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‘OUR DAILY BREAD’ – FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

Abstract: *The topic of this paper is an exploration of Romanian and English proverbs and phraseological expressions from the lexical domains of health and food. In terms of linguistic richness, these lexical units are unique cultural expressions conceptualizing peoples’ socio-cultural mentalities, while also contributing to the development of sociolinguistic competence. The paper focuses on using paremiology in foreign language classes and also explores suitable teaching strategies and types of activities that may be adapted according to the level of study and the learners’ interests. Therefore, the relevance of specialized language courses – including such terminology – in higher education is an attractive educational tool which has the potential to bring learners from different countries together in intercultural environments. Thanks to the simple manner in which proverbs render deeper cognitive aspects of reality, these are also unique tools of expressing socio-cultural and linguistic specificities, while also enriching the cultural experiences the students share with other learning co-participants.*

Keywords: *Proverbs, Phrases, Intercultural dialogue, Foreign language teaching & learning.*

1. Introduction

The paper presents an intercultural approach to language teaching and learning by exploring terminology related to the fields of medicine, food science, and life sciences in comparative oral and written contexts in the academic environment. The target group consists of international students from ‘Victor Babeş’ University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Timișoara and from the University of Life Sciences ‘King Michael I’ from Timisoara studying in the fields of medicine, pharmacy, biotechnologies, agriculture, horticulture, genetic engineering, and food science. We have devised some

didactic scenarios for these target groups of language learners, including meetings in authentic situational contexts. Thus, students have the opportunity to interact, use foreign languages (Romanian, English and French), thereby updating various discourses, as well as their own language learning processes and strategies.

Currently, the concept of interculturality is emphasized more and more in foreign language teaching: ‘Through the intercultural communication competence, we differentiate between the user of a foreign language and the native monolingual speaker’ (CEFR, 2000, p. 51). Learning a foreign language in the target cultural

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environment provides foreign students with an extraordinary exposure to the authentic facts not only of language, but also of culture and civilization. Metaphorical language especially highlights the cultural conceptualisations and figurativeness we all encounter pervasively across cultures (Sharifian, 2011). By the same token, Legendre (1993, p. 224) emphasizes the interdependence between cultural and communicative competence (Iosim, 2019).

In addition, metaphors may often be misinterpreted, unless we develop (inter)cultural awareness, given that they are culturally determined (Irajzad & Kafi, 2018). Therefore, the relevance of accurately decoding proverbs or any type of figurative expressions in general pertains to intercultural fluency for anyone who wants to fully comprehend a foreign language by accessing the native speakers' authentic cultural heritage, thus becoming a skillful conversation partner and a "game changer" in the global community (Reşceanu, & Tilea, (2020).

Thus, with a view to maximizing the effect of authentic interaction, we have introduced joint learning to our language classes in tandem, as described in the discussion below. As hypothesized, this method has proved to be an effective, student-centered teaching approach, which enhances active learning (Stefanovic, & al. 2021). This approach is based on the students' relevant needs, not just from a linguistic, but also from an affective point of view.

Moreover, the study reveals that this method is conducive to the development of sociolinguistic competence, while contributing significantly to the formation of personality traits and "soft" skills for capitalizing on the social dimension of language use, including assertiveness and other emotional aspects (Khajeh & al., 2014; Samfira, 2020; Waldherr & Muck, 2011).

2. Method and Material

This paper describes a follow-up study conducted in tandem between two Romanian universities during foreign language classes delivered to international students. The paper is based on small-scale empirical research carried out in order to test the optimal design and methodology of intercultural language classes and it includes illustrations to the case in point (Dragoescu Urlica, Boc-Sînmărghitan, & Lungu, 2023).

We approach the study from a cognitive linguistics point of view, in particular conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2005; 2010; Pungă, 2016; Sharifian, 2015), while relying on corpus linguistics. This perspective supports Charteris-Black's (2004) view on the "interconnecting aspects of metaphor", arguing for an approach to conceptual metaphor which "incorporates semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic dimensions" (p. 24). A comparative qualitative analysis is also performed on the linguistic we have collected, while employing the corpus approach to CMA (critical metaphor analysis).

