



The contribution of customized lessons with cultural content in the learning of EFL among undergraduates

La contribución de lecciones personalizadas con contenido cultural en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera en estudiantes de pregrado

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive action research study explores the contribution of customized lessons with cultural content in the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).. This study was conducted with a group of 17 undergraduates from the English Language Teaching (ELT) program at a state university in south-eastern Colombia. Data were collected via students' artefacts (EFL lessons developed by the participants) with corresponding self-assessment, teachers' field notes, and surveys on students' perceptions. Findings suggest that designing customized lessons anchored in principles of second language acquisition results in more effective language learning. Additionally, using cultural content in the lessons makes communication more meaningful as undergraduates develop cultural knowledge and understanding. Finally, addressing learning styles and providing learning strategies in the lessons greatly contribute to EFL learning among undergraduates.

Keywords: cultural content, culture, customized lessons, EFL learning, materials development

Resumen

El presente estudio acción-participación de carácter cualitativo-descriptivo explora la contribución de lecciones personalizadas con contenido cultural en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio se llevó a cabo con un grupo de 17 estudiantes de pregrado de la Licenciatura en Inglés de una universidad pública en el sureste de Colombia. Los instrumentos que se usaron para recolectar datos fueron los artefactos de los estudiantes (lecciones desarrolladas por los participantes) con su correspondiente autoevaluación, notas de campo de los docentes y encuestas sobre la percepción de los estudiantes. Los hallazgos de esta investigación sugieren que diseñar lecciones personalizadas basadas en principios de adquisición de la segunda lengua resulta en un aprendizaje más efectivo de la misma. Además de esto, el uso de contenido cultural en las lecciones, hace la comunicación más significativa ya que los estudiantes de pregrado desarrollan conocimiento y entendimiento cultural. Finalmente, tener en cuenta los estilos de aprendizaje y proveer estrategias de

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aprendizaje inmersas en las lecciones, contribuye al aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera en los estudiantes de pregrado.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera, contenido cultural, cultura, desarrollo de materiales, lecciones personalizadas

Introduction

Designing materials that meet students' needs and learning preferences has become a valuable pedagogical activity for English language teachers. To this regard, Núñez and Téllez (2009) explain that developing materials is a great concern for teaching, as these teaching resources contribute to facilitate students' language learning processes. However, the materials used at one particular state university in Colombia are commercial textbooks that do not respond to the specific learning needs of the students. The present article deals with the design and implementation of materials with cultural content to foster EFL learning among a group of undergraduates.

Based on our teaching experience as educators from the ELT program, we identified that EFL materials fail to engage undergraduates from the Basic English I course in EFL learning. We also noticed that the type of content and learning activities were not sufficiently appealing and challenging for undergraduates. To ratify these concerns, we conducted a Likert scale survey (see Appendix A) with the undergraduates and language teachers of Basic English I. The first result evinced that materials failed to engage undergraduates in the EFL lessons. The second result shows undergraduates' desire to learn English by using the language to explore their own cultural background and the culture of the target language. Consequently, this study aims to bring cultural elements bounded in the use of the language to foster EFL learning in undergraduates. Finally, we decided to implement an informed approach to provide learning strategies that fit undergraduates' learning styles to foster EFL learning, which was a concern evidenced in the needs analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Materials Development

Language learning materials are fundamental resources in any language classroom as they are a primary source of the target language. Richards (2001) asserts that "instructional materials generally serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom" (p. 251). Likewise, Núñez, Téllez, and Castellanos (2012) affirm that "materials... are socio-cultural resources that facilitate not only linguistic interaction but also cultural exchanges between the various human groups" (p. 10). Given these reasons, research into developing language learning lessons with cultural content brings new insights into how to apply these sources of language and cultural information to the teaching practice while benefiting, thereby, the learning process of our undergraduates.

Tomlinson (1998) envisions Materials Development (MD) as "anything which is done by writers, teachers or learners to provide sources of language input and to exploit those sources in ways which maximize the likelihood of intake: in other words, the supplying of information about and/or experience of the language in ways designed to promote language learning" (p. 2). In the same line of thought, Núñez and Téllez (2015) claim that "language pedagogy and applied linguistics have recently recognized that MD is a field of study focused on the effect of materials on the teaching-learning process of a foreign language" (p. 57). Hence, creating customized lessons needs to be approached as both an academic and practical endeavor that capitalizes on both students' learning process and teacher's practice.

Materials should include global and local issues. In this regard, addressing the local needs of a teaching context (Graves, 1996; Harwood, 2010; Núñez, Pineda, & Téllez, 2004; Núñez & Téllez, 2009; Núñez et al., 2012; Masuhara, 1998; Tomlinson, 1998, 2011) is a feature of contextualized materials, and including global issues that have a connection to the local context (Duarte & Escobar, 2008; Goldstein, 2015; Tomlinson, 1998) brings

far more possibilities to enhance the learning and the teaching of English. Consequently, developing materials adjusted to the profile and needs of the students results in the creation of an atmosphere that facilitates, prompts, and improves learning and teaching processes.

The process of developing materials implies a reflexive and analytical process of reviewing our knowledge and pedagogical practices. Núñez et al. (2004), Núñez and Téllez (2009) and Núñez et al. (2012) affirm that MD is not a task that should be entrusted only to publishing houses, but also to EFL teachers. Likewise, Kessler and Plakans (2001) asserted that the teaching field needs more teachers willing to develop customized materials, because they are the ones who know students' specific traits and needs. For this reason, the most appropriate people to attend such needs and traits and bring the materials they create to their classes are teachers, since they are the experts in guiding and appraising students' learning.

Culture

McLaren (2003) defines culture as a social group perception of its own life conditions. In addition, Álvarez and Bonilla (2009) define culture as a sphere of knowledge in which the frameworks of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs can be used to "interpret people's actions, patterns of thinking and human artefacts (art, literature, etc.)" (p. 161). Furthermore, Damen, Dolby, Freire and Macedo, McLaren, Nieto, Robinson, Roth and Harama, and Storey (as cited in Castañeda, 2012) assert that culture is a determinant factor in human relationships because cultural traits affect the way people understand the world. Thus, culture is relevant for individuals' interaction with language learning and teaching materials.

Several scholars explore the relationship between language and culture. According to Kramsch (1998) language is the vehicle used by social groups to reflect beliefs, ideas, facts, and knowledge about the world since speakers identify themselves by the way they use the language as a mechanism to express their social identity. Furthermore, Byram (1998) mentions that separating language from

culture goes against the nature of language. Equally, Goldstein (2015) identifies culture as inseparable from language, and Gladstone (as cited in Álvarez & Bonilla, 2009) asserts that both language and culture are unavoidably linked. In this sense, the relationship between language and culture permits the awareness of different cultural codes.

Language and culture are tightly related. To this respect, Brown (as cited in Tudor, 2001) argues that learning a foreign language like English implies learning about the cultures associated with that language. Exploring culture in EFL lessons represents a challenge for educators. Meraji and Zamanian (2014) and Tomalin and Stempleski (1990) purport that culture of the mother tongue (L1) could be used as the starting point for EFL lessons, and that culture-oriented lessons are valuable for EFL learning and teaching, respectively. Moreover, Byram and Risager (1999) state that teachers are mediators among cultures. Correspondingly, we also share Álvarez and Bonilla's (2009) view that teachers as mediators have the responsibility to help students understand, value, and respect their own culture as well as that of others. This should be done to plant the seed for approaching cultural diversity from a critical stance with the aim of fostering English learning.

