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Developing Cultural Competence in a Bachelor's Degree Program in English Language Teaching

Desarrollo de la competencia cultural en un programa de licenciatura en enseñanza del inglés

Desenvolvimento da competência cultural num curso de licenciatura em ensino de inglês

Research article

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Abstract

Objective: Analyze how integrative cultural tasks can improve students' intercultural awareness, digital competence, and understanding of the "world of English" in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking countries. **Methods:** A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring perceptions and experiences regarding cultural learning and intercultural competence. Nine students from the BA Program in English Teaching were conveniently selected. They accomplished a cultural awareness project focused on researching an English-speaking community. Data were collected through students' projects and semi-structured interviews. **Findings:** It was revealed that students developed a great awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity, improved motivation to learn English, and enhanced appreciation for foreign and Mexican cultures. **Conclusion:** Cultural competence should be integrated transversally throughout English Programs using authentic materials, technology, and intercultural projects that promote inclusion, empathy, critical thinking, and global communication skills.

Keywords: applied linguistics, English language teaching, cultural competence, task-based learning.

Resumen

Objetivo: Analizar cómo las tareas culturales integradoras pueden mejorar, en los estudiantes, la conciencia intercultural, la competencia digital y la comprensión del «mundo del inglés» en Estados Unidos, el Reino Unido y otros países de habla inglesa. **Métodos:** Se realizó un análisis temático para identificar percepciones y experiencias recurrentes relacionadas con el aprendizaje cultural y la competencia intercultural. Se seleccionó, por conveniencia, a



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nueve estudiantes del programa de Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés, quienes llevaron a cabo un proyecto de sensibilización cultural centrado en la investigación sobre una comunidad de habla inglesa. Los datos se recopilaron mediante proyectos de los estudiantes y entrevistas semiestructuradas. **Resultados:** Los estudiantes desarrollaron una gran conciencia de la diversidad lingüística y cultural, mejoraron su motivación para aprender inglés y aumentaron su aprecio por las culturas extranjeras y mexicanas. **Conclusión:** La competencia cultural debería integrarse transversalmente en todos los programas de inglés mediante el uso de materiales auténticos, la tecnología y proyectos interculturales que promuevan la inclusión, la empatía, el pensamiento crítico y las habilidades de comunicación global.

Palabras clave: lingüística aplicada, enseñanza del inglés, competencia cultural, aprendizaje basado en tareas.

Resumo

Objetivo: Analisar de que forma as tarefas culturais integradoras podem melhorar, nos estudantes, a consciência intercultural, a competência digital e a compreensão do «mundo do inglês» nos Estados Unidos, no Reino Unido e noutros países de língua inglesa.

Métodos: Realizou-se uma análise temática para identificar percepções e experiências recorrentes relacionadas com a aprendizagem cultural e a competência intercultural. Foram selecionados, por conveniência, nove estudantes do curso de Licenciatura em Ensino de Inglês que realizaram um projeto de sensibilização cultural centrado na investigação de uma comunidade de língua inglesa. Os dados foram recolhidos por meio dos projetos dos estudantes e de entrevistas semiestructuradas.

Resultados: Os estudantes desenvolveram uma grande consciência da diversidade linguística e cultural, melhoraram a sua motivação para aprender inglês e aumentaram a sua apreciação pelas culturas estrangeiras e mexicanas. **Conclusão:** A competência cultural deve ser integrada transversalmente a todos os programas de inglês, por meio do uso de materiais autênticos, da tecnologia e de projetos interculturais que promovam a inclusão, a empatia, o pensamento crítico e as competências de comunicação global.

Palavras-chave: linguística aplicada, ensino do inglês, competência cultural, aprendizagem baseada em tarefas.

Introduction

English language teaching and learning is a global phenomenon that has evolved and globalized with advances in technology and the diversity of English-speaking countries, which offer numerous linguistic and cultural variations. The more the world is connected, the more English speakers will be from the outer and expanding circle of English. Baleghizadeh and Shayesteh (2020) highlighted that "it is not sensible to speak of a target culture of the English language or to recommend that American or British cultures solely are

worth studying" (p. 2). There are more English cultural contexts to cover. As connections among cultures are now possible through technology and digital resources, speakers worldwide are interacting and creating intercultural contacts that present both a challenge and an opportunity for English teachers, since cultural diversity is one of the most important topics to cover. This interconnection of culture and language is now part of the teaching programs designed to help students



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develop cultural competence in coping with intercultural situations and contexts.

