

# Reading the World: Intercultural Literacy in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Leer el Mundo: Literacidad Intercultural en la Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera  
Ler o Mundo: Literacia Intercultural no Ensino do Inglês como Língua Estrangeira

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Intercultural literacy (IL) enriches English as foreign language (EFL) teaching processes by fostering awareness of cultural diversity, promoting cultural sensitivity, and facilitating the interpretation of both linguistic and cultural contexts. Thus, reading the word and the world. Furthermore, IL transforms English teaching into a dynamic and interactive process. **Objective:** In this regard, the aim of the present research is to analyze the role IL plays in EFL teaching with pre-service teachers in Colombia. **Methodology:** This qualitative case study, examined the relationship between IL and EFL teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three pre-service teachers from a private university. **Results:** The findings indicate that IL offers several benefits, such as promoting self-reflection and enhancing understanding of both others' cultures and one's own, thereby mitigating the risk of cultural colonialism. **Conclusion:** This study suggests that EFL teaching, in Colombia, should integrate IL into curriculum designs to promote a more holistic approach to language education.

**Keywords:** Cultural diversity; Foreign languages; Intercultural education; Language teaching; Teacher education.

## Resumen

**Introducción:** La literacidad intercultural (LI) enriquece los procesos de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) al fomentar la conciencia sobre la diversidad cultural, promover la sensibilidad cultural y facilitar la interpretación de los contextos tanto lingüísticos como culturales. De este modo, contribuye a la lectura de la palabra y del mundo. Además, la LI transforma la enseñanza del inglés en un proceso dinámico e interactivo. **Objetivo:** En este sentido, el objetivo de la presente investigación es analizar el papel que juega la literacidad intercultural en la enseñanza del inglés con futuros docentes en Colombia. **Metodología:** Este estudio de caso, enmarcado en un paradigma cualitativo, examinó la relación entre la LI y la enseñanza del ILE. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a tres futuros docentes de una universidad privada. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos indican que la literacidad intercultural ofrece varios beneficios, como promover la autorreflexión y mejorar la comprensión tanto de las culturas ajenas como de la propia, mitigando así el riesgo del colonialismo cultural. **Conclusión:** Este estudio sugiere que la enseñanza del ILE en Colombia debe integrar la LI en los diseños curriculares para promover un enfoque más holístico de la educación lingüística.

**Palabras clave:** Diversidad cultural; Educación intercultural; Enseñanza de idiomas; Formación de docentes; Lengua extranjera.

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## Resumo

**Introdução:** A literacia intercultural (LI) enriquece os processos de ensino do inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE), ao fomentar a consciência sobre a diversidade cultural, promover a sensibilidade cultural e facilitar a interpretação dos contextos linguísticos e culturais. Desta forma, contribui para a leitura da palavra e do mundo. Além disso, a LI transforma o ensino do inglês num processo dinâmico e interativo. **Objetivo:** Nesse sentido, o objetivo da presente pesquisa é analisar o papel que a literacia intercultural desempenha no ensino do inglês com futuros professores na Colômbia. **Metodologia:** Este estudo de caso, enquadrado em um paradigma qualitativo, examinou a relação entre a LI e o ensino do ILE. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com três futuros professores de uma universidade privada. **Resultados:** Os resultados indicam que a literacia intercultural oferece vários benefícios, como promover a autorreflexão e melhorar a compreensão tanto das culturas alheias como da própria, mitigando assim o risco do colonialismo cultural. **Conclusão:** Este estudo sugere que o ensino do ILE na Colômbia deve integrar a LI nos projetos curriculares para promover uma abordagem mais holística da educação linguística.

**Palavras-chave:** Diversidade cultural; Educação intercultural; Ensino de idiomas; Formação de professores; Língua estrangeira.



## INTRODUCTION

Globalization fosters several forms of cultural exchange between different cultures around the world. These interactions occur both at the national and international levels. The latter can take place through face-to-face encounters or via online channels such as social media. Additionally, such exchanges often involve international students, workers or, generally, migrants. On the national level, diverse communities exist, characterized by differences in customs, dialects, values, music, and geography. Therefore, fostering intercultural understanding and cultural learning within our context is essential (Barrera & Cabrera, 2021).

