

Article

Learning on the Ground—Taking Language and Culture Teaching Outside the Classroom

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Abstract: Learning a language can't be a process limited to the classroom, since it demands additional practice. That additional practice can be achieved through activities designed by the teacher, ensuring that they are consistent with the course curriculum. By practicing outside the classroom, the students should feel more motivated, since they are taking charge of their own learning and becoming more autonomous. If those activities are made into games, the students might feel even more engaged, as the learning process will be more entertaining for them. In order to take advantage of Macau's role as a place where Portuguese culture is present in everyday life, the students of the Bachelor of Portuguese at the City University of Macau were challenged to find manifestations of that culture outside the classroom, on a playful activity that should, therefore, be more motivating for them. On a previously set meeting point, the students' teams were given a list of instructions in Portuguese, with varying levels of complexity, according to the year they were enrolled. This activity ensured that the students were practicing the Portuguese language, as they were required to follow the instructions and decode some intentionally less clear information. By including elements of the Portuguese heritage in Macau, making the students go to those places and focusing the questions on information about that heritage, the activity enables students to also learn something about the culture associated with the language they are learning. To assess that learning, the students were asked to answer a test on their knowledge about some of the cultural elements in question before and after the activity was conducted and the results of those tests are presented at the end of this article, along with a student's evaluation of the activity.

Keywords: language teaching; gamification; Macau heritage

1. Introduction

The goal of teaching a non-native language is to help its students master it, so that they can use it in their everyday lives (Alves & Moura Filho, 2024). However, when someone is learning a language in a context where it's not used on a regular basis, the chances to practice it are greatly reduced and that's what happens in Macau, where, although the Portuguese heritage is clearly visible throughout the city, the language itself is not commonly spoken. In this context, it seems like a wasted chance not to use that heritage to help the students learn about the culture that is associated with the language that they are learning and that's how this activity came to be.

By combining these cultural assets with gamified activities, that can make the process more entertaining for the

students (Fischer & Barabach, 2020), this activity was thought as a chance for the students to apply what they learned in the classroom outside of it. In doing so, the students proved that their learning had been successful, by using the language to complete real-life tasks, at the same time as they were having fun, by the addition of a gaming element.

The purpose of this activity was twofold, as the students were not only honing their language skills, but were also learning about the culture associated with that language, something that can strengthen their emotional bond with the language learning process (Liaw, Botelho, & Lau, 2023). Although this project was designed specifically for Macau, which is unique in its cultural heritage, the idea itself can be used for other contexts, especially for



immersive courses, in which the language students are surrounded by the culture associated with the language that they are learning. Hopefully, the results presented here could inspire other teachers to try something similar in their respective teaching contexts.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Learning Outside the Classroom

As language students progress in their learning, a question becomes increasingly complicated to answer: “What languages do you speak?” When do you go from a hesitant “I speak a little Portuguese” to a confident “I speak Portuguese”? The answer seems to rely on what the students can do with the language. If they can use it to communicate, then it is fair to say that they know it (da Europa, 2001). But that raises a different issue: is it possible to really know a language when you only use it in the classroom, where your teacher is frequently your only source of input for that language? (Carlet & Kivistö de Souza, 2018)

The classroom experience is sometimes dictated by a textbook that tends to neglect the authentic language experience, instead focusing on explicit instructions, followed by examples and simulated practice. However, the students who get better learning results are usually the ones who find a way to use the language outside the classroom, by their own volition, which should consolidate what they learned (Tomlinson, 2013).

Assuming that your goal is to be able to use the language you are learning in your everyday life, authentic exposure to that language (i.e., not for teaching purposes) and ample opportunities to practice it seem to be essential (Alves & Moura Filho, 2024). That might require that the students continue their learning outside the confines of the classroom, which, depending on the teaching context (methodology, number of students, engagement...), can itself be very limited in providing the students with chances to practice what they are learning (Carlet & Kivistö de Souza, 2018). Some will do that voluntarily, by searching for music, podcasts, videos or printed press on the target language or even going as far as try to find native speakers with whom to practice (Araya Ríos & Gamboa Sánchez, 2019), but many will need some guidance from their teachers.

In fact, some students lack the ability to understand that they can and should take some responsibility for their own learning, especially when they come from an educational background where the teacher is the indisputed source of all knowledge and the students passively wait for him/her to convey them the information that they need to pass a test (Cheng, 2016). When teaching students with this profile, it's the teacher's job to teach them not only the course contents but also how to learn in a more autonomous way (Man, 2019), since students who take agency of their own learning, by understanding the methodologies

that work better for them and critically analysing the information received, tend to be more motivated to learn and have better academic results overall (Bezerra, et al., 2024).

This lack of autonomy can hamper the learning process, but, if the students have some clear guidelines from the teacher on what the goals are and how to reach them, they are usually willing to take part in autonomous learning activities. The teacher should also take care to plan activities that are interesting for the students and remember to give them proper feedback after those activities are finished (Öztürk, 2020). By getting the students to learn outside the classroom, we are not just extending their exposure to the target language, but we are also tapping into their autonomous motivation. When the students are on their own, they are learning not because that's what they're supposed to do in a classroom, but because they want to do it. When they use the target language outside the classroom, the students feel that what they learned is indeed useful (Bølling, Otte, Elsborg, Nielsen, & Bentsen, 2018), since in language, as in many other subjects, practice makes perfect.