Nonetheless, it has not proved to be an easy task for teachers of foreign languages to transfer the metaphorical component of paremiology to the learners in a sustainable manner (Dragoescu Urlica & al., 2019; Boc-Sînmărghitan, 2021). To this end, we have followed the CEFR principles, which emphasize the utility of employing figurative phrases in foreign language teaching, including proverbs and idiomatic expressions, as these are highly recurrent in informal speech (CEFR, 2003, p. 99).

The selection of adequate materials, suitable teaching strategies, types of exercises which would best highlight the subject matter, and adapting these to the level of each group of learners are among the most important aspects we have sought to address. The proverbs and phrases we have included in our linguistic corpus pertain to the lexical

and semantic area of health, food, parts of the body that serve in this process, pointing to the direct correlations existing between food-related conduct and moral values.

The semantic classification of the collected material was further designed to illustrate several teaching scenarios, based on specialized terminology for students specializing in medicine, nutrition and food science, as well as the life sciences from the two partnered universities. Specialised terminology requires a close-knit partnership among universities and researchers, and this type of study stands proof to our collaborative activities (Furau et al., 2019). The proverbs, phrases, and sayings have been selected and verified in several sources (Gorunescu, 1978; Botezatu, 2001; Candrea, 2002; Zanne, 2003/2004; DEX, 2009), based on the selection criterion of recurrence in informal language use. Expressions which may generate ambiguity due to the use of obsolete or archaic words were avoided, given that they raise problems even for natives (Zanne, 2004, p. 113). In what follows, we discuss these points by providing some models of teaching scenarios and exercises drawing on proverbs and phraseological expressions.

3. The linguistic corpus

3.1. Food/Dishes/Kitchen

3.1.1. Food: *a mânca cât șapte* (lit. ‘to eat as much as seven people’); *a mânca pâinea degeaba* (lit. ‘to eat bread in vain’); *a se căuta/vinde ca pâinea caldă* (lit. ‘to be in demand/to sell like hot bread’); *cine s-a ars cu ciorbă, suflă și în iaurt* (lit. ‘s/he who has burnt his/her tongue while eating soup will blow into yogurt’); *la mâncare ca lupul și la lucru ca butucul* (lit. ‘eat like a wolf and work like a log’); *mai bine mâncare puțină decât boală lungă* (lit. ‘better little food than long sickness’); *mâncarea de dimineața lungește viața* (lit. ‘eating in the morning prolongs life’); *mâncarea de dimineața și însurătoarea de tânăr niciodată nu strică*

(lit. ‘eating in the morning and getting married young never harm anyone’); *mâncarea străină întotdeauna e mai bună* (lit. ‘food from others always tastes better’); *a strica orzul pe găște* (‘to spoil the barley on geese’), etc.

3.1.2. Drink: *a boteza vinul* (lit. ‘to baptize the wine’); *din pumnii străini nu te saturi când bei apa* (lit. ‘you don’t quench your thirst when you drink water from someone else’s hands’); *laptele tinerilor e vinul bătrânilor* (lit. ‘youngsters’ milk is the wine of the elderly’); *pâinea te întărește, vinul te înveselește* (lit. ‘bread strengthens you, wine cheers you up’), etc.

3.1.3. Dining/serving tools: *a avea și cuțitu(l) și pâinea în mână* (lit. ‘to have the knife and bread in one’s hand’); *poftim la masă cu mâncarea de acasă* (lit. ‘we invite you to dine with us with your food from home’), etc.

3.2. Parts of the body/internal organs that serve in the mastication/feeding process

3.2.1. The mouth: *a-și răci gura degeaba* (lit. ‘to cool one’s mouth in vain’); *a vorbi cu jumătate de gură* (lit. ‘to speak half-heartedly’); *gura lumii nu o poți opri* (lit. ‘you cannot stop the world’s mouth’); *a se arunca în gura lupilor* (lit. ‘to throw oneself in the wolves’ mouths’); *a avea gura slobodă* (lit. ‘to have a loose mouth’); *a-i lăsa cuiva gura apă* (lit. ‘one’s mouth is watering’); *a fi numai gura de cineva* (lit. ‘someone is all mouth’, meaning ‘words without deeds’); *a-i umbla gura ca o moară (stricată)* (lit. ‘one’s mouth runs like a (broken) mill’); *a căsca gura* (‘to open one’s mouth’, meaning ‘to be amazed at something’); *grăiește gura fără dânsul* (‘one’s mouth speaks without them’); *a fi cu gura mare* (lit. ‘to be big mouthed’); *ascultă cu urechile, vezi cu ochii, dar taci cu gura* (lit. ‘listen with your ears, see with your eyes, but be silent with your mouth’); *gură multă treabă puțină* (lit. ‘big mouth little work’); *a fi gură spartă* (‘to be broken mouth’,

