quick-witted people now claim that we should no longer speak of openness to interculturalism, that this phase is over, but that we should instead speak of openness to the international” (Porcher, 2004: p. 117). The author strongly opposes this line of reasoning by demonstrating that these are two fundamentally different concepts. In the case of interculturalism, the emphasis is on exchange and the equal dignity of partners, whereas ‘international’ refers to the impersonal, to political and cultural domination, and to a persistent illustration of superiority

and inferiority. The author's reluctance is all the stronger because, in his view, the term 'international' effectively condemns the world to an unequal balance of power, characterised by dominance and subordination, whereas 'intercultural' advocates for equality. He further refines his argument by pointing out that when "one learns a foreign language, it is the intercultural aspect that is at stake, and by no means the international." Admittedly, the aim is communication, and thus a technical competence, but one that cannot be purely linguistic and formal; otherwise, Esperanto would suffice" (Porcher, *op.cit.*, 2004, pp. 117–118). For the author, learning a foreign language means affirming not only one's own identity but also that of the other "by moving towards the conditions for cooperation and equipping oneself with the means to avoid conflict" (*Ibid.*).

Cultures can come into contact through the individuals who represent them. As soon as two or more cultures interact, intercultural interaction takes shape, as an emotional dimension emerges within the relationship. When living in another country, knowledge of the language goes hand in hand with becoming familiar with the culture. It is essential to understand the history, culture, customs and even the cuisine of the host country. Similarly, one must master the appropriate professional conduct, time management, body language and social norm. In France, for example, silence may create unease and cause discomfort for one's interlocutor, whereas in Asia, silence allows for reflection and is considered necessary when making important decisions. Similarly, the French custom of kissing on both cheeks may be perceived as offensive in some cultures. French as a foreign language courses aim not only to teach basic grammatical rules but also to familiarise learners with the socio-cultural norms that enable them to navigate interactions with native speakers. It is in this context that new language teaching methods facilitate the teacher's work by supporting lesson preparation and providing practical classroom strategies. Furthermore, the use of literary texts in language classes enables learners to draw parallels with the literature of their home countries. It is important to note that the reintroduction of literary texts as a learning resource can be attributed to the communicative approach (1970). In a world increasingly dominated by 'political correctness', Martine Abdallah-Preteceille considers literature to be a "space of freedom and openness (...), a vehicle for a humanistic approach to communication" (Martine Abdallah-Preteceille, 2010: p. 146).

3. Definition of a textbook

Jean-Pierre CUQ defines the term 'textbook' as an educational work typically used as a teaching aid. When teaching modern languages, it may or may not be accompanied by audio, audiovisual or digital resources for individual or group use. The term 'method' is used when the student's book is accompanied by a teacher's guide, a workbook, audio or video cassettes, or other types of materials (Jean-Pierre CUQ, 2003: p. 161).

The 9th edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defines a textbook as follows: "An educational work summarising the fundamentals of an art, a discipline or a practice. A school textbook. A textbook on literature, history, mathematics (...)" (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, online).

4. Selection of the corpus

In selecting this corpus, we drew on our extensive experience as a teacher of French as a foreign language (FLE), complemented by our accreditation from France Education International to mark and assess the DELF and DALF examinations. This dual expertise demonstrates not only a thorough understanding of the CEFR but also a solid grasp of the practical realities of the field. Over the years, we have worked with learners from all continents and have encountered numerous challenges related to intercultural communication. In this context, we have had to demonstrate considerable creativity and flexibility in guiding participants towards the successful completion of the training programme.

5. Overview of the corpus

Our corpus comprises two *Alter ego* + textbooks (levels A1 and A2) and two *Mon Alter ego* textbooks (levels A1 and A2), all four published by Editions Hachette. These books were developed by teachers at the Alliance Française in Paris and are widely regarded as a benchmark in the field of teaching French as a foreign language.

5.1 Alter Ego +, Level A1

The first Alter Ego textbook was published in 2006. The Alter Ego + A1 textbook was published in 2012 and its authors are: Catherine Hugot, Véronique M. Kizirian, Monique Waendendries (all teacher trainers at the Alliance Française de Paris-Île-de-France), as well as Annie Berthet and Emmanuelle Daill. Alter ego + includes a foreword in which the team of authors introduces the method, the structure of the textbook, how to teach and assess using Alter ego +, as well as the new features of this method. It is a five-level FLE textbook designed for adult learners or older teenagers. Alter ego +1 is intended for beginners and aims to help learners acquire the skills described in levels A1 and A2.1 of the CEFR :

“ [...] The main aim of the topics covered is to spark a genuine interest in French society and the French-speaking world, and to enable learners to develop the practical and interpersonal skills essential for successful communication. (...) The tasks proposed are designed to reflect authentic situations in various contexts (personal, public, professional, educational), in order to encourage learners’ motivation and engagement in the learning process” (p. 3).

