



# Language Learning form an Intercultural Perspective: Exploring Afro Culture<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Due to the highly globalized nature of communication and the increasing acknowledgement of the role of one's social context in language learning, the intercultural dimension has increasingly been included in the EFL agenda. Nevertheless, the exploration of one's own culture and local context still requires closer attention. Hence, this qualitative action-research study examines how ninth graders conceptualized their own culture and reflected upon their local cultural symbols and practices after the implementation of a pedagogic proposal based on an intercultural view of language teaching. Data were collected through surveys and class workshops. Thematic analysis was applied. Findings suggest that the students identified with Afro-Colombian culture and its symbolic representations. Furthermore, they discussed the meaning of Afro Culture and its diverse components. Similarly, some activities such as poster design, dancing performances, and oral presentations stood out as amongst the most useful to promote intercultural skills.

*Keywords:* culture, interculturality, language teaching, local context, afro-culture.

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# Aprendizaje de lenguas desde una perspectiva intercultural: explorando la Cultura Afro

## Resumen

Debido a la naturaleza altamente globalizada de la comunicación y el creciente reconocimiento del rol del contexto social en el aprendizaje de lenguas, se ha observado un incremento notable en la inclusión de la dimensión intercultural en la agenda de enseñanza de lenguas. Sin embargo, la exploración de la cultura propia y el contexto local aún requiere mayor atención. Por esta razón, este estudio cualitativo de investigación-acción examina cómo los estudiantes de noveno grado conceptualizaron su propia cultura y reflexionaron sobre sus símbolos y comportamientos culturales locales tras la implementación de una propuesta pedagógica basada en la visión intercultural de la enseñanza de lenguas. Los datos fueron recolectados mediante encuestas y talleres de clase, y se aplicó un análisis temático. Los resultados sugieren que los estudiantes se sintieron identificados con la cultura afrodescendiente y sus representaciones simbólicas. Además, evidencian las discusiones que tuvieron lugar entre los estudiantes sobre el significado de la cultura afrodescendiente y sus diversos componentes. De forma similar, algunas actividades como el diseño de afiches, presentaciones de baile y presentaciones orales se destacaron entre las más útiles para promover habilidades interculturales.

*Palabras clave:* contexto local, cultura, enseñanza de lenguas, interculturalidad

## Introduction

Globalization has significantly influenced various facets of society, including economics, politics, technology, and education (Bonilla *et al.*, 2016; Fernández, 2019). In the realm of language learning and teaching (LLT), the advent of online communication, increased access to travel, and rapid transactions has introduced unprecedented opportunities (Álvarez, 2018), leading to a heightened emphasis on culture as a fundamental component of global interactions. Recent scholarship has underscored the interconnections between culture and LLT (Corbett, 2003; Kramsch, 1998), emphasizing that LLT transcends mere linguistic proficiency to encompass attitudes, knowledge, and skills conducive to successful intercultural interactions (Byram, 1997).

Colombian educational and linguistic policies, particularly the National Bilingual Program (NBP), advocate for the integration of culture and interculturality to promote the development of intercultural speakers and global citizens capable of navigating intercultural nuances (Jaramillo, 2023; Gómez, 2017; Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014). Nonetheless, the implementation of these policies in secondary schools faces challenges, especially in addressing Colombia's rich cultural diversity (Granados-Beltrán, 2022; González, 2015). This mismatch was witnessed in the context of this research, where culture is addressed from a culturalist view which is focused on products and within which learners are not encouraged to examine their own culture beyond festivities and factual information. As part of the action-research study, author two from this article (Andrea Cruz) drew upon her experience as a teacher to identify this pedagogical problem and how it has contributed to her students' lack of cultural recognition, self-awareness, and critical positioning.

In response to the need for greater cultural recognition and self-awareness among learners, especially in rural areas, there is a growing imperative to foster reflections upon cultural identity and to challenge social inequalities (Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020). Pedagogical interventions aimed at promoting students' understanding of their cultural heritage and its significance within their local context are deemed essential (Gómez, 2012; Fernández y Castillo, 2023). Therefore, implementing a pedagogical proposal integrating intercultural language teaching (ILT) from the learners' cultural, ethnic, and rural identity is crucial to confronting the problem of learners' scant understanding of their own cultural identity and the institutional neglect of the intercultural dimension (ID). Given the predominant presence of Afro-Colombian features and the community's identification with Afro-Colombian culture in the course of the action-research study, Afro Culture (AC) was the center of this pedagogical project (PP) which was evaluated using the students' voices in terms of the following research questions:

- How did the ninth graders' views of their own culture and identity change during an AC-based pedagogical intervention?
- What are ninth graders' concepts of AC after an AC-based pedagogical intervention?
- What pedagogical actions helped ninth graders to reconfigure their views and concepts of AC and their own cultural identity?

## Previous studies

In Colombia, the incorporation of the intercultural dimension (ID) into LLT has recently gained momentum (Meadows, 2016; Álvarez, 2014). Several studies have explored this dimension in EFL contexts, including the use of literature and writing to foster intercultural competences (Gómez, 2013, 2012; Turizo & Gómez, 2006), the integration of interculturality in language teacher training (Ramos, 2013; Agudelo, 2007; Gómez, 2015), and the role of digital communication in facilitating intercultural reflection and interaction (Carreño, 2018; Álvarez & Fernández, 2019; Fernández, 2019).

Despite these advancements, there is a pressing need to incorporate the ID into school settings (Castañeda, 2012; Mojica, 2007; del Campo & Bonilla, 2007). Some studies have delved into exploring students' own culture (OC) and local context (LC) (Ramos *et al.*, 2012; Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020; Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020). For instance, Ramos *et al.* (2012) investigated the effects of integrating students' rural context into the curriculum and found that it strengthened their sense of belonging and promoted intercultural understanding.

