

Sociocultural Awareness, Cultural Perspectives and Strategies in Language Assistants' Academic Papers in Spain

Conciencia sociocultural, perspectivas culturales y estrategias en trabajos académicos elaborados por auxiliares de conversación en España

Bianca Vitalaru

Investigadora Instituto Franklin-UAH

bianca.vitalaru@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0618-3867>

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Resumen: Este artículo incluye un análisis de trabajos académicos que se centran en aspectos culturales escritos por estudiantes de máster en el programa ‘Teach & Learn in Spain’ en el Instituto Franklin-UAH. El porcentaje de trabajos académicos de estas características escritos por estos estudiantes que actuaron como auxiliares de conversación (AC) en colegios bilingües en España es bastante alto, lo que sugiere la importancia del componente cultural en la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua y su alto nivel de conciencia sociocultural. Por lo tanto, este artículo tiene varios objetivos: a) determinar la existencia de una conciencia sociocultural específica en los trabajos de investigación; b) identificar los aspectos culturales que fueron considerados esenciales por los AC en este programa y mostrar las estrategias utilizadas para proporcionar información; y c) comparar hallazgos considerando antecedentes teóricos. El método se basará en un enfoque mixto basado en análisis cuantitativos y cualitativos y será específico para cada uno de los objetivos.

Palabras clave: Cultura; Investigación; Conciencia Sociocultural; Auxiliares de Conversación; Trabajos Académicos.

Abstract: This paper includes an analysis of academic papers that focus on cultural aspects written by MA students in the ‘Teach & Learn in Spain’ program at Instituto Franklin-UAH. The percentage of academic papers focusing on cultural aspects written by these students who acted as Language Assistants (LAs) in bilingual schools in Spain is quite high. This suggests the importance of the cultural component in the teaching of English as a second language and their high level of sociocultural awareness. Thus, this paper has several objectives: a) to determine the existence of a specific sociocultural awareness in research papers; b) to identify the cultural aspects that were considered essential by the LAs in this program and show the strategies used to provide information; and c) to compare findings considering the theoretical background. The method will rely on a mixt approach considering quantitative and qualitative analyses and will be specific for each of the objectives.

Keywords: Culture; Research; Sociocultural Awareness; Language Assistants; Academic Papers.

Introduction

This paper is written in the context of the training of MA students in the ‘Teach & Learn in Spain’ Program at Instituto Franklin-UAH, which relies on a double training perspective. On one hand, classes in a one-year Master’s Degree in an education-related field from the six programs offered provide theoretical and practical training on different fundamental notions related to education as well as the necessary tools they need to develop autonomous teaching skills. On the other hand, it offers hands-on experience as Language Assistants (LAs) through the 30 credits teaching practicum in bilingual schools carried out since 2008 within the Bilingual Education Program implemented in 2004-2005 by the Spanish Regional Ministry (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2018).

The study provides an analysis of academic papers that focus on cultural aspects written by students enrolled in the program while acting as English-speaking LAs in bilingual schools in Madrid. Two reasons have led to the choice of this topic. First, the percentage of academic papers focusing on cultural aspects is quite high (approx. 70 %), which suggests the importance of the cultural component in the teaching of English or of a second language in general. Moreover, it shows the high number of LAs with a certain level of sociocultural awareness, that is, a

specific awareness of the societies and cultures involved in the communication process and of its context (British Council, 2019). It develops when they are faced with the corresponding challenges of intercultural communication while living, studying, and acting as LAs in Spain. In fact, the underlying cause, culture, is a complex concept that encompasses several meanings and perspectives that have changed over the years. Section 2 will provide more details about the complexity of its definition and the different classifications of its multiple components.

Second, the LAs' own perspective on the cultural aspects that affect their education and teaching performance in a different country can be highly effective for the next generations of LAs that may face the same challenges.

Thus, the general objectives of this paper are a) to determine the existence of a specific sociocultural awareness in research papers; b) to identify the cultural aspects that were considered essential by the LAs in this program and show the strategies used to provide information about the cultural challenges perceived in the social and educational settings in question, and c) to compare findings considering the theoretical background. The method will rely on a mixed approach considering quantitative and qualitative analysis and will be specific for each of the objectives. Thus, we used both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a corpus of papers and their corresponding titles, classifications of topics, qualitative analysis of strategies used to adapt the information for the potential reader, and comparison.

In the following sections the main theoretical concepts involved (section 1), the methodology (section 2), and the results of the analysis (section 3) will be thoroughly discussed.

1. Culture: Definition and Classifications

1.1. Culture and Cultural aspects

Although seemingly simple when considered in monolingual contexts by members of the same social group and country, culture is, in fact, a complex concept that, over time, has acquired an accumulation of meanings, variations, and perspectives. Proof of this complexity are the different attempts to define, classify it or even to compile its different nuances. Thus, if in 1952 American anthropologists Kroeber & Kluckhohn compiled more than 300 definitions on culture, from which they classified 164 definitions, the list is certainly longer today.

Moreover, it manifests itself in different ways depending on a variety of factors such as living conditions, country of origin, and social group of the participants, as well as beliefs, behavior, artistic manifestation, and communication with one's own and other cultures in different settings.

In this context, it seems essential to clarify the different aspects involved when analyzing the students' perception and focus in their decision-making process in academic papers.

First, the definitions from several dictionaries provide basic information about current use and meanings. The Merriam Webster Dictionary includes four main abstract meanings (Figure 1):

Figure 1

Definition of 'Culture'

- | |
|--|
| <p>1 a : the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group</p> <p><i>also</i> : the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time</p> <p>// popular culture</p> <p>// Southern culture</p> <p>b : the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization</p> <p>// a corporate culture focused on the bottom line</p> <p>c : the set of values, <u>conventions</u>, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic</p> <p>// studying the effect of computers on print culture</p> <p>// Changing the culture of materialism will take time ...</p> <p>— Peggy O'Mara</p> |
| <p>d : the <u>integrated</u> pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations</p> |
| <p>2 a : enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and <u>aesthetic</u> training</p> <p>b : acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills</p> <p>// a person of culture</p> <p>5 : the act of developing the intellectual and moral <u>faculties</u> especially by education</p> <p>6 : expert care and training</p> <p>// beauty culture</p> |

Source: Merriam Webster Dictionary

As we can observe in Figure 1, the two basic perspectives for defining it refer either to “excellence of taste” acquired by training or to aspects which characterize a social or religious group, institutions, organizations, fields or activities such as beliefs, attitudes, practices, social norms or traits.

The Cambridge Online Dictionary offers similar meanings for both UK and US context, either as:

a) A way of life and as the artistic manifestation of a group:

Figure 2a

Definition of 'Culture' (US)

culture

noun · US  /ˈkʌl.tʃər/

culture noun (WAY OF LIFE)

 **social studies** [C/U] **the way of life of a particular people, esp. as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs:**

[U] *He studied the culture of the Sioux Indians.*

culture noun (ARTS)

 [U] **the arts of describing, showing, or performing that represent the traditions or the way of life of a particular people or group; literature, art, music, dance, theater, etc.**

Source: Cambridge Online Dictionary

b) The lifestyle of a group at a particular time and aspects related to the organization in the workplace:

Figure 2b

Definition of 'Culture' (UK. Business settings)

culture

noun • UK  /'kʌltʃə/ US 

★ [C or U] **the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time:**

You will need time to get used to working in a different culture.

In today's culture, wireless is part of our daily lives.

