

Colombian Cultural Identity In The Teaching Of English As A Foreign Language

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Abstract

This research project presents a fundamental opportunity for high school students in Bogotá and Chia, Colombia to strengthen and build their knowledge of their own culture in the classroom. Through this research project, students are given the opportunity to implement tools and academic learning strategies to improve their learning of English as a Foreign Language. The purpose of this project is to implement didactic units with Colombian cultural content in the teaching English, and thus, to enrich Colombian culture among students who know little of it. The project takes an ethnographic approach to sociocultural analysis in the classroom, and uses topic-based teaching and learning as a methodological approach to the design and implementation of each didactic unit. Results showed the commitment of learners and the leadership of teachers allowed students to expand and



acquire new Colombian cultural concepts and successfully reach the academic goals; as a result, they consolidated their identity as Colombians.

Key words: Culture, language, identity, Second Language learning, sociocultural analysis, didactic units, Topic based instruction.

Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación presenta una oportunidad fundamental para los estudiantes de secundaria de Bogotá y Chía, (Colombia) para fortalecer y construir su propia cultura en el aula; a través de este proyecto de investigación, los estudiantes tienen la oportunidad de aplicar las herramientas y estrategias de aprendizaje académico para mejorar su aprendizaje del inglés como Lengua Extranjera. El propósito de este proyecto es implementar unidades didácticas con contenidos culturales de Colombia en la enseñanza de inglés, y por lo tanto, para enriquecer la cultura colombiana entre los estudiantes que saben muy poco de ella. El proyecto tiene un enfoque etnográfico para el análisis sociocultural del aula, y utiliza el Topic-based instruction como un enfoque metodológico para el diseño e implementación de cada unidad didáctica. Como se ha observado, los resultados fueron muy positivos; consecuentemente, el compromiso de los estudiantes y el liderazgo de los maestros permitieron a los estudiantes ampliar y adquirir nuevos conceptos culturales y con éxito alcanzaron las metas académicas; como resultado, se consolidó su identidad como colombianos.

Palabras clave: Cultura, lenguaje, identidad, aprendizaje de la segunda lengua, análisis sociocultural, unidades didácticas, enseñanza temática.



Introduction

Colombian people have a deep respect for their own identity, for their own culture and for their roots, but the appreciation of these aspects is often uncertain due to the lack of understanding and awareness of collective memory (Edy, 1999); this is what raises the discussion today, not just as an academic problem but as a social disjunction relating to everyone.

One of the reasons why people disregard the beliefs and values of their social environment is due to the impact of globalization and the amount of information that arises every day in academic contexts and non-formal environments. However, this project addresses the social problem in the language field as an aid for the teaching and learning of a second language using appreciation of national themes in the classroom.

Previous studies have provided evidence on how these social factors construct culture through language, and all dimensions which relating to the human experience such as the intellectual or social dimensions which contribute to the development of the language. By all means, culture, identity, ideologies, and heritage are easily constructed through human interaction, supported by social factors and built upon through awareness of their connection with language. However, Colombian students learn English through foreign cultures that use American or British themes.

In a nutshell, this project attempts to address the following matters in relation to Colombian culture and the English language. Firstly, some traditional teachers have continued using material from abroad as a support for foreign language learning, instead of using their own culture to create successful foreign language teaching and learning. Secondly, it is essential to explore background theory about relevant concepts that support this research. Thirdly, this study intends to establish the methods used in order to create different learning and teaching situations in relation to the application of national topic-based didactic units using the connection between different basic English skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and the implementation of national theme-based activities. This study will attempt to expand knowledge of English as a foreign language which enhances the preservation and acquisition of Colombian culture and identity.

Considering the fact that students are completing a formal academic process of foreign language learning which seeks to acquire comprehension and proficiency in content areas such as the relationship of cultural differences between countries, it is essential that educational entities have extensive and wide training on how to create useful syllabi and academic programs, as well as creating successful learning environments and activities for everyone who is interested in learning a foreign language.

