

## **Culture in Foreign Language Teaching: An Analysis of the Conception of Culture Among French Teachers in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language is often taught in tandem with culture in foreign language classrooms. Learning the culture of the target language speech community has been regarded by foreign language teachers as a necessity, without which teaching is regarded as incomplete. Culture is often a taken-for-granted concept seen as unproblematic, where teachers' personal knowledge of culture is used to guide their teaching. As teaching of culture in the classroom is dependent on teachers' own implicit knowledge of what culture is and how culture should be imparted to students, an in-depth understanding of teachers' conception of culture in the context of foreign language teaching is essential. This study investigated French language teachers' conception of culture in relation to teaching a foreign language. Ideas about culture in teachers' talk generated through semi-guided interviews were analysed as constructions in discourse to uncover teachers' approaches to culture. The results show that the teachers use a predominantly structuralist approach to understanding culture, although there is evidence of awareness of context-dependent constructions. Culture is conceived as fixed attributes of national groups, and culture taught to students focuses on differences, neglecting similarities, between French culture and the students' own culture. Culture is not presented as equal, as the findings revealed a subtle stance of privileging and marginalising particular cultures. Teachers' practices based on

such a conception of culture may inadvertently lead to unintended consequences of stereotyping instead of cultural enrichment. These findings can inform further discussion and reflections on how a more nuanced concept of culture can best be incorporated into the training of foreign language teachers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teaching a foreign language has long emphasised intercultural competence as an objective of foreign language learning. There is a close nexus between learning a foreign language and learning culture, as learning a new language necessarily involves understanding the social practices of the target language's speech community. Teaching of culture is unavoidable in a foreign language class, which is often described as straddling at least two cultural and linguistic practices. Many researchers take the view that language has a strong relation to culture (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Johnson, 2001; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Vásquez et al., 1994). Learning a new language and the culture of the speech community have been regarded by scholars as inseparable in foreign language teaching. Bennett et al. (2003) went as far as to assert that “the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool” (p. 237). The belief that language is influenced and constructed by a cultural context and vice versa is also widely accepted among education, language and culture scholars (Christiansen & Kirby, 2003; Ji et al., 2004; Lambert, 1984; Sherzer, 1987). However, while the purview of language teaching has expanded to include culture, many teachers may still be unaware of its importance, or may not give sufficient attention to what and how aspects of culture can be incorporated into their teaching. More importantly, teachers' own conceptions of culture may vary, leading to

different ways culture is constructed in their language classes.

There have been criticisms of how culture is dealt with in the language classroom. Ideally, learning foreign languages should foster intercultural competence within a plurilingual context; however, there seems to exist, still, a narrow view of languages as belonging to nations as the countries of the origin of the languages; for example, “the Japanese language is thought to belong to Japan, the Chinese language to China, the Polish language to Poland, the Vietnamese language to Vietnam, and so on, English should logically belong to a nation as well” (Nault, 2006, p. 315). This idea constructs nations as monocultural and monolingual. Following this, the country-of-origin idea is often taken for granted as a fact or marker that reveals someone's culture. The simplification of culture to national culture poses a problem for the achievement of intercultural competence for learners. As agreed by scholars who advocate a fluid conception of culture (e.g., Abdallah-Preteuille, 2001, 2005; Dervin & Jackson, 2018; Holliday, 1999; 2010), intercultural competence should focus on the process of interaction between speakers of different experiences and not on the idea that it is an interaction between speakers of different national cultures (or broad sociological categories such as ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, and regions, for that matter).

A simplistic conception of culture as fixed entities based on assumed cultural markers can lead to stereotyping, exclusion and poor communication.

This is because taking an individual as a representative of their group rather than their own unique selves limits the interaction by generalising the actions of every individual as representing the values and practices of their countrymen (Berry, 2008; Edensor, 2002; Faist, 2000). This would inevitably lead to misunderstandings where there is a mismatch between the assumed other-person knowledge of both interactants, which is the main cause of stereotyping and communication failure.

Teachers are the main agents through which intercultural competence is imparted to students. However, while there has been a considerable amount of research done on foreign language teaching and culture in textbooks or teaching materials (Chao, 2011; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Lin et al., 2020), research on teachers' ideation of culture in foreign language teaching is limited. Due to the paucity of empirical work done in the area, information on the teaching of culture and intercultural competence among teachers is lacking in the literature. Teachers may hold varied views of the concept of culture and different ideas about how culture should be taught, and consequently, execute their practices differently (Michel, 2018; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022; Rüschenpöhler et al., 2024; Tran & Dang, 2014). Specifically, research that explores what culture means to teachers is still very limited. Studies that examine foreign language teachers' awareness and rationalisation of their own beliefs and practices are, therefore, needed to provide insight into the subject from teachers' perspectives.

