

Exploring Culture as a Step in the Development of Intercultural Skills

Explorando nuestra cultura como un paso para el desarrollo de habilidades interculturales

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to analyze the reflections of a group of ninth graders from a Colombian high school about their culture during the development of an intercultural-based classroom project. **Method:** This qualitative action research study was grounded in an intercultural approach for language teaching. The study used a questionnaire and the written production of students to collect data which were analyzed using thematic and frequency analyses. **Results:** The findings suggested that the inclusion of cultural topics motivated the students and enhanced their awareness of the value of their culture and the impact of racism and discrimination within their sociocultural context. Similarly, a few elements of culturally relevant pedagogies, such as factual knowledge about culture, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, emerged from the voices of the students.

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Discussion and conclusions: Addressing the local manifestations of culture in English as a Foreign Language classrooms open the path for discussions on social issues and recognize the relevance of one's cultural landscape. Nevertheless, the systematic integration of culture in language teaching at the national level is a task that remains to be achieved.

Keywords: culture, foreign languages, interculturality, intercultural citizenship, intercultural language teaching, intercultural speakers.

Resumen

Objetivo: Este estudio tuvo por objetivo analizar las reflexiones de un grupo de estudiantes de grado noveno de un colegio colombiano acerca de su cultura durante el desarrollo de un proyecto de clase basado en la visión intercultural. **Método:** Este estudio cualitativo de investigación acción adoptó la visión intercultural de la enseñanza de lenguas. Un cuestionario y las producciones escritas de los estudiantes fueron usados para recolectar los datos que fueron analizados mediante análisis temático y de frecuencias. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos sugieren que la inclusión de temas culturales motivaron a los estudiantes y les permitieron ser conscientes del valor de su propia cultura y del impacto del racismo y la discriminación en su propio contexto sociocultural. Asimismo, elementos de pedagogía culturalmente relevante como conocimiento factual cultural, competencia cultural y conciencia crítica emergieron en las voces de los estudiantes. **Discusión y conclusiones:** El abordaje de las manifestaciones locales de la cultura en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera abre el camino para discutir los problemas sociales y reconocer la importancia de nuestro panorama cultural, no obstante la integración sistemática de la cultura en la enseñanza de lenguas a nivel nacional es aún una tarea pendiente.

Palabras clave: cultura, ciudadanía intercultural, enseñanza intercultural de lenguas, hablantes interculturales, interculturalidad, lenguas extranjeras.

Introduction

In the previous decades, the communicative approach has played a key role in foreign language classrooms. In fact, this view has also been at the core of recent Colombian linguistic policies such as the Guidelines for Language Teaching (MEN, 1998), the Basic Competence Standards for Language Teaching (2006) and the National Bilingualism Plan (2004), etc. However, the communicative perspective has fallen short in certain relevant aspects of the nuanced dimensions of language learning (Bennett, 2003; Ho, 2009, Fantini, 1995). An exclusive focus on the communicative dimension has overlooked the close relationship between language and culture (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), excluded elements of deep culture in language teaching (Byram, 1997; Fernández, 2019), increased the possibility of generating stereotypes, and disregarded strategies for avoiding intercultural miscommunication (Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Fantini, 2020).

Furthermore, the globalized tendencies of the postmodern era with highly volatile and emergent spaces have promoted the consolidation of cross-national and intercultural communication (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Fernández, 2017; Álvarez Valencia, 2016). In this

manner, a language teaching view solely centered on the communicative dimension faces difficulty in coping with the needs of the current international communicative milieu, because it neglects a few of the key elements of intercultural communication.

Novel interactive patterns across the globe have brought the need to include a view of language teaching that manages the intricate nuances of intercultural communication (Byram, 1997; Ware & Kramsch, 2005; Fernández, 2017, 2019). Hence, a view of language teaching that integrates the intercultural nature of communication has begun to receive attention from scholars in Colombia (Álvarez Valencia & Bonilla, 2009; Rico, 2012; Álvarez Valencia, 2014; Meadows, 2016). In fact, integrating the intercultural view of language learning in the Colombian landscape is one of the key pedagogical needs of the country. Recently, this tendency is reflected in a few of the previous pedagogical initiatives from the Ministry of National Education. *The Basic Learning Rights (2016)* and the *Suggested Curriculum (2016)* have included certain elements related to culture and intercultural topics. Nevertheless, the vision of culture and intercultural communication continues to require wide-scale methodological inclusion and research.

Therefore, Colombian teachers face a number of challenges in integrating an intercultural view of language learning. One of such demands is the active incorporation and analysis of their culture as a departure point for addressing the intercultural dimension (ID) in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. Hence, this study analyzes the reflections of students about their culture through a classroom project that focuses on the culture and reflections of the students about cultural learning and the development of intercultural skills. The study poses the following research questions:

- What were the attitudes and feelings of the students toward the presence of their culture in English classes?
- What did the students learn about their culture and how did this learning connect with the development of intercultural skills?

