Leena Maria Heikkola*, Minna Maijala, Soila Merijärvi, Päivi Laine and Maarit Mutta

Finnish pre-service language teachers' understanding of culture – from cultural humility to social justice

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Abstract: Immigration to Finland has increased significantly over the past decade. As Finnish schools become more diverse, teachers must develop their CULTURAL COMPETENCE – their ability to work respectfully with people from different cultures. An even deeper understanding of supporting social justice in education can be achieved through CULTURAL HUMILITY, which is the ability to recognize one's own cultural biases and be open to seeing things from another culture's point of view. Until now, this concept has not been investigated in education. Thus, the aim of this study was to investigate pre-service language teachers' (n = 26) understandings of culture, cultural humility and social justice. The data consisted of responses to three open-ended questions in an online survey. The data were analysed qualitatively using theory- and data-driven content analysis.

The pre-service teachers understood culture primarily in terms of customs and traditions but had a relatively sound understanding of social justice; however, it was mainly based on human rights, with only a few mentions of human obligations. They had only a developing understanding of cultural humility. Based on our results, pre-service language teachers may become better equipped to advocate for social justice in education if cultural humility is included in teacher training.

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***Corresponding author: Prof. Leena Maria Heikkola**, The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Language and Culture, PO Box 6050 Stakkevollan, NO-9037 Tromsø, Norway,
E-Mail: leena.m.heikkol@uit.no
Minna Maijala, University of Turku, Faculty of Humanities, School of Languages and Translation Studies, 20014 Turku, Finland, E-Mail: minmai@utu.fi
Soila Merijärvi, University of Turku, Faculty of Humanities, School of Languages and Translation Studies, 20014 Turku, Finland, E-Mail: soila.t.merijarvi@utu.fi
Dr. Päivi Laine, University of Turku, Faculty of Humanities, School of Languages and Translation Studies, 20014 Turku, Finland, E-Mail: paipel@utu.fi
Dr. Maarit Mutta, University of Turku, Faculty of Humanities, School of Languages and Translation Studies, 20014 Turku, Finland, E-Mail: maamut@utu.fi

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Abstrakt: Innvandringen til Finland har økt betydelig det siste tiåret. Ettersom mangfold i de finske skolene øker, må lærerne utvikle sin KULTURELLE KOMPETANSE – deres evne til å arbeide respektfullt med mennesker fra forskjellige kulturer. En enda dypere forståelse av å støtte sosial rettferdighet i utdanningen kan oppnås gjennom KULTURELL YDMYKHET, som er evnen til å erkjenne egne kulturelle fordommer og være åpen for å se ting fra en annen kulturs synspunkt. Hittil har dette konseptet ikke blitt undersøkt i utdanningssammenheng. Målet med denne studien var derfor å undersøke hvordan blivende språklærere (n = 26) forstår kultur, kulturell ydmykhet og sosial rettferdighet. Materialet besto av svar på tre åpne spørsmål i et nettbasert spørreskjema. Dataene ble analysert kvalitativt ved hjelp av teori- og datadrevet innholdsanalyse.

Språklærerstudentene forsto kultur først og fremst som skikker og tradisjoner, men hadde en relativt god forståelse av sosial rettferdighet. Denne forståelsen var imidlertid hovedsakelig basert på menneskerettigheter, med bare noen få referanser til menneskeplikter. Studentene hadde bare en begynnende forståelse av kulturell ydmykhet. Basert på våre resultater kan språklærerstudenter bli bedre rustet til å fremme sosial rettferdighet i utdanningen hvis kulturell ydmykhet inkluderes i lærerutdanningen.

Nøkkelord: kultur, kulturell ydmykhet, sosial rettferdighet, blivende språklærere

L'abstract: Negli ultimi dieci anni l'immigrazione in Finlandia è aumentata in modo significativo. A causa del'aumento della diversità nelle scuole finlandesi, gli insegnanti devono sviluppare la loro COMPETENZA CULTURALE, la capacità di lavorare in modo rispettoso con persone di culture diverse. Una comprensione ancora più profonda del sostegno alla giustizia sociale nell'istruzione può essere raggiunta attraverso l'UMILTÀ CULTURALE, la capacità di riconoscere i propri pregiudizi culturali ed essere aperti a vedere le cose dal punto di vista di un'altra cultura. Fino ad ora, questo concetto non è stato studiato nel campo dell'istruzione. Pertanto, lo scopo di questo studio era quello di indagare la comprensione della cultura, dell'umiltà culturale e della giustizia sociale da parte di insegnanti di lingua in formazione (n = 26). I dati consistevano delle risposte a tre domande aperte in un sondaggio online. I dati sono stati analizzati qualitativamente utilizzando un'analisi del contenuto basata sulla teoria e sui dati.

I futuri insegnanti intendevano la cultura principalmente in termini di costumi e tradizioni, ma avevano una comprensione relativamente solida della giustizia sociale; tuttavia, questa era basata principalmente sui diritti umani, con solo pochi riferimenti agli obblighi umani. Loro avevano solo una comprensione in fase di sviluppo dell'umiltà culturale. Sulla base dei nostri risultati, i futuri insegnanti di lingue potrebbero

trarre vantaggio dall'inclusione dell'umiltà culturale per promuovere la giustizia sociale nell'istruzione.

Le parole chiavi: cultura, umiltà culturale, giustizia sociale, insegnanti di lingue in formazione

1 Introduction

Schools around the globe are becoming increasingly diverse. Compared to countries with significant immigration, Finland – the context of this study – has a relatively small proportion (10 %) of people with a migrant background. However, Finland has seen a sharp rise in immigration over the last decade (Heino and Jauhiainen 2020; Statistics Finland 2024a and 2024b). This has resulted in Finnish schools becoming more linguistically and culturally diverse. The Finnish education system is based on the idea of equality, and the current core curriculum (EDUFI 2014) requires all teachers to be linguistically and culturally aware. Cultural competence is also highlighted in the Common European Framework for Languages as part of language teaching (Council of Europe 2020). However, most current in- and pre-service teachers are white and do not have multicultural or racialized backgrounds. Thus, the increasing diversity has left some teachers struggling with their CULTURAL COMPETENCE – their knowledge of other cultures, cultural awareness, and skills in considering culture when working with diverse populations (Flaskerud 2007).