★ [C or U] **WORKPLACE the ideas and ways of working that are typical for an organization, and that affect how it does business and how its employees behave:**

culture (of sth) *Where I work there's a culture of collaboration.*

build/develop/foster, etc. a culture *Our aim was to foster a culture of innovation at all levels in the company.*

business/company/management culture *This is a handy guide to the management culture in the countries with which we do business.*

Source: Cambridge Online Dictionary

Second, as a fundamental concept in anthropology and sociology, the notion itself has undergone changes and was the reflection of different theories. Some important elements are the association of 'culture' with 'civilization' and use as synonyms in the 18th-19th centuries, the recognition of its multifaceted essence through the hundreds of definitions in Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952)'s study, the recognition of all cultures as different, or its association with 'consumption goods' and the importance of material culture at the end of the 20th century (New World Encyclopedia, 2013; International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008a). Although not a direct reflection of all these theories, we will group some of the most well-known definitions from different periods according to the type of aspects they emphasize as fundamental:

Table 1

Definitions of Culture I

(BGSU, Pre-departure Handbook 2018-2019: 21)	"[...] a set of values, beliefs, assumptions and understandings about the world, human beings and society. All people have a specific culture and it provides a way of interpreting and living in the world. It makes life predictable, understandable and meaningful ".
Spradley and McCurdy (2012:2)	"Culture is a kind of knowledge, not behavior: It is in people's heads. It reflects the mental categories they learn from others as they grow up. It helps them <i>generate</i> behavior and <i>interpret</i> what they experience. At the moment of birth, we lack a culture. We don't yet have a system of beliefs, knowledge, and patterns of customary behavior. But from that moment until we die, each of us participates in a kind of universal schooling that teaches us our native culture . Laughing and smiling are genetic responses, but as infants we soon learn when to smile, when to laugh, and even how to laugh. We also inherit the potential to cry, but we must learn our cultural rules for when crying is appropriate"

Source: own elaboration

c) Both material and non-material aspects; general enumerations:

Table 2

Definitions of Culture II

Tylor (1871) cited by Bhushan and Sachdev (2012: 36)	"Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society".
Maclver cited by Bhushan and Sachdev (2012: 36)	"Culture is the expression of our nature in our modes of living and our thinking, intercourse, in our literature, in religion, in recreation and enjoyment".
UNESCO (2002)	"set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs".

Source: own elaboration

d) Both material and non-material aspects; the ideas of transmission and/or accumulation are key:

Table 3

Definitions of Culture III

Green, Arnold W. cited by Bhushan and Sachdev (2012: 36)	"Culture is the socially transmitted system of idealized ways in knowledge, practices and beliefs, along with the artifacts that knowledge and practice produce and maintain as they change in time".
Mazumdar, H. T. cited by Bhushan and Sachdev (2012: 36)	"Culture is the sum total of human achievements material as well as non-material, capable of transmission, sociologically i.e. by tradition-and communication, vertically as well as horizontally".
Sociology guide (2018)	"Culture can be conceived as a continuous, cumulative reservoir containing both material and non-material elements that are socially transmitted from generation to generation. Culture is continuous because cultural patterns transcend years, reappearing in successive generations. Culture is cumulative because each generation contributes to the reservoir".

Source: own elaboration

e) Every aspect of life; decisions, power, production

Table 4

Definitions of Culture IV

Verhelst (1990:17)	" every aspect of life : know how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language, symbols, socio political and economic behavior, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power , methods of production and economic relations, and so on."
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Source: own elaboration

Third, sources like encyclopedias, studies that explore the cultural components or even repertoires that gather and analyze the conceptual framework of the notion are particularly useful for providing a comprehensive overview of the aspects involved that could be

considered for research. Thus, the New World Encyclopedia (2013) underlines several characteristics of ‘culture’ in a more detailed and cohesive way:

It includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behavior such as law and morality, and systems of belief. The elements of culture are first adopted by members of the social group, found to be useful, and then transmitted or propagated to others.

The same source shows its double-sided nature, both as a reflection of social activities and as a dynamic factor, which influences behavior:

In this way, culture is both defined by the social activities of the group and also defines the behavior of the members of the society. Culture, however, is not fixed or static; rather, it involves a dynamic process as people respond to changing conditions and challenges.

Moreover, Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952)’s study presents the eight essential conceptual categories that culture revolves around and according to which people organize their lives:

1. Topical: A list of topics such as social structure, religion, economic system, and so forth.
2. Historical: Social heritage, or tradition, passed from generation to generation.
3. Behavioral: Shared, learned human behavior, a way of life.
4. Normative: Ideals, values, norms, or standards for life.
5. Functional: The way people solve problems and adapt to their environment.
6. Mental: Complex of ideas, or learned habits, that distinguish people from animals.
7. Structural: Patterned and interrelated ideas, symbols, or behaviors.
8. Symbolic: Arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society.

An important detailed explanation of the aspects involved in the notion itself is the one provided in Borocho (2016)’s reinterpretation of the information used by Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952). For each of the seven definition categories offered in the initial study (descriptive, historical, normative, psychological, structural, genetic, and

incomplete) he includes the criteria used in a visual and conceptual way (Table 5). Thus, we observe the aspects that are, in fact, essential in defining the concept and ultimately for including it into one category or another:

Table 5
Classification of Aspects Included in the Definition of Culture

Group A: descriptive definitions	a) culture as a “complex whole”, b) listing the features of culture, c) in the definitions of this group there are the following expressions: <i>complex whole, whole, total, everything</i> .
Group B historical definitions	a) social heritage, b) social tradition, c) non-biological heritage and intergenerational transmission.
Group C: normative definitions	
Subgroup C1 – rules are emphasized	a) pressure exerted by a group on an individual, b) model nature of life understood as imitation.
Subgroup C2 – values and ideas plus behaviour are emphasized	a) behaviours, b) open actions, c) ideas, d) values.
Group D: psychological definitions	
Subgroup D1 – emphasizing modification of culture as a “tool” solving problems	The influence of Sumner’s theoretical thought in the following categories: a) <i>folkways</i> , b) <i>mores</i> .
Subgroup D2 – learning is emphasized	a) learning of people, b) non-genetic transmission of knowledge and skills.
Subgroup D3 – habits are emphasized	a) custom/tradition as a factor referring to a group, b) habits as a factor referring to an individual.
Subgroup D4 – fully psychological definitions	a) general psychology, b) psychoanalysis, c) social psychology.
Group E: structural definitions	
Group E: structural definitions – emphasizing a model nature and organisation of culture	a) way of organisation of culture, b) components making up the structure of culture, which are specifically system-related.

Group F: genetic definitions	
Subgroup F1 – emphasizing culture as a product or artefact	a) things which become culture, b) factors determining the existence of culture, c) components of culture: material artefact.
Subgroup F2 – ideas are emphasized	a) ideas – immanence, b) ideas – communicability.
Subgroup F3 – symbols are emphasized	a) usage of a symbol in culture, b) definitions of this subgroup use the following words: <i>symbol, project</i> (or equivalents).
Subgroup F4 – other genetic definitions	a) origin of culture, b) listing what culture is not.

Source: Boroch (2016: 62-63)

From these definitions, the complexity and syncretism of the notion is obvious. If in simple words culture seems to refer to "what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce" (Bodley, 2009), its properties, ("shared, learned, symbolic, transmitted cross-generationally, adaptive, and integrated"), seem to explain the lack of consensus regarding its definition.

In this context, the most important characteristics that can be underlined for the purpose of this paper are its semantic and conceptual variety, the transmission from one generation to another or the learning process it implies, and its powerful effect on perception, attitude, and behavior especially in different communication settings.

1.2. Classifications of Culture

Following the same lack of consensus or lack of terminological uniformity regarding the basic elements/categories involved, in the last 150 years, there have been different classifications of the cultural components that affect one's life and actions. Several will be described below based on information from various sources:

a) Material and non-material culture

Specifically, the distinction between these two categories has been made in 1871 when Tylor employed the term "material culture", without defining it.

Material culture consists in "any physical manifestation or product of culture", and it manifests itself in "physical, palpable, measurable form". It includes a variety of forms depending on the field in question. Thus, it is "what archaeologists typically refer to as artifacts, collectors as relics, and art historians as *objets d'art*" and includes:

- "large-scale examples" of "intentionally built environment" such as buildings, gardens, bridges, and monuments.
- "any modification of the environment resulting from cultural activity, deliberate or not" such as crop marks, oil spills, etc.
- "all writing and symbolic expression, from pictographs, graffiti, iconography".

Ultimately, it "communicates, expresses meaning, conveys experience, disciplines, and exhibits agency" (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008b).

