



# Discovering Diverse Realities: Reflections about Cultures in the EFL Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study reports the findings of a didactic proposal developed in a public school in Cali. This research analyzes the effects of a didactic sequence based on intercultural language teaching on the ideas of students about their culture and the Anglophone one. Data was collected through surveys, focus groups, and class observations under the principles of qualitative action-research. Through content analysis, the findings revealed that students identified some differences, similarities, and meanings from their own and other cultures related to everyday life and the social representations of both. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the ways intercultural language teaching might be applied in class.

**Keywords:** culture; interculturality; intercultural competences; language teaching

## Descobrimo realidades diversas: reflexões sobre as culturas na aula de inglês

### Resumo

Este estudo relata os resultados de uma proposta didática desenvolvida em uma escola pública de Cali. Esta pesquisa analisa os efeitos de uma sequência didática baseada no ensino intercultural de línguas sobre as ideias dos alunos sobre sua própria cultura e a cultura anglófona. Seguindo os princípios da pesquisa-ação qualitativa, os dados foram coletados por meio de pesquisas, grupos focais e observações de classe. Através da análise de conteúdo, os resultados revelaram que os alunos identificaram algumas diferenças, semelhanças e significados das culturas próprias e alheias relacionadas à vida cotidiana e às representações sociais das duas. Essas descobertas contribuem para uma melhor compreensão das formas em que o ensino intercultural de línguas pode ser aplicado na sala de aula.

**Palavras-chave:** cultura; interculturalidade; competências interculturais; ensino de línguas

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# Descubriendo realidades diversas: reflexiones acerca de las culturas en la clase de inglés

## Resumen

Este estudio reporta los resultados de una propuesta didáctica desarrollada en un colegio público de Cali. Esta investigación analiza los efectos de una secuencia didáctica basada en la enseñanza intercultural de lenguas sobre las ideas de los estudiantes sobre su propia cultura y la cultura anglófona. Siguiendo los principios de investigación-acción cualitativa, los datos fueron recolectados mediante encuestas, grupos focales y observaciones de clase. A través del análisis de contenido, los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes identificaron algunas diferencias, similitudes y significados de las culturas propia y ajenas relacionados con la vida cotidiana y las representaciones sociales de ambas. Estos hallazgos contribuyen a lograr una mejor comprensión de las formas como la enseñanza intercultural de lenguas puede ser aplicada en clase.

**Palabras clave:** cultura; interculturalidad; competencias interculturales; enseñanza de lenguas

## Introduction

English language has become today's *lingua franca*, an international, vehicular, and instrumental language (Baker, 2011; Quoc, 2015). As a *lingua franca*, English is perceived as a global language used mainly by non-native speakers to achieve successful political world-wide collaboration with Anglo-European States. As an international language, English stresses its social role of pursuing cross-cultural communication among nations. From an instrumental perspective, English is a means to reach economic and political goals emphasizing on monetary factors and the inclusion of emerging economies in influential organizations (OECD, NATO, UN).

These positions of English have echoed in Colombia where the public education system has been in a sequential phase of reforming its pedagogical and didactic standards to get better results in international examinations (MEN, 2015). Unfortunately, these reforms mirror instrumentalist views of English prioritizing economic and political aims overlooking other languages (o.e. Spanish/Sign languages, indigenous languages) and cultures. The result of said view is the neglect of intercultural language teaching (ILT) and the disregard of diverse views of local/national cultures. This omission foregrounds the need to introduce the intercultural dimension (ID) in Colombia's ELT agenda (Álvarez-Valencia, 2014; Meadows, 2016).

ILT (Byram, 2021; Kramersch, 1998) proposes that mastering languages requires enhancing communicative competencies (Corbett, 2003) and recognizing the relationship language-culture; hence, L2 learners need to know/use structural linguistic elements along with the cultural layers that facilitate meaning-making (Byram et al., 2002; Kramersch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Addressing the ID promotes the emergence of intercultural competencies that foster understanding of one's own culture (C1) and the target language/culture for effective/successful interactions (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat, 2008). Other authors stress the need of the ID in ELT (Álvarez-Valencia & Fernández, 2018; Fernández, 2019, Olaya & Gómez, 2013) to catalyze attitudes of acceptance and openness towards other cultures, understanding of one's own and other's cultural systems, and the adoption of critical views to explore sociopolitical phenomena.

The absence of the intercultural dimension in EFL highlights other difficulties: vulnerability and cultural conflicts derived from ethnic/cultural clashes (Urrea & Murillo, 1999), a limited view of cross-cultural communication (Maqsood et al., 2024), native-speakerism (Newton, 2016), and communication barriers/misunderstandings (Zahira et al., 2025).

A persisting issue in EFL is the overlooked or minimized role of culture (Atkinson, 1999; Byram, 2000; Gómez, 2013), and the scarce presence of C1 in language teaching (Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020; Zuluaga, et al., 2009). Local cultures have been displaced by the assimilation of hegemonic perspectives, the settlement of people

from different geographies, and the ever-growing need for homogenization (Jennings, 2011; Machaca, 2013; Urrea & Murillo, 1999). This study explores the impact of a didactic proposal based on intercultural language teaching on the students' ideas about their own and the Anglophone cultures. The following questions are addressed: 1) What are the changes in the students' ideas about their own culture along the pedagogical intervention? 2) How did the learners' views about the Anglophone culture and speakers evolve through the pedagogical intervention?

