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Breaking New Ground in Language Education: Exploring Communities Through Cross-Global Collaborations

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Resumen

A través de una colaboración de investigación-acción en contextos de aula en Colombia y Estados Unidos, estudiantes de secundaria en el curso de idiomas participaron en una plataforma digital translingüística y transgeográfica para examinar críticamente y compartir aspectos de sus comunidades. Este proyecto involucró una clase de inglés de secundaria en una escuela pública de bajos recursos en la región Caribe colombiana y una clase de español como segunda lengua de secundaria en una escuela pública del sureste de Estados Unidos. Utilizando el español y el inglés como parte de su repertorio lingüístico, los estudiantes de ambos contextos crearon artefactos y comunicaciones entre sí para fortalecer sus competencias lingüísticas y culturales. Específicamente, elaboraron y compartieron cartografías sociales de sus comunidades, retratos de sus vidas personales y otros artefactos reflexivos que representaban una variedad de experiencias y saberes. En este artículo, presentamos una breve descripción de la colaboración, junto con ejemplos específicos del trabajo estudiantil, que muestran cómo los estudiantes expresaron su cultura, su lengua y sus experiencias de vida. Al hacerlo, este artículo amplía la noción de paisajes lingüísticos en el Sur Global al mostrar cómo los entornos de educación bilingüe pueden "abrir nuevos caminos" para el aprendizaje de lenguas. Esto se logra al desmantelar creencias jerárquicas sobre el lenguaje, trascender los límites del aprendizaje en el aula y situar las perspectivas de los estudiantes en el centro de su proceso de aprendizaje lingüístico.

Abstract

Through an action research collaboration across classroom contexts in Colombia and the U.S., language learning students in high school classrooms engaged in a cross-linguistic and cross-geographic digital platform to critically examine and share aspects of their communities. This project involved a high school classroom of English language learners in a low-income public school in the Caribbean region of Colombia and a high school classroom of Spanish language learners in a magnet public school in the U.S. Southeast. Using Spanish and English from their linguistic repertoire, students from both classroom settings created artifacts and communications with one another to enhance their linguistic and cultural competencies. Specifically, they created and shared social cartographies of their communities, portraits of their personal lives, and other reflective artifacts that represented a range of experiences and knowledge. In this article, we provide a brief overview of the collaboration, along with specific examples of student work that reveal how they expressed culture, language, and their lived experiences. In doing so, this article expands the notion of linguistic landscapes in the Global South by offering how bilingual education settings can "break new ground" for language learning to dismantle hierarchical beliefs in language, to push beyond arbitrary bounds of classroom learning, and reposition students' standpoints at the center of their language learning.

Introduction

As a result of growing information and communication technologies, it is possible for students in distant geographical locations to connect and learn together through collaborative inquiry. These types of international online collaborative exchanges are a strategy that "engages students in global learning, facilitates access to co-construction of discipline-specific knowledge, and encourages exposure to different worldviews by engaging in cross-cultural interactions" (Vahed & Rodriguez, 2020, p. 597). Research studies suggest online international collaborative exchanges can foster intercultural competence and global awareness and that through engagement with peers from diverse backgrounds, students can enhance communicative skills and global knowledge (Fukkink et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2022). Further, when the online international collaborative exchange includes multiple languages and cultural understandings, these interactions hold the potential to foster intercultural understanding and bilingualism (Chanwaiwit & Mori, 2024). Surprisingly, few studies explore how students can participate in these types of collaborative spaces at the high school level. This is likely compounded by the fact that cross-global and cross-lingual collaborations in schools are a rare phenomenon (Comber, 2016; Sánchez & Ensor, 2021; Tierney, 2017). As argued by Kee and Ahmedov (2025), educational institutions need to find ways "to adapt [and create] innovative ways to form and sustain partnerships that transcend borders" (p. 1126). These partnerships not only enrich opportunities for shared learning between students but also have the potential to empower students to imbue their linguistic and cultural epistemic knowledge beyond the scope of their local boundaries.

In this article, we offer examples from our cross-geographical study involving high school English-learning students in Colombia and high school Spanish-learning students in the U.S. who participated in virtual exchanges across three months. A few primary questions guided this collaboration: 1) What happens when students from diverse linguistic and geographic contexts interact in an online setting? and 2)How can these interactions impact bilingual and cultural learning? For this article, we examine the ways students took on their roles as language learners and community knowers as they extended this knowledge within particular multimodal and multimedia artifacts they created to reflect on their local spaces. We additionally interrogate how these types of engagements can foster vital ways for enhancing linguistic learning in the Global South.

Breaking New Ground

The process for becoming bilingual is laden with complexities, including personal and institutional factors and contexts. This is because language is always politically and ideologically tied to competing and changing social and cultural forces (Barton & Hamilton, 2012). Even "what counts" for being bilingual is contextually dependent. For example, in Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, learning English can be synonymously tied to bilingual education, which, in turn, upholds the dominance of the English language and maintains an elite social capital for bilingual and native speakers of English. In Colombia, for instance, students are mandated to learn English from first grade through their final year of high school Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016). This language policy was, in part, influenced by the creation of the country's Bilingualism Program, which sought to boost Colombia's economic development and its insertion into the globalized world (Cely Betancourt & Urrutia Ramos, 2024). Despite these beneficially intended efforts, bilingual education has been implemented unequally due to disparate training, access, and materials, which further increases socioeconomic gaps. These discrepancies have largely affected

students in the public school system and subsequently those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cely Betancourt & Osorio de Sarmiento, 2024).

Bilingual education in Colombia has unfortunately heavily focused on improving students' proficiency in English at the expense of the multilingual wealth of the country where at least 65 indigenous languages are spoken (Landaburu, 2004). It is important to note, however, that in the last few years, efforts have been made towards decolonizing English teaching with the work of critical language educators in the country (Gonzalez-Humanez et al., 2026; Guerrero-Nieto & Quintero Polo, 2023; Miranda et al., 2023). In this way, even amidst the privileging of English, language learners are being encouraged to be co-constructors of cultural knowledge and examine diverse perspectives. Our project adds to the scholarship on decolonizing pedagogies for language teaching in Colombia by addressing linguistic landscapes from a critical perspective, where students' experiences become the "text" of the classroom with opportunities to enhance intercultural critical awareness through the sharing of these "texts' with other students.

