

**Conectando Culturas en el Aula:
Percepciones de Profesores de Inglés sobre la Interculturalidad en Colombia**

Bridging Cultures in the Classroom:
English Teachers' Perceptions of Interculturality in Colombia

*Conectando Culturas na Sala de Aula:
Percepções de Interculturalidade dos Professores de Inglês na Colômbia*

- Artículo de investigación -

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Resumen

Antecedentes: Este estudio indaga en el papel fundamental que desempeñan los educadores en la reconfiguración de la práctica de la interculturalidad en el aula de inglés, ofreciendo un posible antídoto a la intolerancia y la violencia prevalecientes en el país, al examinar las percepciones de los docentes de inglés en el contexto de la enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros y su impacto en el desarrollo intercultural de los estudiantes en una escuela secundaria privada en Colombia. Métodos: Adoptando un enfoque cualitativo, este estudio adopta las entrevistas semiestructuradas, diarios reflexivos y técnicas interactivas para acceder a las diversas dimensiones de la interculturalidad. A través de una codificación teórica y analítica, se identifican temas predominantes que sustentan los hallazgos del

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estudio. Resultados: Entre los principales hallazgos, este estudio ilustra que los educadores conceptualizan la interculturalidad a través de una mirada arraigada en principios de equidad, igualdad y respeto. Además, el entorno escolar emerge como un crisol fundamental para las experiencias interculturales, aunque marcado por disparidades discernibles al compararlo con el mundo exterior más amplio. Conclusiones: Las conclusiones subrayan una alineación significativa entre las concepciones interculturales de los docentes y los principios interculturales fundamentales de Walsh. Además, enfatizan el papel indispensable que los educadores desempeñan como catalizadores de la interculturalidad, subrayando la imperativa necesidad de un desarrollo profesional integral para impartir eficazmente perspectivas interculturales. En última instancia, este estudio resalta el continuo discurso crítico generado tanto por estudiantes como por docentes en relación con el potencial transformador de la interculturalidad en el país.

Palabras clave: concepciones de interculturalidad, interculturalidad, proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés, rol del maestro.

Abstract

Antecedents: Educators' pivotal role in reshaping interculturality within the English classroom can serve as a potential antidote to the prevailing intolerance and violence in the country. This study investigates English teachers' perceptions of interculturality within the context of foreign language instruction and its impact on the intercultural development of students in a private high school in Colombia. Methodology: Adopting a qualitative paradigm, the study employs a multifaceted approach encompassing semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and interactive techniques to access the complex dimensions of interculturality. The ensuing data analysis engages in a rigorous theoretical and analytical coding process, culminating in the identification of overarching themes that underpin the study's findings. Results: Among the principal findings, this study shows that educators conceptualize interculturality through a prism rooted in principles of

fairness, equity, equality, and respect. Furthermore, the school environment emerges as a pivotal crucible for intercultural experiences, albeit marked by discernible disparities when contrasted with the broader external world. Conclusions: Drawn from this investigation underscore a significant alignment between teachers' intercultural conceptions and Walsh's seminal intercultural principles. Moreover, they accentuate the indispensable role that educators occupy as catalysts for interculturality, underscoring the imperative of comprehensive professional development to effectively impart intercultural perspectives. Ultimately, this study accentuates the ongoing critical discourse engendered among both students and teachers concerning the transformative potential of interculturality within the nation.

Keywords: interculturality, role of the teacher, english teaching and learning, interculturality conceptions

Resumo

Contexto: Este estudo indaga sobre o papel central dos educadores na reconfiguração da prática da interculturalidade na sala de aula de inglês, oferecendo um possível antídoto para a intolerância e a violência prevalentes no país, examinando as percepções dos professores de inglês no contexto do ensino de línguas estrangeiras e o seu impacto no desenvolvimento intercultural dos alunos numa escola secundária privada na Colômbia. Métodos: Adoptando uma abordagem qualitativa, este estudo utiliza entrevistas semi-estruturadas, diários de reflexão e técnicas interactivas para aceder às várias dimensões da interculturalidade. Através da codificação teórica e analítica, são identificados temas predominantes que sustentam as conclusões do estudo. Resultados: Entre as principais conclusões, este estudo ilustra que os educadores conceptualizam a interculturalidade através de uma perspectiva enraizada em princípios de equidade, igualdade e respeito. Além disso, o ambiente escolar surge como um cadinho fundamental para experiências interculturais, embora marcado por disparidades discerníveis quando comparado com o mundo exterior. Conclusões: Os resultados

evidenciam um alinhamento significativo entre as concepções interculturais dos professores e os princípios interculturais fundamentais de Walsh. Além disso, sublinham o papel indispensável que os educadores desempenham como catalisadores da interculturalidade, salientando a necessidade imperativa de um desenvolvimento profissional abrangente para que as perspectivas interculturais sejam efetivamente transmitidas. Em última análise, este estudo destaca o discurso crítico em curso gerado por alunos e professores relativamente ao potencial transformador da interculturalidade no país.