Frequently, the aim of language education, that is teaching a new language in a specific education context, is INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE, which can be defined as five knowledge-abilities (Byram 1997: 450): "knowledge of the self and other, attitudes of openness and curiosity, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness". There are, however, some concerns that the scope of Byram's concept is too national and does not sufficiently acknowledge other cultural groups (e.g., Baker 2024). Therefore, the educational objectives of intercultural communication should include increased cultural awareness of students' home culture(s) and awareness of the culture(s) of speakers of the target language (Thorne 2010).

To ensure social justice in education, teachers need (inter)cultural competence, as well as a wide range of tools to enhance this competence. In socially just education, it is important to become aware of and examine power relations in society and how these are reflected in education (Iikkanen et al. 2023). A deeper understanding of how culture affects equity in society may be gained through CULTURAL HUMILITY, which is the ability to recognize one's own cultural biases and to be open to seeing things from another culture's point of view (Fondora et al. 2016). In social psychology, in particular, the concept of cultural humility has arisen to better understand the needs of dif-

ferent individuals and refers to the recognition of how culture shapes the experiences and perspectives of all individuals, including the effects of power, privilege, and oppression (Fisher 2020; Fisher-Borne et al. 2015). It is important that also teachers understand that they may be placed in a more powerful social or cultural position, while their (marginalized) students may need to align with, adjust to or tolerate harmful interactions (Osanloo, Bosek & Newcomb 2016), which may result in racism. Despite its potential usefulness in education, the concept of cultural humility has not yet been investigated in language teaching and learning. In the field of language teaching, cultural humility could be useful in further developing the concepts of intercultural communication and cultural competence, for instance, by recognizing biases and accepting that they have an influence on interactions between individuals (Kumaş-Tan et al. 2007). Thus, cultural humility could be a way of attaining social justice in education, and it could be used to become aware of and examine power relations and racism in society (on social justice in education, see, e.g., Ennser-Kananen 2023). As cultural humility supports inclusive practices and respects diversity and equality in society, it can also be seen to promote sustainable development (see, e.g., Foronda 2020; Tervalon and Murray-Garcia 1998).

Against this background, the aim of this article was to examine pre-service language teachers' understandings of culture, cultural humility, and social justice. The following three research questions guided our investigation:

1) What kinds of understandings of culture are reflected in pre-service language teachers' responses?
2) What kinds of understandings of cultural humility are reflected in pre-service language teachers' responses?
3) What kinds of understandings of social justice are reflected in pre-service language teachers' responses?

2 Background

In this section, we first present definitions related to culture (Section 2.1). Second, we introduce how culture has been included in language education (Section 2.2). Third, we introduce cultural competence and cultural humility (Section 2.3). Finally, we define social justice and its links to cultural humility (Section 2.4).

2.1 Culture

The concept of culture is difficult to define as it is a complex system that encompasses different aspects of human society and life. It can be defined as a dynamic whole

created by people through shared values, beliefs, ideals, languages, communication systems, practices, behaviours, traditions, and material objects (see, e.g., Causadias 2020; Cowley 2011; Snowdon 2018). According to Causadius (2020), culture as a system is formed of three essential components – humans, places, and practices – which are inseparable and essential for cultures to exist. Understanding culture involves recognizing both its tangible (i.e., material) and intangible (i.e., intellectual, spiritual, and emotional) features (e.g., Kurbonov 2021; Leed-Hurwitz 2013).

The MATERIAL ASPECTS of culture are the physical objects and structures created by human societies. These include tangible expressions of human creativity and technology, such as architecture, works of art, clothing, and tools. Material culture illustrates the historical, social, and economic aspects of a culture (e.g., Dant 1999; Leeds-Hurwitz 2013). The INTELLECTUAL ASPECTS of culture refer to the beliefs, ideas, intellectual pursuits, and knowledge within a society or cultural group. Intellectual culture includes different disciplines, such as arts, education, literature, philosophy, and science, and thus encompasses the ways in which knowledge is produced and communicated within a cultural context. It also entails the intellectual heritage and achievements of a society and influences worldviews, innovations, and problem-solving abilities (e.g., Kurbonov 2021; Leeds-Hurwitz 2013). The EMOTIONAL ASPECTS of culture refer to the attitudes, norms, experiences, and sentiments that individuals or groups associate with their cultural identity. It also encompasses how individuals experience, express, perceive, and regulate emotions in social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and cultural contexts. Thus, the emotional aspect of culture includes interculturality (e.g., Leeds-Hurwitz 2013; Simonova 2019), which influences communication patterns, social dynamics, and behavioural norms and values within societies and cultural groups. The SPIRITUAL ASPECTS of culture refer to the beliefs, practices, values, rituals, and traditions related to the religious, spiritual, and metaphysical beliefs of a society or a cultural group. Spiritual culture entails, among other things, religious ceremonies and places, rituals, prayers, and symbols, and it shapes how a society or a cultural group views morals, values, norms, and a sense of belonging (e.g., Leeds-Hurwitz 2013; Morley and Renfrew 2009).

2.2 Culture in language teaching

In the context of language learning, a distinction is made between cultural phenomena related to everyday life in the target country and the so-called "high culture", including, for instance, values, history, literature, and arts (e.g., Schauer 2021). As explained by Sercu (2000: 28), the former can be called "small c culture" and the latter "big C culture". Both aspects are relevant in the context of language teaching and learning but should not be seen only from the traditional perspective i.e., that of

the target country. In the field of language education, the teaching and learning of culture has shifted towards personal engagement; students' emotions should be activated, and they should construct personal meanings related to the languages and cultures they are learning (see, e.g., Byram and Feng 2004; Kramsch 2009; Norton 2000). Since the 1990s, the concept of INTERCULTURAL LEARNING has been guiding foreign language teaching and learning. In the field of language education, intercultural learning is understood in terms of "mediation between cultures", "personal engagement with diversity", and "interpersonal exchanges of meaning" (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013: 8). In addition, the Finnish national core curriculum emphasizes the importance of languages as valuable resources for learning, as well as the value of introducing culture and encouraging students to recognize how it affects society and everyday life (FNBE 2014).