In this way, for Colombian English teachers, it is sometimes very difficult to make a link between the national culture and the foreign language course. They have to keep in mind aspects such as the impact of education on the identity of the student and how students obtain information about other cultures in a manner that benefits their lives. Besides, culture is a changing and evolving curriculum due to socialization and cultural-

exchange. In addition to this is the uncertainty of how Colombians recognize their own identity as their culture continues to undergo change. High school students that were involved in this research seemed to be abandoning their principles and customs to adopt foreign ways and different lifestyles contributing to a loss of interest in their roots—roots which are worthy of analysis.

The biggest issue that we are facing now is that we may experience foreign language (L2) learning and teaching, using decontextualized foreign language textbooks during the educational process. To avoid this, it is important to create contextualized material considering three important factors: receptors, resources, and data. First of all, the most important factor is the receptor: the students. They are the ones who receive the information and whose acquisition of the language is the reflection of a successful process. Secondly, there is the language itself as the resource. Finally, data is the factor that encompasses all the knowledge that needs to be transmitted through the resource to the receptors. In this case, the data is Colombian themes.

The transmission of self-knowledge generates culture which directly affects the development of experiences and personality itself; all of these academic activities support this development, especially in reading and comprehension skills. The implementation of didactic units with information about Colombia and its culture, using English as a target language and the core subject as the main topic, allowed the researchers to find the answer to the research question. English content books usually develop foreign cultural knowledge, therefore, it is important to create material that contributes to strengthening Colombian

culture and at the same time, contributes to efficient, highly contextualized EFL learning processes.

Considering these issues, this research project, following Topic Based Instruction as an approach to instructional design for classes, came up with a set of well-structured and organized lesson plans with didactic units that focus on Colombian culture and at the same time address the improvement of English skills. It generates a meaningful approach to language acquisition as it immerses the student in his or her cultural context. From the perspective of future teachers, the project allows us to develop our own material based on relevant knowledge of the students' context. Furthermore, this exercise trains us in the field of material development through Topic Based Instruction, which focuses on aspects of Colombian culture. Both learning and teaching are enhanced as the teacher is actively engaged in designing material based on clearly identified students' needs, which revolve around learning English and developing their identity. Moreover, as this approach requires the students to apply language skills as they learn, not only will they learn about the English language, but they will learn to use it as they talk and write about Colombian culture.

In summary, this project addresses the effect of English teaching by applying cultural didactic units focusing on only Colombian themes as the content of their education in English as a foreign language. Information about Colombian society will be explored in each lesson plan, and this information will help with the development and teaching of English classes as a core subject, focusing on the improvement of English skills during the whole process. This will allow learners to acquire foreign language knowledge, and also,



their own cultural identity awareness. It is important to recognize that elementary education in schools is imperative and viewed as being only important in terms of instilling norms in students. This traditional approach is often associated with a monotonous learning environment as materials are not that meaningful or engaging.

Literature Review

This chapter will explore theoretical concepts directly connected to the main topic, and propose a conceptual discussion defining concepts from different perspectives and involving different authors to complement notional ideas, in order to describe the main constructs of the pedagogical characteristics of language, foreign language, culture and identity in order to make a theoretical framework of all the primary features which substantiate this project.

Language is the element that allows humans to share thoughts and ideas, and there are different ways people define this concept. Language is a special kind of cipher or ‘standard code’; it consists of different groups of symbols which are possible to connect in order to become phrases. (Caplan, 1985) For this reason, human language is special due to its use of many codes that can be joined to form words and sentences, thus creating the ability to say anything and express any idea in any context. “Language is a complex code due to all these types of representations interacting to determine the meaning of each sentence in each context” (Caplan, 1985, p. 85) Human beings have the necessity to communicate among themselves to be part of the society in which they exchange ideas and thoughts.



In a language classroom, there must be a neutral position between the mother tongue (L1) and the Target language (L2). This means that the studied language and its contained cultural identity must be apart from, and not interfere with, the own criteria of the students. However, students must realize and be aware of the differences that 2 contrasting languages may have. And in the context of daily language use, they must know and adapt language depending on the context in which it is regularly applied. (Norton, 2000). Certainly, the neutral place between the two languages L1 and L2 should be evident and contrasting in the language environment, and in the social and cultural context.

In regards to foreign language learning in Colombia, the MEN (2006) published the basic standards called: “Estandares Basicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Ingles” (Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign language: English). The main purpose of this document is to show the level that students have achieved and the content students have covered in a certain time, while simultaneously learning their culture (a multiliteracy process). In Colombia, the national plan is addressing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) due to its implications for technology, wider communication, economic power, scientific knowledge and so on, around the world.

