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Research Paper

Using FREPA to Encourage Critical Intercultural Reflections: A Case Study of Intercultural Competence in EFL Textbooks for Grades 3 and 4 in Central Portugal

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Abstract

Intercultural competence, as the ability to explore cultural diversity and alterity, to reflect on them and to gain from that reflective experience, has been deemed increasingly important in today's language classrooms. Yet, when it comes to teaching and learning resources, it has been said that the cultural content presented in English as a Foreign Language textbooks is often superficial and mostly fact-based, aiming at the knowledge level only and not adopting a reflective approach, contrary to what recent language education guidelines state. Therefore, this study utilizes the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA - Council of Europe, 2013) and its cultural descriptors to investigate how intercultural competence is addressed and promoted in EFL textbooks for grades 3 and 4 in central Portugal through a content analysis method. Each cultural section of the textbooks was examined utilizing the cultural *attitudes* and *skills* descriptors from FREPA so as to verify the textbooks' content potential to generate critical reflections and discussions on otherness. The results indicate that the majority of the content analyzed is unlikely to promote deep critical reflections on interculturality due to its fact-sharing-based approach. Therefore, it is argued that policy makers, textbook authors and publishers would benefit from more training on critical cultural

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awareness and intercultural competence so as to become more able to incorporate a reflective and critical slant into the cultural content of EFL resources.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, textbook, English as a Foreign Language, FREPA

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1. Introduction

Up until 2005, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was mostly taught from grade 5 on (10-year-olds) in Portuguese public schools. However, from then on, the Ministry of Education introduced the possibility of public schools offering optional EFL classes for elementary students (6 to 9-year-olds) as extracurricular activities in an effort to conform with European early language teaching and learning policies and to smoothen the gap in relation to other European countries (Ministry of Education, 2005). The success of this initiative triggered the recommendation to convert these classes into mandatory for grades 3 and 4 (8 to 9-year-olds) in 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2006) and, in 2008, the Ministry proposed that the offer of EFL classes would expand to grades 1 and 2 (6 to 7-year-olds) optionally (Ministry of Education, 2008). The Decree-Law 176 of 2014 reinforced the commitment to offering mandatory EFL classes to grades 3 and 4 and, at the same time, recognized the importance of training English teachers to better meet the pedagogical needs of these students (Ministry of Education, 2014).

Consequently, a series of guiding documents was published to assist teachers in planning their EFL classes for grades 3 and 4, namely the *Orientações Programáticas* (Programmatic Guidelines) for grades 3 and 4 EFL teaching (Bento et al., 2005), *Metas Curriculares* (Curriculum Goals)

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for EFL at elementary and middle school (Bravo et al., 2015) and *Aprendizagens Essenciais* (Essential Learnings) for EFL teaching at elementary level (Ministry of Education, 2018). Besides the obvious linguistic goals, all the above documents also stated culture-oriented goals, specifically the sensitization to linguistic and cultural diversity, the development of a cultural identity while exploring other cultures, the development of a sense of solidarity, cooperation and respect for others (Bento et al., 2005), the acknowledgement of other countries and their cultures (Bravo et al., 2015) and the exploration of several aspects of the anglophone culture (Ministry of Education, 2018). The inclusion of this cultural component is strongly rooted in the guidelines of the *Common European Framework for Languages* (CEFR) which explains that language learning cannot be dissociated from intercultural awareness which has the potential to be used to promote social cohesion and democratic citizenship (Council of Europe, 2020). Agenda 2030 is another international document that establishes the importance of continuing to address interculturality in schools and societies at large. For example, goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda proposes to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” (United Nations, 2015, p.18) while goal 4’s outcome targets point to the need to “educate for sustainable development and global citizenship, through the promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development” (Council of Europe, 2018a, p. 4). In the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. Volume 2: Descriptors of competences for democratic culture* (Council of Europe, 2018b), cultural and intercultural elements permeate the key descriptors of this framework, namely under *values*, such as

valuing cultural diversity, and under *attitudes*, such as openness to cultural otherness and respect.

Given the significance of addressing cultural aspects and developing an intercultural competence in language learning, and, on the other hand, considering the lack of attention granted to intercultural education by policy makers and agents in practice in Portugal (Hurst & Franco, 2021), a call for more research in the area emerged, namely with regard to materials used in language learning (Guerra, 2020; Guerra & Gonçalves, 2019). Similarly, a body of studies has claimed that intercultural education initiatives and materials tend to cover superficial aspects of interculturality, focusing on factual information and neglecting opportunities for deep critical reflections on otherness (Danielsen, 2020; Guerra & Gonçalves, 2019; Guerra, 2020; Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018). Critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997 cited in Porto et al., 2018) is, hence, deemed crucial “to manage personal and social transformation through intercultural dialogue” (p. 486).