The pedagogical intervention here reported the analysis of the students' cultural context and some elements of Anglophone cultures within the frame of an English course. This analysis was carried out through the completion of a set of tasks including class discussions, reading, listening, and speaking activities, and oral presentations. These tasks encouraged learners to explore their own cultural landscapes and compare them with elements from Anglophone cultures.

## Previous Research

ILT has been recently studied in Colombia (Álvarez-Valencia, 2014; Meadows, 2016). Some topics under the spotlight have been: students' perceptions of the cultural component in EFL (Cruz, 2007; Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020), the development and recognition of intercultural awareness (Castañeda, 2012), the presence/manifestations of intercultural competence (Carreño, 2018; Gómez, 2012, 2013; Olaya & Gómez, 2013; Ramos, 2013), the ID's function in ELT and the conception of rurality (Ramos *et al.*, 2016; Ramos, *et al.* 2018; Ramos, *et al.* 2021), and the role of identities in ELT (Cuervo, 2020; Ramos & Torres, 2019). Similar research explored different ways to address ILT at schools and the students' ideas about culture and its role in ELT.

Del Campo and Bonilla (2007) described the affordances of radio broadcasting for cultural understanding, communicative competencies, and pedagogical reflections. This study remarks on the possibilities for multidimensional development of communicative, intercultural, and pedagogical abilities. A more dynamic view of evaluation and cultural integration is suggested.

Fernández *et al.* (2024) studied the development of oral skills and intercultural reflection through the analysis of local expressions of Afro descendant culture. They examined the potential of everyday life elements to enhance the students' oral production and interest in their C1. Results showed the students' affective connection with their African roots, their understanding of afro-descendant identity, and the importance of home/school for cultural representations.

Fernández and Castillo (2023) addressed the potential of rhythm and blues music to identify the cultural nature of language learning. They described how students discovered the cultural essence of music and the power of songs to learn about other cultures. Learners addressed social issues in their local context from a critical lens.

These studies highlight the relationship culture-EFL and stress the importance of addressing the ID in ELT and the limitless possibilities of discovering cultures, the importance of the C1, and the discussion of sensitive topics as alternatives for meaningful learning. These experiences echo similar research advocating for a more salient role of culture in ELT (Esteban-Núñez, 2021; Fernández, 2021; Rico-Troncoso, 2021). Following this need, the present study aims to promote the exploration of culture through identification, comparison, and reflection of/about cultural manifestations at local and foreign levels.

## Theory

### Intercultural Language Teaching

Since the 1970s the role of culture in efl has been acknowledged (Rico-Troncoso, 2021; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009; Wiseman & Abe, 1986). Although its inclusion in Colombia dates from the 1990s (Álvarez-Valencia, 2014)

the growing integration of culture in efl has recently taken force (Meadows, 2016) due to the identification of the language-culture connection (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), the social turn in sla which calls for a deeper understanding of elt's sociocultural nuances (Block, 2003), the conceptualization of language as a cultural materialization of peoples' identities (Byram et al., 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Rico-Troncoso, 2021), and the recognition of the cultural nature and origin of linguistic forms (Corbett, 2003). Liddicoat (2008) proposes five tenets to foster intercultural language learning (ill):

1. *Active construction*: Students actively build their learning. More than passively memorizing rules, ILL thrives for active meaning-making through interpretation, interaction, and reflection.
2. *Making connections*: Learners continually challenge their previous ideas and conceptions through inter/intrapersonal communication which encourages them to reformulate their views.
3. *Interaction*: Learning requires interpersonal communication. In this process, individuals bring their cultural/linguistic backgrounds leading to intercultural discovery and knowledge.
4. *Reflection*: ILT requires awareness of the ways individuals comprehend their thoughts, knowledge, and learning which implies the construction of ideas about diversity, identity, and personal experiences.
5. *Responsibility*: Learners are responsible for their actions, attitudes, and perspectives. More than learning about others, ILL implies connecting with them.

These principles stress ELT's cultural nature and encourage teachers to advocate for a more nuanced view of language teaching. Nevertheless, the complex nature of culture and its integration in teaching practices deserves detailed attention, particularly in contexts where English is widely spoken outside of schools. In the next lines, culture is defined and connected with the context of this study.

