

Non and Cafezinho: Approaching Uzbek and Brazilian Foodways for a Culturally Sensitive and Sustainability-Oriented Second Language Curriculum

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Abstract:

This paper reports on the experience of reflecting on two cultural elements in the Uzbek and Brazilian traditions – non (“bread”) and cafezinho (“coffee”), respectively –, as they emerged as relevant themes to be incorporated in Portuguese-as-a-second-language curriculum in the Uzbek higher-education context. Through collaborative curriculum design aligned to the Sustainable Development Goal 04 (Quality Education), the authors emphasize the importance of promoting a critical language education supported by a culturally sensitive curriculum capable of fostering intercultural competence, critical thinking, respect and equity.

Keywords: Collaborative curriculum design. Intercultural competence. SDG. Language education. Brazilian Portuguese. Uzbek culture.

More than simply nurturing the body, eating also comforts the soul and plays a vital role in social life. The ways we eat, our favorite foods, when we eat, how we commune around meals, and how food and eating habits are expressed in different languages say a lot about cultures and forms of social bonding. In this paper, we explore aspects of Uzbek and Brazilian food cultures as a point of departure to reflect on the importance of both a culturally sensitive curriculum and a culturally responsive second language teaching practice. Specifically, we compare social traditions around bread (non) in Uzbekistan and coffee (café) in Brazil. This particular topic emerged from our conversations about the Uzbek and Brazilian cultures during our collaborative work on designing a Portuguese as a second language curriculum for Uzbek university students, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), established by the United Nations (2015), especially SDG 4 – Quality Education.

SDG 4 aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” (United Nations, 2015). From a critical (Pennycook, 2021) and decolonial (Canagarajah, 2023; Menezes de Souza & Hashiguti, 2023) Applied Linguistics (AL) stance, that is, one that considers that language constructs and changes realities, promoting lifelong learning in the second language classroom involves engaging students in language education that emphasizes the understanding of situated processes of meaning-making, rather than a strict focus on linguistic rules (Menezes de Souza & Hashiguti, 2023). Moreover, within the AL interpretation of the SDG framework, language education should offer conditions for students to delink from Western colonial and monolingual epistemologies and paradigms of

knowledge and to relink to local ancestral knowledges of relationality between individuals and the Earth (Canagarajah & Hashiguti, 2025). Delinking from capitalist, individualistic, and exploitive worldviews and relinking to communal traditions grounded in solidarity and collective well-being can foster more sustainable forms of living and should be prioritized in contemporary language education as an attempt to mitigate the purely utilitarian, market-oriented view of life.

In that sense, collaborative and intercultural work on curriculum design is essential to inform designers about locally relevant and intelligible cultural dimensions that support context-sensitive educational practice. We thus contend that a) second language education should be context-specific and culturally responsible, and b) intercultural and collaborative language curriculum design, grounded on academic scholarship and critique and on personal cultural experiences and affects, offers a relevant and effective approach to advancing language education for sustainable development, as well as teacher learning and sensitive preparation for transnational contexts.

Recent studies on culturally sensitive curricula and teaching practices have been addressed by authors such as Koro & Hagger-Vaughan (2025), Thomas & Quinlan (2023), and Nidjuis (2019). According to Koro & Hagger-Vaughan (2025), second language education has a long and erroneous tradition of privileging linguistic proficiency over intercultural knowledge. In their view, however, intercultural understanding or ICU is integral to meaningful language educational processes, for both students and teachers, as it fosters critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997) and intercultural competence to thrive in culturally diverse contexts. The authors highlight the importance of second language curricula that explicitly incorporate ICU not as separate learning objectives but rather as an orientation and a lens through which linguistic aspects are approached. They emphasize that ICU is not about acquiring knowledge about someone else's culture, but engaging in processes of understanding and respecting different points of view.