In addition, intercultural literacy (IL) plays a vital role in fostering cultural awareness and enriching the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially within the dynamics of an increasingly interconnected world where English functions as a Lingua Franca. In this global landscape, shaped by international trade agreements, an expanding demand of cross-cultural communication and language proficiency forces this reality. This cross-cutting theme closely relates Colombia's educational context and the professional development of future teachers. Recognizing its relevance within the teaching process, and opening new paths to equip Colombian students for meaningful interaction across cultures (Álvarez-Correa & Quintero-Arrubla, 2022). Instead of limiting instruction to grammar and vocabulary, weaving IL into EFL classrooms creates opportunities for cultural awareness and motivates learners to value both the diversity found within Colombia and that of cultures around the globe (Braslauskas, 2021).

This paper examines IL and its contribution to EFL teaching in contexts where students' cultural diversities and perspectives are integral. It emphasizes the development of intercultural awareness through educational strategies such as narratives, texts rooted in cultural relevance, and the practice of storytelling. Furthermore, this study aims to deepen our comprehension of the social interactions and dynamics that unfold in relation to the use of English as a lingua franca, along with the importance of acknowledging and valuing one's own cultural background within the classroom setting. Such awareness has reshaped how learners relate their native language to the target language, while also fostering a deeper appreciation for the richness of other cultures.

This study centers its attention on promoting an English teaching approach that connects diverse cultural backgrounds, native languages, and additional languages. However, the tensions arising from differences rooted in the cultural identities of each student often shape their perceptions of the foreign language, in this case, English. Hence, it is crucial that educators acknowledge the integral role of culture in language education prior to engaging in English instruction. As Galante (2020) emphasizes, language cannot be separated from its cultural roots, proficiency in a language is incomplete without a comprehension of the cultural context in which language exists. As Álvarez et al. (2023) state, "language is fastened with culture and, consequently, with history which simultaneously leads to knowledge. The interrelationship that can be established [among] these components constitute human societies and endow them with consciousness regarding their action in the world" (p. 136). In this context, if language is intrinsically linked to culture, the two of them must be taught and learned as complementary elements in the educational process.

Currently, in Colombia, there are educational policies designed to foster inclusive practices across the education system, including the integration of interculturality, which also influences EFL



teaching. In alignment with the Plan Nacional Decenal de Educación 2016-2026 in Colombia, one of its outlined objectives is to “Consolidate a culture that promotes respect for what the ‘other’ thinks and is” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2017, p. 50). This suggests that, within the scope of English language education in Colombia, cultural diversity is acknowledged and valued, intercultural exchange is encouraged, and the development of Intercultural Competence (IC) among learners is supported. Furthermore, teachers are called to critically engage with educational policy, understanding and appropriating it as a vital step towards building a reflective and critical pedagogy within their English classrooms.

The objectives for this study were selected and arranged following Bloom’s Taxonomy of Complexity and Cognitive Processes, to provide a coherent and progressive learning structure. Within this framework, the current research seeks to explore how IL contributes to EFL instruction among Colombian pre-service teachers. The initial objective focuses on describing current EFL teaching practices. After collecting the necessary data, the second objective is to identify and outline the distinctive features of activities that promote IL. The final objective delves into the relationship between Interculturality and the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). At its core, this study aims to address a guiding question: How does Interculturality influence EFL instruction within the Colombian educational context?

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. *Intercultural Literacy (IL)*

IL is a multifaceted concept rooted in social practices, which has progressively gained relevance and experienced a notable evolution, particularly in how it is defined and discussed. In that regard, IL is understood as a critical process involving skills, attitudes, interaction, mediation, reasoning, competencies, understanding, values, and identities elements that together make it a complex phenomenon inherent to the experience of learning a new language (Wang et al., 2021). Based on this definition, various ideas are intrinsically linked to IL, to such an extent that these terms are at times used interchangeably. Nelson and Luetz (2021) equate IL with IC and point out that, due to the increasing attention this field has received, a range of related conceptual frameworks such as cross-cultural competence and cultural competence. These notions reflect a growing interest in understanding how individuals navigate, engage with, and adapt to diverse cultural settings, especially in increasingly interconnected and multicultural societies. In this regard, it can be argued that IL touches upon a wide spectrum of social dimensions.

