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# LOCAL CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW—IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

# CULTURA LOCAL Y COMPETENCIA COMUNICATIVA INTERCULTURAL EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMATIZADA IMPLICACIONES PARA EL CONTEXTO COLOMBIANO

**Original Research Article**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents a systematized qualitative literature review on the incorporation of local culture into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. The corpus was synthesized through a thematic analysis, with the purpose of examining key foundations and recurring claims in language education research and discussing implications for the Colombian context. The review is based on the premise that learning English should not be confined to grammatical and lexical mastery but should also include cultural dimensions that enable learners to connect the language to their sociocultural realities. Across literature, the language culture relationship emerges as a core dimension of language teaching and of the development of communicative competence, particularly when the goal is to foster intercultural skills. Several authors highlight that integrating local culture into English learning enhances student motivation and participation, as content becomes more meaningful when connected with familiar experiences, identities, and knowledge. Likewise, it is argued that this integration promotes a critical understanding of the language, as learning is situated in real contexts rather than limited to abstract linguistic frameworks. The theoretical review indicates that local culture, when intentionally incorporated into teaching practices, can become a pedagogical resource that expands discursive possibilities in the classroom and strengthens intercultural communicative competence. In this way, cultural integration in EFL emerges as a relevant perspective to enrich the educational process and support meaningful learning among students.

**Keywords**: Local Culture; Intercultural Communicative Competence; English Language Classroom

**RESUMEN**

Este artículo presenta una revisión bibliográfica cualitativa sistematizada sobre la incorporación de la cultura local en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). El corpus se sintetizó mediante un análisis temático, con el fin de examinar los fundamentos clave y las afirmaciones recurrentes en la investigación sobre la enseñanza de idiomas y discutir las implicaciones para el contexto colombiano. La revisión se basa en la premisa de que el aprendizaje del inglés no debe limitarse al dominio gramatical y léxico, sino que también debe incluir dimensiones culturales que permitan a los estudiantes conectar el idioma con sus realidades socioculturales. En toda la literatura, la relación entre el idioma y la cultura surge como una dimensión fundamental de la enseñanza de idiomas y del desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa, especialmente cuando el objetivo es fomentar las habilidades interculturales.Diversos autores subrayan que integrar la cultura local en el aprendizaje del inglés favorece la motivación y la participación estudiantil, en tanto el contenido adquiere significado al conectarse con experiencias, identidades y saberes cercanos. Asimismo, se plantea que esta articulación promueve la construcción de una comprensión crítica del idioma, pues sitúa el aprendizaje en contextos reales y no únicamente en marcos lingüísticos abstractos. La revisión teórica consultada señala que la cultura local, al incorporarse de manera intencional en las prácticas de enseñanza, puede convertirse en un recurso pedagógico que amplía las posibilidades discursivas del aula y fortalece la competencia comunicativa intercultural. En conjunto, la integración cultural en EFL se configura como una perspectiva pertinente para enriquecer el proceso educativo y consolidar aprendizajes significativos en los estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** Cultura Local; Competencia comunicativa intercultural; Aula de clase de inglés.

## INTRODUCCIÓN

In the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), the cultural dimension is frequently regarded as a supplementary element, even though the process of language acquisition entails the negotiation of meanings, identities, and power relations. In the context of Colombia, characterized by ethnic, linguistic and territorial diversity, this tension is exacerbated when educational curricula and practices prioritize standardized content and measurement logic, thus marginalizing local knowledge and community experiences. In this scenario, the integration of local culture into pedagogical practices has been shown to engender meaningful learning, whilst simultaneously facilitating the interrogation of cultural essentialisms, thereby amplifying voices that have historically been marginalized, and enhancing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) from a critical perspective. Consequently, a systematic review of the literature on local culture and interculturality in EFL enables the derivation of guidelines with direct implications for the Colombian educational context.

The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) cannot be limited to the repetition of grammatical structures or the practice of isolated linguistic items. Although grammatical repetition is a feature of language that fulfills multiple functions in communication, cognition, and linguistic organization which enhance clarity, supports learning, and enriches both spoken and written discourse through its structural role, it represents

only one dimension of language acquisition. Crucially, cultural dimensions are also involved as they shape how people think, interact, and make sense of the world around them (Purba, 2011; Samovar et al., 1981). In a globalized context where English operates as a lingua franca, many educational models continue to rely on hegemonic cultural references as if they were universal. This tendency relegates students' local identities and creates a noticeable gap between what is taught and what learners find meaningful in their own lives. This disjunction between linguistic instruction and cultural relevance tends to produce what scholars describe as linguistic competence without cultural consciousness which is a form of learning that may be technically correct yet remains conceptually superficial. Kramsch (1998) advocates that language and culture cannot be separated, as language carries memories, symbolic values, and shared ways of interpreting reality. Beyond functioning as a system of communication, language also serves as a repository of society's cosmovision. Words, expressions, grammatical structures, among others, reflect how a community perceives and values the world encompassing from time perception, values and beliefs, hierarchies and forms of interaction, to cultural knowledge and practices that cover traditions, economic activities and even art forms of expression. This idea supports the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis. From this perspective, English instruction needs to move beyond the mere transmission of linguistic forms and integrate cultural frameworks that encourage students to become active interpreters of meaning rather than passive recipients of

information, particularly in countries with a wide variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity.