Therefore, this study utilizes the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (Council of Europe, 2013 - see next sections for details on the framework) to examine how intercultural competence is addressed and promoted in EFL textbooks for grades 3 and 4 in central Portugal. The research questions are as follows:

1. How is intercultural competence addressed in grades 3 and 4 official EFL textbooks in central Portugal?
2. How likely is it that these textbooks’ content will contribute to the development of (critical) intercultural competence?

2. The Intercultural Dimension in Textbooks

The complexity associated with the term ‘intercultural competence’ has brought about a variety of definitions depending on the disciplines it is addressed in; therefore, it became a challenge to reach an agreement on its definition (Daryai-Hansen & Jaeger, 2015). However, in the educational

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context, the most widely accepted definitions of intercultural competence are attributed to Byram (1997) who has defined intercultural competence as “the ability to interact in their own language with the people from another country and culture” (p. 71) and to Beacco et al. (2016) who describe intercultural competence as “the ability to experience otherness and cultural diversity, to analyze that experience and to derive benefit from it” (p.10). The latter is the one that guides this study.

In the field of language education, it is believed that language and culture are intertwined and it is impossible to teach a language without addressing cultural aspects (Byram, 2008; Ekmekçi & Demirci, 2020) since language is in itself a ‘cultural manifestation’ (Peixoto, 2016) and is at the core of intercultural education (UNESCO, 2007). In fact, this solid, dynamic relationship between language and culture is seen as an opportunity to develop intercultural awareness and citizenship skills in the language classroom (Byram, 2008). As stated by Byram et al. (2002), “the ‘intercultural dimension’ in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities and to avoid the stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity. It is based on perceiving the interlocutor as an individual whose qualities are to be discovered, rather than as a representative of an externally ascribed identity” (p. 9).

The necessity to explore interculturality in the language classroom and beyond is heightened by the current globalization, technologicalization and immigration which bring about more possibilities for intercultural encounters (Rico-Trincoso, 2018). In Portugal in particular, the need to prepare citizens for these encounters has been amplified in account of the rise in multiculturalism in the last decade (Guerra, 2020), shown by an increase of 40% in the number of foreign residents (Esteves, 2021, n.p.) who mostly

come from countries where Portuguese is also an official or spoken language, but where cultural landscapes differ. Also, there has been noticed an escalation on xenophobia, bullying and violence cases in Portuguese public schools (Dias, 2023 citing Elisângela Rocha, from Diaspora without Borders Association) as well as a call for more educational initiatives that address diversity and otherness in schools.

Due to this, and following the directives of the local government (Ministry of Education, 2018), several textbook authors started to incorporate more intercultural components in their materials given the central figure attributed to textbooks in the teaching and learning process in the country, generating a sort of ‘manualocracia’ (*textbookcracy*) (Do Paço, 2017, citing Cruz, 2015). Textbooks are sometimes considered the main teaching tool in many language education settings and, interculturality-wise, they can be “rich sources of cultural knowledge and information. Textbooks can also convey cultural information through pictures, texts, audio and video materials, dialogues, lexical items, and other means” (Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018, p. 55 citing Adaskou, Britten, & Fahsi, 1990). This also opened room for a major trend in recent studies on intercultural competence: the analysis of the production of and the uses of original activities and materials to assess their interculturality potential, though not many focus on textbooks (Guerra & Gonçalves, 2019).

The main conclusions from studies which analyzed intercultural aspects on EFL textbooks suggest that a) textbooks should include more international cultures and own culture rather than simply focusing on the target culture (Agustina & Kencana, 2023; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2021; Ekmekçi & Demirci, 2020; Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018), b) there is a scarcity of textbooks that actually explore language as culture (Do Paço, 2017), c) there is a lack of “authentic, open-ended, real world tasks” to develop intercultural

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competencies (Sobkowiak, 2016, p.706), d) textbooks offer insufficient capability to develop students' critical cultural awareness because they treat cultures in isolation and position students as mere spectators and passive consumers of factual information (Danielsen, 2020; De Freitas, 2018; Ibrahim, 2022; Pasand & Ghasemi, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2016), and e) current textbook cultural content alone may not promote deep critical reflections on alterity without the assistance of the teacher (Peng, 2020). In fact, a call for a complete refurbishment of foreign language textbooks has been on the rise (Sobkowiak, 2016) as "it seems clear that they do not meet the European guidelines with respect to intercultural aspects" (De Freitas, 2018, p.21), preferring the adoption of a "tourist culture" approach (Liu, 2016). Byram et al. (2002) cautioned us that "teaching the intercultural dimension is not the transmission of information about a foreign country" (p.14) and that more than acquiring factual knowledge, a strong emphasis should be put on the acquisition of analytical and reflective skills (Byram et al., 2002). In the Portuguese context alone, looking at the guiding documents, one example of this is how the *Metas Curriculares de Inglês Ensino Básico: 1.º, 2.º e 3.º Ciclos* (Bravo et al., 2015) detail the intercultural domain goals by utilizing mostly verbs at a lower order thinking skills of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001), such as 'identify', 'recognize' or 'understand' (e.g. identify festivities around the world), leaving very little room for real, dynamic and profound intercultural awareness to be developed through critical thinking and reflection.