It is valuable to explore these two terms in more depth. Nelson and Luetz (2021) define IC as the ability to communicate and engage meaningfully in settings where diverse cultures, traditions, and communities coexist, encompassing various ways of living. IC entails a combination of essential skills, knowledge, emotional disposition, cultural understanding, self-awareness, and respect for one’s own cultural background. IL is characterized as an ongoing, reflective process of interacting with people and contexts in a thoughtful and critical manner, involving competencies such as awareness and knowledge of other cultures and languages (Rojas et al., 2023).



Building on these definitions, it can be affirmed that IL and IC together comprise a broad set of competencies, abilities, knowledge, and awareness needed for meaningful communication across cultural boundaries. These capabilities function within a framework grounded in respect, empathy, and critical understanding of both interpersonal relationships and the broader context. IL and IC also involve recognizing and valuing a plurality of identities, customs, cultures, and the languages that emerge from them. Moreover, IC includes a diverse set of social abilities and perspectives essential for navigating complex cultural environments.

IC serves as a bridge in human interaction by fostering greater appreciation and understanding of differences in customs, beliefs, preferences, ethnicity, and lifestyles. While IC is frequently discussed in relation to global or cross-national contexts, it also has a significant impact on interactions at the local level. For example, within a classroom environment, students may hold preconceived or biased views of others such as thinking, “Today, I’m going to meet someone who seems clumsy, irritating, strict, and quite complex—this might turn into a real mess.” This illustrates the harm caused by narrow cultural perspectives, where individuals assume a single version of truth, a single lens through which life should be understood or lived. IC challenges these limiting beliefs by promoting broader perspectives that counter ignorance and discrimination, helping individuals to better understand the complexities of social interactions and human diversity.

## 2.2. *Reading the World*

Literacy is often linked to the acts of reading and writing, typically viewed as foundational abilities focused on decoding text. However, its scope goes far beyond this functional perspective it represents a collection of social practices that engage with aspects such as personal identity, societal roles, and interpersonal dynamics (Freire, 2019; Freire & Macedo, 1997). In this sense, literacy is fundamental to making sense of broader concepts because it reflects how individuals utilize language in real-world settings (Perry, 2012). This perspective aligns with sociocultural approaches to literacy (Lantolf, 2006; Vygotsky, 1995), which emphasize the relevance of cultural environments and social influences (Bolaños et al., 2018) in shaping literacy experiences.

According to Beneke et al. (2022), literacy research offers a rich lens through which to examine and reflect on a variety of societal and political topics. As Perry (2012) emphasizes, literacy represents a specific way in which language is employed, and language, in turn, is intricately embedded in the very essence of human existence. This suggests that literacy connects with multiple dimensions, including how people build relationships, interpret cultural norms, understand systems of power, and formulate their views of the world. Therefore, as the scholars mentioned suggest, literacy becomes a window into our sense of self, how we relate to others, and how we navigate everyday life (Mirra & García, 2020). It is essential, then, to reflect on the notion of literacy not simply as something someone has or lacks, but as a condition that shapes human experience, marking a significant difference between being literate and being illiterate (Freire, 2019; Perry, 2012).

IL is more than a fixed term it serves as a powerful framework for preparing individuals to critically interpret the world and interact with it meaningfully. As a socially rooted practice, IL cultivates the awareness and abilities necessary to engage across cultures in ways that encourage transformation and growth. It prepares individuals to think critically about the realities they face and to respond to them thoughtfully and informed by a comprehensive worldview. Similarly, IC nurtures vital capacities in areas



such as global economics, international relations, poverty alleviation, environmental responsibility, human rights, equity, emotional awareness, and empathy (Nelson & Luetz, 2021).

