



# A New Intercultural Model for Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language at European Level

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## Abstract

This paper presents a new experimental intercultural theoretical and operative model for RFL (Russian as a Foreign Language) teaching at European level: the RETEACH model. As a descriptive–normative didactic model, RETEACH builds on the intercultural approach, seeking to foster the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among students. RETEACH promotes respect, understanding, and solidarity among individuals and encourages critical awareness of various issues, such as multiple identities, fuzzy cultural borders, power-related intercultural dynamics, and avoidance of stereotyped representations. The model is grounded in three specific concepts and areas within the foreign language and RFL fields: 1) the use of authentic texts, 2) the role of literature, and 3) textbook theory. The model was tested through two case studies, which investigated the place of culture in RFL classes in Lithuania and Italy (Case Study 1) and in RFL textbooks employed in Italy (Case Study 2). Three different research methods were employed: action research, classroom observation, and comparative content analysis. The findings indicate that the proposed model can boost the development of ICC in RFL learners, thus addressing some general issues with RFL teaching in the European context. There are several theoretical and practical implications of the RETEACH model: 1) combining RFL theory and practice, 2) improving the intercultural approach due to the use of authentic materials, 3) enabling the use of Russian literature to develop ICC, and 4) promoting a complex and critical image of Russia.

**Keywords:** intercultural approach, RETEACH model, teaching practices, teaching Russian as a foreign language, textbooks

## 1. Introduction

Although in the field of teaching Russian as a Foreign Language (RFL), many principles and models for intercultural teaching have been elaborated (Amelina, 2022; Berdichevskiy, 2021; Berdichevskiy et al., 2011; Berdichevskiy et al., 2020; Nemtchinova, 2020; Petrikova et al., 2015), recent research (Torresin, 2023a, 2023b) has pointed to several critical aspects that are overly simplified and essentialized conceptions of culture and interculturalism:

1. The Russian language and culture are seen as fixed, static, and merely national, thus excluding the equally important Russophone (i.e., nonethnic/transnational) component).
2. A stereotyped representation of Russia, and therefore RFL teaching, grounded in the myth of the “Russian soul” (i.e., Russians’ uniqueness), is promoted.
3. What is prefigured is not a dialogue between cultures (i.e., active exchange between cultures, typical of an intercultural approach) but rather tolerance (i.e., passive, and patient coexistence with other cultures, typical of a multicultural approach).

For these reasons, such principles and models are ultimately ineffective. This paper provides a new experimental intercultural theoretical and operative model for RFL teaching at the European level—the RETEACH model.

RETEACH is both a descriptive and normative teaching model. It is intended to provide an initial analysis of how RFL *is taught* in Europe from an intercultural perspective (highlighting strengths and weaknesses) as well as some initial recommendations for how RFL *should be taught* from an intercultural perspective (to overcome known critical issues and strengthen current strengths).

The work is divided into four sections following the introduction. In §2, the theoretical framework of the RETEACH model is presented, which is based on RFL intercultural studies and international intercultural language education studies. In particular, according to international research on intercultural issues and supranational frameworks and guidelines (e.g., policies of the European Union and UNESCO), the concepts of intercultural communication (IC) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) are revised and updated from their theorization in the RFL area to account for the dynamism and complexity of intercultural dynamics and the “multiple identities” of their participants.

In §3, the RETEACH model is described, which is based on three specific key concepts and areas within the foreign language (FL) and RFL fields: the use of authentic texts, the role of literature, and textbook theory.

In §4, a first practical example of the application of the proposed model is presented through two case studies. The research methods employed to test our model were RFL action research and classroom observation (Case Study 1: Italy and Lithuania) and comparative content analysis of a selected sample of RFL textbooks (Case Study 2: Italy). The results from the first testing of the RETEACH model are presented, and the implications of the model are discussed.

Finally, in §5, the overall findings are summarized, and conclusions are drawn. It should be noted that the model proposed here is not a final version but rather a “work-in-progress” model, which could undergo subsequent development, improvement, and refinement.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Discussions of intercultural education focus on the concept of interculturalism (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006; Besley & Peters, 2012; Cantle, 2012; Dervin, 2016; Kastoryano, 2018; Meer et al., 2016; Penas Ibáñez & López Sáenz, 2006; Sarmiento, 2014; Verkuyten et al., 2019;

Zapata-Barrero & Mansouri, 2022), a philosophy that supports dialogue between cultures, which arose from the policies of the European Union and UNESCO in the 1990s.

