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Authentic Materials – Enhancing Language Acquisition and Cultural Awareness

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Abstract

Using a quantitative approach, the submitted paper explores research based on the contrastive analysis of three sources of authentic materials: academic, literary and journalistic texts. The hypothesis - based on the assumption that authentic materials enhance language acquisition and cultural awareness more significantly than pedagogically modified materials - is discussed in the paper. Literary and journalistic materials as effective teaching materials for providing cultural and linguistic input will be analyzed and academic authentic texts will be compared with pedagogically modified materials. The findings indicate that authentic materials are more appropriate for advanced L2 readers than pedagogically modified texts. Practical recommendations for language teachers will be provided in the conclusion.

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that Henry Sweet is believed to have advocated the use of authentic materials focusing on their benefits over contrived ones as early as the 1890s (Gilmore, 2004), the need for authenticity reappeared in the 1970s when the goal of language teaching began favoring the concept of actual language use. In 1972 Hymes remarked that communicative competence does not only comprise knowledge of the language but the need for contextualized communication and later put forward the ideas that linguistic and social norms influence a discourse and speech acts act in relation to social structure, values and social-cultural order and the rules of a community (Hymes, 1972). Mishan (2005) supports the idea that authentic materials can be dated back to the inception of CLT in the 1970s when they were expected to replace contrived texts which had been designed to illustrate grammatical form or

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present items of vocabulary but which in many cases did not contain meaningful message.

As our research is based on measuring the impact of authentic materials on language acquisition and cultural awareness, we will focus on authenticity first. The notion of authenticity was originally introduced to distinguish between artificially simplified texts and unmodified real texts (Thornbury, 2006). Adams (1995) states that materials are authentic if the language data are unaltered and produced by and for native speakers of a common language and not for second or foreign language learners of that language. They can be written or spoken and are produced originally for non-teaching purposes conveying a real message. They contain authentic language and reflect real-world language use. This definition may be complemented by other aspects as authentic texts are published in contexts designed specifically for native-speaker consumption, with no thought given to non-native accessibility. The choice of vocabulary, syntax, grammatical structures are pitched at a target audience of native speakers and offered through media intended for native speakers. On the other hand, it might be disputable that if the material written intentionally for native speakers is taken from the original context and the intended audience, if it still remains authentic. Chavez (1998) is of the opinion that such material is not authentic anymore arguing due to its transfer into the teaching process it stopped being authentic. The text was methodologically processed in order to be applicable in class, which was not the original aim of the author.

There are many objections to using authentic materials in lower-proficiency classes as they can contain difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures. Martinez (2002) mentions that authentic texts may be too culturally biased and therefore difficult for decoding the message. Although these problems may cause a burden for the teachers of lower-level classes, Richards (2006, p. 20) supports the idea of using authentic materials in the foreign language teaching process due to these reasons:

- They provide cultural information about the target language.
- They provide exposure to real language.
- They relate more closely to learners' needs.
- They support a more creative approach to teaching'.

Apart from these, other positives of using authentic materials should be added such as their motivational aspect for learners, the introduction of contemporary language and the coverage of current issues, themes and topics.

2. Authentic materials and their impact on language acquisition

In our research, conducted in 2012-2014, we decided to verify the hypothesis that using authentic materials will increase language development and cultural awareness more significantly than using the modified materials. Within the three-year research period, three experiments were conducted aiming at different groups of learners, using different methods and resulting from different assumptions. Authentic materials related to academic, literary and journalistic contexts were used, applying discovery learning, and content-based, text-based and corpus-based approaches.

2.1. Academic authentic materials

The first experiment related to academic English was carried out in the third year of the bachelor-degree program with the goal to increase the academic language and academic culture of those students who had applied for writing their theses in English. In this research we focused on the impact of an electronic course which comprises both methodologically modified materials as well as authentic texts in both written and spoken modes for 2013-2014 students (an experimental group) and on the impact of the contrived texts prepared for teaching purposes for 2012-2013 students (a control group). The procedures of the experiment resulted from the assumption that students who would attend an online EAP course would benefit from it - improving their academic language and culture more than those who had been supervised in writing theses using contrived materials. Data regarding the students' achievements were collected from various sources (the official results of those who wrote their theses and defended them in academic year 2012-2013, the official results of those who wrote their theses and defended them in academic year 2013-2014, the official results achieved in the course, questionnaires provided to students completing their bachelor-degree program in academic year 2012-2013, questionnaires provided to students completing their bachelor-degree program in academic year 2013-2014 and the activity results based on the completion of a

worksheet by the students of the experimental group).