EFL Learning

Learning a language is a process that develops differently in each person. As a result, individual differences in traits, personality, beliefs, and assumptions affect the process of learning a language. Researchers convey that students heavily rely on their learning styles and learning strategies to achieve learning goals. In this regard, Oxford (2003) explains that "learning strategies and learning styles are among the main factors that help to determine how well our students learn a second or a foreign language" (p. 1). It is essential to start exploring the significance of these two factors in the process of learning English.

Learning is not homogeneous as approaches and strategies are not equally suitable to all students. This means that individuals draw on different approaches to learn, as asserted by Dunn

and Griggs (1988) “learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others” (p. 3). In the same breath, Oxford (2003), Ehrman and Oxford (1990), and Shrum and Glisan (as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002), assert that dimensions in learning styles, such as global or analytic, auditory or visual, contribute to language learning (see Table 1). To conclude, all dimensions of learning styles need to be considered in the language input and classroom interaction.

Concerning the importance of learning strategies in EFL learning, Oxford (1997) asserts that they are “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” (p. 1). Also, Chamot and O’Malley (1996) understand learning strategies as special thoughts or behaviors that students use to comprehend, understand, learn, and handle new information. Concerning this, the conscious use of learning strategies helps students to become more aware of their own learning processes as they become more autonomous during the development of the class activities (see Figure 1).

Pedagogical Design

The customized lessons within this study were developed following the framework of the essential

components proposed by Núñez and Téllez (2009) in the process of creating and adapting language learning materials, as well as the framework for materials development as envisioned by Núñez et al. (2012). A merging of these two frameworks results in the following systematic procedures: need analysis, setting the objectives, selecting the content, selecting and developing the materials (lessons), organizing content and activities, assessment, and evaluation.

Recognizing that materials are driven by SLA principles (Tomlinson, 1998), the following principles were considered to achieve the goals of this study. First, materials are relevant and useful to the learner. Second, they provide a variety of activities, attractive presentation, and appealing content. Third, materials facilitate students’ self-investment, and fourth, materials offer communicative opportunities. Assimilating these informed principles when developing contextualized materials may promote better learning and teaching processes.

The design and implementation of the pedagogical intervention entails five stages as follows. The first phase is the diagnostic or exploration in which we diagnosed our undergraduates to identify their needs by designing and administering a Likert scale survey. The second phase was sensitization in which we informed our undergraduates about the

Table 1: Key Dimensions of Language Learning Styles.

Analytic - global	Analytic learners: Focus on grammatical details; do not participate well on communicative activities. Global learners: Like interactive activities, using main ideas, difficulties with grammatical details.
Sensory preferences	Focus on physical and perceptual learning such as: visual, auditory, and hands on.
Intuitive / Random Sensory / Sequential	Intuitive - random learners: non-sequential, abstract or random thinking to get the global picture. Sequential - sensory learners: prefer well-ordered and step by step information.
Orientation to closure	Learners with little tolerance towards ambiguity. They prefer to know all rules and then use metacognitive skills like planning and organizing.
Competition cooperation	Competitive learners are motivated by competition, winning is very important for them. Cooperative learners prefer working with others in a helpful and supportive situation.

Note. Adapted from Shrum and Glisan, in Richards and Renandya (2002)

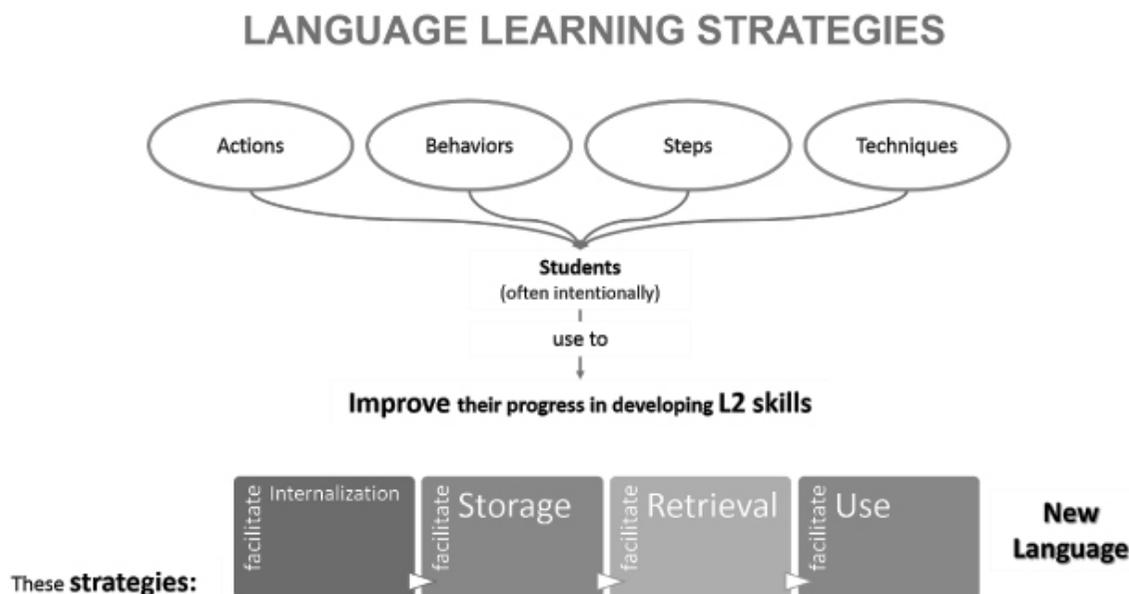


Figure 1. Language learning strategies (adapted from Oxford, 1997).

research study and invited them to participate. In the third phase, called the development phase, we analyzed the information gathered in the surveys. Based on that information, we created the four customized lessons incorporating cultural content to the lessons. The fourth phase was the adjustment in which we piloted the data gathering instruments with a group similar to the target one to fine tune the customized lessons. Finally, the last phase was the implementation in which undergraduates worked on the four lessons under our pedagogical guidance to observe the interaction between them and the lessons.

The selection of the topics, content, and type of activities took into account our undergraduates' preferences. To do so, we used a Likert scale survey (see Appendix B) to gather information related to the most appropriate content, learning activities and strategies for the customized lessons. The analysis of this data provided sound information to start designing the lessons. After this review, the topics for the lessons were: the origins of two different cultures, Colombia and the USA (lesson 1), the electoral system in the USA and Colombia (lesson 2), the relationship between Colombia and

the USA—the Free Trade Agreement (lesson 3) and finally, building a better society from our differences (lesson 4).

Research Question and Objectives

This research project aims to answer the following question: How does the development and implementation of customized lessons with cultural content contribute to the learning of EFL among undergraduates at a state university in south-eastern Colombia? To answer the research question, we established the following objectives: the general objective is to analyze the results of developing and implementing customized lessons with cultural content in the learning of EFL among undergraduates. Then, we established the following specific objectives: (a) to explore undergraduates' responsiveness to cultural issues and activities in their process of learning English, (b) to describe the incidence of learning activities that cater for students' learning styles and provide learning strategies to reach undergraduates' learning goals, and (c) to assess the suitability and effectiveness of customized lessons in helping undergraduates' EFL learning progression.