This superficiality in the exploration of interculturality in language teaching and learning resources prompted our study. Through an examination of current grades 3 and 4 textbooks, the study intends to shed light on how interculturality *is* and *can be* explored in educational resources, with a view to influence policy makers, educational standards developers and EFL

resource designers. The next section explains how the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA) can help in this.

3. The Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) and the analysis of EFL textbooks

Pluralistic or plural approaches are didactic approaches that involve and include the use of several languages in the learning process of any subject (Candelier et al., 2012). They contrast with singular approaches that only take into account one language and/or culture (Daryai-Hansen & Jaeger, 2015; Coste et al., 2009), ignoring an individual's potential plurilingual and pluricultural repertoires. While singular approaches deal with languages and cultures in isolation, pluralistic approaches recognize and value prior linguistic and cultural repertoires and welcome them in the classroom as a resource for learning. Pluralistic approaches were put forward by the Council of Europe as possible didactic methodologies that foster plurilingualism as well as cater to the respect for linguistic and cultural diversity.

There are four main pluralistic approaches identified by the Council of Europe and their Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). After a period of time in which the Council of Europe supported a myriad of programs and projects that incentivized Europeans to learn more languages and explore other cultures, the synergies created among the different languages Europeans spoke and were learning generated a new perspective into language and cultural education within the European Union. The ECML acknowledged four approaches that nurtured the *didactics of/for plurilingualism and pluriculturalism* preconized by the Council of Europe: Awakening to Languages, Intercultural Approach, Intercomprehension and Integrated Didactic Approach. Accordingly, the FREPA was created by a

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group of scholars and curriculum designers so as to respond to the need of “a framework of the knowledge, skills and attitudes which could be developed by such pluralistic approaches” (Candelier et al., 2010, p.9).

Even though the FREPA descriptors were mainly designed to gather areas of *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* possibly activated by the four pluralistic approaches mentioned previously (see all descriptors at <https://carap.ecml.at/Descriptors/tabid/6525/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>), some authors believe they also possess potential to be used as an intercultural competence assessment tool. Daryai-Hansen & Jaeger (2015) explored how the FREPA, though based on Byram’s (1997) and Deardoff’s (2009) conceptions of how to develop intercultural competence, deepens Byram’s and Deardoff’s first definitions of intercultural competence, by enlisting a variety of detailed culture-related descriptors within the three main areas of *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* (list of complete main key descriptors related to culture is available in the next section).

Knowledge (Byram’s *savoirs*) refers to how aware some individuals are of specific linguistic and cultural phenomena. In the field of cultural and intercultural competence, sections VIII to XV of FREPA are all dedicated to understanding cultures, their diversity and their resemblances and differences. For example, individuals could be invited to reflect on the following descriptors: possesses knowledge about what cultures are/how they work, knows that cultural diversity and social diversity are closely linked, knows several phenomena relative to the diversity of cultures or knows the role of culture in intercultural relations and communication (Council of Europe, 2024, n. p.).

Skills (Byram’s *savoir-faire*) consist of a set of abilities developed towards linguistic and cultural diversity. Some examples in the area of intercultural competence could be: can observe/analyze linguistic

elements/cultural phenomena in languages/cultures which are more or less familiar, can interact in situations of contact between languages/cultures or can compare linguistic or cultural features of different languages or cultures (Council of Europe, 2024, n.p.).

Lastly, *attitudes* (Byram's *savoir-être*) specify the modes individuals demonstrate their knowledge of a variety of linguistic and cultural aspects. For instance, in intercultural awareness, individuals could be asked to reflect on the following attitudes: sensitivity to the existence of other languages/cultures/persons or to the existence of linguistic/cultural/human diversity or positive acceptance of linguistic/cultural diversity/of others/of what is different (Council of Europe, 2024, np).

To activate these *savoirs*, individuals need to *learn to learn* (Byram's *savoir-s'engager*) how to engage in intercultural moments, drawing on the three main *savoirs*.

The *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* are also described as internal resources that may be activated through external resources such as other persons, situations or resources (vide *textbooks*) (Daryai-Hansen & Jaeger, 2015).

Daryai-Hansen & Jaeger (2015) stated that FREPA has the ability to bridge theory and practice, serving “in diverse contexts within the educational field to describe plurilingual and intercultural competences, to clearly define learning objectives, to develop curricula within the field and to design teaching materials” (p.126). While it serves to design teaching resources, we believe it can be used to assess how intercultural competence is addressed in textbooks and to suggest ways to move from superficial interculturality to critical exploration of cultures. The next section details the use of FREPA for textbook intercultural competence analysis.

