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Enhancing Sociocultural Integration in Basque Language Learning: Bridging Gaps in Traditional Textbooks with Digital Tools

Diana Palenzuela Rodrigo 

University of Chicago, United States of America

Abstract

This study examines the integration of sociocultural components in Basque language instruction, particularly for international students in higher education who have no prior exposure to the cultural context of the language. An analysis of existing Basque textbooks reveals a misalignment with established pedagogical standards, from the broader Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to the specific sociocultural goals of the Basque government's own curriculum (HEOC), as these materials often presuppose familiarity with Basque culture, resulting in decontextualised activities that fail to engage learners effectively. Qualitative interviews with Basque instructors in the United States support these findings, emphasising the need for supplementary teaching methodologies to bridge gaps in cultural content. To address this issue, a pedagogical intervention was carried out with higher education students using Facebook as a virtual community of practice. The findings indicate that digital platforms provide dynamic, contextual learning opportunities that enhance both linguistic and sociocultural dimensions, leading to greater student engagement and spontaneous knowledge acquisition compared to traditional textbooks. This research highlights the importance of integrating digital tools into Basque language education to better align with contemporary teaching methodologies and improve cultural understanding.

Keywords: Basque language; higher education; teaching and learning resources (TLR); sociocultural dimension; teaching methodologies, virtual community of practice

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AUTHOR:

Diana Palenzuela Rodrigo
dpalenzuela@uchicago.edu

LICENCE:

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Introduction

The Basque language, or Euskara, is a linguistic isolate, unrelated to any other known language family, and serves as a core symbol of a distinct European culture. Primarily spoken in the Basque Country, a region spanning northern Spain and southwestern France, it has approximately 750,000 speakers (Basque Government, 2023) and holds co-official status in the Spanish autonomous communities of the Basque Country and Navarre. Its survival was endangered during the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), which brought the language to the brink of extinction. The restoration of Basque autonomy in the 1980s launched a successful revitalization effort. This initiative prioritized integrating Basque into the school system and fostered a market for instructional materials targeting adult learners within the Basque Country. As a result, most Teaching and Learning Resources (TLRs) have been developed for learners embedded in the local context.

A new stage began in 2010 with the establishment of the Etxepare Basque Institute, charged with promoting Basque language and culture internationally. Starting with the 2010–2011 academic year, Etxepare created a network of university lectureships, now present in over 35 institutions across Europe, the Americas, and Asia. This expansion created a cohort of international students who engage with Basque without prior cultural exposure. Consequently, a pedagogical gap has emerged: TLRs developed for domestic audiences often fail to meet these learners' needs. While instructors have observed this misalignment, academic research remains limited. Among the few systematic studies, Abasolo (2016) concludes that many existing materials presuppose cultural familiarity and are not fully adapted to global classrooms. This study responds to that gap through an evidence-based analysis and the identification of pedagogical solutions. To this end, this paper pursues two primary objectives:

- 1) To systematically analyse the extent to which sociocultural components are integrated into current Basque TLRs for international students.
- 2) To examine the effectiveness of a digital pedagogical intervention – a virtual community of practice – designed to address these gaps.

Therefore, the paper addresses a series of research questions through a multi-layered analysis that includes: a review of European and Basque language policy; content analysis of textbooks; instructors' perspectives; and the outcomes of a Facebook-based activity. The article presents the study's context and framework, followed by the methodology and findings from two studies, with attention to their implications for Basque teaching in international contexts.

Context of the study

The teaching of Basque as a foreign language (FL) in international higher education is a relatively new and rapidly expanding field. Prior to the establishment of the Etxepare Basque Institute's network around 2010, Basque instruction abroad was limited to a few isolated

courses. The creation of this network, which currently supports over 35 lectureships and 11 academic chairs worldwide (Etxepare Basque Institute, 2023), has systematized instruction and given rise to a new cohort of international university students. However, this expansion has also exposed a significant gap: the development of TLRs designed for this audience has lagged. Traditionally, the production of Basque materials has focused on domestic learners, guided by HABE (Helduen Alfabetatze eta Berreuskalduntzerako Erakundea), the Basque Government's agency for adult education. HABE oversees the euskaltegi network (adult language centres) and develops the official curriculum: Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculum (HEOC, 2015).

Following this framework, publishing houses have produced materials intended for learners already immersed in the Basque environment, who acquire cultural knowledge through daily life, media, and social interaction. Consequently, most existing TLRs presuppose such familiarity. Academic research on this issue remains scarce, with Abasolo (2016) providing one of the few direct analyses, concluding that these materials are often poorly suited to international classrooms. For international students, who lack prior exposure to Basque culture and approach the language with different goals and motivations, this creates a fundamental pedagogical mismatch.

Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in a sociocultural perspective on language acquisition, structured around three interrelated pillars: (1) the theoretical shift toward understanding language as a social practice; (2) the pedagogical emphasis on developing intercultural competence; and (3) the growing role of social networks as effective instruments for advancing these contemporary educational objectives.

The sociocultural turn: From language as form to language as social practice

For decades, language teaching was dominated by formalist approaches that viewed language primarily as a system of grammatical rules to be memorized. A major departure from this perspective was introduced by Hymes (1972) through his concept of *communicative competence*, which emphasized that language knowledge involves not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately across diverse social contexts. This paradigm shift drew heavily on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which posits that learning is fundamentally mediated by social interaction and cultural tools, with language serving as the primary instrument. Central to SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space in which learners, with appropriate guidance, can achieve higher levels of competence—placing interaction at the core of the learning process. Building on Vygotsky, Lantolf and Thorne (2006, 2007) have applied SCT to second language acquisition (SLA), arguing that language learning entails not the internalization of abstract rules, but active participation in the cultural practices of a community. Similarly, VanPatten (2017) critiques traditional grammar-focused instruction, asserting that language acquisition involves

the development of complex mental representations through meaningful input and communicative engagement.