On the other hand, non-material culture is defined as "the abstract creations of society (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, ideas, norm, and values) that influence behavior and direct socialization" (Open Education Sociology Dictionary, 2013). This distinction is also implied in the next two classifications which include elements from both categories.

b) Values, norms, and artifacts

The Dictionary of Modern Sociology (1969) mentions three types of cultural components: "values, norms, and artifacts". Values refer to ideas about the aspects that are considered as most important in life and that guide the rest of the cultural elements. On the other hand, norms refer to expectations of behaviors in certain situations. They are

enforced differently depending on each culture and sanctions vary depending on the importance of those norms. Finally, artifacts consist in objects (considered ‘material culture’) and are the result of values and norms.

c) Mentifacts, sociofacts, and artifacts

Another classification, discussed by biologist Julian Huxley, divides the notion into three categories that are strongly related: “mentifacts, sociofacts, and artifacts” (New World Encyclopedia, 2013). Each one is associated with a specific ‘subsystem’: ideological, sociological, and technological (White, 1949). The first one, ideological, refers to “mental manifestations of culture —different ideas, beliefs, and knowledge and the ways in which these things are expressed in speech or other forms of communication”. The second one, sociological, is associated with “the way people interact with each other, and the types of relationships they form”. There is a close relationship between them since socialization “depends [...] on the dominant cultural belief systems”, that is, on mentifacts; similarly, “the sociological subsystem governs interactions between people and influences the formation of mentifacts”. The last one, technological, is formed by “material objects and their use” and is related to the first two subsystems (cited by the New World Encyclopedia, 2013).

d) Visible and invisible culture/ Surface and deep culture

A well-known classification is encompassed in Edward T. Hall’s Cultural Iceberg Model (1976), which proposes an analogy between the culture of a particular society and an iceberg. Both have a visible (on the surface) and invisible (below the surface) side. The 10 % that makes up the visible, on the surface side refers to the external conscious part reflected in aspects such as traditions, behaviors, customs, and aspects that can be easily observed by using our senses. Some of these elements are arts, food, language, greetings, music, dance, and clothing and they are important for social interaction and the development of a sense of unity.

The 90 % that makes up the invisible, deep side is associated with the internal, subconscious part and includes aspects that are more difficult to observe such as core values, customs, priorities, behaviors, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and assumptions. Some examples are personal space, gender roles, authority, communication, body language, worldview, religious beliefs, decision-making models, ideas about leadership, etc. In other words, as explained in *Language and Culture Worldwide* (2015), the iceberg has three elements: observable behaviors at the tip and two other elements below the surface: core values (referred to as "values and thought patterns" in Hall's model) and interpretations (referred to as 'beliefs' in the same model). Each one is explained below in the context of cultural change:

- Observable behaviors: "how we ultimately act"; "the words we use, the way we act, the laws we enact, and the way we communicate with each other".
- Core values: "our way of seeing the world and deciding what matters to us". "They are passed on from generation to generation by numerous factors which surround us and influence us"; therefore, they cannot be easily changed. A detailed definition follows:

Deep below the "water line" are a culture's **Core values**. These are primarily learned ideas of what is good, right, desirable, and acceptable -- as well as what is bad, wrong, undesirable, and unacceptable. In many cases, different cultural groups share similar core values (such as "honesty", or "respect", or "family"), but these are often interpreted differently in different situations and incorporated in unique ways into our daily lives.

- Interpretations: "what [the core values] mean in our personal and professional lives". They "become visible to the casual observer in the form of Observable Behaviors".

e) High and low culture

Another classification that is particularly significant for its frequent use over a long period is the distinction between high and low culture.

Sociologist Herbert Gans (1986: 17-18; cited by the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008c) mentioned the existence of "various tastes" based on which culture could be classified. "Taste cultures" refer to the "array of arts, and forms of entertainment and information, as well as consumer goods available to different taste publics". There are five categories of elements considered for the different taste cultures: "literature, art, consumption patterns, hobbies, and other leisure activities".

On the other hand, there has always been a certain "stratification system" considering the different 'cultures', implying the inequality in terms of valuing them (De Nora, 1991; cited by International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008c). In fact, the difference between high and low culture comes from arbitrary criteria since both involve a certain type of taste within the same categories, i.e. literature, art, music, or material goods. Thus, if high culture taste tends to show a particular interest in classical music, fine art, gourmet foods, etc., low culture tastes rely on different kinds of preferences that high culture does not have. Low culture was at some point a derogatory term for popular and working-class culture; it was associated with lower social status, incomes, levels of education, occupational hierarchy, and fewer opportunities to participate in high culture activities. Thus, factors such as socioeconomic status, equal opportunity, and taste preferences were essential for inclusion in one category or another (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008c).

f) High and popular culture

This classification is, in fact, related to the previous one, but adding more details about the perception of the 'popular' seems essential for clarification purposes.

The appreciation of the value of popular culture came at the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century and became essential in the context of increased literacy, entertainment, capitalism and industrialization. Its meaning is broad and its boundaries blur since, although it was specific for 'ordinary people', some members of the

social elite also showed interest in it. Thus, if high culture referred to the taste and interests of the social elite, as described above, popular culture was used specifically for the mass practices, ideas, and goods that were dominant in a society at a given time:

Tentatively, we can summarize popular culture as an expressive and shared system for the production, transmission, and consumption of cohesive yet simple values readily accessible to and accepted by most members of a given society at any given time, simultaneously fulfilling both normative and practical social interests (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2008d).

In fact, different perspectives in different contexts and theories show the complexity of the term 'popular culture'. Some of them are included in Storey's book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015: 5-13), which, among other aspects, discusses six definitions of the notion. First, he includes four meanings of the adjective 'popular':

- well-liked by many people;
- inferior kinds of work;
- work deliberately setting out to win favor with the people;
- culture actually made by the people for themselves' (237).

The definitions highlight the following perceptions of popular culture, although each one is problematic if considered separately and limited in its nature. Therefore, it refers to the following:

- What is preferred by the majority. Thus, it has a quantitative dimension (5).
- A "residual category" or what is left after deciding what 'high culture' is (6).
- An association with mass culture, particularly from the commercial point of view; "it is mass-produced for mass consumption" and for "non-discriminating consumers" (8).
- Something that spontaneously "originates from 'the people'; is an authentic element created, not imposed.
- A negotiation, a "site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups" (10).

It is interesting to notice that in the postmodernist perspective, culture no longer distinguishes between the two initial categories, high and popular culture, which is interpreted either as the deconstruction of elitism or as the victory of commerce (12).

The most common perception in cultural studies seems to refer to a common reality that each society is familiar with at that given moment. As Gary West (2019) mentions in his database on American pop culture, popular culture can be divided into several common categories:

- a) Entertainment (music, television, movies, and video games).
- b) People and places from sports and news.
- c) Politics, fashion, technology.
- d) Slang.
- e) Current individual ‘pop culture’, that is, choices regarding TV shows, movies, apps, bookmarks, songs playlist, and even topics discussed on social networks. The influence of mass media on people’s attitudes and importance given to certain topics is uncontested (McGaha, 2015: 32-37).

1.3. Sociocultural Awareness and Related Concepts

In this section, four concepts will be explained. First, the key concept of the paper, sociocultural awareness, followed by other significant concepts considering the context of its use, especially in some of the papers that were analyzed: intercultural communication, intercultural competence, and cross-cultural communication.

1.3.1. Sociocultural Awareness

Although not officially defined as a concept in literature, the term has been widely used especially in the context of the relationships between language and culture, language learning, and second language teaching/learning:

Sociocultural awareness means awareness of the societies and cultures of the target language, and therefore of the contexts the language is used in. Teachers themselves transmit information subconsciously about culture and society through their behavior and interaction with learners (British Council, 2019).