4. Methodology

For this study, a mixed methods approach was chosen, i.e., data was analyzed qualitatively but with the support of quantifiable methods for a clearer understanding of the phenomenon that we proposed to examine (Creswell, 2012). The specific research technique adopted for this study was content analysis. Krippendorff (2013) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p.24). In the case of this study, this was accomplished through detailed analysis of the content of two official textbooks for grades 3 and 4 in use in a municipality in the centre of Portugal, called Leiria, in the academic year 2023/2024. The choice of this area of Portugal lies in the fact that the researcher is originally from that town and would be better equipped to gather information on English language teaching resources in the region, particularly considering that she currently lives abroad. The two textbooks called *Easy-Peasy English 3* and *Easy-Peasy English 4* were created by the same authors (Abreu & Esteves, 2023) for the same publisher. They are the recommended and adopted textbooks for the great majority of the school *agrupamentos* (groups of schools) of the region.

Considering the details about FREPA already provided in the previous section, our content analysis utilized only two of the three main areas: *skills* and *attitudes*. This is because our understanding is that the *knowledge* area is usually the one privileged in English language teaching in Portugal, according to the body of research mentioned previously and to the *Metas Curriculares de Inglês Ensino Básico: 1.º, 2.º e 3.º Ciclos* (Bravo et al., 2015) which describe intercultural domain outcomes recurring to mostly knowledge level verbs. Due to their reflective and analytical potential, the *skills* and *attitudes* areas described in FREPA are the ones which will more likely provide insights on whether the examined textbooks contribute to the

development of critical intercultural competence, while the *knowledge* one only requires students to know information and facts. In the interest of conciseness, only the main sections of the culture-related descriptors of FREPA are presented below (see Tables 1 and 2) and served the analysis of the textbooks, however the reader is invited to consult the full documents on <https://carap.ecml.at/Descriptors/tabid/6525/language/en-GB/Default.aspx> (FREPA descriptors - Council of Europe, 2024)

Given that FREPA descriptors are presented so as to analyze what *persons* know, can do or think about in relation to languages and cultures, the *skills* and *attitudes* areas and their descriptors were utilized in an adapted manner, i.e., they were adopted as a guide to how the textbooks *had the potential* to develop such *skills* and *attitudes* in students who use them as a learning resource. For example, under *attitudes*, FREPA's section 4 states "positive acceptance of linguistic/cultural diversity/of others/of what is different" and, for our content analysis, we converted it into "*Content x in textbook y has the potential to generate positive acceptance of linguistic/cultural diversity/of others/of what is different*".

Because FREPA focuses both on linguistic and on cultural *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes*, given the goal of this study, only FREPA's culture-related areas and their descriptors were explored. Below is a table with the culture descriptors considered for this study with the previously mentioned adaptations. In our view, all below descriptors imply analytical and reflective attitudes, nevertheless those which appear to have the potential to develop more critical intercultural competence are identified in bold.

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4.1 Attitudes

The content in the textbook has the potential to...

Table 1.

FREPA cultural descriptors in the area of attitudes that were used to analyze the content of the cultural sections of the textbooks.

A1	...generate attention to cultural diversity in the environment and/or in general.
A2	...sensitize to the existence of other cultures/cultural diversity.
A3	...generate curiosity about/interest in cultures/cultural diversity in the environment and/or in general.
A4	...develop positive acceptance of cultural diversity/of what is different.
A5	...develop openness to cultural diversity/to alterity.
A6	...generate respect for other cultures/cultural diversity in the environment and/or in general.
A7	...develop disposition/motivation with respect to cultural diversity/plurality.
A8	...generate a wish/will to be involved/to act in connection with cultural diversity/plurality.
A9	...develop an attitude of critical questioning/a critical position toward culture in general.
A10	...generate the will to construct “informed” attitudes and representations of culture.
A11	...generate disposition/the will to suspend one’s judgement/prejudices.
A12	...develop disposition to starting a process of cultural decentring/relativising
A13	...generate flexibility towards other cultures.
A14 and 15 (merged)	...develop self-confidence and a feeling of familiarity when coping with cultural diversity.

A16	...lead one to assume one's cultural identity.
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4.2 Skills

The content in the textbook has the potential to...

Table 2.

FREPA Cultural Descriptors in The Area of Skills That Were Used to Analyze the Content of the Cultural Sections of the Textbooks

S1 and S2 (merged)	...lead to an identification and an analysis of cultural phenomena in cultures which are more or less familiar.
S3	...generate comparisons related to cultural features.
S4	...trigger discussions of certain aspects of one's culture/other cultures.
S6	...generate confident interactions in situations of contact between languages.