Nowadays, language learners are seen as multilingual individuals who have grown up in a variety of national, supranational, and ethnic cultures. This is in opposition to the 1970s, when the aim of language teaching was to rear monolingual native speakers belonging to national cultures (Kramsch 2006). A boundary between self and other should no longer be drawn between nations, and cultural knowledge and skills conveyed in language education should move beyond national boundaries (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). Despite the current global understanding of cultural learning found in the literature (e.g., Dervin 2010 and 2011; Risager 2006), the traditional monocultural frame can still be seen in language teaching and learning, for instance, in assessment (e.g., Shohamy 2011) and language textbooks (Shardakova and Pavlenko 2004: 35, 44). Language textbooks often reflect the mainstream or prestige culture of the target culture (see, e.g., Bori 2018; Ulum and Köksa 2019).

Researchers have suggested two contradictory approaches to culture in language teaching and learning: STATIC/SOLID and DYNAMIC/LIQUID. According to the static view, culture is the treatment and transmission of facts separable from language teaching (Liddicoat 2002 and 2004), while the dynamic view is an active and interactive way of dealing with cultural knowledge. Based on Bauman's (2004) paradigms of solidity versus liquidity, Dervin (2011) distinguished between solid and liquid interculturality. The solid approach involves describing the national features of individuals from a particular country, which can often lead to stereotyping. Dervin highlights the importance of being aware of the potential for stereotyping and to approach intercultural interactions with an open mind. In contrast, the liquid approach refers to the interculturality that arises when individuals interact. Accordingly, culture does not exist in a static form but is constructed and evolves in interaction (Dervin 2011; Liddicoat 2002 and 2004). In language teaching, the liquid approach involves reflecting on and exploring cultural backgrounds while simultaneously avoiding cultural stereotypes (cf. Dervin 2011). In this article, we understand culture(s) to be dynamic and changing in interaction between people (e.g. Kimanen et al. 2022).

In their review of the literature on intercultural education in Finland, Roiha, Sommier and Maijala (2025) investigated in- and pre-service teachers' understandings and experiences of intercultural education. Very few studies were found on students' experiences with the implementation of intercultural education. In the Finnish context, studies on pre-service language teachers' perceptions of intercultural education have shown that the understanding of culture is largely traditional and restricted (Larzén-Östermark 2009; Maijala 2020), which aligns with international findings that pre-service teachers often tend to understand culture in terms of customs and traditions (e.g., Silva 2022). Finnish pre-service teachers often construct an ethnocentric white, Finnish, "neutral" cultural reality, where Finnishness remains unseen by the teacher resulting in othering, marginalising and even exoticising students with diverse backgrounds (Heikkola et al. 2025). Living abroad has been found to enhance the intercultural skills of Finnish pre-service language teachers (Larzén-Östermark 2011; Maijala 2020).

In the field of language education, teaching practices and teacher training have traditionally been based on the solid concept of culture (Dervin 2011), for example, practical information for tourists about how to survive in the target country (e.g., Kramsch 2013). Biases are often considered inappropriate in language teaching (cf. Dervin 2011), but in order to recognize these in one's own culture and in other cultures, they must be thematized in language teaching and language teacher education. Cultural competence, and cultural humility in particular, may provide a way to become more aware of one's own biases and one's power position(s), and to actively work for social justice in education through advocacy for social and systematic change and engagement in anti-racist actions. Previous research has shown that many teachers are insecure about addressing, for example, prejudice, discrimination and ethnocentric education (Arnebeck & Englund 2020). In Finland, racism in basic education can be produced by racial categories, but also by invoking cultural differences (Souto 2011), which can result in unequal possibilities to participate and to be heard (Riitaoja 2013). Therefore, culture and different ways of understanding it should be considered in language teacher education and language teaching.

2.3 Cultural competence and cultural humility

Cross et al. (1989) defined CULTURAL COMPETENCE as a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, policies, and structures that make it possible to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Flaskerud (2007) highlighted the importance of three areas of cultural competence: cultural knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and collaboration with the community to be served. CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE refers to learning about a community, from its language(s) to its value systems, beliefs, and practices. CULTUR-

AL SENSITIVITY, on the other hand, refers to valuing and respecting the community's beliefs, values, and practices. Flaskerud (2007) pointed out that cultural sensitivity starts with an awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and practices. COLLABORATION WITH THE COMMUNITY includes involving the community in the matter at hand, be it health services or education. Flaskerud (2007) stressed that to be culturally competent, communication skills and attention to linguistic competence are essential.

CULTURAL HUMILITY is a concept that has gained significant attention in various fields, including healthcare and therapy, in recent decades. It was initially developed by Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia (1998) in response to inequities in healthcare. Unlike cultural competence, which focuses on acquiring knowledge about other cultures, cultural humility emphasizes a lifelong process of reflection and inquiry, including self-evaluation and self-critique of personal and cultural biases, as well as sensitivity to cultural issues outside of one's own culture (Yeager and Bauer-Wu 2013). Fisher (2020) indicated ways in which cultural humility and cultural competence relate to one another. Cultural humility can be seen as an alternative to cultural competence, as it better accounts for the complexity of cultural diversity, experiences of power and privilege, and the need to advocate for systemic change (Fisher 2020; Fisher-Borne et al. 2015).

Cultural competence, on the other hand, has been criticized for focusing too much on knowledge of cultural differences (see also Johnson and Munch 2009), becoming comfortable interacting with "others" (Fisher-Borne et al. 2015), and seeing cultural diversity only as a group-level phenomenon (Kirmayer 2012). Some researchers (see, e.g., Danso 2018) have even defined cultural humility as a repackaging of the components of cultural competence. Cultural humility can thus be seen as a component of cultural competence (Danso 2018) or an intersecting and complementary construct (Ortega and Faller 2011). Within psychological research, it has also been stated that "*cultural humility* as a dispositional orientation may be equally important as *cultural competence* (awareness, knowledge, and skills) in *multicultural counselling* and therapy" (Sue and Sue 2016: 63, italics as used in the original).