As also supported by a growing body of literature, integrating intercultural interactions within classroom pedagogy is a way to enrich students' dialogue with additional languages and cultures (Fernández et al., 2024; Fernández Benavides et al., 2023). The notion of Intercultural Awareness (ICA), for example, is gaining increased attention in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia. ICA is conceptualized as a "conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices, and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication" (Baker, 2012, p. 66). ICA emerged as an expansion of Byram's (1997; 2020) notion of intercultural communicative competence, which is comprised of four categories (or *savoirs)* that allow learners to equip themselves with a set of knowledge (of self and other, of interaction) and gain skills (e.g., interpret, relate, discover) and attitudes (relativizing self, valuing other) to be able to interculturally interact with others. In Colombia, this intercultural turn has moved language teachers to shift from a narrow linguistic approach towards an intercultural approach of language and culture, fostering the exploration of social and identity issues, as well as questioning cultural representations (Alvarez-Valencia, 2014).

In addition, the use of virtual exchanges (VE) has increased in language teaching and learning in the last few years (Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020; Vinagre, 2021; Vinagre & Llopis-García, 2023). Virtual exchanges involve communicating and collaborating with peers from different locations through technology (Dooly & Vinagre, 2021). Experiences with VE in connection to linguistic landscapes, in Colombia and other global contexts, have shown how linguistic landscape pedagogy encourages learners to analyze real-world language use beyond the classroom, fostering connections between language, identity and society (Martínez-Murillo, 2025; Przymus et al., 2025; Vinagre, 2022). These recent models frame linguistic landscape activities as a form of literacies-based pedagogy, not simply as "authentic input." Przymus and Solmaz (2025) point out that linguistic landscapes should be considered as multimodal, socially-situated texts that can be read, interpreted, and critiqued. Therefore, a linguistic landscape (literacy-based) pedagogy allows learners to engage in observation, documentation, interpretation, and critical reflection (Malinowski et al., 2020; Solmaz, 2021), prompting them to question whose languages are visible or invisible, which languages are valued, and how linguistic choices reproduce or challenge social power relations.

Our study makes relevant contributions to this growing body of work regarding telecommunications and linguistic landscapes. First, our work focuses on how students "read" their communities as cultural and social texts. Current scholarship mainly centers attention on language

displayed in public and private spaces (e.g., signs, billboards, murals, and store fronts). We seek to extend this concept to examining individuals' experiences as linguistic landscapes that provide important textual resources for language learning. This notion is supported by studies which highlight critical, sociocultural and decolonizing views of literacies and language learning (Andreotti et al., 2015; Helm & Dalziel, 2017), and builds on views of LL as dynamic, flowing, and nonlinear (Vinagre et al, 2022).

Second, one of the challenges found in current literature is the prevailing dominance of English in such virtual environments (Belz, 2002; Kramsch & Uryu, 2012). Some studies suggest a 50/50 language balance as an ideal approach (Li, 2021; Przymus et al., 2025). Our project was designed to maintain a heavy focus on students' target language. Therefore, rather than English dominating the virtual exchange or seeking a specific ratioed linguistic presence, we invited the students to leverage as much of their target language—English for the Spanish speakers, and Spanish for the English speakers—as possible. This way language usage was determined by the speaker/author rather than the receiver/listener.

Although the politics of language will always live within innumerable tensions in classroom and community settings, the richness for growing one's language self (Pavlenko, 2006) is incommensurable. In the realm of bilingual education, it is clear that educators and students must continue to break new ground in tying a sense of interconnectedness (Sánchez & Ensor, 2020, 2023) to one's language journey. We advocate that this process can include breaking the stigmatizations of linguistic hierarchical beliefs, breaking beyond arbitrary boundaries of the classroom which disassociate learning from life outside the classroom; and breaking the constraint of students' voices and perspectives from being positioned as the center point of classroom learning. By breaking new ground in these ways, the linguistic landscape of the classroom can cultivate new fertile ground in which students can thrive and grow.

Methods

Project Overview

The purpose of our project involved connecting classrooms of language learning high school students from two linguistically, culturally, and geographically diverse places. One classroom site included English language learning students in 10th grade who attended a public school in the northern Caribbean region of Colombia. The other classroom site consisted of Spanish language learning students in Year 3 of their Spanish World Language classes at a high school in the Southeastern region of the United States. In sum, one context consisted of native Spanish-speaking students learning English, while the other context encompassed native English-speaking students learning Spanish.

This classroom collaboration emerged because language learning students in both Colombian and U.S. schools rarely have opportunities to personally engage in authentic communications with their L2 native-speaking counterparts. Instead, language learning often remains siloed within the walls of the classroom, let alone expanding beyond one's national borders. Therefore, this project was designed as a teaching and learning opportunity to examine what happens when communication opportunities are created for students to use their L1 and L2 abilities with students who are native speakers of those L2 languages. We wondered how these interactions might impact students' use of their bilingual and biliterate knowledge and how the interactions might foster cultural awareness or deepen intercultural knowledge. Thus, we formed a partnership to explore these types of student experiences.

Methodology

Our study was grounded in a qualitative approach (Tisdell, Merriam et al., 2025) using a collaborative action research design, which is well-suited for addressing classroom challenges by engaging teachers as co-researchers in the inquiry process. Rather than positioning teachers as recipients of external knowledge, collaborative action research empowers teachers to critically examine their own practices, co-construct knowledge, and implement changes tailored to their local contexts (Burns, 2010). This participatory methodology emphasizes reflection, dialogue, and shared decision-making, creating opportunities for professional growth while simultaneously improving teaching and learning conditions (Kemmis et al., 2014). In line with these goals, our project followed principles such as fostering collaborative and self-reflective inquiry, being inclusive and dialogical, aiming at transforming social and educational practices, and being committed to changing unjust structures (Kemmis et al., 2014). The research team obtained Ethics Committee (IRB) approval and schools' authorization in Colombia and the U.S. Also, consent forms were signed by students' guardians, and assent forms were completed by the participating students. No student names are used in this article.

