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# Exploring French language and culture instruction at an Algerian university: insights from L1 students' perspectives

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Nowadays, it is imperative to comprehend the relationship between intercultural communication and international representations of cultures and nations. This study focuses on exploring the representations that Junior Algerian students hold concerning the French language as well as culture, in order to apprehend students' attitudes towards the language in question, identify pre-existing stereotypes, and eventually promote a more competent understanding of the culture associated with the language. Through surveys' responses by 130 juniors at the University of Oum El Bouaghi who have undergone a year of training in French Civilization, researchers attempt to comprehend the impact of the programs followed on the potential reconfiguration of these representations and to identify the relationship of these future educators with the French language. The researchers adopt a descriptive-analytic approach to evaluate the effects of this on students' conceptions and associated images, concerning the French culture as a whole. The responses exhibited less positive associations with France compared to the French language itself, revealing a positive shift in stereotypical images of French culture among university students. Adopting an intercultural dimension to investigate this underscores the need to prepare learners culturally as well as linguistically in order to effectively interact with different cultures.

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## Introduction

In *English in a Changing World* (1999), Graddol and Meinhof highlight an interview for Julian Amery through which he declared that “At the same time, I also, being interested in language and language acquisition, hope that people will tend to acquire languages other than their own for pleasure and knowledge. Even though I may be able to communicate with a Brazilian in English, I only learn about Brazil, or deeply about Brazil, when I communicate in Portuguese” (18). Employing mother tongue while communicating with others solidifies intercultural communication as it bridges gaps connected to peoples’ history, culture, memory as well as identity. According to Benjamin Lee Whorf’s “Linguistic Relativism”, known also as “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”, our assumptions about cultures and peoples generates our ideology, through which we conceive the world and can be located either in language structure or in language event.

Many prospective graduates of French as a foreign language (FFL) programs in Algeria are motivated by their aspirations to pursue further studies abroad, particularly in Canada or France. Baring that in mind, in addition to the challenges non-native speakers face when interacting with natives, it becomes crucial to equip these students with the necessary skills and knowledge in order to effectively navigate and adapt to new linguistic and cultural environments. Therefore, it is no longer feasible to design a course that neglects the cultural aspects associated with the target language. Realizing the influence and relationship between cultural communication and the acquisition of genuine linguistic competence, FLE students should be ready with sufficient and significant knowledge regarding the French culture. In this context, Michael Byram and his associates argue that:

[...] by focusing on the “intercultural dimension” of language teaching, we aim to make learners speakers or intercultural mediators, capable of engaging in a complex framework and a context of multiple identities, and to avoid the stereotypes generally accompanying the perception of the other in a single and unique identity. This approach consists in seeing in the interlocutor a person whose profile remains to be discovered, rather than an individual simply carrying an identity that has been attributed to him from the outside (Byram et al. 2002, 9).

This strongly underlines that the learner is primarily viewed as a social actor with the ability to engage in linguistic and communicative activities within specific contexts. This approach acknowledges the role of learners and the crucial socio-affective impacts of the knowledge they acquire through their educational experiences. In line with this perspective, the Common European Framework of References for Languages recognizes that language activities involve communication acts that derive their full significance from the larger social setting in which they take place. While context is an integral part of any communication process, the meanings intentions of any action have to be deconstructed concerning the physical, social and interpersonal context. In addition to where, why, by who and to whom communication takes place, ‘task’ is a major player in the process of interaction. As a concept, ‘task’ emerges when individuals purposefully employ their abilities to achieve specific objectives. Adopting an action-oriented approach involves acknowledging the cognitive, emotional, and volitional capabilities, as well as the diverse capacities that social participants possess and employ.

Various branches of linguistics and language instruction also make explicit reference to the concept of representation. Sociolinguists have conducted extensive studies on individuals’ attitudes and representations concerning languages, including their nature, status, or function (Lafontaine, 1986 and Matthey, 1997). In language education, the act of learning serves a distinct

purpose since students are not merely accumulating knowledge but are also required to assimilate a spectrum of functions across diverse contexts, particularly in interactive situations. This specific emphasis accentuates the influence of social, economic, ideological, or emotional factors, with the very diversity of the representation concept proving to be a valuable means of acknowledging the myriad sources and references (psychological, emotional, social, cognitive, etc.) intertwined with the language learning and teaching process.

According to acquisition linguistics, representations constitute a pivotal component in the language learning journey. The representations of one’s native language, the language being acquired, and the distinctions between them are intricately linked to specific learning strategies embraced by learners. These learners construct a representation of the interlinguistic gap between their own language system and that of the language they are acquiring.

The notion of representation holds great significance in the reconstruction of cognitive and affective resources (Tarin, 2006, p. 63). Within this study, it refers to the manner in which individuals organize their understanding of socially constructed realities. Analysing learners’ representations is thus a vital tool for comprehending the attitudes and cultural influences that may arise when they encounter their native language and a foreign language (Tarin, 2006). These factors ultimately determine the outcome of their learning experience and, indeed, all intercultural communication, distinguishing between success and failure.

Interculturality is now an unavoidable necessity that cannot be ignored. Its objective extends beyond merely promoting coexistence among individuals and cultures. In fact, interculturality aims to stimulate the emergence of new shared values, as “it is no longer sufficient to juxtapose the cultures at play, to compare and assimilate them, but it is necessary to compare new configurations, establish new cultural interactions, and create a new culture” (Dufays, 1993, p. 139).