## Culture

Under ILL, culture is conceived as dynamic (Kramersch, 1998), pluridimensional (Morán, 2001), and heterogeneously constructed (Baker, 2015). Culture is also the contextually built reference framework used to interpret realities and act in response to them (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Consequently, culture goes beyond facts, a prevailing view in Colombian scholarship during the initial stages of its inclusion (Barletta, 2009; Mejía, 2006; Álvarez-Valencia, 2014). In fact, to support novel views of culture, theories about multimodal communication (Kress, 2012) and the role of visual (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2005) and nonverbal elements (Poyatos, 2002) challenged previous conceptions of culture. Culture is also seen as a set of semiotic resources with social origin that shapes peoples' interactions and interpretations (Álvarez-Valencia, 2018; Álvarez-Valencia & Fernández, 2018). Culture is understood in this study as a highly changing phenomenon (Nieto, 2002), manifested through the construction/use of semiotic resources (Álvarez-Valencia, 2018) that are reflected in diverse dimensions (Morán, 2001; Rico-Troncoso, 2021), and provides individuals the tools to understand their realities and react towards them (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Consequently, culture is conceived as a living entity encompassing all human activities emerging from social interaction and their relationships with the world. From this angle, students make meaning from their culturally driven interpretations and contextual relationships beyond learning structural elements. These relationships are embodied through tangible/intangible semiotic resources and personal perspectives about their own and other cultures. Nonetheless, comprehending the nature of culture is the beginning of ILL, therefore intercultural skills are necessary for EFL learners.

## Intercultural Competence

Understanding culture requires recognizing the role of competences enabling individuals to integrate knowledge and skills in cross-cultural communication. ILL (Rico-Troncoso, 2021) implies the development of abilities to

successfully interact with others. Intercultural competence refers to the set of affective, cognitive, and pragmatic skills that allow individuals to establish and maintain culturally diverse human relationships (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). Three areas of intercultural communication are pivotal (Byram, 1997; Hamilton *et al.*, 1998; Baker, 2011):

1. *Attitudes*: the affective dimension of intercultural competence encompassing values of acceptance, tolerance, and openness.
2. *Knowledge*: factual/procedural information learners acquire and use in real-time communication. Knowledge is modified during intercultural experiences.
3. *Skills*: practical use of knowledge mediated by attitudes of respect to interact with others, interpret/relate cultural elements in communication, discover diverse perspectives, and take critical perspectives.

Though these areas summarize the actions that speakers are expected to perform in real-time communication, the ways to achieve these capacities are still under discussion. Since several of the proposals to bring life to ILL have been implemented in English-spoken contexts and in European soil, a framework to further intercultural skills in non-English speaking nations is a pending task in EFL. Despite the clarity of the set of skills above, elements such as the different layers of individual identity, the role of family and neighbors, and the learners' changing stances towards their own and other cultures, have been overlooked. Precisely, this study touches upon some of those topics from the perspectives of high school students and tries to develop alternatives to address the understanding of their own and other cultures in EFL. This approach of culture shaped the pedagogic proposal here reported in terms of the design of the instructional design, data collection, and analysis. These details are further explained below.

## Methodology

### Design

Qualitative research was selected because it explores the participants' reflections and experiences from their own perspectives mostly from textual information (Hernández *et al.*, 2014), hence action-research is featured here due to its potential to improve educational experiences through systematic application of pedagogic proposals (Cresswell, 2012). The researchers opted for action research because it facilitated the development of a learner-centered initiative exploring the changes in the participants' ideas of their own and the Anglophone cultures. Since this proposal emerged as an attempt to address a gap in EFL research (addressing intercultural language teaching in Colombia) and to contribute to solve a problem related to the oblivion of the learners' own cultures in ELT (Ajayi, 2008; Stein, 2004), qualitative action-research fits the research questions and is coherent with the scope of this study.

This design was pivotal due to its flexibility and comprehensiveness in the exploration of qualitative information (learners' reflections and commentaries here) (Cresswell, 2012; Hernández *et al.*, 2014). The research design was consistent with the research objectives because it opened the path for the examination of changing ideas throughout the pedagogical intervention leading to discussing culturally driven phenomena.

Action-research promotes collaborative class procedures, teacher-student constant reflection, innovative classroom methodologies, and the transformation of pedagogic practices (Burns, 2000); hence this intervention followed a cyclical structure comprising each lesson as a single cycle stage encompassing planning, action, observation, reflection. These stages determined the continuous reflection and improvement of teaching procedures.

## Setting/Participants

This experience was developed at a public school from Cali-Colombia in an eastern working-class neighborhood. Most learners live near the school and belong to strata one families. The presence of afrodescendant students is high. Technical formation is offered from ninth grade, and two weekly hours are devoted to English. Sixteen sixth graders (ages 11-14) freely participated and continued in this study. The students' parents were informed and signed a consent form allowing data collection. Data was gathered exclusively for academic purposes; anonymity and confidentiality were respected. Author two was the official English teacher of the class and implemented the research under author one's tutoring.

## Data Collection

The conception of culture adopted here impacted the way data were collected by privileging students' commentaries and ideas concerning the concept and manifestations of culture and its impact on ILL.

## Surveys

Two surveys were conducted in Spanish. An initial survey was applied before the implementation of this experience and inquired about the students' preconceptions of the C1, the AC, and the relationship between culture and language learning. The second survey implemented at the end of the pedagogical experience, aimed to know the learners' views of culture after exploring in class some layers of culture. Both surveys examined four areas: the concept of culture, ideas about C1, ideas about AC, and the role of culture in language learning. While the first survey mapped the learners' initial thoughts regarding cultural elements, the final survey identified changes in the students' conceptions regarding the topics from the first questionnaire.