Literature Review

Current studies have analyzed the importance of integrating culture in language teaching and learning (Carreño, 2018; Gómez, 2015; García et al., 2017). Authors, such as Mojica (2007), del Campo and Bonilla (2007), Castañeda (2012), Ramos et al. (2012), Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar (2020), and Quintana-Arias and Bello-Serna (2020), among others, have prioritized the exploration of the ID at the school level. A few of their contributions are described as follows.

Mojica (2007) explored the perceptions of students about culture using a pedagogic unit that focuses on movies in an afterschool program. This case study, which was implemented at a private school in Bogotá-Colombia, revealed that the cultural knowledge of students stems from contact with diverse cultural expressions, such as information, practices, and artifacts which comprise major sources of cultural interpretation that lead to one's understanding and interpretation of the world.

Ramos et al. (2012) analyzed the integration of the rural context of students in an English class for the eleventh grade at a public school. The findings suggested that including topics related to the culture, region, and context of students may increase their interest in language learning compared with using decontextualized materials. Moreover, considering the previous knowledge of students enables them to feel valued, respected, and comfortable, which could enhance their sense of belonging and cultural identity. These behaviors can potentially open the eagerness of students to learn about other cultures.

Quintana-Arias and Bello-Serna (2020) examined the inclusion of Tikuna myths in an English class to solve an intercultural-bilingual conflict through the discovery of one's culture. This participatory/descriptive case study was applied on final-year students at a public school. The results revealed that integrating one's culture promotes the development of social and critical awareness through the discussion of topics related to the sociocultural reality of students. Moreover, the role of cultural identity was highlighted as a major contributor to the understanding of culture as an overarching phenomenon that determines the social relationships of individuals with their environment and themselves.

In the same vein, research led in the area of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) has been pivotal in positioning local knowledge as a major area in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Paris & Ball 2009). Work with different populations, such as American-Afro descendants (Lee, 1995; Ball, 1995; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Williams, 2006), Native Americans (McCarty & Zepeda, 1995; White-Kaulaity, 2007), Latino students (Moje, et al., 2004; Dworn, 2006) and Asians in the United States (Vyas, 2004), have demonstrated the potential of CRP as a source of inquiry and social transformation that aims to explore alternatives for opening spaces for ethnically/culturally diverse learners.

Particularly relevant to this experience, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2002) explored the enhancement effect of using local literacy practices, such as hip-hop, on academic skills. By including hip-hop lyrics into the syllabus of a high school literature course, the authors explored the connections between hip-hop and canonical poetry by comparing examples from both genres and the historical conditions of their origins. The study offers a view on the affordances of local knowledge in the development of academic and critical skills.

Williams (2006) reports a case study of a high school teacher of African American language arts who actively included the linguistic resources of African American Vernacular English along with Dominant American English in lessons. This author discusses the manner in which local/ethnic linguistic heritage (beyond mere coexistence in the classroom) holds the potential to become a powerful facilitator of learning. Similarly, the study capitalizes the role of the identities of teachers in comprehension and agency in their pedagogical practices as the paramount objective of critical educators.

Although these previous studies stressed the importance of the ID in language learning, the authors suggested that the discovery of alternative methodologies for introducing the ID into EFL classes remains a young area in language teaching practices. Moreover, the inclusion of the local context is a zone that requires further research (Paris & Ball, 2009). Therefore, this experience focuses on the exploration of alternatives for integrating one's culture and for developing intercultural skills in language classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Intercultural Language Teaching

This study adopted the intercultural view of language teaching. From this perspective, language learning implies the development of skills that promote intercultural understanding and interaction beyond traditional communicative competencies (Fantini, 1995; Byram et al., 2002; Ho, 2009; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Fantini, 2020). This approach also considers that language and culture are interdependent entities that cooperate in everyday communication (Ho, 2009; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat, 2008). Furthermore, culture and language depict a social nature and origin, which leads to their close relationship as both evolve, shape, and transform each other. Consequently, language and culture emerge at the same time through social interaction in a symbiotic relationship that supports mutual development and acquisition (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). This relationship is also evident in the manner that culture manifests itself in all linguistic levels (Liddicoat et al., 2003, Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Similarly, the language-culture relationship is tangible in the meaning-making process of individuals in relation to cultural symbols, documents, and events. This large-scale relationship with elements beyond the linguistic realm connects with social semiotics, which explores the creation, design, reproduction, and construction of social meaning (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Álvarez Valencia, 2016).

Understanding Culture

This view defines culture as "an open dynamic repertoire of semiotic resources (material and non-material), produced in social interaction" (Álvarez Valencia & Fernández, 2019, p. 3). Semiotic resources are understood as "the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes" (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 16). In this sense, culture is a multilayered and dynamic entity that encompasses diverse cultural manifestations such as products, practices, and perspectives (Morán, 2001; Nieto, 2002). This conceptualization of culture is also the referential framework for social interpretation and interaction, which provide individuals the necessary resources to make meaning of their own reality (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Therefore, the inclusion of culture as a key component of language learning cannot be overlooked, such that alternatives for its integration must be addressed.

Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

One of the alternatives for materializing culture in EFL classrooms is the adoption of guiding models. Following this idea, Byram (1997) proposes a model that adopts certain basic elements from the communicative competence model of Hymes (1971) and the work of Van Ek (1986). Conversely, Byram (1997) presents a model called intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which includes four types of competence, namely, linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and intercultural. Specifically, the author defines intercultural competence (IC) as the capacity to establish successful interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in situations that imply intercultural interaction (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). This ability is achieved through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes which afford behaviors that facilitate cross-cultural relationships (Deardorff, 2006). Byram's (1997) The ICC model has five components as follows:

- Attitudes of curiosity, openness, and eagerness to discover the self and the culture of others.
- Knowledge about the symbols, products, and practices of one's and others' culture.
- Interpreting-relating skills, which enable learners to understand and link cultural documents and events from different cultures to their own.
- Skills of discovery and interaction in which learners use previous ICC components in real-time communication to acquire and understand new cultural knowledge.
- Critical cultural awareness guides learners in critically analyzing cultural manifestations using solid criteria and in taking a personal stance toward them.

ICC promotes the development of intercultural speakers, that is, learners with the skills to decenter from their perspectives and retains their cultural heritage in cross-cultural interactions (Byram, 1997; House, 2007). The ICC model also encourages intercultural citizenship, which is understood as the identification of learners with their social groups, practices, and views, and enables them to become civil and responsible individuals (Castiglioni & Bennett, 2018). Intercultural citizenship implies empathy, understanding of spaces of cultural interaction/connection, and ethicality. This concept is also related to global citizenship, that is, the skill of learners to understand interconnectivity and interdependency at different levels (political-economical-sociocultural) and contexts (local-global). In turn, this concept leads learners to take responsibility for their actions and engage in social action; thus, understanding their role as citizens of an interconnected world (UNESCO, 2015).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Rooted in the advances in the fields of sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972; Heath, 1983) and anthropology (Au & Jordan, 1981; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), CRP emerges as a response to the limitations of both areas in coping with the nuanced realities of culturally diverse classrooms (Ladson-Billings 1995b). The current study adopts assumptions from the proposal of CRP by Ladson-Billings (1995a). The author posits that given the inadequacy of traditional methods for addressing the needs of students in classrooms determined by socially/politically dominant groups, alternative approaches are required to empower linguistically/culturally diverse learners. Ladson-Billings (1995a, b) defines CRP as a pedagogy of opposition for collective empowerment with the following major objectives:

- To achieve academic success;
- To provide opportunities to develop cultural skills;
- To promote critical views toward the taken-for-granted *status quo*

Considering these objectives and the context of this research (a rural area with a large population of Afro descendants), the tenets of the CRP coincide with the nature of the experience described in this study.

Methodology

Design

This paper reports a research in a specialization program¹ that focuses on the exploration of one's culture and the improvement of speaking skills. This paper presents only the findings related to the ID for brevity. This is a qualitative action research study. According to Burns (2009), action research is a reflective educational practice, that is, systematic and critical, in which teachers identify educational issues to solve them and improve the teaching practice and the learning experience of students. Particularly, action research emerges from the concerns of teachers about their students, practices, and context. Based on these dimensions, teachers decide to implement pedagogical actions that might may to a systematic transformation of educational practices and policies (Elliot, 1991; Gebhard, 2005). This investigation belongs to the realm of action research, because it seeks to address the needs of students regarding intercultural education in EFL classrooms and the understanding of their sociocultural background. This research followed the four steps used by Burns (2009) for action research, namely, planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a public school in Ortigal Miranda (Cauca-Colombia). The school is located in a rural zone close to the Colombian Pacific region and far from urban centers. The Afro descendant population is large, and the school administration pays more attention to technical areas such as accounting and management. English is viewed as a subsidiary area in the school curriculum due to this focus and the location of the school, that is, a foreign language does not play a major role in everyday activities thus far. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of the cultural and ethnical roots of students has not been deeply explored except for certain celebrations about the Afro Colombian heritage, which overlooks other important elements of the cultural identity of students.

Therefore, the lack of space, resources, and interest in language learning and the shallow recognition of the cultural identity of students motivated this research. Hence, the expected impact was the promotion of an in-depth vision of culture in which students could identify their culture, be aware of social issues in the local context, and acknowledge their role as transformative agents. Similarly, the study was expected to strengthen the communicative skills of participants in English through the development of speaking-focused tasks. However, the study did not discuss this second objective.

The participants were 26 ninth graders (12-14 years old) from low to middle socioeconomic classes living in nearby towns and rural areas. The researchers informed the parents of the students about the procedures, objectives, and methodology of the study. They then signed a consent form to allow their children to participate. All procedures followed the ethical principles of explicit consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. No negative effects were generated to the students, and they did not receive any compensation for their participation.

¹ This study comes from the specialization thesis: Afro-English Classroom Project, an Alternative to Improve the Speaking Skill of Ninth Graders from a Public School presented at Universidad Santiago de Cali.