From an intercultural perspective, language teaching is a cornerstone in solidifying intercultural communication and eventually intercultural integration and collaboration. Generally, education and scientific knowledge cannot be ignored when attempting to bridge gaps between nations and cultures. The role of the teacher extends beyond simply instructing the foreign language but rather to shaping the minds and souls of generations is. An instructor’s role extends to that of a facilitator who helps students understand the connections between their own culture and other cultures. According to Byram and his associates, teachers’ task is to generate curiosity and foster an appreciation for “otherness,” guiding students to develop an awareness of how different individuals and societies perceive themselves and their own cultures (Byram et al. 2002, p. 12).

The impact of language on culture is unquestionable, prompting numerous scholars to advocate for the inclusion of the intercultural dimension, especially when teaching and studying foreign languages (Porcher, 1986; Galisson, 1991). Geneviève Zarate underscores the significance of the classroom interaction when teaching languages. Such physical and interpersonal context forms a platform for challenging conventional analytical mechanisms and suggesting alternative approaches to the interaction between native and foreign cultures (Zarate, 1986, p. 27). Teaching culture and civilization aims not only to impart theoretical knowledge but also to shape learners’ behaviours and transform their stereotypical perceptions of both the target culture and their own maternal culture. By incorporating the intercultural dimension into foreign language instruction, we move beyond a purely linguistic approach that focuses solely on grammatical and lexical structures to an immersive experience

that enables learners to question their existing representations and develop more informed and respectful intercultural attitudes.

Language assumes a paramount significance in moulding one's cultural identity (Abou, 1995). It goes beyond being a mere tool for verbal communication and encompasses the very essence of its speakers' outlook and understanding of the world. Michel Serres (1996, p. 212) aptly observes that languages convey much more than mere words; they serve as vital markers of identity, shaping our perceptions and worldview.

Research conducted by each of Candelier and Hermann-Brenneke (1993), Zarate (1993), and Muller (1998) highlights the inevitability of the relationship between language, its learning, teaching and associated civilization, in the language acquisition process. Such scientific productions examine how the impressions foreign languages learners have regarding the cultures, its speakers and representations, associated with such languages, are altered through their journey of language learning. Through this study, the researchers aspire to contribute to the practice of foreign language learning and teaching by emphasizing the role of culture in the process of language acquisition. The importance of this study is verified through the transformations experienced by the targeted students, which are the results of being exposed to the French culture through the French Civilization course. Moreover, this study emphasizes the need to integrate culture as an essential subject within linguistic domains and disciplines. Language teachers must employ innovative methods in order to succeed in reshaping students' cultural conception and eventually helping these students achieve intercultural competence. The article forefronts the importance of incorporating cultural dimensions within linguistic ones to guarantee a comprehensive and sufficient learning journey. Based on the sample examined within this study, cultural and linguistic approaches should be fused comprehensibly into language policies as well as university training programs concerning learning and teaching French as a foreign language. This integration should endorse students' intercultural competence, impact their cultural representations of Self and the other, and promote constructive intercultural interactions. The discussion carried throughout this study underscores the strong relationship between cultural exposure and language acquisition. It also establishes the fact that intercultural communication and competence are crucial factors in order to reach international stability, integration and collaboration.

This article aims to address two fundamental points: What are the initial representations held by junior students upon their enrolment at the French department regarding the language and its culture? How do these representations evolve as a result of the cultural and scientific exposure such students experience during their years of studies at the French department as a result of language and knowledge acquisition?

## Literature review

**Exploring representations in language-culture didactics.** Identity is a fluid sense of representation; how one represents him/herself to others and how certain representations and images conquer one's perception of others. Its different levels, including the social, cultural and individual levels are fundamentally connected to each other, forming one's self and others realization and acknowledgment. Thus, identity as a concept as well as a practice, cannot be purely a personal matter. Rather it involves cultural, social and in many cases political aspects that are usually verbalized through verbal communication. Accordingly, different languages throughout the world are examined as mirrors for the identities they are associated with. According to Herni Boyer, language representations are a subset of social representations. He emphasizes that "Representations of language are just one

category of social representations. From an epistemological perspective, sociolinguistic representation functions autonomously in certain areas of language sciences" (Boyer, 1990, p. 102). However, sociolinguistic representations can also operate independently in certain cases. Sociolinguistic representation are anchored through people's sense of belonging to many social groups and their sense of their different social identities. Moreover, while learning or teaching languages, it is important to keep in mind that language, as a crucial cultural ingredient, plays an inevitable role in promoting ethnocentrism among certain nations. Ethnocentrism, originating from *ethno* referring to 'nation, culture, and origin', and *centric* standing for 'center', is a serious form of social categorization. William G. Sumner defined ethnocentrism as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it." (Sumner, 1906 p. 13) As people observe their own ethnicity, and ultimately language, as superior, their view of other cultures, languages and speakers is framed by inferiority. Due to ethnocentrism or social categorization, sociolinguistic representations can act as triggers for cultural biases, especially as they influence people's knowledge, beliefs, or opinions regarding other social groups and objects. As speakers, people employ languages to signal their social and cultural identities. Just as languages symbolizes Self-identity, they also function as mechanisms to categorize Others. People often depend on the languages spoken by others in order to form cultural perceptions about them, forcing others into prejudice social categorizations.