Due to the depth and variety of scholarship on the topic, multiple terms are often associated with intercultural literacy (IL). While they may overlap conceptually, they can also vary in how they are applied in specific contexts. IL, in its broad sense, includes a range of distinct characteristics and functions as a means for developing the skills, competencies, and knowledge essential for meaningful interaction with diverse individuals, communities, and cultural settings in today's interconnected world. Whether applied locally or globally, IL promotes mutual respect and deeper understanding, working against prejudice, intolerance, and cultural unawareness. Ultimately, IL empowers individuals to move through life with heightened awareness, informed by critical engagement with the people, places, and realities they encounter.

### ***2.3. Social and cultural consequences in EFL teaching***

Teaching a language goes far beyond simply acquiring vocabulary, grasping grammar rules, or improving communicative skills. It involves a richer, more meaningful engagement that connects learners to the cultural and social dimensions behind the language itself. While these are undoubtedly vital components, it is equally important for educators to acknowledge and integrate the cultural elements connected to the target language (Rodríguez & Ramírez, 2019). Language learning is inherently cultural; therefore, both linguistic and cultural elements should be addressed together as part of the EFL instructional process (Rojas et al., 2023).

The competencies and understandings associated with IL or IC are intrinsically related to one's own culture as well as to those of others. They promote awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, and the capacity to interact respectfully and effectively across cultural boundaries. Moreover, IL and IC function as bridges that support individuals in navigating the complexities between their cultural identities and those of others, helping to resolve cultural misunderstandings, challenge stereotypes, and manage intercultural tensions (Gilmore et al., 2020). Within this framework, teachers can enhance their EFL lessons by highlighting cultural contrasts, fostering openness toward other cultures, encouraging students to explore their cultural backgrounds, and creating meaningful cross-cultural learning experiences in English.

The implementation of IL in the classroom invites learners to engage in thoughtful reflection, pose questions, share perspectives, and critically interact with different contexts and people throughout their journey of language acquisition. As Fang and Jiang (2019) observe, integrating critical literacy into IC teaching can enable learners to express and critically examine their perspectives, thereby enhancing both their language awareness and intercultural literacy. Through the integration of IL into EFL teaching, educators enable students to not only improve their language proficiency, but also to gain valuable cultural insights and nurture a more profound and critical understanding of both the language and the cultural realities it conveys.

### ***2.4. Intercultural Literacy as a Mediator in Cultural Power Dynamics***

Globalization has brought nations closer together and greatly enhanced communication across a wide range of domains, including technology, healthcare, scientific research, education, tourism,





commerce, marketing, transportation, pharmaceuticals, and more. One of the most notable aspects of globalization is the prominent role of English, which has emerged as the leading language in these global arenas (Srinivas, 2019). This growing prominence of English has reached a point where its influence seems almost irreversible. Driven by capitalist dynamics, this phenomenon has contributed to the homogenization of cultural values especially in the field of education. In EFL contexts, this trend often results in curricula that emphasize a single cultural narrative, often overlooking the rich diversity represented by students in the classroom.

Traditionally, EFL learners were mainly introduced to cultural content from either the United Kingdom or the United States. However, as pedagogical approaches have evolved, acquiring IC now involves engaging with cultures from a much broader range of global contexts (Jumanazar, 2024). Thus, EFL instruction must go beyond its conventional boundaries to embrace not only British, North American, and Latin American cultures, but also those from other regions, cultivating a more comprehensive and globally inclusive outlook.

Contemporary and effective practices in EFL education are no longer limited to teaching vocabulary, grammar, and basic language structures. They now incorporate intercultural and intercultural literacy skills that help students navigate between their own cultural backgrounds and those of others, fostering deeper intercultural awareness. These competencies enable learners to become culturally responsive and act as cultural bridges. In this process, EFL educators are instrumental—they nurture empathy and open-mindedness, promote reflection on diverse worldviews, and create opportunities for meaningful intercultural engagement (Peláez-Henao et al., 2024). By embracing an IL framework, teachers empower students not only to sharpen their linguistic abilities but also to cultivate a thoughtful and informed grasp of different cultures, preparing learners to engage in genuine communication within our deeply interconnected global society.