Within the context of higher education in England, Thomas & Quinlan (2023) draw our attention to the negative effects of culturally insensitive curricula for racial equality. In research conducted with university students on their perceptions of culturally sensitive curricula, they revealed how racially minoritized students (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) reported "fewer academic interactions with teachers", and "lower levels of interest than White students" (Thomas & Quinlan, 2023, p. 283). The authors designed a set of culturally sensitive curricula scales (CSCS) to be used to assess curricula, giving educators better conditions to reflect upon what is taught, how, and by whom.

For their part, Nidjuis (2019) reflects on collaborative experiences of curriculum (re)design in transnational contexts. The author points out that most curricula are developed from Western beliefs and values that present inadequate or essentialized cultural readings. The author argues that culture has a fundamental role in curriculum development, especially in international cooperation projects, as individuals and institutions in international settings may have different values, different organizational structures, laws, and regulations. In their view, the success of curricula designed for international contexts “depends upon an effective synthesis of the culturally shaped needs and context characteristics expressed” (Nidjuis, 2019, p. 86).

In milliy kognitiv manzara, that is, the Uzbek worldview, non is considered a sacred notion. It is not merely food, but the embodiment of baraka (blessing), rizq (livelihood), and mehnat samarasi (the fruit of labor). It is a cultural code, a symbol of social unity, and a metaphor of prosperity. The abundance of bread symbolizes national well-being and social harmony. As numerous as the types of Uzbek bread are, such as patir, kulcha, buxanka, shirmoy, obi non, jizzali non, each reflecting a specific regional, ritual, or domestic connotation, so too are the traditions and sayings around the idea of non that define the Uzbek culture.

For instance, in engagement ceremonies, Non sindirish (“Breaking bread”) is both a metaphor and a gesture that symbolizes the father’s consent to give his daughter in marriage to the family that sent the matchmakers. That is, if there is consent, the matchmakers’ dasturxon (“ceremonial cloth” or “tablecloth”) is opened, and the father breaks the bread brought by the groom’s side, expressing the sacredness and firmness of the promise, as well as a wish for harmony and unity between the two families.

There are also Uzbek proverbs and sayings with non. For example:

Nonning ushog‘i ham non. (“Even a crumb of bread is still bread.”)

Non ham non, ushog‘i ham non. (“Bread is bread, even its crumbs are bread.”)

Non mo‘lligi – el to‘qligi. (“Abundance of bread means the nation’s fullness.”)

Ketmon chopdim – non tishladim. (“I worked with a hoe – I took a bite of bread.”)

Mehnatning noni – shirin, yalqovning joni – shirin. (“The bread of labor is sweet, the life of the lazy is sweeter.”)

“Vai um cafezinho aí?” – Coffee and affect in Brazil

As pointed out by Neves, Sousa Cruz & Behrens (2025), Brazil is the “world’s largest coffee producer and the second-largest consumer.” Coffee represents social bonding, and expressions such as “Vamos tomar um café?” (“Shall we have a coffee?”) are cultural rituals of hospitality. Passar um café (“to brew coffee”) or to serve café passado na hora (“freshly brewed coffee”) is an amiable and convivial gesture.

The strong national preference for coffee over other beverages, along with the abundance of expressions related to coffee, materializes its affective, symbolic, and significant place in Brazilian culture. However, coffee’s history is rooted in colonization, enslavement, and migration, which must be critically discussed in language classrooms to link culture, history, and social awareness.

Approaching non and cafezinho was a fruitful exercise to reflect on how the Uzbek and Portuguese languages construct and shape realities through history, morality, and social values. While non materializes prosperity and unity, cafezinho reflects human connection and warmth. The inclusion of these topics can enhance intercultural competence and foster ethical, culturally sensitive education.

As curriculum designers – one from Uzbekistan, and one from Brazil – our collaborative work on a Portuguese-as-a-second-language curriculum for Uzbek students has allowed us to critically examine both cultures. Through this exchange, we become more culturally sensitive educators capable of designing contextually grounded and sustainable educational programs that prepare students for global challenges.

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