The broad scope of social representations across multiple disciplines, including sociology, social psychology, and cognitive psychology, and their intricate interconnections, present a complex and challenging field of study. Gustave-Nicolas Fischer defines social representation as "A process of perceptual and mental elaboration of reality which transforms social objects (people, contexts, situations) into symbolic categories (values, beliefs, ideologies) and gives them a cognitive status, making it possible to apprehend aspects of ordinary life by reframing our own behaviour within social interactions." (Fischer, 1987, p. 34) As social representations leads to sociolinguistic representations, the process of language learning and teaching can greatly be affected by people's judgements without adequate knowledge, experience or tolerance. Obviously, social representations and categorization serve to control people's interactions with other cultures, peoples and languages, labelling those as favourable/unfavourable, good/bad, etc. This fact functions as a barrier to effective and appropriate communication between members of different groups as it minimizes similarities and underscores cultural and linguistic difference and prejudices.

Denise Jodelet, on the other hand, defines social representation as "a form of knowledge that is socially constructed and shared, serving practical purposes and contributing to the construction of a shared reality within a social group" (1989a, 1989b, p. 53). Obviously, such increasing interest in cultural analysis is initiating a different vitality to theoretical debates in sociology, culture and reality. Today, social sciences are rediscovering culture and its role in shaping collective identity of one's own group and that of others. Regarding their role in understanding social life, Boyer asserts that "Social representations serve as a kind of lens, providing a framework for interpreting various social situations and enabling anticipation of the actions and behaviours of oneself and others" (Boyer, 2010, p. 53). The fact that social representations, including sociolinguistic ones, greatly influence individual and collective perceptions call for a re-evaluation of knowledge; that of Self and Other. Thus, in any attempt to examine cultural communication and language acquisition, one has to keep in mind the cultural dimension as a core resource for

knowledge production and consumption. The relations between our conceptualization of shared reality and sociolinguistic representations, highlight our tendency towards understanding and appreciating one's and others' culture and language.

These representations are conceptual tools used to comprehend different cultures and interpret them through the lens of preconceived notions or stereotypes. They hold significant influence over learners and their teachers, particularly in the context of cultural enrichment. However, both learners and teachers often tend to harbour highly limited conceptions of what a language truly encompasses. Eddy Roulet points out that it is observed that both teachers and students tend to adopt a limited linguistic perspective when viewing discourse as text (1999, p. 5). This perspective views discourse merely as a sequence of sentences, disregarding extra linguistic information such as knowledge of the world or the interactional context, which are implicitly conveyed in the text and essential for proper interpretation.

Furthermore, numerous researchers have emphasized the malleable and unstable nature of representations in both teaching and learning contexts. Byram suggests that learners' representations of foreigners are subject to change and instability, whether through the presentation of socio-cultural content during teaching or through the learners' perception of the foreign world in their imagination during learning. Byram refers to these representations as "intermediate worlds" (Byram et al. 2002, p. 18). The role of languages, throughout the world's different cultures, is essential in shaping what people and nations perceive as true. Through leaning foreign languages, learners' political, cultural as well as personal knowledge, judgments and realizations are scientifically as well as emotionally framed. Theoretical knowledge offers the necessary background for intercultural communication, yet learning and teaching foreign language sets one ready for convenient interaction with others or their cultures. Language functions as an interpreter of the whole of our experience "reducing the infinitely varied phenomena of the world around us, as well as the worlds inside us, to a manageable number of classes of phenomena, types of processes, events and actions, classes of objects, people and institutions." (Resta, 1998).

Eventually, language plays a major role in the construction of our social reality and in molding frames of consistency and representations. Learners and teachers of languages should realize the urge for acquiring cultural knowledge during the language acquisition process. Similarly, Michel Pendanx notes that "representations change naturally during the learning process or when the teacher chooses to intervene directly" (1998, p. 13). In "For a linguistic approach to social representations", the author clarifies that acknowledging learners' cultural and sociocultural representations becomes an integral requirement for the success of language acquisition process, especially that in many cases such representations act as obstacles hindering the learning as well as the teaching processes. (Py, 2004, p. 15). It is the responsibility of educational institutions and teachers, in particular, to intervene and rectify the learners' distorted and inaccurate representations by providing a more balanced image of the target culture.

**Representations versus stereotypes.** Theorists, especially linguists, observe language as social practice, particularly since it is strongly related to the social and cultural contexts associated with it. Any attempt to fully study and comprehend language requires conscious efforts to deconstruct the cultural context within which language is not only socially shaped but socially shaping. In the context of foreign language teaching, it is essential to examine the relationship between language's role in creating social identities, social relations and knowledge and cultural stereotypes and

prejudices. Stereotypes are simplified generalizations often based on prejudices, attributing specific characteristics or behaviours to a particular group. They can be positive or negative but tend to oversimplify and freeze representations of a group, reducing them to generalized and often simplistic traits. Such social categorizations accentuate differences between people and create cultural and linguistic boundaries that can block the flow of intercultural communication. By exploring and discussing stereotypes in the classroom, learners can move beyond them, reconfigure their understanding, and develop a more nuanced and accurate perception of the foreign culture. Thus, foreign language learners and teachers should employ intertextual analysis along linguistic knowledge through the process of language acquisition.