Through this process of *linguistic socialization* (Atkinson, 2011), language learners are not only acquiring linguistic forms, but are simultaneously negotiating their social roles and identities within the target culture. Gee (2008; 2015) elaborates on this idea by introducing the concept of *Discourse* (with a capital 'D'), which he defines as socially-recognized ways of using language, behaviours, values, and beliefs that together form what he calls an "identity kit." In this view, learning a language involves adopting the discursive practices of a particular social group, allowing learners to enact new identities within specific cultural contexts. Thus, language learning extends beyond mastering forms to becoming a legitimate participant in a new sociocultural environment. This entire theoretical lineage underscores a fundamental principle: language acquisition requires active engagement in meaningful, socially-situated interactions where learners learn to *be* rather than simply to *know*.

The pedagogical goal: Fostering intercultural competence

When incorporating culture into language teaching, it is essential to differentiate between two distinct pedagogical aims: the transmission of cultural knowledge and the development of intercultural competence. Traditional approaches have often prioritized the former, presenting culture as a fixed body of facts related to history, geography, or political structures. While such information offers background context, this approach has been widely criticized for its ethnocentric tendencies and its propensity to perpetuate outdated or stereotypical representations of the target culture (Paricio, 2005; Santamaría, 2010). Contemporary pedagogy, as advocated by scholars such as Byram and Fleming (1998) and Kramsch (1988, 2011), emphasizes the cultivation of intercultural competence – defined as the ability to navigate between cultural perspectives, engage empathetically with cultural difference, and critically examine one's own cultural assumptions. This objective requires moving beyond the simple acquisition of factual knowledge toward more reflective, dialogic forms of cultural engagement.

A useful framework for operationalizing this approach is provided by Miquel and Sans (1992), who distinguish between "Culture with a capital C" (canonical culture encompassing literature, art, and major institutions) and "culture with a lowercase c" (the anthropological dimensions of everyday life). The latter includes implicit values, social practices, communicative norms, humour, and daily lived experiences. Engaging with this informal, dynamic "lowercase" culture allows learners to acquire the pragmatic and sociocultural competencies essential for authentic interaction (McKay, 2001). These competencies extend beyond social conventions to include contemporary cultural products such as popular music, cinema, and social media content that actively shape daily discourse. The integration of both "Culture" and "culture" aligns with ecological perspectives on second language acquisition (SLA), which conceptualize language learning as participation within a dynamic sociocultural system rather than mastery of a static code (Lafford, 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). Within this ecological framework,

language serves as a tool for interaction that enables learners to engage meaningfully with cultural norms and practices. Therefore, fostering genuine intercultural competence entails immersing learners in this living sociocultural ecosystem, allowing them to critically engage with diverse cultural elements and develop the interpretive and relational skills required for effective intercultural communication.

The modern tool: Social networks as virtual communities of practice

In the digital age, social networks have emerged as transformative tools for language learning, offering dynamic spaces where learners engage in authentic communication and cultural exchange. These platforms align closely with social constructivist theories (Vygotsky, 1978), fostering *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998) in which participants collaboratively construct knowledge and negotiate meaning. By transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, social networks create immersive environments that support second language acquisition. For minority languages such as Basque, these virtual communities provide vital *breathing spaces* (Belmar & Glass, 2019), offering low-anxiety settings where learners and native speakers can interact, practice, and contribute to the language's vitality beyond its traditional physical contexts. Empirical research highlights the capacity of platforms like Facebook to facilitate meaningful interactions between learners and native speakers, fostering authentic communicative experiences while reducing anxiety (Murphy & Loveless, 2005). Mills (2011) conceptualizes these platforms as *learning clubs*, where students actively create, curate, and discuss content that integrates language learning with their personal interests.

The pedagogical benefits of social networks extend across multiple language skills. Studies demonstrate that platforms like Facebook and Twitter enhance vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy by providing sustained exposure to authentic input and regular opportunities for practice (Slim & Hafedh, 2019). Writing skills benefit substantially, as social networks predominantly rely on written communication; Araujo (2014) and Li (2017) argue that students refine their writing abilities through concise, purposeful interaction. Similarly, reading comprehension is supported through abundant authentic materials that match learners' interests, boosting both motivation and understanding (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Hyland, 2003). Although less explored, emerging research underscores the potential of social media for developing speaking and listening competencies. Wu (2016), for instance, demonstrates Facebook's effectiveness in promoting oral skills through real-time interaction, multimedia sharing, and cross-cultural communication.

Beyond discrete language skills, Facebook has proven effective in fostering virtual communities of practice. Its accessibility and familiarity make it particularly suitable for language learning. Studies by Blattner & Fiori (2009) and Mills (2009) emphasize its role in developing socio-pragmatic competence, learner motivation, and a sense of community through culturally authentic exchanges. Araya Ríos & Espinoza (2015) report Facebook's success as a supplementary tool in English learning, with students citing enhanced skills

alongside appreciation for the platform's flexibility and interactivity. Likewise, Razak & Saeed (2014) illustrate how Facebook groups facilitate collaborative writing, improving linguistic accuracy while promoting learner autonomy and active engagement. The incidental learning that occurs on social networks further enhances their pedagogical value. Spontaneous interactions, vocabulary exposure, and unplanned conversations contribute to sustained motivation and engagement (Kelly, 2012; Song & Fox, 2008). Research by Mazer et al. (2007) and Yunus et al. (2012) shows how social networks foster trust, enthusiasm, and meaningful participation by lowering anxiety and encouraging informal learning. Moreover, Facebook enables extracurricular engagement that bridges formal instruction and student-driven learning practices.

Finally, Facebook's transformative potential extends to diverse educational contexts. Studies conducted in Malaysian and Nigerian universities (Shafie et al., 2015; Tunde-Awe, 2015) demonstrate its effectiveness in developing core language skills – including writing, reading, and communicative confidence – while simultaneously promoting peer collaboration, interaction with native speakers, and self-directed learning practices that align with students' digital habits.

Research Questions

This research investigates the integration of sociocultural components in Basque foreign language instruction, addressing both the limitations of current teaching resources and the potential offered by digital alternatives. To this end, the study is structured in two sequential phases: the first analyses the existing landscape of Basque teaching methodologies and resources; the second evaluates a digital pedagogical intervention designed to address the identified gaps.