According to approved assessment procedures the thesis is assessed by two reviewers, out of whom one is the student's supervisor and the second one is the officially recognized reviewer who is expected to write a review and pose questions related to the thesis topic or research discussed in the thesis. During the oral defence procedures, the review is officially read after the student's presentation with an aim to provoke discussion during which the student's abilities of proper interaction are measured. The total grade includes two grades which measure the quality of writing in the thesis and one grade for thesis presentation and discussion.

Trnava University uses the ECTS system of grades, and the Department of English language and Literature of the Faculty of Education have agreed upon the classification system in which measurements of knowledge, skills and competences should be distributed into grades as follows: A (100-92), B (91-85), C (84-79), D (78-73) and E (72-65). The value transfer of A is 1.00, B – 1.50, C – 2.00, D – 2.50 and E – 3.00.

In 2013, fourteen students applied for writing their theses in English. Most of the assessments given by a supervisor and a reviewer were identical. In two cases, the reviewers assessed theses with worse grades, in one case one level lower, and in one case three levels lower. One student's thesis was measured more positively by a reviewer than by her supervisor. Only in three cases were the total grades worse than partial ones due to a poor presentation and inability to defend viewpoints providing evidence to the claims.

Table 1. Grades achieved by students in 2012-2013 for their thesis and oral defense performances

Grades	A	B	C	D	E	FX
Supervisor	2	1	6	4	1	0
Reviewer	2	2	5	2	2	1
Total	2	0	6	1	4	1

From the total grade perspective, two students were given A, six students achieved C, one student passed with D, five students' theses were awarded an E and one student thesis was assessed FX by a reviewer. While defending his thesis, this student's performance was very poor and the total grade was FX. The average is 2.26, which equals the total grade D.

In the 2013-2014 academic year, the online course was attended by 12 students and only 10 of them completed their bachelor-degree studies submitting their theses and defending them. As far as the total scores are concerned, two students were given A, one student achieved B, five students' theses were assessed C and two students were given D.

Table 2. Grades achieved by students in 2013-2014 for their thesis and oral defense performances, and for course completion

Grades	A	B	C	D	E	FX
Supervisor	3	2	4	1	-	-
Reviewer	1	1	5	2	1	-
Total	2	1	5	2	-	-
EAP course	4	1	4	1	-	-

The total grade achieved by the students after their defending speeches was C (1.85). The average grade achieved in the online EAP course was B (1.6). Despite the fact that the control group students were generally better learners, their final achievements (D – 2.26) were worse than those of the experimental group (C – 1.85).

2.1.1. Methodologically modified materials versus authentic materials

The students who were expected to write their theses in English and attended the online EAP course where provided two sources of materials: methodologically modified materials with the aim to focus on the issues incompatible in English and Slovak and authentic articles related to different academic issues both linguistically- and culturally-induced. The students were provided worksheets related to language acquisition (selecting words and grammatical structures typical for academic language) and issues related to academic culture (critical thinking, paraphrasing, citing and referencing). The students were able to discover expressions related to academic grammar such as the passive, the relative clauses, nominalization, but had some problems with techniques like hedging,

strategies like boosting and so on. Other problems emerged when they were to compare academic spoken and written languages from the vocabulary viewpoint. They could recognize that academic spoken language is less formal but could not make proper distinctions and required explanations in order to be able to use the selected words appropriately and naturally.

From the academic culture perspective the questions of the questionnaire referred to conventions with regard to the higher education behavior and conventions attached to academic writing and referencing. While being asked about ranking personal qualities typical for a university student, control group students gave a high ranking to such qualities as having a lot of knowledge, being methodological and precise in consistence with their experiences achieved at secondary and tertiary levels of education. The qualities typical for university students in English academic environment are curiosity, the ability to be critical, and honesty, which were mentioned by the experimental group students in the questionnaires as they were exposed to several samples of both authentic and modified materials concerning these cultural aspects.