Method

This study follows a qualitative, interpretative and descriptive research approach. This is an action research study which, according to Burns (1999) entails “a systematic and self-reflective approach to collecting and analyzing information to help teachers to explore issues that they face in their classrooms to change or improve their current practice” (p. 14). This type of research study suits our research inquiry since it recognizes an unresolved situation in a social milieu aiming at solving and improving it (Burns, 2010; Sandin, 2003). It also supports the outcomes within a natural context and favors interaction with the participants (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Thus, this research approach suits our study because the main goal is to tackle a problem or situation presented in a natural context.

Participants

Participants included 17 undergraduates (7 women and 10 men) from the ELT program at a state university in south-eastern Colombia and the two English teachers who taught within this program. The participants were enrolled in the Basic English I and II courses. During the Basic English I course, they participated in the diagnosis phase of this study and during the Basic English II course they participated in the implementation phase. The implementation took place over two 16-week semesters. The lessons were carried out over four weeks and each lesson was developed in two sessions of two hours. The technique we followed to choose the participants of this study was the convenience sampling technique that consists of a sample where the participants are selected taking into account the convenience of the researcher; for instance, due to the availability or accessibility (Stevens, 1996). We, the two teachers, perform a triple role while conducting this study as both of us were the teachers in Basic English and I and II courses, researchers of this study, and developers of the customized lessons.

Data Collection

The data collection instruments used were students' artefacts including the corresponding

self-assessment, teachers' field notes, and surveys administered at the end of each lesson. In relation to artefacts, Arhar, Kelly, and Kasten (2001) state that “artifacts and documents provide descriptive records that can enable the researcher to derive insights different from those provided by observations and interviews” (p. 163). This data collection instrument provided valuable information related to what undergraduates did during the lessons, in terms of learning English while dealing with the different language skills. Regarding fieldnotes, Burns (1999) affirms that they “are descriptions and accounts of events in the research context which are written in a relatively factual and objective style. They generally include reports of non-verbal information, physical settings, group structures and records of conversations and interactions between participants” (p. 87). We collected fieldnotes taking into consideration the aspects concerning this study, which are the contributions of customized lessons with cultural content in the learning of EFL. In reference to surveys, Bell (1993) states that “the aim of a survey is to obtain information which can be analyzed and patterns extracted and comparisons made” (p. 10). The surveys on students' perception were conducted with all of the undergraduates to record their perceptions towards the customized lessons, their learning preferences, the cultural content, and learning activities.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via grounded theory which, according to Creswell (2013), is a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (p. 83). To this respect, the data gathered in our research study served as the basis to set explanations that answer our research question. Additionally, Corbin and Strauss (2008) assert that “grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (p. 12). Likewise, the data gathered underpinned the contribution of customized lessons with cultural content in the learning of EFL among undergraduates.

We started the data analysis process by exploring the students' artefacts with the corresponding self-assessment done in the four lessons, the transcriptions of the field notes, and systematization of the surveys on students' perceptions conducted after each lesson. After doing this, we organized the data with the use of the color coding technique which, according to Stottok, Bergaus, and Gorra (2011), "uses colored fonts to assign certain codes, concepts and categories to the text, with codes being keywords or short sentences, concepts being interrelationships of codes, and categories being interrelationships of concepts" (p. 1). Therefore, this technique helped us to identify common and recurrent patterns from the different instruments for data collection.

We triangulated the data collected considering Denzin's and Lincoln's (2005) insights since it involves analyzing students' work, their perceptions, and researchers' points of view. In the process of triangulating we included undergraduates' perceptions and our own insights and reflections. After this carefully review and analysis, we identified three research categories with its corresponding sub-categories, as can be seen in Table 2.

Findings and Discussion

The excerpts presented in this section are registered as follows. Teachers' field notes – Lesson

(1, 2, 3 or 4), students' artefacts – Lesson (1, 2, 3 or 4), activity (1, 2, 3, 4...). In addition, the first two letters (YB, YN, LC...) refer to each of the different participants. The inclusion of these codes helped us to organize and understand the information to create the categories and subsequent sub-categories.

Designing Principle-Based Customized Lessons

The main basis to support our findings is the fact that materials are informed by principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Capital letters which have the potential to contribute to EFL learning among undergraduates. As stated by Núñez and Téllez (2009) "materials development entails the blending of reasoning and artistic processes, which are guided by some tenets and essential ingredients that help both language learners assimilate and provide teachers with the groundwork to embark on the materials development route" (p. 175). Thus, SLA principles informed our customized lessons in an attempt to maximize the effectiveness of the materials and boost the process of learning the language.

Are relevant and useful to the learner. For learning to take place, undergraduates need to relate the content of the lessons to their realities and life conditions and to perceive the lessons as

Table 2: Research Categories and Sub-Categories.

<u>Research Question</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Subcategories</u>
How do the development and implementation of customized lessons with cultural content contribute to EFL learning among undergraduates at a state university in south-eastern Colombia?	Designing principled customized lessons	Are relevant and useful to the learner
		Provide a variety of activities, attractive presentation and appealing content
	Fostering cultural knowledge and understanding	Facilitate students' self-investment
		Offer communicative opportunities
	Addressing learning styles and learning strategies	Expressing cultural knowledge
		Developing cultural understanding
		Considering learning styles in EFL learning
		Applying learning strategies in EFL learning

useful. To this respect, Rico (2005) states that “materials will focus on understandable, relevant, and interesting exchanges of information, rather than on the presentation of grammatical form” (p. 105). Keeping this idea in mind, the customized lessons aimed to provide relevant topics to make undergraduates feel at ease to perform in the class.

Evidence from the self-assessment (see Appendix C) showed that the content presented was relevant for undergraduates in their EFL learning (see Figure 2). In this sense, providing content that is pertinent and useful encourages undergraduates to be engaged in the lessons and use the language while expressing their thoughts and ideas. Expressing their opinions regarding the Colombian electoral system was useful as this particular situation was affecting their lives. These reflections portrayed undergraduates’ awareness of the relevant content presented in the lessons.

The cultural content was meaningful and reflect situations of my context

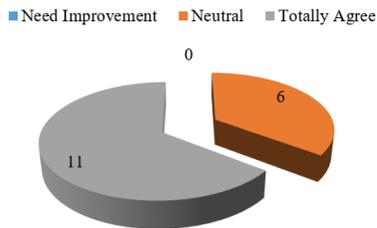


Figure 2. Students’ artefacts: Self-assessment survey.

The following excerpts are samples of how relevant and useful the lessons were for undergraduates. They were aware of the fact that the content gave them opportunities to use the language and explore the usefulness of the lesson.

The students reflect on the content of the materials. GP says that the topic helped him to learn the differences between both countries. In addition, he also says that the vocabulary presented is new for him. (sic)

Teachers’ field notes – Lesson 2

LC talks about the materials. She says that the materials were useful and relevant. She is able to

contextualize the vocabulary because the topic is interesting for her.

Teachers’ field notes – Lesson 4

Provide a variety of activities, attractive presentation, and appealing content. We provided a wide range of activities in each lesson to attract undergraduates’ attention and interests. To this respect, Rico (2005) claims that “materials will involve different kinds of texts and different media, which the learners can use to develop their competence through a variety of different activities and tasks” (p. 106). For instance, Figure 3 exemplifies this particular situation as it presents a variety of matching activities as a way to introduce vocabulary.