The Colombian context illustrates this well. Firstly, Colombia is home to numerous indigenous, afro-descendant, and regional communities, each holding their indistinct ways of interpreting and interacting with the world. According to the Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis, language shapes thought and perception therefore, understanding these linguistic differences is essential for designing educational practices that are culturally relevant and meaningful. Ethnic and regional diversity creates conditions that naturally call for culturally sensitive approaches to EFL teaching. Studies by Bedoya et al. (2018) and Gómez (2018) show that when local cultural content is incorporated into English instruction, whether through oral storytelling, Indigenous narratives, Afro-Colombian music, regional foods, or community histories, students develop stronger connections to their identities and engage more critically with classroom materials. In such environments, students can see themselves reflected in the language, which tends to increase motivation and persistence (Hidayat, Asrifan, & Dewi, 2024).

By contrast, teaching approaches that rely solely on foreign cultural models often create a sense of distance. Students may struggle to relate to the material, which can lead to demotivation and surface-level learning (Kostikova et al., 2018). In these cases, English remains something external, something to memorize rather than a medium through which they can interpret their own

experiences. Ignoring the connection between language, thought, and culture may lead to teaching models that privilege hegemonic linguistic and cultural norms, potentially marginalizing students' local identities and knowledge systems. Integrating local culture into EFL classrooms acts as a bridge between students and the language. It allows English to function not as a tool for replacing local identities, but as an additional resource for understanding, expressing, and even reimagining one's world and foster learning that respects local worldviews, validates learner's cultural backgrounds, and promotes critical and reflective engagement with English. When approached in this manner, English education becomes more than a linguistic exercise and it becomes a space where cultural recognition, critical reflection, and meaningful communication can coexist. As stated by Walsh (2008,2009) it cannot be denied that there is a dimension of power within education. Education is not a neutral process, rather, it reproduces social structures, cultural hierarchies, and power relations. Such an approach requires educators and students to recognize how knowledge production, curriculum design, and pedagogical practices can reinforce existing power imbalances, and to consciously work toward creating educational spaces that challenge hegemonic perspectives by promoting and validating more socially just and culturally responsive approaches to learning English.

## Culture

Culture may be understood as the matrix of symbols, values, beliefs, and shared practices through which communities interpret reality (Purba,

2011). In the EFL educational context, culture compasses far more than evident elements such traditions, customs, or rituals. In the According to this author, without a thoughtful integration of culture, EFL teaching can promote a fragmented or decontextualized understanding by disconnecting students from the authentic communicative and cultural functions of the language in both global and local contexts. Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981), cited in Purba (2011), argue that communication is culturally coded, meaning that the same utterance can produce different interpretations depending on the sociocultural background of the speaker. From this standpoint, culture not only guides how individuals encode and decode messages, but also influences how they interpret and assign meaning, shaping identity, behavior, and thought. Similarly, Kramsch (1998) defines culture as a site of identity construction reinforced by discourse and memory, while Damen (1987), cited in Bedoya et al. (2005), complements this understanding by describing culture as learned and shared human patterns or models for living that permeate all aspects of social interaction, not static, but continuously evolving through interaction and learning. This perspective positions culture as both a collective and individual phenomenon in which people are brought together through shared meanings while simultaneously influencing how individuals understand and interact with the world. In EFL classroom, culture functions as a framework for comprehension because without cultural context, vocabulary lacks nuance, idioms lose resonance, and pragmatics become inaccessible. Consequently, teaching English through

culturally situated experiences provides students with cognitive, affective, and social scaffolds that enhance meaning-making and reduce linguistic alienation.

These theoretical perspectives suggest that culture should be understood as a shared, symbolic, dynamic, and socially embedded system that shapes cognition, communication, identity, and social interaction. In the EFL classroom, culture should not be treated as a peripheral addition to linguistic instruction, but rather as foundational component that supports the development of linguistic and cultural competence. A framework of this scope, positions English learning within contexts where students are encouraged to interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning across diverse cultural settings, while seeing themselves and their communities reflected in the language learning process and developing social awareness and cultural recognition. Santana and Cely (2023) mentions that "learning culture is essential for life because human beings who interact with different cultures become an active recipient and can build and strengthen personality, receiving what the environment offers to cope with the social relationships that people maintain" (p. 63). In the field of education, including cultural education in the classroom is fundamental and necessary for students' human development.

**Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence constitutes a fundamental element in the process of learning a foreign language, as it enables students to engage respectfully and effectively across cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Byram (1997) conceptualizes this competence as a combination of five core dimensions. Attitudes refer to curiosity, openness, involving the ability to reflect on personal cultural assumptions while engaging with alternative perspectives. Knowledge relates to understanding social processes, cultural practices and symbols and comparing them with one's cultural framework. Skills of Interpreting and Relating concern the ability to interpret cultural practices and symbols and compare them with one's own cultural framework. Skills of discovery and Interaction involve adapting behaviors and communicative responses appropriately in unfamiliar cultural settings. Finally, Critical Cultural Awareness refers to the ability to critically evaluate and analyze one's own and others' cultural practices, values, and beliefs. Collectively, these core dimensions highlight that IC extends beyond linguistic skills, requiring a holistic integration of attitudes, knowledge, and skills which accentuates the importance of reflection, critical thinking, and even ethical commitment to respecting cultural diversity, including one's own. Building on this, Fantini (2005) extends this notion by emphasizing the practical abilities necessary for effective intercultural interaction. These involve the interplay of three components already identified by Byram, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills, alongside five operational dimensions. Linguistic Competence refers to the ability to use language effectively across cultural contexts, including an understanding of pragmatics. Behavioral Adaptability involves adjusting one's behavior to align with cultural expectations without compromising personal identity. Relationship-Building concerns establishing rapport and

collaborating effectively with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This is the backbone of intercultural engagement. Cross-Cultural Problem-Solving involves Conflict Resolution navigating misunderstandings constructively. Cultural Decentering and Perspective-Taking refers to stepping outside one's own cultural framework to understand the world through the lens of others, a process that requires empathy. Cultural Self-Awareness entails acknowledging and critically reflecting on one's cultural biases and assumptions. Critical Reflection involves interrogating one's own cultural biases, and others', during intercultural encounters. Managing Emotional Responses refers to the ability to regulate emotions during misunderstanding or frustrations and ensure they do not escalate into conflict. Finally, Acquiring New Cultural Knowledge includes being able to research and actively seeking into understanding the cultural framework of others. Fantini's framework is relevant in FLE contexts because it supports students in transitioning from proficient speakers to globally competent communicators.

Intercultural competence surpasses mere tolerance, it involves the critical examination necessary to dismantle prejudice, encourage dialogue, and cultivate global citizenship. In multilingual societies such as Colombia, this competence reinforces coexistence among diverse communities, positioning English not as replacement for local identities but as extension of cultural pluralism and a lived experience to be cultivated through continuous learning and application.

## Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communicative Competence expands and integrates the conceptualization of the skills required in FLE. ICC incorporates the ability to build communicative and cultural bridges between individuals from diverse sociocultural backgrounds by merging linguistic proficiency with cultural awareness. Byram (2002) defines ICC as the ability to establish shared understanding and to interact meaningfully with speakers whose identities, linguistic repertoires, and cultural experiences differ significatively from one's own. It requires students to interpret meaning across cultural frameworks and to mediate between perspectives. Within this framework, it is essential that students move beyond the mere fact of learning English solely as a communicate tool and instead be equipped with the skills needed to respect and value what is perceived as different. Likewise, Chen and Starosta (1996) offer a complementary lens, they propose that ICC involves affective, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions that allow individuals to communicate flexibly and sensitively in diverse context. They emphasize that intercultural communication goes beyond the mere transmission of information by validating different identities and fostering mutual understanding. In alignment, with the aforesaid authors, Fantini (2002) highlights that ICC is developmental, emerging through interconnected dimensions such attitudes, knowledge, skills and linguistic ability, all of which evolve through continuous exposure, reflection, and interaction in multicultural environments. Thus, ICC constitutes an ongoing process of learning and transformation. In the EFL context, ICC reframes English as

a linguistic skill, a tool for dialogue, collaboration, and identity negotiation while navigating the complexities of intercultural encounters. Students who develop ICC can critically analyze discourse, recognize power dynamics, and articulate their perspectives in global conversations. Overall, ICC is understood as the student's capacity to communicate critically, sensitively, and effectively with individuals from diverse cultural contexts. These competences are key and fundamental not only for fostering dialogue between individuals and cultures but also strengthening linguistic and promoting more inclusive and contextually grounded practices in the EFL classroom.