Data Collection

The study used the written productions of the students and a questionnaire to collect data. These sources helped in determining the reflections of the participants about their culture, sociocultural background, and thoughts after the pedagogical proposal. As the experience reported emerged from the implementation of a class project focused on the ID, the lessons that comprise this project included the development of class workshops and activities that targeted the development of intercultural skills. For brevity, we discuss only data from the final opinions of the study through a written report and the questionnaire to determine the ultimate impact of the project on their ideas about culture.

The written productions of the students were derived from a workshop developed at the end of the project, which intended to address three areas, namely, culture, speaking skills, and classroom experiences. As this study focuses on the ID, it provided no discussion on speaking skills. Alternatively, each section of the questionnaire posed five questions. The first focused on questions about the culture of the participants. The second was about the opinions and experiences of students regarding the development of activities focused on the development of speaking and their opinion about the English language. The third explored the reflections of the participants about the project and teaching methodology. They were requested to answer open-ended questions about the abovementioned areas. The final workshop aimed to identify the final thoughts and perceptions of the students toward their culture and overall experience in the project.

The study used open-ended questions in the questionnaire to identify the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of the participants about the cultural issues discussed in class. [Cohen et al. \(2007\)](#) proposed that the survey is a tool to “gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationship that exists between specific events” (p. 205).

The questionnaire was divided in two sections, namely, speaking skills and culture. This article only discusses the results of the ID. The instrument comprised nine open-ended and nine closed-ended questions. Each section included questions about the frequencies (in the scale of always to never) of certain activities and perceptions, multiple-choice questions about the preferences, actions, or conceptions of students, checklists, allocation of values to certain elements, and yes/no-why questions. The questionnaire was applied once at the end of the project, and the students completed it in class.

Data Analysis

The study conducted two types of analysis, namely, qualitative content analysis for the written productions of the students and frequency analysis for the responses to the questionnaire, given that qualitative and quantitative data were gathered.

Qualitative content analysis. [Hsieh and Shannon \(2005\)](#) define content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). This method explores the communicative features of language as a producer of contextualized textual meaning ([McTavish & Pirro, 1990](#); [Tesch, 1990](#)). Hence, content

analysis provides an in-depth interpretation of textual information in terms of categories that encompass related subcategories (Weber, 1990). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) report three types of content analysis, namely, conventional, directed, and summative. The present study used directed content analysis, which implies the active use of theory in the identification and construction of categories. Thus, we conducted analysis with pre-established categories based on the theory that guided the study and aimed to identify support or challenges to the selected theoretical model (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This procedure uses four processes as follows:

- Extensive data reading;
- Identification of key variables and concepts based on the theory;
- Emergence of operational definitions;
- Code derivation and scheme.

The study selected directed content analysis due to the nature of the data, the objective of the study, and the theoretical approach, in this case, ICC model of Byram (1997). We organized data by classifying information in terms of instruments then applied a triangulation process of comparison to verify the initial categories and identify their intercategory relationships. Data were derived from the responses of the students, which were translated from Spanish to fit the journal guidelines. The identities of the students were hidden and replaced by a number. Similarly, their responses appear followed by a letter representing the instrument and the number assigned to a question (e.g., S1.WA.Q4 (Student 1.Written Answer.Question 4)).

Frequency analysis. After collecting the responses in paper, they were tabulated in a spreadsheet to obtain the figures of each close-ended question. The study analyzed the average, mean, and mode; however, we focus on averages and modes. The results were then presented in terms of percentages and grouped according to the subphenomenon addressed. Comparing data per subphenomena enabled the achievement of a better view of the general patterns that emerged from the tables and figures, which unveiled the identification of relationships among answers. After identifying these relationships, the study conducted a triangulation using qualitative data (derived from the open-ended questions and the written responses of the students).

Data on the experience of the students in the research were organized and examined in terms of (a) their attitudes about the project and (b) cultural learning and its connection with the development of intercultural skills. Hence, these two key areas defined the findings.

Results and Discussion

The study explored two key categories to report on the experience of the students in this pedagogic experience, namely, their feelings and attitudes about the presence of their culture in class and their reflections about cultural learning in the project.

Attitudes of Students Toward the Presence of Their Culture in The English Class

In the survey, the majority of the students (83.4%) reported feeling comfortable (always/very frequently) about the inclusion of their culture (Afro culture [AC]) in class discussions (Figure 1). Similarly, 95.8% mentioned that they enjoyed the presence of AC in class activities (Figure 2).