When examining learners' representations of the target language and culture, it is crucial to consider both representations and stereotypes, allowing students to express their own representations influenced by personal experiences, education, and cultural context. Jean Dufays emphasizes the role of the teacher in supporting learners to develop well-considered judgments and more nuanced ideas that surpass superficial or simplified notions:

Because stereotypes are omnipresent in discourse and because their use and the ideas they convey are often simplistic or reprehensible, it first seems that an important task for language-culture teachers - whether mother tongue or foreign language- is to awaken critical awareness of these phenomena (Dufays, 1993, p. 320).

Stereotypes can be described as ingrained ways of thinking characterized by clichés. They involve simplified descriptive categories derived from beliefs and reductive images used to categorize other individuals or social groups, often subjecting them to prejudice. In the classroom, learners' minds may be influenced by stereotypes rooted in the norms and beliefs of their own culture. These stereotypes can serve as material for exploration, aiming to overcome and challenge them, as they have the potential to create interferences that hinder communication and foster hostility towards foreign cultures.

A stereotype is an incomplete and consequently somewhat inaccurate perception of reality, yet it still contains elements that reflect certain aspects of that reality in an exaggerated manner (Porcher, 1995, p. 64). Hence, it is not advisable to fully eliminate stereotypes as the problem with stereotypes is that the characteristics, being those negative or positive, are attributed to each and every members of a certain culture. This fact, eliminate individual uniqueness and cultural diversity. Many of the stereotypes are either created due to first-hand experience and/or direct exposure to some members of the culture concerned, or are results of second-hand information, especially media representations and propagandas, of this group of people. From an educational perspective, it is more effective to acknowledge their existence and build upon them, surpassing their limitations, and highlighting their limited and exaggerated nature.

**Exploring linguistic-cultural education at Algerian universities.** In addition to linguistic, sociolinguistic and communicative competences, the learner should also acquire the intercultural competence. According to the European Framework "The foundation of intercultural awareness lies in acquiring knowledge, cultivating awareness, and fostering understanding of the connections between "one's own world" and "the world of the target community." (p. 83-84) This entails recognizing both the shared elements and the unique differences between these two realms. It is important to emphasize that intercultural awareness also encompasses an understanding of the regional and social diversity present in both worlds.



Therefore, it is crucial to consider the intercultural aspect when designing and structuring language lessons. Teachers should aspire developing a deep understanding of the beliefs and perspectives that shape the perceptions, expectations, attitudes, and behaviours of both themselves and others. Additionally, it is essential to foster a culture of collaboration and shared understanding, where a cohesive set of shared ideas and principles can be developed and implemented (Puren, 2002, p. 64).

Starting from the year 2000, Algeria witnessed a strong commitment towards fostering openness in language policy. As a result, the re-openings of French cultural centers in major cities in Algeria including Algiers, Constatine, Oran, Annaba, have been accompanied by the establishment of numerous French-language departments. Following the higher education reform plans and strategies, a new subject called “French Civilization” has been introduced as a new subject to be taught through French language programs and courses. This subject not only enables students to learn the French language but also provides them with insights into the target culture. Importantly, it emphasizes the avoidance of broad generalizations about the French mentality, aiming to challenge stereotypes and preconceived notions about France. Moreover, it encourages students to broaden their horizons by exploring and embracing another culture while simultaneously appreciating their own heritage.

By encouraging students to explore French culture in a reflective way, the teaching of French Civilization course promotes a balanced cultural exchange. It encourages students to engage in a process of openness, dialogue, and mutual respect between cultures, while strengthening their attachment to their own cultural identity. Hence, the introduction of this subject within university curricula in Algeria reflects official and governmental awareness of the importance of the cultural aspect throughout language acquisition process. It also testifies to a desire to promote an intercultural approach in education, contributing thus to form individuals who are open, aware and capable of engaging in an increasingly interconnected world.

## Methodology

In our increasingly interconnected world, where encounters with individuals from diverse linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds are commonplace, the need to prepare for effective communication, understanding, and potential conflicts becomes paramount. Recognizing such fact, scholars such as Meriam Abdallah-Pretceille proposes the integration of intercultural competence within language education, acknowledging its pivotal role in intercultural communication.

Intercultural pedagogy, as an approach to teaching, transcends limitations and challenges including specific fields of application and/or target audiences. It encompasses a discourse and perspective that informs teaching practices, disciplines, and education as a whole. It emphasizes that interculturality lies not within the objects, phenomena, or individuals themselves, but rather in the way we perceive and engage and interact with them. Mere study and knowledge of cultures do not automatically constitute an intercultural approach, as cultures and civilizations have long been studied from various perspectives. Therefore, intercultural pedagogy cannot be regarded as a distinct entity, separate from intercultural relations or communication (Abdallah-Pretceille, 1986, p. 162).

To explore the perceptions and assess the evolution of beliefs held by students specializing in French as a foreign language, the researchers conducted a survey utilizing two questionnaires. These questionnaires were administered to a sample of 130 students enrolled in the french department at the University of Oum El Bouagh (Algeria) during two distinct periods. The first

questionnaire was administered upon students’ initial enrolment at the university in October 2018, while the second was conducted at the end of the academic year following their training in French Civilization in June 2019. The aim was to gather and analyse the students’ representations of France, the French people, the French language, and culture, thereby evaluating the extent of their transformation over time. For anonymity reasons, both questionnaires were numbered from 1 to 96 before being administered to facilitate the retrieval and comparison of students’ responses before and after their training.