meaning 'talkative'); *a fi rău de gură* (lit. 'to be foul-mouthed'); *a face spume la gură* ('to foam at the mouth', meaning 'to get angry'); *a-i lua vorba din gură* (lit. 'to take one's words from their mouth'); *a se lua în gură cu cineva* (lit. 'to get into mouth with someone', meaning 'to argue with someone'); *a uita de la mână până la gură* (lit. 'to forget from hand to mouth'), etc.

3.2.2. Lips: *a rămâne cu buzele umflate* (lit. 'to be left with swollen lips', meaning 'to lose everything'); *a-și linge buzele* (lit. 'to lick one's lips'); *a avea buză de iepure* (lit. 'to have a rabbit's lip'), etc.

3.2.3. Tongue: *toată pasărea pe limba ei piere* (lit. 'every bird perishes on its own tongue'); *limba dulce mult aduce* (lit. 'a sweet tongue gains a lot'); *a trage de limbă* (lit. 'to pull someone by the tongue', meaning 'to try to find out something'); *limba oase n-are, dar oase sfărâmă* (lit. 'the tongue has no bones, but it breaks bones'); *a-i ieși limba de un cot* (lit. 'to stick out one's tongue an elbow long'); *a-și înghiți limba* (lit. 'to swallow one's tongue'), etc.

3.2.4. Teeth: *a trage la măsea* (lit. 'to suck to one's tooth', meaning 'to drink a lot'); *a-și lua inima în dinți* ('to take one's heart in one's teeth', meaning 'to dare'); *a-și arăta dinții* (lit. 'to show one's teeth'); *a pune numai pe un dinte* (lit. 'to gain wait only on one tooth'), etc.

3.2.5. Stomach/belly: *stomacul când chiorăiește, la demâncare gândește* ('when one's stomach rumbles, it thinks about food'); *a sta cu burta la soare* (lit. 'to lie on one's belly in the sun', meaning 'to waste time'); *a nu avea pe cineva la stomac* (lit. 'not to have someone in your stomach', meaning 'not to stand someone'); *pe stomacul gol* (lit. 'on an empty stomach'), etc.

3.2.6. Intestines/entrails/viscera: *decât bucate aruncate, mai bine mațe sparte* (lit. 'better to have stuffed entrails than to throw food away'); *a fierbe mațele în cineva* (lit. 'one's entrails are boiling', meaning 'to be very angry'); *a fi mațe sparte* (lit. 'to have broken entrails', meaning 'to eat a lot'); *a-i chiorăi mațele* ('one's bowels are rumbling'), etc.

3.3. Sensations of hunger and thirst

3.3.1. Hunger: *ar mânca și cu ochii* (lit. 's/he would eat with his/her eyes'); *foamea e cel mai bun bucătar* (lit. 'hunger is the best cook'); *cu învățătura, omul nu moare de foame* (lit. 'if you have education you don't die of hunger'); *lacomul, și sătul, flămând este* (lit. 'the greedy person is full while being hungry'); *cu bunătatea mori de foame* (lit. 'with kindness you die of hunger'); *de foame i se lungesc urechile* (lit. 'his ears are elongating from hunger'); *flămând ca un lup* (lit. 'hungry as a wolf'); *de la masa bogatului te socoli flămând* (lit. 'you get up hungry from the rich man's table'); *și sătul, și cu punga plină nu se poate* (lit. 'you can't be full and have a full purse'); *unde mănâncă doi, mănâncă și al treilea* ('where two eat, the third can also eat'), etc.

3.3.2. Thirst: *nu tulbura fântâna care ți-a potolit setea* (lit. 'do not disturb the fountain that quenched your thirst'); *la casa cu două fete mor pisicile de sete* (lit. 'at the house with two girls the cats are dying of thirst'), etc.