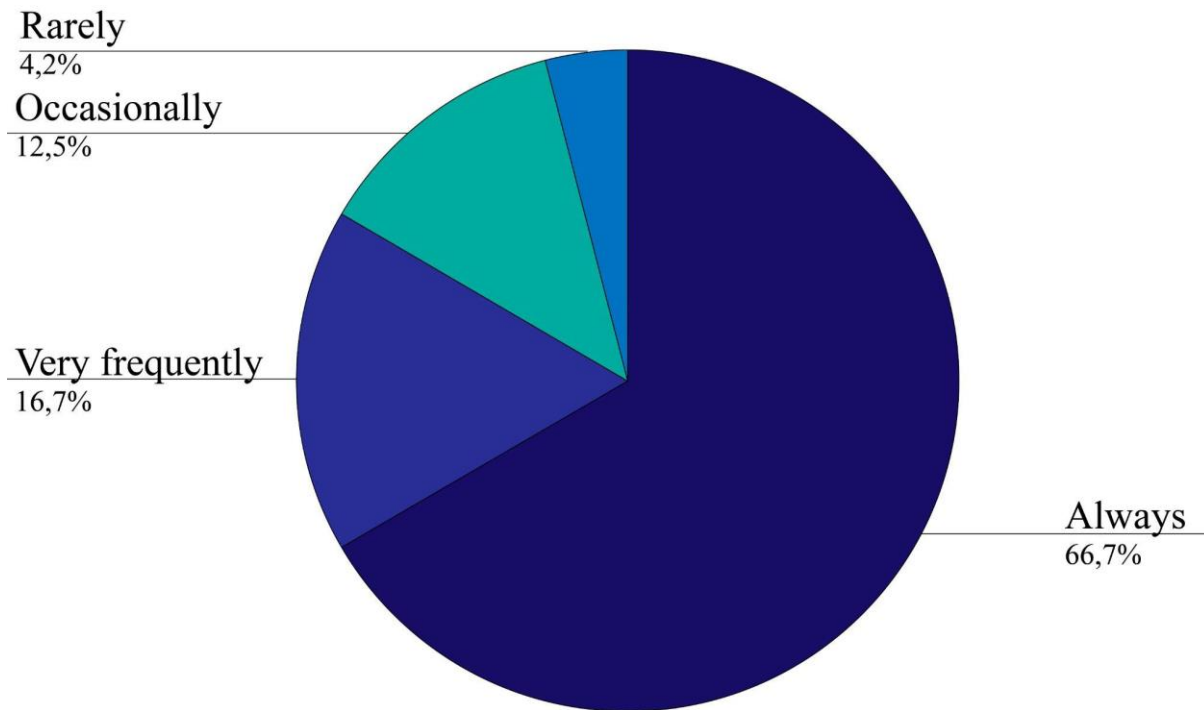


Figure 1.
Degree of comfort of students when talking about Afro Culture
Question 2: Do you feel comfortable talking about Afro culture in class?
Source: Authors

In the same vein, one student reported on her perception about the inclusion of AC in class:

I think it's very good [including the own culture in the English class] because with it we are learning too much information and different details about our Afro culture and we are also practicing both grammar and the part of oral expression in English. (S1.WA.Q11)

These findings demonstrate the acceptance of the students of their culture and eagerness to discover new elements of their cultural heritage and context (Figures 1 and 2). Student 1 points out that the inclusion of AC is very favorable and that her communicative skills improved through practice and the acquisition of factual information about her culture.

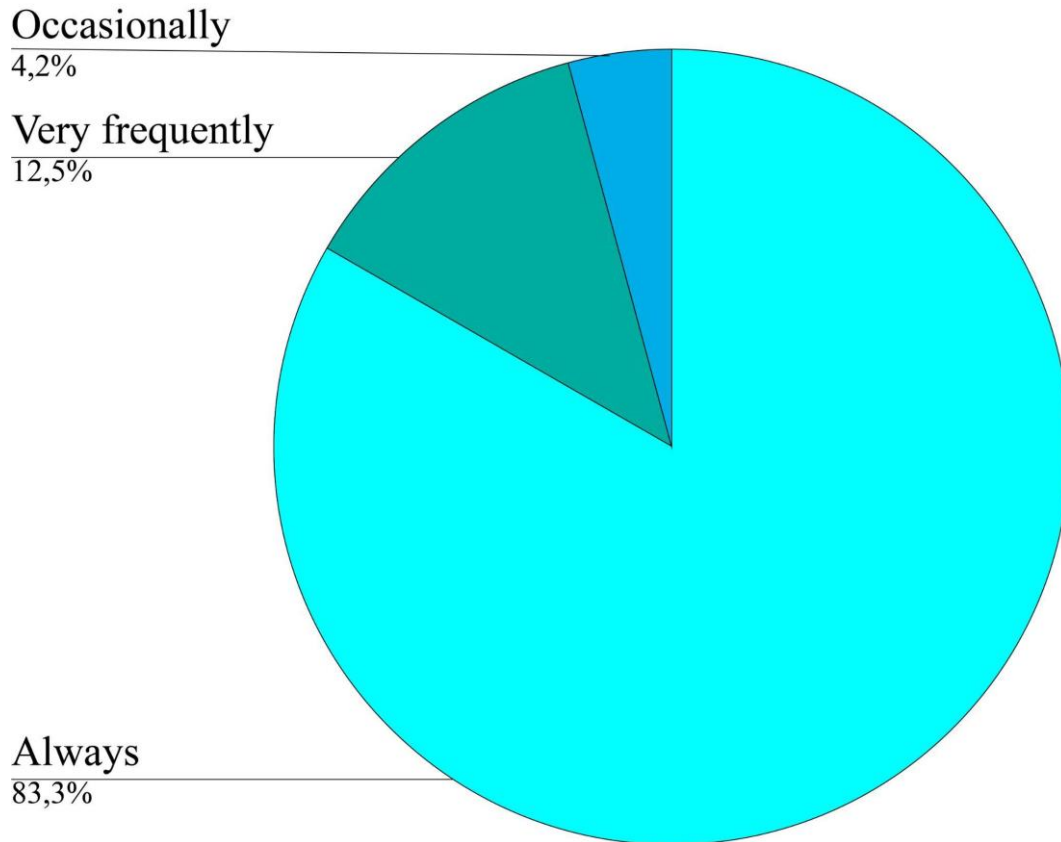


Figure 2. Feelings of students when including activities related to AC
Question 4: Do you enjoy the English class, when the teacher conducts activities about Afro culture?
Source: Authors