[Quintana-Arias and Bello-Serna \(2020\)](#) examined the incorporation of Tikuna myths in an EFL class at a public school, highlighting its potential to enhance students' awareness of environmental, social, and cultural issues. Through this exploration, students reflected on the role and importance of their OC, prompting the authors to stress the need to explore students' OC beyond assimilationist views of LLT. In a similar vein, [Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar \(2020\)](#) studied telecollaboration at a private school as a means of understanding the relationship between LLT and culture, revealing its role in fostering socioeconomic inclusion and students' identity expression.

However, a persistent concern in EFL is the disconnect between LLT, students' OC, and their LC, particularly regarding AC. Previous studies in ELT have reckoned this gap, emphasizing the need to offer practical solutions ([Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020](#); [Fernández, 2019](#); [Meadows, 2016](#)). While OC has been addressed in Colombian research, there remains a lack of extensive exploration into learners' ideas about their OC and its sources ([Gómez, 2015](#); [Carreño, 2018](#); [Esteban-Núñez, 2021](#)).

ILT requires a thorough understanding of learners' OC and those of others ([Liddicoat, 2008](#); [Byram, 1997](#); [Byram et al., 2002](#)). Yet, learners' OC, their cultural representations, and their social contexts have been insufficiently explored in research ([Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020](#); [Guido, 2013](#)). There is a need to strengthen the inclusion of AC in the EFL agenda, as shown by similar experiences advocating for its importance ([Fernández et al., 2023](#); [Fernández & Castillo, 2023](#)). These areas merit further exploration due to their pedagogical relevance in EFL, their significance in understanding learners' cultural landscapes, and the importance of addressing OC/AC in fostering critical perspectives in ILT ([Granados-Beltrán, 2022](#)). Neglecting learners' OC/AC may result in them having a limited knowledge of their cultural heritage, an inadequate understanding of their social practices, and confusion regarding the sources of their ideas about their OC/AC.

## Theoretical framework

### *Intercultural language teaching*

Given the deep relationship between language and culture, their intrinsic social nature, and their role in communication, LLT has been shaped by the ID. The recognition of the intercultural nature of communication has led scholars to propose LLT from an intercultural perspective ([Liddicoat, 2008](#); [Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#); [Byram et al., 2002](#)). We share some key ideas of this view.

Culture is conceived as an ever-changing, multidimensional, and social system of views, behaviors, and semiotic resources that represents peoples' ideas, values, history, and reference frameworks that allow them to interact and engage with the world ([McLaren, 2003](#); [Morán, 2001](#); [Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#); [Álvarez y Fernández, 2019](#)). Interculturality is also seen as a dynamic, interactive, and intersectional process which implies negotiation, dialogue, and exchange among individuals who portray their own practices, beliefs, semiotic resources, and diverse identity affiliations in their social interactions ([Byram, 2008](#); [García y Li, 2014](#); [Álvarez, 2022](#)).

### *LLT goes beyond structures and the communicative dimension*

Language is a structural, functional, and sociocultural phenomenon that integrates these layers in everyday interactions ([Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#)). Hence, LLT must deal with these dimensions since, like language, it is a dynamic phenomenon. The social nature of language poses the challenge of addressing its diverse components. Therefore, LLT implies developing a set of skills that range from structural knowledge to the management of the intercultural intricacies of communication ([Byram, 1997](#); [Kramersch, 1998](#)). LLT is not limited to knowing how to communicate messages, it also requires the development of skills for understanding the cultural nature of interactions and the correct ways to handle misunderstandings ([Byram, 1997](#)).

### *Learning about one's own and other cultures*

Given the intercultural nature of LLT, exploring only the culture of the target language is not enough. Since interactions between speakers of different languages are mediated by different cultural conceptions and visions which are brought

about by each speaker's speech, learners must acquire skills to navigate this sea of utterances (Liddicoat, 2008). Hence, an integral component of ILT implies comprehending one's own and others' cultures in order to know how to interpret the cultural particularities within intercultural interactions (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This knowledge encompasses factual information and procedures for achieving successful interactions in different cultural contexts (Byram, 1997).

### *Agency and critical understanding in ILT*

ILT states that communication is not the ultimate goal of LLT (Kramersch, 1998; Byram, 1997; Liddicoat, 2008). ILT thrives in developing a set of skills that imply a critical interpretation of cultural documents and events (Byram, 1997). This interpretation is also linked to the active role of learners and teachers as transformative agents and the recognition of democratic values (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Wagner & Byram, 2017). From this stance, ILT is not indifferent to social issues, conflict, and ethnocentric expressions. In fact, these elements are brought up in the classroom and actively discussed in pursuit of justice and equality (Byram, 1997). This concretizes the need to address the OC in ILT since its nature and field of action is the social realm, where learners live and experience the world (Walsh, 2012). A look at Byram's (1997) model might illuminate the ways in which the OC might be integrated into EFL.

### *Byram's model*

In his model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Byram (1997) proposes an alternative to connect the ID and LLT by suggesting that successful interactions involve developing a series of competences (linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, and intercultural). The intercultural competence comprises five elements:

- Attitudes: Eagerness, acceptance, and openness towards other people and cultures.
- Knowledge: Factual and procedural knowledge about the cultural symbols (CS), practices, products, processes, and particularities of other people.
- Skills of interpreting and relating: Understanding cultural documents and events and being able to relate them to diverse phenomena of the own culture.
- Skills of discovery and interaction: Using cultural resources and knowledge in interactions in order to discover new cultural information and perspectives.
- Critical cultural awareness: Critically analyzing cultural documents and events and taking an informed stance based on solid criteria.