Eden et al. (2024) stated that "Cultural competence in education has emerged as a critical area of focus in contemporary educational discourse, aiming to create inclusive learning environments that celebrate diversity and promote equitable opportunities for all students" (p. 383). It also conveys the need to recognize the variation and diversity of cultural concepts and behaviors among spoken language users and learners, as well as the unique identities of these individuals.

Developing cultural competence incorporates inclusive language, language variations, overcoming stereotypes, addressing cultural barriers, navigating pragmatic situations, fostering intercultural understanding, and acquiring cultural and social skills for their professional roles as teachers, translators, or communicators. According to Eden et al. "Cultural competence in education is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the ability of educators and educational institutions to effectively understand, respect, and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds and identities of students, families, and communities they serve" (2024, p. 384). Furthermore, language acquisition extends beyond competence in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, as paralinguistics is an essential part of language learning that enables understanding of situations in diverse contexts, taking into account the intentions and identities of human beings. Language is changing, and cultural backgrounds are dynamically evolving. "This cultural dynamism is closely related to human nature, which actively changes products, practices, and the

society in which the culture is located" (Syaputri et al., 2021, p. 29). Thus, norms and cultural-pragmatic behaviors are derived from different English-speaking countries, not only from the English language that the study program has proposed for the textbook students are trained with, or from the policies determined by the intended curriculum.

The importance of culture in English language learning

Culture and language are inseparable because language's lexical and structural components interact with intentions, norms, conventions, ways of communication, and situations from different cultures and places. "Understanding these communication styles and cultural norms can help language learners to communicate more effectively and avoid misunderstandings" (Karlik, 2023, p. 6). That is, culture reflects nuances of the language, and in terms of curriculum, the latter is related to the content for teaching the former.

Even though they are interconnected with speech and behavior in a specific speaking or written situation, where they carry semantic and pragmatic relationships with language, this is particularly intercultural competence, as the contexts, intentions of the speaker, identity, and pragmatism are all involved. Barzani and Mohammadzadeh (2022) affirm that "[i]n communication, whether in written or oral forms, context plays a fundamental role". Moreover, promoting cultural awareness acknowledges cultural diversity and perspectives and avoids stereotypes and situational misunderstandings. Some misconceptions about accents or dialectal forms may arise when using



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materials, especially those found on social networking sites and in the media. Conceiving these forms of speaking without the appropriate training from the teacher and students can devalue the true diversity of language communities. Kim stated, "To create language pedagogy that facilitates more effective intercultural communication, we must have an adequate account of culture" (2020, p. 521). For instance, some accents can be perceived as inferior or superior, restricting the appreciation and inclusion of language variants, including those related to native or non-native speakers.

Olegovich et al. (2019) declared that "Sociocultural competence includes knowledge about values, beliefs, behavior patterns, customs, traditions, language, and cultural achievements peculiar to society" (p. 116). Developing cultural competence in English study programs is essential for improving learners' motivation when exploring new visions, dimensions, and ways of living. Furthermore, it enables the creation of effective communication strategies by understanding the nuances of language, variations, pragmatic components, and even linguistic nuances.

Challenges for institutional programs and educators

All the globalized changes have affected English teaching institutions and educators' roles, as learners must learn using authentic and diverse languages from all over the world and integrate cultural diversity into their professional performance due to the interconnection in this digital era. Thus, global communication, a vast repertoire of cultural knowledge, and pragmatic competence are needed to comprehend the language and its variants. Mao and He

(2021) mentioned that "Language users, to be linguistically and pragmatically competent, require both competences, which have long been explored from different linguistic perspectives" (p. 1).

The conception of only developing grammar and vocabulary neglects the natural and rich integrative parts of the language connected to history, customs, traditions, literature, arts, ways of thinking, or any human expressions found in the language. Thus, "pragmatics is a component of communicative competence functions" (Mao & He, 2021). Awareness of these factors can help students value the cultural particularities of language communities and avoid stereotypes and misconceptions about them. These may affect the capacity to evaluate the contents of textbooks that are erroneously oriented to influence equity and gender aggression for the sake of language learning. Such is the case of the content "habits and routines," from which some textbook designers present women as the ones who mostly do the house routines, and men usually do not do the chores (stereotype). They do so to explain and cover both negative and affirmative forms of the present simple (language). This issue requires attention, as it plays a crucial role that involves sensitivity to cultural aspects in teaching and learning.