Feeling eagerness to explore cultures and receptiveness toward one's and others' culture and discovering new perspectives are some of the factors that imply the development of ICC (Liddicoat, 2008; Kramsch, 1998; Byram et. al., 2002). Particularly, Byram (1997) mentioned that the development of openness, tolerance, and respect is a major component of the ICC model. In fact, positive attitudes toward one's and others' cultures and the cultural dimension is the starting point in understanding the ID of communication and the intricate nuances of intercultural exchange. Other models of intercultural competence stress the relevance of the attitudinal dimension in the promotion of better communicative practices at the intercultural level (Howard Hamilton et al., 1998; Hunter et al., 2006; Deardorff, 2006). Therefore, possessing positive attitudes toward one's and others' cultures promotes the development of other intercultural skills which open doors for exploring and achieving successful intercultural communication (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2020). These findings echo the proposal of Ladson-Billings (1995a) of CRP in which using the local knowledge of learners is an asset that promotes their engagement and boosts schooling practices as meaningful spaces and in which non-school knowledge becomes relevant and transforms the school into a more meaningful space.

Interestingly, Student 1 mentions that she learned facts and details about her culture while developing communicative skills in English (grammar/speaking). As such, the student addresses the multidimensional nature of IC. However, only attitudes are insufficient for achieving successful intercultural interactions; thus, other skills at the cognitive and communicative levels are required, because IC implies the development of a set of skills at various, (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). The subsequent section provides an in-depth presentation of the reflections of the students on learning about factual information and other cultural elements.

Cultural Learning of Students

Data demonstrated that the students learned about factual information, that is, the meaning of cultural symbols and human values. The axes are discussed here.

Factual Information

Student 1 provides an idea about the potential of intercultural language teaching in exploring the diverse nature of IC. Furthermore, Byram (1997) stresses how the development of communicative skills along with the acquisition of factual information are major processes involved in the development of ICC. A few students commented on their learning in the project.

Well, here in the class I learned data like that Africa is the second largest continent on the planet, also that it has 54 countries, and it is surrounded by savannahs where all kinds of species like giraffes, elephants. I have learned that there is also the desert of the Sahara, the river Nile. Also about the dances that come from Africa. I have also learned about the ways of dressing, they have many features that are different from those we have now because suddenly over time they have been put aside, but the colorful way of dressing is still present. (S10.WA.Q11)

In this excerpt, Student 10 mentions the information that he learned. First, we examine the relevance of factual information in the development of ICC. Acquiring ICs is a process that entails the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions (Fantini, 2020). Byram (1997) presented these *learning layers* in his ICC model. Apart from attitudes, the ICC model relies on knowledge about facts and processes regarding one's and other's cultures. This component focuses on the acquisition and understanding of information regarding cultural procedures, perspectives, and products (Morán, 2001). Hence, cultural knowledge is necessary, because it prepares learners to engage in intercultural interactions with the security of being able to understand cultural practices, protocols, and references that emerge from real-time interactions (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Fernández, 2017). Knowledge about one's and others' cultures also opens a window for comprehending one's context and readiness to explore other IDs related to the interpretation, relation, and discovery of diverse cultural phenomena (Byram, 1997; Wagner & Byram, 2017). Furthermore, the acquisition of factual knowledge is part of aspects proposed by the general curriculum; in this sense, one of the axes of CRP is achieved, namely, obtaining academic skills. One of the requirements for developing academic skills implies the management and organization of factual information, which is a process that is transversal for other higher-order thinking skills. Therefore, the interpretation given by the participants to such

information renders them closer to these basic academic skills, which may impact future school success.

The data also demonstrated how the learners acquired factual information in class and reflected about the connection between this information and their everyday life. The relationship between cultural knowledge and the daily life of students, as another pivotal element in CRP (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Paris & Ball, 2009), was evident in the comprehension of cultural symbols.

Cultural Symbols

The response of Student 10 is not only about factual knowledge. One of the particularities is his identification with the AC and the connection that he finds with Africa. Beyond being a cognitive process related to memory, the student manifests his cultural connection with Africa, an aspect discussed by studies that explore the role of the African diaspora in the identity formation of Afro-Latin people (Kabir, 2014; Wade, 2006). In this sense, apart from listing a set of facts about Africa's geography, political distribution, fauna, and practices, the student was able to identify a cultural connection between his culture and the African heritage that has shaped his sociocultural background. This perspective is evident in his last lines regarding the endurance of color in today's fashion, which materializes the tangible and symbolic connection between Africa and the cultural context of the student.