**Local culture in EFL**

The integration of local culture into EFL instruction transforms the classroom from a space of linguistic repetition into a site of cultural exchange, enriching meaningful learning. Mahmud (2019) notes that local cultural elements carry emotional resonance, fostering attachment and meaning and Prastiwi (2013) highlights that oral histories, traditional games, and folklore stimulate creativity, imagination, and linguistic experimentation. From this perspective, local culture is understood as a form of self-identity represented by dynamic constructs that encompass the values, practices, symbols, and shared beliefs that define a group or individual within a specific sociocultural context. Thus, language becomes a vessel for preserving and expressing cultural heritage. Mahmud (2019) emphasizes in the deep emotional and symbolic foundations of cultural identity, which are intrinsically part of an individual

socio-cultural belonging, while Prastiwi (2013), addresses cultural identity as a manifestation of creativity, imagination, and inherent values shaped by the students' local cultural frameworks. Tantri and Santosa (2024) further explain that local culture enhances memory and retention, as students anchor new vocabulary in familiar concepts. This implies a cognitive and emotional engagement in the learning process. Familiar, cultural symbols, traditions, daily practices, or artifacts play a relevant role in making learning meaningful, and their familiarity fosters the retention of new knowledge. Anchoring EFL learning in culturally familiar pathways enhances comprehension, supports long-term retention, and provides depth to language usage. Moreover, integrating local culture contributes to the preservation of cultural roots and the nurturing of sociocultural pride, as identity acts as a bridge between local traditions and globalized education. When students are encouraged to value their native traditions, they counteract the homogenizing effects of globalization. In the Colombian context, characterized by cultural diversity that includes practices such as Wayuu weaving, Pacific marimba rhythms, Andean festivals, and Raizal English Creole, local content not only enriches linguistic input but also nurtures sociocultural pride. This approach reframes English as a vehicle for narrating Colombian identity rather than assimilating foreign norms, connecting everyday realities with educational content. Ultimately, it strengthens identity and belonging by transforming English into a medium for expressing and preserving local cultural traditions and values.

## Critical interculturality

Critical interculturality lies beyond traditional approaches to intercultural education by directly confronting hegemonic discourses and power structures embedded in language teaching. Walsh (2009, 2008) describes critical interculturality as a decolonial project that centers marginalized knowledge and resists epistemic homogenization rather than a merely educational perspective. It emerges from the struggle of resistance and the creation of new ways of knowing and being, characterized by a decolonial stance that challenges the naturalization of dominant epistemologies. Potes-Morales (2022) supports this idea when highlighting that critical interculturality arises from locally driven voices advocating for equity, linguistic sovereignty, and educational justice. Its goal is to dismantle the cultural and linguistic hierarchies embedded in foreign language teaching and to reexamine and transform educational practices in manners that foster more democratic and socially just relations. Granados-Beltrán (2018) enriches this framework by situating CI within a sociopolitical and ethical orientation, shifting the focus from cultural comparison to a critical questioning of power relations, privilege, and the dominance of hegemonic epistemologies. This approach empowers not only students but also teachers to resist the normalization of hegemonic power. Reaffirming the urge of a re-evaluation of curricula that often reinforce Anglo-American normative. On another hand, Viaña et al. (2010) conceptualize critical interculturality as a transformative process that reconstructs social relations by fostering recognition, dignity, and plurality. Considering this approach, by re-centering Colombian

epistemologies, students become critical readers of cultural narratives who can engage with English to defend, represent, and expand their local heritage.

According to Vargas Hernández et al. (2024) for a considerable number of years, the teaching of culture has been regarded as a fundamental component of the acquisition of a foreign language. This has resulted in the integration of the development of intercultural skills within the learning outcomes. Nevertheless, this methodology for the study of culture is conventionally predicated on the assumption that the foreign culture under scrutiny is already familiar to the students, thus neglecting to acknowledge the students' own cultural heritage. CI represents a paradigm shift in intercultural education, transcending traditional approaches and challenging others, while proposing politically and ethically grounded projects that seek to dismantle power structures and hegemonic discourses aligning with a transformative agenda with the aim to align with a decolonial and decolonial and transformative agenda that embraces social justice, equity, and epistemic plurality.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the findings was conducted using a qualitative literature review design, with the principles of thematic content analysis guiding the process. Following the establishment of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the corpus, the selected studies were systematized in an analytical matrix. This matrix collected bibliographic references, country and educational level of experience, methodological approach and design, characteristics of

the participating population, central purpose of the study, and main results related to the incorporation of local culture in English language teaching and the development of intercultural communicative competence. The matrix constituted the fundamental input for the interpretive phase, thereby facilitating a comparative and organized reading of the available empirical evidence.

A thematic content analysis was conducted in several phases on this basis. Firstly, an exhaustive and repeated reading of the results and discussion sections of each article was carried out, from which an open coding was performed, identifying units of meaning related to: a) contributions of local culture to language learning and student participation; b) manifestations of the development of (inter)cultural communicative competence; and c) pedagogical, curricular, and institutional tensions and challenges. Secondly, axial coding was developed, whereby the initial codes were grouped into broader categories and subcategories through a process of constant comparison between studies, contexts, and educational levels. The integration of the findings was then undertaken on a thematic basis, resulting in the establishment of cross-cutting analytical axes that subsequently organize the results section of the article. To strengthen the rigor and credibility of the analysis, a systematic comparison was made between emerging categories and the theoretical framework. Analytical memos were recorded throughout the process, and the categorical system was critically reviewed with academic peers. This process ensured the internal consistency and transparency of the methodological procedure followed.