5.2 Alter ego +, Level A2

Like the Alter ego + textbook for Level A1, the textbook for Level A2 was published in 2012 and has also become a bestseller among French as a foreign language (FLE) coursebooks sold in many countries. The team of authors is almost the same as for Level A1: Catherine Hugot, Véronique M. Kizirian, Monique Waendendries, Annie Berthet, Emmanuelle Daill and Béatrix Sampsonis. This course is designed for learners at the equivalent of level A2.1 and aims to help them acquire all the skills described by the CEFR for levels A2.2 and B1.1. Through a programme of 120 hours of teaching and learning activities, supplemented by assessment exercises, learners are prepared to take the DELF A2 examination.

The textbook features a ‘Culture Corner’ section (*Point culture*) that encourages learners to explore cultural aspects, and a ‘Travel Journal’ (*Carnet de voyage*) that concludes each unit. It is an interactive journey dedicated to cultural discovery.

5.3 Mon Alter Ego 1 and 2

Both textbooks were published in 2023 and were produced by the same team of authors: Celine Himber, Catherine Hugot and Monique Waendendries. Véronique Mazarguil-Kizirian compiled the pronunciation section, Anne-Marie Diogo created the DELF exercises, and Jacqueline Maunier contributed to the research for the ‘Fenêtres sur...’ pages

One notable innovation of these books is that they begin with an introduction and profiles of the three authors. This reflects a clear intention to highlight the authors’ work and to create a sense of connection with the reader.

What sets this collection apart is its detailed lesson planning and the development of an action-oriented approach through the introduction of projects. “Language learning has never been more closely linked to people’s real-life needs ” (p. 3). The authors sought to address the challenges of contemporary learning: the demand for efficiency, the need for rapid results, and the diversity of teaching methods to which teachers must adapt. It is against this backdrop that they adopted a novel approach: they first mapped out the learners’ needs before identifying tasks they are likely to be able to carry out. Each lesson is structured with “a starting point and an end point”. At the same time, the needs of teachers and institutions are taken into account, drawing on the authors’ professional experience in the field.

Learners have two types of needs: those related to life and those related to the learning process. "Each lesson addresses a real-life need and presents a clearly defined, highly contextualised scenario that engages the learner. Learning needs are met through sections designed to help the learner memorise and reinforce their strategies. The pedagogical support provided enables learners to “make sense” of their approach, thereby fostering both engagement and autonomy.

Teachers have access to resources designed to facilitate lesson preparation and delivery. The teaching tutorials represent the major new feature of this collection: they are designed to ‘answer the questions teachers have about teaching methods and to make it easier to implement certain types of activities’. *Mon alter ego* also takes into account teachers’ need or desire to personalise and enrich their lessons: “the *Classe* + activities and resources help them adapt their lessons to their students” (*Ibid.*).

6. Cultural elements in language textbooks

On analysing the four textbooks, we note that learners are provided with rich, high-quality cultural content. We have identified literary sections that enable learners to familiarise themselves with French and/or Francophone literature and to discover a range of French and Francophone authors. In addition, numerous cultural elements feature throughout the lessons: art (painting, museums, cinema, music, theatre, etc.), the French education system, cuisine, sport, shopping and consumer habits in France, tourist destinations in France, types of accommodation, festivals and rituals, churches and other places of worship, values and attitudes

(tolerance, exchange, sharing), family and couple life, friendships, the wider French-speaking world. Furthermore, cultural mediation is a key feature of every lesson, manifested through comparisons between France and the learners' home countries. The French and foreign first names of the characters demonstrate the ethnic and cultural diversity present in France.