In Malaysia, foreign language learning has been actively encouraged by the government. There is an extra allowance for civil servants who are proficient in foreign languages (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022), and most universities in Malaysia have adopted foreign languages as a compulsory element in their curriculum (Chong & Ng, 2016). Teachers of foreign languages in Malaysia comprise native speakers as well as Malaysian teachers (non-native speakers) who have mastered the foreign language after studying in the native country or after extensive study of the language in Malaysia. In terms of cultural orientation, foreign teachers would be expected to differ from local teachers in terms of their connection to their home country. On their views towards the local culture, their appreciation of local cultural practices would depend on their outlook and the length of time they have spent living in Malaysia. This makes foreign teachers an interesting group to study, as their experience living in the host country teaching a foreign language to local students may well result in unique perspectives on culture and intercultural competence.

The current study sought to investigate foreign language teachers' conception of culture in the context of foreign language teaching in Malaysia. Specifically, it aimed to examine how culture in the context of foreign language teaching is constructed through an examination of references to culture in teachers' discourses. The study employed a discourse analytical framework to analyse French teachers' discourses about

culture obtained through a semi-structured interview with four native speaker French language teachers.

### **Perspectives on Culture**

Culture as an abstract concept is difficult to define, as it involves many dimensions of meaning. From the positivist paradigm, Hofstede (1991) conceived of culture as objective markers tied to collectives of people, defining culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p.5), described as “software of the mind” (1991). The emphasis on group cognition implies a fixed way of thinking and behaving, where members of a group inevitably adopt the shared identities, values, and practices of the sociological grouping to which they belong. Specifically, culture is viewed as objective and unchanging, and can be manipulated to achieve different outcomes, such as the idea that certain types of culture can be implemented to achieve certain outcomes. Such a conception of culture, however, does not address how culture is formed or how individuals within the same groupings interpret and demonstrate different understandings and practices. Anthropologists, who seek to describe culture using qualitative ethnographic methods, view culture as the creation of societies and focus on how culture affects and is experienced by individuals. This is achieved by providing a holistic description of the shared knowledge, customs and behaviours of people in society, without

aiming to make broad generalisations of the culture of groups (Kottak, 2012; Nelson & Braff, 2020). Culture is seen as adaptive, which allows members of society to live, thrive, and continue collectively in their environment. Certain artefacts that hold symbolic significance in the group are described as cultural objects; they are, among others, ornaments, food, rituals, music, language, stories, heroes and art (E. Hall & M. Hall, 1990). Intangible items such as customs, values, communication style and time orientation are also highlighted as components of culture.

Table 1 presents objects that are conventionally seen as connected to or representing culture gleaned from existing literature on the subject.

While the anthropological perspective of culture focusses on culture as a set of ideas and practices within the structures of a society, its underlying logic remains in the structuralist paradigm, where patterns and arrangements are described as identifiers of the society, and crossing borders from one cultural group to another is a taken-for-granted assumption.

In recent years, cultural scholars adopting the poststructuralist approach to culture have advocated the conception of culture as a fluid entity that is constantly being produced and reproduced in discourse. Its border is, therefore, indeterminate, as the creation of culture is an open process and small cultural practices can be transferred to different social contexts. This idea of culture conceptually differs from the idea of individuals transitioning across groups

Table 1  
*Categories of cultural objects*

Category	Examples
Group actions	behaviour (Galloway, 1981; Gullestrup, 2009); behaviour, thought or attitude (Bennett, 1998) collective actions (Jasper, 2017) norms (Gullestrup, 2009)
Group characteristics	shared habits, beliefs and values of a national group (Kotter, 1996) identity (Jasper, 2017; Moran et al., 2007) psychological features of a group of people (Bennett, 1998)
Rules	norms and rules (Gullestrup, 2009) obligations (Janoff-Bulman & Legatt, 2002)
Artifacts	folk-dances, festivals, fairs and food (Galloway, 1981) monuments, rivers and cities (Galloway, 1981) material and immaterial products (Gullestrup, 2009) music, literature, drama, dance etc. (Bennett, 1998) language (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Nunan & Choi, 2010 ; Vásquez et al., 1994)

with clear boundaries (Bhabha, 1994; Rüschenpöhler et al., 2024; Seiler, 2013). Holliday (1999) argues for attention to be given to small culture, defined as a small cohesive social grouping which may exist within and between larger groupings, rather than on big Culture, which is defined by ethnic, national, and other large sociological groupings. Small cultures may emerge or diminish with the practices of the individuals in the group, as their existence is dependent on reproduction in discourse. Whereas big Cultures are essentialist and solid (appearing to be discrete and enduring), small cultures are fluid and permeable. In the fluid approach to culture, the focus on the processes of culture as they are produced in real-life interactions is deemed more useful in furthering the goal of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997), as opposed to describing culture as structure. In Byram's model (1997) of intercultural

competence, learners must acquire and operate new knowledge and cultural practices in real-time communication, with the express aim to achieve a "change of perspectives" that includes awareness of one's own cultural perspectives and experiences and understanding others' views and experiences. In other words, the poststructuralist approach emphasises the importance of increasing one's awareness of the complexities within intercultural interactions, which would require self-reflection and continuous negotiation of assumptions in intercultural interactions. This focus on the fluidity of individual and contextual factors in interaction differs from the structuralist approach, which holds that culture and its consequences can be described unproblematically, independent of individual interactions (Peng & Dervin, 2024). In conclusion, culture may be understood as a solid marker of groups and

individuals belonging in groups, as tangible and intangible symbolic artefacts signifying the shared meanings held by the group, or as competence, a process by which individuals produce and reproduce knowledge and behaviour in situated practice to achieve mutual and collective goals.

