



**Rhythm and Blues and Its Power to Promote Intercultural Skills:
A Class-Based Experience**

**Rhythm and Blues y Su Poder Para Promover Habilidades Interculturales:
Una Experiencia Basada en Clase**

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Abstract

Despite the several efforts carried out in order to bring intercultural language learning to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, there are still several challenges in what concerns achieving a full-scale integration. Therefore, this study aimed at describing the ideas of high school students about the role of music in language learning, its potential to address social issues, and its affordances to examine one's own culture after the implementation of a pedagogic proposal based on the study of Rhythm and Blues (R&B) music. Focus group discussions, surveys, observations, and students' written responses facilitated data collection. Findings suggest that using R&B invited students to see the power of music for language learning, awakened their critical spirit through the identification and stance-taking towards social issues, and encouraged them to analyze their own cultural context from a positive view.

Keywords: Culture, interculturality, music, language learning, linguistic soundscapes

Resumen

A pesar de los diversos esfuerzos realizados para llevar la dimensión intercultural al aula de lenguas extranjeras, todavía hay varios desafíos para lograr su integración a gran escala. Por tanto, este estudio tuvo como objetivo describir las ideas de estudiantes de bachillerato sobre el rol de la música en el aprendizaje de lenguas, su potencial para abordar problemas sociales y sus posibilidades para examinar la cultura propia tras la implementación de una propuesta pedagógica basada en el estudio de la música Rhythm and Blues. Discusiones en grupos focales, una encuesta, observaciones y las respuestas escritas de los estudiantes facilitaron la recolección de datos. Los hallazgos sugieren que el uso de Rhythm and Blues invitó a los estudiantes a ver el poder de la música para aprender lenguas, despertó su espíritu crítico mediante la identificación y la toma de postura hacia problemas sociales, y los motivó a analizar su propio contexto cultural desde una perspectiva positiva.

Palabras clave: Cultura, interculturalidad, música, aprendizaje de lenguas, panoramas lingüísticos sonoros

Introduction

One of the major concerns in the area of Second Language Acquisition in Colombia has been the identification of the role of culture in Language Learning/Teaching (Fernández et al., 2024; Rico-Troncoso, 2018), its integration in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom (Meadows, 2016), and the pedagogical implications of the intercultural dimension in language learning (Álvarez-Valencia & Bonilla, 2009).

Following the nationwide change of perspectives coming from the new Political Constitution of 1991 (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1994) and the National Law of Education (Congreso de la República, 1994), English language turned into a major pillar in the Colombian educational landscape (Durán, 2024). Consequently, the English language teaching (ELT) acquired a paramount role in Colombia. This pivotal position of the English language was materialized in the implementation of linguistic policies and educational actions aiming to boost the integration of English in several sectors (Miranda, 2014, 2016). Some of these policies are reflected in the promulgation of the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1998) and the Basic Competence Standards in Foreign Languages: English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006), the implementation of the National Program of Bilingualism: English-Spanish (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004) along with its further versions: the Program of Strengthening to the Development of Competencies in Foreign Languages in 2010, the program Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2015), and the National Bilingual Policy “Colombia Very Well” 2015-2025 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014) with other measures such as the Suggested Curriculum for English Language (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016) and the Basic Learning Rights for English (2016).

The National Program of Bilingualism encompasses a set of policies aiming to promote bilingualism (English-Spanish) at academic and professional levels. The Ministry of Education states on its official website¹ that, up to 2021, the Program has contributed to the formation of approximately 4,800 teachers and 330,000 students from public schools in urban and rural areas through the implementation of online and face-to-face pedagogical alternatives. Although these figures look positive, the results of the period 2022-2025 (not yet available) will shed light on the recent achievements and the future needs of this program.