6.1 Alter ego+, A1

The *Alter ego* + textbook features numerous references to figures from the world of cinema: Guillaume Canet and Marion Cotillard (pp. 106–107), Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve, Marcello Mastroianni, Nathalie Baye (p. 108), and Catherine Deneuve and Gérard Depardieu in François Truffaut's *The Last Metro* (*Le Dernier Métro*) (p. 111). Similarly, music plays a significant role in this book. Learners are introduced to numerous performers: the band Oai Star and the song 'Chérie' (pp. 92–93), Céline Dion (magazine photo) (p. 106), David and Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, Laura Smet, Thomas Dutronc, Jacques Dutronc, Françoise Hardy, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Serge Gainsbourg, Jane Birkin (pp. 108–109), the cover of the book *Monstres sacrés. Portraits de la chanson française* by Jean Michel Boris Gervais, Mathieu Chedit, Edith Piaf, Michel Jonasz, Manu Chao, Jacques Brel, Jean-Jacques Goldman, Zazie, Véronique Sanson, Johnny Hallyday, Georges Brassens (pp. 110–111). The Travel Journal (*Carnet de voyage*) in Workbook 5 includes a listening comprehension activity based on several well-known songs:

“Here is a selection of well-known songs by eight of these artists. Listen to the clips and say in what order the songs appear.

- a. Je suis venu te dire que je m'en vais
- b. La Vie en rose
- c. Je dis « Aime »
- d. Ne me quitte pas
- e. Je ne t'aime plus
- f. Les Amoureux des bancs publics
- g. Je suis un homme
- h. Quelque chose de Tennessee” (p. 111)

For example, Workbook 4 concludes its vocabulary lessons with a travel journal entitled 'Things to do...'. Exercise 1 features five photos taken from the music video for the song 'Chéri(e)' by the band Oai Star. In the first photo, a woman is lying on her stomach on the floor watching television; in the second, a man is writing a shopping list on a blackboard; in the third, a pile of dirty washing-up; in the fourth, the same man feeding his children whilst his wife is on the phone; and in the fifth photo, the man, looking completely demotivated, is holding a bucket of water and a mop. In Exercise 1, learners must listen to the song and identify the theme; they must then look at the photos and identify which one that is repeated in the chorus:

“Darling, we need to do the washing-up
 Darling, it's your turn today
 Darling, we need to do the washing-up
 Do the washing-up and the housework too

Darling, we need to do the washing-up
 Darling, it's your turn today
 Darling, we need to do the washing-up
 Do the washing-up and the housework too" (p. 219).

In Exercise 2, they must listen to a second clip and find the photo that illustrates that part of the song:

"Darling, you need to do the washing-up
 Darling, it's your turn today
 Darling, you need to do the washing-up
 Do the washing-up and the housework too
 Darling, you need to take out the rubbish
 Do the shopping for Saturday
 Take the letter to the nursery
 Go to the bank about the loan."

Activity 3 invites learners to imagine this couple's daily life, discuss it amongst themselves, and indicate whether the situation described reflects their own experience.

Activity 4 presents a series of statistics concerning the division of domestic tasks among couples. Learners must comment on them and compare them with the reality in their own countries: "Domestic tasks are a source of conflict for 50% of couples. Women do 80% of the tasks. Tasks are shared equally by 15% of couples. Source: INED."

Activity 5, entitled 'Dream or Reality?', presents the end of the video in which the young woman wakes up from a dream. The final image shows her washing up whilst her husband plays with his friends. Learners must interpret this unexpected ending and explain the title of the song 'Chéri(e)'.

Exercise 6 features an article from the newspaper *Le Monde*, dated 8 March 2011, in which internet users describe "their difficulty in achieving a fair division of domestic and parenting tasks – still carried out 80% by women – within their relationships" (p. 93).

Although the article begins by noting that women take on 80% of domestic and parenting tasks within their relationships, we can see that these accounts reflect diversity. This may be interpreted as the authors' intention to show that some households are based on mutual respect and solidarity between partners. Learners are then invited to answer questions about the tasks they find easy or difficult, those they dislike, and how such tasks are distributed within their own families.

Addressing this topic within a multicultural audience helps to strengthen intercultural skills. By discussing behaviours, questioning them, and considering alternative practices, learners are encouraged to reflect critically and may become more actively involved in promoting equality within their families and transmitting these values to future generations.