Using the context to enhance the learning process can range from using local texts or cultural items as teaching materials to using the whole teaching location, including buildings, streets and people (Liaw, Botelho, & Lau, 2023). In Macau, where Portuguese speaking partners are scarce (not as much as in other places, though), getting the students to use the language outside the classroom can be challenging, so all these resources should be explored.

The expansion of the learning location to places other than the classroom doesn't necessarily mean that the teacher loses control of the process. The teacher can still plan these activities and make sure that they adhere to the learning goals on the course curriculum, for instance, by asking the students to further explore a topic introduced in class or by leading them to authentic examples of the target language use that are relevant for the course contents (Tomlinson, 2013), something very easy to do in Macau, where Portuguese is more common in its written form, even if linguistically inaccurate in some cases (something that can also be used in class: “What's wrong with this sign?”). Ultimately, these activities don't even need to be directly related to the course. Since the final goal is to practice using the language in real-life situations, the teacher might opt for developing extracurricular activities, like promoting a conversation club or making the students use the language in an activity that can be publicly displayed, like having them recite poetry, perform a play or make a movie in the target language. These public displays of language mastery should increase the students' self-esteem and, therefore, their motivation to continue studying (Tomlinson, 2013).

It is worth noting, though, that not all students will be interested in taking part in extracurricular activities, but some good will might be gained if we simply give them a participation bonus if they join their classmates (Gan &

Ouh, 2023) or make a game out of the activity and give out prizes to the winning students or teams (Huang & Hew, 2021). This, however, doesn't change the fact that an extracurricular activity will certainly increase the teacher's workload and that this strategy is not suitable for all teaching contexts (for instance, not all students have the time to take part in this kind of activity). Still, in a teaching context such as the one in Macau, where finding the Portuguese language is inevitable in your daily life, it seems like a waste of a resource not to use the learning environment to enhance the students' experience.

2.2. Macanese Culture

Macau was administrated by the Portuguese for around 450 years, before returning to the Motherland in 1999. That means that one can find throughout the city several signs of Portuguese culture, of which the fact that Portuguese is still an official language of this Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China is probably the most notable one. In fact, you can still see Portuguese signage on the streets and many posters have both a Chinese and a Portuguese version. This should make Macau an ideal place to learn Portuguese, as one of the few places in Asia (the other being East Timor) where the language is widely used, but the reality is different, as most locals don't speak or read Portuguese.

The fact is that during the centuries that the Portuguese spent in the city, they never succeeded in making the land more "Portuguese-like", because most people living in Macau were always Chinese. Therefore, two separate areas always coexisted in Macau: a zone where most Portuguese lived, that still retains some European style buildings; and a zone where most Chinese lived, with an architecture not dissimilar to other areas of Southern China (Wieczorek, 2020). However, even with the return of Macau to the Motherland, the new administration saw the value of having this mixed heritage and sought to protect it (Chung, 2009), probably even more than the Portuguese administration ever did, getting the city's historical center enshrined as a UNESCO Heritage Site in 2005.

This protected part of Macau celebrates the city's mixed heritage, including both churches and temples and Western-style and Eastern-style architecture and it's one of the region's main attractions apart from its gaming industry (Vong & Ung, 2012). It's one of the things that make Macau unique and, nowadays, one of the few places where you can still see some marks that the Portuguese left in the city, which can be a very useful resource if you're learning Portuguese (Rangel, 2016).

When strolling through the paved streets on Largo do Senado (*Senate Square*) or Taipa Velha (*Old Taipa*), one can be forgiven for thinking that they are in Portugal, such are the architectural similarities. Add to that the Portuguese-styled cafés and restaurants and it might seem that you are not in China anymore. This doesn't happen in all

the city, of course, as the Portuguese influence was always geographically limited to the areas where they lived, but still, it can give the students some information on the Portuguese culture or, at the very least, some curiosity on why things are how they are in certain parts of the city.

However, that doesn't seem to happen, as the locals seem to avoid the crowded (and sometimes overpriced) historical sites and even seem to show no more than a superficial knowledge about the city's heritage (Au, 2016). Obviously, a Chinese national that has never been to Macau will also have some gaps on his knowledge of Macau's history and that is the case with most students at the City University of Macau, who sometimes know very little of the city's heritage. That can be a problem, as learning a language involves learning the cultural context of that language (da Europa, 2001), so that the learners can use the target language appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds.

This ability to tailor the language use to the listener's cultural background is known as intercultural communicative competence and it's extremely important to avoid misunderstandings in pluricultural societies (Akhtariev, Ibragimova, & Puchinina, 2019). Because Macanese society blends several different communities, it seems important to prepare the students to interact with all these potential dialogue partners, although in this activity the focus was on the Portuguese heritage, because that's the cultural background to which we wanted to expose the students.