Background to the School Communities

The school site in Colombia was located in an impoverished area of a northern Caribbean city. The school was built just eight years before the research study began, and it was developed as a response to the growing population in the area— particularly due to a government-funded apartment complex which provided housing for families who were either living in extreme poverty, residing in informal settlements (or *invasiones*), or had been displaced by the Colombian armed-conflict or natural disasters (in the regions of Córdoba, Sucre, and Antioquia). Historically, the residential community faced many systemic inequities, exacerbated by poverty, unemployment, and crime.

At the time of the study, the school served around 1200 students from preschool to 11th grade, which is the graduating year in the Colombian education system. Students in the high school took five hours of English learning per week. However, it would be common for students to have a very basic level of English (Pre-A1 or A1) when they reach the high school level. This was a byproduct of both internal (e.g., unmet basic needs, low motivation) and external factors (e.g., large classes, non-relevant pedagogies, public school dynamics that impact effective teaching time). Unfortunately, students did not always find it relevant to learn an additional language because most have no access to higher education, which meant they would have to work as soon as they completed school. English would not have been necessary for most of those jobs, and in their social context, they did not have interactions with English speakers. For the research project, two 10th-grade English classes with the same teacher participated from the school. The total class enrollment consisted of 59 students. Their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years old. The project was the first time they interacted with students from a different country.

The school site in the U.S. was a high school located in the Southeast. This school consisted of students from varied socioeconomic statuses; however, it was located in a middle-class suburban area of the city. It was built in 2013 and was designed as a magnet school in which students participated in academies with a curriculum focused on contexts in their content areas of study. Historically, the school was recognized as a top-performing public high school in the state and was named a National Magnet Certified School of Distinction by Magnet Schools of America. Approximately 1100 students in grades 9th through 12th attended the school at the time of the study. Almost all students in the school took a minimum of two years of a World Language class

(e.g., French, Spanish), which were required for graduation and a prerequisite for many four-year universities in the U.S. For the research project, two classes of Level 3 Spanish participated. These classes included a total of 35 students ranging in the following grade levels: 12th (1), 11th (30), and 10th (4). The Spanish proficiency of the students varied from novice high to intermediate-mid proficiency ratings in accordance with American Council on the Teaching Foreign Languages guidelines. Most of the students had limited experience in speaking Spanish outside of the classroom, although the potential for them to use Spanish in their future careers could be high. The project was the first time most (if not all) students had the opportunity to speak about their own communities and interact with other students in Spanish.

Project Design

Our collaboration emerged from the researchers' mutual interest in creating opportunities for teachers and students to broaden classroom language learning opportunities toward a multicultural, global collective endeavor in Colombia and the U.S. The research team consisted of a classroom teacher (Luz Karime and Erika) and university researcher (Lenny and Lina) from each site. Together, we created curricular materials to help students design oral and visual content they could share with their counterparts on an online platform. The university researchers collaborated with curriculum design, accompanied some of the activities with the virtual platform, and contributed to data collection, management, and analysis. The teacher researchers led the curriculum-making and implementation and participated in data collection. All team members analyzed the data and contributed to this article.

Across three months, the research team held several virtual meetings to discuss common needs, school curriculum, and students' interests and then jointly designed the intervention. The curriculum included common class-wide conversations and inquiries that took place separately in both settings as well as artifacts students produced (individually and in small groups). These artifacts were shared through an online platform as a type of virtual exchange between the school sites.

From March to May 2025, the students participated in four main exchanges. The exchanges were designed to help students reflect on their own context as well as learn about their counterparts' context as tied to a wider global lens (see Table 1). In this article, we focus on two exchanges: word clouds and social cartographies. For the word clouds, students digitally created these in small groups to visually capture key aspects of their local communities. Students accompanied these word clouds with video-recorded descriptions and explanations. For the social cartographies, students designed these in small groups and primarily hand-drew them on large poster boards. These were created to critically examine their communities' assets and challenges. Students also produced video recordings to present with their social cartographies.

Table 1

Exchanges

Exchange	Activity	Task Mode & Type	Interaction
1	Digitally-created concentric circles to introduce and describe themselves.	Asynchronously posted. Constructed individually.	Students initiated and responded to other students' postings online.

2	Digitally-created word clouds and accompanying video recordings to introduce aspects about their local communities.	Asynchronously posted. Constructed in small groups.	Students initiated and responded to other students' postings online.
3	Hand-drawn social cartographies and accompanying videos to share deeper understandings of their local communities.	Asynchronously posted. Constructed in small groups.	Students initiated and responded to other students' postings online.
4	Real-time exchange and dialogue to discuss previous online exchanges and engage in personal conversations.	Synchronous video interactions of the classes from both school sites.	Students and teachers interacted in real time.