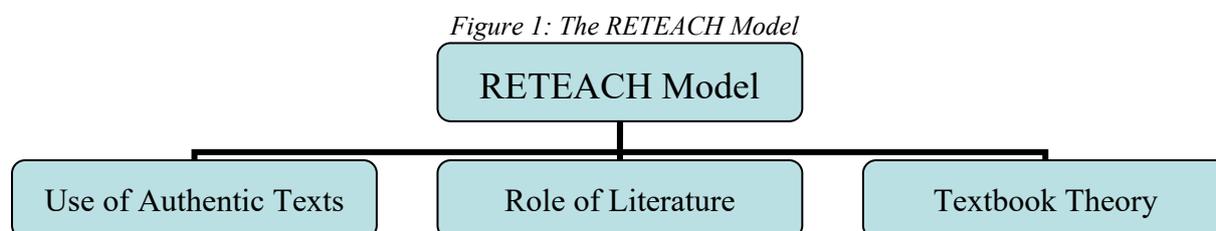
In RFL, interculturalism involves the concepts of IC (*mezhluk'turnaya kommunikatsiya*) and ICC (*mezhluk'turnaya kommunikativnaya kompetentsiya*). According to scholars, IC is defined as “an adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act who belong to different national cultures” (Vereshchagin & Kostomarov, 1973, p. 43; hereafter, the translations are mine). Meanwhile, ICC is both the condition and goal of IC. It is commonly depicted as the ability “to communicate with people from another culture” (Berdichevskiy, 2020, p. 9), or, in other words, “to exist in a multicultural society, to be successfully understood by representatives of other cultures and by representatives of one’s own culture” (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 134).

Here, in line with Torresin (2022a, pp. 274–275) and drawing on international intercultural language education studies (e.g., Byram, 1997; Coperías-Aguilar, 2002; Corbett, 2022; Deardorff, 2009; Kramsch, 1993; Soler & Safont Jordà, 2007), we understand both concepts in a revised way:

- **IC is a dynamic interrelationship and interaction between (at least) two participants in (at least) two different cultures (not necessarily national but also transnational), characterized by own specificities, individualities, and “multiple identities” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 10);**
- **ICC is both the condition and goal of IC.**

### 3. The RETEACH model

In this section, we describe the RETEACH model, which is grounded in three specific concepts and areas within the FL and RFL fields (according to the theoretical framework outlined in §2): the use of authentic texts, the role of literature, and textbook theory (see Fig. 1).



It should be noted that this is an experimental model, which could certainly be improved through subsequent research and testing (some of which is already underway).

The model has a double descriptive–normative nature. On the one hand, it aims to offer an initial analysis of the current situation of RFL teaching, while on the other, it aims to provide guidelines/indications for effective RFL teaching (with reference to the European context). Due to its characteristics, the model is capable of identifying strengths and weaknesses in RFL teaching methods and suggesting possible improvements.

#### 3.1 The use of authentic texts

The use of authentic texts plays a major role in modern FL and RFL teaching (e.g., Mishan, 2005; Nosonovich & Mil’rud, 1999). Although the question of authenticity and the notion of authentic text have been the subject of heated debates, especially in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Breen 1985; Nostrand 1989; Widdowson, 1970), here we rely on the definition of Galloway (1998, p. 133), who considers authentic texts as those “written by members of a

language and culture group for members of the same language and culture group.” Further, since the notion of text cannot be limited to written texts alone, we broaden this definition to include audio, video, and audio-visual linguistic materials.

Examples of authentic texts that can be used for teaching RFL include paper and online resources (e.g., books, newspapers, blogs, websites, and educational games) as well as audio, video, and audio-visual resources (e.g., songs and music programs, information programs, podcasts, radio, video clips, and movies).

Authentic texts are useful in RFL teaching (as well as for teaching other FLs) from an intercultural perspective because they provide real-life examples of language used in everyday situations and bring the FL culture into the classroom. Consequently, authentic texts are an important input source for RFL learners, which convey cultural information and thus help to develop learners’ ICC. In addition, they are also highly motivational for learners.

Indeed, the first principle of the RETEACH model is the use of authentic texts, which is closely aligned with the second principle (§3.2), the central role of literature, which presumes the use of authentic texts, in this case, literary texts.