As time moves on and the Portuguese culture slowly disappears from focus, through the arrival of many immigrants with no connection to the city's past cultural background, Macau is at the risk of becoming just another Chinese city (Fogaça, 2019). A way to avoid this loss of character is to get more people involved in the conservation of what makes Macau unique: its mixed heritage. Through activities such as the one described in this paper, the students are lead to question if this homogenization of Macau is really inevitable or if preserving the Portuguese influence can be beneficial to the region. This critical interpretation of the cultural context should result in an increased social awareness that will make the students more engaged in their future social roles (García Chapinal, 2022).

Fortunately, Macau still has ample resources to introduce the students to the Portuguese culture and all it takes is for the Bachelor of Portuguese students to leave the classroom and explore the city's Portuguese heritage. Combined with an activity that requires them to use the language that they are learning, this trip through Macau should, in theory, help the students consolidate their learning and motivate them to learn even more.

2.3. Gamification

A sure way to get students interested in any activity is to make it fun for them. By adapting gaming elements to

the learning process, such as points systems, levels and badges, we can make the students more engaged, since they are familiar with these elements and associate them with fun activities that they do voluntarily in their free time (Candra, Handoko, & Lindawati, 2024). This gamification of the teaching process can make it more relevant for the students, because it moves it into their comfort zone: they are learning the same way that they play.

Gamification is an active methodology, since it focuses on getting the students to apply their learnings to real-life situations. It works by connecting theory and practice and showing the students that what they are learning can be useful outside of the classroom, and its effectiveness has been proven by recent studies, although some teachers, students and institutions can be hesitant to embrace it, given that it's a major deviation from traditional teaching methods (Bezerra, et al., 2024).

Through gamification, we can create challenges that the students must overcome to get to the “next level”. This should be more engaging than just posing the same process as “after answering this question, you should answer the next one”. If there are rewards when part of a process is completed, the students should feel that they achieved some progress and that should, in turn, increase their motivation to continue the process (Bitencourt, 2023). As an example, we gave the Portuguese students a passport that they could fill with stamps for each completed activity related to the Portuguese language. If a student completed all the activities, they would receive a small token (a key-chain shaped like a “pastel de nata”, a Portuguese delicacy), very cheap, but enough to motivate them to complete all the tasks.

The fact remains that current students, used to getting their information instantly and effortlessly from many available sources (though not all of them sufficiently accurate), frequently find the traditional teaching methods inefficient and even boring. By turning the process into a game, the students should be more motivated to develop their problem solving, cooperation and communication skills (Dicheva, Dichev, Agre, & Angelova, 2015). The goal is to make learning fun, without losing sight of the goals that the students should achieve (González-González & Navarro-Adelantado, 2021), meaning that a balance must be struck between what makes the students engaged and what they still must learn, in a fun way or not.

One of the skills that any language student must learn is communicative competence, since, as mentioned previously, you can only master a language once you're able to use it in everyday life and that involves interacting through it (Vieira, 2022). Because your chances to use the target language are greatly reduced if you're in a country where that language isn't commonly spoken, the teacher must try to create those opportunities (González Barona & Robalino Múñiz, 2024) and designing games that

require the students to use the target language can be a way to engage them.

Ideally, a learning game should be designed to solve a real-world problem, which, in language teaching context, means performing a task, i.e., using the target language as you would outside the classroom (Castillo Losada & Insuasty, 2017). The students should then investigate, collaborate (if divided into groups) and apply their skills (Bitencourt, 2023). This can have the form of a simple request: “Get directions to the restaurant X”, something that the students might need to do in real-life. Then, to make it more into a game, you can give rewards to the fastest teams to get the correct answer. It doesn't have to be an actual prize; it could just be allowing them to decide the next task (within the constraints of the curriculum). This activity could be even more lifelike if the students had to perform it outside the classroom, just by asking the directions from random people on the street. Maybe add a bonus for the first team to physically reach the target and you have yourself a game, where the students might have learned more about asking for and following directions than by simply hearing and reading about it in the classroom.

One of the drawbacks of gamification is that it can promote a competitive environment and that's why it's necessary to promote cooperative games, in which the students must communicate, discuss and reach the desired solution. By cooperating to achieve a common goal, the students should not be focusing on beating each other, but on working together. Also, by listening to other possible ways to solve an issue, the students should be able to develop their critical thinking skills, an asset in not only learning, but in life in general (Fischer & Barabach, 2020). By making the students work together, the teacher is also allowing them to foster emotional bonds between them, something that should make the learning process more pleasant and should remove some of the focus from the final result—winning the game—to the process itself—having fun with the classmates (González-González & Navarro-Adelantado, 2021). Another advantage of having the students working together to reach a common goal is that it promotes their autonomy, making them active agents in their own learning (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2015).