4. Discussion

Food represents "a cultural domain that is often elaborated into complex systems of meaning" (Goode, 1992, p. 233). For that reason, food, eating, and food-related metaphors appear to be pervasive across all cultures, as they conceptualize fundamental aspects to our daily lives (Jacobsen, 2004). To the linguistic corpora including food items, we have added body parts and internal

organs, especially those related to food and eating (Sharifian & al., 2008), as encountered in phrases and proverbs.

In the lexicographical literature, proverbs have received a variety of definitions, but the conceptual domain revolves around the same basic targets: wisdom teaching, morality, ethical values, collective mentalities, universal values, unknown authors, depending on the specificity of each country. According to CEFR (2003, p. 93), phraseological expressions (e.g., *mouthwatering*) are figurative expressions which are to be distinguished from proverbs (e.g., *Too many cooks spoil the broth*). Occasionally, certain phrases may display common features, which highlight universal cultural commonalities, thus making them easier to acquire by students.

A suitable illustration may be the phrase employed in the title of the paper, which was among the corpora discussed in the contrastive analysis by foreign students in our tandem classes, given its commonality of meaning and structure across several languages, not only Romanian and English. By putting this example under a magnifying glass in mixed-language classes, we have collected a series of equivalences for the English expression *our daily bread* employed in a wide variety of contexts, e.g., Romanian: *pâinea noastră cea de toate zilele*, French: *notre pain quotidien*, Italian: *il nostro pane quotidiano*, Spanish: *el pan de cada día*, German: *unser täglich Brot*, Dutch: *ons dagelijks brood*, Arabic: *خبزنا اليومي*.

The choice of proverbs and other metaphorical phrases may be adapted to the learners' level of language proficiency, so that they may be used successfully to develop linguistic, communicative, and socio-cultural competence. At an elementary level, the targeted activities focus on discovering and matching language and vocabulary items, whereas at a higher proficiency level, the goal is mainly to find equivalence across languages, to

discriminate literal from metaphorical meaning, and to 'characterize the degree of accuracy, adequacy, and natural use in language proficiency' (CEFR, 2003, p. 37).

The illustrations below describe class activities based on the proverbs and phrases listed in our corpus, which have been applied to an intermediate language level. Various tasks have been designed for pair or group activities devised for our classes in tandem. Besides proverbs and idioms, items aimed at developing sociocultural skills might also include the use of suggestive images.

For instance, instead of typical gap-filling drills, students are required to find the missing word corresponding to the image, e.g., *mai ușor e să oprești a vorbi cu jumătate de ☹* (lit. 'to speak with half a ☹'); *cui închide gura nu-i intra musca in gura* (lit. 'a closed ☹ catches no flies'); *ascultă cu 👂, vezi cu 👁, dar taci cu ☹* (lit. 'listen with your 👂, see with your 👁, but be silent with your ☹'), etc.

Objectives

- learning proverbs/sayings/idiomatic expressions through games;
- developing interest in paremiology and cultural codes;
- developing language skills;
- developing sociocultural competence and 'soft' skills through paremiology.

Language level: B1-B2

Target group: Medical students/Life science / Biotechnology students (in tandem)

Material: drawings of body parts/internal organs illustrative for a specific topic; body parts and organs linguistic corpus from the literature (Sharifian & al., 2008).

Duration: 30-40 minutes

Activity type: Group activity, in groups of 5-7 students; frontal activity

Student worksheet 1

Exercise 1: Choose from the given images the corresponding ones, so as to complete the given proverbs/phrases.

Exercise 2: Choose three of the given phrases/proverbs and make up contexts to illustrate their meaning.

Exercise 3: Choose three pictures and create your own proverbs, then use them in appropriate contexts. Find equivalents in your language.

In another language learning scenario aimed at developing lexical competence, exercises include tasks which require students to match proverbs or to group phrases according to their meanings. This type of exercises may also be adapted for elementary language learners. Based on the use of phrases, the proposed exercises are aimed at learning by discovery, targeting the vocabulary from a certain target semantic field, e.g., food or body parts. The list of phrases is limited to simple formulations, which are easy to decode, such as: *big mouth, good taste*. These activities extend beyond the area of discovery, towards the consolidation and improvement of linguistic aspects specific to independent language users.