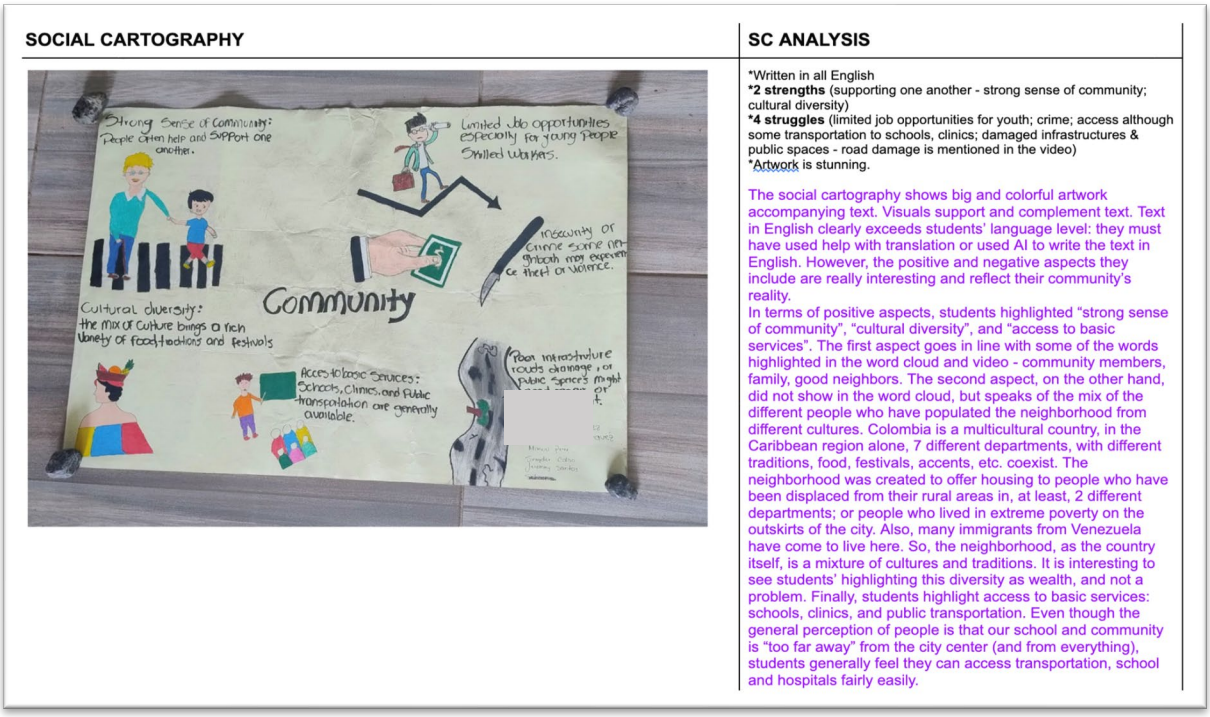
The classes used SeeSaw for the virtual exchanges, which allowed the students to post videos, images, and written text. Students could respond to one another's postings through written responses and non-verbal reactions such as a "thumbs up." Within all their work and communications, students were encouraged to use their L2 languages but were explicitly invited to use any languages they desired (e.g., L1). The research team wanted students to have the opportunity to use their full bilingual repertoire yet feel encouraged to practice using L2. In this way, the target language was privileged for each site accordingly.

Data Sources and Analysis

During the project, students across both sites posted a total of 128 initial postings on the digital platform, which included individual and small group postings. Beyond the initial postings, students engaged in numerous follow-up responses to one another's work. After closely reviewing all initial postings, we decided to turn this article's analysis on the initial postings of the students' word clouds and social cartographies. These two types of postings offered a rich glimpse into how students leveraged community knowledge within their target language sharings. Subsequently, we engaged in purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to select and analyze a small representation of students' word clouds and social cartographies to gain deeper insights into how these students used their linguistic repertoire in L2 and L1 to engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions with other students who were also learning an additional language.

Data from both sites were analyzed using critical discourse studies (Resende, 2021), which offer a framework for understanding meaning-making and power relationships. We created multimodal transcripts of the selected student work by adding pictures of student artifacts and transcripts of the videos, along with an analysis of the multimodal material of the students' postings (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2026). Figure 1 provides an example. Then, the research team convened on main themes and met to discuss the analysis. To guarantee trustworthiness and confirmability, we conducted peer debriefings, member check sessions, data triangulations, and audit trails (Baker 2022). In the following section, we highlight three groups (two Colombian and one U.S.) which reflect a range of ways students examined and portrayed their local spaces.

Figure 1
Example of Multimodal Analysis



Findings

In this section, we highlight the ways students turned a reflective eye on their communities as they worked to construct artifacts in their L2 to share with their counterpart classes. This process involved participating in several class-wide discussions to examine topics such as the complexities of what makes a community, the types of communities they are part of, and how they see themselves as part of a larger multilingual and multicultural community. In what follows, we accentuate the digital word clouds and multimodal social cartographies from three student groups that reveal the diverse ways students portrayed their communities. Taken together, they reveal meaningful ways students "read" the social landscapes of where they live, revealing important aspects of their day-to-day experiences, which, in turn, open opportunities to shape intercultural learning for them and their peers.

Group 1: From Positive Representation to Critical Reflection

Group 1 was composed of eight students from one of the tenth-grade English language classrooms in the Colombian school site. Because this was a large group, sometimes they worked together and at other times in two small groups. Together, they produced the community word cloud and social cartography as seen in Figure 2. Both of these student artifacts were written fully in English, although they used digital tools (e.g., Google Translate, ChatGPT) for translating some words and expressions unfamiliar to them. Students also used English in their videos to present both artifacts. While some students were still learning how to pronounce certain words, they

conveyed their message in their L2. In both videos, students took turns to reference various aspects of their visual designs.

Figure 2

Group 1's Digital Word Cloud (Left) and Hand-Drawn Social Cartography Poster (Right)

In their word cloud, we noticed students focused on positive aspects of community life. Students highlighted nature (*lakes, animals*), positive attitudes (*kindness, good neighbors*), and places for studying, shopping, and having fun (*school, stores, soccer field*). Some interesting local cultural practices were also included, even though they were not as visible. For example, this group included *rooster fights*, which were, in part, a surprise to us because this was not a current practice in the community. Many years ago, these activities were very common, but now they rarely happen and would only likely occur in small towns and villages in the region. However, the students clearly felt it was important to include this activity as a representation of their community life. When inquired about this, the Colombian students conveyed they saw this as a form of entertainment rather than a controversial topic (i.e., animal protection issue) and thought it important to share with their U.S. peers because it was a unique and special part of their local culture.