## FINDINGS

Following a systematized qualitative review, the corpus was examined through thematic content analysis supported by an analytic matrix and iterative coding. This process produced cross-cutting themes that capture the most consistent ways in which local culture mediates learners' engagement, meaning-making, and ICC-related growth. The thematic synthesis resulted in overarching themes and related subthemes that recur across the reviewed literature, including Colombian and international studies.

Previous studies succeeded in showing the importance of linking local culture in the EFL Teaching and Learning classroom as a strategy to enhance and strengthen the learner's identity and improve language comprehension.

Studies undertaken in other countries serve to reinforce and support the notion that cultural components play a significant role in the enhancement of intercultural and communicative competencies. In Indonesia, different studies demonstrated how materials that include learners' own cultural elements succeed in creating a better connection with the learning content as well as promoting a sense of belonging. For example, Mahmud (2019) states that local culture is the cultural self-identity that is created and integrated into learning materials to preserve identity and thus facilitate language acquisition.

Likewise, Prastiwi (2013) highlightes that local culture, when integrated with traditional resources such as storytelling, allows students to incorporate their own local cultural values and thus build their personal identity. In

Algeria, Bouslama & Benaissi (2018) succeeded in identifying that intercultural competencies are missing effective resources for teaching and learning, although they are essential.

Likewise, in Colombia, Gómez (2018) stated that international news readings were implemented to develop critical awareness and intercultural communication skills in students. Similarly, Bedoya et al. (2018) demonstrated that when Colombian cultural content and tools are used, it suggests that encouraging learner participation and comprehension.

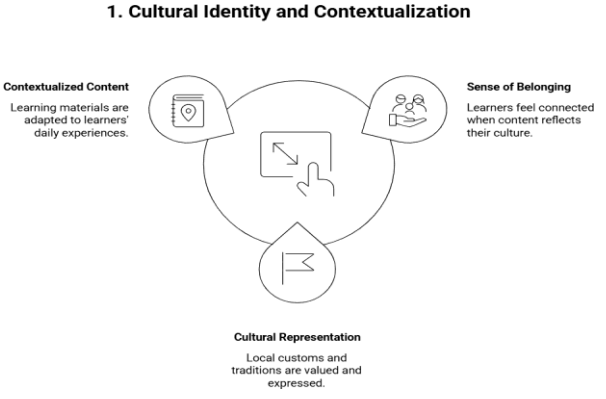
Thus, all previous studies finally show that including cultural components, specifically those of the learners' local context, succeeds in generating better results in comprehension, participation, and motivation, and helps learners to interact in a more effective, critical, and respectful way in diverse cultural contexts. The analysis of findings could demonstrate that the incorporation of local culture helps students to develop their cultural identity; improve their communicative competencies in English; and develop intercultural communicative competence.

### 1. Cultural Identity and Contextualization

The findings indicate the presence of three elements through which the incorporation of local culture into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom enhances learning. These mechanisms are as follows: the contextualization of content (adapting materials to students' everyday experiences), the sense of belonging (emotional connection and recognition

when the curriculum reflects their culture), and cultural representation (appreciation and expression of local customs and traditions).

**Figure 1** *Cultural Identity and Contextualization*




### *Sense of Belonging*

This is one of the most consistent findings in previous studies, since EFL learners feel more connected to the learning content when it has and includes elements of their context and sociocultural environment. Local culture is the cultural self-identity that is created and integrated into learning materials (Mahmud, 2019). The link between the learning content and the learner's reality helps strengthen the learner's sense of belonging, creating a more meaningful learning environment. The local culture is not only the bridge for foreign language learning, but it is also a fundamental point for the learners since it helps them feel represented in their learning process. The integration of local knowledge and practices, including traditional stories, festivities and everyday sociocultural practices, into the English curriculum has been shown

to be positively valued by teachers and students alike. This incorporation is regarded as a privileged way to strengthen the sense of identity and emotional connection with the language being learned (Margana, 2009; Prastiwi, 2013).

***Cultu/al Rep/esentation***

Creating the representation of local customs, traditions, expressions and even gastronomy in materials and activities of classes, it has been demonstrated that the learner indicates that recognizing its own culture and making it valuable and worthy of being expressed through English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This also helps to improve the self-esteem and participation of the learners, while succeeding in creating a cultural projection towards other learners. When Colombian cultural content and tools are used, it was associated with encouraging learner participation and comprehension (Bedoya et al., 2021). Therefore, learning stops being an obligation and imposition with unrelated content, and becomes a construction between the Foreign Language and the local context and content.