2.1.2. Conclusions related to the academic authentic material experiment

The goal of the online EAP course was to expose the university students to real academic language and culture typical for English-speaking universities. All of the materials (printed, electronic and audio-visual) made students discover, analyze and process information for their own needs in order to become autonomous learners. The students' achievements comprise the lists of:

- the most frequently used abbreviations typical for taking notes and summarizing
- equivalents of both formal and informal academic English
- neutral expressions
- grammatical structures needed for defining, classifying, comparing, expressing cause and effect
- passive constructions either simple or complex ones
- linking connectors and other linking expression needed for text coherence and cohesion.

The priority of the EAP course was to develop critical thinking focusing on argumentation, decision-making, analysis, judgment, observation and persuasion. The students became aware of these issues but being addressed to compare authentic materials included in the course and methodologically modified materials they favored both. However, they admitted that while working with authentic ones they missed the explanation, clarification and systematization, and studying on their own, they reached for modified texts amazingly frequently.

2.2. Authentic literary materials

The aim of the second experiment was to thoroughly examine the effects of culturally-induced authentic materials on language acquisition and cultural awareness on the students in their first year of the bachelor-degree program. Being influenced by linguists (Kramsch, 1991; Buttjes & Byram, 1991) who claim that language and culture are inseparable and that foreign language learners become learners of target culture, we decided to measure the impact of the culturally-induced authentic materials either literal or non-literal ones on English Major students during their first year of study. Formulating a research assumption was influenced by a modification of Seelye's framework for facilitating the development of cross-cultural communication skills (Tomalin & Stempleski 2008) focused primarily on the development of understanding culturally-conditioned behaviors, of locating and organizing information about the target culture. The hypothesis predicted that a literary text was more appealing and motivating for learners than non-fiction authentic materials and therefore literary-text readers' cultural awareness and language acquisition would be more significant than those of non-fiction readers. The research questions referred to language acquisition and cultural awareness, which were measured by completing four tasks. The tasks referred to a law study in the U.S.A, the dress code in American universities either for students or their teachers, and students were expected to provide evidence for their opinions. The third task was based on the list of 10 items related to grammar and vocabulary the students had learned from the texts for real-life purposes. The fourth task made students search for informal expressions as we intended to focus on formal and informal English and both texts seemed to be proper for discovering this distinction by students.

The research sample consisted of 88 students of the bachelor-degree program in 2013-2014 summer semester divided into two groups: an experimental one (44 students) and a control one (44 students) in alphabetical order. The experimental group (A-K) consisted of 36 females and 8 males while in the control group (K-Z) the number of females was 35 and the number of males increased by one (9). As these freshmen were higher-level proficient users of English (CEFR B2 and C1), the introduction of authentic literary texts and journalistic articles seemed to be proper. As the culturally-influenced behaviors should arise out of the language material being studied or read, the best selection seemed to be using authentic materials. The experimental group of students was obliged to read Chapter 2 from *The Pelican Brief* by John Grisham (1992) and the control group was provided authentic materials taken from the Internet (available at www.internationalstudent.com, blog.talkingphilosophy.com) related to all three issues mentioned in the tasks. The length, the level of proficiency, the language difficulty and the English variant (American English) were the same as required by the conditions for proper comparison. The students were working with the texts on their own and were allowed to use monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and grammar reference books or any electronic devices. All their answers were assessed and analyzed, checking if they were able to validate their claims. Then they were given the questionnaire referring to cultural awareness (closed-item questions) and the whole process was concluded by discussing which texts were more appealing and motivating and which ones they considered more suitable for acquiring new language and developing their cultural awareness.

2.2.1. Discussing the findings

Analyzing the students' scores, we can conclude that the first task was better achieved by the control group as they could retrieve exact information directly from the text and discovered that law studies in the USA focus on preparation for U.S. legal practice to be of use to students whose careers would be based in other countries. Other pieces of information they managed to find were the number of hours necessary for the program completion, the classes in property law, contracts, and torts, the electives they can choose and the method of teaching (the case method). On the other hand, the students of the experimental group had to read the whole chapter to be able to infer the necessary information (the seating of students in the lecture hall, the behavior of the students, the students' preparation for the lecture, the way of delivering the lecture and so on), which was time-consuming and students of this group had to tackle reading between lines.