Palavras-chave: concepções de interculturalidade, interculturalidade, processo de ensino e aprendizagem do inglês, papel do professor.

Introduction

In the specific context of Colombia, the nation finds itself at a critical crossroads, characterized by a series of consequential political, economic, social, and educational developments. Notably, contemporary Colombian society grapples with profound political instability, stemming from a pronounced polarization. This division manifests between those who harbor optimism, welcoming a new era following the recent election of a left-leaning president, and those who lean more pessimistically, fearing potential societal upheaval akin to other nations under communist governance. Regardless of one's standpoint, it is incumbent upon us to evaluate the role of the English classroom, dedicated to nurturing intercultural awareness, in ameliorating this prevalent polarization and cultivating enhanced tolerance within our society.

As Colombia emerges from a protracted period of conflict and social exclusion, education assumes an indispensable role as a driving force. It acts as a catalyst, stimulating citizens to embrace their reality actively and participate in its transformation. Within this sphere, the integration of interculturality in education becomes crucial. UNESCO (2006) defines interculturality as the coexistence and

equitable interaction of diverse cultural groups, fostering the creation of shared expressions through dialogue and respect. Building upon this definition, interculturality has emerged as a pivotal concept in the contemporary educational landscape. It is imperative to recognize that intercultural education transcends being a mere supplementary component within the standard instructional framework. Instead, it must be integrated comprehensively into the educational milieu, spanning various dimensions of the educational process. This includes the overall learning environment, aspects of school life and decision-making, teacher education and training, curriculum development, language of instruction, teaching methodologies, learner interactions, and the creation of pedagogical materials.

In the realm of English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT), interculturality is often confined to an anthropological treatment of folklore traditions, as outlined by Walsh (2005), and its integration into the classroom setting remains partially peripheral. Typically, what masquerades as "interculturality" within this context revolves around the inclusion of conventional cultural topics, which merely serve as superficial representations of specific geographical regions. This often involves the use of textbooks and didactic materials that highlight diversity but fail to foster a more in-depth understanding of diverse worldviews and cosmologies, as discussed by Walsh (2010). Consequently, the conception of intercultural education as an inter-epistemic process of learning and study remains largely unattained in most educational settings. It appears that we have yet to acknowledge the plurality and diversity of disciplines and knowledge systems, and we have not fully grasped the intricate connection between shaping a new society and the interdisciplinary perspective and cultural education of emerging generations within our schools. In the ELT field, this challenge appears even more distant.

Hence, it is crucial to recognize the imperative for a deeper and more meaningful vision beyond reducing classroom practices to mere communicative drills or instilling the notion that English proficiency solely equates to better travel opportunities or employment prospects in the future. Instead, the English classroom serves as a

profound space to instill in students an awareness of cosmogonies. Here, we come to understand that, despite our political interests, ideologies, races, and nationalities, we are all part of a universal family. Students must recognize themselves in their shared humanity and, simultaneously, appreciate the rich tapestry of cultural diversity inherent in all that is human (Vallejo, 1999). ELT, when intertwined with interculturality, provides a gateway to fostering empathy, respect, and a deeper appreciation for the interconnectedness of our world. It allows students to transcend political divisions, embrace diversity, and envision a future where intercultural understanding is at the heart of global cooperation, transcending borders and fostering peace and harmony. In this critical juncture of Colombian history, ELT can be a beacon of hope, illuminating the path towards a more inclusive and interconnected society.

Given that the central focus of this research study revolves around the exploration of English teachers' perceptions of interculturality within the context of teaching and learning, and its implications for the intercultural development of students, it becomes imperative to establish key concepts that will provide a contextual framework for this paper. The first concept to be elucidated in this research is that of "interculturality." As defined by Walsh (2006), this notion transcends mere interactions between individuals of different cultures, thoughts, or beliefs. Instead, it encompasses a multifaceted process that delves into political praxis, social power dynamics, and the fabric of society itself. Interculturality also seeks to illuminate alternative modes of thought and action that both relate to and challenge the constructs of coloniality and modernity. In essence, it serves as a paradigm that evolves through a deliberate political praxis.

Besides, Walsh (2010) refers to interculturality from three perspectives: the first one is relational interculturality, which emphasizes in the contact among people without alluding the intercultural conflict; functional interculturality, which is the one that fosters dialogue and tolerance without questioning the causes of social and cultural asymmetry, in other words, without reflecting about the status quo or world order,

which maintains inequality and hegemony; and critical interculturality, that refers to the understanding, construction, and placement of a social, ethic, epistemic, and political project which remarks on the necessity to change the relations among cultures and structure, conditions, and power tools which maintain inequality, racialization, and discrimination.