In conclusion, weaving intercultural perspectives into English language instruction contributes to building more inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms. This approach emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and valuing cultural pluralism, inviting students to expand their understanding of both majority and underrepresented cultures. It also nurtures an appreciation not only for Anglophone traditions but also for their own cultural heritage. IC provides learners with a reflective space to consider their personal cultural journeys while meaningfully connecting with those of others.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is situated within the interpretative paradigm, with a qualitative focus (Vasilachis, 2006). Case study methodology was implemented as a social qualitative research strategy (Galeano, 2018). The study aims to determine the role of IL in the context of EFL teaching by analyzing academic literature and gaining insights into the viewpoints, pedagogical practices, and lived experiences shared by pre-service teachers. It acknowledges that the subject of study is not detached from the researcher; rather, it is collaboratively developed through the ongoing, interactive process between the researcher and the participants engaged in the study (Quintana & Hermida, 2019).

In line with a qualitative research approach, the sample size did not aim for statistical

representativeness, but rather for the collection of rich, dense, data for a deep understanding of the IL phenomenon in EFL teaching. According to authors such as Patton (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2018), in this type of study, the quality of the information obtained takes precedence over the quantity of participants, as the objective is to capture experiences, perceptions, and meanings. Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016), seeking specific profiles that could offer diverse and in-depth perspectives on the integration of IL into their pedagogical practices. Criteria such as their advanced stage of academic training and their incipient experience in teaching practice were considered to ensure maximum variability within the study's relevance.

Additionally, case study methodology is comprehended as a research approach that deepens our understanding of a phenomenon, within specific contexts, whether individual, group, organizational, social, or political (Galeano, 2012). Accordingly, this research employs both primary and secondary data collection methods. The primary data consists of information gathered by using a semi-structured interview. Secondary data, on the other hand, refers to the information collected from a systematic review of existing studies. In this process, the researchers examined, analyzed, and compared various studies to identify gaps in the literature, focusing on areas that had not been sufficiently addressed. Researchers mainly consulted Google Scholar, EBSCO, Scopus, and Springer journal. The manuscripts found were also categorized in order of relevance. Besides, some were discarded because the aim was to select only those articles that addressed the relationship between IL and EFL.

The study was conducted at a university in Colombia and involved the voluntary participation of pre-service teachers. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: they were in their seventh to tenth semesters of an undergraduate degree in Foreign Languages, with an emphasis on English. All selected individuals were between 19 and 25 years old. Thus, each researcher interviewed three pre-service teachers.

The data collection technique employed was the semi-structured interview. As noted by Cohen and Crabtree (2006), this method is favored by many researchers because it allows for the preparation of guiding questions beforehand, helping interviewers remain focused and effective during the conversation. At the same time, it gives participants the flexibility to share their thoughts openly, facilitating the collection of reliable and comparable qualitative insights. Ethical considerations were strictly observed during the entire data gathering process. Initially, formal authorization was obtained from the host institution. Subsequently, researchers provided each participant with an informed consent form, clearly outlining the study's objectives, the structure of the interview, and emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also informed about the confidentiality and secure handling of their responses, the expected duration of the interviews, the tools involved, and any other relevant details.

The interview protocol included eleven questions. The first three aimed to collect background information and better understand the participants' profiles, while the remaining eight, explored their views on IL and the ways in which they integrated these related practices within their teaching settings. Each interview was conducted individually by the researchers, who followed the predefined questions while also allowing space for spontaneous discussion when new topics emerged. The interviews lasted around 30 minutes and were audio-recorded. All interviews were recorded to support the subsequent analysis and then transcribed verbatim. During transcription, the researchers applied coding techniques to identify central ideas and uncover connections between them (Savin-Baden & Howell,



2013). To protect anonymity, each participant was assigned a code (P1, P2, and so forth).

To support qualitative analysis, a matrix was created to organize and interpret the interview data. This matrix was developed through a blend of deductive and inductive strategies, incorporating both the established theoretical framework and literature review, as well as the emerging themes that arose from participants' responses. In this sense, content analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015) was the strategy implemented to unveil participants' speech. These procedures allowed for an in-depth exploration of the study's research aims. Tables 1 and 2 below present the participants' profiles and a synthesis of their responses, offering insights into the role of IL in EFL teaching.