The first phase seeks to diagnose the main shortcomings in current Basque language instruction for international learners, articulated through the following primary research question:

RQ 1 What are the main gaps in current Basque language learning methods and strategies for international students?

To provide a comprehensive response, this central question is further subdivided into three specific research inquiries that structure a multi-faceted analysis:

RQ 1.1 How do current European language policies treat the sociocultural dimension?

RQ 1.2 Are Basque instructional materials aligned with European language learning standards regarding the integration of sociocultural components?

RQ 1.3 What are the opinions of Basque language instructors teaching in foreign contexts about current Basque teaching methodologies?

Building upon the diagnostic findings from the first phase, the second phase of the study proposes and assesses a digital pedagogical intervention utilizing a social media platform. This experimental component is guided by two additional research questions focused on its effectiveness and learner perceptions:

- RQ 2:** How do the outcomes of the Facebook activity align with contemporary trends on the inclusion of sociocultural components?
- RQ 3:** What are students' perceptions of this activity compared to other instructional strategies?

Data and methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method qualitative research design, integrating documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a case study approach to address the research questions comprehensively. The research is organized into two main phases, each corresponding to the two studies outlined in the research design.

Study 1: Analysis of teaching and learning resources and instructors' perspectives

The first study investigates the gaps in current Basque FL teaching through a three-pronged approach.

Part 1: Analysis of European and regional language policies

The first component employs documentary analysis, a qualitative research method designed to systematically examine and interpret existing documents (Bowen, 2009). This analysis focuses specifically on how sociocultural components are addressed within key European foreign language policy frameworks and regional curricula. The documents selected for analysis include:

- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (European Council, 2002).
- The *CEFR Companion Volume* (European Council, 2018).
- The Basque-specific adult curriculum, *Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculum* (HEOC).

The analysis followed a four-stage procedure: (1) an initial comprehensive reading to identify relevant arguments related to sociocultural content; (2) a focused reading stage to extract specific references to sociocultural dimensions; (3) aggregation of the extracted data into a synthesized spreadsheet categorizing the information; (4) a final interpretive stage where thematic patterns were identified. Table 1 provides a synthesized model of the categorization process applied during the documentary analysis:

Examined Materials	Information on Sociocultural Components	Themes Based on Codes
CEFR (European Council, 2002)	<i>“Sociolinguistic competences refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use. Through its sensitivity to social conventions (rules of politeness, norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals in the functioning of a community)” (pp. 13-14).</i>	Sociocultural Knowledge; Cultural Practices and Behaviours
	<i>“Sociocultural knowledge includes understanding the society and culture of the community or communities in which a language is spoken. This includes features such as everyday living, living conditions, interpersonal relations, values, beliefs and attitudes, body language, social conventions, and rituals” (pp. 101-102).</i>	Sociocultural Knowledge; Cultural Practices and Behaviours
	<i>“Intercultural awareness is the comprehension of the similarities and differences between the ‘world of origin’ and the ‘world of the target community. Such awareness is enriched by the awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner’s L1 and L2” (p. 103).</i>	Intercultural Awareness; Cultural Practices and Behaviours
CEFR Companion Volume (European Council, 2018)	<i>“The plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples” (p. 4).</i>	Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence
	<i>“The plurilingual and pluricultural approach places individuals as “social agents” whose competence is rooted in all the languages and cultures they are familiar with, evolving as they engage with new languages and cultures” (p. 4).</i>	Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence; Intercultural Awareness
HABE curriculum	<i>“Bigarren azpiatalean, Ezagutza eta portaera soziokulturalak izenekoan, aurreko azpiatalari lotuak dauden bizi-baldintzak, konbentzio sozialak, balioak edota sinesmenak biltzen dira” (p. 48). [In the second subsection, titled ‘Knowledge and Sociocultural Behaviours’, the living conditions, social conventions, values, or beliefs associated with the previous subsection are gathered.]</i>	Sociocultural Knowledge; Cultural Practices and Behaviours

Table 1. Categorisation of the information extracted from the documentary analysis.

Source: Own elaboration

Part 2: Analysis of published Basque teaching and learning resources

The second component examines how sociocultural dimensions are represented in widely used beginner-level Basque teaching materials. The five textbooks selected for analysis – *Arian 1*, *Primeran 1*, *Bakarka 1*, *Aurrera*, and *Hitzetik Hortzera* – represent the primary resources recommended by the Etxepare Basque Institute and its international university network for introductory Basque language instruction. Importantly, these materials were also selected because they represent the only widely-available textbooks on the market specifically designed for post-secondary level learners in the early stages of Basque acquisition. The editions analysed correspond to the publication years cited in this study.

This phase also employed documentary analysis (Bowen, 2009), using a structured

analytical framework informed by both international and regional language policy standards. Specifically, the framework was constructed through a dual examination of complementary policy documents:

- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2002) and its *Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2018), which together serve as the international benchmark and emphasize the integration of sociolinguistic competence, intercultural awareness, and plurilingual competence (as previously summarized in Table 1); and
- The *Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculuma (HEOC)* (HABE, 2015), which articulates the Basque government's official curricular guidelines for adult language education and mandates the inclusion of "Sociocultural Knowledge and Behaviour" (HABE, 2015, p. 48).

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, one representative chapter from each textbook was selected for in-depth analysis. Chapters were chosen based on thematic relevance; that is, those whose topics (e.g., daily routines, family life, festivals) offered the greatest potential for rich sociocultural content. This sampling strategy was deemed appropriate, given the consistent organizational structure and repetitive sequencing of chapters across the analysed textbooks. Second, a data-driven coding process, a technique central to grounded theory methodologies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2015), was employed. Specific examples, exercises, and texts from each book were systematically coded and mapped against the CEFR- and HEOC-derived sociocultural parameters using a dedicated spreadsheet. This enabled a direct comparative analysis across the selected materials. Finally, a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted to identify recurring patterns, trends, and gaps in the representation of sociocultural content throughout the textbooks. The coding categories applied in this analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Open Code	Memo	Content
Sociocultural knowledge	Representation of Basque society, values, beliefs, daily life, and traditions.	• Specific names of spots in the Basque Country without details.
Cultural practices and behaviours	Depiction of social norms, interactions, and rituals specific to Basque culture.	• Mention of some leisure activities that are not necessarily typical in the Basque Country.
Cultural products	Inclusion of tangible and intangible cultural elements such as literature, music, festivals, or artefacts.	• Lack of authentic materials that reflect cultural products. • Just some names of towns are presented.

