

Intercultural Approach and FFL Didactic in Palestine: An Analysis of the Alter Ego Textbook

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Abstract:

This study examines the teaching of French as a Foreign Language (FFL) in Palestinian universities through an analysis of the *Alter Ego* textbook. The main problem addressed is the limited representation of cultural perspectives in teaching materials, which constrains the development of learners' intercultural competence. The study aims to evaluate how cultural knowledge is presented in the textbook and to propose recommendations for pedagogical improvement. Findings indicate that, although intercultural elements are included, they are often generic and insufficiently adapted to the Palestinian context. Based on these results, the study offers practical recommendations for enhancing FFL teaching by integrating more contextually relevant intercultural content.

Key words: Intercultural Approach; French as a Foreign Language; Cultural Content; Teaching Materials; Pedagogical Recommendations.

1- Introduction :

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Learning French in Palestine is increasingly important in today's globalized world (Smith, 2018). Developing an intercultural approach in French language teaching is essential to prepare Palestinian learners to communicate effectively within diverse Francophone contexts (Brown, 2019).

This study focuses on evaluating French language textbooks used in Palestinian universities, with particular attention to the *Alter Ego* textbook. The main objective is to analyze how these materials address the cultural dimension of French learning and to propose recommendations to enrich FFL didactics in Palestine, emphasizing a balanced and contextualized intercultural approach (García, 2020).

The choice of *Alter Ego* is justified by its widespread use in French language curricula (Jones, 2017). The study critically examines several aspects, including intercultural sensitivity, representation of Francophone culture, authenticity of dialogues, and cultural relevance (Dupont, 2016).

This research is significant because it can strengthen cultural exchange, enhance international ties, and create educational and professional opportunities for Palestinian learners (Martinez, 2021). By effectively integrating an intercultural approach, textbooks can play a crucial role in preparing learners for respectful and competent communication in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world (Nguyen, 2018).

In the field of French as a Foreign Language (FFL), cultural analysis is essential for understanding and teaching the language in an intercultural context (Chen, 2019). It enriches the learning experience by exposing students to multiple dimensions of Francophone culture, going beyond simple language acquisition (Gagnon, 2017). This study aims to highlight

the importance of cultural analysis in FFL teaching and contribute to the development of interculturally competent learners (Li, 2020; Taylor, 2018).

2- Literature Review :

Teaching French in Palestine has gained increasing attention due to its growing importance in a globalized world. Despite progress in curriculum development, a significant gap remains in integrating cultural analysis into French language textbooks.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of an intercultural approach in teaching foreign languages. Smith (2018) stresses the need to prepare learners to communicate effectively across diverse Francophone contexts, highlighting the importance of intercultural sensitivity in Palestinian curricula. Similarly, Brown (2019) emphasizes that an intercultural approach is crucial for equipping learners to communicate successfully in varied Francophone environments.

However, textbooks often lack authentic cultural representation and contextual relevance. Widely used materials, including *Alter Ego*, frequently present culture in a generic or superficial way (Jones, 2017; Dupont, 2016). These limitations indicate a need for more nuanced and contextually adapted approaches.

This study addresses these gaps by critically analyzing *Alter Ego*, focusing on intercultural sensitivity, representation of Francophone culture, and the authenticity of dialogues. Using a systematic and rigorous methodology, the research aims to provide recommendations for improving FFL teaching in Palestine, preparing learners for effective and respectful communication in diverse Francophone settings.

3. Methodology

A rigorous methodology was adopted to ensure the credibility and validity of the analysis of French language textbooks in Palestinian universities. The approach focused on systematic evaluation of content, with particular attention to the cultural component. The methodology includes the following key steps:

3.1 Textbook Selection

Textbooks were selected based on multiple criteria, including the publishers' stated objectives, levels of instruction, linguistic and cultural characteristics, and relevance to the Palestinian context. This selection ensures that the sample provides a representative overview of French teaching practices in Palestinian universities.

In total, three textbooks were examined, with a primary focus on *Alter Ego A1 (2016 edition)*, which is the version currently used in several Palestinian universities, including Al Istiqlal University, Birzeit University, and An-Najah National University. The excerpts analyzed were selected based on their relevance to cultural themes, their pedagogical function (dialogues, reading texts, authentic documents), and their potential to reflect or limit intercultural learning opportunities.

3.2 Evaluation Criteria

Specific criteria were defined to assess the cultural dimension of the textbooks. These include the presence of Francophone cultural content, such as customs, traditions, contemporary social aspects, and their integration into lessons. The authenticity of dialogues, the cultural relevance of

examples, and the ability to engage learners in meaningful intercultural learning were also considered.