## Research tools description

**The first questionnaire.** The first questionnaire, designed for the pre-survey, encompasses a total of 20 questions that are categorized into four sections. Its purpose is to gather diverse insights and information from the respondents. The first section delves into the respondent’s profile, capturing biographical and socio-linguistic data such as gender, age, baccalaureate course, and language practices within their family, social, and university contexts. The second section aims to understand the students’ perspectives on learning foreign languages, including their relationship with the French language, their proficiency level, and the methods they employ in learning the language. The third section explores the students’ representations of France, the French people, the French language, and the culture it embodies. Lastly, the fourth section focuses on evaluating the impact of the “French Civilization” course on the evolution of the respondents’ intercultural perceptions. By utilizing closed, open, and semi-open questions, this comprehensive questionnaire provides valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

**The second questionnaire.** The second questionnaire, comprising 18 questions divided into three sections, focuses on capturing the evolving representations held by the observed students regarding France, the French people, the French language, and the culture it encompasses. Additionally, the questionnaire aims to gather insights on the students’ perspectives regarding the contribution of the French Civilization subject in reshaping their representations. This survey serves as a valuable tool for understanding the dynamic shifts in perceptions and opinions among the students participating in the study.

## Results discussion

Through the analysis of the questionnaire, valuable insights will be gained regarding the profile of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) student at the University of Oum El Bouaghi. This examination will delve into their viewpoints, emotions, representations, needs, and overall interest in learning the French language. Moreover, the responses will shed light on the perception of the French language within the students’ social circles, spanning positive, negative, or neutral perspectives. The interconnections between the French language and French culture, as well as the impact of the French language and culture on Algerian identity, will also be thoroughly explored and examined.

**The results of the pre-survey.** To ensure anonymity, the two questionnaires were assigned sequential numbers ranging from 1 to 130 prior to their administration. This numbering system facilitated the process of comparing the students’ responses before and after their training. The following results pertain to select questions specifically designed to unveil the sociolinguistic characteristics of the students and shed light on their motivations for learning foreign languages.

**Table 1 Student Characteristics Based on Sex and Baccalaureate Stream.**

| Baccalaureate stream          | Male      | Female    | Total      |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Letters and Foreign Languages | 16        | 46        | 62         |
| Letters and Philosophy        | 24        | 29        | 53         |
| Experimental science          | 5         | 10        | 15         |
| Total                         | <b>45</b> | <b>85</b> | <b>130</b> |

**Table 2 Students' Perception of the Complexity of the French Language.**

| French is a language    |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Easy to learn           | 41% |
| hard to learn           | 32% |
| Very difficult to learn | 27% |

*Participants' background information.* Based on the data provided in Table 1, it is evident that most students targeted in this research are female (65%). Out of these students, 62% hold a bachelor's degree in foreign languages, while 53% have backgrounds in Letters and Philosophy. Additionally, 15% of the students have completed their secondary education in Experimental Sciences. The analysis of the data concerning "sex and secondary school education" reveals a trend of increasing feminization in undergraduate French language studies in Algeria, mirroring a global pattern observed in various regions worldwide, irrespective of the baccalaureate stream (Tables 2, 3).

*Language usage and contexts of communication.* When students were asked about the languages they use when they speak with family members, with friends and acquaintances from their social contexts and/or with their teachers and colleagues at the university, their answers split between Arabic and French languages. Yet, the researchers noted that such usages of these language vary in percentage; namely dialectal Arabic is undoubtedly the language mainly used in social contexts and family communication situations with a percentage of 75%. This percentage of Arabic usage is less as students communicate with university teachers. Students say they use French massively while communicating with professors and teachers with a percentage of 86%, followed by dialectal Arabic reaching 12%. It should be noted that Chaoui, one of the variants of Berber exclusively characterizing the Aurès region in Algeria, is used in the family (35%) followed by French (7%).

*Students' perception of the complexity of the French language.* In relation to the level of difficulty, it is observed that 41% of the students find French to be an easy language to learn. On the other hand, 32% consider it difficult, and 27% perceive it as very difficult. Overall, it can be concluded that the French language is generally regarded as challenging. It is important to note that the perception of language difficulty is subjective and may vary among students. Several factors, including familiarity with the language, motivation, prior language skills, and teaching methods, can influence these perceptions of difficulty.

Considering the individual perspectives of students is crucial, and providing tailored resources and strategies according to their competence level and specific needs is essential. This approach fosters a positive learning experience and enhances student motivation in acquiring proficiency in the French language.

**Table 3 Diverse Reasons Behind the Pursuit for learning French.**

| Q7: According to you, learning foreign languages means: | Mean |
|---|------|
| Learn to communicate correctly in general.              | 4.04 |
| Access to linguistic and scientific knowledge.          | 3.65 |
| Open up to other worlds, discover other cultures.       | 2.48 |
| Have wider professional opportunities.                  | 1.25 |
| Shape your personality and develop your skills.         | 0.71 |

*Perceptions of the French language within family circles.* Question 6, "How is the French language perceived in your surroundings (family, friends, and city)? (a) Positively; (b) Negatively," aims to understand the reception of the French language within the respondents' immediate environment, including their families. The collected responses reveal that a portion of student families (40%) hold a positive perception of the French language. They view it as prestigious, globally oriented, and offering academic and professional opportunities for their children. On the other hand, the left portion of the respondents (60%) still manifest a negative perception towards the French language, often associating it with the colonial legacy. It is important to note that these perceptions can be influenced by various factors such as education, family environment, personal experiences, and individual perspectives.