## Focus Group

Four focus group sessions were developed in Spanish after the pedagogic proposal. These sessions were audio recorded. The same topics of the surveys were discussed.

## Observations

Seven sessions were audio recorded to identify the students' commentaries and reactions about the topics discussed. A spreadsheet was used to write the students' commentaries and questions about it.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was applied by submitting data for systematization, classification, codification, interpretation, correlation, and categorization (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Data were openly interpreted, integrating multiple perspectives (Martínez, 2005). Six steps were followed: 1) Data immersion 2) Data classification 3) Generation of categories 4) Definition of categories and subcategories 5) Identification of correlations 6) Revision and reassessment of initial systems of categories, subcategories, and correlations.

Some of the students' commentaries were translated into English. The excerpts presented summarize the participants' salient ideas. Data here first mentions the student's pseudonym with a number: S1=Student 1; the instrument: IQ (initial questionnaire), FQ (final questionnaire), F (focus group), and O (observation). For questionnaires and focus group answers, the number of the question is added. For observations, the number of sessions appears, e.g. S3FQ8: Student 3's answer, eight question, final questionnaire). For observations, e.g. S12O3: A commentary mentioned by student 12 in the third class.

## Pedagogic Proposal

This proposal took seven sessions (two hours each), during seven weeks (Table 1). Every class was conceived as a micro cycle with its stages: planning, action, observation, reflection (Hien, 2009). After each session the teacher read his observations and considered his experience aiming to redesign the upcoming encounters. This iterative process has boosted alternatives to address intercultural issues and skills.

Task-based-learning (TBL) informed the design and implementation of this intervention given its flexibility, learner-centeredness, and meaning-making focus (Nunan, 2004). TBL's principles shaped lesson planning and intervention structure allowing a harmonious integration with the school syllabus. Each lesson included three sections: pre, during, and post task. Lessons usually started with a pre-task moment inviting learners to activate previous/local knowledge. Then, students watched videos or read texts about the topics for each session and completed their corresponding task. Sometimes, task completion required grammar and/or vocabulary review. Finally, learners shared their ideas in group discussions focused on their intercultural discoveries. The questions, resources (videos, texts, images, etc.), activities, and tasks for each session related to a specific cultural dimension previously determined (Table 1). All material used followed Cortazzi and Jin's (1999) criteria to support the intervention.

The activities developed included discussing the content of videos/texts in English, group discussions, writing texts, oral presentations, designing graphic tasks (family trees, posters, portraits, etc.). These activities invited learners to identify elements from C1, AC, and to explore the intercultural realm.

**Table 1.**  
*Didactic proposal*

Session	Communicative functions	Cultural elements	Activities
1	Getting personal information	Preconceptions about culture	Role play providing personal information, online interview to an American student, and class discussion about the concept of culture
2	Comprehending basic information from oral documents	Cultural manifestations of the Anglophone culture	Class discussion and report about the content of videos and readings related to the AC
3	Describing people	Physical descriptions in different cultures	Listening to oral descriptions of Colombian, American, and British people's physical features and discussing their differences/similarities
4	Understanding oral documents about families	Families and their behaviors in Anglophone cultures	Watching videos about American and British families and talking about physical/cultural features of Colombian and Anglophone families
5	Describing family members	Families and their behaviors in the local context	Oral discussions and drawing a family tree. Learners' families written description. Comparing some elements in Colombian and Anglophone families
6	Discussing daily routines	Anglophone people's daily routines	Discussing American students' daily routines and comparing the routines between Colombian and American learners
7	Describing one's own daily routine	Students' daily routines	Oral presentations about one's own daily routine and class discussion about the way culture impacts learners' habits

Source: Authors

## Results and Discussion

This section reports the changes in the participants’ ideas about their own and the Anglophone culture following their progress along the intervention and the class activities.

### Students’ Own Culture

#### Preconceptions about one’s own culture

At the beginning of this experience, students described their ideas regarding their C1 revealing blurry conceptions about their C1 manifestations which were reduced to music, dance, and sports. Data from the initial survey (Table 2) offer a glimpse:

- “Teacher, I don’t know what is own culture, but I think that it is soccer, music and a lot of dancing” (S12O2)
- “I don’t identify myself with any culture of my own.” (S13O1)

**Table 2.**  
*Students’ identification of their own culture*

Which of the following items represents your own culture?	
Movies	2
Technology	4
Fashion	5
Money	2
Religion	6
Music	9
Sports	5
Parties	5
Social networks	9