Developing ICCs seeks the promotion of intercultural speakers who can establish and maintain successful interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997). House (2007) mentions that IS navigate across the diverse nuances of cultural manifestations without losing their OC and social identity (SI) (Byram *et al.*, 2002). This implies the recognition of similarities and differences among cultural systems (Coperías-Aguilar, 2007; Liddicoat, 2008). One of the key challenges of LLT is to provide spaces for reflection and analysis about one's own and other cultures (Kramersch, 2013) without leaving aside the role of teachers as transformative intellectuals in their LC (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Consequently, a critical intercultural stance offers learners the possibility to explore their OC, identify the social markers that define their cultural identity (CI) and its manifestations, and reflect on their stance towards their OC and the origins of those ideas. This study offered an alternative to explore AC to critically approach the learners' LC in the EFL classroom, which explains the need to examine student's OC given the social nature of LLT, its connection with the ID, and the role of ICC, particularly its critical dimension, in the analysis of learners' sociocultural ideas.

### *Afrocolombianity*

Since providing a definition of Afrocolombianity runs the risk of essentializing Afro-Colombians' cultural, social, racial, and political heritage (Dennis, 2006), we will discuss some significant elements found within the Afrocolombian community. Law 70 (1993) issued a conception of Afrocolombianity stressing its racial, historical, and rural nature. However, some scholars criticized its perceived lack of inclusion of urban, heterogeneous, and subjective elements

that constitute Afro-descendants' cultural identities ([Wade, 2009](#); [Ng'weno, 2007](#)). This view was also conflicting since it presented Afrocolombians as an homogenous group. This discussion persist today, where contemporary scholarship, rather than looking for a single definition of blackness, Afrocolombianity, or *comunidad negra* ([Wade, 2009](#); [Dennis, 2006](#)), aims to identify common lines in the Afrocolombians' struggle. Hence, four major axes stand out in the configuration of Afrocolombianity ([Valderrama, 2008](#); [Dennis, 2006](#); [Hall, 1999](#)):

- Passionate rediscovery of the African origin and culture
- Importance of the American soil (particularly the Colombian Pacific) as a source of cultural conservation, social migration and adaptation
- Legacy of colonial struggle and power dynamics
- Influence of North American processes of mobilization, vindication, and struggle

These elements are not simply adopted by Afro-descendant communities; rather, they undergo the dynamics of social organizations and individuals in order to be adapted to their particular conditions. Consequently, these main axes are part of the elements that represent Afrocolombian people's cultural identities and struggles beyond racial, ethnic, or minimalist definitions that position them as objects and not as individuals. Seeing Afrocolombianity and cultural identities as subjected to dynamic processes ([Montoya & García, 2010](#)) instead of tangible products led this study to problematize students' views about their OC and LC.

## Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative action-research design with a phenomenological approach. Action-research is a reflective method aimed to discover educational issues and contribute to their solution through direct action ([Altrichter et al., 2007](#); [Hernández et al., 2014](#)). This approach was selected due to the nature of this project and its focus on methodological alternatives to address the ID and the LC. Incorporating phenomenology into the study was decided upon to comprehend individuals' particular perspectives on specific phenomenon and their experiences ([Robinson y Reed, 1998](#); [Maypole y Davies, 2001](#)). The focus was on students' individual and subjective views of their OC, their concept of AC, and the activities that facilitated these reflections. The learners' construction of their concept of AC (phenomenon under study) is mediated by their participation in their LC and their reflections in this PP (experience). The connection with phenomenology appears in the interest to know the learners' subjective views about AC and the resulting ideas after engaging in the PP. This experience challenged learners to examine their LC and cultural practices. These factors embody two defining components of phenomenology: phenomenon and experience.

## Context and participants

This research was applied at a rural/monolingual public school in the municipality of Ortigal Miranda, Cauca. This school offers services from preschool through high school and follows a technical education model in the fields of administration and accountancy (six hours per week). Hence, the school emphasizes accounting subjects, with English as a subsidiary area (three weekly hours) and no support for extracurricular activities. The school lacks teaching materials, technological resources, and an updated EFL syllabus that integrates intercultural elements since the PEI (*Proyecto Educativo Institucional*). The schools' English curriculum focuses on reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and translation, leaving aside communicative and intercultural skills and thus neglecting students' LC and OC.

The participants (24 ninth graders; ages 12-14) were mainly students from low and middle-class backgrounds, residing in neighboring families, with most being of Afro-descendant origin. Afro-descendant elements such as the ethnic and cultural identification with AC, pride of their physiognomy, everyday behaviors, celebrations, traditions, and perspectives, the importance of the Colombian Pacific, and the references to Colonial past are part of the tangible elements in the community and the participants. Nevertheless, beyond superficial factual information and shallow conceptions of AC, students had not received at school the opportunity to challenge their views and rediscover their OC, surpassing a merely culturalist approach. Hence, the importance of a PP integrating AC elements from an intercultural perspective in the English class. Consent forms were signed by the students' parents. This project was applied in author two's class who was the course English teacher.

### *Data collection*

Data were collected through a questionnaire, a workshop, and class observations during ten weeks<sup>5</sup>. Questionnaires serve as data collection techniques used at a specific moment to unveil participants' thoughts, the circumstances of particular events, and their relationships within the research context (O'Leary, 2014; Cohen *et al.*, 2007).

A questionnaire was applied to analyze the participants' opinions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the project, AC, and the development of speaking skills. The questionnaire had eighteen questions divided in two sections: a) Information about speaking skill and b) Information about culture<sup>6</sup>. The questionnaire included topics such as the students' conception and ideas about AC, the presence of culture in class, elements of the students' AC and AC's relevance.