***Contextualized Content***

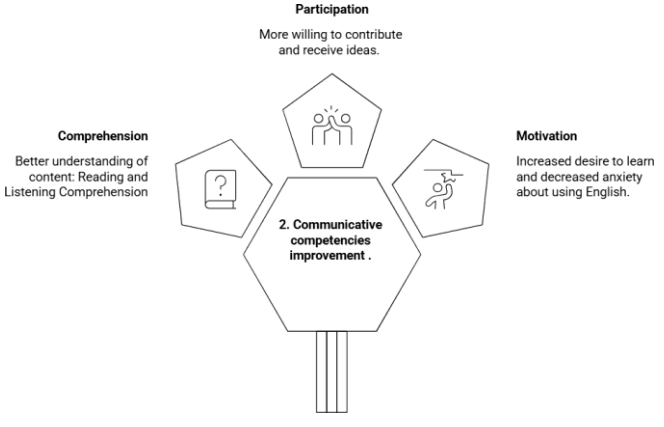
The contents that are successfully adapted to the daily context, experiences, and cultural references of the learners, make the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning more comprehensible to them. Creating a contextualization of the learning contents, the interpretation of meanings is improved, thus facilitating comprehension and linking what is being learned with what is being experienced. As Tantri and Santosa (2024) state, the use of local

culture helps to enhance language comprehension as well as promote cultural identity. It is evident that the process of contextualization is instrumental in transforming the EFL classroom into a more functional and realistic learning environment. A study conducted in Colombia by Vargas Hernández et al. (2025) demonstrates that the systematic incorporation of local culture into English language classes at a rural school in Choachí (Cundinamarca) transforms foreign language learning into a more relevant, meaningful and contextualized experience for students.

## 2. Communicative competencies improvement

Findings demonstrate how the incorporation of local culture enhances communication skills, a central theme that manifests itself in three associated results. Firstly, greater participation is characterized by a willingness to contribute and receive ideas in interaction. In addition, there are reports of progress in comprehension (particularly in reading and listening) and increased motivation, accompanied by reduced anxiety when using English.

**Figure 2** *Communicative Competences improvement.*



### *Reading and Listening Comp/ehension*

Using materials based on local culture has shown positive effects on the process and development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading and oral comprehension. Previous studies have found that learners succeed in understanding the content better when texts or audios are related to their cultural environment. Improve students' reading comprehension and motivation using reading materials focused on local culture (Aminullah, Sada & Sudarsono, 2019). This occurs since by connecting the topics and content with the context, learners do not exert a greater effort to understand the context and succeed in concentrating more on the language, reducing an extra cognitive load. As demonstrated in the study by Vargas Hernández et al. (2025), students begin to use English as a resource to describe, interpret, and reevaluate their own context, rather than as a mere linguistics code detached from their experience. Findings reveal that designing reading materials focused on local cultural references, activate students' prior knowledge, improve reading comprehension, and promote more positive attitudes toward the foreign language. (Aminullah et al., 2019; Mahmud, 2019).

### *Pctive Pa/ticipation*

Learners' participation is specifically related to their levels of identification with the learning content. When the topics are shown in their reality and culture, learners succeed in feeling more willing to contribute and receive ideas. Thus, as evidenced in the study by Bedoya et al. (2021), Colombian

cultural content encourages learner participation. Thus, the inclusion of local cultural practices, such as festivities, legends, myths, or expressions, successful in promoting genuine and spontaneous participation on part of EFL learners. When students perceive learning as meaningful, they are motivated to participate in class, as they can connect their new knowledge with their prior knowledge, which is already familiar to them. This in turn motivates them to participate actively in class.

The studies reviewed agree that incorporating local culture and culturally significant content transforms the role of students from passive recipients of input to actors who participate actively in classroom interactions. In the Colombian case, Bedoya et al. (2018) show that the implementation of teaching units focused on Colombian themes generated a more pleasant classroom atmosphere and, above all, "an increase in learner participation and production," to the point that they "participated throughout the class" because they felt engaged by content with which they identified and that allowed them to draw on their previous experience while using English as a means of expression. Similarly, the study on local culture in a rural Colombian context by Vargas Hernández et al ( 2025) that reviving customs and traditions from the community context and integrating them into English classes, within the framework of active learning and learning by doing approaches, responds to students' desire to "be more active" and enhances their motivation to engage in communicative and intercultural tasks in a foreign language.

*Meaningful Motivation*

Increasing motivation becomes a fundamental strategy for Foreign Language learning, as indicated by previous studies, in which it is said that increased motivation is succeeded when the content is linked to the learner's culture. Improve motivation and anxiety levels in the classroom with the use of local culture and thus generate more meaningful learning (Fuad et al., 2020). Familiarizing the learning content with identity recognition and including it in the learning materials has been demonstrated to engender a more positive disposition towards learning among learners, thus reducing anxiety levels, and improving their learning process. The strategic incorporation of local culture into English language instruction can effectively transform the learning environment, significantly enhancing motivation among students. Working with customs, traditions, through cultural activities, authentic materials, and tasks such as nature walks and comparative poster making makes learning more attractive, relevant, and meaningful. This is because students can identify concrete applications of the language in their immediate environment (Vargas Hernández et al., 2025).