Furthermore, Walsh (2010) delineates the concept of interculturality from three distinct perspectives: first, relational interculturality places emphasis on interpersonal contact among individuals from different cultures while avoiding direct reference to intercultural conflicts. Functional Interculturality promotes dialogue and tolerance but does not delve into the underlying causes of social and cultural disparities. In essence, it refrains from critical examination of the prevailing status quo or the global order that perpetuates inequality and hegemony. The last perspective, critical interculturality, revolves around the comprehension, construction, and implementation of a comprehensive social, ethical, epistemic, and political project. It underscores the necessity for transforming intercultural relations and addressing the structural conditions and power dynamics that perpetuate inequality, racialization, and discrimination.

An equally pivotal concept centers on teachers' perceptions and conceptions of interculturality. Notably, some scholars have articulated a clear differentiation between conceptions and beliefs. As articulated by Pajares (1992), beliefs are often characterized as a form of limited knowledge, predominantly associated with religious contexts. In contrast, a conception, as expounded by Da Ponte (1999), assumes the role of a foundational and comprehensive conceptual framework. Moreover, authors such as Contreras-Domingo (1991) and Thompson (1992) extend this idea by defining a conception as an intricate mental construct that encompasses a spectrum of elements, including beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental imagery, and personal preferences. Understanding the profound import of this concept is paramount, given its recognition of the substantial influence wielded by the social, cultural, and historical milieu upon individuals. Notably, teachers'

conceptions wield a guiding influence over the formulation of pedagogical practices, profoundly shaping the essence of teaching in practical terms.

A concise interpretation supported by Ramos (2005) characterizes conceptions as individuals' ideas on a specific subject, shaped by personal experiences and social constructs. These conceptions form networks of beliefs, acting as filters through which individuals perceive and interpret the world, ultimately guiding decision-making (p. 29). In this context, teachers' conceptions of interculturality are inseparable from their pedagogical practices. These conceptions, influenced by theories, culture, society, and history, serve as the compass directing their actions in the classroom and informing their decision-making processes.

Pedagogical practices, rooted in Freire's critical pedagogy, extend beyond conventional schooling to encompass societal knowledge and cultural wisdom passed on to new generations. This approach aligns with the contemporary need for individuals to adopt critical, reflective, and transformative stances to actively contribute to a society that values freedom and responsibility (Freire, 1979). Freire's perspective emphasizes the urgency of preparing citizens capable of peacefully resolving conflicts, fostering reflection, dialogue, and respectful coexistence within society (Freire, 2005). In this context, teachers are envisioned as agents of social transformation, necessitating a departure from narrow linguistic and technical viewpoints towards a broader examination of the socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions of education, particularly in the context of foreign language instruction in Colombia (Peláez, 2021). This calls for open forums where diverse perspectives can be discussed, and various stakeholders can share their insights and proposals in dialogue with national and international conversations (Usma & Peláez, 2017).

The path to peace building necessitates an education that equips citizens with the capacity to peacefully resolve conflicts, fosters critical reflection and dialogue, and promotes respectful coexistence (Usma et al., 2020). To contribute to this ongoing

discourse and offer valuable insights for the formulation and reformulation of future policies and programs, this paper delves into the essential role played by teachers as intercultural agents within the classroom and as exemplars for their students. We contend that, while some research exists on intercultural communicative competence, there has been a notable gap in exploring the link between English teachers' perceptions of interculturality and its impact on students' intercultural development. In the subsequent sections, we will outline the methodology employed in this study, dig into the findings organized into two thematic sections, and conclude with a discussion of the implications for the field.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study, drawing from the principles of case study research (Creswell, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2013), was designed to provide in-depth insights into the relationship between English teachers' conceptions of interculturality in the teaching and learning processes and the subsequent intercultural development of students. Our research adhered to an interpretive paradigm (Taylor & Medina, 2013).

Participant selection followed a deliberate sampling strategy (Marchall, 1996), wherein we identified teachers who could offer pertinent insights related to the research problem. We also considered both theoretical knowledge and empirical familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation as criteria for selection. Our sample comprised two distinct subgroups: key informants and critical informants (Moore et al., 2012). We chose these individuals based on their suitability to provide information directly aligned with the research question. The participants encompassed six English teachers from a private school in a Colombian city, comprising three primary teachers, three middle and high school teachers.