On the other hand, identity is the way people conceive of themselves as individuals or feel part of a group or community; it is also the way in which one perceives and categorizes people different from themselves. Identity refers to how people understand their relationship with the world and recognize how it is constructed across time and space. West (1992) declares that identity relates to the desire for recognition, the wish for affiliation, and the longing for security and safety. A person's identity will shift in accordance with

changing social and commercial relations. Language and identity are extremely interrelated. Language is a feature of human identity. Gender, education level, age, profession, and place of origin are features that all constitute aspects of one's personal and collective identification. Language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity (Spolsky, 1999).

Neither identity nor languages are used as fixed notions; both are dynamic, depending upon time and place (Norton, 1995). The way people perceive themselves changes with the passing of time, allowing us multiple identities over the years or even within a day. Commonly, an ethnic group identifies itself with a specific language. For the majority of Hispanics, the Spanish language goes deeply into cultural and personal identities. The work of the sociologist Goffman (1963) has been influential in showing that the self is constructed entirely through discourse, making our language choices of supreme importance for identity construction. In fact, Goffman states that personal identity is defined by how others identify an individual, not how people identify themselves.

Cultural environment involves not only ways of expressing oneself, but how people live and try to interact with society, and how they can understand each other in one place. According to Damen (1987) "Culture is learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day- to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism" (p. 367). Based on this, the culture is an adaptive mechanism that provides every human with their respective day to day living patterns and with models of living to be able to cooperate with the development of the society. In a nutshell, the main idea exposes the importance of culture



in life because this is the pattern that models the respective values and beliefs of each person.

Research Design

In order to achieve the objectives of this research project, the research team has chosen an Ethnographic action-research design. This is a methodology that permits researchers to evaluate the observed population in a more accurate and precise manner. According to Tacchi, Salter & Hearn, this approach “is based on combining two research approaches: ethnography and action research. Ethnography is a research approach that has traditionally been used to understand different cultures. Action research is used to bring about new activities through new understandings of situations” (2003, p. 1). Large amount of data can be analyzed in attempting to bridge the gap between EFL and cultural identity; using this method, engaging communities and overcoming the problematic situation will be easier. Mainly, this research method relies primarily on observational analysis used in an environmental setting, where students (the research community) defined the problem. To further investigate the effect of Colombian culture on English class, this project was addressed to high school students in private institutions located in Bogota and Chía, who wished to achieve high academic standards of education. Students were aged between 15 and 18 years old and they learned English through the use of foreign textbooks from A1 level of proficiency until B1 (according to the Common European Framework).

Instructional Design

In order to understand the meaning and the main goal of this methodology that is applied with these didactic units, it is appropriate to discuss and explain the basis and the implementation support of this process; Topic-Based instruction fulfills and recreate the Whole Language Approach (Edelsky, 1993) wherein it is essential to connect the four main skills “reading, writing, listening and speaking” as one, instead of seeing and processing language in pieces.

The procedures following data were collected to determine the problem and identify the substantial changes during development of the project. Firstly, surveys were taken to determine awareness of students’ prior knowledge of Colombian culture. Following that, a specific topic-based interview about Colombian themes gave the learners the opportunity to produce direct and straightforward answers. Finally, topic-based didactic units were applied according to a linear progression of grammar topics (based on lesson plans). At the conclusion, the application of these methods assisted in the development of language support for the students and provided a basis for the elaboration of this paper.

After applying these instruments, researchers decided to create and design lesson plans and didactic units focusing on the results of the survey and the interviews, considering topic-based instruction as a way to plan every single unit. The didactic unit was divided into three parts; these activities were the warm-up (which is the pre-activity), followed by the explanation of the topic and finally, the practice and production based activities. Furthermore, considering the all-inclusive language approach, each student

participated in reading, speaking, writing and listening comprehension exercises. In that way, these activities were analyzed focusing on the critical production of the students during the class. The design of different types of cultural activities was focused on engaging actively between them; all students contributed to the development of each didactic unit.