In fact, sociocultural awareness is specific for a ‘sociocultural perspective’ as a theory in psychology and as applied to learning. As a theory, it refers to the influence of the society we live in on the learning process and the essential role that elements such as language, art, social norms, and structures play in "the development of our cognitive abilities" (Psychologist World). In fact, modern social learning theories are based on ideas from Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1986). He identified the importance of social interactions for "the development of higher-order thinking skills" (Polly *et al.*, 2017) such as voluntary attention, logical thought, intentional memory, planning and problem solving, among others (Fahim & Haghani, 2012: 693). Two of his principles underline, on one hand, social, cultural and historical interactions and, on the other hand, language, as essential for "human development and learning" and for developing "higher mental functions".

Specifically, in terms of second language acquisition,¹ Lantolf & Thorne (2006; 2007) and Lantolf (2007) discuss how the principles of the sociocultural theory can also apply to second language acquisition. In this context, as Banković (2015: 4) explains, using language in meaningful experiences, internalization as well as imitation, which implies reasoning, is key:

The opportunity to use language as a means of making sense of experiences with others is a crucial step in learning to use language meaningfully, appropriately and effectively [...] It enables the child to internalize the language and carries it into further performance. The value of imitation is also emphasized for children’s language learning, arguing that internalization through imitation is not a matter of just miming and copying but entails an active, and frequently creative, reasoning process.

¹ Other recommended studies: Fahim and Haghani (2012)

In this paper, the term will refer to the existence of a specific awareness of the importance of cultural aspects in the teaching of either English in general or a specific content that is useful to understand cultural differences and avoid communication misunderstandings. Ultimately, we will refer to a particular awareness about how the students can affect or improve intercultural communication between the different agents involved.

1.3.2 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication can be defined in three different contexts as:

a) a concept that involves interaction between individuals or groups of different origins:

Intercultural communication is defined as situated communication between individuals or groups of different linguistic and cultural origins. This is derived from the following fundamental definitions: communication is the active relationship established between people through language, and intercultural means that this communicative relationship is between people of different cultures, where culture is the structured manifestation of human behavior in social life within specific national and local contexts, e.g. political, linguistic, economic, institutional, and professional (Langua, 2010).

b) an interdisciplinary field of study involving interaction and differences in terms of cultural backgrounds, language systems, and behaviors as suggested in the following definitions:

The interdisciplinary field of study that investigates how people of different cultural, religious, social, educational, etc. backgrounds interact and understand one another through different discourse systems and how these affect language use and attitudes of individuals in communication (Uzun, 2015).

[...] the discipline that studies communication from the perspective of the culture of those involved. The discipline analyzes affective, psychological, and social factors, and describes

the communication process from cognitive, behavioral, and affective perspectives (Assumpta, 2009).

c) an essential factor for teamwork in a work environment or, in general, in an organization; failure in addressing and solving the cultural differences result in conflicts and even low productivity:

The term "intercultural communication" is often used to refer to the wide range of communication issues that inevitably arise within an organization composed of individuals from a variety of religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Each of these individuals brings a unique set of experiences and values to the workplace, many of which can be traced to the culture in which they grew up and now operate. [...] The failure to address and resolve culturally based conflicts and tensions will inevitably show up in the form of diminished performance and decreased productivity (Encyclopedia of Small Business, 2007).

1.3.3. Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is associated with intercultural communication and influences its effectiveness:

Intercultural communication is identified as both a concept and a competence. Intercultural competence is the active possession by individuals of qualities which contribute to effective intercultural communication and can be defined in terms of three primary attributes: knowledge, skills and attitudes (Langua, 2010).

In Hammer (2012: 116)'s words, it refers to the "the capability to shift cultural perspective and adapt behavior to bridge across cultural differences involving increased cultural self-awareness; deepening understanding of the experiences, values, perceptions, and behaviors of people from diverse cultural communities". Thus, it involves shifting and adapting behavior, increasing cultural self-awareness. In turn, as Bennett (2014: 5) mentioned, cultural self-awareness is not only "our recognition of the cultural patterns that have influenced our identities and that are reflected in the various culture groups to which we belong",

but also a "prerequisite for the development of intercultural sensitivity" or "of intercultural competence".

In the same context, the title of Assumpta (2009)'s book, *Intercultural Competences as a Trust Factor in Virtual Teamwork*, associates the intercultural competence with its influence in a particular environment, in this case, virtual teamwork.

1.3.4. Cross-Cultural Communication

A term that is sometimes used interchangeably with intercultural communication is cross-cultural communication. It refers to "a process of creating and sharing meaning among people from different cultural backgrounds using a variety of means" (Omori, 2017). Another definition shows the contrast between several elements considering two cultures as essential:

Communication between members of different cultures through which each member's values and patterns of thinking, communication and behavior are often revealed as contrasting the values, patterns of thinking, communication, and behavior of the other (Takševa Chorney, 2009).

Therefore, the difference between the two concepts consists in the focus they are given from the research perspective. Thus, while the first highlights the interaction between the different cultures, the second stresses the differences between them (Omori, 2017).

2. Method

The research method used was a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments. A brief description of the methods used for each objective follows:

Objective 1: to determine the existence of a specific sociocultural awareness. More specifically, the focus was on establishing the percentage of papers that focused on sociocultural aspects as well as

identifying and establishing the main cultural aspects approached in each of the two types of paper applicable (research papers and curriculums) written between 2014 and 2017. The method consisted of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a database of topics/corpus of papers. It resulted in different classifications of papers that focused on cultural and intercultural aspects.

Objective 2: to identify the specific topics that the students who designed a practical guide for American Language Assistants in Spain in their final paper considered essential in terms of cultural, intercultural or cross-cultural aspects.

Objective 3: to underline the strategies used to adapt the information for the potential reader. The method was a qualitative analysis of a selection of four papers that included guides on cultural aspects, written under the supervision of the advisor, considering both the general and specific topics discussed (Vitalaru, 2019a). This also helped to gain more insight into the level of sociocultural awareness of the students.

Objective 4: to contextualize the aspects identified in the previous stages as considered essential by the LAs in the papers in general and in the guides considering more traditional classifications of cultural components. The method relied on comparing the observations found with main ideas provided in the literature review section.

3. Results and discussion

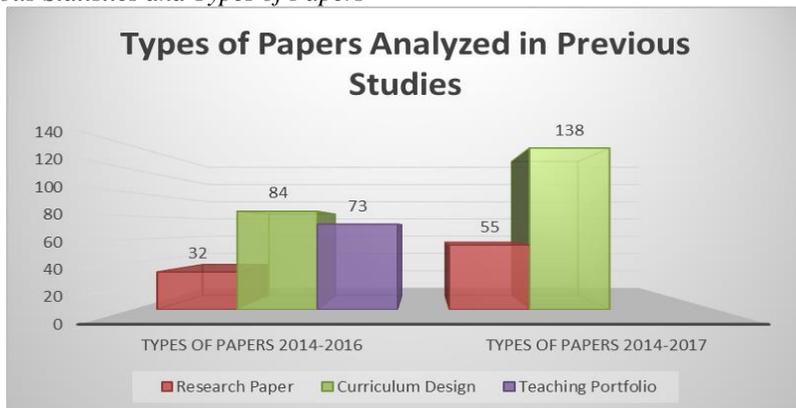
3.1 Previous Statistics and Types of Papers

As a general context regarding the types of academic papers required from students, the number of papers we focused on in previous analyses and classifications carried out will be mentioned. Thus, as shown in Figure 3, the first analysis focused on 189 papers written between 2014 and 2016 and it referred to the three initial types of papers offered in the program: Research Paper (RP), Curriculum Design (CD) and Teaching Portfolio (TP). A second analysis focused on 193

papers written between 2014-2017, which included three academic years and left out the third option.

Figure 3

Previous Statistics and Types of Papers



Source: own elaboration

With regards to the total number of papers during the timeframe established, the RP represented 17 % and 28 % of the papers while the CD 44 % and 72 %.

From the classifications established in the previous studies, the percentage of papers from the category related to cultural aspects will be briefly described in the next sections.