All the above cultural descriptors were used to examine the textbook content's ability to prompt critical intercultural competence and have been given codes (A1 or S1, S2, etc.) to facilitate the analytical description of the textbook content in the data analysis section.

5. Description of the textbooks

5.1 Grade 3 textbook

This textbook is divided into 6 units: 1) Me, myself and I, 2) Numbers and Dates, 3) School and means of transport, 4) Family and Routines, 5) Pets and games, and 6) Seasons, weather and clothes. In each unit, there is a clearly identified culture section with a theme: 1) Famous people, 2) Lucky numbers, 3) Going to school, 4) The British Royal family, 5) International animals, and 6) Typical clothes around the world. In addition, outside these units and sections, the textbook starts with another cultural section on *English around us* and *The United Kingdom* and has an end-of-book cultural section on English-speaking-world festivities.

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Below, a table provides more details on the cultural sections of this book and shows the code attributed to each section to facilitate the content analysis (see next section).

Table 3.*Summary of Cultural Content in Grade 3 Textbook*

Name of section/activity	Description	Code
<i>English around us</i>	This introductory cultural section explores the presence of English and use of English words in the Portuguese context (e.g. stop, skate, ketchup,...). It invites the students to listen to the words, say them, write them or find them in word searches.	3 Intro 1
<i>The United Kingdom</i>	This second introductory section presents the countries of the UK, their flags and a few landmarks.	3 Intro 2
Unit 1 Culture Section Famous people	It presents brief reading comprehension activities on famous people (not necessarily only from the English-speaking world) to explore the topics of names, countries, nationalities and flag colors. It has a small "Stop & Think" sub-section inviting the students to think of a Portuguese celebrity they admire. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students introduce themselves (name, country, nationality and favorite color), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other famous people in the world and present them in class.	3U1
Unit 2 Culture Section Lucky numbers	It presents short reading comprehension activities on lucky and unlucky numbers around the world. It has a small "Stop & Think" sub-section inviting the students to think of lucky and unlucky numbers in Portugal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students introduce themselves (name, age, birthday month and favorite day of the week), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other lucky and unlucky numbers in the world and present them in class.	3U2

Unit 3 Culture Section Going to school	It presents short reading comprehension activities on how children go to school around the world. It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think of how the Portuguese go to school. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students describe their school bags (size, color and what is in it), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other ways of going to school in the world and present them in class.	3U3
Unit 4 Culture Section The British Royal Family	It presents short reading comprehension activities on the British royal family. It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about a famous family in Portugal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students describe their families (family members’ names), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other famous families in the world and present them in class.	3U4
Unit 5 Culture Section International Animals	It presents short reading comprehension activities on animals (parrot, iguana, dingo). It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about typical animals found in Portugal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students draw a “crazy pet” and present it, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other amazing animals in the world and present them in class.	3U5
Unit 6 Culture Section Typical clothes around the world	It presents short reading comprehension activities on typical clothes around the world (kilt, sari, kimono). It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about traditional clothes in Portugal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students draw clothes from a fashion show and present it, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other costumes in the world and present them in class.	3U6

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Festivities	A collection of fun activities (songs, word searches, crosswords, color by number, games and arts and crafts) about Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, and May Day that mostly explore vocabulary.	3F
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5.2 Grade 4 textbook

Grade 4 textbook follows the same pattern as grade 3. It is divided into 6 units: 1) My body and I, 2) Numbers, dates and time, 3) School routines and time, 4) My city and my house, 5) Farm and wild animals, and 6) Food and drinks. The culture sections in each unit are: 1) Special people, 2) Famous people, 3) Different school routines, 4) Original houses around the world, 5) Interesting animals around the world, and 6) Typical food around the world. As in grade 3 textbook, there is an initial general culture section called *Around the World* and it has an end-of-book cultural section on English-speaking-world festivities. Below, a table provides more details on the cultural sections of this book and shows the code attributed to each section to facilitate the data analysis.

Table 4.
Summary of Cultural Content in Grade 4 Textbook

Name of section/activity	Description	Code
<i>Around the World</i>	This introductory cultural section shows the English-speaking countries, mentioning their capitals, symbols and landmarks.	4 Intro 1
Unit 1 Culture Section Special people	It presents brief reading comprehension activities on special people (deaf, blind,...) to explore the topic of physical descriptions. It has a small "Stop & Think" sub-section inviting the students to think of a Portuguese special person. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students introduce themselves (name, age, nationality and	4U1