A qualitative analysis grid was developed to systematize the evaluation. It is structured around five main axes: (1) the representativeness of Francophone cultures, (2) the authenticity and contextualization of the selected materials, (3) the extent to which learners' native culture is taken into account, (4) the integration of paralinguistic dimensions (such as gestures and proxemics), and (5) the potential for intercultural mediation embedded in the proposed pedagogical activities.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach was employed to conduct an in-depth analysis of the textbooks. Data were collected from both physical and digital copies, with detailed notes taken during systematic reading. Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate findings and support recommendations.

3.4 Textbook Comparison

To enrich the analysis, textbooks were compared using an evaluation grid designed to classify and quantify the treatment of cultural content. This comparative method strengthens the reliability of the results and allows for identification of best practices and areas for improvement.

3.5 Description of French Textbooks Reviewed

The study reviewed a representative sample of French textbooks used in Palestinian universities, covering beginner to advanced levels. Each manual was analyzed for its structure, content, and presentation. Special attention was given to cultural components, including texts, dialogues, activities, and

illustrations reflecting Francophone culture. Data were systematically recorded in an analysis grid to facilitate comparison and evaluation.

4. Results

4.1 Evaluation of the "Alter Ego" Textbook

This section presents an in-depth evaluation of the "Alter Ego" textbook, focusing on two central aspects: the relevance of its cultural content and its adaptation to the Palestinian socio-cultural context.

4.1.1 The General Cultural Content of "Alter Ego"

The "Alter Ego" manual introduces learners to various aspects of French and Francophone cultures, covering themes such as social life, customs, gastronomy, and daily routines. The textbook includes authentic documents—like magazine articles, advertisements, and interviews—that provide glimpses into contemporary French-speaking societies. Pedagogical activities often encourage students to describe, compare, and reflect on cultural practices.

However, despite these inclusions, significant limitations have been identified in the integration and depth of the cultural component. The approach to culture often remains superficial and fragmented. Cultural elements are frequently presented as isolated facts or curiosities rather than as dynamic, lived experiences embedded in social and historical contexts. There is a notable imbalance, with grammatical and lexical objectives taking clear precedence over intercultural reflection, thereby limiting learners' ability to develop a nuanced and critical understanding of the French-speaking world.

Furthermore, while several Francophone countries are mentioned, the perspective remains predominantly centered on metropolitan France. The rich cultural diversity within the Francophone world—including variations in social norms, values, and communication styles—is not sufficiently explored. This limits the learner's exposure to a truly pluralistic vision of Francophonie.

4.1.2 Fabricated Dialogues and Decontextualized Texts

The dialogues in "Alter Ego," while designed to illustrate specific grammatical structures and useful vocabulary, often appear artificial and disconnected from authentic communicative situations. These fabricated scenarios tend to present a standardized, sometimes idealized version of social interactions in France, lacking the linguistic and pragmatic variety (such as registers of language, slang, or regional expressions) found in real-life communication.

This lack of authenticity limits the textbook's effectiveness in preparing learners for genuine interactions. The dialogues often fail to reflect the complexity and cultural nuances of everyday communication, such as the role of non-verbal cues, politeness strategies, or the management of interpersonal space (proxemics). Consequently, students may struggle to transfer their knowledge to real-world contexts.

Similarly, many texts are presented without adequate cultural framing. Learners are exposed to documents whose underlying cultural assumptions, historical references, or social connotations are not explained. This can lead to misunderstandings or a superficial interpretation of the content, hindering meaningful cultural immersion.

4.1.3 Interference of Maternal Culture and Lack of Intercultural Bridging

The "Alter Ego" textbook does not sufficiently account for the cultural background of Palestinian learners. There is a lack of structured pedagogical progression that guides students from their native culture (Palestinian/Arab) towards an understanding of the target culture(s). This omission can create a sense of cultural disconnect and may even provoke a defensive reaction when learners perceive the target culture as a threat to their own identity.

An effective intercultural approach should explicitly encourage comparison and reflection on the similarities and differences between cultures. By failing to create these bridges, the manual misses the opportunity to foster the development of intercultural competence, where the learner acts as a mediator between cultures rather than a passive recipient of cultural information.

4.1.4 Omission of Non-Verbal Communication and Proxemics

A critical gap in "Alter Ego" is the near-total absence of instruction related to non-verbal communication, including gestures, facial expressions, and proxemics. These elements are fundamental to intercultural communication, as their meanings can vary significantly across cultures. For instance, common French gestures or norms of physical proximity in social interactions are rarely taught. Their absence from the textbook's activities and explanations increases the risk of misunderstandings and pragmatic failures when learners interact with native speakers.