Following the National Program of Bilingualism, English has become an integral part of the national curricula from pre-school to high school in private/public sectors (Bermúdez et al., 2014). Most undergraduate programs push for high English proficiency levels as part of their requisites, which has also echoed the attention given to the formation of language educators (Durán, 2024; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2024; Miranda et al., 2016). English has been paramount in national academic discussions and pedagogical debate from the mid-nineties (Durán, 2024). These actions have impacted the stakeholders’ views towards English, the political/economical relevance assigned to this language, and its future in the Colombian scholarship.

These changes attempt to provide answers for some of the postmodern challenges echoing through Colombia (Rico-Troncoso, 2021): fighting discrimination and injustice (Álvarez-Valencia & Ramírez, 2021), giving voices to unheard populations (Gutiérrez et al., 2021), finding spaces for international collaboration (Johnston & López, 2022), and integrating emergent technologies in language learning (Sotomayor et al., 2023). These challenges added to the highly dynamic

¹ Ministry of Education Official Website: <https://educacionrindocumentos.mineduacion.gov.co/pilar-1-educacion-de-calidad/programa-nacional-de-bilinguismo>

communicative practices across the globe (Álvarez-Valencia, 2016) and push for an ever-growing inclusion of the intercultural dimension in the Colombian EFL agenda.

Colombia's multicultural/multilingual condition (Bonilla et al., 2018), socio-political struggles, and social disputes awareness (Álvarez-Valencia & Ramírez, 2021; Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020) have awakened the interest in discussing the importance of culture in ELT and called attention on the need to evaluate our theoretical conceptions (Patiño et al., 2021), its integration (Baker, 2011; Liddicoat, 2008), and exploration (Meadows, 2016; Rico-Troncoso, 2021). Notably, the Colombian Program of Bilingualism has turned attention to EFL phenomena, and it has also served to foreground the role of the intercultural dimension in ELT (Meadows, 2016).

Although these policies were conceived and implemented following the shadow of instrumentalist and discriminatory views of language learning (Cárdenas 2018; Cárdenas, & Miranda, 2014; Soto & Martínez-Heredia, 2018), which left behind national and additional languages other than English (Gómez-Sará, 2017), its development, implementation, and adjustment has been pivotal for the emergence of State initiatives to enhance bilingualism projects (Aponte-Mantilla, 2024). Derived from this Anglocentric view in the Colombian conception of bilingualism, some scholars have devoted their efforts to find spaces for cultural plurality in ELT.

Motivated by the need to address Colombia's intercultural nature and recognize diverse linguistic/cultural views that reconstruct the concept of bilingualism, previous efforts have integrated the intercultural dimension in Colombian curricula, practices, and academic discussions (Henao et al., 2019; Meadows, 2016). These attempts reflect the positioning of the intercultural realm as a factor to consider in ELT (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021).

Despite initiatives from Colombian scholars, integrating the intercultural dimension in ELT still remains in its initial phase. This limitation is reflected in scant spaces to discuss the inclusion of intercultural elements, the design of pedagogical alternatives, and the development of research addressing the relationship between culture and language learning/teaching (Fernández, 2017, 2019, 2021). Hence, three concerns arise: the exclusive focus of language teaching on the communicative dimension (Byram, 1997; Kramersch, 1998; Liddicoat, 2008; Rico, 2018, 2021), the essentialist view/treatment of culture in the EFL classroom (Kramersch, 1998), and the scarce integration of the learners' own cultures (Henao, et al., 2019; Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020; Rico-Troncoso, 2021). These limitations reduce spaces to actively integrate the intercultural perspective in ELT and hinder the exploration of the learners' own culture, which obstructs the possibility to analyze their sociocultural realities.

Teachers must include elements coming from the learners' daily lives (Ramos et al., 2012), especially their linguistic soundscapes (LSs). Based on the relationship of the LSs in the learners' development of social skills, music (part of the students' LSs) is a major factor in the construction of cultural identity (Kabir, 2020). Similarly, music, a layer of LSs, facilitates the examination of cultural norms, behaviors, and meanings that compose intercultural language learning. Exploring the role of music in the comprehension of cultures from a linguistic soundscape approach might bring useful insights about the learners' connection with their own realities and struggles in ELT.