**Table 1**  
*Profile of the participants*

Participants	Gender	Current English Level	Current University semester
P1	F	8	B1
P2	M	9	B2
P3	F	9	B2

**Table 2**  
*Analysis matrix summary*

Categories	Times the category is mentioned in pre-service teachers' speech		
	P1	P2	P3
Interculturalism: Diversity in EFL classroom	6	1	3
Power relations	5	2	2
Intercultural literacy practices in EFL teaching	6	2	3
Inclusion	2	1	4

**Participants' responses were first analyzed**

The interviews invited participants to engage in thoughtful self-examination of their teaching methods and to critically reassess their instructional approaches. They were tasked with documenting their actions, the results they witnessed, and the underlying motivations for their decisions. This process of reflection encouraged them to explore the reasons behind their behaviors and to consider potential adjustments to their strategies for future practice. Their insights and experiences were crucial for the study, as they shed light on various aspects of IL in EFL teaching that helped address the research question.

**Results and discussion**

At the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on the role of IL in teaching EFL to pre-service teachers. Through follow-up questions related to EFL and IL, participants shared valuable perspectives that enriched the comprehensive insight into the research topic and its objectives. At the outset, aspects connected to the goals of EFL teaching were carefully examined. It became evident that English teachers prioritize more than merely the grammatical or syntactical components of the language. They intentionally integrate a diverse range of topics aimed at tackling social issues



and fostering social consciousness, all thoughtfully tailored to resonate with the specific contexts of their students. As one English pre-service teacher expressed, “English serves as a gateway; within the classroom, we have the opportunity to explore numerous topics that foster empathy among students, and it is this empathy that truly engages their interest” (Participant 3, Semi-Structured Interview, 2022).

This view emphasizes that teaching English goes beyond simply mastering language rules and communication skills. English teachers have the ability to create learning spaces that promote meaningful interaction, and critical thinking, enabling students to utilize English as an effective communication. It is important that English teachers do not just focus on teaching grammar, but also emphasize the cultural dimensions of the language. This approach helps students become active learners who can critically engage with and adopt the cultural aspects intrinsic to EFL (Rodríguez & Ramírez, 2019). This point of view is taken as a quite better alternative than building vocabulary, moving on to receptive skills, and finally developing productive skills, it is to say, conceiving language teaching as a lineal process.

Although Rodríguez and Ramírez (2019) discuss meaningful learning through cultural content, there are important pedagogical aspects to consider in the Colombian context. Particularly, the necessity to incorporate IL into preservice teacher education. As Gutiérrez (2022) notes, adopting a more critical lens to examine the Colombian context reveals contradictions and challenges for both preservice teachers and teacher educators. Such a challenge has to do with fostering critical thinking in students and teachers. Moreover, teachers often introduce guiding questions to the classroom to foster discussion towards social issues, encouraging students to engage in meaningful debates. If any issues or misunderstandings arise during the discussion, the teacher identifies them and provides guidance to address them. For example:

Using reading and writing of stories, students engage deeply. After reading, a discussion takes place, which can happen through dialogue, debate, or written reflections. They’re essential to highlight that each activity must be guided by a clear intention and a well-defined focus. (Participant 1, Semi-Structured Interview)

Wang et al. (2021) pointed up that incorporating stories and narratives through diverse interactive approaches serves as a powerful strategy for teaching English. The aim is to bring diverse stories to the classroom, each reflecting different worldviews, social contexts, and situations, allowing students to immerse themselves in different cultural perspectives. This approach reinforces the idea that language is not isolated; rather, it is intrinsically linked to the society from which it originates, and in turn, language also shapes society.

As said by Perry (2012), language is inseparable from its social context; they both exist and are shaped by the surrounding culture, while culture, in turn, is influenced by language. Thus, language is fundamentally intertwined with and serves as a reflection of others’ experiences and realities. More specifically, language is simultaneously connected to multiple facets such as social relationships, cultural norms, power structures, political influences, individual life experiences, ethical values, and the physical world, including objects and locations.