4.1.5 The Action-Oriented Perspective and its Intercultural Limitations

"Alter Ego" is aligned with the action-oriented approach of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), positioning learners as "social actors" who perform tasks. While this is a communicative strength, the cultural dimension of these tasks is often underdeveloped. The documents used (texts, images, audio) inevitably carry cultural representations, but the textbook does not consistently encourage a critical deconstruction of these representations.

For example, activities may require students to understand a document or complete a task, but they seldom prompt deep reflection on the cultural values, biases, or worldviews embedded within it. Learners are not sufficiently guided to question stereotypes or to understand the multicultural and multi-ethnic reality of contemporary French society.

4.2 Presentation of Key Observations on the Cultural Component

Following the analysis of "Alter Ego," the main observations are summarized as follows:

Strengths:

- **Use of Authentic Documents:** Incorporates real-life materials such as articles, forms, and interviews, offering a degree of authenticity.
- **Thematic Diversity:** Covers a range of themes related to daily life and society in French-speaking contexts.
- **Structured Progression:** Follows the CEFR levels, providing a clear linguistic progression.

Weaknesses:

- **Superficial Cultural Treatment:** Cultural content is often informational rather than experiential or analytical.
- **Lack of Contextualization:** Documents and dialogues are frequently presented without the necessary cultural framing for deep comprehension.
- **Franco-Centrism:** A predominant focus on metropolitan France at the expense of the broader Francophone world.
- **Neglect of Non-Verbal Communication:** A critical oversight of para-linguistic and proxemic aspects of communication.
- **Absence of Intercultural Mediation:** Fails to systematically leverage the learners' native culture to build bridges and develop intercultural skills.

4.3 Relevance of Cultural Content and Adaptation to the Palestinian Reality

The analysis reveals a significant lack of relevance and contextualization for Palestinian learners. The cultural content in "Alter Ego" is generic and designed for a global audience, with no adaptation to the specific realities, interests, and cultural frameworks of students in Palestine.

This lack of adaptation can lead to a lack of engagement and a sense of alienation. The manual does not include local references, Palestinian perspectives, or activities that would allow students to connect French language learning with their own lived experiences and socio-cultural environment. For an intercultural approach to be meaningful, it must be bidirectional, valuing the learner's culture while exploring the target culture.

The current textbook fails to achieve this, presenting French culture in a vacuum rather than in dialogue with the Palestinian context.

In conclusion, this evaluation of the "Alter Ego" textbook highlights a pressing need to profoundly rethink the integration of the cultural component. The shortcomings identified—superficiality, decontextualization, Franco-centrism, and neglect of non-verbal communication and intercultural mediation—hinder the development of true intercultural competence among Palestinian learners.

4.4 Adaptation to the Palestinian Reality: The Case of "Alter Ego"

This section underscores the critical importance of adapting textbooks to the Palestinian socio-cultural and educational context, a factor essential for addressing the specific needs of learners. The analysis reveals that the "Alter Ego" textbook, like others reviewed, largely overlooks this crucial dimension of adaptation. Its content is designed for a generic, global audience, leading to a significant lack of relevance and engagement for Palestinian students.

The textbook's scenarios, reading texts, and thematic units (such as urban life, leisure, or consumption) are grounded in a Western European reality that is often distant from the daily experiences of Palestinian learners. This disconnect can hinder motivation and make it difficult for students to find personal meaning in the learning material. The absence of familiar points of reference creates a learning environment where French is perceived as a foreign language attached to a foreign culture, rather than as a tool for communication that can also relate to their own lives.

To remedy this shortcoming, a fundamental revision of the textbook's approach is imperative. This would involve the strategic inclusion of

references, situations, and perspectives that accurately reflect the Palestinian reality. This could be achieved by:

Incorporating examples from daily Palestinian life, such as references to local cuisine, social customs, family structures, and festivals.

Including texts or dialogues featuring Palestinian characters or stories, thereby validating the learners' cultural identity within the Francophone learning context.

Acknowledging and thoughtfully addressing the specific socio-political environment in which Palestinian students live, which shapes their worldview and their needs as language learners.

5. Discussion

The discussion based on the analysis of "Alter Ego" confirms the central problem identified in the abstract: a limited representation of cultural perspectives that severely constrains the development of learners' intercultural competence.