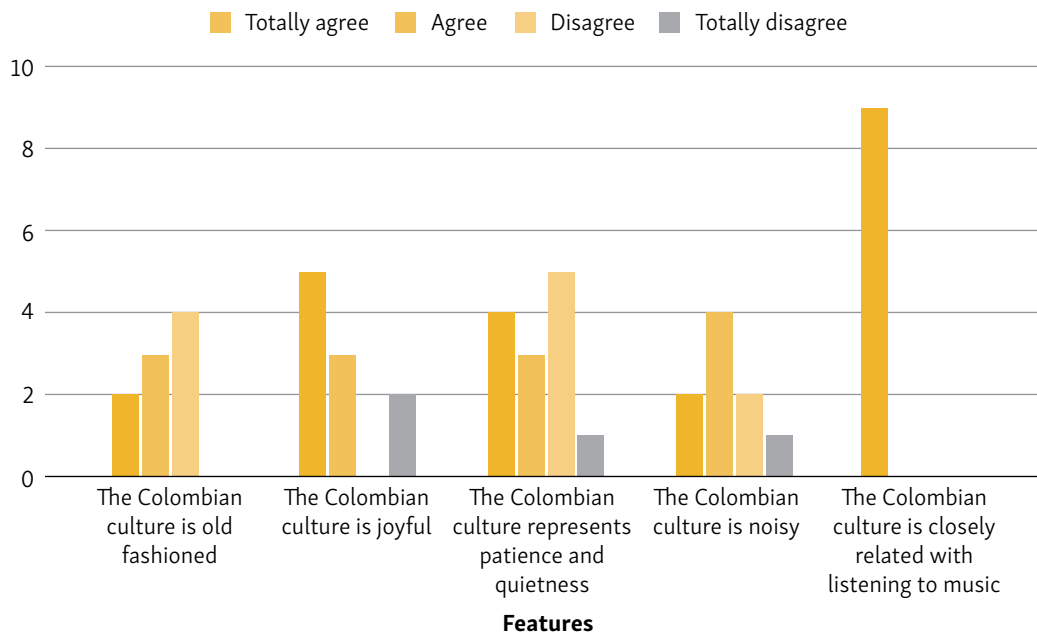
Source: Authors (IQ5)

The commentaries above indicate confusion regarding the C1. S12’s answer suggests a scant presence of the intercultural dimension in the English curriculum, which is reinforced when S13 expresses not feeling identified with any culture. These commentaries mirror the absence of reflection about the meaning of culture and its relevance in their everyday lives. However, not feeling identified with their C1 might be attributed to other causes. Data revealed a shallow view of C1. In the initial survey students conceived their C1 in terms of music, religion, fashion, sports, or parties (Table 2 and S12’s answer) reflecting a partial comprehension of the phenomenon (Byram, 2021; Rico-Troncoso, 2021). Though these elements are present in the students’ realities (S12: soccer, music, dancing), several layers of cultural dimensions or even a clear cultural affiliation (S13) are absent from their initial conceptions. Besides lacking a clear notion of C1, initial data revealed a tendency to equate culture with surface elements ignoring culture’s complex nature. Although elements related to practices (parties/sports), perspectives (religion), and symbols (music/fashion)-(Morán, 2001) are present (S12’s items), other aspects connected with C1 are ignored. This lack of clarity and depth helped the authors to structure the intervention towards a more nuanced view of culture.

### The meaning of one's own culture

At the end of the pedagogical experience, students examined with more detail their ideas towards C1 and cultural manifestations. Learners recognized the connection between C1 (in terms of nationality) with music (symbol), joy (value), and loudness (behavior), (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**  
Students' ideas about their own culture



Source: Authors (FQ5)

These features were complemented with ideas of dynamism and modernity ingrained in the Colombian imaginary. Most learners disagreed with the idea of an old-fashioned C1, suggesting their conception of Colombian people/culture as changing and progressive. Interestingly, the students' conceptions about the relationships between patience, calm, and C1 are divided. Although most participants (n=5) disagreed with that notion, others (n=3) agreed with it. This sign shows that attitudes such as patience and calm are not seen as Colombian people's major traits. These opinions resonated with the focus group:

What do you think about Colombian culture? (F2)

- "I think it is very beautiful since we have all the religions and we learn to live with each other. We keep building our own culture with all the laws as a community" (S5F2)
- "I think it is very beautiful because of the diversity of our skin color." (S6F2)

Religion, legal order, and diversity are key elements representing C1. S5 stresses the positive role of religion and law for social coexistence, a characteristic mentioned by S6, who explains that racial diversity embellishes C1. Notably, relating the way religion and law provide social cohesion added to the positive side of ethnic diversity is a discovery related to the development of intercultural skills for a connection between these factors is key to understanding how cultures interact (Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997), and here how C1 is a phenomenon that encompasses more dimensions besides products and traditions (Álvarez-Valencia, 2018). Similarly, explaining how ethnic diversity is a marker of Colombian identity highlights a deeper look at the national/local realities that are necessary to unveil a more elaborated conception of culture by distinguishing Colombia's multiethnic reality.

These findings foreground a more diverse comprehension of the C1 beyond tangible representations encompassing other areas: values, ethnic diversity, and social order. Though surface elements like music and religion are still prevalent, students reinterpreted their C1 in more complex, dynamic, and multidimensional terms by exploring elements belonging to their social reality from a more comprehensive perspective. Albeit limited in the conception of C1, these answers report an advance in the participants' representation of culture. Nonetheless, achieving this level of reflection required exploring the learners' local realities.