### **Past Studies on Teachers' Beliefs About Culture**

Studies that investigate teachers' beliefs about teaching culture in the classroom are numerous; however, there are very few studies that probe into teachers' conception of culture itself and the nature of this conception. We review selected studies related to teachers and their beliefs about culture, with particular attention to the approach to culture that underpins each study.

Michel (2018) asserted that language teachers should place as much importance on intercultural competence as linguistic competence, and therefore, should prepare students to interact with people of other cultures. In his study on culture in EFL teaching among teachers in secondary schools in Côte d'Ivoire, 53 EFL teachers answered a questionnaire aimed at discovering their beliefs about culture and intercultural teaching. The results, based on a quantitative analysis of the data, showed that the teachers believed that the students' own culture and the target language culture are both important to be taught in the classroom, but there is more variation among the teachers in their beliefs about the importance of students' own culture.

The teachers also agreed that textbooks should include materials on other cultures. However, the teachers' beliefs did not match their actual classroom practices in terms of culture teaching.

Tran and Dang (2014) conducted a similar study on culture in English language teaching, focusing on teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Unlike Michel (2018), the study used both a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with 38 teachers in a foreign language centre in Vietnam. The study found that teachers had a positive attitude towards teaching of culture and believed in the important role of culture teaching in EFL teaching. However, most of the teachers did not implement culture teaching in their classrooms, despite their belief that it was important. This could be due to a lack of knowledge about how culture should be taught.

Next, Rohmani and Andriyanti's (2022) study, also on English language teachers, surveyed 144 junior high school teachers using a questionnaire and interviewed six teachers in Indonesia. The findings showed that most of the teachers agreed that incorporating culture into language teaching is important for students to learn the language, specifically to minimise any misconceptions that may arise from learning the foreign language.

Another important study is one examining the beliefs of 14 EFL teachers in Indonesia on culture teaching (Kidwell, 2021). Using a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, lesson observations, professional learning community sessions and journal entries,

the study found that the teachers could be categorised into two groups. One group felt that teaching culture in the EFL classroom was to protect students from unfamiliar cultures (the protectors), while the other group felt the purpose was to prepare students to deal with unfamiliar cultures (the preparers). Adoption of either one of the beliefs about the role of culture teaching was associated with the teachers' exposure to intercultural learning opportunities. These findings underscore the importance of providing intercultural experiences as part of teacher education.

A study about teachers' perceptions of the integration of Aboriginal culture into the high school curriculum in Canada used a mix of qualitative data similar to Kidwell's study. The study (Kanu, 2005) was conducted with ten teachers in three high schools in a city in Canada using classroom observations focusing on participants' teaching processes, teachers' journals focusing on participants' reflection on the integration process (of Aboriginal culture) and interviews focusing on participants' perceptions of the integration process. The results show that all teachers in the study believe that the integration of Aboriginal culture into the school curriculum is important, and they support the integration generally. However, in practice, very little is observed despite their expressed openness to cultural integration. Notable challenges highlighted by the participants were a lack of knowledge about Aboriginal culture, a lack of classroom resources, some racist attitudes from non-Aboriginal students and staff, as well as limited support from school administrators.

The final study reviewed differs from those presented earlier in that it involves culture in chemistry education (Rüschepöhler et al., 2024). While the study is not in the context of language teaching, findings revealed through a qualitative analysis of teachers' talk make this study an important contribution to the literature on teachers' conception of culture. Seven secondary school teachers in Germany were interviewed, and their talk was subjected to a qualitative content analysis. The teachers conceived of culture using a predominantly structuralist lens; for example, culture was defined as "a structure of a group of people who share certain goals and impulses" (p. 4089). Adopting the assumption that there exists "a culture of chemistry" (p. 4083), students should be taught this culture to bridge the gap in their learning. Teachers also held poststructuralist ideas about culture, where they believed reflecting on and having ongoing dialogue with students about culture were important. Some teachers denied the existence of culture, citing the difficulty in identifying students' cultures due to the vast differences in individual histories and traits. They felt that culture was not an important factor in learning chemistry, and that culturally relevant teaching was not needed in the teaching of chemistry. The researchers concluded that teachers' denial of culture could lead to discriminatory practices where inequities (from background differences) among students that affect their learning of chemistry are not addressed.