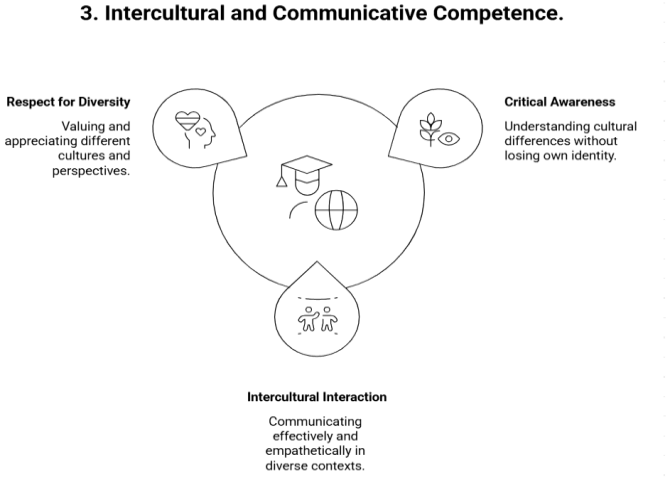
Findings of this systematic review of classroom materials based on local culture indicate that these types of resources are consistently associated with increases in motivation, decreased anxiety about using English, and perceptions of more meaningful learning in EFL contexts, to the extent that

the foreign language is re-signified as a tool linked to the daily life of students and not as a foreign or exclusively academic code (Tantri & Santosa, 2024).

## 3. Intercultural and Communicative Competences

The evidence demonstrates that the incorporation of local culture fosters three interconnected facets of intercultural development: respect for diversity, critical awareness, and intercultural interaction. Taken together, these findings suggest that learning is not limited to the recognition of cultural differences, but also involves the valuation of diverse perspectives, the ability to understand these perspectives critically without renouncing one's own identity, and the communication of empathy in heterogeneous contexts.

**Figure 3.** Intercultural and Communicative Competences




### *C/itical Pea/eness*

One of the goals and objectives that are created when teaching a Foreign Language, is to train learners to obtain a capacity for cultural reflection, to be

able to recognize other cultures, recognizing the differences, without breaking down previous knowledge. In Gómez (2018) previous study, international news readings were implemented to foster critical awareness in English learners. Such strategies enable learners to succeed in developing language skills and a critical eye and awareness of sociocultural contexts and content that can be represented through the language of learning. The study by Vargas Hernández et al. (2025) mentions that through workshops in which students create cultural posters, record videos of the preparation of typical dishes, or go on ecological walks to emblematic places such as La Chorrera adventure park (a place in Colombia), participants strengthen their skills of observation, comparison, and reflection on the relationship between language, territory and sociocultural practices. These artefacts revealed a growing awareness of the value of local heritage and a greater willingness to project it to external audiences using English. This, in the words of Vargas Hernández et al. (2025), translates into advances in the identity dimension of intercultural competence, articulating pride in rurality with openness to dialogue with other cultures.

### *Inte/cultu/al Inte/action*

When interacting with diverse cultures, more than translating words, skills are needed to be able to interpret, adapt, and communicate effectively and empathetically in different contexts. As well as the study developed by Bouslama and Benaissi (2018) in Algeria, where it was evidenced that teachers succeeded in recognizing the absence of effective resources to foster these

skills, even though intercultural competencies are essential. Therefore, this need is reflected and observed in the Colombian context since the aim is to prepare learners not only to use English as a Foreign Language but also to succeed in participating in real conversations and contexts with speakers from other cultures, but without losing their own identity.

***Respect fo/ Dive/sity***

Fostering respect for other cultures and contexts creates a great contribution to the learning process in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through an intercultural approach. When cultural content is created and presented from different perspectives or points of view, learners succeed in learning and becoming aware of the value of other ways of seeing the world and their context. Likewise, this respect succeeds in being enhanced when learners feel and believe that their own culture and context are valued. This is why integrating local culture does not create competition with foreign culture, but rather they work together. As stated by Fantini (2002), intercultural communicative competencies require the development of attitudes, knowledge, and linguistic skills, enabling the learner to communicate effectively in multicultural environments.

***Tensions and Challenges***

Despite the positive outcomes reported across the reviewed literature, the thematic synthesis also reveals recurrent tensions between traditional curricular priorities and intercultural aims. Several studies have described how

EFL programs remain strongly shaped by standardized curricular demands and measurable linguistic outcomes. This has the potential to restrict the time and pedagogical space available for sustained intercultural work in the classroom. In such contexts, the integration of local culture and the development of ICC are often regarded as "add-ons" rather than being considered fundamental dimensions of language education. This results in a discrepancy between the stated educational objectives and the actual practices employed in the classroom.