6.2 Alter ego +, A2

Culture plays a central role in the Alter ego + textbook, A2 level. Consequently, there are numerous examples relating to literature and cinema. For example, the Travel Diary in Unit 1 is dedicated to the writer Philippe Delerm. Learners will find a biographical note on the author,

readers' reviews of one of his books and an extract from the book *Paris, l'instant*, published in 2002 (pp. 28–29). Many other books are mentioned in the textbook : *Les fleurs du Mal* by Baudelaire, *The Three Musketeers*, *L'écume des jours*, *Waiting for Godot* (p. 156), works by Fred Vargas: *Pars vite et reviens tard*, *Ceux qui vont mourir te saluent*, *Coulez la Seine*, *Dans les bois éternels* (p. 151), and *L'usage du monde* by Nicolas Bouvier (pp. 116–117).

The Travel Journal for Unit 3 is entitled *Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings* and includes several activities based on Lynda Lemay's song *Maudits français* (pp. 64–65). In addition, the dossier features a first-hand account posted on a forum dedicated to cultural misunderstandings, in which a user recounts the experience of a Japanese woman being kissed during her visit to an old French bakery (p. 65).

Learners can familiarise themselves with French cinema through the numerous examples of iconic films cited: Lesson 1 of Unit 5 is devoted to cinema, and the poster for the film *The Artist* serves as the lesson's introductory material (pp. 90–91). Other examples are cited: *Nomad's Land* (p. 118), *A Cat's Life (Une vie de chat)*, *All the Suns (Tous les soleils)*, *The First Day of the Rest of Your Life (Le premier jour du reste de ta vie)*, *My Share of the Cake (Ma part du gâteau)*, *Heartbreaker (L'Arnaqueur)* (p. 104).

Lesson 2 of Unit 3, entitled '*Expatriates: Asking Questions About / Discussing a Change of Lifestyle*', presents the questionnaire completed by Marie, an expatriate living in Beijing. This French teacher wanted to try something new (p. 56). For learners of French as a foreign language, it is interesting to discover the perspective of a French woman who has chosen to live abroad. The protagonist presents herself as an ambassador of French culture and traditions; however, she claims that her country lacks positive energy and she enjoys distancing herself from its way of life referring to the stereotypical tendency of the French to complain and criticise.. The activities accompanying the text are designed to develop reading comprehension but also to encourage a process of self-reflection regarding an event (a trip, a meeting, etc.) that has prompted a new perspective on her country of origin and the emotions this has generated.

6.3 Mon alter ego 1

My Alter Ego, Level A1 introduces a new feature: at the end of each unit, there are sections devoted to various themes, including literature. In this way, learners are introduced to Roland Barthes and his work (p. 95) and to Robert Desnos, as well as the poem *L'oiseau du Colorado* (p. 129). Both sections offer a range of literary activities that encourage learners to practice their writing skills.

The '*Literature*' section on page 26 features the poster for the play *Le Prénom* by Mathieu Delaporte and Alexandre de la Patellière, starring Patrick Bruel and Guillaume de Tonquedec, among others, along with the following summary: "Vincent is going to be a father. At a dinner party, family and friends ask him about the name of the future baby. Vincent replies, and this causes chaos" (p. 26). Learners must first look at the play's poster and answer a series of questions; they must then read the extract in the textbook and complete a reading comprehension exercise:

" (...) Vincent: It's a boy's name.

Élisabeth: Camille is a name for both girls and boys.

Vincent: For me, it's definitely a boy's name. ...
 Claude: Bartholomew? Balthazar? Give us a clue.
 Vincent: It starts with an A.
 Pierre: Ah! An A. Alexandre?
 Vincent: No. (...)
 Claude: Alphonse?
 Vincent: Not bad! That's not it. (...) It's a literary reference.
 Claude: Aramis! Arsène! (...)" (*Ibid.*)

In Activity 3, learners are asked to work in small groups to suggest French first names based on the clues provided and to share their suggestions with the other groups. In terms of intercultural communication, this topic has a dual significance. On the one hand, learners are introduced to French culture and have the opportunity to discover French actors, and, on the other hand, they become familiar with French first names right from the start of their learning and can compare them with those used in their own cultural contexts.. If we assume that the teacher suggests that learners watch the play together or at home, they will also discover topics that are sensitive for a French family and how unspoken matters and secrets manage to paint, in a superficial way, a picture of a happy and fulfilled family life.

In this section, we focus on intercultural aspects as well as mediation, as teamwork involves consultation with other group members and subsequent interaction with other groups. The action-oriented approach is applied through the research tasks assigned to learners.