We designed vocabulary matching exercises differently in each lesson to engage undergraduates in their development. Concerning this fact, Tomlinson (1998) explains that variety in activities occurs when you change what is usually done in the classroom by giving different instructions and changing sources, among others. Based on these insights, we deduced that lessons without variety will be demotivating and monotonous for students. The following excerpts from the field notes evidence that JA and GP stated that the lessons provided different examples and activities:

JA says that the materials give different examples of the language: texts, audios, examples for the activities.

Teachers’ field notes – Lesson 2

GP expresses that the materials had many and different activities. GP says “in each lesson we work on different skills and the good thing is that at the end we have to present a product”

Teachers’ field notes – Lesson 4

The variety of activities had a positive impact on undergraduates as they felt engaged into the lessons. Moreover, this concern made the lessons more enjoyable and interesting. The survey on students’ perceptions evidences that this situation was beneficial for undergraduates while they were developing the lessons (see Figure 4).

What do you know about 'Conquest'?

Learning Strategies: grouping, making associations and using imagery

1. Match the vocabulary, definition and pictures by using colors.

a. Colombia	Someone who travels from one place to another because of their religious belief	
b. Wealth	A specific country	
c. Religion	A territory under the immediate political control of a country	
d. Conqueror	A spiritual, catholic who helped to improve the agricultural conditions for economic or political reasons	
e. Settlers	A great quantity or some of money, valuable possessions, property, or other values	
f. Empire	A person who is born in a particular place or country	
g. Native	A group of people who establish a settlement from a new country or area	

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What do you know about the Free Trade Agreement?

Learning Strategies: Grouping and using association

1. Draw a line to match the vocabulary with the corresponding definition.

Market	Trade	Custom-duty	Treaty	Wage
Formal agreement between two countries	the act of buying and selling goods	the payment workers receive for their work	an exchange mechanism in which sellers and buyers interact	the act of buying and selling goods

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Following about Colombia and the USA

Learning Strategies: Grouping, using imagery, making associations

1. Arrange the words below under the categories given.

ORIGINS	VOCABULARY	PARTNERSHIP
 Religions Markets Conquerors Settlers Colonies	 Trade Customs Markets Conquerors Producers Wages	 Partners Settlers Colonies Markets Conquerors Customs

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Figure 3. Students' Artefacts, matching activities (Lessons 1, 3, & 4).

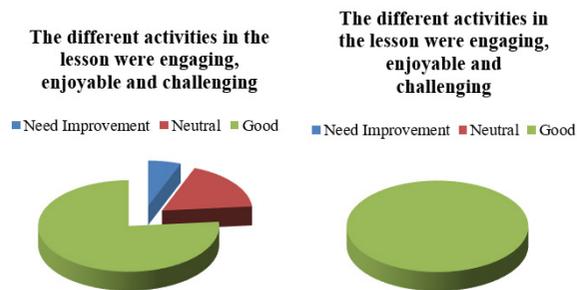


Figure 4. Survey on students' perceptions (Lessons 2 & 4).

The second aspect in this sub-category deals with attractive presentation in the lessons. As asserted by Lamb (2011) "visual appeal is key not only in its ability to grab the interest of your reader but also to help the reader remember the details of your message" (p. 14). We found evidence of undergraduates' perception regarding the presentation in the surveys on students' perceptions conducted after each lesson (see Figure 5). This data provided valuable insights about the layout of the materials since the majority of the undergraduates considered the layout as appealing.

Additionally, the layout contributed to make the lessons easier to understand by means of eye catching colors and imagery. GP expressed this in the following excerpt:

According to GP, the material design is understandable and according to the topic. The

colours and the images help him to understand.
Teachers' field notes – Lesson 3

The third aspect in this sub-category is appealing content. Based on the information gathered, there is evidence showing that undergraduates considered content as motivating for their learning. To this respect, Tomlinson (1998) claims that "the content is appealing when it has got topics of interest to the target learners, topics which offer the possibility of learning something new, engaging stories, universal themes or local references" (p. 7). This can be seen in the following excerpts from the field notes in which LC reflects on the topics presented and GP clarifies the importance of the topic for his learning.

LC states: "The materials are useful and relevant because I learnt new vocabulary but I also contextualise them in a topic that is interesting to me. This is why we were motivated to participate"
Teachers' field notes – Lesson 4

GP talks about the importance of the topic because he says "it helps me to understand vocabulary and it helps to understand grammar easily".
Teachers' field notes – Lesson 1

Facilitate students' self-investment. This sub-category is featured by the opportunities that undergraduates had to achieve and complete the learning goals by consciously using the learning strategies proposed in the customized lessons.

The material is appealing and has a nice layout

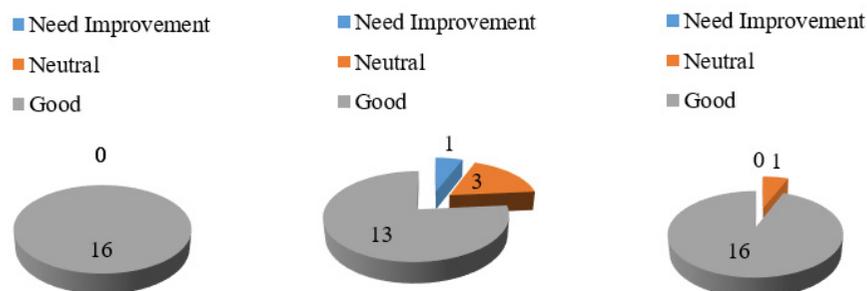


Figure 5. Survey on students' perceptions (Lessons 1, 3, & 4 respectively).

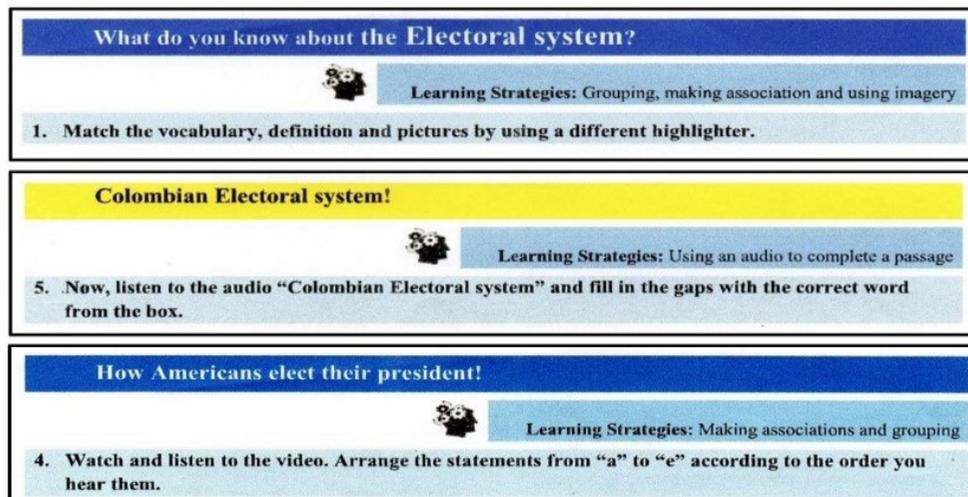


Figure 6. Students' Artefacts—learning strategies (Lesson 2).