*Language Learning Motivation and Interest.* Question 7 prompts respondents to prioritize and rank the reasons behind their preference for learning foreign languages. To assess the significance attributed to each idea, the researchers assigned points based on the ranking provided (1st rank = 5 points, 2nd rank = 4, 3rd rank = 3 points, 4th rank = 2 points, 5th rank = 1 point). Subsequently, the researchers computed the average score, ranging from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 5, to gauge the relative importance of each reason.

The primary motivation for learning foreign languages, cited by nearly all of the interrogated students (80 Students), is "The ability to express oneself correctly". According to these respondents, acquiring proficiency in different languages allows for improved pronunciation, expanded vocabulary, and enhanced language usage. The second source of motivation mentioned by the students is "Access to linguistic and scientific knowledge". Mastering languages such as English or French, for example, enables them to access a wealth of valuable resources in their studies without relying solely on translated works in their native language.

Then comes "Openness to other cultures". The students perceive foreign languages as a means to delve deeper into a country's culture, beyond the typical tourist experiences. It fosters an openness towards others and the acceptance of differences, as intolerance to cultural diversity hinders meaningful intercultural understanding.

Furthermore, "Having wider professional opportunities" ranks fourth among the motivations. The students recognize that foreign language proficiency is a vital asset in the job market. Sectors such as education, communication, and business often require individuals to have a strong command of at least one foreign language alongside their native tongue. Finally, 12 of the student respondents believe that learning foreign languages contributes to shaping their personality and developing their interpersonal skills.

These motivations collectively highlight the multifaceted benefits and aspirations associated with learning foreign languages as perceived by the students.

**The results of the survey.** The findings presented in this section are intertwined with the questions posed in the two questionnaires, enabling us to gauge the extent of transformation in the students' perceptions before and after their training. The results of these questionnaire offer a solid foundation to evaluate the influence of French language instruction on the students' representations and measure the magnitude of change in their intercultural perspectives. Such insights are invaluable in assessing the effectiveness of teaching and training in French as a foreign language, and they can inform future endeavours aimed at enhancing learners' intercultural competence.

*Images and representations of France.* Question 10, "Cite some images (objects, personalities, historical facts, places, etc.) that you closely associate with France," aims to uncover the various representations formed by students regarding France. Initially, the respondents provided 153 words in their answers during the pre-survey. However, after two years of training in French License, their responses expanded to 305 words. To analyse these words, a semantic comparison was employed, resulting in the following groupings:

From the results presented in Table 4 above, we can say that there is a certain evolution in the representations that students had of France: the number of words that students cite testifies to the diversity of representations when moving from one category to another.

*Evolution of representations of France.* The findings from question 9 reveal a substantial decrease in negative perceptions associated with France, indicating a predominantly positive perspective towards the country and its culture. Almost all students (83%) consider France to be the top tourist destination for Algerians, with Paris specifically recognized as the fashion capital. One student eloquently described France as a nation with a romantic language, a rich culture, and refined individuals. The national motto of France, "justice, equality, and fraternity," resonated with many students, who also highlighted iconic landmarks such as the Louvre Museum, the Eiffel Tower, and the Palace of Versailles. French gastronomy was praised for its exquisite and luxurious nature, while the abundance of French literature was showcased through references to renowned writers like Molière, Hugo, Baudelaire, Camus, and Sartre. However, it is important to note that some respondents (55%) also acknowledged France's historical role as a former colonizer of Algeria, which led to negative associations such as colonization, enmity, war, and the May 8, 1945 massacre.

*Images and representation of the French.* The positive perception of France held by students also extends to its inhabitants to some extent. Most of the respondents (67%) appreciate the beauty, simplicity, open-mindedness, organization, culture, and civility of the French people. Students describe the French as intelligent, punctual, and dedicated to their work, in addition to being

individuals who appreciate and embrace the joys of life, including a romantic approach to love. However, it is important to note that among the respondents, 49 individuals perceive the French as having racist and Islamophobic tendencies. They perceive a negative attitude towards anything non-Muslim, justified under the pretext of combating "terrorism" and "radical Islam." These recurring stereotypical discourses were observed in the responses to the second questionnaire.

**Sources of students' formed representations.** Question 13 was designed to investigate the sources of negative perceptions held by respondents concerning France and the French people. The findings indicate that these stereotypical images primarily originate from historical factors (58%), followed by media influence (21%). It is evident that the legacy of colonialism continues to shape the imagination of new generations in Algeria, reinforcing their connection to historical identity and national references.

Interestingly, the influence of the family circle (7%) appears to be relatively less significant in shaping these perceptions compared to Algerian educational policy (15%). As argued by Mohamed Benrabah, educational materials in textbooks contribute to the promotion of confinement, fostering a sense of distrust and intolerance towards non-Muslims. This perpetuates a form of "cultural xenophobia" that lays the groundwork for the elimination of anything perceived as different (Benrabah, 1999, p. 163).

**Representation of the French language and culture.** According to the survey results, the French language is overwhelmingly viewed positively by nearly all of the surveyed students (84%). They associate it with prestige, love, elegance, and modernity. Moreover, a significant majority (89%) acknowledge the widespread usage of French in Algeria. Furthermore, a substantial percentage (76%) of students believe that French serves as an effective medium for accessing scientific knowledge. However, it is worth noting that less than half of the students (23%) find the French language to be challenging due to its unique phonetic and orthographic characteristics.