Another key element in the students' word cloud included a positive representation of people. Students particularly highlighted individuals involved in close interpersonal relations with them and who play relevant roles in their community. For example, students mentioned *family, good neighbors, food vendors, police officers,* and *garbage collectors.* This decision provided an interesting insight into students' viewpoint of their community, which represented an affirmative community identity and encompassed those who intersect their everyday local spaces.

Overall, their word cloud shows this group's desire to foreground a celebratory image of their neighborhood. This is significant because the general perception of their community is chiefly negative from those who live elsewhere in the city. This implies a strategic choice from this group of students to push back against this stereotype, especially for an audience unfamiliar with this area of Colombia. In their word cloud video, the students reinforced the same content of the visual components; however, students used the video to insert more personal elements, which were not necessarily the most salient words in the cloud (e.g., *family*, *landscape*, and *environment*). It seemed these aspects of the community carried important weight to the students, even though those topics may not have been the ones in common with their peers, which is why the word cloud made those words smaller in size. For this reason, the video format provided more space for individual

voices to be heard within their collective artifact.

In their social cartography, which they constructed for a subsequent virtual exchange, the students expanded the narrative of their community to include struggles that were not considered in the word cloud. For example, students represented pressing structural challenges they regularly faced in their community such as *youth unemployment*, *insecurity*, and *damaged infrastructure* (i.e, road drainage and public spaces that need repair). These issues would appear in regular discourses by young people and adults alike, embodying a well-known systemic fabric of this community.

In terms of strengths, students highlighted a *strong sense of community*, *cultural diversity*, and *access to basic services*. The first attribute aligned with some of the descriptors highlighted in the word cloud and video, such as *community members, family,* and *good neighbors*. *Cultural diversity*, on the other hand, only appeared in the social cartography and reflected a mixture of the different people who have populated the neighborhood from different cultures. Although Colombia is a multicultural nation, in the Caribbean region alone there are seven different departments (equivalent to states in the U.S.), each having different traditions, food, festivals, language accents, etc. In fact, the school's neighborhood was created to offer housing to people who have been displaced from their rural areas in at least two different departments and to offer housing to people who lived in extreme poverty on the outskirts of the city. Also, many immigrants from Venezuela had come to live there so the neighborhood itself is extremely diverse. One can understand why the students decided to represent the concept of diversity in their social cartography. However, what makes this decision compelling is that they highlighted this as an asset. In this region, the public discourse demarcates these extreme levels of diversity as problematic. For example, there is widespread perception that migrants strain the economy, destabilize public service resources, and contribute to higher rates of crime and job insecurity. These concerns heighten racial and social tensions between the ethnic groups within the larger community. However, rather than casting cultural diversity as a negative trait of their community, the students portrayed this multiethnic aspect as a positive characteristic.

Also in this artifact, the students referenced the topic of *access to basic services*: *schools, clinics,* and *public transportation*. The general perception from those who do not live in the students' community but know the area often characterize this community as "too far away" from the city center (where community resources and community life exist), but these students pushed back against this stereotype by expressing their viewpoint in their artifact that they can access transportation, school, and hospitals with ease.

For their group social cartography video (see Appendix A for transcription), the students were divided into two subgroups, which allowed them to extend the content of the cartography. The first subgroup took turns introducing themselves and discussing positive and negative aspects that were included on their poster. The second subgroup, however, included new aspects of their community. For example, they highlighted strengths such as less traffic. By being farther from the city center, traffic tends to be less congested. In terms of struggles, they mentioned garbage and drugs, which reflected pressing issues everyone in the community would recognize, yet these were not included in the textual artifacts of the word cloud or social cartography. As exemplified, the video enabled new details to surface as well as to highlight nuances that were not visible in their textual artifacts. In turn, this deepened the community narrative created by this group.

Looking across modalities, from the visual to the written texts to the video and oral productions, this group of students shifted from an exclusively positive portrait of their community to a more critical and multifaceted depiction of their neighborhood and people. This might suggest that multimodal artifacts around the same theme can scaffold students' ability to explore and

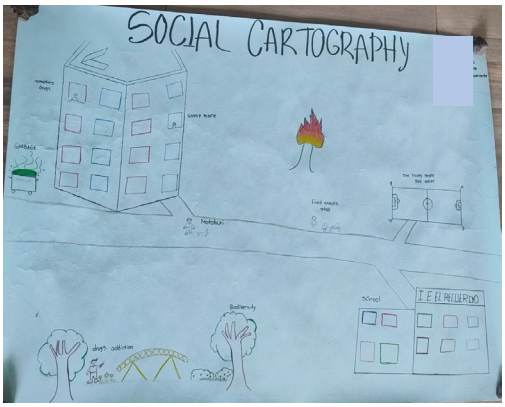
expand on different nuances of community life, as well as to extend their linguistic repertoire to discuss these issues. Students' progression from positive to critical framing of their community can also inform how bilingual, multimodal practices can push students' surface depictions (and descriptions) towards critical inquiry. As studies such as Fernández et al. (2024) affirm, integrating opportunities into the classroom for students to engage in critical positioning of their culture and local context promote intercultural understandings and belonging.

Group 2: Navigating Community Contradictions

Group 2 included five students from the Colombian school site. This group designed a comprehensive word cloud, as well as a visually powerful social cartography (see Figure 3). Both artifacts were fully written in their target language—English—and, for the most part, represented vocabulary that existed as part of the students' proficiency. They did look up some word translations for their word cloud and sought the teacher's help more often than Group 1 to ensure translation accuracy. In the videos, the group took equal turns to speak without aural interferences of communication or mispronunciations, or mistaken vocabulary.