Data Analysis and findings

Three categories of information were selected and analyzed in order to measure the impact of the lessons on both language and culture acquisition during the period of intervention. This data enabled us to compare and contrast the validity of English lessons incorporated with aspects of Colombian culture. Ultimately, the data generated demonstrates improvements in both areas. During the duration of a semester, student's oral and written output in terms of language usage and cultural knowledge was analyzed through inventories of prior knowledge about culture using English, and Spanish when students were unable to express themselves.

Transition between traditional methods to topic based instruction based on Colombian cultural didactic units in the EFL classes.

This section explores the way in which the activities such as role-plays, interviews, games, posters, etc., were implemented. After designing the curriculum units with Colombian themes with language learning, these were adapted to the English program, while considering the time available for activities during the class hour and the independent work of the students when they were not in the classroom. Additionally, the activities contributed to the interaction between classmates who had the opportunity to have conversations related to their context; there were some topics that the students did not know very well, and for that reason, they responded positively in class.



In spite of having a short range of themes (Colombia), limited knowledge and prior understanding of specific topics, as well as unfamiliarity with culture-mixing lessons, students proved interested and motivated by the experience of participating in the project's implementation of these units. In the following excerpt from a class transcript, the teacher started the lesson asking for background knowledge about Myths and Legends. Then, students discussed for about two minutes and they recognized four stories which were El Moan (S6, La Llorona (S7), La Madre Selva (S8) and La Bola de Fuego (S1). After this, they were concentrated on the teacher's reading about the topic. At last, they made a distinction between a Myth and a Legend.

S5: For example with Myth, is related with the religious and political...

T: Religious and?

S5: Religious things; and...With Legends, is more like a symbolic thing, is not related with, I don't know...

T: With history meaning, yes?

S5: Yeah!

(Didactic unit #1, Myths and Legends, Recording-Class 01/didactic unit

Video 01,8 Minutes. 27-10-14)

It can be observed in this conversation that the Student (S5), though he did not answer the question, is connecting English language with the topic, trying to employ the previous knowledge that he had. However, the student on the final recording answered the last question with a story called "La Bola de Fuego" which is originally from Mexico.

Consequently, in each class process, even if students had prior knowledge about the topic of the class (and their own national folk traditions), they were able to express their ideas, although they had some difficulties with the topic because they did not know much about the content. However, they showed interest in the topic, and what is more; they connected new knowledge of language and cultural content.

The students gave positive feedback throughout the implementation of cultural short stories. Most students made a positive distinction between the legends and myths of the topic; the following are some of their answers to the question: “Which one of the ghost’s stories was more interesting for you?”:

S1:” I preferred the Antioquia’s Evil Chicken, because it was the funniest legend I had heard, when the teacher said “Pollo Maligno” I laughed a lot. Also it was funny that the only way to dispatch the chicken was praying a novena of Archangel Miguel.” (S3 – 27/10/14)

S2: “The evil chicken is the most interesting story because it can be interpreted as a signal of disfortune and we don’t know why we can be followed by this creature [*sic*].” (S9 – 27/10/14)

S3: “The pollo maligno because I considerate the chicken as a very weak creature, and because the chicken is a very pacifical creature. And because it was the only story that I’ve don’t know until now [*sic*].”

S4: “I found more interesting was the “Antioquia’s evil chicken” the Mysticism that involves over a small creature.” (S7 – 27/10/14)

(Didactic unit # 1, Colombian Myths and Legends, Question ·1)

The use of adjectives (funny, mysticism, small, weak, pacifically, misfortune) can be observed as an indication that the students successfully understood the class due to the learners' precise opinions and descriptions and their ability to develop reading comprehension through a personal view of interest. On the other hand, it is evident by S4 student's answer that he had linked up his definition of the animal "Chicken" with his new perception of this creature by the story; he compares his old concept with the one which the story is explaining, then he explains it and makes a meaningful distinction. Even though there are grammatical errors in these students' answers, they communicated their interest and curiosity for these new thematic stories (The Antioquia's Evil Chicken story in particular). Consequently, it is not difficult to extract from this data sample that their writing production involves a conceptual relation to previous thoughts and also, sharing meaningful positive feedback in terms of the content of this specific didactic unit.