Of the six studies discussed, the first three using questionnaires, or questionnaires with interviews, appear to take the structuralist approach to culture, where cultures are identified as different entities or systems to be taught or learned, and that cultures of different groups are inherently different, and need to be bridged or crossed (Michel, 2018; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022; Tran & Dang, 2014). Kidwell's (2021) and Kanu's (2005) studies used qualitative data and inductive analysis, where categorisation of teachers' conception of the goal of teaching culture is formulated, driven by the data. In Kidwell's study, there is a reference to cultures as either familiar or unfamiliar from the teachers' perspective, revealing a crossing-border concept in the structuralist paradigm. In Kanu's study, a contrast was found between beliefs and practice among teachers and perceived resistance to integrating Aboriginal culture into the curriculum. This reveals the underlying structural paradigm of the study that positions cultures as separate entities, and particularly, the idea that cultures can be perceived as privileged or marginalised. Rüschenpöhler et al.'s (2024) study, using qualitative content analysis, explicitly identified its theoretical underpinning as observing the structuralist-poststructuralist paradigms. Particularly, the study is significant in that it highlights the potentially negative implications of teachers' conception of culture.

These studies and others not discussed here due to space constraints have made many inroads in attempting to describe teachers' beliefs about culture in teaching.

However, the majority of the studies focus on the practical aspects of how teachers feel about teaching culture or integrating culture into the school curriculum. While not explicitly stated, most of the studies are grounded in the structuralist paradigm where culture is formulated as discrete, fixed entities. In view of the recent advancement of the poststructuralist approach to culture, which is important for the development of intercultural competence, research on teachers' beliefs about culture must give particular attention to the nature of teachers' understanding of culture, and the extent to which they demonstrate awareness of the interweaving of both the solid and fluid conceptualisations of culture.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study adopts a qualitative methodology using discourse analysis, where participants were interviewed, and their talk was subjected to detailed analysis to uncover their conception of culture in the context of foreign language teaching. Four French language teachers from France teaching French language in Malaysia participated in this study. The first author is a French language teacher and hence, has some contact with the native French language teaching fraternity in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which is a very small community. The four teachers in the study agreed to participate after being invited by the researcher. All the participants were native speakers of French and had been residing in Malaysia between five to forty years.

We are not able to reveal further details on the demographic information of the participants (e.g., age, gender, place of work) as there are few native French teachers teaching in Malaysia. Revealing this information will compromise the confidentiality of their identities.

A semi-structured interview about culture, teaching of culture and intercultural competence was conducted with the participants. The participants were informed about the nature, purpose and procedure of the research before they were asked to sign a consent form. All four teachers gave their consent. The interviews were conducted in English and French by the first author, and audio-recorded with the participants' permission. It is clarified that most of the participants answered in English, and French was used only intermittently. The recordings were transcribed, and segments in the French language were translated into English. The translation was done by the first author, who is a qualified French language teacher in Malaysia.

The interview transcripts were read several times to identify language (words, phrases, clauses) that point to speakers' ideas about culture. This could be explicit descriptions of culture cued by expressions such as "culture is/means...", or implicit constructions through descriptions of self and others, practices, objects and associations in relation to a group identity. Group social identity may be referenced using linguistic structures such as pronouns "we/us/our", "they/them/their", locations "here/there", or social categories such as

French, Malaysian, students, local/foreign/foreigner, Asian, and European, and words indicating comparison between cultures, such as "different/similar", and evaluation, such as "common/normal", "modern/traditional", "a problem", "offence", and so forth. References to culture in the teachers' talk were then inductively interpreted, labelled and categorised through an iterative process to identify and refine emergent themes that represent teachers' construction of culture.

In addition, the teachers' language signifying references to objects and practices (both tangible and intangible) that hold symbolic meaning significant to the group were also relied on to search for talk segments relevant to culture. Objects indexing culture may be physical objects which include different "kinds of monuments, buildings, artifacts and figures, from founding heroes and suffering victims to landscape paintings and visual caricatures, to conversion stories and other textual references, to song lyrics and poems" (Jasper, 2017, p.289). They may also be "philosophy of life, the values, norms and rules, and actual behaviour as well as the material and immaterial products" (Gullestrup, 2009, p.4). Themes are labelled and relabelled to describe what ideas and positions the participants are formulating by making references to the concepts related to culture, such as identity, sociological boundaries, cultural artefacts, values, competence and evaluations, that are contextually relevant.