The learning strategies were selected favoring the pacing and level of complexity of the activities. In this regard, Núñez and Téllez (2009) assert that:

In materials development, both content and activities could be structured in three distinct fashions known as the building, the recycling, and the sequence and matrix approaches. The first one gradually moves from the simplest to the most complex activities, from the general to the specific ones, and from the concrete to the abstract. The second one provides students with a learning challenge in terms of a new skill area, a different type of activity, or new focus. The third one follows a consistent sequence to be fulfilled within a given period. (p. 180)

The lessons favored the overt-model of strategy instruction which informs the name, use and the benefits of applying learning strategies (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999). As can be seen in Figure 6, learning strategies were informed during the development of the lessons in each one of the activities. This was done to encourage undergraduates to consciously use the learning strategies to achieve learning goals.

Drawing on Tomlinson's (1998) principles for MD, self-investment and self-discovery facilitate a more efficient use of the learning resources.

Undergraduates noticed the learning strategies given in the lessons and this contributed to a more effective use of the resources offered in the customized lessons (see Figure 7).

The learning strategies provided by the activities allowed me to get a clear idea about the reading passages

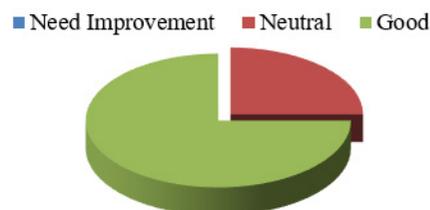


Figure 7. Survey on students' perceptions (Lesson 1).

Offer communicative opportunities. This sub-category deals with the opportunities undergraduates had to use the language for communicative purposes during the implementation of the customized lessons. According to Gilmore (2007), the objective of materials "is to produce learners who are able to communicate effectively in the target language" (p. 6). Concerning this fact, during a plenary session undergraduates had the opportunity to recall concepts from previous lessons to express their own ideas and opinion (see Figure 8).

Let's share our thoughts!

Learning Strategy: Reflecting and reasoning on how cultural differences help to build a better society

3. Share how the different aspects discussed in the previous activities (colonization, democracy and partnership) contribute to build a more inclusive, democratic and egalitarian society.

Plenary session...

What is a Plenary session?
The plenary session is an assembly where people meet to share ideas about a topic.

How to support your ideas?
(Modes of argumentation based on Núñez & Tellez, 2012)

- Providing facts.
- Identifying cause and effect relationships.
- Providing true examples.
- Making analogies.

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Speaking Guide

Write no more than 3 words in each line to support your participation in the plenary.

ORIGINS

- > Rattles for natural resources
- > We came from different cultures
- > Communications between peoples

DEMOCRACY

- > Government by the people
- > Supreme power is vested in the people
- > Free electoral system
- > Complex electoral system

PARTNERSHIP

- > The state of being a partner
- > Participation, association, joint interest.
- > Partners in business.

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Figure 8. Students' Artifacts (Lesson 4).

As we can see, undergraduates acknowledge that the customized lessons offered plenty of instances to communicate with the class and the teacher during the lessons. Regarding this, undergraduates gave and shared their opinions regarding the consequences of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the following excerpts from the fieldnotes.

Students talk about the consequences of FTA:
MA: "The USA helps Colombia because of the Amazonia. They have other interests"
DC: "FTA is a kind of business between both countries"
YB: "FTA will make little businesses disappear"
WJ: "FTA will make raw materials cheaper"
Teachers' field notes – Lesson 3

The content and the activities presented encouraged undergraduates to use language for communicative purposes. Based on Ramírez (2004), materials need to offer "exposure to real language which is attained by giving students opportunities to use language in real-life communicative activities" (p. 6). The aforementioned issues lead us to conclude that offering communicate opportunities is a fundamental concern since communicating in the foreign language is the main purpose of communicative language teaching and learning.

Fostering Cultural Knowledge and Understanding

To achieve more meaningful communication, both language and cultural content are fundamental. As affirmed by Kramersch (1998), language is linked to culture when it is used for communicative purposes. With this idea in mind, there are two important factors to consider in this study in terms of cultural content. First, undergraduates wanted to know more about the culture of English-speaking countries, in this case the USA. Second, they wanted to express their own cultural reality using the foreign language.

Expressing cultural knowledge.

This subcategory entails the opportunities undergraduates had to express what they knew and learned regarding the cultural aspects in the

lessons. According to Crawford-Lange and Lange (2010), "cultural themes are provocative concerns or issues related to the values of either the native or target culture or both. The stronger the relationship to the learners' situation, the more powerful the theme will be" (p. 259). In this sense, the lessons proposed different topics related to the following cultural aspects: colonization, the electoral system and economy in both Colombia and the USA with the idea of motivating undergraduates to take part in the lessons. Figure 9 presents the different cultural content offered in the lessons.

The presentation of these topics gave undergraduates the possibility to express their opinions regarding cultural knowledge in two ways, as something they have already known and something that is new for them. In this regard, one of the first points of expressing cultural knowledge is the ability to express specific and general cultural knowledge (Byram, 1997). The following excerpts from students' artefacts show the knowledge undergraduates have regarding their cultural realities.

Do you think Colombians perceive voting as a serious responsibility? Why?

MA: from my point of view we don't perceive voting as a serious responsibility because we don't have faith in the changes candidates could realise in our country.
Students' artefacts – Lesson 2, activity 6

Do you think the candidates in Colombia are the most suitable for that position? Why?

YN: Yes, I believe candidates are very intelligent, and they have lot experience but lots of them lack of professional ethical.
Students' artefacts – Lesson 2, activity 6

Expressing cultural knowledge equates to the capacity to use the target language to express what undergraduates knew about their own culture and that of the target language. As expressed by Goldstein (2015), culture is bounded to language. In this sense, we can say that undergraduates used the language to express their cultural knowledge in relation to the topics presented.

Developing cultural understanding. This subcategory is featured by the possibilities the lessons offered to develop cultural understanding in undergraduates which let them interpret, relate, and communicate cultural differences and similarities. Based on Crawford-Lange and Lange (2010), integrating culture into the EFL classroom allows students to transform their cultural understanding by interacting with new linguistic situations related to cultural aspects. The aforementioned ideas converged and contributed positively as undergraduates expressed their own understanding of the cultural content presented. This information is corroborated with the results of the surveys on students' perceptions (see Figure 10) which revealed that undergraduates reflected on cultural aspects developing understanding of the culture from the USA and relating it to their own culture.

Cultural content of the lesson allowed me to reflect on cultural issues in relation to both countries

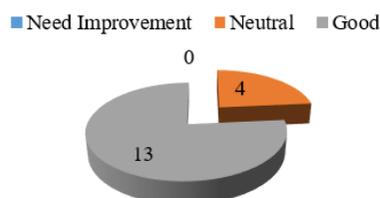


Figure 10. Survey on students' perceptions (Lesson 2).

According to Rico (2011), achieving intercultural communication is to consciously create relationships between cultural aspects such as differences, similarities, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, skills, and language. Indeed, this will contribute to undergraduates' awareness of the cultural aspects previously mentioned. Further evidence from these statements are presented in the following excerpts selected from the field notes. The following excerpts exhibit how undergraduates compared and looked for similarities in relation to the cultural content presented in the lessons and how this helped them to broaden their cultural perceptions and awareness about the world.