There are several ways to gamify a course, from giving a competitive makeover to a traditional classroom task to creating a whole curriculum based on gaming elements, in which students must overcome challenges to get medals, level up or improve their scores (Huang & Hew, 2021). Only when the students reach a certain score on a task performance can they move on to the next level, something that they can attempt multiple times, on their own time, thus fostering their autonomy, in a process that resembles what the students do in their free time (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2015). This process does require constant supervision and feedback from the teacher, and it risks

removing the focus from learning to just playing a game (Leffa & Alves, 2020), so maybe some balance is advisable.

In theory, using games to practice language should make the students more engaged, as they can feel more actively involved in the learning process. It is important, however, that these gamified activities should not only fall within the learning goals of the course, but that they should also be challenging enough to motivate the students, but not too much, as to not have the opposite effect (Candra, Handoko, & Lindawati, 2024). The games designed by the teacher should be adjusted to the students' profiles, considering their ages and linguistic and personal skills.

Any such activity should also have very strict rules, so that everyone involved knows exactly what to expect and no one can feel that the game results aren't fair. After the activity, it's also important that the teacher provides some feedback, so that the students understand what they did well and not so well and are given tools to improve on their flaws (Fischer & Barabach, 2020).

We should remember, though, that gamification is not without its limitations. As mentioned, the activities designed should be adjusted to the students, motivating them to learn and not distracting them from learning (Suryatama & Damayanti, 2023). Furthermore, this kind of activity can require vast resources (technological or otherwise), so it's not possible to do it in every context. Finally, not all students will thrive in the competitive environment promoted by this methodology and making the grades dependent on the students' performance in competitive tasks can increase their anxiety and have counter-productive results in their motivation. Also, as mentioned previously, not all students will have time available to devote to this kind of activity, especially when it takes place outside the classroom (Buckley, Doyle, & Doyle, 2017).

Regardless of these limitations, the gamification of teaching seems to have positive effects on the students' motivation for learning a language (Orak, 2025) and it would seem foolish not to adjust the teaching methodologies to the students' preferences, by making learning as fun as possible. However, when the class time is limited, but the learning goals must still be met, we might have to turn those fun ideas into extracurricular activities. And that's how this project was born.

3. Empirical Study

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The goal of this study was to assess how much the Bachelor of Portuguese students could benefit from practicing the target language outside of the classroom. The students in question are almost exclusively from Mainland China and all of them speak Mandarin (for the most part) or Cantonese as their first language, with Portuguese being a foreign language for all of them. All students are in their late teens to early 20s and they have, as they

enter the course, a very limited knowledge of not only Portuguese culture but also of the Portuguese influence in Macau.

Given that the class time is limited and these students sometimes lack the autonomy to look for ways to practice the language by themselves, this activity focused on ways to make them interact with Portuguese speakers and use the Portuguese language to navigate the city and follow instructions to adequately perform tasks. This should result in an increased autonomy, that should, in turn, make their subsequent language learning easier. In order to assess this improved autonomy, the students were asked, after the task, if they felt more autonomous.

Since learning about the culture that it expresses is a part of learning a language, this activity made use of the Portuguese heritage within Macau, to show the students that Macau is not a monocultural environment and that knowing about its residents' diverse cultural backgrounds (in this case, mainly the Portuguese) can facilitate communication. The students' knowledge about Portuguese culture in Macau was the object of a short test that they should complete before and after the activity, in order to assess how much it evolved by performing the several tasks proposed. Additionally, the students were also asked after the activity, what they believed to have learned from performing it.

The formal assessment of the activity focused on development of cultural knowledge, because the students' linguistic knowledge was a necessary condition to complete the activity (if they couldn't understand the instructions, the students couldn't complete all the tasks) and could be at least partially assessed by looking at the final results. Still, the students were asked after the activity if they felt that it had helped them practice Portuguese, which was one of the main goals of the task design.

Because the students have a very busy schedule, this activity was thought as extracurricular and was made into a game in order to make it more appealing for them. Some extra motivation was given in the form of a 10% participation bonus (i.e., if the student had an 80% score on participation, they would get 88%).

3.2. Task Design

The idea was as follows: at a previously set meeting point, the students' teams would be given a list of instructions in Portuguese, with varying levels of complexity, according to the year they were enrolled. Those instructions included:

- (1) Following directions, for instance: "Virem à direita e depois à esquerda. Sigam em frente até um templo." (*Turn right and then left. Go straight ahead until you reach a temple.*)
- (2) Answering questions about the Macanese heritage, mainly of Portuguese origin, present in the area, for instance: "Estão na Rua Camilo Pessanha. Quem foi

Camilo Pessanha?” (*You are on Camilo Pessanha Street. Who was Camilo Pessanha?*)

- (3) Taking pictures, for instance: “Fotografem a placa de uma rua com o nome de uma escritora portuguesa.” (*Take a picture of a street sign with the name of a Portuguese writer.*)
- (4) Drawing, for instance: “Está um templo à vossa direita. Desenhem o deus a que esse templo é dedicado.” (*There’s a temple on your right. Draw the god to whom that temple is devoted.*)
- (5) Talking in Portuguese with the teammates and a Portuguese speaker who would be expecting them on a designated location, for instance: “Perguntem à Alexandra se acha que há espaços verdes suficientes em Macau e deem a vossa opinião.” (*Ask Alexandra if she thinks that there are enough green spaces in Macau and give her your opinion.*)

The starting location was Feira do Carmo (*Carmo Fair*), a square in the middle of one of the most touristic places in Taipa, from where the students could follow different paths, mostly through pedestrian streets. The location was selected because it was surrounded by several heritage locations (both of Portuguese and Chinese origin) that could be used as waypoints on the students’ paths and be the basis for the questions that they had to answer. In total, four different paths were created for each year, creating a total of 16 variations. For each year, the four different paths included the same exact tasks, so that the level of difficulty was the same, but in a different order, by changing the directions on the script that was given to the students at the beginning of the activity. If there were more than four teams enrolled in a year, the start times would be different, so that no team could just follow the previous one.