Data collection employed a multifaceted approach to ensure comprehensive insights. Initially, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant,

delving into their perceptions of interculturality's significance in the English classroom, thereby yielding valuable qualitative insights (Longhurst, 2003). Additionally, the teacher-researchers maintained reflective journals to document their personal perspectives and experiences. Moreover, a collaborative reflective exercise was conducted, involving schoolteachers, two of the research's authors, and four other English teachers who willingly participated as contributors, enriching the study with their valuable reflections. Furthermore, to triangulate the gathered information and gain students' perspectives, an interactive technique was employed with a group of tenth and eleventh-grade students. This technique encompassed diverse interactive activities, including problem tree analysis, video and documentary discussions, and film analysis (Chacon et al., 2002).

The subsequent data analysis process commenced with open coding, whereby we meticulously examined the collected data to uncover implicit theories. These codes were then organized into categories through selective coding, followed by axis coding to align missing codes with existing subcategories and categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The resulting categories were further synthesized to distill the overarching themes that underpinned our findings. For clarity in the subsequent sections, we will identify the participating teachers with numerical designations ranging from 1 to 6. Following each teacher's testimony, there will be a notation such as "Participant 1" or "Participant 6" to attribute the testimony to the respective individual.

Findings

In the forthcoming sections, we unveil the compelling findings of a rigorous research endeavor focused on the perceptions of English teachers regarding interculturality within the context of foreign language education. Our study, conducted within the confines of a private high school, explores the profound impact of these perceptions on the intercultural development of both students and educators. Our findings elucidate the profound connection between the principles of interculturality, as

articulated by Walsh (2006) - equity, justice, respect, and diversity recognition - and the deeply ingrained beliefs and practices of these English teachers. These principles form the cornerstone upon which teachers construct their pedagogical approaches, fostering an inclusive environment where diverse voices are not only heard but also cherished. In this segment, we delve into the strategies employed by these educators, the pivotal role of active listening, and the transformative power of language education within the microcosm of the school. Furthermore, we explore the disparities that persist between the ideals nurtured within the school and the realities of the external world, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in fostering true intercultural understanding.

Teacher Conceptions and Interculturality Principles

Our findings show how teachers ground their conceptions of interculturality in principles articulated by Walsh (2006), namely equity, justice, respect, and the recognition of diversity. These principles serve as the foundation for teachers' efforts to foster a collaborative construction of knowledge among students, which becomes evident not only in their narratives but also in their classroom practices. These practices are centered on creating a safe and inclusive environment where all participants feel empowered to contribute from their unique perspectives without fear of judgment or exclusion.

One prevalent strategy employed by teachers is the democratization of discourse, ensuring that every member has an opportunity to express their thoughts. This practice assumes great significance when addressing sources of conflict and tension, as it allows all voices to be heard and considered during the problem-solving process. As one teacher noted, "I always assign speaking turns through various strategies, such as using a fortune wheel or a numbered bag, to ensure that each student has an equal opportunity to share their views while respecting others' contributions" (Participant 2).

This participant's approach aligns with the conception of interculturality based on principles of fairness, democracy, equality, and equity. Their objective extends beyond fostering interpersonal relations among students; it seeks to cultivate a collective and comprehensive understanding of reality through dialogue. Walsh (2006) underscores that interculturality must transcend mere interrelation, emphasizing the promotion of diverse ways of thinking, acting, and collectively constructing knowledge.

Consistent with Walsh's perspective and its underlying principles, teachers place a strong emphasis on active listening as the cornerstone of effective dialogue. They acknowledge the necessity of accepting diverse viewpoints and respecting the inherent differences among individuals. As Participant 3 aptly stated, "I must be a skilled listener, acknowledging that we all possess unique opinions and perspectives" (Participant 3). Furthermore, this participant not only recognizes active listening as essential for effective dialogue but also implements strategies to instill this skill in their students. These strategies include fostering pair and group work, with a primary focus on valuing others' ideas and ensuring every student could contribute their beliefs and perspectives.

Incorporating intercultural dialogue is integral to teachers' practices, with a strong emphasis on listening to others and acknowledging the importance of respect. They firmly believe that respect must underpin all dialogues among students, reinforcing the significance of this intercultural principle. In their view, genuine dialogue is unattainable without mutual respect and acknowledgment of each other's unique identities and perspectives.

Teachers highlight the value of diversity of thought within the classroom. Drawing from Skliar's (2017) perspective, they emphasize the importance of facilitating encounters among diverse individuals as a catalyst for collective learning. Teachers promote an environment where students respect and appreciate different ways of thinking and acting. They leverage the classroom's inherent diversity to exemplify

how individuals can possess distinct perspectives while still coexisting and interacting within a space where respect reigns.