	physical and personality description), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other special people in the world and present them in class.	
Unit 2 Culture Section Famous people	<p>It presents a brief reading comprehension on Simone Biles to explore the topic of dates, time and ordinal numbers.</p> <p>It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think of a Portuguese person who was first in something.</p> <p>It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students present their Birth Fact File (measurements, weight, time and date of birth), and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find another famous person in the world and present their birth fact file in class.</p>	4U2
Unit 3 Culture Section Different school routines	<p>It presents short reading comprehension activities on school routines around the world to explore the Present Simple tense and time.</p> <p>It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about the Portuguese school routine.</p> <p>It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students present about their weekly school routine, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other school routines in the world and present them in class.</p>	4U3
Unit 4 Culture Section Original houses around the world	<p>It presents short reading comprehension activities on original houses in the world to explore vocabulary on parts of the house. It also encourages students to go online and find out more about those houses.</p> <p>It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about different/original houses in Portugal.</p> <p>It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students draw and describe their dream house, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other original houses in the world and</p>	4U4

	present them in class.	
Unit 5 Culture Section Interesting Animals around the world	It presents a short reading comprehension on the kiwi bird. It also encourages students to go online and find out more about another animal: platypus. It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think of an animal in danger of extinction in Portugal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students draw an original “super animal” and present it, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other interesting animals in the world and present them in class.	4U5
Unit 6 Culture Section Typical foods around the world	It presents short reading comprehension activities on typical breakfast food around the world. It has a small “Stop & Think” sub-section inviting the students to think about a typical Portuguese meal. It has another small sub-section which offers two Projects to choose from: in Project A, students draw their favorite food and present it, and in Project B-Multicultural, students are invited to find about other tasty foods in the world and present them in class.	4U6
Festivities	A collection of fun activities (songs, word searches, matching, games and arts and crafts) about Halloween, Christmas, Valentine’s Day, Pancake Day and World Food Safety Day that mostly explore vocabulary.	4F

Despite the implied presence of cultural aspects throughout the whole textbook while exploring linguistic elements, only the cultural sections of the book described above were analyzed for intercultural competence development potential since if they were purposefully designed to develop cultural knowledge and interculturality as required in *Orientações Programáticas* (Programmatic Guidelines) (Bento et al., 2005), *Metas Curriculares* (Curriculum Goals) (Bravo et al., 2015) and *Aprendizagens Essenciais* (Essential Learnings) (Ministry of Education, 2018), then

certainly these are ideal to verify whether the intercultural goals they were designed for may be met or not.

Our focus was on the textbook (student's book) and not on any other of its components (teacher's book, workbook, dictionary, etc.). This is because the goal of the study is to, with the help of the FREPA descriptors, analyze the potential of the content of the textbook itself to generate interest, curiosity and willingness to engage with cultural diversity and, from there, be ready for future intercultural interactions open-mindedly without the teacher's guidance and support. It is, surely, predicted that the teacher's book will most likely have guidance or follow-up activities connected to the cultural sections of the textbook, however an analysis of the role of the teacher is not the purpose of the study. Our intention is to examine the textbook's content genuine capability to develop intercultural *attitudes* and *skills* in independent, autonomous learning situations where the book would be the only resource, particularly considering current pedagogical beliefs which privilege active learning, student agency, autonomy, and independent, self-paced learning (Ang et al., 2021; Roberts, 2019; Michael, 2006; Novak, 2002). One example is how the research projects are explained and whether those explanations alone will be sufficient to generate deep intercultural reflections.

6. Results and discussion

6.1 Grade 3 textbook

Utilizing the FREPA descriptors presented before, Tables 5 and 6 below summarize the presence of specific cultural *attitudes* and *skills* on grade 3 textbook per unit (see Tables 1 and 2 for full FREPA descriptors), visually demonstrating the potential that the book has to generate critical intercultural *attitudes* and *skills*. After each table, a description and an analysis of its content are provided.

Attitudes

Table 5.*Critical Intercultural Attitudes Potential Found in Grade 3 Textbook*

Attitude	Grade 3 textbook sections								
	3 Intro 1	3 Intro 2	3U1	3U2	3U3	3U4	3U5	3U6	3F
A1		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
A2		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
A3		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
A4									
A5									
A6									
A7		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
A8									
A9									
A10				✓	✓				
A11									
A12		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A13									
A14/15		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
A16		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Looking at the table, we can clearly see a pattern. Intro 1 didn't reveal the presence of any of the *attitudes* selected from FREPA for our analysis because, as can be confirmed in the descriptors in the section *Methodology*, it simply presents facts (words in English that are used in the Portuguese

context), failing to likely develop deeper intercultural reflective attitudes and skills on the topic. However, most of the remaining cultural sections (6 out of 9) show potential to generate attention, disposition and curiosity toward cultural diversity, sensitizing children to the existence of other cultures (attitudes A1, A2, A3 and A7). This is because the cultural activities proposed focus on situations, customs and people from around the world and not just from the English-speaking world, with several examples from a variety of other countries and through fun (e.g., lucky numbers) and relatable topics (e.g., going to school, famous people they may admire). Units 4 and 5 did not show potential to develop the above attitudes because, again, they present factual information without cultural implications, which place students as passive consumers of cultural information. For example, they present the British royal family tree as if merely presenting a “famous” family, while the topic could have been explored, for instance, from the perspective that in the UK there is a monarchy and this is why they are called princes, princesses, dukes, duchesses, etc. Similarly, 3U5 presents interesting animals that are typical of certain parts of the world but could have elaborated more on local aspects that make them be more present in certain parts of the world (e.g., weather, landscape).