Open Code	Memo	Content
Intercultural awareness	Opportunities for learners to compare their culture with Basque culture, promoting critical reflection on cultural similarities and differences.	• No comparisons with the students' context. • At the end of the chapter, students are asked to write a brief description of their town.
Plurilingual and pluricultural competence	Integration of Basque as part of a broader multilingual and multicultural context, enhancing learners' overall linguistic repertoire.	• Explanations are in Spanish, but not all students know Spanish. • Two short readings about Croatia and Costa Rica.
Communicative scenarios	Real-life communicative contexts that reflect authentic Basque language use, including sociolinguistic conventions and registers.	• Real-life scenarios are not explicitly proposed. • Some activities suggest a reproduction of basic dialogues, but they are based on imitation. • More than 80% of the activities have a multiple-choice format. • Some short questions that require short answers. • Matching words with images.
Holistic integration with language skills	Incorporation of sociocultural content across all core skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) through meaningful activities.	• Listening activity where Basque towns are mentioned. • Grammar activities linked to the topic of the unit, but not specifically related to Basque culture.

Table 2. Descriptor checklist to classify textbooks' content.

Source: Own elaboration

Part 3: Perspectives from Basque language educators

To complement the documentary analyses and further explore how sociocultural components are addressed in real-world classroom settings, this third component employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews with Basque language instructors working in international contexts. Specifically, the study included four instructors currently teaching Basque at universities in the United States. To preserve participant anonymity while providing relevant contextual detail, their demographic profile is summarized as follows: all four participants (two men and two women, aged between 30 and 45) held postgraduate degrees in linguistics or Basque philology and had from four to eight years' experience teaching Basque at the post-secondary level. The interviews were guided by a flexible protocol comprising four open-ended questions, designed to elicit in-depth reflections on teaching experiences and perceptions:

- 1) What are the main challenges you face when teaching Basque to international students?
- 2) How do you evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching materials currently available to you?
- 3) What role does the sociocultural dimension play in your classroom, and how do you integrate it?
- 4) Could you describe a particularly successful or unsuccessful teaching strategy you used?

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was selected for its capacity to identify both expected and emergent themes from participants' discourse, allowing the findings to remain closely grounded in the lived experiences and pedagogical reflections of the instructors. The analytical categories applied during this process are outlined in Table 3.

Themes	Description
Efficacy of the materials	Evaluation of existing teaching materials to teach Basque as a foreign language in terms of their efficiency.
Needs and avenues	Need and avenues for creating innovative and effective teaching materials.
Treatment of the sociocultural dimension	Role of cultural components in Basque instruction.
Teaching strategies	Dynamics and strategies that have proven successful in the teaching environment

Table 3. Categories for the classification of the information from interviews

Source: Own elaboration

Study 2: Fostering cultural knowledge through a virtual community of practice

The second study adopts a qualitative case study design aimed at evaluating the pedagogical potential of a virtual community of practice for fostering sociocultural competence. Specifically, the intervention involved a Facebook-based activity that facilitated cross-cultural interaction between beginner-level learners of Basque in the United States and proficient Basque speakers from the Basque Country. The study combines content analysis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to assess both the nature of the cultural content generated and the participants' responses to the experience.

Participants

The participant pool consisted of two distinct groups:

- 1) 20 beginner-level Basque language learners enrolled at a U.S. university; and
- 2) 12 proficient Basque-speaking informants from the Basque Country.

The student group (12 female, 8 male; age range 19–23) was composed of university-level learners who volunteered to participate in the activity as part of their language course. 80% of the students (n=16) were linguistics majors fulfilling a departmental requirement to

study a non-Indo-European language. The remaining students (n=4) joined the course for personal reasons: two out of general interest, one as a multilingual learner seeking a new linguistic challenge, and one with prior travel experience in the Basque Country who sought to deepen their cultural connection. The Basque-speaking participants (7 female, 5 male; age range 20–28) were graduate students from the Basque Country who were personally known to the researcher and agreed to participate voluntarily. Their motivations centred on a shared interest in intercultural communication and a desire to contribute to the international visibility and transmission of Basque language and culture.

Procedure

To implement the virtual community of practice, a private Facebook group was created to serve as a space for authentic intercultural interaction over an 18-week period. Each week, the course instructor initiated a discussion thread centred on a broad cultural theme – such as Festivals and Traditions, Food and Social Life, or Daily Routines – which served as conversational prompts designed to elicit contributions from both learner and informant participants.

Participants were encouraged to interact freely within these threads, either in small groups or through one-on-one comment exchanges. The structure was intentionally open-ended to promote spontaneous interaction rather than fixed pairings or scripted exchanges. This flexible format aimed to mirror the dynamics of natural online discourse and reduce the cognitive pressure often associated with formal language tasks. To ensure accessibility and foster a low-anxiety, supportive environment, the proficient Basque speakers were instructed to use simplified Basque whenever possible, and to employ English selectively for clarification when necessary. This bilingual affordance was designed to scaffold comprehension, maintain participant engagement, and lower the communicative barrier for novice learners.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this second study was collected through three complementary methods:

- 1) Structured observations and content analysis of all posts and comments within the Facebook group, with particular attention to themes related to cultural exchange, identity positioning, and language use.
- 2) A 40-minute in-person focus group discussion with 18 student participants conducted at the conclusion of the activity, aimed at capturing learner perceptions and reflections on the experience.
- 3) The researcher's field notes, which documented informal feedback from students and classroom observations related to their engagement with the activity and use of Basque during instruction.