One participant eloquently expressed this sentiment, stating, "We teach students to embrace differences as something positive and to respect others' opinions, even when they diverge from their own. We view interculturality as an opportunity to learn another language, explore different cultures, lifestyles, and thoughts" (Participant 2). Moreover, teachers perceive the classroom as an intercultural space characterized by the principles outlined by Walsh (2006), including respect, fairness, justice, equality, and equity.

This perception is not merely theoretical but is reflected in their classroom strategies. For instance, teachers employ strategies to ensure that every participant has an equal opportunity to contribute to discussions without bias or favoritism. In the words of one teacher, "We respect each other's opinions and allow everyone to express themselves freely. We respect differences and diverse opinions, actively seeking to understand and learn from them" (Participant 1). Another participant emphasized the importance of equality within the classroom, where all individuals are viewed as equals in terms of their opportunities to express themselves. This recognition of equality extends to the understanding that even when someone may hold a differing opinion, it presents an opportunity for learning and personal growth. "I believe that it's crucial to recognize that we are all equals and that everyone has something valuable to contribute. We respect each other's differences and varied perspectives" (Participant 2).

In summary, our findings reveal that English teachers' conceptions of interculturality are deeply rooted in principles of fairness, democracy, respect, equity, and an appreciation for diversity. In the classroom, they employ strategies that prioritize equal participation, foster respect for cultural and thought diversity, and promote awareness that all individuals are part of a heterogeneous group.

School as an intercultural setting: bridging the gap between school and the outside world

In this section, we will delve into how the school transforms into a crucible of intercultural experiences, examined from a critical perspective, encompassing the voices of both students and teachers. Teachers offer insights into a broader view of language education, transcending mere utility by emphasizing its cognitive and humanistic dimensions. Additionally, we explore how students actively engage in knowledge construction, following Skliar's (2017) notion that acknowledging differences can serve as a cornerstone for the creation of new knowledge. We will also analyze the interplay between teachers' beliefs and practices, as well as how students critically confront various societal issues. Lastly, we will address the paradoxical relationship between the school environment and the external world.

Traditionally, the teaching and learning of languages, including English, have been primarily instrumental, driven by economic competitiveness and employability concerns (Usma, 2009; Montoya-Lopez et al., 2020; Peláez et al., 2022). However, our findings unveil a more comprehensive vision among English teachers, encompassing cognitive and humanistic dimensions. From a cognitive perspective, language serves as a gateway to understanding the world, enabling access to diverse realms such as art, literature, and academic discourse. Simultaneously, language fosters humanistic values by facilitating communication, connecting cultures, and promoting empathy. To illustrate this multifaceted approach, one teacher articulated their purpose in teaching English as follows: "I aim to enable students to connect with others, explore different cultures, and broaden their ways of thinking." – Participant 2

Furthermore, the school emerges as a microcosm of intercultural exchange, where diversity is cherished in various forms. Teachers emphasize the significance of linguistic diversity, recognizing the beauty of distinct accents within their native language. They equate linguistic variations with cultural attributes, emphasizing the need to respect and appreciate these differences: "By celebrating the diversity of

Castilian Spanish spoken in different regions, we highlight the cultural richness inherent in these linguistic variations." – Participant 5

Teachers consistently view diversity, encompassing linguistic variety, thoughts, customs, and more, as a valuable resource for learning. This diversity serves as the foundation for forging connections and constructing knowledge. Such an inclusive perspective fosters a global understanding of reality, as it encourages dialogue among different perspectives. "We, teachers in this school, actively promote this approach by teaching students to embrace difference, respect others' opinions, and see interculturality as an opportunity to learn about new languages, cultures, lifestyles, and worldviews." – Participant 5

This educators' viewpoint on diversity aligns very well to students' perspectives. Students not only acknowledge the importance of diversity and its enriching effects but also vehemently reject any notion of cultural superiority. In their view, cultures are not ranked but rather celebrated for their unique contributions to human experience. This sentiment is well encapsulated in one student's statement: "They (students) do not perceive cultures as superior to one another; they appreciate the differences, recognizing their richness." – Participant 6

Furthermore, students exhibit a form of critical interculturality, transcending surface-level interactions to address deep-seated societal issues like racism, sexism, and xenophobia. These issues are not relegated to theoretical discussions but are intrinsically linked to the students' lived experiences. For instance, when analyzing the film "The Trial of the Chicago 7," students' express indignation at instances of discrimination and prejudice depicted in the movie. They connect these instances with ongoing socio-political events in Colombia, particularly the national strike, drawing parallels between the injustices portrayed in the film and those they witness in their own society: "Students strongly condemned the injustices depicted in the film and drew parallels to recent events during the national strike in Colombia. They criticized media complicity in perpetuating these injustices." – Participant 6