Considering that English has evolved into a “Lingua Franca,” it has transformed social and cultural interactions across various contexts. English has now become the standard language to be acquired,



whether as a foreign language or a second language. As a result, language teachers often place greater emphasis on North American cultures, highlighting power dynamics within EFL teaching and the methods they employ. One English pre-service teacher shared the following experience:

As language educators, when selecting visuals, [for instance] when I'm focusing on a specific topic like descriptions, I usually look for flashcards labeled "girl." Most often, I come across the stereotypical image of a blonde, white girl. This choice unintentionally conveys certain messages and shapes students' perceptions, reinforcing the idea that English speakers are typically white, blue-eyed foreigners. (Participant 2, Semi-Structured Interview).

In this context, Participant 2 gave an example illustrating how language teaching can sometimes lead to cultural clashes in the classroom. When students consistently learn the same topics in a way that lacks real-world context, it becomes difficult for them to develop IC. For this reason, it is vital for teachers to tailor their activities and resources accordingly. The field of foreign language teaching has undergone significant evolution, with the intercultural dimension now recognized as an essential component of both EFL education and comprehensive civic learning (Álvarez, 2019). Thus, EFL being taught by considering society and ethics, this means, the social commitment all language teachers take once they decide to teach language.

Therefore, English educators should develop activities rooted in critical pedagogical approaches (Freire, 2019) and intercultural literacy (IL) models. This is why the role of the teacher is important as a cultural agent that invites transformation, equity, and critical consciousness, and not just a transmitter of content. Within the context of EFL education, this critical literacy can serve as a potent instrument to encourage students to re-think and question dominant ideologies, promoting a more decolonised comprehension of language and identity. These activities need to include context-sensitive content that cultivates students' understanding of both foreign cultures and their own cultural backgrounds, strengthening their personal identity and simultaneously improving their communication skills. As expressed by one pre-service English teacher:

English instruction is often centered around American culture, but from my perspective, teachers could incorporate literature from our own country. We could also create links between the language and our local realities. I believe it's essential to bring literature from our own context into the classroom to explore relevant issues and encourage critical thinking (Participant 2, Semi-Structured Interview).

From this reflection, it becomes clear that many English teachers tend to frame their lessons predominantly within North American cultural settings, which may restrict opportunities to foster critical thinking (Correa et al., 2014). The broader aim of teaching foreign languages is to serve as a bridge between cultures supporting learners in recognizing the importance of respect and cultural awareness. It upholds the principle that no culture is superior or inferior, but rather that each holds its own unique traditions, values, and ways of seeing the world (Valencia, 2013). One of the pre-service EFL teachers expressed this clearly: "It's not just about the language itself, but also about encouraging strategies that foster inclusivity and inspire everyone to engage with and learn about diverse cultures" (Participant 2, Semi-Structured Interview). Wang et al. (2021) affirm that developing meaningful multilingual and multicultural competence in EFL settings involves weaving elements of students' own cultural backgrounds into the teaching of IC.



Indeed, cultural instruction plays a crucial role in building awareness within the classroom. Participant 2 highlighted how literacy materials, including literature, is particularly relevant, as it encourages critical thinking among students. Teachers are responsible for teaching more than just linguistic competence. They must also focus on the broader characteristics an EFL teacher should possess, such as understanding social differences, especially in the classroom, and finding meaningful tools for teaching. One such tool is literature, in which characters embody the values of various cultures. As Cruz et al., (2020) said, teachers should integrate culturally relevant practices and materials that embrace ethnicity, identity, age, diverse ideologies, and so forth, in order to deliver a culturally responsive instruction.

The teaching process takes place within a diverse environment, where the teacher holds a vital role in connecting and recognizing the differences among students. As one pre-service teacher expressed, "Teaching English must embrace an intercultural approach, since no classroom ever consists of a uniform, identical group of students" (Participant 1, Semi-Structured Interview). For instance, Colombia is a pluricultural and multiethnic nation that encompasses more than 100 indigenous, raizal, palenquera, Afro-Colombian, and Rom communities. Each region in Colombia possesses a distinctive richness in cultural and linguistic diversity (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2017). Furthermore, Colombia has experienced an influx of migrants from countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, and the United States, contributing to a enrich diverse population. According to Barman (2024), this demands language and literacy education to be more inclusive and employ effective methods to nurture IC within diverse communities. Therefore, educational settings need to reconsider their inclusive teaching approaches by embedding IL practices that encourage respect for and awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity.