3.2 Classifications and Sociocultural Awareness

In an initial analysis of all the papers submitted by students from 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 in the three MAs taught in English (Vitalaru, 2019b) the category that focused on cultural aspects had a high percentage both for RP and CD, with a total of 58 % from 116 papers. Thus, from the total of 32 RP classified into 10 categories of topics established through the analysis of their titles, 21 % of them focused specifically on cultural aspects. Consequently, it was included between the categories with the highest percentages. On the other hand, from a total of 84 CD classified into 21 categories, the category ‘culture and

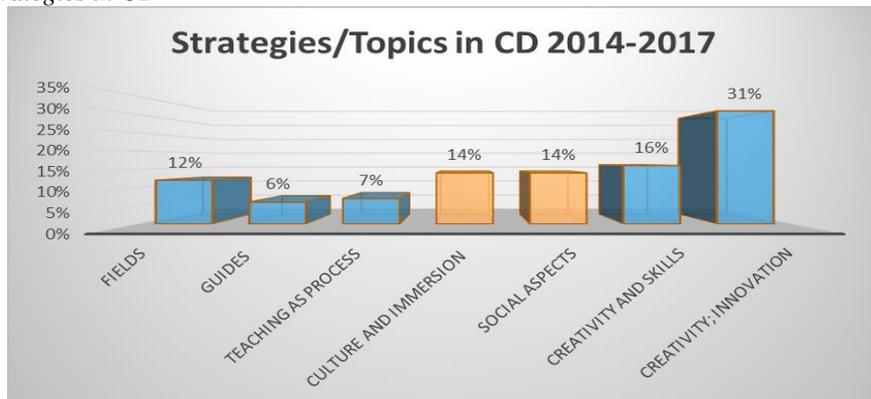
culture as a complement to language learning' occupied the highest place with 37% of the papers. These results indicate a high level of sociocultural awareness in the students who acted as LAs in the two academic years in question.

A second, more specific analysis carried out (Vitalaru and Vescan, 2018: 370-371) focused, this time, specifically on strategies LAs underlined in the titles of their CD in three academic years (from 2014-2017). The following seven categories were established for a total of 138 CD:

1. Creativity, exploration, and innovation
2. Creativity, self-esteem, motivation; personal and professional skills
3. Use of social aspects
4. Use of culture and cultural immersion
5. Focus on other aspects of teaching
6. Practical guides & guidelines
7. Focus on particular fields.

As shown in Figure 4, categories 3, 4 and 6 (focusing on social aspects, culture, and practical guides), which are related to the syncretic concept of 'culture', summed 34% of the CD:

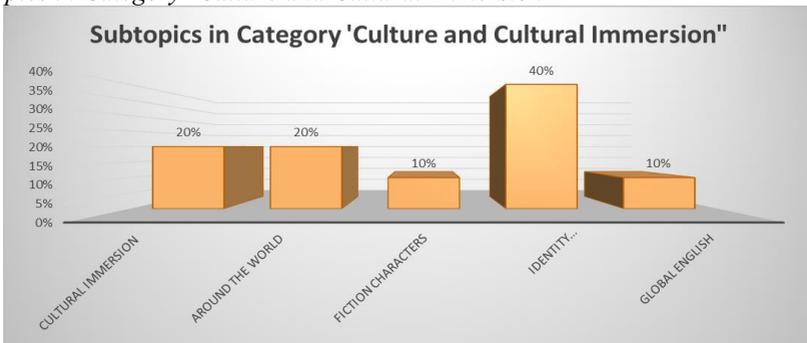
Figure 4
Strategies in CD



Source: based on Vitalaru and Vescan (2018: 370-371)

Moreover, it is interesting to observe the fact that a specific category titled "Culture and Cultural Immersion" has been included, which suggests its importance considering the aspects that the students believed needed to be tackled. The subtopics included in that category refer to a variety of aspects such as identity (American/Australian/British/English/ European) (40 % of the papers), cultural immersion (20 %), around the world (20%), global English (10 %), and the use of fiction characters (10 %) (Figure 5):

Figure 5
Subtopics in Category 'Culture and Cultural Immersion'



Source: own elaboration

Some examples of the actual titles from the different categories have been included in Table 6, below:

Table 6
Subtopics of ‘Culture and Cultural Immersion’

MA	CATEGORY	TITLE
MABE 14-15 15-16	AROUND THE WORLD	Teaching Social Issues and Culture – The Keys to Unlock the World : Curriculum design Curriculum Design: ‘Cultural Geography’ – Taking a Closer Look at Cultures Around the World - Florida Public Middle Schools
MAIE 16-17	IMMERSIO N	My Holiday Diary: English Around the World -- Teaching <u>English as a Second Language</u> through a Cultural Immersion Workshop and a Proposed Handbook
16-17 (all the MA)	IDENTITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The American and British Identity: A Curriculum Design that Dissects Aspects of American and British Culture to Promote Critical Thinking Skills in a Student-Centered Approach to Learning <u>English as a Foreign Language</u> • Teaching European Culture through Project-Based Learning for Primary Students in the United States: Language, Cuisine and Festivals
MABE 16-17	Global events	Multicultural Perspectives : developing thinking and communication skills through debates on controversial Global Current Events in the 11th Grade ESL Classroom in Spain
MABE	FICTION	

Source: own elaboration

The elements that the students included in the papers and were considered specific for cultural context focused on a variety of aspects. On one hand, they discussed more common topics such as cuisine, habits and practices, beliefs and attitudes, festivals, and arts (music, drama, literature, etc.). Other aspects included are defining a specific identity, the use of historical events or even controversial social and political issues such as immigration, segregation, rights, among others, to learn a second language. The identities and cultures referred to in the papers are diverse and include mostly the following: African American, American, British, Australian, English, Dominican Republic, European, Japanese, Korean, Latin American, and Spanish.

Another category that, for the purpose of this study, is considered related to the previous one is the “Use of Social Aspects” as a strategy to develop certain skills in the potential students/readers that the papers addressed. In fact, some of the aspects approached in this category have already been mentioned in the previous category since the papers themselves refer to or combine both ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ aspects. The aspects focused on are diverse and emphasize different types of social problems that resulted into specific behaviors and attitudes in different periods such as civil rights, women’ roles and

oppression, immigration, refugees, and human rights. They even show the relation between political aspects, historical aspects, or religious and sociocultural characteristics of particular groups. Some examples follow:

Table 7

Titles from Category 'Social Aspects'

MA TEACHING (2015-2017)
Human Rights Education. A Curriculum for Secondary School
Heroes and dreamers: The Fight for Civil Rights
Unprecedented: The Story of the 2016 Election .
Teaching English to Adult Latin American. Immigrants with a Cultural Component An Adult ESL Curriculum for Immigrants and Refugees in the United States

Source: own elaboration

On the other hand, if the RP are considered, 36.36 % of 55 total papers focus on a social or cultural aspect. The specific titles and keywords in bold included in Tables 8, 9, and 10 are highly illustrative. The topics approached in relation to sociocultural aspects are varied and could be grouped in the following categories:

a) Awareness as LA

Table 8

RP. Subcategory 'Awareness as LA'

	Awareness as LA	Keywords
RP 2014-2015 MABE	Investigating the Needs of Native English Teaching Assistants: A comparison of programs and experiences in Madrid	LA and cultural differences
RP 2016-2017 MABE	Help, I Woke up as an English Language Assistant In Madrid! Now What?! Two Years, Five Schools and One Master's Degree Later: What I Wish I'd Known An Ethnography	LA and cultural differences
RP 2016-2017 MAIE	Cultural Shock and Adaptation for First Time Expat Teachers: Proposing a Resource Guide for Expat Teachers	cultural shock; guide
	Analysis of the Importance of Cross-Cultural Training for U.S. Undergraduate Students Studying Abroad in Spain: proposal of a practical Cross-Cultural Guide for students studying abroad in Spain	cross-cultural training; guide

Source: own elaboration

b) Attitudes and identity:

Table 9

RP. Subcategory 'Attitudes and Identity'

Attitudes/identity		Keywords
RP 2016-2017 MAIE	Attitudes toward multiculturalism and language of immigrant students in Spain	multiculturalism; immigrant students
RP 2014-2015 MABE	Identity Crisis : A look at cultural identity and bilingualism	cultural identity and bilingualism