Textbooks cover many cultural aspects. However, they are oriented to policies and tendencies of the dominant languages. Xiong et al. (2022) stated that "according to different national and educational contexts and conceptual perspectives, the majority are concerned with tensions between cultural dominance and cultural diversity" (p. 3). However, teachers can utilize much



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more authentic digital and printed materials that present natural situations to develop language learning. Additionally to this situations, it is essential to provide students with diverse contents and materials with a more holistic understanding of the English language to enhance intercultural communication skills in terms of global communication, appropriacy of variations, norms, conventional behaviors, empathy, inclusion, human rights, respect of individualities from different speaking communities and appreciation for cultural values resulting in knowing how to use the words respectfully and relevantly.

The case in the BA program “Lengua Inglesa”, “Didáctica del Inglés” and the cultural competence

Following the previous revision of culture and its importance in language learning, a revision of the BA program profile in Lengua Inglesa y Didáctica del inglés is necessary for developing language culture. According to the intended curriculum (Facultad de Idiomas. Language Program, 2023), the BA program intends:

- 1) to train students for lifelong learning to communicate effectively with linguistic, metalinguistic, extralinguistic, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, social, verbal, and non-verbal strategies. At the end of the BA, they must use those skills accurately, fluently, and effectively in different contexts, with attitudes that demonstrate honesty, tolerance, and respect.
- 2) The second aspect is to carry out processes, actions, and projects based on the application of different theories and approaches that

promote the knowledge and understanding of the English language and English-speaking culture to meet the needs of the social and work context; and,

- 3) to have the capability to investigate the problems affecting society and education in terms of the use of languages through research approaches, theories, and methodologies. As can be seen, the BA program of the Language Faculty includes culture as a significant competence to train. The curriculum includes two subjects that explicitly cover cultural competence (British Culture Studies and American Culture Studies) and one optional subject at the end of the program for developing intercultural competence in class (La interculturalidad en la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés - Optativa). However, analyzing the necessity of all the existing cultural diversity and the relevance of developing cultural competence in response to globalization demands reveals that there is not enough culturally diverse content required for those three subjects to cover sufficient variants of English.

Technology plays a vital role in cultural competence, and technology integration in language teaching is now part of the trained English language programs as a requisite for facing the evolution of the digital era, which allows people to access a large amount of information and material produced worldwide and found on the internet and in mobile applications. The learning curve for all digital tools is remarkably short,



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enabling students to utilize technology and manage large amounts of information effectively. This ability in students enables educators to provide them with

learning tasks, culturally authentic materials, integrative learning projects, exercises, quizzes, and assignments that utilize digital learning tools.

Methodology and methods

Type of research

This study uses a qualitative research design and is a descriptive case study. It aims to explore and analyze perceptions, reflections, and experiences regarding the implementation of a task-based learning project focused on developing cultural competence. This research intends to interpret participants' perceptions and follows the qualitative paradigm with the use of thematic analysis. As a first step, a review of the conceptual framework is conducted; later, a design for task-based learning is developed before implementation. After that, qualitative data were collected to provide an in-depth understanding of the effects of the cultural awareness task within a specific context that included a group of BA students enrolled in an English teaching program.

Participants

A purposive, convenient sample was used to focus special attention on students who demonstrated active, dynamic participation in cultural development and motivation to enhance their English cultural competence and English language skills. The sample included nine students from the BA Program in English and Teaching English Language (Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa y Didáctica del Inglés). All participants agreed to share experiences and insights, and all voluntarily shared their final products (a task-based learning

project analyzing an English-speaking community) to contribute to the study of the documents. The selection was based on the engagement of these participants in learning and increasing their cultural awareness. This provided meaningful data for the qualitative thematic analysis.

Data collection techniques

Student Projects (Task-Based Learning Products).

There were two sources to gather the information. The first was taken from the students' projects. It was an integrative cultural project in which students selected an English-speaking community, gathered information about its cultural characteristics, produced a digital presentation (e.g., video, slideshow, infographic), and presented their findings and conclusions. It is a product that demonstrates cultural, digital, and language competence

Semi-structured interview and analysis of artifacts

After the project was completed, nine students were selected based on their level of interest in culture and interculturality. They participated in a semi-structured interview to explore their perceptions of the tasks, learning experiences, and reflections on cultural competence. All the information gathered provided detailed accounts of students' personal insights. Some observations were conducted during and after the



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task-based learning implementation, including the analysis of artifacts such as the videos produced by students. The reflective discussion following the students' presentations provided additional insight into students' attitudes, collaborative interactions, and metacognitive engagement.