Therefore, in order to address the intercultural dimension in EFL from the learners' own cultures, this study is framed within a national policy promoting English and explores the ideas of a group of high school students from a private-monolingual school in Cali (Colombia) about the role of music in language learning and teaching, its potential to address social issues, and its affordances to examine one's own culture after the implementation of a pedagogic proposal focused on the study of R&B as part of the learners' LSs.

Previous Studies

In second language acquisition, the intercultural dimension has been researched through the identification of cultural manifestations in textbooks (Henaó et al., 2019), the inclusion of culture in language lessons, the critical dimension of culture (Gómez, 2015), students' perceptions about culture, and LLT and cultural manifestations (Álvarez-Valencia & Bonilla, 2009; Ramírez-Lizcano & Cabrera-Tovar, 2020). Some Colombian studies have reported their experiences bridging the gap between language, culture, and the learners' local/social context.

Ramírez-Lizcano and Cabrera-Tovar (2020) used telecollaboration to discover other cultures and reflect about their own culture. Data revealed that telecollaboration promotes intercultural communication/interaction. Through online contact with high school learners abroad, this study showed how intercultural interaction is a path to discover the instrumental role of English at the social and the economic level as well as self-identity expression and the diverse nature of culture represented in products and practices.

Paredes-Mendez et al. (2021) addressed some alternatives to stimulate ninth graders' agency and identity construction through participation and discovery of their rural/local community. The authors promoted their students' interest on their own rural context and decision-making through a student-focused need analysis, a flexible syllabus, community inquiry, local knowledge integration, multimodal products, a glocal perspective of environmental issues, a field visit within a community service experience, language-centered activities, and permanent class discussion/reflection. Placing the learners' rural context at the center of this project, using their own representations and experiences as class materials, and connecting global environmental issues with their everyday realities allowed learners to discover their own cultural realities and encouraged them to move toward agency (e.g., helping a local farm and leading a campaign for environmental care). This experience showed how one's own culture offers social, communicative, and identity resources that enhance students' development of agency and social participation. Seeing English as an expression vehicle and bridge between the students' own culture and other forms of communication led to discussing the need of approaching EFL with the learners' local, cultural, and social realities. Paredes-Mendez et al.'s (2021) findings are connected with this study since R&B music was integrated in the English class syllabus due to its close relationship with the learners' cultural/local realities embodied in their LSs. Using R&B as part of the learners' linguistic soundscapes highlights the potential of intercultural language teaching in promoting approaches that acknowledge Global South epistemologies in everyday teaching practices.

Romero and Pérez (2021) investigated how task-based learning promotes citizenship and communicative skills. The researchers discovered how public school students identified some components of citizenship related to values and agency. The connection between the learners' own culture and classroom activities was a factor that enhanced the participants' awareness of their role as social/transformational agents. Findings opened the discussion about the dialogue in EFL regarding the demand of connecting schools with their students' cultural/local realities and social change.

In linguistic soundscapes, some studies have reported the cultural weight of sounds to display cultural identity in multilingual spaces (El-Ayadi, 2022; Pappenhagen et al., 2016). While El-Ayadi (2022) examined the presence of diverse languages in a touristic area of inner-city Amsterdam, Pappenhagen, et al. (2016) contrasted the presence of linguistic/written landscapes versus linguistic soundscapes in the St. Georg district of Hamburg. Both studies stressed the limitations of traditional linguistic landscapes' approach that heavily focused on signs, posters, billboards and written language. El-Ayadi (2022) and Pappenhagen et al. (2016) went beyond this

stance and actively addressed the cultural load of LSs (talks, songs, conversations, sounds, noises, etc).

Through linguistic sound walks (walking around specific places in order to gather sound information), El-Ayadi (2022) found that LSs are biographical by enacting people's identities, experiences, and values. The ways individuals interpret languages depend on their life stories and particular stances, which determine their response to them. Furthermore, sounds are not enacted in the vacuum; their interpretation encompasses contextual cues such as the places where they are produced and the people who are part of the communicative act.