However, when learners listened to Colombian songs, most of the reactions were quite negative, because the majority of them did not like this type of traditional Colombian music. However, as Colombians, they recognized why this music genre is an important symbol of our country. Nowadays, teenagers listen to different music genres and just a small number of people around the whole country like listening to traditional music. The most important aspect of this activity was that learners felt identified with our traditional music and despite the fact that they did not like this kind of music they know it and can distinguish it just by listening. As the following response:

Q1: "Why is this music important for Colombian people?"



S1: “Is important because Colombian musics create the songs [*sic*].”

S2: “Colombia has the music that is from us and that is important because we can show this to the world as Colombian music.”

S3: “Is music for old people but is our music from a long, long time ago.”

S4: “Because is our identification as Colombia people.”

(Didactic unit # 4, Colombian Typical Music, Question 1)

Based on these answers, it is notable that all the students have some idea that led them to understand the importance of this type of music culturally. In order to recognize this as a traditional value of our country the four answer (S1, S2, S3 and S4) reflected that their knowledge has something in common: they noticed this music as their own Colombian music; on the other hand, students were not using the correct way to express their ideas, but they were able to transmit them without any difficulties to their classmates. Even though learners did not relate to the songs and the type of music, students valued them for their connection to Colombia.

As can be seen from the intervention with students, most participated in creating a good environment for the development of the class; even the students who did not have a good grasp of the pronunciation wanted to read the slides or give opinions on visualizations of the presentation.

Following this, the teacher explained the importance of the roots in a nation, talked about the cultural heritage and tried to explain where Colombian natives come from. The students who participate actively, for example at the beginning of the lecture, start reading

the slides aloud; in this way, people who do not know how to pronounce or say the word can listen to their partners. Furthermore, this is not sufficient assistance, the teacher could give a deeper explanation of the grammar aspects, meanings and pronunciation relating to the topic.

Relation between English knowledge and Colombian cultural appropriation

The relation between English knowledge and Colombian cultural appropriation is an essential component in this project, mainly because students are learning English through the lens of studying national culture. For us, it was a challenge to relate English language with Colombian culture since there was a list of terms that could not be translated directly into English, such as terms relating to Colombian arts or the different kinds of typical Colombian musical instruments. The implementation of a cultural-enriching curriculum brought several advantages such as providing relevant, significant vocabulary and the identification of new and unknown aspects of a specific culture and the assessment of the cultural features presented.

S3: I believe teacher that most of us haven't heard about the carnivals that Colombia has. The first thing that comes to my mind is the Río de Janeiro carnival, it is just because the beaches and the.....fun people of Brazil can get when they are having fun...

S2: Well actually, I remember some of the carnivals of Colombia, like the green moon in San Andres or the “Carnival de Blancos y Negros en Pasto, or the “festival de las flores.

S5: “Teacher, it is the same carnival and fair?”

T: Well, actually when people hear the word Carnival, it is directly related with people, culture, customs, phenomenon for having fun in different places and cities of Colombia so, I think we can refer to a carnival as a feast.

(Didactic unit # 2, Colombian Carnivals, Recording-Class 02/, 6 Minutes.
10-11-14)

Regardless of the differences presented in the speech of the students and the contrasting level of knowledge about the target language, students refer to and talk about the topic freely and spontaneously, taking into account their own knowledge and memories of Carnivals in Colombia. It is also worth mentioning that the intervention and thoughts given in class are done by students with much more knowledge and confidence in the L2. It is also relevant to note that the group of students has a heterogenic knowledge of English, from level A1 to B2. The implementation of the Cultural-enriching Curriculum provided students a space to interact, contribute and utter diverse points of view of the theme. As a pedagogical strategy, it worked, and they expressed ideas freely about their own experience.

Students were as open to learning different perspectives about Colombian culture, as they were interested in sharing their different ideas. This encouraged them to participate and be active while they were using English.

S2: “I did not know that Colombia there be a place like that (referring to Caño Cristales located in Meta,) this is the first time that I heard this place is really interesting to know more of that because is our country. There are many places that I do not know. And this place is nice, has many colours, I like it [*sic*].”

(Didactic unit # 5, Colombian Art, Warm-up activity)

In this activity, students shared prior individual knowledge and from this place of knowledge, spoke with confidence in the L2, since they knew the meaning of the class topic. As a result of these kinds of activities, students began to build their knowledge of Colombia from a different perspective. They also showed that they wanted to know more about it, and when the teacher explained the topic in more detail they really showed confusion and surprise about some places that they had never heard of.