Each team should be composed of three to five students, not only to foster cooperation, but also because some of the tasks included a dialogue that needed to be recorded in video (by a third student) for future grading. This recording was an important part of the activity, since the students’ videos (not just of the dialogues, but also of the different parts of the activity) would later be used as the basis for four short films (one for each year) to be screened at the Portuguese Language Day, a yearly celebration of the work done by the students of the Bachelor of Portuguese at the City University of Macau. This public display of the students’ language achievements should be further motivation for their continuous learning, as well as a boost to their self-esteem, especially for the winning team. Care was taken to choose at least one video from each team (and, if possible, including every participating student) so that everyone felt like they were included and that their participation was valued.

As the activity was planned, a test was designed to assess how much cultural knowledge the students gained from the activity. So, they would be asked the same series of questions about the Macanese cultural heritage before

they started the activity (pre-test) and after they finished it (post-test). Since all the answers to those questions could be found as the activity was performed, an increase in the number of correct answers in the post-tests in comparison to the pre-tests should indicate that some learning occurred. Since the scripts for the 1st year teams were simpler, as their language skills are more limited, no tests were given to those teams; only to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year teams.

The tests, like the list of tasks that the students had to complete, were designed considering the students’ linguistic skills, meaning that the 2nd year students had to answer simpler questions than the 3rd and 4th year students. The main concern was that all the questions focused on some sort of cultural knowledge of Macau and/or the Portuguese presence in the territory and that the answers to those questions could be found while performing the designated tasks.

So, for instance, the 2nd year tests had questions like “Sabe o nome de um governador de Macau? (*Can you name a Macau governor?*)”, something that the students could learn from one of the questions in the activity script: “Atravessem a Rua Correia da Silva. Quem foi Correia da Silva? (*Cross the Correia da Silva Street. Who was Correia da Silva?*)”. These students were also shown a picture of the “calçada portuguesa”, the pavement typically found on the old parts of Macau (and in most of Portugal) and asked to name it, before, during the activity, they were asked to take a photo of “calçada portuguesa”, so that in the post-test they had the answers to that question, if they didn’t know it in the pre-test.

Sometimes, the questions weren’t that difficult but tested the student’s vocabulary skills. For instance, the 3rd year students were asked to name a church in Taipa, before the activity path made them go past it. The desired answer was “Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Carmo” and many students knew the church in question, but only by its Chinese name: 嘉模教堂. Hopefully, by the end of the course, they would be able to answer the same question with the church’s Portuguese name.

Not all answers were as easy to find and for the 4th year students the level of difficulty was increased, demanding some attention on their part. For instance, in the pre-test, the students were asked to name a Portuguese explorer and later, during the activity, they had to turn left on Rua de Fernão Mendes Pinto (*Fernão Mendes Pinto Street*) and were asked in which century he lived. When researching about him, the first sentence that the students would find would probably be “Portuguese explorer who lived in the 16th century”, meaning that they had the answer for the script and, if they were attentive enough, also the answer for the post-test.

Additionally, after the activity, all the participating students (including the 1st year ones) would be given a set of open-ended questions to evaluate the activity, that should help assess what they learned with it and what

they felt needed improvement. The questions were as follows:

- (1) Did you learn anything from this activity? What?
- (2) Do you think that this activity was motivating? Why?
- (3) Do you think that this activity helped you practice Portuguese? How?
- (4) What changes would you suggest for the next similar activity?

When the designated day arrived, 103 students had enrolled in the activity, which is a very encouraging number, given that it represents more than a third of the total students enrolled in the Bachelor of Portuguese. The breakdown of this number is as follows: forty-seven 1st year students divided into 12 teams; twenty-four 2nd year students in 6 teams; seventeen 3rd year students in 5 teams and fifteen 4th year students in 4 teams.

The activity itself took place on two different days, with the 1st and 3rd year students doing it one day and the 2nd and 4th year students doing it the following week. Each team was given their designated script and the students from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th years were also given the pre-tests before they were sent on their way. After they finished the courses and returned the scripts, they were given the post-tests, that were, like the initial ones, anonymous, and filled without checking the internet.

After all the teams completed the activity, a total of 112 tests were received (56 pre-tests and 56 post-tests) and the number of correct answers in each was counted, so that the progress of the students' knowledge of the cultural elements that they visited could be assessed. The students were also asked to evaluate the task, answering the aforementioned questions via WeChat.