All data sources were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive approach to identify emergent patterns, themes, and tensions. This analytical method allowed for a grounded interpretation of participant experience while

facilitating cross-validation across data types. To ensure the ethical integrity of the study, all participants signed informed consent forms, and full anonymity was maintained throughout the research process. Students were informed that participation in the Facebook activity was voluntary and that non-participation would have no impact on their course grades or academic standing. Tables 4 and 5 present the classification of data extracted from the Facebook interaction logs and in-class field observations (Table 4), and the post-activity focus group discussion (Table 5), respectively.

Open code	Memo	Students' voices
Sociocultural Knowledge	Students were exposed to various aspects of Basque culture, including food, festivals, music, and mythology, through Facebook discussions.	"It was beneficial to post videos and images that gave us a clearer idea of some concepts."
Cultural Practices and Behaviours	Students gained insights into Basque practices such as traditional sports and music, comparing them to their own cultural norms.	"I thought esku pilota was Mexican; I learned it was Basque after discussing it."
Cultural Products	Students engaged with tangible cultural elements like Basque instruments, food, and architecture using multimedia resources.	"That looks like an accordion! Is it a Basque accordion?"
Intercultural Awareness	Students compared Basque concepts with familiar cultural equivalents, fostering cultural awareness and dispelling misconceptions.	"Olentzero means Santa? It's like the Basque version of Santa Claus."
Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence	Students engaged in meaningful bilingual discussions, gradually incorporating Basque vocabulary while navigating real communication scenarios.	"I tried to use more Basque this time. It felt like talking to real people."
Communicative Scenarios	The activity allowed students to practise language in real contexts through dynamic interactions about everyday topics.	"We talked about my concert and their choir in Basque. It felt real!"
Holistic Integration with Language Skills	Students engaged in reading, writing, listening, and speaking by interacting with native speakers and sharing multimedia content.	"Posting videos and images gave us a clearer idea of some concepts."

Table 4. Classification of data extracted from Facebook discussions

Source: own elaboration

Open code	Memo	Students' voices
Enjoyment of the activity	Students enjoyed the interactive and dynamic nature of the Facebook activity, particularly meeting native speakers and engaging in real conversations.	"The Facebook group was a positive experience... it made me want to know more about the language."
Usefulness for learning	Facebook complemented traditional classroom learning by providing opportunities to interact with native speakers and learn cultural concepts.	"Such a good way to complement what we learned in-class."
Comparison with other course materials	Students found Facebook discussions more engaging and productive for learning vocabulary and cultural concepts compared to textbooks.	"Talking to real people brings up more concrete cultural issues that interest us."
Fostering of cross-cultural awareness	Facebook promoted cross-cultural exchange, where students could compare cultures, share experiences, and reflect on perspectives.	"It was like having an informal conversation with people of my age... I think they also learned from me."

Table 5. Classification of data extracted from the focus group discussion

Source: own elaboration

Findings

Study 1: Analysis of teaching and learning resources and instructors' perspectives

Findings from the analysis of European language policies

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2002) and its Companion Volume (2018) underscore the fundamental role of sociocultural and sociolinguistic competences in language learning. These frameworks extend beyond linguistic proficiency to incorporate cultural awareness, interpersonal dynamics, and the norms and values that shape communicative behaviour within specific language communities. The CEFR defines sociocultural knowledge as an understanding of the society and culture of the target language community, including aspects such as daily life, values, beliefs, social conventions, and rituals. It also emphasizes sociolinguistic competence – the ability to use language appropriately in varied social contexts – as essential for successful intercultural communication. Notably, the framework stresses that such competence affects all facets of interaction, even when users are not consciously aware of its influence. In addition, the CEFR links intercultural awareness to language acquisition, urging learners to engage critically with both cultural similarities and differences. This awareness is seen as essential for empathetic, respectful communication and is further enriched by exposure to multiple subcultures, including those outside the learner's native linguistic and cultural domains.

The CEFR Companion Volume (2018) advances these ideas by introducing the concept of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. It portrays learners as social agents whose

communicative abilities emerge from their cumulative experience across languages and cultures. Rather than compartmentalising their linguistic knowledge, learners are encouraged to develop an interconnected cultural and linguistic repertoire, enhancing their capacity to navigate diverse communicative settings. Both the CEFR and its Companion Volume promote a holistic pedagogical model in which sociocultural content is not supplementary but integral to language education. This model aims to cultivate not only communicative effectiveness, but also the intercultural agility needed in multilingual environments.

Complementing this European framework, the *Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculum* (HEOC) developed by HABE (2015) applies these principles to Basque language instruction. As the official curriculum for adult education in the Basque Country, the HEOC operationalizes the sociocultural component through two core categories: (1) General knowledge, events and characters, and cultural productions; and (2) Sociocultural knowledge and behaviour, which includes social norms, organization, and interpersonal relations. This structure reflects a strong institutional commitment to embedding cultural understanding into language instruction, establishing a local benchmark against which Basque TLRs may be assessed.

Findings from the analysis of Basque teaching and learning resources

This subsection presents the results of the analysis of five beginner-level Basque language textbooks, focusing on their integration of sociocultural knowledge, cultural practices and behaviours, intercultural awareness, plurilingual and pluricultural competence, communicative scenarios, and the overall alignment of sociocultural content with language skills. The analysis also considers the authenticity of materials and the extent to which these resources align with the pedagogical orientations outlined in European language policy frameworks. Below are the key findings for each textbook:

- *Arian 1* (Etxabe et al., 2013) introduces topics relevant to students' lives but includes minimal sociocultural content. For instance, a unit on cities features a matching exercise with images of tourist attractions in San Sebastián, such as La Concha beach, yet provides no cultural context or discussion of local significance. The book presupposes Spanish proficiency, which may hinder plurilingual development for non-Spanish speakers. Communicative scenarios are underdeveloped, and exercises tend to be form-focused; a typical task requires students to fill in verb forms in isolated sentences (e.g., *Miren* ____ [*joan*] *mendira* – “Miren ____ [to go] to the mountain”), without embedding them in broader conversational contexts.
- *Primeran 1* (Elhuyar Aholkularitza, 2013) incorporates authentic materials such as real-life visuals (e.g., a *Lurraldebus* bus schedule), which support sociocultural exposure. However, these materials often lack sufficient scaffolding or explanation for international learners, limiting their pedagogical impact. Although intercultural awareness is encouraged through comparisons (e.g., travel habits), it remains largely descriptive, with little space for critical reflection. Communicative tasks are more

open-ended than in other textbooks, but the integration of grammar, images, and discourse sometimes lacks cohesion.