Cultural humility is built on the understanding that cultural differences do not exist within any one individual; rather, they exist in interactions between persons (Fisher 2020; Hammell 2013). The assumption, then, is that culture is dynamic and multifaceted and is affected by various contexts in a person's life (Kirmayer 2012; Zilliacus et al. 2017). Cultural humility can be defined as a keen awareness of the impact of culture(s) on one's experiences and perspectives, including an understanding the influence of one's own culture on one's actions and interactions with others (Fisher-Borne et al. 2015). As cultural humility can help teachers understand the different positions of power teachers and their (marginalized) students may have, it may be a useful tool to promote social justice in education, as well as to prepare teachers to actively engage in antiracist activities. Although cultural humi-

lity has been researched and used in, for example, social psychology and health sciences training, it has not yet been investigated in the contexts of education and language teaching.

In their analysis of cultural humility in the health and mental health disciplines, Foronda et al. (2016) created five key attributes of cultural humility: openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive interaction, and self-reflection and critique. Openness refers to open-mindedness towards diverse cultures and willingness to interact with people from other cultures. Self-awareness describes one's awareness of one's own strengths and limitations towards diversity of cultures. Egolessness includes a person's ability to be humble towards others and the ability to throw away one's own ego. Supportive interactions can be defined as intersections of existence among individuals that result in positive human interaction, such as taking responsibility for others. Finally, self-reflection and critique refers to one's capability to critically reflect on one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Foronda et al. 2016). These five attributes of cultural humility can be used in research and in training professionals to better serve their communities.

2.4 Social justice and cultural humility

Many social injustices occur in the context of cultural diversity (Fisher 2020; Shriberg and Clinton 2016). Social justice can be seen as a broad framework, for instance, for promoting more equitable healthcare services or education, and as advocacy for social and systematic change (Fisher 2020; Shriberg and Clinton, 2016). Cultural humility, on the other hand, can be seen as "a way of being" (Foronda et al. 2016: 214), giving a practitioner or teacher an opportunity to become more aware of social injustices and engage in socially just practices (Fisher 2020). Cultural humility can thus be seen as a link between cultural diversity and social justice, as it allows practitioners and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of diverse human experiences, which makes them more effective in advocating for equity and cultural responsiveness, for example, in healthcare services or education (Fisher 2020). Researchers in antiracist education (see, e.g. Arneback & Jämte 2022; Gillborn 2008) emphasize the need to focus on systemic racism and power imbalance between different racial identities to advocate for equity and achieve social justice.

In education, the ultimate aim of social justice is to address injustice and social inequities (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017), meaning that all students should be seen as valuable regardless of their background or previous knowledge (Iikkanen et al. 2023). Social justice is linked to respecting the rights and identities of all students (Shriberg and Clinton 2016). Similarly, cultural humility values all aspects of an individual's identity and promotes collaboration with individuals to empower them

(Fisher 2020; Foronda et al. 2016). Cultural humility can be seen as a filter through which teachers become aware of the impact of culture on all aspects of being and understand how power and privilege perpetuate social injustices (Fisher 2020), and how they may lead to racism. An essential part of cultural humility is proactively challenging systemic power imbalances (Fisher 2020; Fisher-Borne et al. 2015; Hammell 2013), as well as to counteract racism. Thus, to empower their students, teachers should teach them to challenge prevailing norms and practices (Boyd 2017) and themselves advocate for systemic change and actively engage in antiracist activities (Arnebäck & Jämte 2022) According to Fisher (2020: 57), cultural humility compels practitioners and teachers to be active agents of change "by openly discussing culture, diversity, and oppressions, challenging policies and practices that maintain inequity" (see also Fisher-Borne et al. 2015).

3 Methodology

In this section, the methodology of the study is presented. First, the questionnaire used to gather the data and the data of the study (Section 3.1) are described. Second, the participants of the study (Section 3.2) are introduced. Third, the method of analysis used in the study (Section 3.3) is presented.

3.1 Questionnaire and data

The data for this study were gathered via an anonymous online questionnaire. Author 2 administered the survey as part of a course for master's-level university students majoring in languages at a Finnish university. The survey was conducted during one of the first lectures of the course. The students had not received any course materials about cultural humility or the role of culture in language teaching. However, as the students were majoring in languages, it can be assumed that they had obtained cultural information about the target cultures from previous language courses. While responding to the questionnaire, the students asked the teacher questions about cultural humility, which we assumed to reflect their unfamiliarity with the concept. The students were instructed to explain their comprehension of the concepts at the moment of their participation.

The questionnaire included Likert scale questions on culture, cultural humility, and social justice (34 items total), as well as five open-ended questions and 11 background questions (age, gender, first language, major, starting year of university studies, history of studying linguistically and culturally responsive teaching, teacher training, experience in language teaching, living abroad, studying in another lan-

guage, and most important part of one's own cultural background). Responses to the following open-ended questions formed the data of the current study: 1) What is culture? 2) What is cultural humility? 3) What is social justice?

The respondents were given the opportunity to refrain from responding to the questionnaire. Those who participated in the study gave their written consent in the questionnaire. It was explained that not participating in the study would not affect the participants' grades in the course during which the questionnaire was administered. The results of the study have been reported in such a way that no individual respondent can be recognized. The data is stored on a secure server.

3.2 Participants

The participants in the study were students (n = 26) majoring in languages at a Finnish university. To qualify as language subject teachers in Finland, language students are required to have a master's degree in their major subject. Most study other language(s) as their minor subject(s). In addition, they are required to take a one-year teacher training within their bachelor's or master's degree. The background information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' background information (n = 26).