### Families, neighborhoods, and behaviors

Reinterpreting C1 required the exploration of everyday practices related to family and local behaviors. The lines below illustrate these topics after addressing them along with the intervention:

What habits from your C1 might seem weird to people from other cultures? (F4)

- “In our neighborhood, when someone dies they [neighbors] play loud music and everyone from the block goes in convoy to the cemetery and fire weapons in the air along the way” (S9F4)
- “On Christmas, they [people from different cultures] see all the fun we have in the streets, family gatherings, [and] Natilla; getting ready to spend some time on Christmas Eve.” (S2F4)
- “When they [people from different cultures] see us eating *chontaduro* with honey and salt. They [people from different cultures] have never seen that fruit.” (S4F4)
- “When we eat green mango with salt. They [people from different cultures] find it very weird.” (S4F4)

Students describe how other people interpret local practices. They discuss the relationships among their C1, music, social bonds, and foods appearing in the way funerals and Christmas are held (with loud music and neighbors' participation). The role of music, unity, and feeding was identified during the experience and here, its socially cohesive power is highlighted. The students' recognition of their neighborhoods' symbolic force, tangible in death and Christmas, portrays how they discovered the connections between foods, as semiotic cultural references (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021), and their cultural identity. Students report that eating *chontaduro* (a traditional food from the Colombian Pacific region) and green mango might seem weird to people from other cultures because of their lack of knowledge of these foods.

The relevance attributed to these foods stresses their semiotic power and connection with the learners' socio-cultural identity since feeding habits are semiotic resources that shape learners' cultural identities. Identifying social meanings behind everyday practices shows comprehension of multimodal communication, a major element facilitating cross-cultural interactions (Álvarez-Valencia, 2018, Kress, 2010). Students refined their conceptions of local/cultural manifestations (religion, law, music, celebrations, and feeding) by interpreting their neighborhoods' social bonds present in the role foods and rituals play in their neighborhoods. This understanding mirrored the learners' conception of C1 (modern, joyful, dynamic, and expressive) and confirmed that a more-grained identification of cultural elements from their everyday lives was achieved. The neighborhood was seen as a space for sociocultural identification and identity construction, a factor discussed in research about local cultures and their impact on ELT (Fernández et al., 2023; Stein, 2008).

Although the learners' insights are far from high levels of intercultural skills and critical perspectives, knowing one's own cultural information and developing attitudes of acceptance and respect towards the C1 are departure points for reaching intercultural skills (Byram, 2008; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) -here attitudes and knowledge- (Byram, 1997) and intercultural awareness (Baker, 2012). Despite the slight risk of falling into stereotypes, (loudness, parties, foods, and joy as overgeneralized ideas about Colombian people) students recognized some representative local practices which allowed them to picture themselves as semiotic agents able to

improve their intercultural skills. Nonetheless, exploring one's own culture is just a starting point in the intricate world of ILT (Byram, *et al.*, 2002; Kramsch, 2013; Liddicoat, 2008). Critically comprehending other cultures is a must in ILT. The following section explores how learners changed their views about AC.

## The Anglophone Culture

### Initial Ideas about the Anglophone Culture

A major factor in the students' discourse was their conception of the AC stemming from the participants' earliest perceptions presented in the first survey and initial lessons, which were compared with their commentaries in later sessions, the final survey, and focus group. Early ideas showed stereotypical conceptions about Anglophone communities' lifestyles, their access to technology and information, and values. First, the students mentioned the relationship between the Anglophone culture and their economic/ intellectual power:

- "It looks like they [People from Anglophone cultures] have money to buy the latest in technology, [they are] well dressed (sic)." (S8O2)
- "People who speak English are very smart because talking that (sic) language is very hard. For me English is too difficult because I don't understand anything and I don't like it." (S11O2)

These excerpts explain how students related AC with predetermined ideas coming from social media and pop culture. The economic dimension is relevant for the students and S8 illustrated it. The connection between AC and its language (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) was evident for the students: S11 opines that English is difficult to learn, which implies that people speaking it have outstanding intellectual capacities. S11 manifests an antagonistic attitude towards English due to her scant understanding of it. These thoughts summarize the learners' opinions about AC at the beginning of the pedagogical proposal and stress how Anglophone-speaking countries are seen as wealthy and academically advanced. These views parallel the students' answers in the first survey. Most learners (12/13) considered English-speaking people as: "Very intellectual" and that AC is, again: "Very intellectual" (11/13).

Although students do not mention the origin of these perceptions, their sociocultural milieu and the current global configuration exhibit Anglophone communities as leading, sophisticated, and exemplary nations. This paradigm mirrors some academic systems around the world that have adopted methodologies and perspectives from West/North countries, aiming at reproducing them without prior contextualization (Canagarajah, 2005, Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Prabhu, 1987). Learners distinguished religion and social networks as key markers of AC (Table 3). These answers suggest that the AC's symbolic dimension was present through the values portrayed in its religious systems, cultural behaviors, and online representations. This finding is relevant because learners never mentioned a specific religion, however, the idea of a religious set of values behind AC was above other elements of pop culture (movies/fashion/music/sports/social networks). Similarly, the salience of social networks as representative elements of AC showed the influence of these sites in the way students conceive and learn about the Anglophone cultural system. Hence, recognizing religion as a cultural symbol that determines people's behaviors and social networks as paramount representations of Anglophone people were major elements identified by students at the beginning of the intervention.