### **3.2 The role of literature**

Among authentic texts (§3.1), literary texts occupy a prominent role in our model and form the core of its second principle.

Literature has long been recognized as one of the pillars of FL education (e.g., Duff & Maley, 1990; Hall, 2005; Lazar, 1993). In the RFL field specifically, the use of literature in RFL classrooms has been the object of several studies since the 1970s, which have examined literary texts and teaching from different perspectives, considering linguodidactic, pedagogical, and psychological aspects (e.g., Akishina & Kagan, 1997; Klychnikova, 1973; Kulibina, 2001; Zhuravlyova & Zinovyeva, 1984).

Literary texts can be integrated into RFL classes in two main ways: as the focus of the lesson (e.g., lessons built entirely around literary texts) and as supplementary materials (e.g., in-depth cultural insights on authors and/or texts encountered in class or new ones).

The role of literature in shaping the ICC of RFL learners is well argued by Kulibina (2015, pp. 26–30), who views a literary text as a “communicative unit” or a “means of communication,” through which learners develop their ICC (along with linguistic skills and communicative abilities). In other words, literature provides added value to RFL classes, offering an opportunity to work with authentic texts that reflect the verbal heritage of the Russian and Russophone worlds and offer insights on the cultural universe of Russian speakers.

Based on what we have said, it follows that RFL should not be taught without the inclusion of literary texts, which, despite potential difficulties in organizing classroom work for lower levels, are one of the most useful and interesting text types.

In the RETEACH model, the first and second principles determine the choice of materials and contents in an RFL class as well as the teaching processes and the organization of RFL classes as a whole. The next principle (§3.3) focuses on the link between RFL theory and practice, represented by RFL textbooks and textbook theory.

### **3.3 Textbook theory**

In addition to the materials and concrete practices for organizing RFL classes examined above (§3.1, §3.2), our model acknowledges the centrality of the primary learning tool—the RFL textbook—and its impact on both the theoretical–methodological and practical–operational aspects of RFL teaching.

The role of textbooks in FL and RFL has been intensively studied since the 1970s (e.g., Arutyunov, 1990; Bim, 1977; Miloslavskaya, 2008; Trushina, 1981; Vyatyutnev, 1984) until our days (see, among others, Berdichevskiy & Golubeva, 2015; Fuchs & Bock, 2018; Orlova, 2020; Shaklein, 2019; Shchukin, 2018).

By FL and RFL textbook we understand “the basic teaching tool” which guides learners’ and teachers’ work and embodies a specific teaching method adopted by its author(s) (Azimov & Shchukin, 2009, p. 332). Scholars view the RFL textbook as a learning tool that organizes the activities of teachers and students and actively influences the pedagogical process. Further, based on Bim’s (1977, p. 267) research on FL textbook theory, it is also seen as an “adapter-adaptive system,” that is, a system consisting of interconnected elements and therefore capable of being adapted to the pedagogical process.

The relevance of the textbook in RFL teaching (as well as for teaching other FLs) does not require explanation. As summarized by Torresin (2022b), the textbook is where theories meet teaching practices, where new approaches and methods are subjected to experimentation, and where pre-existing teaching habits and beliefs are consolidated or, conversely, broken down.

With regard to the intercultural dimension and development of ICC, textbook theory (i.e., the study of textbooks) is important to the RETEACH model in multiple ways: first, for the RFL author, who writes a textbook and is not always aware of the culturally hegemonic discourses (bias, ideologies, myths, stereotypes, etc.)—initiated by the author or in which the author participates—within which the textbook is created; and second, for the RFL teacher and the RFL student, who are active users of the textbook as a support to their teaching/learning but are not always aware of the culturally hegemonic discourses hidden within it.

It is well known that textbooks play a key role in shaping the perception of FL and culture. In the case of RFL, this is often linked to forms of cultural essentialism and reductionism, to the creation of stereotypes, or to the support of myths, such as the “Russian soul” (see Torresin 2022c, 2023b, 2023c).

In summary, this third and final principle of our model implies a focus, along with authentic materials (§3.1) and the role of literature (§3.2), on the subtle and often convoluted link between RFL theory and practice through an examination of the beliefs, biases, conceptual representations, and explicit or implicit ideologies of the textbook authors as well as those of the teachers and learners who use textbooks.