In line with the principles of discourse theory, we adopt the stance that social

objects are constructed entities within frames of space and time, in discourses that are produced and aligned to particular situational contexts. Hence, no claim is made about the teachers adopting a particular view of culture as an individual trait or as an enduring belief. We hold that there is a difference between the conventional understanding of “belief” as an enduring cognitive state and a constructed ideation of culture, the existence of which is transient and dependent on its production and reproduction in discourses in specific situations. Teachers’ conception of culture as displayed in their talk in the research interview is deemed a theory in progress, where they actively attempt to work out what they understand about a subject they had not paid much attention to previously, and which could potentially change moment-to-moment. The following section presents the findings illustrated by quotations from teachers’ talk.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The teachers related culture to intangible objects, such as practices, habits, rules, and values, with minimal reference to concrete objects. Overarching themes on the conception of culture that emerge from these references are: culture is collective action along national boundaries, culture is obligation and social sanction, culture is unequal, culture is art and history, and language is culture. The teachers appear to rely on a predominantly structuralist approach in describing culture, where group boundaries are clearly defined in the

description of groups and their differences in cultural practices. This resulted in instances where cultures attributed to people of different nationalities were evaluated either positively or negatively. Implications for the teaching of culture in foreign language teaching are discussed in light of the findings.

### Culture is Collective Action Along National Boundaries

The first theme from the analysis of references to culture by the teachers is culture as collective action along national boundaries. In this finding, group categorisation at the national (country) level frequently occurred, cued by pertinent words associated with group boundaries such as *we/us*, *they/them*, and *here/there*. The teachers conceived of culture as actions that are done collectively by members of the national community (Bousslama & Benaissi, 2018). Linguistic cues in the talk that point to collective action are those that make references to customs or norms. Excerpt 1 shows teacher FLT3 telling the interviewer what they thought about culture (Table 2).

The teacher clearly delineates actions that are acceptable to the French-speaking community in France, differentiating between private and publicly visible actions. There is a hard line drawn between behaviour of the learners in their own country, and in private, if in France (“in your own country”, “at home”), and behaviour when in France (“accepted by the majority”, “general acceptable behaviour”, Excerpt 1, Table 2). Learning about acceptable

Table 2  
Excerpts 1 to 3

Excerpt	Quotations from teachers' talk
1	FLT3: [...] if you are <b>from a different country</b> or whatever, you have your own things. So at home, what you do, you do whatever, exactly like <b>in your country</b> , and there is no issue. <b>But once you are in a public place, you must behave in a way that is accepted by the majority.</b> [...] So you just <b>follow the generally accepted behaviour</b> , and that's all. And then you do <b>your own thing at home</b> . I mean that one is your problem. While you are among yourselves, then you can do whatever you do in your country.
2	FLT3: Certain things, for example, you enter a shop <b>in France</b> , you <b>always</b> say good morning or whatever greeting ... but <b>here</b> it doesn't matter.
3	FLT1: It is just for example, <b>how to queue in Germany</b> ... so you have dots... aligned of rain dots... like this...dot dot dot; <b>how to queue in China</b> ...you have a crowd of ... a great crowd of rain dots [...]

behaviour when living among native French people takes precedence in the teaching of culture to students who are preparing to study in France, and students' own habits and behaviours that may not be in line with French culture should remain hidden.

Similarly, in Excerpt 2 (Table 2), the practice of greeting "good morning" to a shopkeeper/shop owner is described as obligatory in France ("always say..."), but not in Malaysia ("here", Excerpt 2). In Excerpt 3 (Table 2), differences in the habit of queueing are highlighted along the national group level, Germany and China. These examples show that the teachers' idea of culture is delineated along national borders. This could be because the teachers feel it is the most effective way to bring awareness to students about what is acceptable or not acceptable to French people in France, in order to protect them from adverse reactions (Kidwell, 2021). However, the question arises as to

whether describing culture with the big "C" (Holliday, 1999) along national groupings without attention to the small processes of practices can best facilitate intercultural competence. National groups are implied as homogeneous in their behaviours and expectations, and no attention is given to situational contexts where a variety of skills and strategies are needed to navigate intercultural interactions.

### **Culture is Obligation and Social Sanction**

Culture is constructed as an obligation imposed on members by the group. Cultural practices are anchored on the values and requirements of the group, and following that, have consequences to the individual in terms of group approval or social sanction (Claridge, 2020). Language indexing obligations include modals of obligation such as "must", "should", "have to", and lexical expressions indicating necessity,

such as “minimum”, “compulsory”, “rule”, and various other expressions that indicate the notions of “requirements”, and “consequences” if those “requirements” are not met.

The teachers’ conception of culture as an obligation is reflected in their talk, rationalising the aim of teaching culture. The main concern of the teachers is that a lack of knowledge of the culture of the target language community may result in negative consequences for the language learners when they eventually interact with French native speakers. In Excerpt 4 (Table 3), teacher FLT1 emphasised what they regarded as “basic rules” or “minimum knowledge” needed to stay out of trouble (Excerpt 4). The basic minimum appears to comprise only components that are deemed to be “different” between the foreign and local way of life, and which are likely to cause friction (“they won’t like”, “that will be a big problem”, “you offend”, Excerpt 4). Similarities in practices, on the other hand,

might have been regarded as unproblematic and were therefore not emphasised.