Figure 3

Group 2's Digital Word Cloud (Left) and Hand-Drawn Social Cartography Poster (Right)



Unlike Group 1, this group immediately acknowledged community contradictions in their multimodal constructions by combining positive aspects (e.g., *respect*, *love*, *friendships*, *joy*) with struggles (e.g., *drugs*, *gangs*, *injustice, gossip*). One powerful example that stood out in their word cloud was the inclusion of a well-known slogan *happy life despite everything*. In fact, this group was the only group from all the classes to integrate a cultural motto into an artifact. This particular phrase encapsulates a strongly felt tension between the hardships and the resilience that those living in their community experience in their everyday lives. It represents an optimistic viewpoint that happiness is possible amidst great adversity. Including a cultural motto such as this not only serves as a sense of belonging for the Colombian students but also opens the door to an important aspect of cultural wisdom for the U.S. students to understand about their counterparts. Beyond this inspirational proverb, this group of students integrated other aspects in their word cloud not considered by other groups. For example, they reference *tech dependence* (which is a major issue for many young people) and neighborhood *noise* levels which reveal additional everyday challenges of their community.

In their accompanying video, students highlighted very few items from the word cloud and instead focused on aspects that seemed to resonate with them the most, such as *love and family*,

parks and diversity, *bad people and tolerance*, and *drug addiction and injustic*e. Of these, they seemed to emphasize strengths (e.g., *love* and *family)* and aspects they valued such as *parks* and *diversity*. *Respec*t and *creativity* also stood out as positive examples in their word cloud. Overall, it seemed they were intentional in wanting to ensure they conveyed a positive outlook of their community despite the many challenges which exist. In terms of struggles, students interestingly contrasted bad people with tolerance, which reflected a unique perception of the student groups that they need to tolerate what "bad people" do in their neighborhood. Perhaps the students recognized cited problems such as *drug addiction* are complex and beyond their individual control and very likely to be a longstanding part of their community. They are exposed to *injustices* daily which may not be able to be escaped but can be acknowledged.

For their social cartography, the students designed a map-like view of the neighborhood (see Figure 3), which included a layout of several important places. For example, they drew a street that leads to the school and into their neighborhood along with pathways to a park, soccer field, apartment building, etc. These different elements in their drawings allow the viewer to envision common scenes in the community. Interestingly, the student authors provided accompanying texts to these locations, which explicitly illustrate contrasting realities within these spaces. For example, the students referenced *drug addiction* in the park next to *biodiversity* and placed hardworking people (e.g., *moto taxi driver*, *fried snack stalls)* along with people *gossiping* and *smoking drugs* in the apartments. They also highlighted bad-smelling *garbage* containers outside of these apartment towers, which represent a systemic problem for those living in the apartments. These kinds of issues and the inclusion of them alongside places of value underscore a powerful visualization of daily life tensions that the students' experience. This portrayal reinforces a multidimensional viewpoint of community culture (Byram, 2008) and helps others interpret the cultural particularities of these social systems (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

In their video (see Appendix A for transcript), the students presented elements of their community under different categories and did not use the same pattern as the poster. For example, they started with strengths and then moved on to the challenges. They also included information that was not visible in the social cartographies such as respect, love, kindness, and friendship. They also emphasized people "who earn a living by working," which is similar to the juxtaposition in the cartography, where they contrasted the hard-working people with the people gossiping or doing drugs. Additionally, they mentioned motorcycle taxis, people selling fried foods on the streets, and people recycling. In contrast, the challenges they mentioned could all be seen within the social cartography poster such as drug addiction, pollution, street garbage, and gossip.

Overall, the students' oral framing underscored resilience and dignity in the face of community struggles with maintaining a more explicit acknowledgement of the contradictions. The combination of artifacts and videos foregrounded values such as solidarity, persistence, and hard work and were treated as equally relevant in defining a community along with struggles such as drug addiction or injustices. Their layered multimodal depictions exemplify how students in the Global South can repurpose bilingual learning spaces to visualize the plural realities of their own communities as part of their language learning and critical reflection.

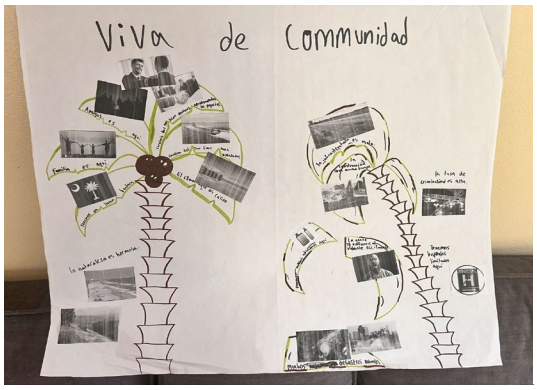
Group 3: Framing Community From a Broad Perspective

The third student group comprised three students from the U.S. classroom who constructed a word cloud and social cartography about their local community (see Figure 4). These artifacts were created in their target language—Spanish. Their written content reflects communicative competence with a few words consisting of misspellings (e.g., *regligon, communidad*) and missing

accent marks. Neither error types likely interfered with the students' meaning since they largely consisted of cognate origins. In the accompanying videos, the students also spoke fully in Spanish. For the video of the word cloud, the students created a speaking script which included describing the entire word cloud in unison. For the social cartography video (see Appendix A), students took turns describing the content with two students taking the lead roles.

Figure 4

Group's Hand-Drawn Social Cartography (Left) and Digital Word Cloud (Right)



In the word cloud, students largely focused on highlighting physical contexts tied to their community. For example, they included *lago* (*lake*), which is in reference to a popular lake in the community area that is considered the "jewel of the state" and ranked as the top lake for water sports in the U.S. in 2025. As one can imagine, spending time at the lake is a highly popular pastime for many locals, including many students in the school. In addition, the students listed *país* (but likely meant "*el campo*" for countryside) and *fuera* (*outside*) as positive attributes about their community. We suspect this is because the state boasts almost fifty state parks and several major coastal beach tourist destinations. Locally, there are several well-known state parks that contribute significantly to the state's reputation and commerce. In their word cloud, the students also referenced *iglesia* (*church*), *religión* (*religion*), and *Jesucristo* (*Jesus Christ*). These descriptors likely reflect a large influence of Christianity in the area. The state exists in what is called the "Bible Belt"—a term used for a region of the U.S. where Christianity influences many of the cultural norms of those states. Many of the students in the school likely grew up attending Christian churches. Lastly, the students included their *escuela* (*school*) as well as their interest in *videojuegos* (*videogames*) in the word cloud. These aspects point to activities that are part of their everyday lives.