## **4. Testing RETEACH: The model in practice**

In this section, a first practical application of the RETEACH model is illustrated through the presentation of two case studies. The first section (§4.1) describes the research methods used for the testing of the model, consisting of action research, classroom observation, and comparative content analysis. The second section (§4.2) presents the results of the two case studies to verify the effectiveness of the RETEACH model: culture in RFL classes (Case Study 1: Italy and Lithuania) and culture in RFL textbooks (Case Study 2: Italy). Then, the theoretical and practical implications of this experimental model are discussed in the third and fourth sections (§4.3 and §4.4) along with its limitations, which may be addressed in subsequent research.

### **4.1 Methods**

The following research methods were employed to test our model: RFL action research and classroom observation for Case Study 1 (Italy and Lithuania) and comparative content analysis on a selected sample of RFL textbooks for Case Study 2 (Italy).

#### **4.1.1 Action research and classroom observation**

Action research is a participatory process that is highly useful in higher education, involving a constructivist approach that combines theory and practice (Mertler, 2019; Rowell et al., 2017). This research method is grounded in action, evaluation, and critical analysis of practices based on collected data to identify potential improvements and “new forms of understanding” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 2). Action research consists of the following self-reflective cycles (Lewin, 1946, pp. 34–36): planning to initiate change, implementing the change (acting), observing the process of implementation and its consequences, reflecting on the changes and replanning, acting and observing, and reflecting.

Here, the collection of primary empirical data involved first-person action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. xxvi), a process through which educators reflect on their own teaching in order to improve its quality.

Meanwhile, classroom observation is a purposeful examination of teaching through systematic data collection and analysis processes (Bailey, 2001), which entails different typologies (popular classifications are presented by Wragg, 1999 and Gosling, 2002). Unlike first-person action research, classroom observation is a collaborative, joint, and mutually enriching operation. Observation of the teacher by an observer, who records what happens in the classroom, encourages critical reflection on teaching practice (Brookfield, 1995) and “serves the dual purpose of promoting the development of both observer and observed” (O’Leary, 2020). Accordingly, action research and classroom observation complement each other, allowing teachers to self-reflect on their own work (first-person action research) while providing an outside look by one teacher at another (classroom observation).

Despite some disadvantages (e.g., lack of generalizability and repeatability as well as delays in completion of the action), these research methods have at least three main advantages: they have high practical relevance, they provide both quantitative and qualitative data, and they offer in-depth knowledge about problems.

#### **4.1.2 Comparative content analysis**

Content analysis is generally defined as a “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p. 14).

The close connections between messages (or texts) and the context in which they are produced is a central point of this method, which Krippendorff (2004, p. 18) defines as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.”

For the purposes of our analysis, a comparative content analysis (cf. Rössler, 2012) was deemed most appropriate, as it offers a comparative perspective that “attempts to reach conclusions beyond single cases and explains differences and similarities between objects of analysis and relations between objects against the backdrop of their contextual conditions” (Esser & Vliegthart, 2017, p. 2). In essence, the addition of a comparative component serves to generalize the content analysis method, allowing researchers to compare the elements under investigation to highlight similarities and differences and thus draw general conclusions.

Although comparative content analysis is a time-consuming and difficult process to automate, it has several advantages: it is an unobtrusive research process, it provides both quantitative and qualitative data, and it offers historical/cultural insights over time.

## 4.2 Results and discussion

In this section, we describe the results of the two case studies in terms of the effectiveness of the RETEACH model. In both case studies, the place of culture in RFL teaching was investigated, both during class (Case Study 1) and in textbooks (Case Study 2).

Case Study 1 was based on an analysis of the use of authentic materials and the role of literature in RFL classes in Italy and Lithuania, whereas Case Study 2 was built on textbook theory, specifically in RFL textbooks commonly employed in Italy.

### 4.2.1 Case Study 1: Culture in RFL classes (Italy and Lithuania)

Action research and classroom observations were used to apply the RETEACH model to the teaching of culture in RFL classes (Case Study 1). The aim was to explore how Russian culture *was taught* and *should be taught* in Italy (Stage 1) and Lithuania (Stage 2), with a focus on the use of authentic materials (§3.1) and the role of literature (§3.2). The data collected and analyzed in these two stages of investigation, which will be described, examined, and interpreted more extensively in future publications, are presented below on a preliminary basis.