A workshop was held at the end of the PP to identify participants' opinions and perceptions, from a phenomenological perspective, regarding AC and the topics addressed in the project. Workshops serve as artifacts that enable students to participate in class as part of the research (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The workshop addressed three sections in a worksheet completed in class: identifying ideas about culture and cultural heritage, the development of speaking, and addressing students' experiences with the project. In the two sections dealing with culture, topics such as the concept of culture, the students' ideas about AC, the components of culture, and experiences were brought into the conversation. Here, students had to reflect upon their experience as a whole throughout the PP and record in writing those reflections based on a set of questions. This workshop explored the four axes of AC contextualized in the learners' LC. The principles of ILT were also reflected in the way LLT was connected to the students' OC, and references to skills in Byram's model appeared in the questions. The worksheet was handed to students in class and they answered the questions on it. Students were encouraged to think back upon all the class discussions, tasks, and lessons learned during the PP. Questions about the worksheet were answered and points of confusion were clarified. This worksheet was different from the students' oral tasks developed along the PP (Table 1).

Observations are useful for obtaining information about people through contact, interaction, and supervision (Creswell, 2012). Through observations, firsthand information is collected about the participants' situation, environments, contexts, interactions, and relationships (Cohen, *et al.*, 2007). Observations were employed during the entire study. A form for the registration of the students' behaviors, comments regarding habits, values and beliefs, and perceptions was used in each lesson. Events, students' opinions, interactions, contradictions, and insights were also reported in the observations.

These data collection techniques captured the students' ideas, perceptions, and reflections about culture from a phenomenological view, allowing us to approach the learners' visions of culture, diverse practices, and the particular cultural experiences (Welman & Kruger, 1999) which define their daily routines and shape their LC (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). The data collected using these instruments reflected the students' changing ideas, final conceptions, and previous experiences related to AC. The students' freedom to address these topics and the depth of discussion of culturally-driven topics after the PP provided a close look at the learners' subjective and deep experience in the configuration of their ideas around culture and their LC. This is what necessitated the inclusion of a phenomenological component in the study. The questionnaire and the workshop were implemented in Spanish in order to allow students to express with confidence.

### *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis (TA), defined as "a qualitative research method that researchers use to systematically organize and analyze complex data sets" (Dawadi, 2020, p. 62), was used. TA uncovers themes through extensive reading and several classification and categorization cycles (Cavendish, 2011). Inductive TA was applied since the categories emerged from the students' recurrent voices without following a pre-established set of categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5 The pedagogical proposal was applied as part of a class project called: Afro-English Classroom Project.

6 Due to space constraints, we only examine here the findings related to the ID

The six stages of TA were followed:

- Data familiarization: All data were read, scanned, and uploaded to Google Drive.
- Initial codes: Keywords and color coding were used to determine prior codes. Relevant data were organized on a spreadsheet in terms of instrument, participant, and topic.
- Thematic search: Based on the codes and initial classification, emerging themes were identified.
- Thematic revision: Mind maps were created to illustrate the findings, then samples were selected and related with ILT.
- Thematic definition and naming: Frequencies were obtained and compared to the mind maps to determine the key elements' hierarchy.
- Report: Findings were reported.

We used triangulation and data contrast, with the phenomenological perspective being triangulated through the comparison of the students' answers in the instruments (survey/workshop/observations). Comparing data from all instruments revealed similarities and patterns in the students' comments and behaviors about their experiences, subjectivities, and particular views of AC. Students' comments were translated from Spanish to English here.

### *Pedagogical intervention*

The PP was implemented in ten sessions in an English class in order to discuss the students' conceptions, ideas, and perceptions of AC. This PP was informed by the principles of ILT and task-based learning (TBL). TBL is a LLT approach focused on the development of communication and the completion of learning tasks in the classroom ([Willis & Willis, 2007](#)). In TBL, LLT centers around a main task which determines the structural and communicative elements to be learned. TBL goes through three stages: pre, during, and post-task. TBL was selected to support the PP, as it provided three opportunities for students to:

- a) pre task: prepare their pre-conceptions and experiences with AC
- b) during task: work around a main speaking task including research and information gathering
- c) post task: present their task and reflect about what they learned when completing the task

This TBL cycle was applied across all ten sessions comprising the PP, varying throughout the sessions the communicative tasks, cultural elements to be explored, and final reflections to be discussed ([Table 1](#)). TBL was selected because of its versatility for addressing communicative functions, building on the students' own experiences relating to their LC, and relying on their agentive power. Therefore, TBL was used from an intercultural view.

Burns' (2009) cycle was pivotal in the PP's design. This cycle encompasses four stages:

- Planning: Design and redesign of each lesson.
- Action: Lesson performance and task completion.
- Observation: Supervision and follow-up of each lesson through the observation form and teacher's active participation.
- Reflection: Sharing students' ideas, perceptions, and experiences. These elements were paramount to design the following lesson.

Similar to the TBL approach, this cycle was also applied to each lesson, since the experiences of previous sessions were taken into account to redesign the upcoming lessons and adjust didactic measures to perform in the future. This means that this PP was composed of ten micro cycles (one per lesson) which composed the study presented here.

This PP ([Table 1](#)) was adapted to cope with the ninth grade institutional syllabus in terms of structural elements (grammar/vocabulary/pronunciation), language skills (mainly speaking), and communicative functions which were addressed through the class tasks, discussions, and activities. This PP was designed taking into account the axes of AC discussed by [Valderrama, \(2008\)](#), [Dennis, \(2006\)](#), and [Hall, \(1999\)](#). The core task was defined from a speaking



communicative function which guided the development of each session. Ten speaking tasks were created, supported by videos, texts, and anecdotes from students and their families. These sources were used to address the students' AC, OC, and LC. In each lesson, a specific topic about AC was addressed and discussed following the TBL stages and the cultural sources mentioned above. These reflections were tracked in the observation form. Given the oral nature of this project, only at the end students did students write what they learned in the final workshop.