	Participants (*n = 26)*
Age	M = 25.6, SD = 7.1, min = 19, max = 58
Gender	77 % female, 19 % male, 4 % I wish not to say
L1	92 % Finnish, 8 % bilingual
Major	35 % Finno-Ugric languages 23 % English 15 % Spanish 11 % Nordic languages 8 % German 4 % French 4 % Latin
Year of starting university studies	23 % 2018 36 % 2019 23 % 2020 9 % 2021 9 % 2022
Previous studies	82 % linguistically responsive teaching 43 % culturally responsive teaching 11 % philosophy of values and worldviews (Fi. *katsomustieto*)

Table 1: (continued)

	Participants (*n* = *26*)
Teacher training	46 % Yes
	18 % No
	32 % I have applied to take teacher training
	4 % Primary school teacher
Experience teaching language	64 % No
	21 % Yes, under a year
	11 % Yes, 1–5 years
	4 % Yes, over 5 years
Lived abroad	69 % No
	27 % Yes
	4 % Answer missing
Studied languages other than L1	62 % No
	38 % Yes

The average participant age was 25.6 years, and 77 % of participants were female. Finnish was the first language (L1) of 92 % of the participants, and two were bilingual. They had started their studies at the university between 2018–2022, and their majors comprised seven different languages. 82 % had taken some courses in linguistically responsive teaching, 43 % had studied culturally responsive teaching, and 11 % had studied philosophy of values and worldviews. Almost half had completed their subject teacher training, one-third had applied to start the training the following year, and one participant had a previous degree in education and was a primary school teacher. Almost 70 % had lived abroad, and 38 % had studied in languages other than their L1.

3.3 Data and methods of analysis

The data consisted of the pre-service language teachers' responses to three open-ended questions: What is culture? What is cultural humility? What is social justice? These broad questions were chosen deliberately to enable a survey of the pre-service teachers' knowledge, as cultural humility has not previously been studied within education. The responses given to these questions were analysed using data-driven and theory-driven content analysis (see, e.g., Krippendorf 2019) reiteratively among the authors. All data were organized through coding using NVivo software (version 12; Bazeley and Jackson 2013). The response examples were translated from Finnish to English by a native English-language translator, and each participant was assigned an ID code. The analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Methods of analysis of the three topics of the study.

Topic	Initial analysis	Further analysis	Final analysis
Culture	Data-driven content analysis by Author 3: understandings of culture		Theory-driven content analysis by all authors: aspects of culture 1) intellectual, 2) emotional, 3) spiritual, and 4) material aspects of culture (Leeds-Hurwitz 2013; Kurbonov 2021)
Cultural humility	Data-driven content analysis by Author 3: themes in the responses	Theory-driven content analysis by Authors 1 and 3: cultural humility 1) openness, 2) self-awareness, 3) egoless, 4) supportive interaction, and 5) self-reflection and critique (Foronda et al. 2016)	Theory-driven content-analysis by all authors: cultural humility 1) openness, 2) egoless, and 3) self-awareness and self-reflection (modified from Foronda et al. 2016)
Social justice	Data-driven content analysis by Author 3: human rights vs. human obligations	Data-driven content analysis by all authors: human rights vs. human obligations Theory-driven analysis by Author 3: sustainability dimensions 1) ecological, 2) social, 3) cultural, and 4) economic (Maijala et al. 2023)	Theory-driven analysis by all authors: sustainability dimensions 1) ecological, 2) social, 3) cultural, and 4) economic (Maijala et al. 2023)

The responses to the question about culture were initially analysed by Author 3 using data-driven content analysis (Krippendorf 2019). The focus of the analysis was the participants' understandings of culture(s). The analysis was continued by all authors using theory-driven content analysis; all the categories identified in the initial analysis were further categorized to fit four main categories: intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material aspects of culture (Kurbonov 2021; Leeds-Hurwitz 2013). Responses related to beliefs, ideas, intellectual pursuits, and knowledge within a society or a cultural group were categorized as "intellectual aspects of culture". Mentions of arts, education, literature, philosophy, and science were also coded into

this category, as were responses referring to intellectual heritage and the achievement of a society. Responses touching on attitudes, norms, experiences, and sentiments associated with cultural identity were categorized as "emotional aspects of culture". This category also included mentions of how people experience, express, perceive, and regulate their emotions, including communication patterns, social dynamics, and behavioural norms and values. Responses including interculturality were also coded into this category (see, e.g., Leeds-Hurwitz 2013).

Responses mentioning beliefs, practices, values, rituals, and traditions related to religion, spirituality, and metaphysical beliefs within a society or a cultural group were categorized as "spiritual aspects of culture". In addition, mentions of religious ceremonies and places, rituals, prayers, and symbols were coded into this category, as were responses related to how morals, values, norms, and a sense of belonging are seen by a specific cultural group. As some aspects of emotional and spiritual culture overlap, these were assigned a combined category: "emotional-spiritual culture". Finally, responses including mention of physical objects and structures created by human societies were categorized as "material aspects of culture". Tangible expressions of human creativity and technology, including architecture, works of art, clothing, and tools, were also coded into this category. After the categorization, the coding and categories were discussed among all authors until consensus was reached. Examples of the four categories are presented in Table 3 in Section 4.

Responses to the open-ended question about social justice were initially read and coded into categories by Author 3 based on the themes identified in the responses. Next, the categories were discussed by Authors 1 and 3, and the initial categories were reanalysed to fit the five themes related to cultural humility: openness, self-awareness, egolessness, supportive interaction, and self-reflection and self-critique (Foronda et al. 2016). There were few responses related to self-reflection and self-critique; thus, responses related to this and self-awareness were coded into one category: "self-awareness and self-reflection". As the data were gathered using a questionnaire and not by observing actual interactions between teachers and students, and no responses referred to interactional situations, the category "supportive interaction" was omitted from the analysis.

The final categories included in the theory-driven content analysis were 1) openness, 2) egoless, and 3) self-awareness and self-reflection. Responses dealing with being open to engaging in intercultural/cross-cultural interactions and being open-minded and open to new ideas were coded as "openness". Responses related to displays of humbleness and modesty about one's own culture and reflections of beliefs that all people and cultures are equal were coded as "egoless". Finally, responses referring to the awareness of one's own culture in relation to other cultures, awareness of values, beliefs, and behaviour in other cultures, or self-reflection about one's own culture and beliefs and attitudes towards other cultures were

coded as "self-awareness and self-reflection". The categories and coding were then discussed among all authors until consensus was reached. Examples of responses coded into the three categories are presented in Table 3 in Section 4.