These initial notions set the cornerstone to promote novel conceptions about AC and challenge the learners' preconceptions from their engagement in the activities from the pedagogic intervention. The paragraphs below illustrate how this process echoed the learners' AC views.

**Table 3.**  
*Students' initial concepts about AC*

In which of these items do you recognize the Anglophone culture?	
Movies	3
Technology	5
Fashion	4
Money	4
Religion	10
Music	3
Sports	5
Parties	0
Social networks <sup>4</sup>	8

Source: Authors (IQ7)

## Final Ideas about the Anglophone Culture

### Cultural Manifestations of the Anglophone Culture

At the end of this research, students highlighted social networks and money as the most salient AC representations (Table 4) meaning that after the pedagogical intervention, their ideas changed. For example, religion, which was the top AC cultural manifestation at the beginning (Table 3), appeared with less relevance and instead of it, money took its place. Hence, participants reinforced their view of social networks as windows portraying AC's values, behaviors, and symbols, their role in the Anglophone lifestyle and its global ideological proliferation. This finding embodies the way learners' opinions stem from social networks and their influence on the students' conceptions.

Participants also highlighted the importance of money. Learners understood the economic power of Anglophone societies and their access to material assets as essential features of who they are, since this has been a decisive advantage in the development of those countries (Baker, 2012). Learners observed this fact through some class activities in which they discovered elements about Anglophone people's everyday lives.

**Table 4.**  
*Students' final related concepts about the Anglophone culture*

In which of these items do you recognize the Anglophone culture?	
Movies	3
Technology	2
Fashion	4
Money	7
Religion	2
Music	3
Sports	4
Parties	2
Social networks	11

Source: Authors (FQ7)



4 Here the sites of Facebook, Instagram, Spotify, Snapchat and Tik-Tok were grouped in the category of social networks on Tables 3 and 4.

These views document how learners recognized AC's information resonating with **Byram's icc (1997)** skill of knowledge. Though superficial, final perceptions testify how the intervention led learners to challenge their initial views and consider that religion is not the only AC's paramount factor. Furthermore, interpreting other cultures in tangible terms is part of what students are called to develop within the ILT framework (**Baker, 2012; Byram, 2021; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013**). The learners' conception of the relationship between AC and money suggests that they see how consumerism is attached to the AC from their exposure to social media and their own class and life experiences. The role of money in the students' conception of the AC appeared in the discussion about Anglophone family relationships and routines.

### **Life at Home in Anglophone Cultures**

Nevertheless, the items recognized by students as AC'S major representations were, to a certain extent, based on stereotypes. Though identifying a nation's economic power and its people's acquisition level is necessary in the comprehension of the other (**Baker, 2009; Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002**), the risk of assuming essentialist views is latent. In fact, some students' opinions revealed the presence of shallow AC depictions:

- “They live in [a] big and beautiful country house. They must be rich.” (s5o5)
- “They like to play video games a lot, the boy was playing video games.” (s15o7)

Learners discussed topics related to American families and their behaviors. In the excerpts, learners think that having a country house and videogames are markers of wealth. s5 mentions: “They must be rich”, mirroring the position assigned to money on Table 4. This depiction is reinforced by s15 who says that “everybody” enjoys videogames just because of an example from a class video. Students anchor their conceptions about Anglophone people on representations lacking a detailed and nuanced picture of who they are; showing that learners' Anglophone representations emerge from their own perspectives leading to partial interpretations of the other.

Given the learners' social background and mainstream Colombian realities, owning a country house displays wealth, hence s5's idea of American richness. The same happened when s15 discusses video games as a generalized activity of Anglophone teenagers just because in a video a kid appears playing video games at home. Like s5, s15 bases his conclusions on a particular case and claims that since one person enjoys this action, others do it. These excerpts evidence that EFL teachers must break stereotypes by stressing that material used (didactic/authentic) depicts only a partial view of other cultures. This clarification should have been more frequent.

These examples confirm how the students' AC views stem from their personal perspectives regarding housing, hobbies, and language learning, ignoring cultural nuances. Learners cannot be blamed; when developing intercultural competence and awareness, diverse stages are undergone. Stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations are progressively modified (**Baker, 2009, 2012**). Therefore, these findings reveal that students go through life-long processes of rediscovery and reinterpretation, which are pivotal to reaching higher levels of intercultural skills.