In the social cartography, the students further symbolized their reflections on their community by portraying their community's strengths and challenges as palm trees (see Figure 4). In fact, the type of palm tree used in their design serves as their state's tree and is integrated into the state's nickname and flag. This is because of its significance as tied to historical wars in the state as well as it being a palm species found growing throughout the state. Given the multifaceted background of this tree, one can see why the students chose it to represent their community in their social cartography. They did so with two different palm trees. The tree on the left characterized community strengths, illustrated by a tree standing straight in stature with a healthy canopy of leaves. On the leaves and alongside the trunk, the students shared various attributes such as *los amigos* (*friends*), *la familia* (*family*), *la naturaleza hermosa* (*beautiful nature*), *el clima caluroso* (*warm climate*), *los actividades de agua* (*water activities*), *la bandera* (*state flag*), and *las*

oportunidades de negocios (*business opportunities*). With each trait, the students printed out and attached a photograph to provide an additional glimpse into these aspects.

In a similar fashion, the students identified some challenges, which are depicted in the tree on the right side of their poster about where they live. This tree is leaning and has several leaves falling off, with only a few leaves remaining at the top. These symptoms of decline exemplify struggles impacting the community, which are listed and pictured alongside the tree. They include natural disasters such as hurricanes and flooding which are regularly occurring concerns for state residents because the state is vulnerable to hurricanes and has a six-month hurricane season each year. During this time of year, communities remain on alert for flooding as a result of the storms. Beyond these weather-related challenges, the students cited concerns about social detriments such as high *crime rates*, *addictions*, and *lack of access to hospitals* (or costs of medical care)—all of which are systemic public health issues that impact the quality of life in their communities. The students also mentioned problems such as *road issues* (e.g., *repairs* needed, constant *construction*) and conveyed a concern for how easily *people get angry* or *become violen*t. This last concern is intriguing and may have been influenced by a noticeable nationwide increase in violence in public spaces over the past few years. Altogether, through their word cloud and social cartography, the students conveyed varied aspects impacting their lives that were not just tied to their local context but represented cultural norms, issues, and assets that were connected to a broader sense of community (e.g., their state, their region).

Discussion

As can be seen by the students' multimodal artifacts, each of the student groups defined their communities in ways that showcased fortes, differences, and inequities. Across all groups, for example, they revealed nature as an important source of richness. Places such as lakes and parks were cited as valuable land resources and also represented popular spaces where people socializes and enjoyed time together. It was clear from their perspectives that natural resources contribute to an important aspect of community well-being and foster a major sense of cultural identity for their communities. This type of natural economy was of high value to them as was illustrated in each of the community representations. Interestingly, the students also noted significant problems that can be caused by the natural environment. They all live in areas where flooding, for instance, can create severe destruction. For the students in Colombia, they witnessed regular flooding that significantly impacted their housing and school communities since they were built in areas with no run-off pathways for storm water. For the U.S. students, their communities could be impacted by the effects of hurricanes in which damage is more unpredictable. Although flooding occurs for differing reasons between the two contexts, the students cited this same issue as leading to larger problems for their communities. In both cases, they viewed it as a recurring challenge.

In each of the word clouds and social cartographies, the students also showcased people as valuable sources of strength for their communities. This included friends, family, and others who intersect their everyday experiences. This revealed an important viewpoint of their communities given that they emphasized this social structure from a personal standpoint of those who are part of their immediate social connections. In this sense, the students chose to portray the relational function of their communities as opposed to illustrating a community comprised of disparate and unknown individuals. Across the artifacts, students also revealed common structural barriers that impacted their communities (e.g., crime, insecurity, drugs, and addictions). Despite living in very different types of communities, students alike cited similar types of systemic issues and insecurities.

Not only does this illustrate students' willingness to take a critical stance on the conditions where they live, but it reinforces how communities are alike in their complexities. These types of valuable insights contribute to one's formation of civic responsibility and intercultural awareness (Liddicoat, 2019).

While the student groups expressed examples of common traits across their communities, they also narrated differing aspects about their local spaces. For example, as previously described, Group 1 highlighted "rooster fighting" and was the only group in their classes that included this in their artifacts. Even though it was no longer considered a common form of entertainment, it was a historical practice and part of their cultural heritage that they wanted to share with their U.S. peers. In addition, this group explicitly articulated cultural diversity as a specific feature of their community and noted it as a source of pride. For Group 2, they were the only group to integrate a cultural motto in their work, which they subsequently used as a symbolic representation for their social cartography. This particular colloquial expression helped them frame the representations of their community from a standpoint of what we see as optimistic contradiction. For the third group, they took an approach that revealed ideological, cultural, and environmental dimensions that were shaped by the larger context of their region. They also designed their entire social cartography from a unique sense of imagery that reflected multiple histories and dimensions of their community through their use of a particular palm tree. Altogether, the three student groups' multimodal and multimedia artifacts served as impressive artistic portraits of their communities and expressed powerful viewpoints for understanding their backgrounds, values, and experiences.

We propose that embedding opportunities such as those propelled by our project can uniquely enrich learners' experiences in language education settings. Not only do they offer sites for growing one's knowledge about diverse life experiences, but they also serve as powerful tools for self-expression and deep reflection on one's own experiences. The fact that the students had to communicate with other students in another country, who were likely unfamiliar with their culture, allowed them to reflect on what identifies their community and to express themselves in L2 in a meaningful way. This aligns with research that advocates for virtual exchanges to be scaffolded in ways that allow students to see the stories of their environment and the multiplicities that exist within (Vinagre et al., 2022). In our project design, this involved positioning students to build communal knowledge together and create a sense of connected identity from a cross-cultural, cross-linguistic standpoint.