Pappenhagen et al. (2016) discuss how usefulness, status, and cultural identity determine the linguistic landscapes. Whereas German is mainly used for economic transactions and general purposes in commercial sites (boutiques/restaurants/hotels), other languages like Turkish and Arabic appear in informal discourses and intimate talks in places (restaurants/bars) where cultural identities are tangible. This "sound behavior" appears in the linguistic landscape of the area under analysis in which foreign languages (English/French), referring to broad-easily recognizable world areas (Balkan/Thai Asia/Ibérico), are mainly used on Lange Reihe Street by groceries and hotels to attract the attention of tourists who lack deep cultural knowledge. In the Steindamm street, the places' names appeal to a more discrete and specific clientele familiar with the cultural background of the places in that area. El-Ayadi (2022) and Pappenhagen et al. (2016) discuss how LSs disclose the intercultural nature of multilingual areas and the sounds' cultural weight. Their findings call for a more nuanced view of linguistic landscapes and for a closer presence of LSs beyond sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics.

Other studies related to LSs highlight the role of music in the configuration of religious, regional, and urban communities (Bafford, 2023; Johnson, 2021; Weston, 2012). Bafford (2023) discusses how LSs (particularly musical worship in religious services) are a pivotal element of South African evangelicals. The author reports the ways in which music (a religious LS) lays a boundary between unholy and sacred lifestyles, the tensions stemming from the use of "modern" musical trends to attract wider audiences, the multiplicity of linguistic repertoires in the religious hymns, and the presence of indigenous African instruments as part of the worship. This study remarks the cultural role of music in everyday life and its influential power as part of peoples' LSs.

The studies addressing LSs above reported touched areas still underexplored. Within the intercultural dimension, unveiling the cultural relationship of music and sounds with places, religion, identity, and social media within the context of language lessons is a challenge for scholars in intercultural language teaching/learning. Critical historical analysis of LSs from the lens of language learning could also give birth to a novel branch, especially in the Global South where the connections between LSs, colonial rule, and cultural hierarchies are still a debt with past generations. Although studies dealing with LSs center their attention on urban, rural, and symbolic spaces, exploring classrooms, and specifically, EFL contexts has been out of their agenda, which leaves a huge ecosystem of linguistic, cultural, aural, and multimodal manifestations claiming to be discovered and analyzed.

The studies above emphasize the need to deepen scholarship into the LSs and its impact on interactions in multilingual spaces, individuals' identities, and the sociocultural meaning attributed to places. Nonetheless, the relationship between LSs and language learning has not received enough attention in Latin American scholarship. Given the need of expanding research on the areas of bilingualism and linguistic landscapes in the Global South, the present research aims to contribute to existing literature through the implementation of a pedagogical intervention addressing the learners' LSs from an intercultural perspective that foregrounds the role of social contexts in Latin

American countries, particularly in Colombia, where a nationwide program of bilingualism is in place. These factors and the scarce presence of LSs in South American scholarship highlight the connection between this study and the present special issue of the *Bilingual Review/Revista Bilingüe* in terms of its thematic field, scope, epistemological approach, and context.

Although these studies have provided valuable insights about current EFL challenges by approaching the intercultural dimension from diverse perspectives, the need of strengthening spaces for social analysis of local realities from a critical perspective in EFL is still an increasing demand from the ever-changing and complex global realities. Due to this gap, this study focused on the students' conceptions of music in Language Learning/Teaching through the use of R&B to discuss the connections between Language Learning and the intercultural dimension.