- *Bakarka 1* (Letamendia et al., 2009), a self-study textbook, shows significant limitations in terms of sociocultural integration. Cultural references are minimal and superficial. While Basque names like *Iñaki* or *Ane* appear in grammar drills, the characters are not contextualized and do not contribute to cultural learning. The book lacks activities that promote intercultural reflection or spontaneous communication. Tasks are typically mechanical, such as transforming sentences from affirmative to negative, without offering opportunities for authentic interaction.
- *Aurrera* (White, 2010) places strong emphasis on grammar and vocabulary while virtually omitting Basque cultural practices and heritage. It presents language in a decontextualized manner; for example, the word *etxea* (“house”) is illustrated with a generic clipart image, overlooking the culturally significant *baserri* (traditional farmhouse). Communicative tasks are limited to controlled translation or grammar exercises, reinforcing a word-for-word approach and impeding communicative fluency. No authentic materials are included.
- *Hitzetik Hortzera* (Urruzola Arratibel, 2007) exhibits critical weaknesses in both pedagogical and ethical dimensions. While it occasionally refers to cultural practices (e.g., *herriko festak*, or local festivals), these are presented as isolated vocabulary items with no elaboration on their cultural meaning (e.g., traditional music, dances, rural sports). The textbook is monolingual and fails to acknowledge or leverage learners’ plurilingual repertoires. Most concerning, it includes content that is culturally inappropriate and pedagogically indefensible. One grammar exercise lists *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler as an example of a book someone enjoys reading – an inclusion that raises serious concerns regarding editorial oversight and the material’s suitability for any educational setting.

Findings from the perspectives of Basque language educators

The perspectives shared by Basque language instructors provide critical insight into the challenges and opportunities involved in teaching Basque in international higher education contexts. Four main themes emerged from the interview data (originally conducted in Basque and translated into English by the author): the perceived efficacy of existing materials, the need for innovation and tailored resources, the integration of the sociocultural dimension, and the implementation of effective teaching strategies.

Efficacy of materials

A consistent concern among participants was the inadequacy and outdated nature of current instructional materials for international learners. Several educators described available resources as obsolete and poorly adapted to non-Spanish speakers. Participant A noted: “There are no materials, or they are super outdated. We have some CDs from the 80s.” Similarly, Participant C emphasized: “The current resources are inefficient. They are neither adjusted

to non-Spanish speakers nor suited for an international higher-education environment.” Participant D added: “The materials available for teaching Basque are very scarce, and at no time have I felt that they are valid for the type of students we have.”

Needs and avenues

Educators unanimously highlighted the urgent need for context-sensitive, innovative materials. In the absence of such resources, many rely heavily on self-produced content. Participant B stated: “You need to have a lot of imagination. I create more than 50% of the materials.” Participant C echoed this point: “I spend long hours creating and adapting materials. Sometimes I just do not have time.” While digital tools—such as videos, music, and online platforms—are frequently used to incorporate cultural content, there was some hesitation regarding the idea of a shared resource bank. As Participant D explained: “I dedicate a lot of time collecting and creating material from scratch so that it would be relevant and suitable for my kind of students.”

Treatment of the sociocultural dimension

All participants emphasized the vital role of sociocultural content in Basque instruction, especially for learners unfamiliar with the language’s historical and cultural context. Participant A observed: “If we do not contextualize what we teach, Basque may seem something extraterrestrial.” Participant B reinforced this idea, stating: “Students need to know that Basque is a real language spoken by people like them, valid to fulfil any communicative purpose and essential to transmit a very rich culture.” Participant C added: “They need to realize that they are learning something useful and real, and for that to happen we need to transmit the sociocultural dimension of the language.” Virtual tools and immersion techniques were seen as particularly effective in achieving this goal.

Teaching strategies

Instructors reported using interactive, creative strategies that promote spontaneous language use, cultural engagement, and critical thinking. Participant B described one successful instance: “They started singing the song by themselves. They remembered most of the lyrics and they were eager to practice and to sing together.” Participant C discussed a scenario-based approach: “I give them a situation with a communicative objective. I even assign them roles. Then, they create a script and solve the situation.” Similarly, Participant D highlighted the success of role-plays and gamified activities: “The role-plays were an activity that the students took very much to heart. The Jeopardy competitions that we organized as a review of the units were also a lot of fun for them, and they ended up having a great time.”

Study 2: Fostering cultural knowledge through a virtual community of practice

The findings of this second study are organized to assess the extent to which the outcomes of the Facebook-based activity align with the sociocultural parameters outlined in both European and regional language policy frameworks. Specifically, the analysis draws on the descriptors presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of

Europe, 2002), its Companion Volume (2018), and the *Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculum* (HEOC) (HABE, 2015), the official curriculum for adult Basque language education. These documents emphasize the integration of sociocultural knowledge, cultural practices and behaviours, intercultural awareness, and plurilingual competence as essential components of language learning.

Alignment of sociocultural parameters with Facebook activity outcomes

The Facebook-based activity revealed strong alignment with key sociocultural parameters defined in European and regional language education frameworks, including the CEFR (2002), its Companion Volume (2018), and the HEOC (HABE, 2015). Below, the findings are organized according to six pedagogically relevant dimensions.