The second task was achieved rather on average three percent higher by the experimental group. As the students of the experimental group had once read the whole chapter it was easy for them to concentrate directly on the dress codes as these were described on the first and second pages of Chapter 2. The third task completion revealed the richness of literary language and students were able to provide a lot of interesting samples of the language we had presented in the article *Literary texts as a source of cultural awareness and language acquisition* (Béřešová, 2014). The fourth task was intended to present informal vocabulary. The students of the experimental group presented the words found in the first two pages of the second chapter without checking the level of formality in the monolingual dictionary. Having received their papers corrected, they were astonished by their performances, as only four out of the most frequently used words were informal:

- he was cool (informal – impressive),
- he gave a damn – (informal – not to care about)
- he had a history of closeness - to be well known for doing something because you have often done it in the past
- a cheerleader – mainly in AmE, one of a group of people, especially young women, who shout and dance to encourage the crowd to cheer at a sports event
- But she was not one to flaunt it. – to deliberately try to make people notice your beauty because you want them to admire you
- was the old standby
- and for a split second he wondered – extremely small amount of time
- a sweetheart – informal old-fashioned – a kind and helpful person
- flunk – informal – to fail a course.

The students underestimated the necessity to check the words, consulting them in the dictionaries, which we did

using MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002) and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) while correcting the papers. The students of the control group used a strategy of writing down the words which were in inverted commas or written in italics, for example *saggy pants*, *tube tops* (in BrE *boob tubes*) *do-rags*. These words were not able to be found in the officially compiled dictionaries and we were forced to look them up on the internet, which might or might not be a reliable source.

Table 3 Scores of experimental and control group students

Items	Experimental group	Control group
Item 1 (10 points)	68%	75%
Item 2 (10 points)	73%	70%
Item 3 (20 points)	88%	76%
Item 4 (10 points)	49%	52%

The answers to the questions of the questionnaires proved that the students were aware of the relationships between language and culture and were very active in the discussion led after the experiment providing their findings, either challenging for them or motivating.

2.2.2. Conclusions related to the literary authentic material experiment

This experiment has proved that using authentic literary texts is to the benefit of the students as they are more enjoyable and students find a chance to interact with the language and its use, and are informed about what is happening in the world they are likely to be interested in. Despite the fact that the students of the experimental group had to deal with metaphors and metonymy, they liked Grisham's language and the way his messages were conveyed in English. 12 students of the experimental group who decided to buy the book and read it were followed by 7 students from the control group. A reward for the teacher was when they asked me to provide a list of books recommended for reading for pleasure with a hidden goal related to language acquisition and cultural awareness development.

2.3. Authentic newspaper materials

Encouraged by the results of the second experiment in which we used the materials related to journalistic genres as well, we decided to concentrate on authentic newspaper materials, exclusively. The authentic texts written in journalistic style are various as the newspaper comprises various sections, which differentiate by its content, the topic and the used language. This variability can enrich target language and culture acquisition as it stimulates students to prefer topical themes rather than traditional ones.

From the communicative language skill perspective, the newspaper texts enable students to practice the language meaningfully within the integration of these skills. The advantage of including these authentic texts in English class is seen also in its application inside and outside the educational context.

2.3.1. Journalistic authentic materials

Focusing on the quality of target language we wanted to introduce to our bachelor students in their fifth semester of studies, we had to take into account these two dimensions:

- a) variability of the newspapers
- b) variability of the genres used in the newspapers.

As far as the former dimension is concerned, we decided to deliver a short presentation based on the cultural phenomenon in the U.K., where the distinction between quality or elite newspapers on the one hand (*The Guardian*, *The Independent*) and popular newspapers (*The Sun*, *the Daily Mirror*) on the other hand is related to interests, social classes, level of education was also reflected in the physical size of the newspapers until recently. While elite newspapers used to be printed on size A2 due to this size they were known as *broadsheets*, popular newspapers had paper size A3 and were called *tabloids* (Semino, 2009). Analyzing both, the students discovered that the most

frequent themes in the newspapers were prevalingly the events that happened within a 24-hour time span and concluded that the themes differed because some newspapers selected them due to the interests of the readers.