On the other hand, students showed their interest in Colombian art and destinations. They tried to talk and express ideas about these topics by constructing basic English sentences. They already knew the topic (i.e. important museums and recognized tourist destinations) and used the opportunity to expand their English vocabulary as they communicated with new words to the class.

S5: “Vargas Swamp Lancers Memorial, It was important because it is the battle for the independence.”



S1: “The Gold Museum in Bogotá, because it has many things that are important for the culture.”

S3: “La Catedral de sal de Zipaquirá, is a nice place, is a church that has the history of Jesus.”

S4: “Cartagena important place, because it is the liberation of the Indians they fight.”

(Didactic unit # 5, Colombian Art)

Students tried to do their best during each class. In the previous class “Colombian Myths and Legends,” the teacher explained the topic by using ICT (such as a Power Point Presentation), in which he explained some of the most important legends like “La Llorona” and “The Alligator Man” among others. Included in the explanation was information about the regions where these famous stories took place, complemented by the use of pictures. This part of the lesson plan helped students to understand and link the new vocabulary with ideas that they already had about the class theme. Furthermore, they continued learning in a more effective way and using appropriate vocabulary to explain basic ideas that they could already discuss fluently in their native language. When students learn in their own native language, they have the opportunity to contribute substantially to the class through cooperative learning. They are able to sustain aspects of conversation that can be shared and analyzed for academic purposes.

Improvement of English skills

The aim of this section is to analyze the process of students' English learning from the beginning to the end of the project; how they were able to improve their English skills during the time in class and use them in a real environment. Topic based instruction was the methodology used to construct each lesson plan with the corresponding didactic unit, taking into account the four main skills (speaking, writing listening and reading comprehension) and the tools for each class (e.g. poster, presentations, games, and comprehension activities). The opportunity to have resources (e.g. computer and projector) gave us the capability to enhance some listening and speaking activities, because students had the opportunity to see beyond grammar structures.

When the tasks were carried out, when called upon to share ideas, some students demonstrated their knowledge related to the topic of the class by using the new vocabulary they learned in previous classes. Additionally, they took part in the class by using their English skills to present the poster of each group as asked:

DS1: “We know that the region of Orinoco have seven sub regions that have a lot of rivers that have a lot of fish.”

DS2; “There has a lot of hot and a lot of rain that is the weather of Orinoco.”

DS3: “They have a tradition with cows and bulls and the name of the tradition is festival International Folclorico y Turistico del Llano.”

(Didactic unit # 3, Colombian Natural Regions)

It was illustrated that through the improvement of the English skills that students had been acquiring since the beginning of the classes in the didactic units, they had already learned sufficient vocabulary to express themselves—though often imprecisely or incorrectly. However, in this case, it is clear that the classmates were able to understand what the S1, S2 and structures or words are able to communicate. During the development of this didactic unit, students linked previous English words and concepts with the class theme, creating short descriptions in the foreign language as they advanced in their learning process.

English played an important role in the activities prepared because all of them were developed using the target language to communicate the content of the slides and exercises. When the teacher asked students to read or if they had doubts, they were required to use their English knowledge to read or to ask questions regarding unknown vocabulary depending on the situation. However, Spanish was also used to clarify or explain some concepts, especially when working with basic level students.

S: “Profe, cuando un número tiene th después, ¿cómo se lee eso?”

T: “La terminación th es Interdental, estamos hablando de 16th, 13th son números ordinales los ordinales son los que tienen la terminación th a partir del cuarto.”

T: “¿Alguien tiene alguna pregunta? ¿Algún termino que no distingamos?”

S:” ¿Qué significa settlement?”

T: “Viene de la palabra settle o establecerse. Settlement es Asentamiento, hasta ahí, ¿todo claro?”

S: “Yes good.”

(Didactic unit # 7 Colombian History Appendix)

Students identified unknown English vocabulary from the lesson content in the slides and exercises. They participated during the whole class, the environment was very enjoyable, and it allowed the learners to solve some doubts related to prior knowledge that they had. The teacher provided students with some slides and exercises developed with English content. Therefore, students asked questions related to new words and unclear previous information that they found in the class material. When they participated in reading the activities, they had to do it using their English skills.