Data analysis and interpretation

In this study, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted. An interpretative approach was used to analyze data gathered from the interview transcripts. Identifying recurring patterns and meaningful statements from participants was the first step. Secondly, the emerging theme quotations were grouped and sorted out. After that, topics were defined and determined to revise and analyze grouped data in terms of cultural learning, comparisons of cultural elements, and students' engagement in developing cultural competence. This analysis contributed to the interpretation of how students constructed meaning from the task, how they perceived cultural diversity and linguistic variation, and how the complex task contributed to the development of cultural competence. All the interpretative analyses included constant comparison, triangulation of the three data sources, and alignment with the theoretical framework of cultural and intercultural competence.

Ethical considerations

The considerations were based on the principles of educational qualitative research ethics. Participants were asked to participate voluntarily, and they were informed of the purpose of the research and that all information collected would be used for analysis in

strict confidence. Students were asked to share only the materials they consented to, and all the identities of participants would be kept confidential.

Intervention design

A proposal for implementing cultural awareness with task-based learning

Title: Understanding cultural diversity in an English community (Points: 25)

Introduction. In the search for significant learning with a communicative learning approach in terms of the importance of language culture, this integrative task-based project has been designed to develop an understanding of cultural diversity in a community and the world of English and how English is currently conceived as a means for communication among cultures rather than a norm or structured language derived from the dominant territories that influenced its spread. Furthermore, this project aims to foster an awareness of diverse English-speaking cultures and a recognition of their equal importance alongside other cultures. For this assignment, you will use transversal skills such as digital competence, competence in dealing with diverse information, thinking skills, critical thinking, and creativity. You are expected to analyze data, process it, and create a product that can be converted into a written document and a presentation for your classmates. This presentation will demonstrate the diversity of a culture, including its main language variants, key traditions, and representations of the English-speaking community, as well as the characteristics of a group, town, city, or country.



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The rationale for the Task. It is relevant to be aware of the different kinds of English in the world to remark on the equity among nations and the cultural issues of English-speaking communities to avoid stereotypes of superior or inferior languages. Thus, immersing and exploring other cultures enhances awareness of conceiving cultures as equal and valuable for learning English, and promotes acceptance of different types of English as part of the learning in this study program.

Objective. To understand the importance of cultural diversity and the world of English

Instructions. With the use of technology and digital resources, do the following activities:

Activity 1. Select one community, town, city, or country. You can search for information about English-speaking places and select one.

Activity 2. Searching for information. a) Revise and collect information about the language and its characteristics in your chosen place. B) Revise and collect information about the main traditions in that place, c) Revise and collect information about the leading food there, d) Highlight the most important differences from those found in your country.

Activity 3. Analysis of information. Categorize the information regarding traditions, food, main differences from your nation, English variants, and particularities.

Activity 4. Producing. Use the most appropriate tool to create a presentation that is seven to ten minutes long and includes all the information collected. You can use PPT, Infographics, Canvas, Genially, Prezi, etc. The presentation must consist of a) Presentation of the

author, b) Presentation of the place, c) Main traditions, d) Food, e) Main differences from your country, and f) English language variants.

Activity 5. Reporting. (20 points). With the presentation, prepare yourself by considering the following standards for a lecture. Revise presentation details for accurate pronunciation, grammar structures, and explanation strategies; practice aiming for 7 to 10 minutes; and check the information and new vocabulary. Make sure the technology works properly and is compatible with other equipment.

Activity 6. Reflection in class. Discuss the following questions in groups of 3. (5 points)

a) Does the English language consist of only two countries (the UK and the USA)? Yes, No. Why? b) What do you feel after exploring and discovering cultural issues about a specific English-speaking country? c) What is your perception of culture, and what is the importance of culture in your BA program studies? d) What would be your definition of "the world of English" now? and d) Discuss this phrase: "Language is culture."

Evaluation. Evaluation Rubric for Activity 6 (5 points) meets the requirements for participation, contribution, interest, and relevant comments in the discussion.

Evaluation of the Task. Summative assessment. Evaluation Rubric

As seen at the end of the Task, a rubric was designed to evaluate the student's learning process. As this summative assessment is based on the teacher's appreciation, an evaluation rubric was designed to measure the students' cultural achievements. It is



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evident that the agency-oriented Task (Activity 1 to 5) is a rubric that intends to appreciate the level of curiosity, attitude towards learning, investigation, management of information, and coherence in presenting the final product, which must be developed using technology.