Theory

Defining Culture

Here, culture, bilingualism, and R&B are connected through the affordances of R&B as a semiotic cultural resource for language learning integrated from an intercultural perspective within a country (Colombia) following a national project of bilingualism (English-Spanish). These dimensions explain the use of this musical genre (part of the learners' linguistic soundscapes-LSs) in the exploration of the learners' own culture framed in an English lesson. This theoretical discussion addresses the concept of culture, its connection with the intercultural view of language teaching, and the cultural nature of music from a linguistic soundscapes perspective.

Since this study responds to the needs of bilingual development (English-Spanish) in Colombia, emphasis on the role of culture is key to understanding the connection between ELT and the learners' own culture (Liddicoat, 2008; Paredes-Mendez et al., 2021). This relationship is embodied through the inclusion of R&B and its role as part of the participants' LSs. Integrating music (part of the learners' LSs), contextualized the pedagogical intervention and addressed the learners' cultural background, which is an elemental aspect in intercultural Language Learning/Teaching. Hence, bilingualism and communicative competences are not isolated from the cultural realm (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), and bilingual education addresses the ways culture impacts Language Learning/Teaching here through the exploration of LSs. Therefore, the concept of culture constitutes the backbone of this research.

Scholars recognize the multidimensional nature of culture (Morán, 2001), remark the symbolic/factual representations behind culture (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), and describe its semiotic/multimodal dimensions (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021; Kress, 2010) and the transformative role of culture (social agency/citizenship) (Rico-Troncoso, 2021; Wagner & Byram, 2017). Morán (2001) defines culture as an ensemble of products, practices, and perspectives pushing social integration through their interconnection. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) see culture as a reference framework to interpret contexts, actions, and thoughts. Álvarez and Fernández (2019) and Álvarez (2021) see culture as the set of semiotic resources that change across time and place and are modified through social interaction. For Rico-Troncoso (2021), culture has a social role in the development of agency and the identification of individuals' co-constructed identities that break colonialities of knowledge, being, and power (Rico-Troncoso, 2018). Culture encompasses discourses, ideologies, and practices that directly impact the individuals' relationships with their own contexts and with themselves. Given this study's context, where bilingualism plays a major role in the national linguistic policies, culture is conceived as a multidimensional, social, and dynamic entity encompassing thoughts, actions, and objects through the manipulation of individuals who read/write their multiple identities in situated experiences coming from the learners' school,

family, and neighborhood (Fernández et al., 2024). Connecting the learners' fields of action (school/family/neighborhood) and language learning materializes here through the examination of cultural practices stemming from the students' own cultural experiences which are framed in R&B-based language lessons. Therefore, the relationship between the conception of culture adopted here and bilingualism at school foregrounds the role of intercultural language learning along with its connection to the learners' linguistic soundscapes manifested through R&B. Hence, the complex nature of Language Learning/Teaching calls out for a more intimate approach to culture (encompassing its diverse manifestations) in Language Learning/Teaching where social exchanges and learning experiences are seen as intercultural actions situated within intercultural landscapes facilitating interaction, negotiation, and mediation across diverse cultural systems and views (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021). This approach requires analyzing the convergence between culture and language.

Culture and Language Learning

Language Learning/Teaching aims to achieve skills for successful interaction with people from different linguistic/cultural backgrounds (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat, 2008). These skills echo the needs for bilingual education in Colombia and the national goals for English language proficiency. The problem is the exclusive focus on English and the neglect of Spanish and other languages. Despite this issue in the Colombian Bilingual Project, efforts in the promotion of communicative skills in English have been notable (Correa et al., 2014).

In communicative activities, participants bring their own cultural backgrounds which nourish these interactions with meaning and semiotic resources (Liddicoat, 2008; Álvarez-Valencia, 2016, 2021). The nuances of those meanings and semiotic resources cannot be understood without knowledge, attitudes of acceptance, and skills to interpret, relate, interact, and critically analyze cultural manifestations happening within a specific set of sociocultural conditions (Baker, 2011; Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002).