Students share their comic strips from the last activity, the students explain:

YB: "This is a real story, Starbucks. Long lines to buy a coffee when the people sell the same coffee for 500 pesos. People in Colombia lack personality" [sic]

Teachers' field notes – Lesson 1

The teacher asks students about their knowledge regarding the FTA:

JA: "There is a military agreement. The USA send army, soldiers to fight to FARC"

DC: "The USA helps Colombia to fight drug trafficking"

JA: "Colombia needs dollars" [sic]

Teachers' field notes – Lesson 3

Addressing Learning Styles and Learning Strategies

The main basis to support our findings is the fact that the activities presented in the customized lessons cater to undergraduates' learning styles and provide learning strategies to reach EFL learning goals. These aspects are relevant as our undergraduates have different learning styles and helping students to identify learning strategies is fundamental in EFL learning as undergraduates become more conscious of their use and application in the lessons.

Considering learning styles in EFL learning.

This represents how the lessons address the different learning styles. This means that each student learns in a different way according to specific behavioral and biological traits. According to Dunn and Griggs (1988) and Ehrman and Oxford (1990), there are different dimensions that entail the different learning styles which significantly intervene with the learning of a foreign language. With these ideas in mind, the different activities are situated to suit undergraduates' different learning styles. Furthermore, we found evidence in the field notes in which addressing learning styles such as auditory and visual contributed to complete undergraduates' learning goals.

Students talk about the importance of images. MM and JL say that it is easier to complete the exercises with images. In addition SG and GP think that mind maps are helpful to organize ideas.

Teachers' field notes – Lesson 1

Teacher asks students about the activities:

DC: "It is difficult to learn these concepts in English. The audios, the images and the activities helped me to understand"

ML: "We completed the exercises using the context (filling the gaps activity). Then we check with the audio. It was faster"

Teachers' field notes – Lesson 2

Achieving the learning goals is possible by taking into consideration that all students learn differently. According to Núñez and Téllez (2009), one of the most important factors to attain the goals of a course is to tune the activities to suit students' different learning styles. In this sense, the customized lessons presented contributed to address undergraduates' learning styles and consequently helped to improve their EFL learning (see Figure 11).

Applying learning strategies in EFL learning.

This subcategory is featured by the opportunities undergraduates had to develop the diverse activities presented in the customized lessons throughout the conscious use of the learning strategies. The different activities proposed in the lessons were thought to be developed following specific learning strategies according to the goal of the activity. We confirmed this by means of the surveys on students' perceptions that reflect how undergraduates completed the different activities by consciously applying the learning strategies (see Figure 12).

Making undergraduates reflect and become aware of their own process was essential as they

realized the importance of the use of the learning strategies. As stated by Ormrod (2004) this process entails "people's knowledge of effective learning, and cognitive processes and their use to enhance learning" (p. 358). During the intervention, undergraduates accomplished the learning activities and achieved the learning objectives through the use of those learning strategies. The following excerpts from the teachers' fieldnotes exemplify how ML, SG, and DC became aware of the learning strategies and consciously applied them to develop the activities during the different lessons. Consequently, undergraduates became aware of the use of the learning strategies as one of the objectives of these lessons was to contribute to EFL learning among undergraduates by making them more reflective about their learning processes.

Students talk about the learning strategies provided in the lessons:

SG: "Nice strategy to use mind maps and the learning strategy semantic mapping"

DC: "We remember the vocabulary from the previous lessons. We use similar learning strategies, so we feel familiar with the topics in the lessons"

Teachers' field notes – Lesson 1 and 4

Conclusions

Designing and implementing materials anchored by SLA principles is an essential endeavor to maximize students' interaction in the target language. The inclusion of SLA principles

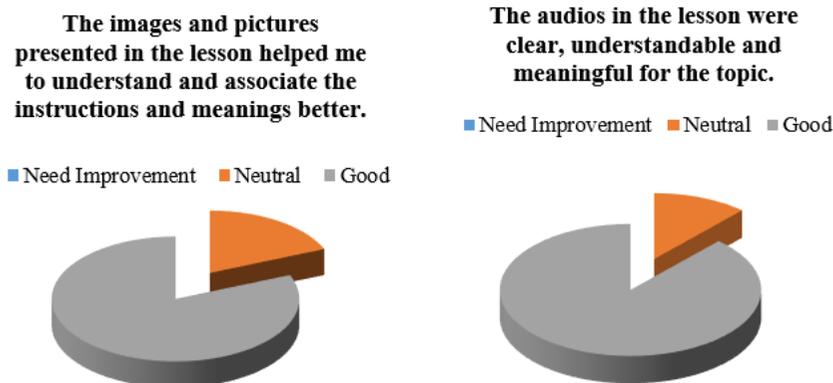


Figure 11. Survey on students' perceptions (Lessons 1 & 2).

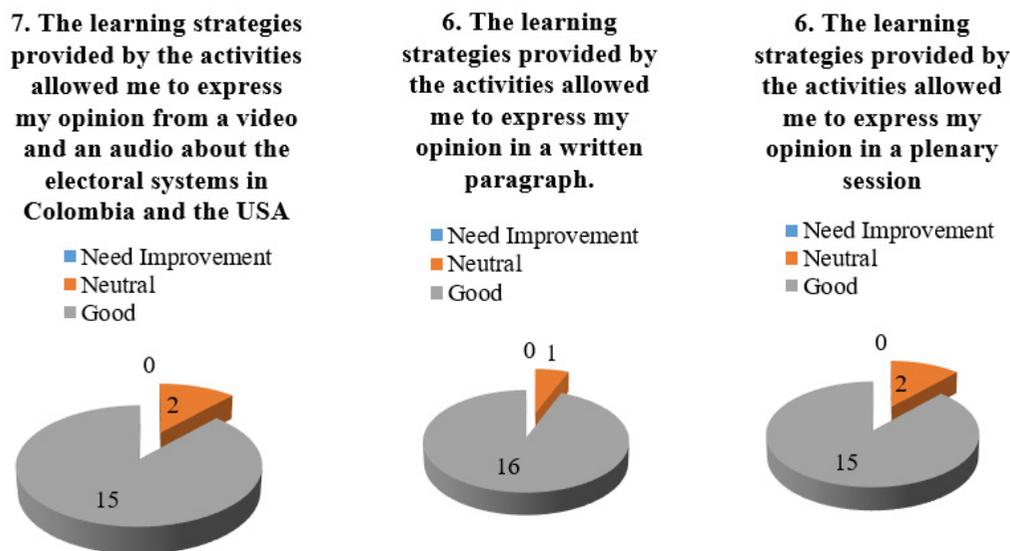


Figure 12. Survey on students' perceptions (Lesson 2, 3, & 4 respectively).

contributes to EFL learning as they maximized learners' interaction with the target language. In accordance with Núñez and Téllez (2009), Núñez et al. (2004), and Tomlinson (2010), the findings in this study reveal the benefits that MD principles have for students and teachers alike.