This critical awareness extends to various aspects of societal discrimination, as students actively question classism, racism, sexism, and prejudices. The students are not merely passive observers; they are agents of change, reflecting their rejection of societal ills and their commitment to confronting them. In the classroom, these critical dialogues are facilitated through respectful exchanges of diverse perspectives. Intercultural principles, such as respect for others, are manifest in the students' interactions. Teachers observe that students collaborate rather than compete, embracing difference as an opportunity for collective knowledge construction: "Students demonstrate excellent communicative competence during discussions, displaying deep respect for one another. Camaraderie prevails, with students celebrating each other's successes and readily offering assistance when needed." – Participant 4

To foster these principles further, teachers employ specific strategies that encourage dialogue and intercultural awareness. Students frequently engage in discussions that promote knowledge construction and idea generation, emphasizing the importance of respecting diverse viewpoints. Real-world issues form the crux of classroom reflections, prompting students to adopt positions based on their personal identities and knowledge. Authentic materials, such as films and readings rooted in real-life events, enhance communicative and intercultural competence. Despite the pronounced presence of intercultural principles within the school, students and teachers perceive a dissonance between the school environment and the external world.

Outside the school's nurturing intercultural atmosphere, both students and teachers are keenly aware of certain societal dynamics that differ significantly from the values upheld within the school. They recognize the existence of cultures that are inadvertently favored over others, despite their shared belief that this practice should be discouraged. This phenomenon, known as ethnocentrism, is identified as an issue within Colombian society. Teachers and students alike acknowledge the

preference for American culture, often seen as the embodiment of the "American dream." One participant articulates this preference as follows: "There is a prevailing trend towards pursuing the American dream, thus elevating American culture above others." – Participant 2

Conversely, participants also acknowledge the devaluation and prejudices directed towards other cultures, often rooted in misinformation or generalizations. For instance, negative stereotypes emerged in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting perceptions of Chinese culture. However, students are quick to challenge these biases, highlighting the richness and positive aspects of the cultures in question: "While acknowledging biases against certain cultures, such as Chinese culture due to the pandemic, students simultaneously express admiration for these cultures and vehemently reject any notion of cultural superiority." – Participant 2

This student's testimony emphasizes the importance of knowledge and awareness in countering stereotypes. Moreover, it underscores the societal issue of xenophobia, particularly when Colombians make derogatory jokes about Eastern cultures: "Colombians occasionally display disrespect and ignorance regarding Eastern cultures, treating them as a source of amusement while holding American culture in high regard." – Participant 2

Additionally, another teacher highlights the power of language in perpetuating discrimination. They point out that words with negative connotations can stem from linguistic prejudice and contribute to the denigration of certain groups. For example, the term "gypsy" carries a pejorative connotation in Spain, while in Colombia, derogatory terms like "venecos" have emerged in reference to the Venezuelan community. These linguistic biases further underscore the need for intercultural education: "In some regions of Spain, 'gypsy' is used pejoratively, and here in Colombia, 'venecos' is sometimes used derogatorily to describe Venezuelans. These linguistic prejudices highlight the importance of addressing these issues through education." – Participant 5

Despite the school's efforts to promote interculturality, participants recognize that the institution can inadvertently perpetuate certain issues. For instance, the standardization of behavior and the focus on subject matter content, without contextualization, can hinder progress. Teachers advocate for education that transcends rote content delivery, emphasizing critical thinking and the development of intercultural competencies: "Although the school attempts to address discrimination, it sometimes unintentionally contributes to these issues by promoting homogenized behaviors or overemphasizing academic content divorced from its real-world context." – Participant 4. Nevertheless, teachers stress the importance of professional development in intercultural pedagogy. They acknowledge the need for training in pedagogical approaches that move beyond content delivery to effectively encompass intercultural principles: "While the school strives to address discrimination, there is a pressing need for teacher training in pedagogical methods that integrate intercultural principles more effectively." – Participant 5

In conclusion, the school serves as a transformative intercultural setting, fostering global perspectives, respect for diversity, and critical interculturality among students and teachers. It nurtures an environment where differences are celebrated, and knowledge is collectively constructed. However, the external world often contrasts with this positive intercultural dynamic, perpetuating ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and cultural biases. Acknowledging these disparities, teachers and students engage in critical reflections, fostering an ongoing dialogue aimed at addressing structural issues and promoting a more equitable society. While challenges persist, the school remains a vital space for cultivating intercultural awareness and driving social change.