A similar notion of not offending the members of the French speech community is also expressed by FLT2 (“not challenging the society”, Excerpt 5, Table 3). The teacher referred to behaviours described as “compulsory”, implying there is a minimum set of basic knowledge that learners must acquire. Excerpts 4 and 5 underscore the overarching concern of teachers to protect students from transgressing the norms and expectations of the French speech community and the negative consequences resulting from it. Thus, attention is predominantly focused on dissimilarities between French culture and the local Malaysian culture. In other words, culture is constructed as having clear boundaries between groups, defined by differences.

Also noteworthy is that the negative consequences of transgressing group culture are presented at the level of national group practices, without any attempt to explain

Table 3  
Excerpts 4 and 5

Excerpt	Quotations from teachers’ talk
4	<p>FLT1:            What they need to understand is <b>the basic</b>... like <b>the minimum basic</b> is the things in the house, how to... for example, how to use... like things in the bathroom, the fact that in France we don’t have the... [...] The hose? [...] here it’s common to see water on the floor in the bathroom. In France, you do that in a family, which <b>will be a big problem. They won’t like.</b> So those things like things in the kitchen... in the bathroom... in the bedroom, like common... like <b>very basic rules</b> we have. [...] simple interaction, like when you enter a shop, you would say hello, bonjour. If you don’t do this, <b>then you offend.</b></p>
5	<p>FLT2:            There are things that are universal in France, this I am sure, like saying bonjour before talking to someone in all my life, it is <b>compulsory</b>, you have to... There are <b>small things like that that are very important.</b> Once you do them, <b>then you are not challenging society.</b></p>

processes at the interpersonal level. Cultural norms are taken for granted as the rule and logic of group actions, and out-group members need only to comply to live harmoniously among the target language community in the foreign country.

### Culture is Unequal

While the teachers presented culture as belonging to large national groups, and that specific differences between cultures are what distinguish them, they do not construct cultures as neutral systems that have equal status. In fact, evidence in the teachers' talk showed active evaluation of group behaviour as negative or positive, and better or worse, in relation to one another.

During the interview, FLT1 (Excerpt 6, Table 4) gave an example of the teaching materials they used in the classroom, which were images showing a specific behaviour attributed to certain national groups in

pictorial form. The images showed aligned dots to represent the queuing practice of people in Germany, and a group of dots randomly arranged (neither in a straight, zig-zag nor any discernible line), to represent the "non-queuing" practice of people in China. While the pictures were intended to trigger discussion about differences between group behaviours from an educational standpoint, the implicit message imparted is a negative evaluation of the group shown to be "not queuing." When questions such as "what are the differences and why...?", and "what would be the reactions of people...?" (Excerpt 6) are posed to students, answers casting a negative perception towards the "non-queuing" group are inevitable. Further, the queuing practice is highlighted as a norm for the entire national group, Germany and China, without acknowledgement of possible variations within the national groupings.

Table 4  
Excerpts 6 and 7

Excerpt	Quotations from teachers' talk
6	FLT1: It is just for example, <b>how to queue in Germany</b> ... so you have dots... aligned of rain dots... like this...dot dot dot; <b>how to queue in China</b> ...you have a crowd of ... a great crowd of rain dots [...] I came with many, many pictures like this...many drawings... [...] and then they had to guess what he was presenting? <b>What is the cultural aspect he is presenting</b> ...things like that, and <b>what are the differences and why</b> ... and so then <b>what would be the reactions</b> of someone from China moving to Germany in this situation? What could be the reactions of someone from Germany moving to China?
7	FLT1: [...] I think our job as French teachers <b>teaching cultures is not focusing on the minority</b> ... You know. We just want to give them the tool to... <b>so they won't have any misunderstanding</b> when they are in France.

In Excerpt 7 (Table 4), FLT1 explains that the focus of culture teaching in the foreign language classroom should not be on minority groups (e.g., immigrants). This implies that minority groups are less important as their practices may not significantly impact newcomers to French culture, in that it would not help the students in avoiding trouble with the majority group in France (“so they won’t have any misunderstanding”, Excerpt 7). Hence, the culture attributed to the majority group takes precedence in the teaching of the culture of the target language community.

### **Culture is Art and History**

Conventionally, the term culture is often viewed as associated with elements in the humanities, such as art, literature, food, music and history. This dimension of culture is evoked by the teachers in the study, specifically referring to France as the focal point to be introduced to learners of the French language. In Excerpt 9 (Table 5), FLT4 and FLT1 identified a variety of cultural objects such as art, food, places, and celebrations (Excerpts 8 to 10, Table 5) as essential to be included in the teaching of French culture.