As far as the genres are concerned, the most frequent journalistic genre is the news report which consists of a factual account of events that have occurred since the last edition of the newspaper (Semino, 2009). The students have found out that the news report is a relatively short piece of information and comprises information related to accidents, catastrophes, crimes, wars, political and diplomatic events. Specific pieces of information referring to sports, business, healthy lifestyle, fashion occupy particular sections of newspapers. The students' discovery about the columns was complemented by the definition that the columns focus on a particular topic with commentary, analysis and current information (Semino, 2007). Many students analyzed advertisements as they usually unify verbal and visual elements and compared them with cartoons. Students were explained the role of the editorial, which provides the official view of the newspaper on a particular issue.

2.3.2. Analysis of five newspaper articles

As the students were not familiar with reading the selected newspaper, from our experiment perspective we decided to introduce a weekly newspaper *the guardian weekly* for various reasons. This weekly newspaper is accessible in any country of Europe and most newsagents have them at disposal for their weekly survey of events. The newspaper is published in the U.K. and covers all the most important events from all over the world on 48 pages using the following format: International news, Finance, UK news, Comment and Debate, Reply, Weekly review, Discovery, Books, Culture, Diversions, Sport. The goal of the newspaper seems to be coverage of variable topics to attract the audience, which is recognizable in language difficulty and therefore we considered them as a useful authentic material for our students.

The students, who participated in our experiment, had been studying in the English Major bachelor degree program for two years. The effects of journalistic authentic materials on language acquisition and cultural awareness were verified on the sample of 17 students who volunteered. They were provided the list of newspaper articles and could choose the one which attracted them most or was familiar to them. The worksheet (Appendix A) comprised the tasks related to lexical units, collocations, grammatical structures and expressions the students might consider useful and meaningful for their study. The second part of the worksheet was focused on searching for samples through which cultural awareness can be developed.

Table 4 Selection of newspaper articles by students

1. Stonehenge was just the centre of a massive monument group	4
2. The journalists who never sleep	2
3. Where excess weight is a risk to health, it should be tackled	2
4. The whistle blows as Europe's iconic sleeper trains disappear into the night	3
5. Garden delight	3
6. 'McBrunch' trademark on the menu	3

The students involved in the experiment were working independently and we have summarized the expressions that were frequently presented as words, lexical items, collocations and grammatical structures the students considered inspiring and provoking for target language development. They are presented in order consistent with the order of the articles we have presented in the above table:

- words and lexical expressions:

1. *at the heart of sprawling landscape; burial mounds; burial rituals; exposure; a giant upright blocking its entrance*
2. *emblematic figure in this new, horizontal discipline; converting data; diverse formats*
3. *mobile communications; internet browsing habits; to generate; algorithm; tracking; countless; heavily overweight; gawping lunchtime crowd; the right-wing political lobby groups; tougher economic times; moral failing; the honed and toned; finger-wagging skinnies; brush something under the carpet*
4. *time-efficient; environmentally sustainable; irresistibly romantic; ground-breaking*

- technology; low-budget airlines; microwave meals; health grounds*
5. *terminal decline; once-common species' disappearance; the top of the counts charts; drought-stricken*
6. *McBrunch trademark; late morning risers; fast food chain; coveted breakfast market*
- grammatical constructions:
1. *that have never been seen before; were spotted in the soil; the building is thought to have been*
2. *... they were being replaced...; ... the Los Angeles Times has laid off many writers; To compose sentences; it has a library of rules... Data is sorted and ranked using a method which focuses exclusively on building a narrative.*
3. *...she may have been being restrained in public...; ...she was afraid of people judging her...; ...aren't they entitled to have a go ...; It was a turning point that would lead her in quite the opposite direction.*
4. *...sleeper trains are being silently phased out across the continent...; ...services had been cut because they were circulating with empty coaches...; ...had fallen by 25%...; ...as opposed to 70...;*
5. *...it increased by 232%...; ... it was feared that...; ...what makes them tick...; ...it has baffled scientists...*
6. *...business rakes in about...;...a new word that could appeal to...; ...opportunities in the breakfast segment have been particularly attractive recently.*