Discussion

The strategies employed by teachers in the English classroom, such as the democratization of discourse, fostering intercultural dialogue among students, and instilling respect for one another, signify tangible and invaluable contributions to a

country like Colombia. For decades, and as an unfortunate element ingrained in our culture throughout the history of the republic, we have grappled with violence (Romero-Prieto & Meisel-Roca, 2019). In this context, the cultivation of interculturality within the classroom emerges as a crucial endeavor. As the findings presented in this study underscore, these strategies are not mere pedagogical techniques but powerful tools for social transformation. They pave the way for a more inclusive, empathetic, and harmonious society. By encouraging students to appreciate diversity, value different perspectives, and embrace individuals from various regions and neighboring countries, educators are sowing the seeds of peace and understanding. In a country scarred by conflict, the English classroom becomes a sanctuary for hope, where the next generation learns the profound lesson that coexistence and respect can indeed triumph over violence and division.

In light of these findings, it is evident that English teachers play an indispensable role as models of interculturality for their students (Florez-Montaña et al., 2022). Beyond the conventional boundaries of language instruction, they are ambassadors of tolerance, empathy, and cultural understanding. As they guide students through discussions, dialogues, and collaborative learning experiences, teachers exemplify the values of equity, respect, and diversity recognition. Their influence extends far beyond the confines of the classroom, reaching into the heart of a society striving for healing and unity. In a nation grappling with historical wounds, the English classroom serves as a microcosm of transformation, where educators not only impart linguistic skills but also cultivate the seeds of peace and intercultural harmony. Through their actions and pedagogical approaches, teachers help bridge divides, challenge stereotypes, and inspire the next generation to envision a brighter, more inclusive future for Colombia. In this endeavor, they embody the hope that education, interculturality, and empathy can prevail over violence and discord, shaping a society where diversity is celebrated, and common humanity is cherished.

Numerous authors emphasize the pivotal role of teachers in the educational process. As Kramer and Nugent (2014) assert, teachers are not mere transmitters of

information; rather, they serve as guides and facilitators for students. Additionally, Paricio (2014) underscores that teachers should possess not only subject knowledge but also critical, reflective, and respectful attributes. In this context, teachers are not only purveyors of information, which can quickly become outdated, but also champions of intercultural principles, serving as role models for their students. This study corroborates the elevated importance of teachers as intercultural promoters. Beyond their traditional instructional roles, teachers actively engage in classroom discussions on global issues, skillfully connecting the curriculum with the Colombian context. A prime example of this proactive approach was evident during the 2021 strikes, where teachers introduced pertinent topics into classroom discussions, adopting a critical perspective to help students comprehend the prevailing societal turmoil and provide new meaning to the chaotic world around them.

The significance of teachers transcends their instructional duties; they also serve as models for their students within the school community. According to the interviewed teachers, they have a responsibility to set an example for their students. It is essential to reflect on what teachers are communicating through their actions, as any inconsistency between their words and deeds can render their teachings meaningless to learners. Thus, to have a meaningful impact on students, educators must prioritize their values alongside their pedagogical competencies, encompassing pedagogy, didactics, curriculum development, among others.

This study reveals how teachers actively promote various discussions in the classroom to stimulate critical thinking and employ diverse strategies to encourage student participation. While active student engagement is crucial, teachers must also adopt a critical and sensitive stance toward the myriad of global issues (Peláez-Henao et al., 2020). Impacting students' development as critical thinkers, instilling sensitivity toward global concerns, and motivating them to effect change beyond the school walls becomes challenging if teachers adopt passive roles, lack critical thinking, or exhibit discriminatory attitudes towards minorities. In alignment with

Budiarti (2018), it is emphasized that teachers must possess intercultural competence as a prerequisite for teaching from an intercultural perspective. To promote intercultural principles like fairness, equality, justice, and respect for other cultures and differences, teachers must embody these qualities and demonstrate them to students through their actions, grounded in intercultural knowledge.

Furthermore, teachers require ongoing professional development to effectively teach from an intercultural approach and foster these skills in students. Despite national statutes and policies that advocate for respect for differences, there remains a gap in effectively integrating subject content with the societal values needed. This study highlights the reality that teachers often lack the knowledge to bridge this gap in the classroom. As one participant noted, teachers must take it upon themselves to self-train and enhance their pedagogical skills, but there is a shared responsibility that rests with policymakers to provide comprehensive professional training to elevate education, a resource that exists but remains insufficient.

It is imperative to address historically ingrained societal issues such as discrimination and rejection. When individuals silence others' opinions, preventing them from expressing their perspectives, they convey a message of insignificance and exclusion. This unfortunate reality is experienced daily by immigrants and minorities who face prejudice and discrimination. Consequently, teachers play a vital role in countering these injustices through their actions and practices. They must proactively address these situations and not serve as passive bystanders, recognizing the need for context-based education. Teachers are called upon to embrace a stance of critical interculturality (Walsh, 2006) and bridge the gap between the classroom and reality, ensuring that education is not isolated but deeply connected to what transpires in the world.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge the awareness demonstrated by both teachers and students regarding their context, specifically the Colombian context. They recognize the significance of taking a stand against various forms of violence, such

as discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and sexism (Alaminos et al., 2010; Peláez-Henao et al., 2021). Simultaneously, they appreciate the richness of diversity and the importance of respecting differences in thoughts and behaviors. Nevertheless, there is an acknowledgment of the stark contrast between the principles upheld within the school and the harsh realities beyond its walls. This paradox serves as a positive indicator that education is indeed impacting the newer generations, offering hope for change concerning the societal issues.