**Table 1.** *Content of the DS*

Lesson	Cultural topic	Speaking task
1	Afro-Culture history	Narrating an event
2	Racism	Sharing ideas to avoid racism in Colombia
3	Slavery in America	Debating about slavery in Colombia
4	Afro-Colombian typical foods/drinks	Conversation: ordering food in a Colombian restaurant
5	Afro-Colombian clothes/hair styles	Asking how Afro-descendants look
6	Afro-Colombian ritual/ceremonies	Discussing students' cultural celebrations
7	Afro-Colombian dances/music	Describing musical instruments and Afro-Colombian dances
8	Comparing Afro-Americans and Afro-Colombian people	Presentation comparing facts about Afro-Americans and Afro-Colombians
9	Afro-Colombian festivals/traditions	Roleplay: meeting someone during a festival
10	Afro-American culture/traditions	Roleplay: interaction between a Colombian and a foreigner

**Source:** Authors

## Results and discussion

Results are divided into three parts: changes in learners' views of their own culture and identity during the PP, students' conceptions of AC, and pedagogical actions that supported learners' reconfiguration of their views of AC and their own cultural identity.

### *Students' own culture*

There were some changes regarding students' views about their OC, particularly in the way they conceived AC. At the beginning of the PP, their ideas about AC were focused on showing their OC through their everyday behaviors and cultural manifestations learned at home.

The students showed interest in the class. Most of them act according to the customs, values, and beliefs learned at home and at school. They showed some of their customs in the way [they] talk, with a marked accent, and in some expressions. Furthermore, the students participated actively in oral activities when they had to talk about one's own and the foreign language cultural practices, and during communicative activities (Observation #1).

Some of the students showed their cultural customs in the way they talked and with a marked accent. For example, among the expressions, we found some words as "sabrosura" and "berraquera" when they were referring to their ethnic group (Observation #2).

In both excerpts from the observations, we notice how students stress their OC through vocabulary and talking patterns such as their tone of voice, volume, and prosody. These behaviors were learned by students at home and their LC, and were brought to school as a means to reinforce their view of their OC. During class, learners discussed how these cultural elements represent their views regarding their OC as a set of embedded and contextually-located elements that operate during social interactions and whose function is to strengthen their cultural identity. These expressions and communicative behavior showcase that students conceive their OC as a tangible means of cultural representation. However, these views were anchored in superficial elements that neglected deeper cultural aspects such as thought, beliefs, and social systems. This partial view of their OC acquired other elements along the PP.

During the development of some tasks, students completed a set of tasks about events, meanings, and elements related to the AC. Task seven in particular allowed students to portray their views of their OC, as they performed a dance that incorporated music and topics of AC.

Today, students were very happy with the dance activity. A group chose a song about slavery and students wore colonial-inspired clothing and represented the period of slavery. A classmate even simulated beating and forcing them to work, but near the end of the song, students acted out their liberation; and when the word *negros* started appearing in the song, the rest of the class started to clap, move, and sing along while their performing actors continued dancing. They sang: *negro, negro, negro*, over and over again until the end of the performance. (Observation #7)

Students could have selected among a vast myriad of options to portray their OC, but they chose the colonial period and slavery to be represented. This selection of topics and their classmates' reaction to the song and the performance show how they identify their OC with AC and how they openly recognize their roots from African people and slavery. In fact, the word 'negro' is a source of pride for them, evident in their enthusiastic singing and dancing whenever the word was mentioned in the song. What this finding indicates is that some of the key axes of AC mentioned by [Dennis \(2006\)](#) and [Hall \(1999\)](#) were present in the students' view of their OC, notably, the passionate identification with African origins, the references to the Colonial period, and the importance of the Colombian Pacific (which was the geographical context of the play) for their development of cultural identity.

This connection between students' OC and AC was also evident at the end. Students reported being more informed about their OC and its connection with AC.

During the activities we learned about the African continent, its division, its limits, its location, as well as important information such as issues related to food scarcity, intense drought, poverty, and migration. We also learned about the most important places in Africa, including the Sahara Desert, the Nile River, and Congo, and the animals that inhabit there. (Student 1/Workshop)

In class I learned not to be racist, listen to people, and work in a group to understand situations and reflections about what we don't know and judge. What I learned the most was not to judge and not to reject people of color. (Student 8/Workshop).

These answers are proof of the new perspectives learners acquired after having participated in the PP. They mentioned having learned about elements related to the historical roots of AC, basic information regarding Africa (including some social issues), and how important are the values of empathy and cooperation in the struggle against racism. All these elements explain how the learners' view evolved from being strictly focused on their LC to encompass other dimensions such as the recognition of their African roots and the need to contest racist behaviors. In general, data revealed that learners' views included more elements related to ICC, such as attitudes of acceptance, respect, and openness, knowledge about the history and geography of their AC, and a critical stance against racism. These views were further supported by the students' recognition of their cultural identity.

### *Cultural Identity*

At the end, students reported feeling identified with AC and stressed being proud of it:

Obviously, I do feel very proud of my Afro culture because throughout my life this culture has been a form of identification in my society. It is with it that I characterize myself beyond my skin color, hairstyles or physical traits. (Student 4-Workshop).

I am very proud of the Afro culture as each of its customs, hairstyles, and dances have had an impact on the entire world, allowing to delight their viewers with what it means and what it implies to be Afro and despite that we continue fighting to be free and respected, with great honor, it is part of a culture that has had a great history. (Student 16-Workshop).