This connection is also manifested in the responses of the students about their identification and pride with/of the AC:

Yes, I am obviously very proud of my Afro culture because it is obvious that I come from it, I come from a mixture. It is a way in which I can identify with my culture, with my physical, spiritual and personal traits. (S10.WA.Q2).

In spite of everything, yes [she feels proud of her AC] because I like my culture a lot or so many types of hairstyles or customs [...] the traditions of our community and the vocabulary. (S6.WA.Q2)

Both students expressed a feeling of identification with AC. Student 10 emphasizes on *mestizaje* as a key identity factor. The mention of a *mixed* origin establishes a bridge with his previous commentary about Africa, because he shows continuity between his local culture and its link with the African heritage as a source of cultural knowledge. Moreover, he discusses how his cultural identity crisscrosses with other dimensions: body, spirit and personality. Hence, Student 10 identifies the diverse layers of culture and its manifestations at various levels, which is a feature mentioned by Morán (2001), who described culture as a set of products, perspectives, and practices.

In this case, these levels of culture are related to the identity of the student in terms of tangible (body) and intangible (spirit/subjectivity) elements. This understanding is linked to the idea of semiotic resources as major components of culture as a dynamic entity (Álvarez Valencia & Fernández, 2019). The conception of body, spirit, and personality can be taken as semiotic resources, because they are representations used by the student to make meaning of his reality. In addition, they are manifestations of his cultural identification. Therefore, the conception of the student about culture exceeds a mere set

of knowledge. In other words, the student understood the connections with his cultural heritage through mestizaje and the role of culture in the definition of individual/cultural identities.

Additionally, Student 6 begins by potentially suggesting the issues faced by Afro descendants. When she says: “In spite of everything, yes,” we can assume that despite the several struggles undertaken by Afro descendants (Duany, 2005; Bula, 2016; Góngora-Mera, 2019; Zuluaga et. al, 2021), she continues to feel attached to AC due the cultural identification that she experiences with certain manifestations such as hairstyles, customs, traditions, and vocabulary. These elements can be considered cultural symbols and semiotic resources due to the semantic charge behind them. The meanings of such cultural elements play a key role as mechanisms in cultural creation and transformation. Social semiotics explains this process as meaning-making procedures that afford the interpretation of reality through social interaction (Kress, 2010; Álvarez Valencia, 2016). Consequently, Student 6 is able to interpret a number of social practices (hairstyles, customs, traditions, and vocabulary) in terms of cultural symbols that shape the conception of AC. These elements also appear in other commentaries:

During the activities I have learned about the Afro culture their hairstyles, their gastronomy, their representative costumes, their music, their dances, the conditions they go through even today, such as discrimination, [and] their history. I have known the place where they live [and] the animals that live there. (S3.WA.Q11)

Particularly, other authors have reported the cultural symbolism of hairstyles, dances, and music (Johnson & Bankhead 2014; Mbilishaka et. al., 2020; Escobar, 2008; Fryer, 2000; Chasteen, 2004; Kusser, 2012) as a representation of the ethnic and racial struggles of Afro descendants to achieve equality in an Eurocentric world. In this sense, Student 3 mentioned the acquisition of cultural knowledge (one of the components of ICC) and reflected about these symbols and the presence of discrimination. Apart from listing cultural items, the student connected these cultural manifestations as relevant elements for the representation of AC, which opened the gate for developing a deeper understanding of the multidimensional essence of culture. In connection with these commentaries, the study observes manifestations of cultural competence as per the terms used by Ladson-Billings (1995a). The author clarified that apart from academic skills, cultural competencies are essential for equipping learners for professional and human development. From the framework of CRP, cultural competencies refer to the acknowledgment and interpretation of one’s cultural heritage and its incorporation in everyday activities (Ladson-Billings (1995a, b). The voices of the participants and their interpretations of the manner in which they describe, understand, and assess their cultural heritage precisely reflect this aspect. This set of abilities work together with the objectives of ICC and intercultural critical approaches as a foundations for the development of deeper critical skills. In fact, as far as this study is concerned, the students also explored racism, discrimination, and inequality.

Human Values

Another dimension discussed by the students was the relevance of human values and respect. The major themes discussed were racism, intolerance, and discrimination:

Yes, the topics of Afro culture have been discussed a lot in English class and I think it is very important to be able to know the history of our ancestors to have the right knowledge to help and exterminate racism and to be able to have a different mentality and learn to respect and not to discriminate against any kind of condition. (S3.WA.Q4)

What I have learned in class is not to be racist; I learned to listen to people, and to work in groups, to understand situations and reflections on what we do not know and judge, what I learned most was not to judge and not to reject people of color. (S8.WA.Q12)

These commentaries reveal the identification and interpretation of the students of discrimination and racism. In fact, apart from listing the cultural elements they learned in class (cultural information and symbols), they recognized the historical struggle endured by Afro descendants from centuries ago, which is a key step toward understanding the African heritage and its role in the postmodern society (Viáfara, 2006; Busey & Cruz, 2015; Hooker, 2009; Antón, 2008). Both students mention the situation of discrimination suffered by Afro descendants, take a personal stance against this issue, and manifest that fighting racism is a personal choice. Moreover, they stress the importance of developing values such as respect, tolerance, acceptance and empathy. Furthermore, both students focus on avoiding judgment and rejection toward Afro descendants. These commentaries expose how the students can develop personal perspectives on social and cultural situations and reflect on their individual roles in social transformation.