The responses to the question regarding social justice were first read and categorized based on the themes found in the data by Author 3. The initial analysis was conducted on two levels. First, the responses were coded inductively based on the data into two main categories: 1) human rights and 2) human obligations. Next, the responses were coded into subcategories within the two main categories. The categories were then discussed together by all authors, and it was decided that the initial subcategories would be reanalysed into the four sustainability dimensions: ecological, social, cultural, and economic (e.g., Maijala et al. 2023; United Nations 2015). Ecological sustainability refers to the preservation and protection of the environment (Vadén et al. 2020). Social sustainability refers to the promotion of well-being and the reduction of inequality within and between countries, including ensuring these for future generations (Vallance et al. 2011). Cultural sustainability refers to maintaining the cultural beliefs, practices, and identities of all persons (Soini and Birkeland 2014). Economic sustainability refers to supporting economic growth without negatively affecting the ecological, social, or cultural aspects of a community (Spangenberg 2014). The analysis of the sustainability dimensions was conducted by Author 3 and then discussed among all authors until consensus was found. Examples of the categories are presented in Table 5 in Section 4.

4 Results

In this section, our results are presented. The section is divided into three subsections according to our research questions: the pre-service language teachers' understandings of culture (Section 4.1), reflections on cultural humility (Section 4.2), and understandings regarding social justice (Section 4.3).

4.1 Pre-service teachers' understandings of culture

When asked about their understanding of culture, some participants found it difficult to define the concept. Instead, many listed elements related to culture, as shown in Example 1.

1) A very broad term. Culture is, for example, different customs and habits in a particular place, local events and way of speaking, prevailing political conceptions and norms. (ID16)

Most of the pre-service language teachers' mentions (n = 54) reflected the emotional-spiritual aspects of culture (see Table 3 for number of mentions and examples). Within this category, the most frequently mentioned subcategories were customs (n = 19) and traditions (n = 13). The responses in these subcategories emphasized that these aspects are transmitted from one generation to another and shared among a specific group of individuals (Examples 8, 9 and 10–12). Beliefs and norms (n = 9), including religious beliefs, and values (n = 6) were also mentioned in the responses (Examples 13–14, 19–20 and 15–16). Furthermore, identity was referred to three times as an aspect of culture (Examples 21 and 22), and community was seen as an aspect of emotional-spiritual culture (Examples 17 and 18). One response highlighted that culture is "the dynamics of interacting with people" (Example 18), while another mentioned local events as part of culture (Example 23).

Table 3: Pre-service teachers' understandings of culture (n = 26).

Aspects of culture	Subcategories	Mentions	Examples
Intellectual (17 mentions)	Language	12	2. *The **language**, customs, practices, norms, values, etc. of a particular group* (ID12) 3. *Culture encompasses, for example, **language(s)** and different social practices.* (ID18)2. *Culture is the practices, **knowledge**, customs and often a part of identity also.* (ID11)
	Knowledge	2	4. *Culture is the practices, **knowledge**, customs and often a part of identity also.* (ID11)
	Politics	2	5. *A very broad term. Culture is, for example, different customs and habits in a particular place, local events and way of speaking, **prevailing political conceptions** and norms.* (ID16) 6. *A particular group's adopted customs in different areas of life. It includes, for example, language, religion, art, **power structures** and livelihoods.* (ID9)
	Trade	1	7. *A particular group's adopted customs in different areas of life. It includes, for example, language, religion, art, power structures and **livelihoods**.* (ID9)
Emotional-spiritual (57 mentions)	Customs	20	8. *The **customs** specific to a particular country/group* (ID2) 9. *Culture is a particular group's **way of living**. Culture includes, for example, traditions, language, art.* (ID4)
	Traditions	14	10. *Art, community, **traditions** and customs* (ID1) 11. *Culture comprises a community's or group's customs and **traditions**.* (ID5) 12. *An understanding of customs and **traditions** that are passed on to future generations.* (ID26)

Table 3: (continued)

Aspects of culture	Subcategories	Mentions	Examples
Emotional-spiritual (57 mentions)	Beliefs	6	13. *Culture comprises a community's shared values, **beliefs**, practices, languages.* (ID13) 14. *A particular group's adopted customs in different areas of life. It includes, for example, language, **religion**, art, power structures and livelihoods.* (ID9)
	Values	6	15. *For example, society's customs, practices, **values*** (ID6) 16. *Ways of living, **values**, norms, language, practices* (ID23)
	Community	4	17. *Art, **community**, traditions and customs* (ID1) 18. *Culture is the traditions and customs of different countries, understanding of different people, religion, eating habits, religion, fashion, the **dynamics of interacting with people**.* (ID13)
	Norms	3	19. *Ways of living, values, **norms**, language, practices* (ID23) 20. *The language, customs, practices, **norms**, values, etc. of a particular group. (ID12)*
	Identity	3	21. *A person's **identity**.* (ID10) 22. *Culture is the practices, knowledge, customs and often a part of **identity** also.* (ID14)
	Events	1	23. *A very broad term. Culture is, for example, different customs and habits in a particular place, **local events** and way of speaking, prevailing political conceptions and norms.* (ID16)
Material (11 mentions)	Art	6	24. ***Art**, community, traditions and customs* (ID1) 25. *The concept of culture is really broad and multidimensional. Culture encompasses, in my opinion, not only real **cultural productions (for example music, art)** but also the values, thoughts and the actions driving everything people do.* (ID17)
	Food	3	26. *Culture relates to, for example, language, **food**, fashion, religion and different ways of thinking and behaving. (ID21)* 27. *Many things. Customs and traditions, festivities, **food culture,** entertainment (films, literature, music), ways of communicating, language, and non-verbal communication.* (ID20)
	Clothing	2	28. *Culture is the environment we live in. Culture relates to, for example, language, food, **fashion**, religion and different ways of thinking and behaving.* (ID21)

Intellectual aspects of culture were mentioned 16 times. Due to challenges in defining culture, many participants opted to list several aspects that came to mind. For exam-

ple, language was mostly mentioned as one item in a longer list of elements belonging to culture, for instance, "Culture encompasses various aspects such as language, food, clothing, and different ways of thinking and behaving" (ID21; see also Examples 2 and 3). Knowledge and politics were each mentioned twice in the participants' responses (Examples 4, 5, and 6). In the responses on politics, both political views and power structures were reflected upon. Trade was mentioned once (Example 7).