These excerpts show that learners generally have a strong identification with AC. Students 4 and 16 feel pride in their Afro-descendant heritage, which manifest across four dimensions: legacy, values, cultural systems, and physical features. The legacy and values appear when student 16 mentions the historical struggles and the resilience behind the acts of resistance. When she says "despite that we continue to fight to be free and respected, with great honor,

it is part of a culture that has had a great history” values of resilience, honor, and racial pride are highlighted within the historical frame of discrimination, racism, and inequality. The role assigned to Afro-descendants’ history shows the connection that Student 16 sees between AC’s legacy and its social impact. This also appears when Student 4 expresses that her AC shaped her SI beyond her physical appearance (this is part of her uniqueness) and provided her a sense of belonging.

Concerning the CS, students highlighted Afro cultural elements that have left a trace in the world, such as hairstyles, dances, and similar. The case of hairstyles is especially remarkable given its social symbolism among some female Afro-descendants who see their hair as a manifestation of freedom, identity, struggle, and rebellion against Eurocentric beauty standards ([Mbilishaka et al., 2020](#); [Ray, 2018](#)). Dance has also a major role as a contestation means against racial/social oppression ([Kabir, 2014](#)) or as rhythms of resistance ([Fryer, 2000](#)). Thus, students privileged these symbolic elements as dominant dimensions of CI due to their role in the development of their social construction and emancipation within a context of white-centered standards. This was evident when student 16 mentions the Afro-descendants’ historical fight to achieve social justice manifested with dances and hairstyles as key Afro cultural elements.

Regarding physical features, student 4 describes this dimension along with skin color as main elements that characterize her. She says that her CI is more than her appearance because she expresses that beyond her skin color, hairstyle, and physical traits she identifies with AC. Even though physical traits are explicitly mentioned as part of the dimensions that define the students’ Afro-cultural identification, their sense of belonging is more complex: “Even though I’m white, I consider myself black because I grew up that way (Student 12-Workshop)”. Although the student identifies as a white girl (due to her physical appearance), she considers herself to be an Afro-descendant due to the values and the context where she was raised. Therefore, the students’ level of cultural identification has evolved such that determining AC is not only a matter of appearance but of social construction. This is highlighted particularly when Student 12 proudly emphasizes on the fact that she is “*negra*” (this emphasis appeared in the original text) because of the way she was educated.

The students’ ideas are grounded in a comprehension of culture that encompasses symbolic systems and social practices. The multi-layered nature of culture appears in the data. When learners include elements such as customs, hairstyles (as social/ethnic symbols), history, and SI, some of the multiple dimensions of culture emerge in the students’ understanding of culture and connection with AC. Therefore, the students’ comments a more nuanced understanding of their OC by exploring the meanings, conceptions, products, and practices embedded in their everyday lives, thereby identifying their connection with their cultural identity. This understanding is crucial in ILT ([Morán, 2001](#); [Nieto, 2002](#); [Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#); [Álvarez & Fernández, 2019](#)).

In general, learners reported feeling identified with AC. This identification transcended boundaries of race and ethnicity, as indicated by a student who, despite considering herself as a white girl, felt as an Afro-descendant. Another student mentioned that her cultural identification with AC extends beyond her physical features. Students recognized that CI is a phenomenon that encompasses elements such as ideas, perspectives, and social conventions ([Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013](#); [Byram, 1997](#); [Kramsch, 1998](#)). The dimensions that embodied this identification — legacy, values, CS, and physical features— were evident in the data. These findings underscore the progress students achieved during the PP, as their identification with AC extended beyond the realm of local context and specific speaking patterns which were the elements students understood as representative of their AC, neglecting the rest of layers further discovered along the PP.

### *Students’ conception of their AC*

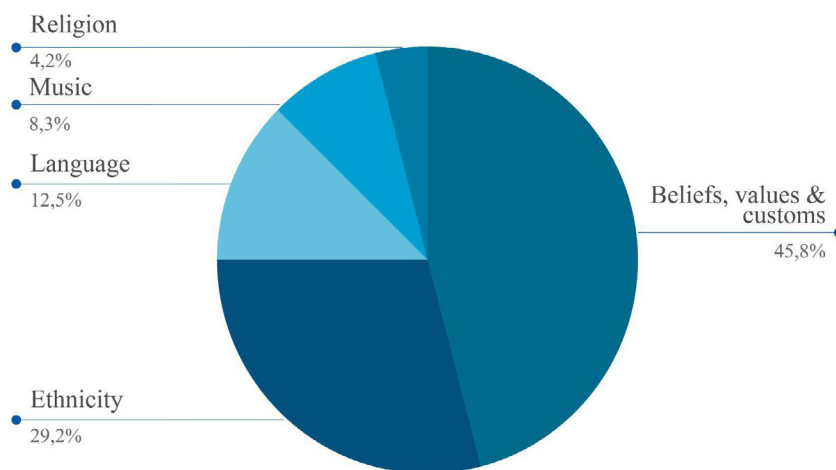
The second research question from this study enquired about the learners’ concepts of AC after the PP. To integrate students’ OC into LLT, it is necessary to explore how students’ OC is conceived after the DS so that students understand the sociocultural relationships and the cultural events from their LC. Data revealed that students conceived AC as the set of features that represent Afro-descendants at several levels (historical legacy, values, CS, and lifestyle) beyond racial/ethnic dimensions. Learners defined AC mainly as a lifestyle, tradition, and history ([Figure 1](#)). The percentages indicate the extent to which each of those cultural categories influenced students’ conceptions of AC. These concepts

were defined using Morán's (2001) framework to determine the diverse manifestations of a community differentiating among products, practices, perspectives, and people. Figure 1 present categories that represent those elements in the terms they were studied in the PP.