Targets

- learning phrases by discovering common intercultural features
- developing interest in paremiology
- developing foreign language skills
- enhancing sociocultural competence through idiomatic phrases and metaphors

Language level: B1-B2

Target group: Medical students/life sciences students – in tandem

Duration: 10 minutes

Activity type: individual work.

Student worksheet 2

Exercise 1. Read carefully, then group the phrases according to the meaning.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g

Phrases:

1. *Și sătul, și cu punga plină nu se poate* (lit. 'you can't be full and have a full purse')
2. *A-i lăsa gura apă* ('mouthwatering')
3. *Stomacul când chiorăiește, la demâncare gândește* ('when one's stomach rumbles, it thinks about food')
4. *A-i chiorăi mațele* ('one's bowels are rumbling')
5. *La mâncare ca lupul și la lucru ca butucul* (lit. 'eat like a wolf and work like a log')
6. *A fierbe mațele în cineva* (lit. 'one's entrails are boiling')
7. *A face spume la gură* ('to foam at the mouth')
8. *De foame i se lungesc urechile;* ('one's ears are elongating from hunger')
9. *A avea gura slobodă* (lit. 'to have a loose mouth')
10. *A sta cu burta la soare* (lit. 'to lie on one's belly in the sun')
11. *A fi cu gura mare* (lit. 'to be big mouthed')
12. *Ar mânca și cu ochii* (lit. 's/he would eat with his/her eyes')
13. *A mânca pâinea degeaba* (lit. 'to eat bread in vain')
14. *Flămând ca un lup* (lit. 'hungry as a wolf')
15. *Poftim la masă cu mâncarea de acasă* (lit. 'we invite you to dine with us with your food from home')
16. *A-i umbla gura ca o moară (stricată)* (lit. 'one's mouth runs like a (broken) mill')
17. *A fi gură spartă* ('to be broken mouth')
18. *A-și linge buzele* (lit. 'to lick one's lips')

Meaning:

- a) to be hungry
- b) to spend/to waste
- c) to be lazy
- d) to covet/to desire
- e) to be talkative
- f) to take advantage of
- g) to be angry

Key:

a	b	c	d	e	f	g
3, 4, 8, 12, 14	1,	10, 13, 5	2, 18	9, 17, 11	15	7, 6

Furthermore, text cohesion exercises would also be extremely useful for the development of sociocultural competence, vocabulary development, but also for the consolidation of grammatical skills. The following type of exercises are aimed at the overall cohesion and structure of the sentence, as well as other cohesive elements.

Target group: Medical students & Life sciences / Food science students (in tandem)

Level: B2

Duration: 45-50 minutes

Activity type: individual/frontal and pair/group work

Student worksheet 3

Exercise 1. Put the phrase units below in the appropriate order.

Model:

Random order	Correct order
la, pâănă, a, mână, de la, uita, gură (to, until, to, hand, from, forget, mouth)	a uita de la mână pâănă la gură (to forget from one's hand to one's mouth)

Exercise 2. Look up the *missing words* in the table in the phrases below. With the letters you have not used make up a proverb.

- ... *te întărește, vinul te înveselește.* (e.g., *Pâinea te întărește, vinul te înveselește,* lit. 'bread strengthens you, wine cheers you up')
- *A trage de ...* ('to pull someone by the ...')
- *A-și lua inima în ...* ('to take one's heart in one's ...')
- *A-i lua vorba din ...* ('to take one's words from their ...')
- *A trage la ...* ('to suck to one's ...')
- *Cu bunătatea mori de ...* ('with kindness you die of ...')

- *Decât ... aruncate, mai bine mațe sparte* (lit. 'better to have stuffed entrails than to throw ... away')
- *Cine s-a ars cu ... suflă și în iaurt* (lit. 's/he who has burnt his/her tongue while eating ... will blow into yogurt')

Key 1

P	D	G	U	R	Ă	Ă	P	D	G	U	R	Ă	Ă
N	D	I	N	T	I	I	N	D	I	N	T	E	I
E	C	I	O	R	B	Ă	E	C	I	O	R	B	Ă
B	U	C	A	T	E	E	B	U	C	A	T	E	E
P	F	O	A	M	E	R	P	F	O	A	M	E	R
R	L	M	Ă	S	E	A	R	L	M	Ă	S	E	A
R	L	I	M	B	Ă	A	R	L	I	M	B	Ă	A

The English equivalent of the Romanian missing words: *mouth, teeth, soup, food, hunger, jaw teeth, tongue.*

Romanian proverb with *pâine* 'bread': *A avea pâinea și cuțitul în mână* (He has the bread and the knife in his hand).