Some students mentioned smaller but no less important material aspects of culture, such as clothing (n = 2) and food (n = 1; Examples 26–28). The respondents only seldom (n = 5) mentioned other material elements, including arts, music, theatre, and ballet (Examples 24 and 25).

4.2 Pre-service language teachers' understandings of cultural humility

Based on the responses, cultural humility seemed to be a new concept for the participants (see Table 4). Compared to the responses related to culture, which reflected multiple understandings thereof, the responses (n = 22) regarding cultural humility included only one attempt at defining the concept, and four participants were unable to answer this question completely. The most recognized aspects of cultural humility were egoless (n = 9) and openness (n = 8), and five responses reflected an understanding of self-awareness and self-reflection for cultural humility.

Table 4: Pre-service teachers' understandings of cultural humility (n = 26).

Categories	Mentions	Examples
Egoless	9	29. *Viewing your own culture as being just as good as other cultures, and not ranking one better than another.* (ID8) 30. *It's not ranking your own culture above all others by default.* (ID10) 31. *It means not thinking your culture is above all others.* (ID23)
Openness	8	32. *Being open towards other cultures.* (ID26) 33. *Mutual respect between people representing different cultures* (ID9) 34. *It could refer to being open and respectful towards all cultures. It could also mean that no one can ever learn/understand everything about a particular culture.* (ID14)
Self-awareness and self-reflection	5	35. *Being conscious of your standing in relation to others* (ID6) 36. *Being able to relate to different types of people and their customs and traditions. Understanding how other people's background can affect the different areas of their life.* (ID13) 37. *Having the courage to examine your attitudes and being able to take the attitudes of people from different cultures into consideration and respecting them.* (ID19)

Responses categorized as "egoless" indicated that all cultures should be seen as equally good, that cultures should not be ranked, and that one should not see one's own culture as better than other cultures (Examples 29–31). "Openness" was understood as openness and mutual respect towards other cultures, as well as being aware that no one can fully understand all cultures (Examples 32–34). In the responses categorized as "self-awareness and self-reflection", participants mentioned being aware of one's (power) position in relation to others and the importance of identifying with others and their customs and traditions (Examples 35 and 36). One response also highlighted being brave enough to examine one's own attitudes and being sensitive to others' attitudes and respecting them (Example 37).

4.3 Pre-service language teachers' understandings of social justice

Responses related to social justice were first analysed based on whether they reflected human rights or human obligations (see Table 5). Social justice was most often described as different types of human rights (29 mentions); only two participants described social justice as human obligations, and two respondents did not know what social justice was.

Table 5: Pre-service teachers' understandings of social justice (*n* = 26).

Sustainability dimensions	Human rights and obligations	Mentions	Examples
Economical dimension (*n* = 4)	Obligation to provide aid	1	38. *Everyone has the right to support from others and the State, but they **are also responsible for bearing their share**. (ID19).*
	Right to an adequate standard of living	1	39. *That **no one needs to live in poverty** (ID4).*
	Right to Social Security	2	40. *Right to **social assistance** and other **social welfare support** (ID8)* 41. *Everyone has the right to **support** from others and the **State**, but they are also responsible for bearing their share.* (ID19)
Ecological dimension (*n* = 1)	Right to safety	1	42. ***Guaranteeing safety** and conditions for living for everyone in the community.* (ID24)

Table 5: (continued)

Sustainability dimensions	Human rights and obligations	Mentions	Examples
Cultural dimension (*n* = 4)	Right to religion	1	43. ***The right*** *to your own identity and opinions, the right to express yourself,* ***practice your religion****, culture, etc.* (ID20)
	Right to cultural life	2	44. ***The right*** *to your language and* ***culture****? (ID9)* 45. ***The right*** *to your own identity and opinions, the right to express yourself,* ***practice your*** *religion,* ***culture****, etc.* (ID20)
	Right to language	1	46. ***The right to your language*** *and culture?* (ID9)
Social dimension (*n* = 22)	Obligation for fairness	1	47. ***Fairness*** *between people,* ***mutual responsibility*** (ID26)
	Right against social deprivation	1	48. *Everyone's* ***right to social interaction****.* (ID22)
	Right to education	1	49. *Endeavour to defend the rights of everyone,* ***the right*** *to an independent life and possibility* ***to get an education*** *and take care of your health.* (ID24)
	Right to equality	12	50. *People have* ***the same rights*** *irrespective of their social status.* (ID5) 51. *Multicultural* ***equality****. That everyone is treated the same and fairly.* (ID10)
	Right to freedom of opinion	1	52. ***The right*** *to your own identity and* ***opinions****,* ***the right to express yourself****, practice your religion, culture, etc.* (ID20)
	Right to individuality	2	53. *Everyone has* ***the right to be themselves****.* (ID3) 54. **The right to one´s own identity** and opinions. (ID20)
	Right to live independently	1	55. *Endeavour to defend the rights of everyone,* ***the right to an independent life*** (ID24)
	Right to participate in society	1	56. *Systematic consideration of different people and encouraging them to* ***participate in decision-making.*** (ID16)
	Right to health	2	57. *That no one needs to live in poverty and* ***everyone has access to healthcare*** (ID4)

The responses related to social justice were also analysed based on the four dimensions of sustainability: economic, ecological, cultural, and social. Within the eco-

nomic dimension, the pre-service language teachers' responses reflected a person's right to social security (Examples 40 and 41), right to an adequate standard of living (Example 39), and obligation to provide aid for others (Example 38). Within the ecological dimension, there was one mention of the right to safety (Example 42). Within the cultural dimension, the responses reflected understandings of the right to cultural life (Example 44 and 45), the right to religion (Example 43), and the right to language (Example 46).

The social dimension of sustainability was the most frequently mentioned (22 mentions) and included 12 mentions about the right to equality (Examples 50 and 51). In addition, one or two responses each reflected understanding the following: right to individual autonomy (Examples 53 and 54), right to health (Example 57), right against social deprivation (Example 48), right to education (Example 49), right to freedom of opinion (Example 52), right to live independently (Example 55), and right to participate in society (Example 56). One obligation – obligation for fairness – was also mentioned (Example 47).