The teachers also advocated having students learn specific information related to the system of governance, such as immigration, and the place of religion as separate from the state (Excerpts 9 and 10, Table 5), as important to be imparted to students. This finding is similar to Bouslama and Benaissi’s (2018) finding that teachers regard culture as a body of factual knowledge to be taught. In the current study,

the attention given to the teaching of cultural elements associated with the country of the target language (France) by the French teachers overrides the inclusion of cultural references to the local country (Malaysia).

### **Language is Culture**

The teachers in the study regard culture as a necessary component in learning a language. They expressed their belief in the importance of culture in language learning, to the extent of claiming that understanding culture is required to understand language. Excerpts 11 and 12 (Table 6) illustrate the teachers’ view of culture as an essential component of foreign language teaching.

The direct assertion that culture is part of language, culture is essential to understand language, and culture is interlinked with language, as well as the use of modality of obligation and ability, such as “have to teach” and “cannot separate them”, all clearly point to the teachers’ conviction on the importance of culture in foreign language teaching.

Further, the teachers demonstrated a strong acceptance of the diversity of French speakers in the world, comprising people with different accents and cultural practices (Excerpt 13, Table 6). The teachers advocated that understanding different accents is essential in understanding different French native speakers, and that the diversity of the Francophonie should be included as part of the teaching of French culture.

While the teachers presented the French-speaking population as diverse in

Table 5  
Excerpts 8 to 10

Excerpt	Quotations from teachers' talk
8	FLT4: [...] to improve is to participate in <b>different events</b> , for example, if they take French, we have the <b>French festival</b> every year, organised in Malaysia. You have several <b>movies</b> shown in big cinemas. So that can be a way to know more about the movies, then there are <b>different places</b> , <b>different artistic exhibitions</b> ...different...a lot of activities like <b>cooking</b> ... a lot of things that can improve the people and the students, <b>to know more about French culture</b> , and definitely I always encourage my students to go to this kind of activities.
9	FLT1: [...] here we have one semester only...almost only on intercultural...where we would work in...on different aspects about <b>French history</b> , about <b>immigration in France</b> , [...] or the <b>place of religion in France</b> [...]
10	FLT1: [...] <b>Things about religion</b> like the fact that France is a country where there is a big <b>separation between religion and the state</b> . So, for example, school, there is no religion in school...hmmm... what else? Hmm...some as we teach them about the <b>celebrations</b> . So what is important for French people in terms of celebration, what they do, how to offer a gift and how to receive a gift...

Table 6  
Excerpts 11 to 14

Excerpt	Quotations from teachers' talk
11	FLT4: <b>Culture is part of the language</b> . So when you teach language, you <b>have to also teach</b> the cultural side. <b>It is essential to understand the language</b> .
12	FLT3: [...] <b>The language is one thing, but it goes together with culture</b> because I mean, there are certain circumstances while you say something, or even the intonation of how you say or the gestures that go with it ...you know...how you express your feeling is also part of it. <b>So, it is interlinked, like you cannot separate them, cannot say oh! It is language only</b> .
13	FLT4: <b>Understanding different accents, understanding different French native speakers</b> . I would say by going to an open discussion like organise in Malaysia, for example, in KL (Kuala Lumpur). Like a weekly discussion, <b>you meet native speakers while not necessary French</b> . So that is a good way, by interacting with more people, the more you gain knowledge about that, and get used to well...the accents. Then I would say <b>in France</b> , even though you have <b>different people speaking French from different countries, accents are not that strong</b> ... I mean, except for Quebec or some countries in Africa.
14	FLT4: [...] except knowing the capital was Kuala Lumpur, I didn't know much. I was not really shocked, but I was quite surprised that for an ancient British colony, English is not well spoken everywhere. And it still surprises me <b>that even in the big city, many people don't speak a common language, which is something that quite surprises me</b> [...]

the way they speak French and as distributed across different geographical locations in the world, the idea that languages must be associated with national boundaries is still observed among the teachers. In Excerpt 14 (Table 6), the diversity of languages spoken among Malaysians is viewed as unusual (“many people don’t speak a common language”, Excerpt 14).

The analysis discussed above shows that the teaching of intercultural competence across all themes advocated by the teachers focuses on differences rather than similarities between groups and particularly referenced on national groups. In contrast, the multiplicity of individuals belonging to minor cultural groups is seldom mentioned by the teachers. There is a clear lack of mention of individual idiosyncrasies, the permeability of cultural boundaries, or a discussion of stereotyping as a possible consequence of a lack of intercultural awareness.