Exercise 3. Fill in the *missing words* to make a phraseological unit.

a) *A avea și cuțitu(l), și pâinea în ...*

'to have the knife and bread in one's ...'

- deget ('finger')
- mână ('hand')
- degete ('fingers')
- b) *A-i ieși ... de un cot*
- 'to stick out one's ... an elbow long'
- mâna ('hand')
- limba ('tongue')
- sufletul ('soul')
- c) *Gură ... ('... mouth')*
- mica ('small')
- spartă ('broken')
- rea ('bad')
- d) *Flămând ca un ...*
- ('hungry as a ...')

- lup ('wolf')
- cerșetor ('beggar')
- sărac ('poor')

These types of activities provide suitable opportunities for language learners to find commonalities across languages and cultures and debate with peers what would be the best option. When students choose among several items in multiple choice exercises, they often go for the option that makes better sense.

For example, in the phrase *Too many cooks spoil the broth/soup/food*, the correct option is *broth* – which may require a short explanation as to the difference between soup and broth, as shown in the study *A linguistic 'soup' and a semantic false friendship* (Dragoescu & Groszler, 2016, p. 225).

Furthermore, role-play activities also imply functional methods of simulating real-life contexts, which usually produces optimal learning outcomes in our foreign language class experience.

We may also make use of paremiology in this type of situation, as it has generated positive feedback with our international, as well as Romanian students. Finally, another illustration of item we have employed follows along these lines, in a 30-minute activity where students work in groups of 5-7 students.

Objectives

- understanding the functioning mechanism of proverbs by relating them to everyday situations and characteristic features;
- developing the students' creativity;
- developing communicative competence by participating in role play.

Language level: B1-B2

Target group: Medical students & Life sciences /Food science students (in tandem)

Student worksheet 4

Exercise. Read the *scenarios* below and match them with one of a *proverb/phrase* below to illustrate the idea. Then act out the scenes, in groups.

Scenarios

1. We celebrated a holiday and cooked many Romanian dishes. We went over the top in terms of quantity. There was a lot of food left, but since we couldn't throw it away, we had to eat all of it.
2. Yesterday, we attended a conference on the topic *Computer-aided surgery*. We were totally amazed by the scientific evolution of medicine today.
3. Mike was very angry today; he couldn't help it and said some words that he would later regret.
4. I just love sweets. On my way to the university, I passed by a confectionery; my favorite cake was on display. Seeing it, I craved it for some long minutes...

Proverbs/Phrases

- a) *Grăiește gura fără dânsul* (lit. one's mouth speaks without them); to speak too much when one is angry and careless.
- b) *A-i lăsa cuiva gura apă* (lit. 'someone's mouth is watering'); make someone's mouth water; to crave food.
- c) *Decât bucate aruncate, mai bine mațe sparte* (lit. 'better to have stuffed entrails than to throw food away').
- d) *A rămâne cu gura căscată* (lit. 'to leave someone with their mouth open').

Key:

1	2	3	4
c	d	a	b

5. Conclusion

The material we have collected provides an adequate prerequisite for further developing and extending joint learning projects and

cultural exchange between our universities. The pilot study has corroborated its wide applicability, as well as the cross-cultural and intercultural stakes we have hypothesized at the start of our joint project. The variety of idioms, proverbs, and phrases, we have compared in English and other languages reflect psycho-sociological commonalities and ultimately help build a shared cultural heritage on a multicultural level.

It is essential for foreign language learners to be able to decode such complex linguistic

aspects, so as to avoid cultural faux-pas, misunderstandings, or the distortion of accurate meaning in intercultural encounters. Therefore, it is highly relevant for language methodology developers to include such linguistic items in the curricula.

Beyond linguistic acquisition, the importance of incorporating an extended cultural dimension in our language classes lies in the need to develop transversal competences and to be aware of the diversity and richness provided by the area of languages in contact.

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