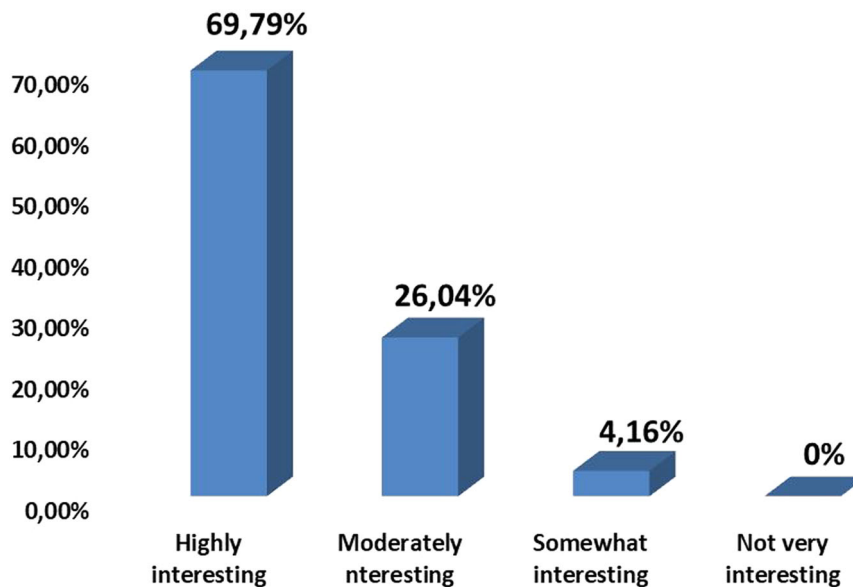
*Evolution of cultural representations.* In relation to French culture, it provides insight into the initial perceptions held by respondents when they initially enrolled at university during their first year. Less than half of the participants (35%) initially possessed positive representations of French culture, which were shaped by personal judgments, shared experiences, and representative configurations. This subgroup of students held the view that French culture is exceptionally rich and has had a profound influence on humanity throughout the centuries. They regarded France as a country that highly values various artistic practices, including music, theatre, painting, and more. However, a majority of the respondents (65%) expressed negative perceptions or chose not to provide an answer. This observation highlights a significant intercultural crisis within the Algerian education system, characterized by compartmentalization and intolerance towards the culture of others. It is worth noting that these negative perceptions gradually transformed into positive ones after the students underwent training in French Language and Literature. This finding emphasizes the potential impact of education and exposure to French Language and Literature in shaping students' perspectives and fostering a more favourable perception of French culture.

*Students' perception of the French language before and after training*

*Relationship with the Media Landscape:* Question 15 was designed to explore students' preferences regarding French or

**Table 4 Words presented in relation to France.**

| Categories  | Words listed in October 2018 | Words listed in June 2019 |
|-------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| French life | 34                           | 51                        |
| History     | 28                           | 49                        |
| Places      | 13                           | 37                        |
| Landmarks   | 5                            | 21                        |
| Culture     | 24                           | 58                        |
| Various     | 49                           | 89                        |
| Total       | <b>153</b>                   | <b>305</b>                |



**Fig. 1 Interest granted to the French Civilization course.** This figure shows the level of interest expressed by students towards the French Civilization course when they first encountered it during their undergraduate studies at the university.

French-speaking television channels and their potential impact on their language perception. The survey results revealed that a significant majority of students (68%) expressed a preference for Arabic channels, followed by French or French-speaking channels (25%), with English-speaking channels being the least preferred (7%). These findings indicate a notable trend of growing interest in French-speaking channels among the students, showcasing their enthusiasm to utilize diverse resources in their journey of learning the French language and immersing themselves in its associated culture.

*Integration of French culture in courses.* In question 16, the objective was to gauge the significance attributed to French culture by teachers in their classes, as perceived by the students. The findings revealed that the majority of students, regardless of their individual interest in the French language, regarded the emphasis on culture by their teachers as moderately important. It was noteworthy that the students' assessment of the role of culture in French as a Foreign Language (FFL) courses seemed to be unaffected by their personal preferences. Thus, it can be inferred that their perception of the prominence of culture in their FLE learning experience is not substantially influenced by their own fondness or lack thereof for the French language.

**Online interaction with French or French-speaking individuals.** Question 17 investigated whether students interacted online with French or French-speaking individuals to improve their communication skills in French. Most respondents answered "no" due to the lack of social contact with foreigners. Some foreigners decline their social media invitations because of the foreigners' limited availability rather than a lack of interest. Additionally, several factors may stand as obstacles behind the inability to establish social contact with foreigners. According to the respondents, establishing contact with native French speakers online may pose challenges due to language barriers, cultural differences, and concerns related to privacy. Furthermore, strangers' reluctance to accept social media invitations could be influenced by individual factors such as time constraints, personal priorities, or a general wariness towards contact requests from unknown individuals.

#### **French civilization course and intercultural skills development**

*The significance of the French civilization course.* The data displayed in the Fig. 1 (cf. p. 30) indicates that 69.79% of students found the French Civilization course highly interesting or rather moderately interesting as reported by 26.04% of the respondents. These two groups of students expressed that the course allowed them to gain insights into the French nation, culture and civilization, especially regarding the social and cultural realms such as the French way of life, gastronomy, cinema, and history. The design and content of the course reflect the ideology of those who designed it. Those experts realized the feasibility of investing in language learning and cultural exposure as this facilitates cultural and intercultural encounters with others. The left portion of the respondent students 4.16% considered the French Civilization subject to be not very interesting. This attitude is generated due to the nature of the course which they consider as tedious. They would appreciate it better if their language instructors smoothly integrated the cultural aspects related to the French culture and nation along their language learning studies. The concept of allocating a distinct subject to instruct students in the theoretical presentation of cultural facts, forcing them to mechanically absorb information devoid of genuine understanding, can be regarded as devoid of purpose. The foreign language teacher, especially when teaching civilization, should consider new strategies and more effective methods to spark learners' curiosity in discovering the other culture. This may involve using authentic documents, word games, group work, and autonomous research via the Internet to create an engaging learning environment for exploring foreign cultures.