In the ICC model, these reflections are linked to the components interpreting/relating and critical cultural awareness. These components highlight the development of skills for critically understanding and relating cultural phenomena and information with their culture and selecting a position based on solid criteria. In the excerpts, both students not only recognize the presence of social issues but also relate them to their reality. Singularly, Student 8 expresses her view toward these social issues and opts to propose that acceptance, group work, understanding, and reflection are the path toward fighting against racism and discrimination. Similarly, promoting values, such as respect, democracy, and empathy, is part of the objective of intercultural language teaching (Liddicoat, 2008; Wagner & Byram, 2017; Fantini, 2020) and major elements for training intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997) and citizens (Ichilov, 1998; Castiglioni & Bennett, 2018). These values are concurrent with the development of critical awareness from the conception of CRP (Paris & Ball, 2009), since they operate from the perspective of one's culture and their usefulness in addressing the nature of social issues, discrimination, and inequality.

These findings call attention toward the implications of this study. On the one hand, the manner in which culture becomes a source of meaningful experiences in the classroom is notable. This result implies taking school to the homes of the students by including their everyday reality as an axe of discussion and analysis. By so doing, learners are exposed to a critical analysis of their societies, which promotes the generation of significant school experiences. On the other hand, discussing culture and social issues bears the potential to awaken the interest of the study in their realities and methods for identifying areas of inequality, discrimination, and oppression to take the banner to fight injustice.

Although the voices of the students revealed the potential of including culture as a tool for developing intercultural skills and intercultural citizenship, this study has its limitations

during its development. First, although the students mentioned a number of important elements related to their lives, their scarce observation about the complex nature of culture did not go beyond the mention of aspects related to celebrations, habits, and a few tangible symbols. Moreover, the recognition and description of the dynamic, multilayered, and semiotic essence of culture was not widely present in their reflections. Second, despite the effort exerted in class, the remains of a limited vision toward other cultural phenomena apart from traditions and habits are evident, which the participants were unable to observe. Third, the study observed that the students lacked an in-depth view of the manifestations of social issues, because they were unable to expand their explanations about the causes and close relationship of these issues with their context and discuss potential solutions out of the classroom.

In general terms, this study contributes to the field of applied linguistics in two areas, namely, pedagogical alternatives and empirical research. Regarding the pedagogical realm, this experience offers an example of a practical option for addressing the ID in EFL in rural public schools though the description and recognition of diverse cultural manifestations in the local context. Additionally, this project offers a pedagogical alternative for linking English to areas with scarce L2 contact through meaningful local experiences, which enables students to perceive the relevance of language learning as a lifelong beneficial asset. Similarly, as an example of action research, this study offers an opportunity for understanding the nuanced nature of culture beyond the urban centers of knowledge production. Its objective is to encourage teachers from rural areas to become knowledge producers and share enriching wisdom through research and action in their classrooms.

These results call attention to the need to explore the ID in English classes. Despite the promising results and the reflections of the students, a comprehensive analysis of their culture and cultural symbols is required. Establishing a dialogue with other cultures is also necessary, and taking a critical stance toward other social phenomena is an area that future studies need to address.

Conclusions

In summary, this experience demonstrated that integrating one's culture in EFL classrooms may promote ICC skills and the development of intercultural citizenship. First, the students commented that they enjoyed examining their culture and discussing its cultural manifestations. Similarly, they acknowledged that they acquired factual knowledge on general information about AC, Africa, certain cultural symbols, and social issues. Moreover, the students critically analyzed the presence of racism, discrimination, and inequality, which persists in their social context. This discussion led them to reflect on the importance of acceptance, respect, openness, and inclusion. Thus, these findings suggest that students manifested a certain development of ICC skills, such as attitude, knowledge, interpreting/relating, and critical cultural awareness.

In terms of CRP, this study exhibited the potential of local cultural manifestations to address the three objectives of CRP, namely, academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings 1995a, b). Based on an understanding of factual

knowledge, the interpretation of out-of-school cultural manifestations and the straightforward reference to social issues and power relations, this research demonstrated an alternative for empowering students and guiding them in exploring their cultural contexts as relevant and meaningful spaces.

Apart from the creation of spaces for acquiring information about other cultures, exploring one's culture presents teachers with the opportunity to consider local issues and the role of students as transformative agents who may engage in social change. Although the results illustrated positive insights, future studies could address reflections about other cultures, different social dimensions, and a critically-oriented approach toward cultural symbols. Hence, further research should be conducted to elucidate the intricate nuances of intercultural language teaching and methodological alternatives for introducing this dimension to EFL classrooms.

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