Attitudes 12, 14/15 and 16 are present in all sections, except Intro 1. This is where the authors’ efforts to work on multicultural and intercultural attitudes and skills are more evident, specifically through the “Stop & Think” and Projects A & B, which undoubtedly have been designed to trigger disposition for cultural decentering, to develop self-confidence and familiarity with cultural diversity and to help one assume one’s cultural identity. This is because the “Stop & Think” sub-section of each cultural section per unit invites the student to make connections to their own Portuguese culture after reading about other countries, and proposes research

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projects that entail further independent research on the topic around the world.

In the table, it can also be seen that the content in the cultural sections does not appear to have the potential to generate positive acceptance, flexibility, openness and respect for cultural diversity (attitudes A4, A5, A6 and A13). Similarly, it does not seem to create informed attitudes and representations of culture (except in 3U2 and 3U3) or develop the willingness to connect with others (attitudes A10 and A8). Opportunities for critical questioning and positioning toward culture are non-existent (attitude A9) and the likelihood to lead to suspension of one's prejudices or judgments (attitude A11) is not present either.

Despite the variety of culture-oriented activities and the clear underlying intention to prompt cultural/intercultural reflections, the way they are presented in the textbook is not prone to generate profound interculturality. They lack follow-up activities and/or open-ended questions that could prompt serious deep thinking, decentering, flexibility and openness. For example, in 3U1's "Stop & Think", after reading about three international celebrities, students are invited to think about celebrities in Portugal and speak about them, but there is no encouragement to reflect on their differences and similarities, on which are more famous internationally and why, on whether Portuguese celebrities are known in English-speaking countries or not and why, and so on. The same applies to 3U2 (lucky numbers), where both the "Stop & Think" and the project fail to provide an opportunity for thinking on reasons why number 13 is considered unlucky across many European countries or on why China has different lucky and unlucky numbers.

In order for the textbook to show legitimate potential to independently bring about acceptance, critical positioning and suspension of prejudices through its content alone, it should contain a reflective approach associated

with the culture activities that invite students to go beyond reading about and acknowledging cultural facts, as stated by Byram et al. (2002).

Skills

Table 6.

Critical Intercultural Skills Potential Found in Grade 3 Textbook

Skill	Grade 3 textbook sections								
	3 Intro 1	3 Intro 2	3U1	3U2	3U3	3U4	3U5	3U6	3F
S1/S2				✓	✓				✓
S3				✓	✓				✓
S4				✓	✓				✓
S6	✓			✓		✓		✓	✓

The table above shows that the textbook's content has little explicit potential to allow for moments when students can analyze cultural phenomena, compare between cultures, discuss their own and other cultures, or interact confidently. Because the topics in Intro 2, 3U1 and 3U5 are presented in a factual manner, there is little room for discussions and comparisons. One example is how the goal of all activities in 3U1 is to explore famous people by focusing solely on their name, nationality and country's flag colors, or how in 3U5, only animals and their features are described. Intro 1, 3U4 and 3F also do not seem to likely trigger reflective analysis of cultures but definitely contribute for students feeling more confident, at least linguistically, in future interactions between cultures and languages because their focus is mainly vocabulary (e.g., Christmas vocabulary, family members, ...).

Even though units 2, 3 and 6 are short of follow-up tasks that would encourage further and more profound cultural reflections, as mentioned in the

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attitudes section, their reading comprehension activities, by presenting situations in different countries, may *per se* constitute implied comparisons (e.g., 3U2 – 4 is a lucky number in Germany, but unlucky in China) likely to promote natural, subconscious individual reflections.

6.2 Grade 4 textbook

Tables 7 and 8 below summarize the presence of specific cultural *attitudes* and *skills* on grade 4 textbook per unit, visually demonstrating the potential that the book has to generate critical intercultural attitudes and skills. After each table, a description and an analysis of its content are provided.

Attitudes

Table 7.