Source: own elaboration

c) Education and cultural differences

Table 10

RP. Subcategory 'Education and Cultural Differences'

Education and Cultural Differences		Keywords
RP 2014-2015 MA Teaching	Exploring Teacher and Immigrant Student Perceptions in English-Language Learning Classrooms in Spain	cultural background; perception of roles
	Language from the Outside-In. A Comparative Analysis of the Educational Systems and Foreign Language Assistants in Spain and Japan	comparison between education systems
	How Education Reflects Cultural Values : Implications On Student Perceptions of Empowerment and its Global Significance	education and cultural values
RP 2014-2015 MAIE	Culture Clash : The School Experience of Gitano Boys and Girls in Mainstream Spanish Society	culture clash; minority cultures
	Pedagogy of Education in Brazil – The Value of Dialogue: A correlation between culture, social prejudices , and poverty	education, culture, social status
	An Analysis of Cultural Differences on the Development of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships : Spain and the United States of America	cultural differences; perception of roles
RP 2016-2017 MAIE	Culture and Language Skill Acquisition: A comparison of ESL students and teaching methods in South Korea and Spain	culture and language skills

Source: own elaboration

Based on the previous data, if both RP and CD are considered for the three academic courses mentioned, the percentage of papers that focus on cultural aspects is of approximately 70 % (136) from a total of 193 papers, which suggests, once again, that the number of students who are interested in sociocultural topics and express their sociocultural awareness through their academic papers is very high.

Finally, both the variety of the topics addressed in the different classifications as well as their association with teaching knowledge and language in context shows that the level of sociocultural awareness

among the students is higher from one academic year to another. It is interesting to observe that it surfaces particularly when the students/LAs themselves are directly affected by the cross-cultural interaction and communication circumstances in which they face some of the challenges of living, studying, and assisting teaching in a different country.

3.3. Analysis of Papers that Include Guides on Cultural Aspects

The analysis proposed in this section is based on a previous general analysis described in Vitalaru (2019a), which focused specifically on the objectives and topics approached in four academic papers from the same program that included guides on cultural aspects. The same papers were used, but reanalyzed. The current analysis also focuses on the strategies used by their authors to adapt the cultural information for their potential readers.

The corresponding qualitative analysis aimed at identifying each paper's main objective, as well as the cultural components approached in the practical part of the paper, which focused on designing a specific guide or course for future LAs. The first subsection focuses on two CD while the second one on two RP.

3.3.1 Curriculum Designs: Topics and Strategies

From this category, two papers included a guide and reflected it in the title either as a main objective or as a practical solution (see words in bold):

Table 11

CD that Include Guides on Cultural Aspects

2016-2017	MA INT EDUCATION	Survival Guide for North American ELA Teachers coming to Teach in Madrid, Spain
2015-2016	MA INT EDUCATION	Semester-Long Spanish Language & Culture Study Abroad Curriculum for American University Students

Source: own elaboration

The first CD (CD 1) specifically mentioned the target group establishing the need for an adaptation of the information to a specific "style" that North American LAs who have never lived in Spain "are more familiar with". This suggests an important level of cultural awareness. Its objective was "to help and aid the English Language participants as well as the coordinators of these programs" and therefore, be used as an "orientation curriculum". Thus, the content covered as described was related with the following aspects: "education system, teaching methodology as well as crucial cultural norms in a classroom by simultaneously incorporating key components of subtle cultural immersion" (CD 1: 5).

Two important observations that can be made are the diversity of the general topics and the practicality of the information provided considering that it covered procedures normally required to facilitate daily circumstances. Some of these were everyday life needs (logistical information, budgeting, setting up a bank account), formalities and suggestions regarding the differences between systems (healthcare, education, embassy, social security), historical details, and useful social norms (Vitalaru, 2019a).

Table 12

Topics CD 1

- 4.2.1 Overall Plan: Unit one House Hunting
- 4.2.2 Overall Plan: Unit two Budgeting
- 4.2.3 Overall Plan: Unit three Staying Healthy and Safe
- 4.2.4 Overall Plan: Unit four US Embassy Functions in Spain

- 4.2.6 Overall Plan: Unit six Living in Spain
- 4.2.7 Overall Plan: Unit seven Avoiding Polarization
- 4.2.8 Overall Plan: Unit eight History of Education in Spain
- 4.2.9 Overall Plan: Unit nine ABC's of Assistant Teaching

Source: CD 1: 7

As required, the paper also included a specific discussion about the theoretical background related to culture, the fundamental concept involved. Moreover, the curriculum itself included explanations about

culture, the iceberg theory, cultural self-awareness, and the importance of balancing cultural pride and cultural humility.

The second CD addressed American students who wanted to study abroad at a university in Madrid and focused on the Spanish language and culture. Its general objective, as mentioned by the student, was "to have the students' Spanish speaking skills improve vastly while also being fully immersed in the Spanish culture and way of life" (3). The specific objectives (Table 13) were part of a cultural comprehension goal that contributed to "fostering students' cultural understanding and global mindfulness":

Table 13

Specific cultural comprehension goals CD 2

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Facilitating and emboldening personal growth, self-awareness, and global mindfulness of the student.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing an understanding of intercultural relations and diversity amongst the community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inspiring independence and confidence within the student.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Breaking down the cultural stereotypes and galvanizing open-mindedness and acceptance of new cultures (p. 12).

Source: CD 2: 12

Table 14 includes the general topics included in the Guide:

Table 14

General topics in CD 2

4. Overall Plan.....	Page 16
4.1 Intensive Spanish Grammar Course.....	Page 16
4.2 Practical Internship Course.....	Page 19
4.3 Spanish History Course.....	Page 20
4.4 Spanish Speaking Skills Course.....	Page 27
4.5 Everyday Practical Spanish.....	Page 37
4.6 Spanish/English Language Exchange.....	Page 49
4.7 Cultural Variations in Spanish Autonomous Communities..	Page 55

Source: CD 2: 2

It is interesting to observe that there was no direct reference to culture in the title of the sections, except in the case of the cultural variations that are specific for the autonomous regions in Spain. In spite of that, the analysis of the topics approached in each one of the five courses included shows that at least 60 % of them (three) include specific cultural aspects. This reflected the LA's perception of the fundamental sociocultural aspects that other LAs should pay attention to:

Table 15
Specific Topics in CD 2

Specific topics	
<p>Spanish Speaking Skills Course</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spanish Government, The Recession, and Corruption. Writers Current Events from “El País” Spanish Art Movies Discussion on Spanish Culture: Spanish Traditions, Holidays, Food, Music Madrid and Excursions Madrid’s Hidden Gems: bars, restaurants, parks, markets 	<p>Spanish history course</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Historical and political aspects <p>Everyday Practical Spanish</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting Set Up Getting Around: Transport in the City Common Phrases to Use on the Street Directions Ordering in a Restaurant Tapas Experience Going to the Doctor Markets in Spain Traveling around Spain/Europe Earning Extra Money Interviewing Locals

Source: CD 2: 21-49

3.3.2. Research Papers: Topics and Strategies

The following two RP were selected for the same cultural context as in the previous section:

Table 16
RP that Include Guides on Cultural Aspects

2016-2017	MA INT EDUCATION	Cultural Shock and Adaptation for First Time Expat Teachers: Proposing a Resource Guide for Expat Teachers
2016-2017	MA INT EDUCATION	Analysis of the Importance of Cross-Cultural Training for U.S. Undergraduate Students Studying Abroad in Spain: proposal of a practical Cross-Cultural Guide for students studying abroad in Spain

Source: own elaboration

The first RP approached culture shock both as a phenomenon and as a ‘paradox’ and it offered information about its causes and characteristics, as well as an analysis and background information useful in the context of education in Spain and Korea. It provided a

guide with information and basic training that could help teachers to understand and prevent the phenomenon:

a practical guide with information on required travel documents, programs for teaching abroad, tips on moving, and coping strategies for culture shock will be included as a result of this research to be used by schools and teachers to make transitions in another culture easier and more effective (RP 1: 7).