3.3. Task Results

As mentioned, 56 pre-tests and 56 post-tests were collected, 24 each from 2nd year students, 17 each from 3rd year students and 15 each from 4th year students, with the goal of assessing if the number of correct answers about the Portuguese culture in Macau increased between the start and the end of the activity.

Each pre-test and post-test had the same 8 questions and the total number of correct answers was taken from each test, before adding them and getting an average. For the pre-tests, the average results were at the lower 3 (out of 8) for all three years (Table 1), meaning that the students' answers were below 50%, showing a somewhat limited knowledge of the cultural elements in question, something that was to be expected, given their cultural background.

After they completed the activity, the students then answered the post-test, which featured the exact same questions as pre-test. The expectation was that the averages were higher and that's what happened, with all three years registering results on the high 5 (out of 8), an increase of over 2 points (out of 8), putting the students' explicit knowledge of the cultural elements in question now above the 50% mark (Table 2).

In summary, all three years registered an increase on their performance when trying to identify cultural elements of the Portuguese heritage in Macau (Table 3), something that seems to confirm the efficiency of this strategy of taking the students outside the classroom to experience the culture expressed by the language that they are learning.

Table 1. Average results on the pre-tests.

	Number of Students	Total Number of Correct Answers	Average Correct Answers per Student
2nd year students	24	77	3.21
3rd year students	17	59	3.47
4th year students	15	52	3.47
TOTAL	56	188	3.36

Table 2. Average results on the post-tests.

	Number of Students	Total Number of Correct Answers	Average Correct Answers per Student
2nd year students	24	137	5.71
3rd year students	17	98	5.77
4th year students	15	85	5.67
TOTAL	56	320	5.71

Table 3. Comparison between the averages on the pre-tests and post-tests.

	Average Correct Answers per Student on the Pre-Tests	Average Correct Answers per Student on the Post-Tests	Variation
2nd year students	3.21	5.71	+2.50
3rd year students	3.47	5.77	+2.30
4th year students	3.47	5.67	+2.20
TOTAL	3.36	5.71	+2.35

To validate the data from these tests, it was required to determine if the variation between the answers in the pre-tests and the post-tests were statistically significant. For that purpose, the results were analyzed through a *t* test, with an alpha value of 0.05, meaning that, if the test results were positive (i.e., if the *p* value resulting from the

test was under 0.05), then it would be predictable that in 95% of the cases, the answers of a similar sample would coincide with the ones obtained in this study. The results of those *t* tests (Table 4) showed that in all three sets of data the answers were statistically significant.

Table 4. Statistical analysis of the results.

	Average Correct Answers per Student on the Pre-Tests	Average Correct Answers per Student on the Post-Tests	<i>t</i> Test Result
2nd year students	3.21	5.71	$p < 0.001$
3rd year students	3.47	5.77	$p < 0.001$
4th year students	3.47	5.67	$p = 0.001$
TOTAL	3.36	5.71	$p < 0.001$

As mentioned on the previous section, most of the questions on these tests focused on the Portuguese culture that could be found on the streets that the students were exploring. Some questions were easier to answer in the pre-test, such as “Escreva o nome de um café na Taipa” (*Write the name of a café in Taipa*), a question in the 2nd year test, to which the correct answers barely changed between the two versions of the test, as the students already knew some cafés in Taipa. In other questions, however, like “Escreva o nome de um bispo de Macau” (*Write the name of a Macau bishop*), another 2nd year test question, there was a significant change between just three right answers on the pre-test to seven on the post-test, showing that the question that the students had to answer on the script about a Macau bishop, “À direita fica a Escola Dom João Paulino. Quem foi Dom João Paulino?” (*On the right is the Dom João Paulino School. Who was Dom João Paulino?*), was at least partially effective, since the four extra correct answers on the post-test were all “Dom João Paulino” (assuming that the three original correct ones, all referencing the current Macau bishop, remain unchanged). Learning this significant element of the Portuguese presence in Macau (the religious influence) can lead to further research by the students (What is a bishop? Is there still one in Macau?) who can then develop both their autonomy and their intercultural competence.

Even if it wasn't the main concern of this activity, the students' linguistic skills were also assessed on the dialogues that they filmed. While most students adhered to the instructions, some went beyond what was required, like a 2nd year students that had to ask a Portuguese speaker where she were from and, when she answered “Cascais”, the student went off-script to explain that she had been to Cascais and proceeded to tell what she had done there. It is also worth mentioning the 1st year student that asked a Portuguese speaker his hometown (“naturalidade” in Portuguese) and, when he received the answer “Português” (the nationality, or “nacionalidade” in Portuguese), promptly rephrased his question, emulating what he surely heard in class, by saying “Não, não.

Naturalidade” (*No, no. Hometown*). These examples show that some of the participants in this activity have enough confidence to use the Portuguese language to communicate in real life situations and seem to be highly motivated to do so outside the classroom.