*French civilization and intercultural understanding course.* Question 18 aimed to assess whether the French Civilization course effectively develops students' intercultural competence in managing misunderstandings and intercultural conflicts. Among the respondents, 42 acknowledged that this course introduced them to French culture, traditions, and ways of life, the fact that challenged their preconceived and outdated stereotypes. Stereotypes act as filters hindering relationships and intercultural communication, offering an inaccurate perception of others. However, 54 students felt that the French Civilization course



alone did not adequately prepare them to handle misunderstandings or intercultural conflicts. They believed that real immersion in the target culture through cultural stays or training courses, providing authentic communication experiences, was necessary. Additionally, they found that the course content did not sufficiently expose them to the intricacies of the French world, making it challenging to interpret certain cultural phenomena encountered in social networks or television.

*Effective approaches for developing intercultural competence according to respondents.* The final item in the second questionnaire prompted students to reflect on measures that would genuinely enhance their intercultural competence. Most respondents (73%) expressed that language skills alone were insufficient for immersing themselves in foreign cultures. They believed that studying “French Civilization,” “artistic and literary monuments,” or theoretical aspects were inadequate for acquiring intercultural competence and understanding the heterogeneity and diversity of cultures. Instead, they suggested that direct exposure to the target culture through language trips or engagement with native speakers via social networks would establish a genuine connection.

## Conclusion

The various languages of people cannot be detached from inherited principles and assumptions about the world and the nations inhabiting it. In “Words and social change. The impact of power and ideology on the language of Economics and Law”, Simonetta Resta underscores Foucault’s point of view indicating that “the constitutive power of modern society lies in the discursive practices of social institutions and organisations. These practices are often redesigned in accordance with particular strategies and objectives...” (Resta, 2).

Integrating the intercultural dimension into French language teaching aims to help learners prepare to interact effectively with individuals from different cultures. This skill facilitates understanding and acceptance of people with diverse values, traditions, opinions, and behaviours, enabling the challenge of prejudices and stereotypes. The teacher plays a vital role in encouraging students expressing their perceptions of French-speaking countries, cultures, and nations, guiding them toward a more realistic understanding while preparing them for embracing otherness.

This study aimed to assess the evolution of intercultural representations among students and future teachers of French as a foreign language regarding France as a country, the French people and French language and its associated culture. The results indicate that the respondent students exhibited less positive associations with France and the French people compared to the French language itself. On one hand, students attributed a certain prestige to the French language, recognizing its usefulness in their socio-professional lives due to the opportunities it offers in education, administration, and other sectors. On the other hand, less positive associations with France and the French people may reflect persistent prejudices or negative personal experiences influenced by colonial heritage, media portrayal, or individual interactions.

In summary, the responses to the questionnaires reveal a positive shift in stereotypical images of French culture among university students. This transformation is largely influenced by the exposure to French culture through the French Civilization course, which introduces various cultural aspects of France and its people. However, according to the interviewed students, culture should not be taught as a separate discipline but rather should be integrated into other subjects. Considering the dynamic and changeable nature of representations, teachers must explore innovative methods to foster genuine intercultural competence in

learners and reshape their representations. Teachers can encourage learners to reflect on their own representations, challenge stereotypes, and explore cultural diversity. Activities such as discussions, research projects, presentations, and cross-cultural exchanges can enhance cross-cultural awareness. Furthermore, interaction with native French speakers and French-speaking students from other countries through online exchanges, language partnerships, or international programs can deepen students’ understanding of French culture and help dispel preconceived notions.

Ultimately, these approaches should be incorporated coherently into language policies and the design of university training programs concerning learning and teaching French as a foreign language. This integration will promote robust intercultural competence among learners, reshape their representations, and foster positive and respectful intercultural interactions. Establishing the relationship between cultural exposure and language acquisition on one hand and intercultural communication and competence on the other is a crucial matter for international stability, integration and collaboration. Targeting university students with such knowledge can guarantee real social change. This segment of society can easily influence and challenge cultural beliefs, values norms and social practices. Language instructors, as mediator between language and culture, are cornerstones in emphasizing political player through cultural, social and political tolerance and inclusions. The impact of social change on sociolinguistic representations as well as on language use, teaching and learning is inevitable. Linguists, educators and cultural experts have to join hands for the sake of a better tomorrow.

## Data availability

No data were generated in the paper.

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### Author contributions

SB and Hala AT contributed equally to this work.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical approval

The research was conducted by teacher-researchers among university students who are of legal age, preserving complete anonymity of their responses and does not require a ethical approval.

### Informed consent

The research was conducted with the participants' consent. The study did not induce any physical, emotional, or psychological issues in the participants and did not involve any privacy risks or major ethical issues. Participants were informed about the anonymity of the research and were briefed on the procedures before undertaking it.

### Additional information

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