The guide included the following general and specific topics:

Table 17

Topics in RP 1

1-IT'S ALL ABOUT PLANNING AHEAD

- 1.1 How to prepare for a job overseas-planning, application, and accepting positions tips
- 1.2 Travel Documents for Teaching English Abroad List
- 1.3 Passport information
- 1.4 Visa Descriptions, Types
- 1.5 Degrees/Certifications-Possible types, Chart of different certifications
- 1.6 Criminal Background Check -How to get one
- 1.7 Other documents

2- IT'S ALL ABOUT MOVING ABROAD

- 2.1 Finding a job abroad- Questions to ask before committing
- 2.2 Moving Checklist

3-IT'S ALL ABOUT CULTURE

- 3.1 Quick Summary
- 3.2 What is Culture?
- 3.3 Aspects of Culture-
 - 3.3.1 Cultural Types-Lewis Model
 - 3.3.2 Cultural Iceberg
 - 3.3.3 Communication Patterns and Assumptions
 - 3.3.4 Why might I experience culture shock in my host country
 - 3.3.5 Comparison Activities
- 3.4 What is Culture Shock?
- 3.5 Culture shock stages
- 3.6 Passage for Experiencing a New Environment
- 3.7 Symptoms/Feelings
- 3.8 Culture shock reactions
- 3.9 Responding to Culture Shock

Source: RP 1: 47

The second RP had two different objectives and was divided into two specific parts. The first one analyzed the current situation regarding cross-cultural training, training needs, information, and training resources provided to U.S. undergraduate students. The second one included a "guide to help students develop their own cultural self-awareness prior to studying abroad" (1).

The variety of the topics providing information on culture and skills, guidelines, recommendations, tips, and resources can be observed in the table of contents:

Table 18

General topics in RP 2

Table of Contents of the Guide

1. General Information.....	50
2. Guidelines to gain cultural self-awareness and to have a cross-culturally successful study abroad experience in Spain.....	51
3. Areas of culture to be aware of.....	52
4. Learn cross-cultural communication dos and don'ts.....	62
5. Develop skills to adapt to new environments and skills that professionals in multinational companies and global organizations look for.....	64
6. Top Tips and Testimonies from former study abroad students and study abroad professionals.....	66
7. Additional Recommended Resources for Study Abroad Participants.....	70

Source: RP 2: 48-49 (adaptation)

The approach in terms of the specific topics (Table 19) reveals two perspectives. First, understanding cultural differences is essential, particularly regarding "values and behavior in certain circumstances such as academic settings, cuisine, social meetings as well as understanding 'deeper cultural concepts' and the complexity of culture shock". Second, the relation between two key elements in intercultural meetings (communication styles and pragmatics) is discussed through recommendations (dos and don'ts) based on "the comparison of

different communication acts (greetings, compliments, requests) and contextual elements (the perception of space)" (Vitalaru, 2019a).

Table 19

Specific topics in RP 2

Specific topics

- Definitions of culture
- Linking Values to Behavior
- Understand Deeper Cultural Concepts
- Academics
- Socializing
- Cuisine
- Culture Shock/Cultural Fatigue

Cross-cultural communication dos and don'ts

- Public and Private Space
- Communication Styles
- Intensity Factors
- Greetings
- Compliments
- Making Requests
- Communication dos and don'ts



Source: RP 2: 48

3.3.3. Adapting the Information and Strategies

3.3.3.1 CD

Regarding the strategies used to adapt the information in CD 1, some of them can be observed when analyzing the information in Figures 6 and 7, below:

Figure 6

Strategy I in CD

Source: CD 1: 58

Figure 7
Strategy II in CD

2. Private Medical Facility Information

- **Give to Bilingual Coordinator at Your School**
- **Auxiliaries Have Different Insurance** (your school must have your doctor contact information on file)
- **Store Doctor Contact in Your Phone**

Metro: Alonso Martínez (Line 4, Line 9, and Line 10)
Tel.: 91-700-1979
Website: www.sirews.es
Psychology, Psychiatry, Multi-cultural couples, Grief counseling, Eating disorders, Non-substance addictions, Cultural education, Support group for victims of sexual aggression.

Tourist Health (Hospital Universitario HM Madrid)



Plaza del Conde del Valle de Súchil 15, 28015, Madrid (Madrid)

Source: CD 1: 59

Generally, it can be said that the strategies used are: a direct approach ("call your school", "call your doctor", "give to bilingual coordinator at your school"); visual elements (photos of the actual place it refers to, arrows and lines, different colors and fonts); fragmented information, and questions-answers structure ("what to do before you get sick", "what to do when you get sick", etc.).

As for the specific strategies in CD 2, we observe several aspects. First, that the paper proposed different courses that focused on the relation between language skills and other skills. Second, it included competences such as cultural awareness or, as the author mentioned, "the focus on the practical side of learning Spanish": use of the language in various real-life situations "outside of the classroom on the streets of Spain" (37). Moreover, the direct approach can be observed in the journal activity proposed to reflect on their actual experience after an internship experience:

Figure 8

Direct approach

7.2 Guided Questions for Practical Internship Weekly Journals

1. Reflect on your first week on the job. How did you feel upon starting the job? Were you excited or nervous on Monday? How did you feel on Friday? Do you have goals for the internship?
2. What similarities and differences do you see between the Spanish and American work environments?
3. Now that you have been working for three weeks, do you feel more confident using your Spanish in the workplace? If yes, why? If no, what do you think is influencing you not to be confident using your Spanish?

Source: CD 2: 69

3.3.3.2 RP

The strategies used to adapt the information identified in RP 1 are quite specific too. First, questions-answers structures are used, as well as a direct approach, such as the one in the example below:

Figure 9

Strategy 1

2.1 WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I ASK MYSELF WHEN MOVING ABROAD?

- Why do I want to move abroad? Appropriate reasons include: career development/advancement, to experience worldliness/ other cultures, meet new people or increase financial benefits. Inappropriate reasons could include: Escaping life/ a person/ situation, change of weather, extended vacation
- Am I ready for the challenge? Moving abroad causes many obstacles and challenges based upon how much support one receives from the teaching program. Looks into what services they provide, such as housing, language or culture information/courses, transportation pickup, orientation, housing, airfare, assistance with setting up living (bank accounts, electricity, water)

Source: RP 1: 70

Second, the use of a checklist with the same direct approach identified in the case of the CD is another strategy. It can help the target student organize his/her ideas and adopt a pragmatic attitude towards the actions required as well as a sense of accomplishment:

Figure 10

Strategy 2

2.2 MOVING CHECKLIST

3-6 months prior to move

- Make an inventory of all the items you plan to sell, put into storage and take with you. Record their size, value and estimated weight.
- Complete a pre-visit if possible in order to be familiar with the area.
- If the house or apartment is available to see, take photos of all aspects of the property and make an accurate floor plan
- Buy a container or folder to store necessary paperwork needed for the move (estimates, letters, receipts, phone numbers, previous year taxes, important bank information)

Source: RP 1: 73

Finally, the guide also included activities to encourage self-reflection and application of the basic knowledge learned:

Figure 11

Strategy 3

Xinyuan, who works for Industrial Design Department, The Academy Of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, defines Culture as "Culture is conceptualized as a 'system of meaning that underlies routine and behavior in everyday working life' [3]. Culture 'includes race and ethnicity as well as other variables and is manifested in customary behaviors, assumptions, and values, patterns of thinking and communication style' [4]. 'Culture is communication, and communication is culture' [5].

TASK: Think about the traits of culture and how they have influenced you as an Individual.

- *How have these traits influenced you in your home country?*
- *How do you think they will affect you abroad?*
- *In what ways do you think they will change?*

Source: RP 1: 77

As for the specific strategies identified in RP 2, some examples have been included either in the form of:

- a) An observation and an inferred comparison (Figure 12):

Figure 12

Strategy 1

- Expected work load

In Spain and most other European countries, there is generally not a lot of assigned “homework” or work to be done outside of the classroom aside from a couple larger papers or projects that will carry most of the weight for the final grade of the course. Most often, professors will assign short readings or exercises to be done at home before the next class to reinforce what was taught in class that day or to preview what will be taught during the next class session.