First, relevant and useful content contributes to encourage learners to take part in the lessons as these concerns are related to their realities and interests, and provides useful language to communicate during the lessons. Second, when the variety of activities, presentation, and content are perceived as meaningful and appealing for students, they have the potential to maximize materials effectiveness. Third, the implementation of explicit strategy instruction contributes to make students more autonomous and aware of a more suitable mechanism to achieve learning goals; this refers to the SLA principle which aims to promote students' self-investment. Lastly, students feel more relaxed to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in the target language when the materials offer communicative opportunities regarding the content presented.

The findings in this research study suggest that the inclusion of cultural content in instructional

materials contribute to EFL learning. Including culture from the target language as well as from the students' own culture encourages learners to take active part into the EFL lessons. This enables students to relate their knowledge about their own and the culture of others to reach different learning goals. In other words, including both culture and language in customized materials is beneficial as language serves as a basis to express cultural knowledge and to develop cultural understanding. As a result, by discussing cultural content learners make progress in their EFL learning.

Catering learning styles and incorporating learning strategies acknowledges the fact that each person learns differently. Keeping this in mind, the inclusion of the aforementioned concerns in the customized materials contribute to EFL learning in several ways. First, considering how students' specific learning traits intervene in the learning processes ensures that all students' learning preferences are addressed. Second, the application of learning strategies contributed to EFL learning as it enables undergraduates to become independent learners by reflecting and applying the different strategies to achieve their learning goals.

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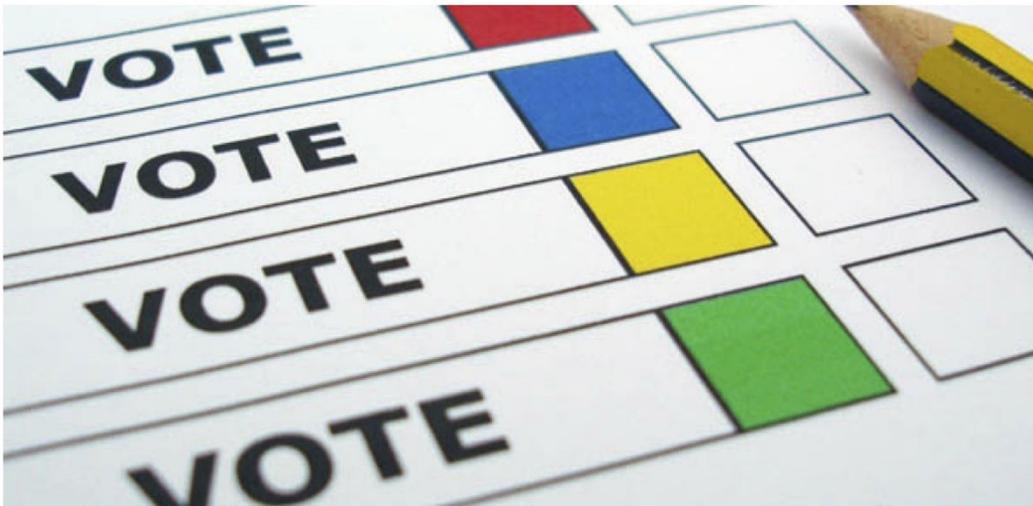


Appendix A

Lesson No. 2 – Sample

UNIT 1 Lesson 2

The electoral system in the USA and Colombia



Taken from http://www.google.com.co/imgres?imgurl=https://www.deepdotweb.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/vote1.jpg&imgrefurl=https://www.deepdotweb.com/2014/06/15/can-bitcoins-technology-change-the-way-we-vote/&h=290&w=600&tbid=XuE7Vog7VwC7jM:&docid=AnwJ7lTmxkMEM&ei=3RKVovCM8ibmQHF_qKwDQ&ibm=isch&ved=0CB8QMygEMARqFQoTCMurn_yZlskCFchNJgodRb8l1g

General Objective

To state a personal point of view regarding the electoral systems from the USA and Colombia while watching to a video-clip

Specific Objectives

To explore vocabulary related to the electoral system in the USA and Colombia

To discover and understand the electoral system in the USA and Colombia

To contrast and state opinion in relation to both electoral systems

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS	
Research Question	How do the development and implementation of customized EFL materials with cultural content contribute to the learning of English in undergraduates of the English Language Teaching Programme at Universidad de la Amazonia?
Pedagogical Intervention	The development and implementation of customized EFL materials with cultural content to contribute in the L2 Learning.
Material Development (M.D) Framework	Núñez and Tellez (2009) Essential Components in the process of creating and adapting didactic learning and Núñez, Téllez, and Castellanos (2012) A framework for MD
Contextualized Principles for MD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve impact thorough novelty, variety, attractive presentation, and appealing content (Tomlinson, 1988) • Materials must be perceived as meaningful and useful by the learner (Tomlinson, 1998). • Readiness: Materials must provide tuned input through familiar language, but they also facilitate new language knowledge learning (Krashen, 1985). • Materials enable students to develop self-confidence and self-discovery (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982).
Theory of the nature of the Language	<p><i>Culture and ideology perspective:</i></p> <p>The visions of theory of the nature of language underlying this unit are the linguistic, functional and self-expression. In addition, the culture of a particular social group is represented by the language this group holds. In the same line of thought, Brown (2001), Tudor (2002), Stevick (1989) and Norton (1997), as cited in Tudor (2001), state that “learning a language implies learning the culture of the language” (p. 1). Language is determined by socio-cultural issues. The inclusion of culture in both, programme design and teaching, determines learner’s capability to use language in meaningful and contextualized situations.</p>
Theory of Language Learning	<p><i>Analytical Learning:</i></p> <p>As stated by Nuñez (2011), Using analytical learning to develop this unit will foster the use of deductive analysis. With this idea in mind, Learners pick up language features and develop language knowledge on their own. In the same line of thought, Tudor (2001) adds that the use of analytical learning promotes the development of the cognitive skills necessary for language learning. In addition, the use of this language learning theory in this unit, as stated by Tudor (2001) will contribute to perceive language as a communicative system.</p>
Teaching Approach	Content-based Instruction.

What do you know about the Electoral system?

Learning Strategies: Grouping, making association and using imagery

1. Match the vocabulary, definition and pictures by using a different highlighter.

<p>District</p>		<p>Represents the quantity of electors a specific area has</p>
<p>People who are able to vote in a specific district, they are also known as voters</p>	<p>Candidates</p>	
	<p>Are autonomous territories that belong to a country</p>	<p>President-elect</p>
<p>Electors</p>		<p>Are people who want to become president</p>
	<p>States</p>	<p>Winner of the Election Day</p>

The USA Electoral system!

Learning Strategy: Using the audio to complete a passage

2. Watch and listen to the audio about “Electing a US President” and fill in the gaps with the correct word from the box.

counted	states	president	responsibility
together	candidate	vote	system

PART I

Every four years Americans who are 18 or older have a big (i) responsibility. Our votes decide who becomes the (a) _____ of the United States. Unfortunately, the US election (b) _____ isn't that simple.

It's easy to imagine every US citizens vote being counted (c) _____ on Election Day, but this is not the case. Elections are not decided by the total or popular vote, but individual (d) _____.

Let me explain... it starts with your (e) _____ on Election Day. Your vote for president and the vice-president, you get one choice. Then all the votes in your state are (f) _____.

The candidate with the most statewide votes becomes the (g) _____ your state supports for president.