As for the open-ended questions, when asked about what they learned from the activity, almost half of the students (47%) claim to have learned many new Portuguese words and phrases, some of them noting that this vocabulary was “never included in the classes”, while roughly a third of them (32%) highlighted learning about the Portuguese culture in Macau and Macau's history, with one student saying he especially enjoyed doing it “through a game”. 21% of the students preferred to highlight learning how to work as a team, since each member had a different task (“one was following directions, another was answering the questions, another one was filming”). No negative answers were registered, meaning that all participants claim to have learned something from the activity, which is an encouraging outcome. Below (Table 5) are the most common answers to this question, with the caveat that more than one answer was possible for each student, so the percentages don't add up to 100%, as will happen in the following tables.

Table 5. Did you learn anything from this activity? What?

I learned about Portuguese words and phrases	47%
I learned about Portuguese culture in Macau	32%
I learned about the history of Macau	32%
I learned about teamwork	21%
I learned about places in Macau	16%
I learned about the street names in Macau	11%
I learned about oral communication skills	11%

When asked if the activity was motivating, all the students answered affirmatively (Table 6), with the majority (58%) expressing that it helped them understand how the language can be useful in Macau, with some saying that they want to improve their oral skills so that they can

interact “with more Portuguese speakers”. 26% of the students highlighted the many different tasks involved and how they made them interact in a way “they never had to in class” (according to one student), while 21% of the students express their enjoyment for knowing a different culture, which is “very interesting”.

Table 6. Do you think that this activity was motivating? Why?

It was motivating because I understood how Portuguese can be useful	58%
It was motivating because it had many different activities	26%
It was motivating because I learned about a different culture	21%
It was motivating because I could talk with Portuguese people	16%
It was motivating because I solved problems with my friends	11%
It was motivating because it was fun	11%

One of the main goals of this activity was to give the students an opportunity to practice Portuguese and, when asked about that, all students claimed to have had that opportunity (Table 7), with more than half (53%) underlining the chance to have real conversations (“for the first time” according to more than one student) that helped them develop their oral skills. 21% said that they practiced because they had to use the language to understand and perform tasks, with a student claiming that succeeding in finding the right places was “incredibly rewarding”, while 16% highlighted the fact that they used Portuguese to communicate as a team, with a similar percentage noting that they developed their reading skills by navigating using the street signs in Portuguese.

Table 7. Do you think that this activity helped you practice Portuguese? How?

It helped me practice by having actual conversations	53%
It helped me practice by using the language to understand and perform tasks	26%
It helped me practice by talking in Portuguese with my teammates	21%
It helped me practice by reading Portuguese on the streets	16%

Finally, the students were asked if they had any suggestions on how to improve the activity (Table 8), with a third saying that they had no changes to propose, while 29% requested more speaking activities with different partners (“maybe shopkeepers”) and 18% asked for a similar activity to take place in a different venue “to learn more about the Chinese, Macanese and Portuguese cultures”. This focus on the speaking activities is consistent with the

students’ view that the activity was effective in helping them practice Portuguese through actual conversations.

Table 8. What changes would you suggest for the next similar activity?

No changes	33%
More speaking activities and partners	29%
Similar activity on a different place	18%
Similar activity at an earlier time	6%
Harder tasks	6%

4. Discussion of the Results

The results of the tests point to an increased knowledge of the Portuguese culture present in the streets of Macau by the participating students between the beginning and the end of this activity, data that is statistically confirmed by a *t* test. This is in line with Liaw, Botelho, & Lau (2023), who reported in a study with pre-teen foreign language students that a trip to a local museum help them engage and better understand the culture expressed by the language that they were learning. This is especially important when it comes to Chinese students of the Portuguese language, who have a very limited access to the target culture (Manuel Duarte & Lin, 2021), something that highlights the importance of this kind of activity in improving the students’ intercultural skills.

As for the open-ended questions, the participants’ answers show an awareness of having learned from the activity, underlining their enhanced vocabulary after performing the required tasks, in a way that they never did in class. These findings confirm studies by Öztürk (2020), Liaw, Botelho, & Lau (2023) and Vieira (2022), who demonstrated that learning outside the classroom has beneficial effects on the students’ speaking skills. The students also pointed to learning through teamwork, which is in line with Liaw, Botelho, & Lau (2023), who claim that shared experiences can help make the students into more active learners, and Suryatama & Damayanti (2023), who highlight the peer learning aspect of gamified activities.

The students also considered the activity motivating, something that was previously demonstrated by Bølling, Otte, Elsborg, Nielsen, & Bentsen (2018) and Dettweiler, Lauterbach, Becker, & Simon (2017), in studies with primary school students, who reported higher intrinsic motivation and autonomy after taking part in outdoor activities, even if for short periods of time. Bølling, Otte, Elsborg, Nielsen, & Bentsen (2018) add that this motivation can, with time, increase with students that are already engaged in their learning and decrease with students with a lower intrinsic motivation, possibly due to the less clear definition of the learning environment. There is not enough data in this study to prove or disprove this information, but it’s certainly an idea for further research.