In summary, the role of the teacher is multifaceted, with a transformative capacity to effect change. Teachers serve as active participants in addressing discrimination and other societal challenges. They must do more than passively observe; they must think, reflect, and act preemptively to foster contextualized education. Teachers are not just instructors but also role models, influencing students through their actions and behaviors. Furthermore, professional development is essential to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills required to teach from an intercultural perspective effectively. The classroom becomes a platform for critical thinking, as students and teachers engage in discussions on social issues while honing their communicative competence. Education is not isolated from reality but deeply connected to it, offering the potential for genuine impact. Finally, the awareness demonstrated by both teachers and students about their context reflects a commitment to fostering positive change and addressing long-standing societal issues.

Conclusions

This comprehensive study delves into the perceptions of English teachers concerning interculturality within the realm of foreign language education. It takes place within the context of a private high school, exploring the profound impact of these perceptions on both students and educators' intercultural development. The findings reveal a profound connection between the principles of interculturality, as

articulated by Walsh (2006) - equity, justice, respect, and diversity recognition - and the deeply rooted beliefs and practices of the participating English teachers.

These educators have adopted these principles as the cornerstone of their pedagogical approaches, cultivating an inclusive environment that encourages diverse voices to be not only heard but cherished. They employ strategies such as democratization of discourse and active listening, prioritizing fairness, equality, and mutual respect. These practices reflect the conception of interculturality that extends beyond interrelation, aiming to promote diverse ways of thinking, acting, and collectively constructing knowledge. The study also highlights the school as a transformative intercultural setting, where diversity in all its forms is celebrated and knowledge is collectively constructed. However, it acknowledges the existence of disparities between the school environment and the external world, manifesting as ethnocentrism, stereotypes, and cultural biases.

From both the perspectives of teachers and students, the English classroom serves as a crucible for the cultivation of critical thinking and the exploration of a myriad of societal issues. Here, within the confines of the classroom, a dynamic intercultural dialogue unfolds. It is a space where students and educators engage in discussions about pressing social matters, all while honing their communicative competence. Importantly, the classroom is not isolated from the world outside; rather, it serves as a bridge to connect the curriculum with the realities of students' lives and the broader context in which they exist. Teachers leverage authentic materials, such as films that delve into social issues, providing students with opportunities to draw meaningful connections between the content and their lived experiences.

Within this dynamic, students exhibit a profound appreciation for their own culture, yet they simultaneously grapple with and question the specter of violence that persistently shadows the nation's achievements. They acknowledge that Colombia is home to remarkable individuals and a rich cultural tapestry, but the pervasive presence of violence often obscures these positive aspects. Furthermore, students

assert their roles as active agents in countering various societal issues, including discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. In their eyes, the classroom is a transformative space where these issues can be addressed and potentially transformed. They recognize that the school is a microcosm reflecting the broader society, and as such, it holds the potential to be a catalyst for change.

Similarly, teachers embrace their responsibilities as change-makers, taking proactive measures to combat discrimination, racism, and xenophobia within the classroom. They view their roles as educators extending beyond the mere imparting of language skills; rather, they see themselves as advocates for intercultural understanding and social change. The English classroom becomes a platform for the transformation of attitudes and perspectives, mirroring the teachers' conviction that the school should reflect the values of an inclusive and empathetic society. In essence, both students and teachers share a perspective of critical interculturality, fostering an environment where dialogue, reflection, and action intersect to address societal challenges and promote a more harmonious coexistence.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the role of English teachers in promoting interculturality, has limitations. It focused on a single private high school in Envigado, Colombia, which may not fully represent the diversity of educational settings in the country. Factors like school type, location, and student demographics can influence intercultural education dynamics, limiting the generalizability of findings.

Furthermore, the study primarily relies on qualitative methods, offering in-depth insights but benefiting from the inclusion of quantitative data to assess the prevalence and impact of intercultural practices in Colombian English classrooms. Additionally, self-reported data from teachers and students could introduce response bias.

Future research should strive for a more diverse sample of schools, including public institutions, employ mixed-method approaches, and consider longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of intercultural education practices. Exploring the perspectives of parents, school administrators, and policymakers would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities in advancing interculturality within the Colombian education system.

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