In order to clarify these broad categories for students, they were exemplified using the elements shown in [Figure 1](#):

- Products: Folklore
- Practices: Lifestyle, tradition
- Perspectives: Other
- People: History

Folklore and elements such as coolness, strength, joy, and customs appeared with less frequency. This reveals that students' understanding of AC embraced several elements tied to their SI and cultural/daily practices, allowing them to recognize the nuanced nature of AC and its manifestations in their everyday lives.



**Figure 1.** *Student's conception of Afro culture*  
**Source:** Authors

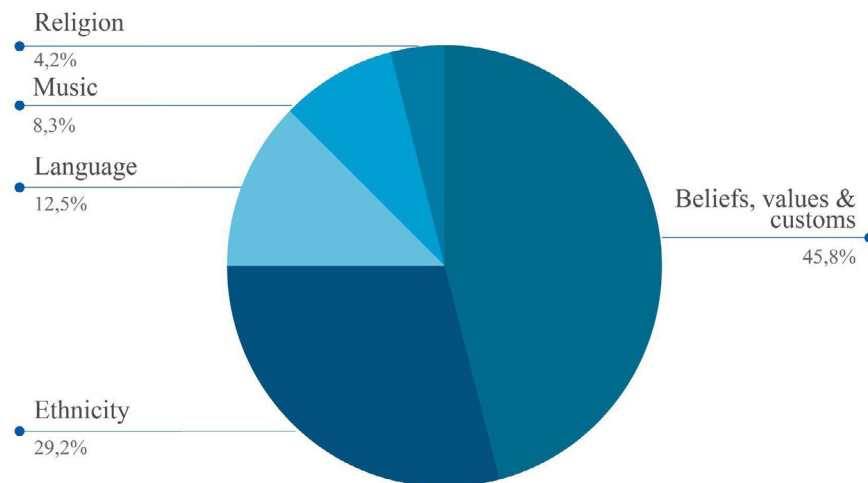
However, one word is not enough to describe the concept of culture; therefore, in the workshop learners defined their concept of AC. They highlighted its multidimensional nature and historical elements:

For me the Afro culture is a legacy of life, which we apply every day in our lives, such as customs, attitudes, the way we dress, physical features, cultural activities, and even food. All this [is] influenced by our African ancestors brought as slaves to America (Student 1).

Afro culture for me are the traditions they have because for years they have preserved them thanks to their ancestors. Their stories are very important and they have managed not to be rejected by people although they suffered greatly from slavery, and because they were sold for hard labor. Afro is the overcoming and survival of blacks (Student 8).

These findings show that the students identified the presence of AC in their everyday lives and actions. Rather than simply listing a set of fixed behaviors, products, and ideas, students acknowledged the changing nature of AC and its influence on them. Hence, the social value and role of the diverse Afro-cultural manifestations appeared as resistance, racial legacy, and cultural representations: “Afro is the overcoming and survival of blacks” or “the Afro culture is a legacy of life, which we apply every day in our lives”. Although essential elements appear, they are connected with the students’ reality and are not interpreted as the center of culture. Furthermore, these elements closely align with the dimensions through which students identified with AC. Notably, the relevance of history and the struggle against oppression are major factors that characterize the students’ conception of AC and accentuate the role of resilience as a prominent value that shapes the Afro-descendants’ relationship with their social context.

Figure 2 (Questionnaire/question 10) presents the students’ ideas about the key dimensions that represent AC. Elements such as beliefs, values/customs, and ethnicity stand out, while language, music, and religion are less emphasized. This finding coincides with the participants’ previously presented views of culture. A relevant role is assigned to the cultural ideas and conceptions linked to the Afro-descendants’ reality and their ethnic values which are reflected in the cultural manifestations of AC through language, music and religion.



**Figure 2.** *Key elements that characterize the Afro culture*

**Source:** Authors

Consequently, the Afro-descendants’ cultural essence is conceived as an ensemble that, highly determined by ethnic elements, is reflected in ideas about the world, society, and values manifested in everyday practices. This relationship between ethnicity, values, and SI is evident in the following statement:

The Afro culture, besides being a black ethnicity, for me means much more than that since, thanks to the Afro culture, I have been able to know many customs, hairstyles, dances that inspire joy in our hearts and let us see and know the history of our ancestors which had a great impact on us as Afro people. It is also a set of ways of life and customs of a social group that in this case would be Afro (Student 3-Workshop).

Student 3 emphasizes the impact that the symbolic nature of AC has had on her identity. She highlights the intangible attributes of AC by expressing that her culture means more than just belonging to a particular ethnic group. This example shows again how learners understand the immaterial dimension of culture and some of its nuances.

Elements such as customs, hairstyles, and dances are identified, yet Student 3 goes beyond a reductionist or essentialist definition of her culture. She delves deeper into the cultural essence by acknowledging the role of AC as a prime socializing factor that determines social patterns and lifestyles. Student 3 notes that AC has equipped her with elements to engage in social rituals (customs, hairstyles, dances). These CS can be understood as SR because they have a social origin and facilitate people's interaction leading to construct CI and behavior (Álvarez, 2016; Kress, 2010). Therefore, the social semiotic nature of culture appears in this commentary by emphasizing the importance of meaning making processes which emerge and travel across social interactions (Kress, 2012). When stressing the belonging of certain patterns to a specific social group, she understands the collective origin of SR such as CS and their relevance in social interaction.