The main reason quoted for why the students considered this activity motivating was that it showed how the

language that they are learning can be useful, which is something mentioned by Öztürk (2020), in his research with undergraduates studying to be English teachers, who are not aware of the resources that allow them to learn autonomously outside the classroom, not unlike the students of the Bachelor of Portuguese at the City University of Macau. The students also highlight the fun aspect of the gamified activity, an effect also noted in Suryatama & Damayanti (2023), who underline the competition and collaboration fostered by the gamification of learning and its contribution to achieving the learning outcomes (if properly aligned with these). Other studies, by Orak (2025), Bezerra, et al. (2024), Huang & Hew (2021) and Buckley, Doyle, & Doyle (2017) support the idea that gamified activities can enhance student motivation, autonomy and learning, with the latter adding that male students have better results (something countered by the Orak study). Since this study didn't focus on gender, there are no data to support this difference, although the results showed 80% female winners in the activity (with the caveat that the course has around that percentage of female students anyway).

The students considered that the activity helped them practice Portuguese, something that was also concluded by Bezerra, et al. (2024), who shows that gamified activities increase motivation by simulating real language use, which is something that the students don't have enough chances to do in class. Outside the class, Öztürk (2020) and Sargsyan & Kurghinyan (2016) point to the internet and social media in particular as the main source of foreign language input, which is a problem in the Portuguese language case, since most online content in Portuguese is from Brazil, where a different version of the language is spoken. Not to say that Brazilian Portuguese is in any way a lesser version of the language (it is not), but our students are learning the version spoken in Portugal and the lexical and syntactic differences can, especially in the beginner levels, hinder their performance on the target version of the language.

In summary, the results of this study support the idea that an activity outside the classroom can help the students learn about the culture surrounding them, as they simultaneously hone their language skills, by using the target language to understand and complete the proposed tasks and communicate with their classmates in order to solve problems through teamwork. This activity was overwhelmingly considered motivating by the students, who got a chance to practice the language that they are learning in an authentic context, boosting their autonomy, and the gamified aspect of the activity contributed to make it enjoyable as well.

5. Limitations of the Research

Although the validation from the *t* test seems to back up the idea that this activity was effective in helping the

students learn about the Portuguese culture in Macau, it is important to note that these results are based on a limited sample size of just 56 students and there was no control group, since no students were given the test without taking part in the activity. Also, even if the tests are considered statistically relevant, it should be taken into account that they focused on some very specific items, all related to the venue, and it's not a guarantee that the knowledge gained by the participants will be retained on the long term.

Additionally, in the evaluation part of the activity, the students were given open-ended questions, meaning that the answers were not always appropriate. Even though the questions were asked in both Portuguese and English, some students didn't understand exactly what was asked, so a Chinese version of the question in a future study should be considered.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that Macau is a highly specific location, with a unique culture that includes Portuguese elements, making it ideal for an activity based on the Portuguese heritage. Replicating this study in places where immersive learning isn't possible (even if a very limited immersion, like in Macau), this sort of activity would require a different approach.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

First and foremost, it would be interesting to see if a subsequent activity in similar fashion would yield similar results. Would the cultural knowledge still increase, when the initial knowledge is already higher? Furthermore, the discussion of the results raised some other questions, namely, if the motivation does indeed decrease with repetition in less intrinsically motivated students or if gender plays a role in engagement.

In any case, it is the author's intention to repeat the activity in the next school year, following some of the students' recommendations, like adding some more speaking tasks and partners, using a different venue and making the activities more challenging. It could also prove insightful to present the same test to the students to make sure that their newfound knowledge was retained.

7. Final Remarks

The data from the tests and the students' answers point to a positive influence on the students' learning process when some field work, combined with playful competition, is added to their class work. It increases their motivation and autonomy and helps them develop some personal skills as well. But another result we can take from this activity is unquantifiable: the enthusiasm and fun that the students felt and their sense of fulfillment as they completed all the tasks. Some of these students graduated this year and when asked about their fondest memories during the course, they rarely mention the classes; they remember these moments, when they just had fun

with their friends while using Portuguese. And seeing themselves on the film resulting from the activity was something that they clearly enjoyed.

It's unquestionable that our main task as teachers is to help the students learn, but sometimes we seem to be too focused on how to pass on the relevant contents in the classroom, forgetting that the students have the ability to learn or consolidate their learning by themselves, with nothing but some guidance on our part. The activity described here is just an example of how we can try to make the students understand that what they are learning is useful. If they have to use what they learn (in the classroom or otherwise), those contents will be more than just theoretical; they will be part of their lives. And especially when you're learning a language in a place where you have very few opportunities to practice it, any chance to use it is valuable, even if it means doing it on their own time.

This activity focused on the Portuguese heritage found in Macau, but there is no reason why it can't be adjusted to other subjects. There are many resources throughout this city (and others) to help the students learn about many cultural topics and getting them engaged in what they are learning should help keep them motivated to keep doing it. Such activities do increase our workload as teachers, but the final result can be worth it.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, because all the participants in this extracurricular, activity with voluntary participation were fully informed before, during and after the data collection of its purposes and no personal data was collected.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The pre-test and post-tests, are available in digital form upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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