As previously referenced, education settings in both Colombia and the U.S. far too often limit learning to resources and activities that ignore students' personhoods as core "texts" of the classroom (Bettney Hedit, 2023; Zimmerman, 2022). Yet, these textual resources are key for strengthening intercultural understandings (Ramos et al., 2012) and contributing to one's critical understanding (Fernández, 2024). This is why pedagogical innovations, such as with our study, become important opportunities where students' cultural and linguistic identities can be at the forefront of their learning. This enables classroom learning to serve as an intersectional process where individuals' knowledge and identity affiliations can co-exist with the teaching content (Álvarez, 2022). Through a project such as ours, this pedagogical approach also extends a reflexive lens of the self to become a reflective tool for understanding others' experiences across diverse cultural and geographical spaces. For nearly all the students in both contexts, our project served as the first time for students to communicate in their L2 with other native-speaking students of that L2. Furthermore, it offered them an opportunity to use their L2 to write and to speak about critical issues pertaining to their own communities. Subsequently, these communications enabled students to share personal knowledge about local communities as well as gain new knowledge about their

different communities. This included shedding misconceptions. For example, the Colombian students learned they shared similar struggles with the students in the U.S. and that the U.S. students' communities suffered from significant systemic issues. For the U.S. students, they learned that schools in other parts of the world can operate very differently from those in the U.S. and that inequities in schools can be very different. This kind of knowledge-sharing helped students in both contexts to recognize that life is not straightforwardly easier/better/worse elsewhere, which helps foster greater intercultural awareness and one's connections to the broader world.

Along these lines, this type of shift in teaching practices in education settings helps reposition students' lived experiences from the periphery of the classroom to the center. This, in turn, breaks the silencing of their voices and perspectives. For our project, it was very much designed with the goal for students' lives to be at the center of the curriculum. By designing projects like this, students can create community narratives rooted in their own cultures and languages which help disrupt homogeneous assumptions about their and others' communities and cultures. In addition, this dual perspective can be enriched as students engage in cross-linguistic communications which reinforces how language should be a vibrant part of connecting students to a more diverse part of their world.

Conclusion

In the context of our study, the two language learning classrooms became scenarios to not only break geographical and linguistic boundaries but also to embrace learning as a culturally-centric, community-grounded, globally-connected endeavor. The virtual exchanges proved useful to help students think critically about their community as well as view their linguistic and social landscape as tied to landscapes near and afar. In addition, this enabled students the opportunity to expand their linguistic and creative repertoires to become "intercultural communicators" (Vinagre & Llopis-Garcia, 2024) to enrich their own understandings of the world as well as those of others.

We hope our work can provide relevant insights into shaping new landscapes for language teaching in the Global South; and we hope our transnational, critical, and intercultural collaboration can serve an example for how teachers and students can resist traditionally unconstructive views of language learning that also perpetuate inadequate language ideologies and reinforce constrained teaching practices. In this project, students were able to position themselves beyond typical deficit views of language learner personas (i.e., having basic or poor language proficiency, lacking lexical knowledge, exhibiting limited fluency, possessing low motivation); rather, they assumed a variety of strength-based roles as community knowers, cultural ambassadors, artists, digital creators, and experts in their L1 (vis-a-vis their partners) among others. This experience allowed them to gain confidence in a myriad of abilities they possessed and create language learning motivation and relevance for others. By engaging in these cross-global exchanges, students were also able to see how their lived experiences can intersect the linguistically and culturally diverse lives of others, which can help blur the boundaries between that which defines the Global South and Global North. We urge others to help break new ground by similarly moving beyond the isolated barriers of linguistic and cultural configurations of the classroom and to remake these spaces into new sites of borderless possibilities.

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Appendix A
Transcriptions of Social Cartography Videos

Group 1, Subgroup 1, Spoken in English:
Speaker 1: Good morning, we are [name].
Speaker 2: [name].
Speaker 3: [name].
Speaker 4: [name].
Speaker 5: [name].
Speaker 2: In our community, there are positive aspects, such as…
Speaker 5: Strong sense of community, cultural diversity, access to basic services.
Speaker 4: In our community, there are negative aspects such as poor infrastructure, roads drainage…
Speaker 3: Insecurity or crime, limited job opportunities…
Speaker 4: Thanks for your attention, bye.

Group 1, Subgroup 2, Spoken in English:
Speaker 1: Hello, good morning. We are [name], [name], and [name]. We want to talk about the positive aspects of our community.
Speaker 2: In our community, there is a lot of nature, less traffic, and there are also many possibilities.
Speaker 3: There are also problems in the community; for example, a lot of garbage, and of drugs, and [unintelligible]. Thank you for your attention. Bye.
Speaker 1: Bye.

Group 2, Spoken in English:
All in unison: This is our social cartography! Hello!
Speaker 1: We are [name], [name], [name], [name] and [name]. This is our social cartography.
Speaker 2: There is a lot of diversity, sports spaces, respect, love, kindness, and friendship.
Speaker 3: There are also people who earn a living by working…
Speaker 4: As motorcycles, taxi, selling, fried foods, and recycle.
Speaker 3: There are also some negative aspects…
Speaker 5: For example, drug addiction, pollution, street garbage, and gossip people.
Speaker 2: Thanks for your attention.
All in unison: Bye

Group 3, Spoken in Spanish:
All in Unison: ¡Hola!
Speaker 1: Viva de comunidad.
Speaker 2: Que es bueno es tenemos un buena bandera. Familía es aquí. Amigos es aquí. [El estado] tiene muchas oportunidades de negocios y Carolina del Sur tiene más actividades. Aqui es cálido y la naturaleza es hermosa.
Speaker 3: Mal. La infraestructura es mala. La construcción lleva mucho tiempo. Tenemos muchas adicciones aquí. La gente se enfurece al volante fácilmente. La tasa de criminalidad es alta. Tenemos hospitales limitados aquí, muchos desastres naturales.
Speaker 3: Bye
Speaker 2: Adios
Speaker 3: Adios