For example, one student once confided that she avoided interacting with her classmates because they were Catholic, and she identified as Christian. In situations like this, it becomes essential for the teacher to step in, not to impose a change in the student's beliefs, but rather to encourage the exploration of alternative perspectives and invite reflection on other ways of understanding and relating to others, beyond their usual frame of reference. (Participant 1, Semi-Structured Interview)

Educators are constantly striving to foster students' understanding and appreciation of diversity by implementing a range of meaningful activities, as highlighted throughout these discussions. In doing so, it becomes essential to embed inclusive and comprehensible forms of language, along with pedagogical practices and strategies that support the development of IC, within the educational experience. This approach supports the diverse classroom population by using image-based, visual, and written resources, since they play a vital role in encouraging learners to engage critically with diverse cultural contexts. Children's literature, in particular, stands out as a powerful tool to support this exploration (Arizpe et al., 2014).

It can be said that English goes beyond being just a classroom subject; it surpasses the ideological walls people may have, and expands into something much larger, as individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures also embrace the language. This expansion of language use is closely related to IL, which emerges as a significant educational challenge. IL functions as a tool for managing power dynamics among cultures. It poses a challenge by prompting students to critically examine and thoughtfully engage with multimodal portrayals of cultural diversity (Wang et al., 2021).

A foundational step towards teachers acquiring critical literacy more than a grammatical approach is to create reflective spaces where future educators can write and speak about the struggles and limitations of the EFL system. These spaces promote awareness of historical, cultural, and sociopolitical narratives relevant to Colombian life. However, this challenge extends beyond Colombia, this is, Latin America holds the potential to confront and transform colonial power structures within English language education.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has underscored the importance of IL when viewed through pedagogical-critical lens in the context of EFL teaching in Colombia. The English pre-service teachers emphasized how valuable it is to bring cultural dimensions into language instruction, fostering the development of IC and moving beyond an overreliance on North American cultural references. Through the use of IL-oriented and context-sensitive materials —such as literature, culturally resonant texts, children’s stories, and narrative practices— teachers were able to strengthen students’ critical thinking and intercultural understanding. This approach encourages English educators to embrace more inclusive teaching practices that recognize and celebrate both linguistic and cultural diversity.

It can be said that instructional approaches are deeply intertwined with intercultural engagement, ergo, pedagogical choices are often shaped by the integration of culturally responsive activities. Educators aim to move beyond conventional approaches to English instruction by fostering social awareness and empathy, making sure that their lessons are thoughtfully adapted to align with the specific realities and needs of their students. Social issues, therefore, are often portrayed in the classroom, highlighting the integral connection between IL and language teaching. In other words, EFL teaching is inextricably connected to IL practices, as language learning encompasses more than just linguistic competence; it involves engaging with the “other” and understanding the world beyond one’s own culture.

In this line of thought, without careful mediation of literacy activities, English teaching practices can become colonized by a dominant cultural narrative. In this context, IL serves as a vital catalyst for fostering awareness and understanding of diverse beliefs, value systems, cultural practices, commonalities, distinctions, and ways of life. The presence of others’ stuff permeates English teaching, yet it remains anchored in the culture being taught, reflecting an acculturation process. Thus, the relationship between IL practices and English teaching opens paths to new worldviews while respecting one’s own cultural identity. When used together, they form a powerful tool for developing global competencies that prepare students to navigate an interconnected world.

As a conclusion, education should prioritize training students to first understand their own culture, followed by a broader exploration of African, Asian, European, and other cultures as contexts within their own cultural framework. This perspective is valuable for IL, especially when applied to study programs in Colombia. It enables a broader exploration of linguistic competence, cultural identity, and the exploration of English and Spanish, by engaging with both the reading and writing of language itself and the wider world it reflects.



## Conflicts of interests

We declare that this submitted work does not represent any conflict of interests between us, the journal and the publishing entity. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships with any individuals or organizations that could influence or be perceived to influence the content of this manuscript.





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