Sociocultural Knowledge

The activity significantly enriched students' understanding of Basque society and culture. Topics such as traditional food, festivals, music, and mythology proved particularly engaging. Students explored cultural icons like *Olentzero* (a Basque figure comparable to Santa Claus) and mythological beings such as the *Lamiak* (Basque mermaids). Visual and multimedia resources, including videos and images, enabled students to grasp otherwise abstract or unfamiliar cultural concepts. As one participant noted: "It was beneficial to post videos and images that gave us a clearer idea of some concepts." Discussions on everyday traditions, such as *aizkolatritza* (wood-chopping competitions) and *pintxo* culture, further anchored cultural content in lived experience and helped learners uncover core elements of Basque identity.

Cultural Practices and Behaviours

Students were able to explore and compare Basque customs with their own, enhancing their cultural literacy. For instance, a discussion on *esku pilota* (Basque handball) led one student to comment on its perceived similarity to Mexican sports, prompting clarification and reflection: an example of how intercultural dialogue can challenge assumptions and expand awareness. Similarly, discussions on Basque music, including references to radical rock from the 1980s, provided both historical and contemporary perspectives on cultural expression. These comparisons mirrored the HEOC's emphasis on social conventions and values, as well as the CEFR's emphasis on cultural sensitivity and participation.

Cultural Products

The exchange prominently featured both tangible and intangible cultural products, including traditional instruments (e.g., the *trikitixa*, or Basque diatonic accordion), cuisine (*pintxos*), and visual references to Basque landscapes and architecture. Sixty-one percent of the posts included visual content that helped mediate cultural understanding. One student correctly identified the *trikitixa* as an accordion, demonstrating cross-cultural recognition and the activation of prior knowledge. These visual and symbolic artefacts served as powerful entry points for learners to engage meaningfully with cultural content.

Intercultural Awareness

The activity fostered rich cross-cultural reflection, as students consistently drew parallels between Basque cultural elements and familiar concepts. For instance, when introduced to Olentzero, a student asked, “Olentzero means Santa?”, a comment that reflects the construction of cultural meaning through analogy. Similarly, clarifications provided by native speakers in response to misunderstandings, such as the association of esku pilota with Mexican sports, helped to correct misconceptions and deepen understanding. These moments illustrate precisely the type of intercultural competence emphasized in the CEFR and HEOC frameworks: awareness that emerges through contrast, comparison, and dialogue.

Plurilingual and Pluricultural Competence

The bilingual nature of the exchange allowed for fluid movement between English and Basque, reinforcing the development of plurilingual competence. Initially, students relied on English, but progressively integrated more Basque into their interactions. Native speakers accommodated this by using simplified language and offering clarifications in English, creating a supportive environment for negotiation of meaning. Students asked questions, shared personal experiences, and clarified cultural concepts using both languages, demonstrating their emerging ability to navigate multilingual communication.

Communicative Scenarios

The Facebook group provided a low-stakes, authentic context for spontaneous communication. Students discussed topics ranging from food and music to politics and mythology, and participated in real-time exchanges that mimicked natural conversation. They posted questions, shared concert plans, and commented on festivals, applying language in situated, purposeful ways. These activities align directly with HEOC descriptors related to interactional competence and real-world usage.

Holistic Integration of Language Skills

The activity facilitated engagement with all four core language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – within an integrated sociocultural context. Students read and responded to posts, wrote comments in both Basque and English, and engaged with video content that provided listening input. Although speaking was not synchronous, references to oral traditions and music encouraged the recall and internalization of spoken language. One student commented: “Posting videos and images gave us a clearer idea of some concepts,” highlighting the multimodal nature of the learning experience and its contribution to deeper comprehension and retention.

Students’ perceptions on the Facebook activity

Student feedback gathered from the focus group discussion revealed a generally positive perception of the Facebook activity. Their comments underscore its motivational impact, pedagogical value, and comparative advantage over traditional materials. Four key themes emerged: enjoyment and engagement, perceived usefulness, comparison with traditional methods, and development of intercultural awareness.

Enjoyment and Engagement

Students consistently described the activity as enjoyable and stimulating. The opportunity to interact with native speakers in an informal and authentic environment was seen as a refreshing change from traditional classroom tasks. Student S4 remarked: “Meeting real speakers of such a unique language was amazing”, while S7 simply noted: “It was fun, I enjoyed it a lot.” These reflections point to the motivational power of meaningful social interaction, especially in the context of a minority language like Basque.

Perceived Usefulness for Learning

Participants perceived the activity as a valuable complement to classroom instruction. The platform allowed them to engage with cultural topics and native speaker input that extended beyond the scope of textbook content. Student S10 explained: “Talking about this stuff in class would be time-consuming... Facebook pushed me to think more critically.” Others (S4, S9) highlighted specific areas of learning, such as gastronomy, with S9 commenting: “I loved learning about Basque cuisine. I really want to go to Donostia and eat pintxos.” These statements illustrate how the activity facilitated deeper cultural engagement and critical reflection in a way that felt meaningful and accessible.

Comparison with Traditional TLRs

Students overwhelmingly preferred the interactive and real-world nature of the Facebook exchanges over more conventional instructional formats. Several participants described the acquisition of vocabulary and cultural knowledge through authentic conversation as significantly more effective than rote memorization. As S1 explained: “Learning words through conversations with Basque native people was much more productive than memorising vocabulary lists”. Similarly, S11 observed: “We got to engage with concrete cultural issues that interest us”, pointing out that such topics are often absent from standard textbook content.

Fostering of Intercultural Awareness

The activity was also praised for facilitating intercultural exchange. Students valued the reciprocal nature of the interaction, which allowed them not only to learn about Basque culture but also to share their own. Student S6 articulated this clearly: “It feels good to learn first-hand experiences from native speakers and to be able to share ours.” The informality of the platform was perceived as enhancing authenticity and making cultural dialogue more approachable than traditional formats such as scripted texts or passive video watching.

Discussion

This research sought to diagnose the sociocultural gaps in current Basque language TLRs and to evaluate the potential of a digital intervention to bridge them. The findings confirm a significant disconnect between the pedagogical needs of international learners and the resources available, while simultaneously highlighting the effectiveness and appeal of virtual communities of practice as a viable alternative.