The final activity is for reflection. Using formative assessment creates an appropriate learning

environment for students, and teacher observation is the most suitable way to evaluate and score the activity. In this case, five points were assigned to the final discussion activity, a vital process for developing metacognitive and socio-cognitive learning strategies. At this stage, constructivism and collaborative learning play a crucial role in shaping concepts and perceptions.

Results and discussions

Evaluation of the task-based learning implementation

After the task, nine students were interviewed. The sampling was purposive and based on convenience, with the most appropriate students showing interest in the class and motivation to learn about culture and develop their English language skills. Most students reported feeling free and well-oriented to complete the task.

"I found the task easy to follow, and I noticed that I could be free to study any English-speaking community. I feel good learning about the USA, but I know there are many more countries... not just the USA and the UK are English-speaking. There are many more and now we interact with all of them because we have communication with many people around the world. I feel great learning about Australia". (Participant 3)

Participant 3 showed evidence of the learning task (Final project), and the work is shown in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPzPVOwqDHE>.

Some participants focused essentially on the advantages of technology and digital resources.

"I love the use of the internet and all the resources available to do research. I used AI to find more information about the specific city I selected for the project. Recording a video to explain what I learnt is very important because I can practice my English and share what I learnt. (Participant 5)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdVFKIb2MPU>

On the other hand, comparing cultures is also a fine strategy they used when comparing their own culture with the English-speaking community. They affirmed that the value of Mexican culture is increased by comparing and describing other cultures.

"We all realized that our culture is rich and can be found in other English-speaking countries, as it is in the Southeastern USA. We can say that the Mexican-origin people keep traditions and change other cultures with all the influence they provide. I really feel awesome comparing my culture in the USA". (Participant 8)



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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrjUr9TsftQ>

As seen in the participants' statements, the project is a chance to display all their capabilities through a transversal, integrative task focused on a controlled task. However, it allows students to choose the community, the digital tools available, and the strategies for communicating with their classmate's using technology.

The world of Englishes is so extensive that students need more exposure to the cultures of other English-speaking countries, in addition to British and American English, which will be covered thoroughly. The proposal is focused on the English subjects (Elementary to Advanced). As English is one of the main subjects in the BA English study program, cultural competence can be enhanced from the beginning of the studies.

Conclusions

Developing cultural awareness and cultural competence in a BA English program should be the mission of the teachers' committee and authorities. It is not easy for individual efforts in isolation to cover a considerable responsibility. Hence, it must be discussed and negotiated as a team. This proposal does not intend to change the BA curriculum. It offers only one of the possibilities that some other teachers may have. Imran (2024) proposed that "By exposing learners to diverse artistic and philosophical traditions, educators nurture creativity and critical thinking, essential skills that transcend disciplinary boundaries" (p. 8).

Additionally in his results, Zarate (2023) affirmed, "under the flipped classroom didactic design was a

A culture-awareness task-based project can be integrated into the English subject without altering the BA curriculum. Those projects could target stages of cultural competence such as 1) Developing the pragmatic concepts in language, 2) Understanding cultural diversity in an English community and the world of English, 3) Digital resources, tools, and applications for language and cultural input, 4) Intercultural competence for communication, 5) Comparison of Human rights and principles in different nations (including Mexico), 6) Understanding traditional perspectives from different English-speaking countries, 7) Cultural events or expositions that take place in English-speaking communities, and the ones that teachers can propose.

viable alternative for teaching the contents of the American Culture course". This study showed that the use of alternative digital tools and environments enhanced cultural awareness. Undoubtedly, cultural development can also be reflected in the academy's cultural activities. Some other subject instructional designs can contribute to the project of cultural learning tasks that enhance transversality with intercultural communication, and the use of digital competence to deal with information about culture, transdisciplinary projects in favor of cultural awareness.

Minoia. (2019) provided meaningful information in his study that matches the results of this study, highlighting the students' benefits of "the reflective nature of the



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practice as they were able to consider their pre-conceptions and enjoyed engaging in a lasting process of learning on interculturality” after integrative complex tasks. The institution must act and focus on exposing students to culture to achieve cultural competence with a diversity of authentic cultural materials, the use of technology for providing opportunities and access to specific authentic cultural materials and resources,

exposing students to explore cultural diversity with integrative learning projects, and enhancing discussion on intercultural topics to acquire intercultural competence throughout the duration of the study program (Imran, 2024).

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is not conflict of interest.