During Stage 1, first-person action research was carried out in Italy at the University of Padua in academic years 2019–2020, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from a total of 339 teaching hours (7 courses of 42 hours each and one of 45 hours, including 3 BA-level RFL courses and 5 Russian–Italian translation courses, including 1 BA course and 4 MA courses delivered in person or online).

The purpose of the action research was to investigate the effectiveness of authentic texts and literature in the development of RFL learners' ICC. To achieve this goal, various methods and techniques for introducing cultural content through authentic texts and literature were utilized, including playful teaching, a task-based approach, and text-based learning. Several variables (e.g., planned vs. improvised activities and long vs. short activities) were tried with the same class. Teaching sessions using authentic texts and literary inputs were interspersed with sessions without the use of authentic texts and literary inputs to observe differences.

Data collection was carried out with a longitudinal scheme through field notes taken after each single lesson of each taught course to document needed contextual information straightforwardly and quickly, and a teaching diary to register calmly and thoughtfully the didactic actions implemented, the teaching process, and student response, along with reflections and considerations. Further data were provided by a satisfaction questionnaire administered to learners anonymously at the end of each course. A data retrieval chart was used to organize and analyze the data.

The action research revealed the following:

1. Classes that used authentic texts, including literary texts, were generally more enjoyable for students than those that did not. This was because the use of these inputs, done correctly, motivated learners and made them protagonists of their own learning.
2. Especially when combined with active teaching methods, such as playful teaching, both authentic materials in general and literary texts in particular conveyed cultural information in an effective way that motivated learners.
3. Authentic texts and literature inputs presented during classes were carefully planned by the teacher to be connected to intercultural objectives. Otherwise, as in the case of improvised activities, they could lose all their intercultural potential.

In sum, two main findings emerged from action research in RFL classes:

1. Authentic texts in general and literature texts in particular may be extremely useful for developing intercultural aspects in an RFL class.
2. To be powerful as intercultural tools, authentic texts and literature must be selected correctly with specific didactic planning and intercultural strategies.

In Stage 2, data collected from the action research were compared with data obtained from classroom observations conducted at Vilnius University in Lithuania in the second semester of the academic year 2022–2023 (February to May, 2023). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from observations of 45 hours of RFL classes taught by three different teachers at the BA level (general language and Russian–English translation courses).

Classroom observations were targeted at further validating the results of the action research. Data were collected through a special observation grid compiled after each class, according to a longitudinal scheme. This observation grid consisted of a first section dedicated to the description of the context (type of course, linguistic level of the students, etc.) and a second section which, with guiding questions, investigated the types of materials used (authentic texts and literary texts), the frequency with which they were used, the teaching methods employed, and so on. The analysis and interpretation of the collected data were performed manually.

From classroom observations, the following emerged:

1. Only one teacher made systematic and organized use of authentic texts, while the other two used authentic texts but without adequate planning, and thus their full potential was not realized.
2. All three teachers used literary texts or inputs in their classes, but their use was limited to grammar or translation exercises. Thus, the intercultural potential of such materials was not fully exploited.

These classroom observations not only further validated the findings of the action research (the importance of authentic texts and literature for the formation of learners' ICC, and the need for accurate and precise didactic planning for effective intercultural teaching) but also revealed critical aspects of RFL teaching in general, proving the validity of the RETEACH model:

1. The use of authentic texts should be increased, as they enhance learners' motivation and provide them with cultural information that has immediate relevance and interest.
2. The use of literature for only grammar or translation is limiting, as its potential for intercultural work is neglected.

In sum, Case Study 1 confirmed that the first two principles of the RETEACH model (use of authentic texts and the role of literature) are central to the development of RFL learners' ICC.

#### **4.2.2 Case Study 2: Culture in RFL textbooks (Italy)**

Case Study 1 entailed an analysis of the use of authentic texts and literature—the first two principles of the RETEACH model (see §3.1 and 3.2) to enhance learners' ICC—using data collected from action research and classroom observations in Italy and Lithuania. Case Study 2 was grounded in textbook theory—the third principle of the RETEACH model (see §3.3)—and sought to explore through a comparative content analysis how RFL textbooks adopted in Italy conveyed cultural content and their impact (alongside authentic texts and literature employed in everyday teaching practices) on the development of learners' ICC from a mixed theoretical–practical and ideological perspective.