Student 3 also discusses the relevance of history as a paramount factor determining CS and relationships in which history is an extension of the CI that carries an emotive meaning related with social values. She mentions that the SR learned from her cultural background cause positive emotions and constitute a window to know the Afro-descendants' historical legacy. This relationship between history and SR is key to develop a system of values. She remarks on the decisive role of history in the configuration of people's sociocultural identities and lifestyles.

In sum, students conceptualized AC as a phenomenon composed of diverse elements that are manifested through the historical legacy, values, CS, and lifestyle. These elements appear in the students' definition of AC. According to students' responses, history is a defining factor of AC, values are a remarkable part of AC, especially resilience and joy, the CS appear as SR that promote social interaction, and lifestyle is an important dimension shared through customs, traditions, and even as an extension of the cultural/historical legacy.

### *Activities that helped learners to reconfigure their views-concepts of AC their own cultural identity*

Students' new perspectives on their OC and AC emerged from the classroom activities (Table 1) and their experiences in the PP. Particularly impactful activities mentioned by students included creating an anti-racism poster, participating in a dance performance, and delivering presentations on African culture.

So far the activity that [I] enjoyed [the] most was the construction of the poster in which we capture phrases with which we refer to the abolition of racism and inclusion, it was also there where we captured the traces of our hands painted in black and white. (Student 1/Workshop)

The activities that I enjoyed most were the dance that we did, the activity of knowing their [Afro-descendants'] place of residence, their culture, what I found super cool was the mural full of words and posters to stop discrimination of any kind. (Student 3/Workshop)

In the poster activity, students designed posters with messages against racism and discrimination. These posters were displayed on a wall where students also painted handprints in black and white. Students highlighted the importance of the message and the symbolic impact of using their hands as a representation of their role in the fight against racism. This connection was echoed in the words of one student during a workshop: "I learned that we are all equal, that we are only differentiated by skin colors and that we all have the same rights and opportunities in our lives." (Student 11/Workshop). This activity not only educated students about the Afro-descendants' struggle against racism but also encouraged them to avoid discriminatory behaviors. These values imply a deeper understanding of AC, acceptance of their LC, and students' positioning towards a social issue. These manifestations are linked to the ICC skills (Byram, 1997) of attitudes, knowledge, and critical cultural awareness. The students' reflections indicate that beyond recognizing racism, they are also aware of the need to be open to people from diverse cultural origins and the importance of equal treatment for everyone regardless of their physical features. Taking into account the learners' LC and their cultural identification, these excerpts prove the extent to which activities integrating AC,

graphic elements, oral performances, data collection, and acting enhanced students' capacity to "read" their LC and find the links with AC. Likewise, the critical dimension was always present in the way students manifested their views against racism.

This finding is related to the dancing performance in which students acted out a scene from colonial times, highlighting the presence of racist behavior and the need to overcome it. Similarly, students mentioned the oral presentations about AC. These activities also encompassed skills of knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, evident in how students used new information and their interactions to understand their own culture from a critical lens towards social issues. From an intercultural perspective, these activities served as catalysts for discussions about AC since they offered a platform for cultural discovery and open discussion. It was also the opportunity to allow students to show their own perspectives and start a dialogue with their peers. All these actions were necessary to integrate the ID in LLT, as they sparked learners' curiosity for their LC and benefit exchanges among students which ultimately, pave the ground for a more nuanced comprehension of the LC. Although a deeper confrontation of these views with other social issues, arguments constructed integrating factual information, and concrete ideas to fight discrimination are not present, students' advancements were remarkable given their context where grammar, reading, and vocabulary were privileged against other alternatives for LLT. Despite these encouraging results, more actions aimed at incorporating the LC and AC are needed to find presence of other ICC skills, such as skills of relating/interpreting and skills of discovery and interaction.

## Conclusions

Through the implementation of a PP based on AC and the students' LC, this study sought to determine the effects of an approach of LLT integrating ILT in students' understanding of their own culture. Three areas were addressed:

**Changes in students' views of their own culture and identity:** Students started having a view of their own culture focused on the communicative practices rooted in their immediate context (home/school) to acquire a deeper understanding of what their own culture means by incorporating factual information into their conceptions about their geographical and cultural origins and the recognition of historical elements such as slavery and racism as a paramount axis of their cultural identity. Results revealed that after their participation in the DS, participants identified with AC, particularly, the dimensions of legacy, values, CS, and physical features were highlighted as key manifestations of their OC. Students remarked that their CI went beyond physiognomy.

**Learners' concepts of AC after an AC-based pedagogical intervention:** Learners understood AC as an ensemble of different components which include their historical legacy, values, CS, and lifestyle. Resilience and joy, among other values, were reported as highly relevant and fundamental for their self-identification as the appearance of the four cultural axes of AC proposed by [Hall \(1999\)](#) and [Dennis \(2006\)](#) was evident in the students' comments.

**The pedagogical actions that helped ninth graders to reconfigure their views-concepts of AC and their own cultural identity:** Among the ten activities in the PP, three scored higher references in the workshop: the anti-racism poster, the dancing performance and the oral presentation. This selection of activities as the most remarkable ones for the students underscores the usefulness of implementing activities focused on diverse cultural elements and communicative functions as catalysts of ICC skills such as attitudes, knowledge and critical cultural awareness.

These results encourage further studies to integrate the LC into the inquiry of the ID. Hence, the symbiosis of English and other subjects could be an alternative to address ILT. Topics such as the use of class projects to develop intercultural awareness, the study of the OC from a critical perspective, the examination of social issues, democratic citizenship and the transversality of the ID beyond the EFL classroom are areas that reclaim urgent attention. This study is an example and a call to other scholars to actively engage into the design and application of pedagogical methodologies aimed to promote intercultural values and exploring the OC.

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