## CONCLUSION

From the analysis of teachers’ talk on culture in the French language classroom, several observations on their conceptions of culture can be made. First, the teachers being French native speakers from France believe that their most urgent task at hand is to prepare the students for a life in France, as most of the students they teach have the intention to further their studies in France at some time in the future. This makes the conception of culture along national boundaries a convenient working model to be adopted by the teachers to construct their understanding

of culture. People are identified by their country of origin or country of domicile, and cultures are attributed homogenously to the population of the country (Holliday, 2010; Risager, 2007). Following this broad-brush construction of cultural groupings, there is no attempt made to explore and examine variations within the country, especially through the lens of fluidity of culture, where cultures are conceptualised as in constant movement and recreation (Bauman, 2000). The focus on national references to culture indicates the teachers’ reliance on the structuralist approach to understanding culture (Rüschepöhler et al., 2024; Seiler, 2013). Cultures are clearly defined and contained within groups, and members of the group are assumed to be homogenous in their ways of thinking and behaving. To learn about and understand different cultures would mean crossing borders between distinct social worlds (Bhabha, 1994). Cultures are viewed as fixed products where discrete information is learned, rather than a process where the focus is on the procedural moment-by-moment interaction, taking into consideration situational variables. Such a conception of culture, while useful for coming up with recipe-book style tips for survival in a foreign country, may not facilitate a deeper understanding of culture and intercultural competence (Dervin & Jackson, 2018; Holliday, 1999, 2010). There is also the danger of unintentional stereotyping of people of different nationalities when culture is defined based on countries (Seiler, 2013). As is well documented, stereotyping

leads to pre-conceived assumptions and misunderstandings, which can lead to failure in intercultural communication, apart from the many other harms it may bring (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Greenwald et al., 2002).

Second, culture is conceived of as practices and behaviours that are socially controlled, and compliance is needed to live peacefully in society as a newcomer. This is reflected in the teachers' selection of cultural elements to be taught to students, for specific comparison between Malaysian and French culture. In line with the teachers' goal of preparing students to live in France, the logical method was to highlight only those practices among Malaysians (referred to as "Malaysian culture") that could potentially cause offence to people in France. This inevitably leads to the unintentional and implicit labelling of selected behaviours among Malaysians as "offensive" and which should remain hidden from public view, when in France.

Closely related to this is the third finding, where the teaching of culture involves comparison between specific behaviours of people of different countries. This appears to be an attempt by the teachers to explore cultural differences with their students. However, the selection of behaviours as defining the people of an entire nation may render the effort ineffective in fostering intercultural competence. "Cultures" as defined by selected behaviours may be implicitly evaluated as "better" or "worse" in comparison, and not merely "different". Hence, the introduction of cultures from different countries may not result in

achieving the intended purpose of cultural enrichment and intercultural awareness (Chao, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Lin et al., 2020), but may, instead, end up with stereotyping and misrepresentation. While differences are focused on, similarities are backgrounded or totally neglected. Engaging students to explore similarities between people in the world was not given due attention by the teachers to foster intergroup understanding, which is crucial for intercultural competence.

Fourth, language and objects in the arts and humanities are highlighted as symbols of the culture of the country of the target language (Gullestrup, 2009; Jasper, 2017). France is thematised as the reference point of cultural practices to be taught, and local and other cultures remain mostly invisible. This appears to be a logical choice by the teachers as it aligns with their purpose of preparing students to live in France.

The analysis of the teachers' talk reveals the teachers' ideas about culture as influenced by the goal of preparing students to live and survive in France. This goal becomes the overriding force that directs the teachers to construct culture along national boundaries, foregrounding France as the point of reference, and taking the structuralist perspective of culture. Comparisons with practices of people in other countries are made with the sole purpose of ensuring compliance with French culture. While there are attempts to impart awareness of differences in cultural practices, there is a tendency for culture to be viewed in reductionist terms, where there

is a set of practices that would be deemed sufficient to know the culture of a group. On the other hand, there is also an ambiguous understanding of what comprises culture, where any behaviour of people observed through personal experience is tagged as culture.

### **Implications of Study**

There are implications for teacher training for foreign language teachers. Most teachers of foreign languages do not undergo formal training on the teaching of culture and intercultural competence. As found by some previous studies, some teachers have expressed anxiety about teaching culture and felt they needed instructions or guidelines on how to include intercultural competence in their classes. Integration of intercultural learning in language classes is still lacking as teachers may not be ready to deal with it (Borghetti & Qin, 2022; Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018). In the case of native speaker teachers, it could be assumed that the teachers have first-hand knowledge of the culture of “their own people” and should be able to impart this knowledge to their students unproblematically. However, this may not be so, as suggested in the current study. The findings indicate a need to revisit how culture and intercultural competence should be defined, and how they can be incorporated as part of teacher training for foreign language teachers. Specifically, the theoretical understanding of the concepts of culture and intercultural competence, and the objectives of integrating them into language teaching should be emphasised along with

their pedagogical implications, to achieve better intercultural learning outcomes for students (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018).

In order to provide professional training to teachers, learning what the teachers think about intercultural competence and teaching of culture allows teacher trainers to develop a better module to mentor and to coach future teachers to ensure their professional development. Training support to the teachers should be provided to raise their knowledge and confidence in integrating culture into their foreign language teaching, with a clear aim of broadening the space for intercultural discourse.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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