Music as a Semiotic resource in the Learners' Linguistic Landscape

From an intercultural perspective, Language Learning/Teaching happens within a sociopolitical context marked by specific linguistic and cultural traces. Under this approach, languages and cultures are immersed in the speakers' semiotic spaces through visual, linguistic, aural, spatial, and gestural modes of communication (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021). This multimodal presence echoes the theory of linguistic landscapes which are conceived as the salient presence of linguistic elements and their use in the speakers' everyday life (Birnie, 2020; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Within the field of LL, there is another area centered on the exploration of sounds in communicative practices and their impact on the way individuals "read" their environment and enact their identities (Birnie, 2020; Pappenhagen et al., 2016) through the aural dimension. This sub field is called linguistic soundscapes (LSs) and whereas LL mainly examines visual and logocentric signs, LSs embrace the whole palette of semiotic meanings and interactive rituals behind the presence of linguistic units in specific spaces and interactions (El-Ayadi, 2022). Therefore, the LSs' nature is, in fact, multimodal and intercultural. In this research, R&B music is conceived as a socially-emergent component of the participants' LS and as a cultural semiotic resource (Álvarez-Valencia, 2021) with valuable potential for Language Learning/Teaching since it encompasses peoples' rituals, habits, perspectives, identities, and products. The cultural nature of music (here R&B) makes it appropriate to address issues related to the learners' local realities and to connect their own experiences with learning a foreign language.

The cultural meanings of musical messages (Mosquera & Provansal, 2000) and the role of their own culture and the learners' LSs as spaces of social engagement and agency (Álvarez-Valencia & Bonilla, 2009; Bafford, 2023; Quintana-Arias & Bello-Serna, 2020; Weston, 2012) guided this research towards an alternative to close the gap, namely the adoption of intercultural language teaching (ILT): school-home from the exploration of R&B (as constitutive part of the learners' LSs) in the conceptualization of cultures. In sum, this research promotes Language Learning/Teaching from the analysis of an element of the students' LSs: R&B music from an intercultural approach framed within a national linguistic policy aimed at supporting bilingualism (English-Spanish).

Methodology

Design

Qualitative action-research was followed. Action-research aims at finding alternative solutions to specific contextually-base problems (Cresswell, 2007; Hernández-Sampieri et al, 2014). Given the participatory and transformative nature of action-research, which promotes students' engagement, collaboration, and reflection (Burns, 2000), this design allowed the integration of ILT to comprehend learners' ideas about cultures and their analysis of the elements studied in class from the analysis of R&B. This study followed the four phases of action research: planning, implementation, assessment, and reflection (Przymus & Faggella-Luby, 2023). Each lesson was taken as a whole cycle in which all these phases were followed and implemented. Lesson planning and performance was the result of constant evaluation and reflection that impacted the redirection of the upcoming sessions. An initial problem was identified after some weeks of previous observation, then the pedagogic intervention was designed taking into account that issue. This main issue was the center of the pedagogical design and some of the pedagogical elements related were modified throughout the whole intervention.

Setting, Individuals, and Ethical Considerations

This study was carried out at a monolingual-private school in Cali, a Colombian city in the southwestern pacific region. This school offers education from preschool up to high school and is located in a middle-class neighborhood. Students (ages 5 to 19) attending this school belong to low and middle social class. This school follows the principles of a humanistic approach and focuses its curricular actions on developing ethical, academic, and scientific skills. This institution also offers formation for learners with functional diversity (cognitive, psychological, sensorial, and/or motor disabilities).

Regarding the EFL curricular approach, and following the goals of the National Bilingualism Program, the school, centers its attention on preparing learners to obtain high scores on the annual ICFES test (a nationwide exam that tracks learners' academic competences). The school has two English teachers: one for preschool and elementary school, and another for secondary school. The school uses the Pearson book series to support language lessons and the eighth grade's textbook is *Refresh 3*. Four weekly hours of class were devoted to English; however, given the focus on written skills to pass the national exam, scarce attention was devoted to oral skills. These limitations were addressed in the pedagogical intervention. This school was selected due to Author's Two access to it, the institution's socioeconomic context, its pedagogical approach, the administration's interest in strengthening English language teaching, and the conditions offered to Author Two to carry out her research inside the school.