Conclusions and implications for further research

The positive impact which has been observed in the EFL classes was an increase on the participation and output of learners. This arose as a result of a new and interesting methodology and implementation of didactic units, which encouraged students to learn and use English. Through the design, development and implementation of this material (Colombian didactic units), students and teachers have worked in a mutually supportive way to enrich the students’ knowledge and awareness of Colombian culture and at the same time, to develop the appropriation of the foreign language, English.

The implementation of innovative didactic units let us interplay cultural aspects, language and identity, focusing on the interaction of these three factors. With the help of this material, students approached the language using their previous knowledge of



significant and specific aspects of Colombian culture, and their familiarity led learners to introduce new words, phrases and expressions taken from the foreign language in order to build their own ideas and form statements. We sought to provide clear and sufficient information to learners, in order to simultaneously improve their cultural knowledge and their English skills. This was done by designing language lessons around Colombian information and cultural facts. The significant difficulty of a lack of connection between national culture and English teaching classes was observed, identified and overcome as indicated by the performance of English learners from ninth, tenth and eleventh grades. These issues were addressed throughout the implementation of different activities within the classroom, the integration of new knowledge with old concepts, and the creation of original relationships between the target language and personal experiences. This was accomplished through the application of topic-based instruction.

The impact of Colombian didactic units in the EFL classes used didactic and methodological practice as it guided the teacher's role and students' performance. All the activities were accompanied by different charts with information related to the specific cultural aspects corresponding to specific grammar that was the language learning objective for the activity. Although the participation and English level of learners was different, they clearly felt motivated and encouraged to participate within the activities proposed in the units because they identified with several implications and points of view that converged into one specific field of study: their own cultural identity. These groups were mixed into level groups and positive collaborative learning took place between the different skill levels.



The transition from traditional methods of English language teaching to Topic Based Instruction on Colombian cultural study is seen throughout each of the activities that required the participation of the learners in different English levels (basic, intermediate and advanced). It was due to the diverse environment and institutions where students came from and studied English. Then, the Improvement of English skills started with the understanding and knowledge of new vocabulary and the integration of grammar objectives into each lesson. While it is undeniable that English language development in many parts of Colombia has been increasing, these mostly cover the skills of reading and speaking, and improvements in these Language Skills are related to a well-planned and executed class in which each ability is practiced and worked on.

We hope this project can contribute to further research and studies that seek additional knowledge about national cultural education (specifically Colombian traditions and values), and may serve as an inspiration for others to integrate cultural artefacts and aspects into their teaching. Foreign language classes do not have to alienate students from their own culture, but can instead be used to help them explore it—while at the same time, the culture can serve as a support to the students while they explore the foreign language from a place of confidence and knowledge.

About the Authors;

*Andrea Bedoya, an undergraduate student of Bilingual Education at Bosque University, Colombia. I decided to study teaching a foreign language because in my country this a field that requires further development and I would like to contribute to the teaching of English as a foreign language in Colombian schools. For students, they will have many opportunities in their professional and personal life. My research interest lies in the language field, with a focus on the culture and the design of new resources to teach English or Spanish to non-speakers of these languages.

Luis Enrique Romero is an undergraduate student at El Bosque University. His decision of being a teacher comes from the Colombian reality based on ineffective teaching methods, poor English skills and the high number of students who finish high school without sufficient preparation to decide on an appropriate career path. Taking this social and educational issue in mind, Luis and his thesis co-workers developed this project in which the main objective is making an improvement in Colombian education in the field of languages in order to overcome the aforementioned problems that have been affecting the Colombian educational level.

Luis Harvey Gordillo is an undergraduate student at El Bosque University, Colombia. His research is focused on the improvement of English skills through the use of Colombian content with the main purpose of addressing cultural, social and educational issues.

Ricardo Stiglich Campos in an undergraduate student at El Bosque University (Bogota – Colombia). He started learning about how students can learn a foreign language (especially



English) with unusual topics from the beginning of the degree program, as he wanted to produce real results. Today, this investigation project was just the start of a research process on which Ricardo and his thesis co-workers are still working.



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