A secondary cross-cutting challenge pertains to the accessibility of authentic materials and educators' professional preparation in implementing culturally situated and critically oriented pedagogical approaches. The extant literature indicates challenges in accessing or producing locally grounded resources that transcend superficial representations of culture, as well as limitations in institutional support for adapting materials to diverse classrooms. Furthermore, pedagogues frequently express a necessity for enhanced preparation in the domain of intercultural pedagogy, with a particular emphasis on the avoidance of cultural essentialism, the facilitation of critical dialogue, and the integration of local cultural content with communicative language objectives.

When considered as a whole, these tensions indicate that the promotion of local culture and the ICC in the context of EFL necessitates not only innovation at the classroom level, but also the alignment of curricula and the ongoing professional development of teachers. In the absence of these

enabling conditions, the potential for culturally responsive initiatives to become systemic and efficacious is diminished, as they may remain fragmented and dependent on individual teacher efforts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study recognizes that incorporating local culture into the process of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) enables students to learn in a more meaningful manner and to develop a broader and deeper understanding of the language in connection with their sociocultural environment. When the foreign language learning process is connected to students' traditions, real-life contexts, and cultural narratives, it becomes more motivating and contextually grounded, thereby strengthening students' identity and sense of belonging.

The review also demonstrates that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is not exclusively dependent on language proficiency, but on learners' ability to recognize, value, and engage in dialogue with other cultures from their own cultural standpoint. Furthermore, the findings highlight the need to design teaching strategies and materials that integrate local culture in meaningful and intentional ways, particularly when approached from a decolonial and emancipatory perspective that challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge and centers local epistemologies.

Despite these advances, two major challenges persist. First, the limited availability of didactic materials that authentically represent Colombia's cultural diversity creates a barrier to implementation. Many existing resources continue

to prioritize foreign cultural contexts, producing a disconnect between students and the content used in EFL classrooms. Second, teacher preparation remains insufficient, as educators frequently lack training in intercultural pedagogy, decolonial education, and critical language teaching practices. Addressing these gaps is essential for ensuring that culturally grounded and emancipatory approaches can be enacted effectively.

Vargas Hernández et al. (2025) state that when the foreign language curriculum explicitly incorporates the practices, knowledge, and narratives of the community, it simultaneously enhances language learning, intercultural awareness, and the positive reinterpretation of rural schools as legitimate settings for building global citizenship. In this sense, the findings support the thesis that the development of intercultural communicative competence in rural contexts does not depend exclusively on access to cutting-edge technologies, but above all on the ability of teachers to turn local culture into a central pedagogical resource in the process of teaching and learning English.

Overall, the findings collectively show that teaching English from the perspective of local culture not only enriches the teaching and learning process but also contributes to the formation of critical and reflective students who are aware of their identities and capable of engaging respectfully in diverse intercultural contexts. Approaching EFL education through a decolonial and emancipatory lens supports the construction of a more coherent, humane, and inclusive education system, one that values Colombia's cultural richness,

challenges hegemonic narratives, and positions English not as a tool of linguistic domination, but as a gateway to communication, mutual understanding, and plural citizenship. Such an approach ultimately affirms that culturally situated EFL instruction holds transformative potential for promoting equity, critical consciousness, and social justice within Colombian education.

Despite the numerous benefits that studies have identified regarding the impact of teaching local culture on the development of students' communication and intercultural skills, there are tensions in the design of the English curriculum. The curriculum maintains a more traditional view of English language teaching, in many cases solely to prepare students for standardized English tests. Bouslama & Bouhass Benaissi (2018) and Margana (2009) highlights structural tensions that provide a contextual framework for these findings. In Algeria, for instance, despite the official English curriculum explicitly promoting the development of cultural knowledge, the comparison of different cultures and the cultivation of attitudes of tolerance and openness, classroom practices remain predominantly focused on preparing for standardized tests and imparting linguistic competence. This restricts the effective integration of intercultural competence.

## Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest related to this research.

## Declaration of contribution to authorship

**Leidy Daniela Torres Castiblanco:** validation, visualization, drafting of the original manuscript.

**Yeny Paola Herrera Mendoza: data** curation, formal analysis, research, methodology,

**Blanca Lucia Cely Betancourt**: supervision, validation, revision, and editing of the manuscript

## Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

The authors declare that they used artificial intelligence as a support for this article, and that this tool does not in any way replace intellectual work or processes. After rigorous reviews with different tools, which confirmed that there is no plagiarism, as evidenced by the evidence, the authors state and acknowledge that this work is the product of their own intellectual work, which has not been written or published on any electronic or AI platform.

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