The participants were 32 eighth graders (16 boys/16 girls aged 13-16 years old) from the same class who belonged to working-class families generally residing near the school. The school only had one group of eighth graders. Participants reported having had scarce contact with English outside of school and not having prior experience visiting Anglophone countries. This course was chosen because of the communicative functions addressed in the syllabus and the expected skill development to fulfill according to the national Basic Standards or English Teaching (2006): to describe to people, to discuss simple arguments, to participate in conversations, to exchange personal information, to express personal opinions, and to report their daily routines. These functions nourished the design of the pedagogical intervention reported here and the learners' reflections about intercultural phenomena. The learners' age was considered appropriate for examining social, cultural, familial, and affective elements explored here.

Before the research, the participants' parents received information about the study; once they signed the consent forms, data collection began. Confidentiality, anonymity, and exclusive data academic usage were maintained. There was no harm caused to any of the students who were part of this research.

Researchers' Roles

Author One directed this study which was Author Two's requisite to obtain her B.A. diploma. The requisite was to conduct research in an area related to language teaching. Author Two chose to carry out an action-research experience at a school with teen learners. Author Two was not the official English teacher at the research setting. In order to complete this proposal, she requested and obtained special permission by the school administrative staff (principal and coordinators) to develop her research under *in-situ* surveillance from the official school English teacher and as part of an academic project. The official English teacher was in charge of the course where this study was implemented and of teaching English in all high school levels. She allowed Author Two to design, implement, and assess her lessons and provided logistic, disciplinary, and pedagogical support in the research setting. The English teacher also supervised the pedagogic proposal's suitability with the teaching context, school curriculum, and course syllabus. In turn, Author One guided Author Two's pedagogic proposal's design, assessment, redesign, and reflective stages.

Pedagogic Proposal

This study consisted of the implementation of English lessons focused on the analysis of cultural elements of R&B. The pedagogic intervention required working in the students' classroom throughout six lessons and it was in this space that all exchanges here reported occurred between the learners and Author Two. In the first five lessons, students examined the lyrics and messages of some R&B songs. Although all activities were developed inside the classroom, Author Two assigned some pieces of homework to invite students to reflect about their own cultural contexts. Learners composed an English song which was performed in the sixth lesson. Each lesson had a core cultural topic determined by the analyzed song (Table 1). This pedagogic proposal encompassed communicative and linguistic elements which were connected to the cultural topics and functions addressed in each lesson.

Table 1
Pedagogic Proposal

Lesson	Topic	Song	Communicative functions	Linguistic elements
1	Defining R&B (stereotypes/preconceptions)	Beyoncé's "Move Your Body" (2011)	Talking/writing about music and personal opinions	Past continuous-Phrasal verbs
2	Social Issues: Racism in Mississippi (1968)	Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" (1964)	Discussing predictions and their connections with past events	Future simple-time prepositions
3	Love and Flirting	Beyoncé's "If I Were a Boy" (2008)	Comparing and discussing love and flirting practices	Comparatives, superlatives-Conditional 1-Used to
4	Gender Roles	Beyoncé's "Formation" (2016)	Talking and writing about gender identity and roles	Qualifying adjective-Phrasal Verbs-Idioms
5	Women's social roles	Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman" (1954)	Talking about gender discrimination and writing about women's contributions	Present simple-Linking words-Cognates
6	Changing our culture	Students' songs	Discussion about one's own culture	Adjectives-Simple tenses-Connectors

The activities, contents, and communicative functions structuring the pedagogic proposal were connected to the design of the study since they provided scaffolded methodologies to address the intercultural dimension, the learners' LSs, and syllabus elements from an intercultural perspective that supported the learning aims of the National Program of Bilingualism. The activities also cover an area in need in the research context—the development of oral skills—and fits within the reach of the purposes of action research given its localized and transformative nature. Learners interacted with R&B by listening to the songs listed above, watching their music videos (when available); analyzing their lyrics; discussing their sociohistorical contexts, messages, and interpretations; and establishing relationships with their own cultural contexts.