Critical Intercultural Attitudes Potential Found in Grade 4 Textbook

Attitude	Grade 4 textbook sections							
	4 Intro 1	4U1	4U2	4U3	4U4	4U5	4U6	4F
A1	✓			✓			✓	✓
A2	✓			✓			✓	✓
A3	✓			✓			✓	✓
A4								
A5								
A6								
A7				✓			✓	
A8								
A9								
A10				✓			✓	✓

A11			
A12		✓	✓ ✓
A13			
A14/15	✓	✓	✓ ✓
A16		✓	✓

In a nutshell, table 7 shows that, similarly to grade 3 textbook, grade 4 textbook reveals limited potential for reflective cultural awareness and critical intercultural competence development. While half of the culture sections do present content that will likely develop attitudes of attention, interest and curiosity toward cultural diversity (attitudes A1, 2, 3 and 7) as well as construct better informed attitudes toward and familiarity with otherness, four out of six units show no potential to encourage reflective practices culture-wise. For example, 4U1 addresses an important topic but not necessarily cultural (people with a disability). Another example is that 4U2 presents a text about a famous person, Simone Biles, who happens to be American and an English-speaking person, however the text is very fact-based and does not provide information that would trigger cultural curiosity or interest. The same applies to units 4 and 5 which share interesting but factual information on houses and animals around the world, without culture-related data that could potentially promote deep intercultural attitudes.

In comparison with grade 3 textbook, this one provides fewer opportunities to develop critical interculturality, which is unfortunate since students in grade 4 are slightly older and more mature, possessing an even more advanced capacity to engage in intercultural reflections.

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Skills

Table 8.*Critical Intercultural Skills Potential Found in Grade 4 Textbook*

Skill	Book sections							
	4 Intro 1	4U1	4U2	4U3	4U4	4U5	4U6	4F
S1/S2	✓			✓			✓	✓
S3				✓			✓	
S4				✓			✓	
S6								✓

As for the skills, similar to grade 3 textbook, the table above shows that most of grade 4 textbook's content is unlikely to allow for instances when students analyze cultural phenomena, compare between cultures and discuss their own and other cultures. This only happens fully in two of the end-of-unit cultural sections (4U3 and 4U6), and this is because, once more, the content prepared is mainly factual, not allowing for deep discussions and comparisons. For instance, while unit 4 presents fun data on original houses around the world, which will definitely generate interest among 4th graders, it does not build on that interest to explore cultural aspects. The same applies to unit 5, where different, less-known animals are presented, but no follow-up reflective approach is utilized, such as questions on how the animal in New Zealand is called kiwi and New Zealanders are also called kiwis informally.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the two textbooks using FREPA revealed that despite the latent intention to address culture, as required by the ministerial documents, and to prompt reflections on cultural diversity, especially evident in the "Stop & Think" and Projects sub-sections of the culture sections of the books, the way the content and topics are presented does not fully support deep

intercultural awareness and reflections. The textbook itself alone does not provide tasks that stimulate open and critical discussions on otherness, susceptible of generating acceptance, respect or decentering. For this to happen, the fact-based, passive-spectator-like textbook activities need to be accompanied with follow-up tasks or/and open-ended questions that encourage delving into deeper aspects of cultural diversity, prepare students for future intercultural encounters and develop positive perceptions of alterity. Also, given the surface level approaches chosen to present the cultural topics in these textbooks, mainly focusing on the usual themes of typical food, famous people, landmarks, and so on (the so called “tourist culture” approach (Liu, 2016)), it becomes clear that the role of the teachers is fundamental in sparking critical interculturality through the potential discussion they may promote in follow-up activities after exploring the textbook activities, as stated by Peng (2020). Given that the current didactic discourse supports facilitation, instead of teaching, and stands for autonomous and active learning, it would be desirable that the resources alone would have the full potential to encourage critical, reflective interculturality or, at least, the ability to prepare students to independently brainstorm initial ideas to engage in those discussions and reflections later in class with the teacher.

We acknowledge that, in elementary school EFL classes, students may not yet have the linguistic ability to proficiently participate in advanced discussions on interculturality, but we believe that adopting a dual language method, such as the translanguaging/plurilingual approach (see more on this pedagogy in Coelho & Steinhagen, 2023), could bolster and sustain the capability and motivation to debate otherness confidently and critically in EFL classes.

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In conclusion, and answering the research questions (*How is intercultural competence addressed in grades 3 and 4 official EFL textbooks in central Portugal?* and *How likely is it that these textbooks' content will contribute to the development of (critical) intercultural competence?*), it can be said that even though the textbooks are very attractive to students and exhibit a clear attempt to focus on cultures, their (inter)cultural content is, regrettably, still considerably knowledge-level-oriented, fact-based and “tourist view”-centered, and, therefore, it is unlikely that all their cultural sections will foster deep critical reflections on interculturality. Hence, we argue that policy makers, textbook authors and publishers would benefit from more training on critical cultural awareness and intercultural competence so as to become more able to incorporate reflective intercultural approaches and content in EFL resources which would entail mostly authentic, open-ended, and critical discussion-oriented (inter)cultural tasks.

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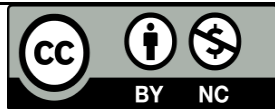
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