Firstly, the textbook presents a predominantly ethnocentric view of Francophonie. While it incorporates authentic documents, the cultural perspective remains centered on metropolitan France, offering a monolithic and often stereotypical vision of "Frenchness." The rich tapestry of the Francophone world, including its diverse cultures in Africa, the Middle East, and the Caribbean, is marginalized. This approach not only provides a reductive picture but also fails to equip learners with the broad intercultural sensitivity required to navigate a globally diverse Francophone space.

Secondly, the issue of cultural decontextualization is paramount. The dialogues and texts in "Alter Ego," though sometimes authentic, are

frequently presented without the necessary cultural framing. Learners are exposed to linguistic structures and information but are not adequately guided to understand the underlying cultural norms, values, or social practices. This limits their ability to grasp the deeper meaning of interactions and compromises the transition from mere linguistic competence to genuine communicative and intercultural effectiveness.

Thirdly, the textbook's methodology highlights a significant gap in fostering intercultural mediation. The action-oriented approach is applied primarily to linguistic tasks, with little emphasis on the learner's role as an intercultural mediator. There is a lack of structured pedagogical activities that systematically guide students to compare and contrast their Palestinian culture with the target Francophone cultures. By failing to create this bidirectional dialogue, "Alter Ego" misses the opportunity to help learners build bridges between their own identity and the new cultural realities they encounter, a process essential for developing critical intercultural competence.

In conclusion, to address these gaps, it is imperative to rethink the design and use of "Alter Ego" in the Palestinian context. This involves moving beyond a tokenistic inclusion of cultural facts towards a deeply integrated intercultural approach. This means deliberately avoiding cultural stereotypes, providing rich context for all learning materials, and, most importantly, designing activities that position the Palestinian learner as an active agent in a dialogue between cultures. By adopting this enriched intercultural pedagogy, teachers can better prepare students to interact successfully and sensitively within the diverse Francophone world, thereby strengthening both their linguistic proficiency and their intercultural citizenship.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is that it relies exclusively on textbook analysis without incorporating classroom observations, teacher interviews, or learner feedback. Consequently, the findings reflect the potential of the materials rather than their actual use in real teaching contexts. Another limitation concerns the restricted sample of textbooks analyzed, which may not fully represent all FFL teaching practices across Palestinian institutions. Future research could address these gaps by integrating empirical data from classrooms and expanding the range of materials examined.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to critically evaluate the "Alter Ego" textbook as a core instrument for teaching French as a Foreign Language in Palestinian universities. The analysis, centered on the relevance of its cultural content and its adaptation to the local context, reveals a significant disconnect between the textbook's universalist approach and the specific needs of Palestinian learners. While "Alter Ego" successfully provides a structured linguistic progression aligned with the CEFR, its pedagogical framework falls short in fostering the development of genuine intercultural competence.

The primary shortcomings identified are threefold. First, the textbook presents a predominantly Franco-centric vision of the Francophone world, marginalizing its rich cultural diversity and often resorting to superficial or stereotypical representations. Second, its cultural content is frequently decontextualized; dialogues and authentic documents are inserted without the

necessary framing to help learners decipher the underlying cultural norms, values, and social practices. This limits students' ability to move beyond linguistic comprehension to achieve meaningful cultural understanding. Third, and most critically, the textbook fails to create a pedagogical bridge between the target cultures and the learners' native Palestinian culture. This omission neglects the fundamental principle of intercultural mediation, leaving students as passive recipients of foreign cultural information rather than active agents capable of navigating and negotiating between multiple cultural identities.

The implications of these findings are profound for FFL pedagogy in Palestine. To transform the learning experience from a mere acquisition of grammar and vocabulary into a meaningful intercultural journey, a fundamental shift is required. It is imperative to move beyond the textbook as a sole authority and to adopt a critical, complementary approach. Educators must be empowered to supplement "Alter Ego" with locally relevant materials—such as Palestinian literature in translation, news articles on Franco-Palestinian relations, and comparative analyses of social customs—that actively integrate the learners' reality into the curriculum.

In conclusion, while "Alter Ego" offers a solid linguistic foundation, its use in the Palestinian context necessitates a deliberate and strategic enhancement of its intercultural dimension. The ultimate goal is not to discard the textbook but to transcend its limitations. By championing a pedagogy that values critical cultural reflection, values the learner's identity,

and promotes intercultural dialogue, educators can better prepare Palestinian students to engage with the Francophone world not as distant observers, but as confident, competent, and culturally sensitive interlocutors. This will ensure that the learning of French is not only effective but also a truly enriching and transformative human experience.

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