Source: RP 2: 54

b) A warning (Figure 13):

Figure 13

Strategy 2

Be careful! Just because something is not labeled as “homework” or the professor will not be checking that you have done it during the next class, doesn’t mean that it is optional. If you slack on these small assignments, when the big test or final paper/project is assigned you may be unprepared.

Source: RP 2: 55

c) Additional practical readings (Figure 14):

Figure 14

Strategy 3

- Common teaching styles and methods

Read about some common teaching methods for tertiary education in Spain:

<http://tertiary-education.studentnews.eu/s/2328/57788-Tertiary-education/2913251-12-Spain-Teaching-methods.htm>

Source: RP 2: 55

To summarize, in terms of the specific strategies used to adapt the information for the reader, the following seem essential to address the target audience in an efficient way:

- Direct approach addressing the reader (mostly informal style).
- Use of questions to encourage reflection and self-identifying strategies.
- Use of visual elements and details about the aspect discussed.
- Practice exercises.
- Identifying differences and contrasting information.
- Suggestions based on own experience, studies, and reports from other students.
- Theoretical background.

3.3.4. Findings and Traditional Classifications

This section has two main aims: first, to highlight the aspects that LAs consider fundamental for effective communication in cross-cultural situations; second, to establish the cultural components approached considering the traditional classifications mentioned in section 1 of this article.

Considering the first aim, the aspects approached in the LAs' papers as part of culture-related topics, were initially classified in Vitalaru (2019a) into four main categories (a)-d)), which will be adapted and expanded based on the findings in this paper. Two more categories will be added (e) and f)):

a) General cultural and social aspects

- Popular culture (arts in general; music, literature, movies).
- Traditions, holidays, celebrations, cuisine, customs, and practices.
- Historical facts.
- Geographical variations.
- Social events and political aspects.

The following social aspects were specifically discussed: different types of social problems that resulted into specific behaviors and attitudes in different periods such as civil rights, women's roles and oppression, immigration, refugees, and human rights. Some papers even showed the relation between political aspects, historical aspects, or religious and sociocultural characteristics of particular groups.

b) Lifestyle

- Pragmatic aspects (housing, transportation, traveling, budgeting, opening a bank account, other formalities).
- Behavioral aspects (dos and don'ts, socializing in bars, restaurants, parks, etc.).

c) Systems: education, health, work settings

- Education approaches, differences, and tips.
- Healthcare system.
- Job-seeking.
- Embassy formalities.

Of particular interest is the perception of education and the cultural differences involved. Thus, some of the aspects approached particularly in the practical guides proposed are: the perception of roles (teacher, student, LA), the different educational backgrounds and policies, the cultural values reflected through education, the importance of culture in language skills acquisition, the status of minority cultures in schools and culture clash, and the relation between education and social class.

d) Cultural awareness and adaptation

- Culture shock.
- Cultural and intercultural awareness.
- Communication patterns/styles.
- General skills: self-awareness, independence, confidence, and open-mindedness.
- Understanding of intercultural relations and diversity.
- Breaking down cultural stereotypes.

- Acceptance of new cultures.

e) Attitudes and identity

- Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and how they affect one's identity.
- Challenges of training multicultural students.
- Defining a specific identity, historical events or even controversial social and political issues such as immigration, segregation, rights, etc. The diversity of identities and cultural aspects referred to in the papers is essential too.
- LA's role as a cultural ambassador.

f) Awareness as LA regarding

- Specific educational differences (systems, roles, training strategies and assessment procedures, skills focused on, types of schools and levels of education, perceptions regarding labor market training).
- Perception of training needs in relation to language and culture as well as the importance of life and professional skills.
- Their own culture, cross-cultural differences, and effects of intercultural aspects on teaching a second language in Spain or in another country.

On the other hand, regarding the second aim, several observations can be made.

First, non-material culture seems to be preferred over material culture, through aspects that reflect attitudes, beliefs, ideas, norms, and values that influence behavior and direct socialization. These elements are specific for different time periods (historical and political facts), regions (geographical aspects) or formal professional settings. At the same time, they can also be related with typical situations of everyday life (social gatherings, behavior, and procedures people follow in practical situations such as transportation, social security formalities, etc.) Other aspects that can be included in the same category are those related to (inter)cultural awareness and their relation to effective communication. Of particular relevance are the advice and recommendations about how to avoid or overcome culture shock.

Material culture is also included in many of the papers through representative artistic elements (visual arts, music, literature, and movies), traditions, holidays, celebrations, cuisine, and other visible practices, particularly from popular culture.

Second, the classification into mentifacts, sociofacts, and artifacts and their specific subsystem can also be identified. Thus, although artifacts are included in all the papers, mentifacts and sociofacts are particularly considered in the guides designed for LAs. It is interesting to observe how the students approached the ideological and sociological systems focusing on the "mental manifestations of culture" (beliefs, attitudes, etc.) (White, 1949) and the different ways in which cultural aspects affect communication and interaction in different situations.

Third, both invisible and visible culture are approached through the same elements discussed in the previous classifications (material, which can be associated with visible elements, and non-material, which can be specific for invisible aspects). Most of the aspects included in the literature can be easily found in the papers analyzed. Some of the most common visible elements are language, greetings, arts, food, music, dance, and clothing. On the other hand, examples of invisible culture are communication, body language, perception of time, personal space, gender roles, authority, worldview, religious beliefs, decision-making models, ideas about leadership, etc. Moreover, some of the concepts discussed belong to both categories. For example, religion and education are complicated as they involve rituals and practices that are visible and easily accessible but, at the same time, specific ideologies, as well as a social and historical context. Thus, understanding behaviors and attitudes in Spain necessarily implies being familiar with the ideology behind them.

Forth, no specific distinction seems to be made between high and low culture elements in the sense described in this paper although there seems to be a high interest in popular culture. It is seen as specific for the mass practices, ideas, and goods that were dominant in a certain period in Spain and in the US. The idea of authenticity, spontaneity, and

specificity is also implied in the approach. Most of the categories established by Gary West (2019) can be found in several papers particularly: a) entertainment (music, television, and movies); b) people and places from sports and news, and c) politics, fashion, technology; the importance of mass media on people's attitudes. In this category, literature and different types of artistic behavior are particularly significant not only for cultural background but also as strategies for developing motivation and specific communication skills.

Conclusions

Although the term sociocultural awareness is not specifically used in the papers, the analysis revealed a high interest in topics related to culture and communication in different settings. Thus, terms such as intercultural communication, intercultural competence, cross-cultural communication, cultural aspects, relations, differences or challenges, cultural (self-) awareness, cultural understanding, cultural competence or skills are common in the corpus of papers and titles analyzed.

Considering the objectives of the paper it can be said that not only the percentage of papers that discuss culture-related topics is high (approx. 70 %), but the specific topics approached, and the focus given to the papers reveal a high level of awareness regarding the importance and impact cultural awareness has on interlinguistic communication and second language teaching.

Another important aspect observed in the papers is the need for specific strategies used to adapt the information for the reader and address the target audience in an efficient way. Although not directly shown or underlined with examples, students themselves imply the need or the existence of a strategy, particularly in the case of the guides on cultural aspects proposed.

All the sociological perspectives discussed in the theoretical part seem to be approached in a more or less specific or direct way in the papers analyzed. This is seen in the fact that most of them include both

a solid theoretical background about the main topic and a practical part. Although the cultural components and categories are mixed and there seems to be no clear distinction between them in the papers, the components are integrated into the general educational approach. They are based on real-life application in the context of effective interaction in different types of communicative acts. This suggests a high level of sociocultural awareness that the students/LAs translated into providing practical solutions for the specific needs detected and less interest in the details of the theoretical background behind them.

Although this analysis is limited, it provides ideas and reflections about the perception LAs have regarding the cultural aspects that their peers should be aware of or learn about prior to their stay in a different country, especially in Spain. Simultaneously, it shows the complexity of the concept of culture and some applications of its perception in certain circumstances.

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