### **Anglophone People's Daily Routines**

When analyzing Anglophone people's daily routine on videos, learners built a view of the AC based on a particular case:

That gringo [the video character] doesn't take a shower because in all his routines [...], we always write to take a shower and, in that video, that gringo doesn't take a bath and the girl that lives in Spain, she takes a shower but for two hours. (s8o8)

This was a common opinion among students. Based on an example about the daily routine, learners understood that taking a bath was not part of Anglophone people's routine because it was not mentioned. Students generalized

a specific behavior based on a punctual case. Nonetheless, learners did not reflect about the focus of the videos' characters on other daily activities, instead they took for sole evidence these videos and developed a misbelief about Anglophone people without proving it. Although the teacher motivated students to find more information to challenge their views, they remained on their belief based on one single class experience. This situation manifests that teachers must nuance ideas coming from didactic resources by stressing that they are small cultural depictions.

Although far from reality, this finding reveals that students used their previous knowledge and attitudes (Byram, 1997) to interpret foreign behaviors from their own cultural reference framework (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013) and overapplied it to another cultural system. Albeit limited in depth, this overgeneralization evidences the students' process of discovering and approaching different cultural systems. This example confirms that learners use their own cultural framework and comparisons to interpret other cultures. Liddicoat (2008) stresses the relevance of comparison in ILL because learners establish similarities and differences allowing them to analyze cultural manifestations that determine personal perspectives towards themselves and others. As Baker (2009, 2012) proposes, developing intercultural understanding and skills takes time and is achieved through scaffolded endeavors in which learners undergo processes of self-discovery, analysis, and reflection. Comparing is part of that path, and it appeared again when students discussed language learning in their own context and in Anglophone countries:

What do you think about the people who live in the USA or the UK? (F10)

- I think, the same as me, they must learn to speak another language. (S1F10)
- I think that they must have studied very hard to learn that language. (S3F10)

S1 considers that one language is not enough to engage in the social dynamics of a globalized age. For S1 young people need to learn an L2 because this demand is prevalent in some countries (Colombia, USA, UK). This commentary illustrates skills of relation/interpretation (Byram, 1997). S1 is aware of a common condition in different parts of the world and acknowledges that although American and British people's L1 is English, they: "must learn to speak another language" since one language is not enough today. S1 saw beyond his cultural background and identified a pattern for global survival. Understanding one's own place in the world and in the local context is relevant to develop intercultural competences (Byram & Wagner, 2018). Students must recognize that their role in social transformation trespasses the walls of geopolitical barriers (Byram, 1997; Rico-Troncoso, 2018). Grasping this duty requires beholding reality from diverse perspectives (Álvarez-Valencia & Ramírez, 2021), that novel understanding of reality is exhibited in this commentary.

S10's opinion about how hard Anglophone people study to master English is also based on her point of view and the difficulties that she faces learning that language without considering that some Anglophone speakers endure different cognitive processes and that sometimes language learning happens beyond school. S10 sees English learning as a process coming from effort based on her experience, ignoring other alternatives and possibilities. Again, comparisons based on the students' own frameworks appear as their conceptions' cornerstone. Nevertheless, learners showed the construction of personal perspectives coming from the activities carried out along the intervention.

## Conclusions

This article discussed an action-research experience at a public school in Cali through the comparison of students' initial and final ideas regarding their C1 and AC. Data reported the following conclusions:

Seeing culture as an everyday phenomenon allowed learners to challenge their first C1 perceptions. When this experience began, some students lacked a clear idea about what represented their C1. A student mentioned not feeling aligned with any cultures, others reduced their C1 as music, religion, fashion, sports, or parties. At the

end of this research, students understood that their C1 was an amalgam of several interconnected behaviors, meanings, and perspectives tangible in their everyday lives: music, joy, and loudness. Knowing that C1 was close to their routines allowed learners to feel identified with their sociocultural context, guiding them to positively see these cultural manifestations and to feel part of their community. After all, who they are is also a result of what they learned in their C1.

Knowing the C1 is not enough to discover the intercultural nature of our global reality. Therefore, this experience also discussed the learners' AC conceptions. Stereotyped views and generalizations about AC and its people appeared frequently. Learners related AC with elements such as economic power and social networks. Beliefs about Anglophone people and their language stemmed from the students' own preconceptions rooted in their own realities. They saw English as a difficult language and reduced AC only in terms of consumerism. Some of these thoughts remained at the end of this research, foregrounding future challenges. Despite these constraints, learners experienced comparison as a process to understand other realities. Although stereotyped views emerged from the students' lack of critical exploration, comparing promoted intercultural skills by calling attention towards global needs like learning an L2.

Despite these encouraging findings, some limitations, such as the students' scarce time with more varied cultural representations, their C1 centeredness, and their overgeneralized views about others based on personal perspectives, hindered the development of intercultural skills. Likewise, the presence of generalizations, stereotypes, and superficial conceptions of culture remained at the end of this study, foregrounding some challenges for ELT teachers. Though these results are not ideal, they show humble progress in understanding the multifaceted nature of culture, the development of deeper C1 views, the role of comparison to understand others, and the need to go beyond essentialist views of cross-cultural relationships. Further research should address the exploration of diverse cultural systems over longer periods, the multimodal nature of intercultural communication, and alternative ways to take the "invisible" elements of culture to the EFL classroom. This study intends to encourage more teachers towards a long-scale adoption of critical/intercultural views of EFL from a bottom-up approach.

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