A comparative content analysis was performed on a purposive sample consisting of four of the most popular RFL textbooks for first-year students in Italian universities, written by Italian, Russian/Russophone, or mixed (Italian and Russian/Russophone) authors and published by Italian or Russian publishers—*Mir Tesen*, *Poyekhali*, *Molodets*, and *Davayte* (Bonciani & Romagnoli, 2023; Chernyshov & Chernyshova, 2019; Langran et al., 2011; Magnati & Legittimo, 2017). The goal of the analysis was to identify the ways in which Russian culture was presented and conveyed to RFL learners.

For the purposes of our investigation, a comparative content analysis of the selected RFL textbooks focused on qualitative data collection. Data were collected through textbook analysis grids (one grid per textbook) that organized cultural content under various aspects, taking into account the manner of representation (complex vs. essentialized/stereotyped) as well as topics treated, the presence of Russophone (besides Russian) elements, and so on. Data analysis and interpretation were carried out with the combined use of manual coding and QDA Miner Lite, a qualitative data analysis program.

As in Case Study 1, the data collected and analyzed, to be covered more extensively in future publications, are illustrated below on a preliminary basis.

The comparative content analysis of the sample revealed the following:

1. Each textbook studied contained a very specific representation of what the authors considered to be Russian culture, which was influenced by RFL scholars.
2. This representation was often based (in two of the four cases, excluding *Davayte* and *Mir Tesen*) on a simplified and essentialized view of Russian reality (e.g., the Russophone aspect was excluded, and only the national Russian dimension—holidays, food, music, etc.—was portrayed). In other words, half of the textbooks presented “distorted mirrors” of the Russian world (see also Torresin, 2023c).
3. Even RFL textbooks introducing learners to Russian culture in all its manifestations and complexity may partially foster a stereotyped portrayal of Russia. This was the case with *Mir Tesen*, which seemed to promote the myth of the “Russian soul” (*russkaya dusha*) (Torresin, 2022c, 2023c), thereby reinforcing this cultural reductionism.

The results of Case Study 2 can be summarized as follows:

1. RFL textbooks are powerful vehicles of a certain image of Russian culture, which is influenced by the mentality of the authors and is, in turn, conditioned by the dominant theories and thoughts in the RFL scientific–methodological field.
2. Due to subjective perceptions and bias of their authors, RFL textbooks often convey a partial idea or even a stereotype of Russian culture, which may hinder the development of learners’ ICC.
3. Teachers and students must use RFL textbooks carefully, and their authors must recognize these aspects and develop new intercultural textbooks with an awareness of textbook theory.

In essence, Case Study 2 confirmed that the RFL textbook is not a secondary element but rather plays a central role in the formation of learners’ ICC, thus validating the third principle of the RETEACH model (textbook theory).

### 4.3 Implications

The theoretical and practical implications of the RETEACH model are as follows:

1. It can unify RFL theory and practice.
2. It strengthens and enhances the intercultural approach due to the use of authentic materials.

3. Russian literature can be used as a means to develop ICC.
4. It promotes a complex and critical image of Russia.

#### 4.4 Limitations

Despite the positive effects on intercultural RFL teaching described above (§4.3), there are also some limitations of the RETEACH model. First, the generalizability of the model is limited due to the small amount of data and the limited contexts considered in the initial testing. Second, there is a need to examine other aspects (theoretical and practical) in order to obtain a clearer picture of RFL teaching. Thus, there are grounds for future studies and implementations of this experimental model.

### 5. Conclusion

We proposed an experimental model for intercultural RFL teaching at the European level to support learners' development of ICC from a non-essentialist cultural perspective, based on three principles: the use of authentic texts, the role of literature, and textbook theory.

The RETEACH model was tested through two case studies investigating the place of culture in RFL teaching in classes (Case Study 1) and in textbooks (Case Study 2), which demonstrated its validity. In particular, Case Study 1 showed that the first two principles of the RETEACH model (the use of authentic texts and the role of literature) are cardinal to the enhancement of RFL learners' ICC. Furthermore, Case Study 2 verified the effectiveness of the third principle of the model (textbook theory) by confirming that the RFL textbook contributed significantly to the progress of learners' ICC.

The next step is the further validation and refinement of our model in future studies.

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