5 Discussion

The pre-service language teachers found it difficult to define culture and instead often listed elements that they regarded as part of the concept. As in previous studies, the respondents primarily understood culture in terms of customs and traditions (Silva 2022), with a focus on emotional-spiritual aspects. The respondents also emphasized the importance of understanding other cultures and shared cultural experiences (see also Cowley 2011); however, most responses did not reflect an understanding of cultural differences existing in interactions between people (see Hammell 2013) but focused mostly on the individual level. Some responses reflected an understanding of interculturality, in that culture was seen as belonging to "different countries" or "certain groups of people", illustrating an understanding that culture is shared, not something that belongs to one individual.

Although culture teaching has moved towards more personal engagement (see, e.g., Byram and Feng 2004), the pre-service language teachers' responses reflected a traditional solid understanding of culture (see also Heikkola et al. 2025). This may reflect the fact that the focus in language education has traditionally been on the solid concept of culture (Dervin 2011; Maijala 2020). These results are worrisome, as this view can lead to stereotyping, which may hinder educational equity and social justice. A move towards a more liquid view of culture could be attained by thematizing potential biases during teacher education so that future teachers become more aware of their own partiality, and how these may lead to experiences of otherness and even racism by students. By introducing cultural competence and cultural

humility in teacher training, future language teachers could better reflect on the different ways culture(s) and power positions affect experiences of social (in)justice and racism in education.

Cultural humility was a new concept for the pre-service language teachers; only one participant attempted to define the term. However, over one-third of the participants' responses reflected an understanding of egolessness and openness being related to cultural humility. Thus, the participants understood that no culture should be deemed better than another (egolessness) and that all cultures should be respected (openness; cf. Foronda et al. 2016). These results are in line with previous research showing that not all Finnish pre-service teachers are aware of their own culture; rather, their own culture, namely Finnishness and whiteness, is seen as the norm (i.e., neutral), whereas everything "other" or "foreign" is seen as culture (Heikkola al et. 2025). This may enforce an imbalance in the power positions in education, as students with diverse backgrounds may need to align with, adjust to or even tolerate harmful interactions (Osanloo, Bosek & Newcomb 2016). Only one in five participants was aware of possible power structures in society and their effect on equity in education.

Although most of the pre-service teachers were not aware of cultural humility before participating in the survey, they were able to name different aspects thereof in their responses. Thus, the participants have already started the life-long process of reflection and becoming aware of their own cultural biases (Yeager and Bauer-Wu 2013), which is necessary to advocate for equity and stand against and actively change systemic inequities in society, as well as engage in antiracist activities (cf. Fisher 2020; Fisher-Borne et al. 2015). This is in line with studies stating that most higher education students in Finland have leftist and green political stance (Mäkilä 2020). Thus, political polarisation is not as visible in higher education as in the rest of society.

Most of the participants understood the meaning of social justice. The majority of the mentions defined social justice in terms of human rights, including the right to language and social security. Interestingly, only two mentions of human obligations were made: obligation for fairness and obligation to provide aid. Thus, it seems that the pre-service teachers mostly saw social justice from an egocentric point of view: What is in it for me? This is problematic as human rights cannot exist without human obligations (Burman 2017). Moreover, the responses reflected a focus on individuals rather than community, which is aligned with the participants' belief that cultural differences exist as a characteristic of the individual rather than becoming evident in intercultural interactions. It is important for future language teachers to be aware of their rights and those of their students, but teachers must also be able to solve problems and teach students how to solve problems. To do so, both teachers and students must be aware of their obligations as well.

When analysing the responses from the perspective of sustainability, the responses mostly reflected the social dimension. Almost half mentioned the right to equity, which accurately reflects the aims of social justice: fair division of resources, opportunities, and privileges in society (Leeds-Hurwitz 2013). The responses further reflected the view that by increasing social justice, social sustainability can be achieved. These results are in line with previous research on pre-service language teachers' understandings of sustainability (e.g., Maijala et al. 2023). Interestingly, the cultural dimensions of sustainability were not often mentioned by the participants in this study, which contradicts previous findings (Maijala et al. 2023). Economic dimensions were mentioned in some responses, while ecologic dimensions were mentioned in only one response.

As the data of this study consists of open-ended responses to three broad questions, and the sample was quite small, the results cannot be generalized outside the specific context of the language students investigated. However, as cultural humility has thus far not been examined within (language) education, this study functions as an initial attempt to study the concept in the context of education and can make a small contribution in informing future research and possible venues of developing teacher education. In the future, cultural humility in education should be further studied in larger samples of both in- and pre-service teachers including different types of data, for example a combination of open-ended and multiple-choice responses and semi-structured interviews. In addition, a comparison of in- and pre-service teachers in different roles and grade levels is warranted as previous studies have shown large differences between teacher groups, for example, regarding their understanding of the role of language in teaching and learning (Heikkola et al., 2021). Teachers' background factors may also be of interest to investigate, as teachers' experience in teaching migrant background students has previously been shown to be linked to a more linguistically responsive understanding (Alisaari et al 2019).

6 Conclusions and implications

To our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate cultural humility in the context of education. Based on the results, pre-service language teachers seem to have a solid and traditional albeit multifaceted understanding of culture but a limited understanding of cultural humility. Most participants saw the value of socially just education; however, their responses focused mostly on rights instead of obligations. With regard to the sustainability dimensions, the responses reflected the social dimension most frequently. To ensure a socially just education for all students, language teachers must better understand the impact culture can have on equity. To

improve teachers' cultural knowledge, awareness, and skills to advocate for culturally diverse students, cultural competence and cultural humility should be introduced into teacher training. For example, by allowing pre-service teachers to take a migrant student's perspective in a task or a discussion, they could experience being the "other", the one who has to adjust to the majority culture and power structures. Within linguistically responsive pedagogy, such a simulated role change within teacher education or professional learning has been shown to be effective (see e.g. Fisher 2020). This type of change in teachers' understanding and especially their pedagogical skills takes time, but by giving future teachers opportunities to discuss and critically reflect on their own thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (cf. Foronda et al. 2016), they can become agents of change for a more equitable, socially just, antiracist and sustainable education for all students.

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