From the vocabulary viewpoint, the expressions derived from the first article were familiar to students but they were not familiar with their collocations. The third article was based on the topic related to overweight people and their problems with moving in the environment where economic reasons made restrictions in space. This common topic attracted the students and they were eager to find expressions they felt might be useful for them while writing essays or discussing the topic in the practical lessons of English. In addition to this, all the samples being analyzed revealed the students' problems with compounds, collocations from vocabulary perspective and the passive complex constructions, -ing and -ed participles, progressive aspects of the present perfect and past tenses, and prepositions from the grammatical viewpoint.

As far as cultural awareness is concerned, the students responded very positively to the text about Stonehenge, which provided the latest knowledge about this frequently visited sight and at the same time they found out a lot of information had not been covered in the course called An Introduction to British and American Civilization. The second text which was considered as enriching cultural awareness was related to the fast food chain for late morning risers and the third text from which the students extract the most expressions and grammatical structures was a topic concerning obesity in American society.

2.3.3. Conclusions related to the newspaper authentic material experiments

The students had not experienced reading the newspapers before the experiment and therefore they were highly motivated by their success in managing to work with this kind of authentic materials. They claimed in the questionnaire that they had enriched their current knowledge in various aspects. They focused on the format of the news reports and were able to infer that a typical title in English newspaper is followed by one or more by-lines crediting a news agency or the journalist(s), who wrote the piece. Then they discovered that one paragraph usually provides a summary of the story and is quite frequently written in bold type. As the students were exposed to the samples from the elite newspapers as well, they could discover that the titles of the articles have a specific grammatical structure, the omission of the auxiliary verbs and the definite or indefinite articles and that the verbs are usually in the present tense or the infinitive form, in order to avoid the need for suffixes. While summarizing the typical features of the journalistic style, the students proposed this list of using:

- passive constructions in order to omit the agent
- noun phrases to refer to people and groups
- nominalization
- metaphorical expressions
- variable verbs in order to express actions and events.

Analyzing the authentic materials typical for the journalistic style, the students emphasized the heterogeneity and complexity of the issue and required a more frequent application of the newspaper articles in English class which might help them acquire linguistic techniques used in presenting facts without overt comments, providing a particular perspective and evaluation.

Developing cultural awareness was considered a natural impact of using the newspaper as it enables students to become aware of the world events. The students involved in the experiment admitted that they had underestimated reading the newspaper in the original language before as in their value ranking it occupies a very low position. The experiment enabled them to become aware of the fact that authentic texts in the newspaper encourage target language acquisition naturally in its most current form and topical information will broaden their horizons of cultural awareness.

3. Conclusions

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (2001) influenced the language education in Europe as its focus on what language learners have to learn in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop to be able to act effectively has been incorporated into the national curricula and syllabi. The document promotes communicative competence, which includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, strategic and existential competences. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favorable development of the learners' whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture (CEFR, 2001).

Despite the fact that authentic materials might be difficult due to language difficulties (culturally- or figuratively-induced lexical items or a mix of various verb tenses and forms, complex grammatical constructions), it provides natural use of target language and exposure to target culture or world-wide culture. The difficulty of the authentic text can be lowered by a proper task, and the role of the teacher, who plans and prepares these materials, is undoubtedly demanding as the materials are to be beneficial and meaningful for learners.

Richards (2001) believes that communication which takes place in English class must simulate as much as possible the communication observable in the real world outside. Referring to this facilitating role of authentic materials we highly recommend their use regardless of the challenge they can cause for teachers. We propose to teachers that they will be rewarded twofold: once while watching their students being engaged in activities and working enthusiastically and independently, and in the long term as preparing authentic materials for their classes will help teachers enhance their own language competence and deepen their cultural awareness.

4. Appendix A

Name:

Title of article:

A) Language Acquisition

Write down five expressions/phrases (you have learnt from the selected text) for each category 1-4

- 1) Lexical units
- 2) Words in collocations
- 3) Grammatical structures
- 4) Expressions or sentences you consider useful for your language development

B) Cultural Awareness

Write down five examples related to target culture.

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