The section on French first names concludes with the '*Societies*' feature on page 27, which presents a selection of French songs accompanied by photographs of the performers: '*Pierre*' by Barbara (1964), '*Elisa*' by Serge Gainsbourg (1969), '*Petite Marie*' by Francis Cabrel (1977), '*Caroline*' by MC Solar (1991), '*Léa*' by Louise Attaque (1997), '*Raphaël*' by Carla Bruni (2002), '*Alexandre*' by Juliette Armanet (2017).

The instructions for Activity 1 are to listen to extracts from these popular French songs and identify their titles and the artists' names; you must then identify the boys' and girls' first names. Activity 2 involves watching an interview about the top three first names for boys and girls in the 2020s. Activity 3a is a discussion activity in which learners are asked to discuss, in small groups, current trends in first names in their home countries and to identify any potential similarities with the situation in France; in part b of the same activity, they must compile a list of the class's top three favourite male and female first names. This group work requires not only language skills but also the ability to work as part of a team and to take into account the views of other members of the class. Furthermore, comparing their own country with others allows learners to discover the different cultures represented within the group.

6.4 Mon alter ego 2

My Alter Ego, at A2 level, helps learners acquire a wealth of cultural knowledge. For example, the '*Societies*' section features various articles on garage sales and suggests a range of activities based on this theme (p. 42).

The '*Heritage*' section (*Patrimoines*) highlights various French brands that have made history: L'Opinel knives, the MULLCA 510 chair and Méduse sandals (p. 43).

The ‘*Literature*’ section on page 27 features an introduction to the rapper Soprano and his song ‘*Mon précieux*’. The section is accompanied by a photograph and a brief profile of the singer. Activity 1 asks learners about their knowledge of Soprano, other French or French-speaking rappers, and their musical preferences.

In Exercise 2, they must listen to the song ‘*Mon précieux*’ and say who the message is addressed to, who ‘*mon précieux*’ is (point a), and what kind of relationship is described :

“I share my life with you, instead of living it
 You share other people’s lives with me to entertain me
 I haven’t looked at the sky since you took me
 My eyes are glued to your apps, baby
 I don’t know how to live without you by my side
 Your pixelated gaze has cast a spell on me
 (...) Why go to a concert? You’ve put everything on YouTube
 You help me consume, because you only speak to me through adverts
 I don’t pay attention to spelling anymore since I speak to you with my fingers
 My kids don’t go down the slide anymore; they’d rather play with you, baby” (p. 27)

Exercise 3 asks students to listen to the song again, read the lyrics, check the answers given to the previous exercise, note what Soprano does with his ‘precious’ (point a), and identify the changes that have taken place in Soprano’s life since he has been with his ‘precious’, as well as the nature of these changes (positive or negative). Activity 4 on page 27 asks about the song’s message, which encourages the teacher to initiate a discussion on the current use of digital technology.

This section is particularly relevant when analysing the concepts of intercultural communication and mediation. Firstly, learners need to familiarise themselves with a different type of language; some may be discovering the concept of rap for the first time, whilst others will be getting to know French rap. Secondly, a whole debate can be sparked within the classroom, as the presence of mobile phones has changed the way our lives function, the way in which we form new friendships or romantic relationships that are more or less fleeting, the lack of genuine communication within this mass communication, and finally, the admission of an addiction that impacts the lives of most users. Mobile phones used during lessons have become a real enemy for teachers, who often find themselves speaking into a void created by the noise of social media.

7. Conclusions

The four French language coursebooks offer rich and varied content, enabling learners to acquire the knowledge needed to interact effectively with native speakers and understand French cultural norms. *Alter ego* +, A1 and A2 are two coursebooks that have proved highly successful among students of French as a foreign language worldwide.

Mon alter ego 1 and 2 are two innovative language coursebooks designed to meet the needs of learners, teachers and educational institutions. The topics covered are up-to-date and aligned with modern requirements. Using these books enables learners to familiarise themselves with a wide range of cultural and social topics necessary for long-term integration in France and for

interacting with various people when dealing with administrative procedures or in everyday life. We are convinced that the authors' teaching experience is a considerable asset in the design of these textbooks, which greatly facilitate learning and the acquisition of a wide range of skills.

Alter ego + and *Mon alter ego* are leading textbooks in the field of French as a foreign language (FLE) teaching, as the authors and designers have developed a methodological approach that highlights the omnipresence of culture in every linguistic act.

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