Learning Strategies: Reporting cultural understanding and developing/contrasting cultural understanding

3. After reading the passage above, complete the following information. Then answer the three questions according to your beliefs and perceptions. Share your answers.

STATEMENT - REASON

Voting is a big responsibility because...

 _____

US election isn't simple because...

 _____

To become the president of the US, the candidate needs to...

 _____

How Americans elect their president!

Learning Strategies: Making associations and grouping

4. Watch and listen to the video. Arrange the statements from “a” to “e” according to the order you hear them.

a. Then on the following January 28 th the president elect is sworn in as the next president of the United States.	<input type="text"/>
b. That candidate receives all the collectors from your state.	<input type="text"/>
c. So, let’s recap... your vote helps your state choose a single candidate.	1
d. And it all starts with your vote, make it count!	<input type="text"/>
e. The candidate, who can win enough state to reach 270 total electors, wins the national election and becomes the president elect.	<input type="text"/>

Colombian Electoral system!

Learning Strategies: Using the audio to complete a passage

5. Now, listen to the audio “Colombian Electoral system” and fill in the gaps with the correct word from the box.

faith	population	democraey	votes
problems	vice-president	political	constitution

COLOMBIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Voting is fundamental for (i) democracy . However, Colombian electoral system has several (a) _____ that make it ineffective, even though voting is a big responsibility for every citizen, more than 50% of the Colombian (b) _____ that are able to vote don’t do it.

According to the Colombian (c) _____, Colombians under 18 years old that have registered their I.D to vote are able to do it for president and (d) _____ .

To win the elections the candidate has to win the majority of the (e) _____ of all the

population registered.

The reason why people in Colombia don't vote is that they have lost (f) _____ in the political parties and candidates, as they have been ruling over this country for more than 100 years, and Colombians continue facing the same social, economic and (g) _____ problems.

Learning Strategies: Developing and contrasting cultural understanding

6. Listen to the audio "Interviewing a candidate". Then answer these three questions according to your beliefs and perceptions.

Reflecting and stating a position about both Electoral Systems! Have you say!

Useful expressions bank

I think...

From my point of view...

I disagree...

I believe...

Colombians are/aren't aware...

I am in disagreement...

1. Do you think Colombians perceive voting as a serious responsibility? Why?

 _____

2. Do you think the electoral system in Colombia is simple or complex? Why?

 _____

3. Do you think the candidates in Colombia are the most suitable for that position? Why?

 _____

Images taken from

- <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/92-195-x/2011001/geo/fed-cef/fed-cef-eng.htm>
- <http://www.clipartpanda.com/categories/balloting-clipart>
- <http://www.clipartsheep.com/variety-of-royalty-free-printable-united-states-and-canada-jpg-maps-clipart-176727.html>
- http://mayorvanjohnson.com/uploaded_images/vote2-765029.jpg
- <http://es.aliexpress.com/popular/barack-obama-car.html>

Audios and videos taken from

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok_VQ8l7g6l&spfreload=10
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RD7QM6_VH3Y&spfreload=10

Appendix B

Likert Scale Survey

<i>Likert Scale</i>		
<i>#</i>	<i>Literature</i>	<i>Our Research New Statements</i>
1	<i>Commercial textbooks fail to engage and motivate learners. Duarte & Escobar (2007)</i>	<i>I found English textbooks interesting and motivating.</i>
2	<i>English textbooks used in Colombia are not intellectually stimulating and limit learners' creativity. Muñoz (2009)</i>	<i>The use of English textbooks encourages me to reflect and create things in English.</i>
3	<i>Lessons from a course book can result in ineffective lesson hours. Ocak et al (2010)</i>	<i>Using textbooks make my learning time more effective.</i>
4	<i>Learners need visual and audio sources to learn new vocabulary. Ocak et al (2010)</i>	<i>Audiovisual materials (pictures, videos, audio recordings, etc.) help me to learn new vocabulary.</i>
5	<i>Learners' native cultures affect how they perceive foreign cultures and languages. Castañeda (2012)</i>	<i>Talking about my own culture motivates me to learn English.</i>
6	<i>Risks and benefits of Implementing L1 culture into L2 language learning materials. Meraji and Zamanian (2014)</i>	<i>Talking about American culture motivates me to learn English.</i>
7	<i>Learners need the training in the use of appropriate strategies to foster reading comprehension.</i>	<i>I use a lot of strategies (taking notes, asking for clarifications, cooperating with peers, translating, etc.) to learn more effectively.</i>
8	<i>Create and select materials to foster learners' motivation. Duarte & Escobar (2007)</i>	<i>Materials used by the teacher motivate me into English classes</i>
9	<i>Selection of appropriate materials (published, adapted, created) for English lessons. Duarte & Escobar (2007)</i>	<i>Materials adapted by the teacher are appropriate for my language learning</i>
10	<i>Customized/adapted language learning materials foster learners' motivation and language learning. Duarte & Escobar (2007), Muñoz (2009), Bautista (2012), Castañeda (2012), Meraji and Zamanian (2014)</i>	<i>Teacher provides appealing materials that fit my interests.</i>

Developed by Henry Álvarez & Hans Oviedo G.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM
BASIC ENGLISH I GROUP A – NIGHT

Project: *The Contribution of Customized Lessons with Cultural Content in the learning of EFL among Undergraduates*

INSTRUCTION

Read each one of the statements and mark with (X) just one option according to your situation.

	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>
1. <i>English course-books are interesting and motivating.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. <i>English course-books encourage me to reflect and create things in English.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. <i>Course-books make my learning time more effective.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. <i>Audiovisual materials (pictures, videos, audio recordings, etc.) help me to learn new vocabulary.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
5. <i>Talking about my own culture motivates me to learn English.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
6. <i>Talking about foreign cultures motivates me to learn English.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
7. <i>Using strategies (taking notes, asking for clarifications, cooperating with peers, translating, etc.) help me to learn more effectively.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
8. <i>Materials used by the teacher motivate me into English classes.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9. <i>Materials adapted by the teacher are appropriate for my language learning.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10. <i>Teacher provides appealing materials that fit my interests.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Developed by Henry Álvarez & Hans Oviedo G.

Appendix C

Self-Assessment Sample

Learning English through Customized EFL Materials with Cultural Content

Teacher Researchers: Henry Alberto Alvarez & Hans Humberto Oviedo

M.A in English Language Teaching

Universidad Surcolombiana

Self-assessment

Survey

Dear student, your opinion is highly important for the assessment of this research study. Please, accomplish the following chart according to your experience during the lessons. Mark with a “✓” in the option that best fits your perceptions about the aspects presented.

Statement	Need improvement	Neutral	Totally agree
1. The content of the workshop motivated me to take part of the lessons.			✓
2. The cultural content was meaningful and reflect situations of my context.			✓
3. The workshop allowed me to understand the cultural differences between two countries.		✓	
4. The cultural content motivated me to learn English.			✓
5. The workshop provided meaningful and motivating activities.			✓
6. The activities presented a variety of options that suit my learning styles.			✓
7. The learning strategies provided allowed me to complete the tasks and activities.			✓
8. The activities made me feel comfortable and active to perform in class.		✓	
9. The workshop provided opportunities for interaction and language use.			✓
10. Taking part in this lesson contributed to my English learning.			✓

Designed by Hans Oviedo G & Henry Álvarez Guayara