Gaps in Basque language teaching and learning resources (Answering RQ1)

The findings from Study 1 reveal a profound misalignment between the analysed teaching and learning resources (TLRs) and the core principles of contemporary, socioculturally-oriented language education. A predominant reliance on decontextualized grammar drills, as exemplified in materials such as *Arian 1* and *Bakarka 1*, stands in direct contradiction to the foundational notion of communicative competence as articulated by Hymes (1972). This formalist orientation fails to foster the integrated linguistic and pragmatic skills necessary for real-world communication. As VanPatten (2017) argues, excessive mechanical practice inhibits the formation of the complex mental representations that underlie language acquisition.

The cultural dimension is equally problematic. Cultural content is often reduced to isolated facts, images, or token vocabulary items, reflecting what Paricio (2005) has termed the “national paradigm”, a static, monolithic representation of culture. This approach fails to promote the kind of intercultural competence theorized by Kramsch (2011) and Byram and Fleming (1998), who emphasize the need for learners to engage critically and reflectively with cultural difference. The result is a lack of linguistic socialisation (Atkinson, 2011): learners are not positioned as participants in a living community of practice, but rather as passive consumers of inert information. In Gee’s (2015) terms, these materials do not grant access to a socially situated Discourse, nor do they support participation in the kind of dynamic, adaptive sociolinguistic ecosystem described by Larsen-Freeman (2018).

These theoretical critiques were echoed and validated by the instructors interviewed. Their testimonies confirm that the shortcomings identified are not merely conceptual and they have immediate pedagogical consequences. Instructors must routinely compensate for the inadequacy of available resources, investing considerable time in the creation of supplementary materials to address their students’ needs. Their experiences reflect a consensus: the existing materials are not only misaligned with the broad descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2002; Companion Volume, 2018), but also fall short of meeting the specific sociocultural learning outcomes articulated in the *Helduen Euskalduntzearen Oinarrizko Curriculum* (HEOC, 2015). Therefore, the answer to RQ1 is that the primary gap lies in a fundamental paradigmatic flaw: the TLRs currently in circulation are still based on outdated models of language instruction that are incompatible with modern understandings of language learning as a socially and culturally situated practice.

The Facebook activity as a viable alternative (Answering RQs 2 & 3)

The second part of this study examined whether a virtual community of practice could serve as an effective pedagogical response to the sociocultural gaps identified in current Basque teaching resources. The findings indicate that the Facebook activity succeeded precisely where the textbooks failed: it created an interactive, learner-centred space where students could engage authentically with the language, culture, and members of the Basque-speaking community.

Through this digitally-mediated interaction, the activity operationalized core principles of Sociocultural Theory. As students navigated discussions in both Basque and English, they operated within Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), with native speakers providing essential scaffolding. This dynamic allowed learners to co-construct meaning, explore culturally embedded language use, and gradually move toward greater communicative autonomy. The activity thus embodies the position advanced by Lantolf and Thorne (2006; 2007), namely that language proficiency emerges through participation in culturally-situated interaction rather than through isolated rule acquisition. It also reflects Larsen-Freeman's (2018) ecological perspective, by situating learners in a living, responsive linguistic environment.

Importantly, the Facebook exchange also fostered genuine intercultural competence. Rather than receiving culture as fixed information, students were required to actively interpret, compare, and negotiate meaning across cultural frameworks. The dialogue around Olentzero and Santa Claus, for example, exemplifies the type of cross-cultural reflection central to the models proposed by Byram (1998) and Kramsch (2011). These moments of interpretive engagement transformed the Facebook group into a "breathing space" (Belmar & Glass, 2019) for intercultural learning – an accessible and safe space for authentic, non-prescriptive exploration of cultural difference.

Crucially, student perceptions (RQ3) further validate the success of this approach. Participants described the activity as more motivating, engaging, and effective than traditional methods. The opportunity to interact with real speakers and learn about culture through meaningful conversation was perceived as more productive than memorization-based strategies. One student's reflection – "learning words through conversations with Basque native people was much more productive than memorising vocabulary lists" – encapsulates this shift in learner agency and epistemology. These results suggest that such digital platforms should not be relegated to the status of supplementary tools. Rather, they can serve as primary vehicles for sociocultural learning, particularly for international learners who lack direct exposure to the target language environment. When designed with intention and grounded in a sociocultural framework, digital interventions like this one can fulfil curricular aims more effectively than many existing print-based materials.

Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions

While this research demonstrates the potential of virtual communities of practice in enhancing Basque language instruction, its primary contribution lies in exposing a long-standing pedagogical gap and outlining a theoretically-grounded path toward its resolution. However, the limitations of the study must be acknowledged. As an exploratory qualitative case study, the findings are constrained by the small and localized sample: four instructors and twenty students from a single U.S. university. This limits the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the absence of a control group precludes definitive quantitative claims regarding language gains. Practical limitations, such as time zone differences and voluntary participation, may also have influenced the consistency and depth of student engagement.

Nevertheless, these limitations highlight important future directions. Upcoming research should:

- Expand the participant base across multiple geographic, linguistic, and institutional contexts.
- Employ quasi-experimental designs with control and treatment groups to better assess the efficacy of digital interventions.
- Support the development of a dedicated, open-access digital TLRs for Basque, built on the principles of sociocultural learning and virtual community-building.

This is not to suggest that traditional textbooks are obsolete. Rather, their function within a modern “ecology of materials” (Larsen-Freeman, 2018) must be rethought. Textbooks remain useful for providing structured input in grammar and vocabulary. However, they are incapable of fostering the fifth macro-skill outlined in the CEFR: live, spontaneous interaction. Digital platforms, when used purposefully, can fill this gap by serving as ecosystems for interaction, cultural immersion, and learner agency. Ultimately, the implications of this study reach beyond the Basque classroom. For minority and underrepresented languages, the challenge is not only linguistic survival but cultural transmission in a globalized, digitally mediated world. Addressing this challenge will require educators and institutions not merely to supplement outdated materials, but to reimagine what TLRs can be: tools that invite learners not just to study a language, but to enter and sustain its living culture.

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