Data Collection

A survey, focus group sessions, students' written productions, and observations were used to gather data during the eight weeks. Surveys and focus groups were applied in Spanish.

Survey

To discover students' ideas about R&B, culture, and the English class, a survey was used and had eleven questions (two open-ended and nine close-ended) divided in three sections: language learning, culture, and R&B. Learners completed this instrument in class on paper.

Focus Group

Four sessions were performed, each with six students. These sessions aimed to explore the students' perceptions, reflections, and opinions towards their own and other cultures within their experiences in the pedagogic proposal. Fifteen questions were asked to examine the participants' experiences in the research, to examine reflections about culture, and to examine ideas about the relationship of music and Language Learning/Teaching. All sessions were recorded and lasted 28 minutes on average.

Students' Written Productions

A reflection question was asked in each session to the students, who delivered their answers. Those questions addressed the class topics. The objective of those questions was to promote inquiry about stereotypes, social issues, cultural identity, and social practices. In the sixth lesson, students presented a song composed by themselves in groups.

Observations

Observations were carried out by Author Two to identify students' commentaries, perceptions and behaviors. Observing allows the description of visible manifestations of people's behaviors and attitudes (Creswell, 2007). A format with three sections (students' reactions towards cultural elements and music, and their communicative behaviors) was used. Eight lessons were observed: one before the implementation of the pedagogical experience, six of the research, and the final one in which the students completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

- Scanning Data
- Construction of Initial Codes
- Main Topic Recognition
- Topic and Category Revision
- Prevailing Topics and Categories Identification
- Report of Conclusions and Final Report

Thematic analysis was selected for its potential to explore qualitative data and generate main categories. By addressing the dimensions of this study through thematic analysis, the participants' thoughts and ideas were discovered and general patterns were established according to their salience in the data.

After finding relevant data from the instruments, an online matrix was used to organize, label, and categorize information. Through triangulation, categories were cross-referenced in three ways, which provided validity to the analysis. Relevant excerpts were selected to illustrate the findings here.

Data coming from the surveys and focus groups were translated to English. Students' written productions were produced in English. Excerpts are presented under the following code:

Student=S# (All subjects are represented with a letter (S) and a number).

Instruments: FG=Focus group; S=survey; R=Reflection; O=Observation. For focus groups and surveys, the number of question is placed after the corresponding letter (FG7: Focus group/question seven). With observations, the number accompanying it is the one of the observed session. Reflections are coded with the number of session along with the students' pseudonym=S8-R5.

Students' pseudonyms appear first, followed by the instrument and question number (surveys/focus group) or session (observation/reflection).

Results

Data coming from the students' survey answers, focus groups, written products, and their reactions in class were studied to scrutinize the impact of using R&B as part of the learners' LSs on their ideas concerning the power of music in ELT. This section reports the findings of the present research in terms of a) the potential of music to promote Language Learning/Teaching, b) the possibilities to address social issues in language lessons, and c) the use of music to examine the learners' own culture.

Music and Language Learning

Taking into account the context of the research here described (a Latin American country undergoing a policy of still incipient bilingual education [English-Spanish]), this study tried to make students aware of music as a resource for Language Learning/Teaching due to its potential to strengthen specific areas of communicative skills, to heighten abilities to discover different cultures, and to bolster strategies to recognize their own LSs. In fact, the development of bilingual skills aims to improve learners' communicative functions in their foreign language. Through interaction with R&B in each lesson, learners were provided with opportunities to explore diverse cultures (and their own) by scrutinizing this music style. This interaction privileged the analysis of cultural references, historical events, and personal experiences which led to the promotion of communicative and intercultural skills. The relationship of R&B with the students' LSs (since some of the songs explored in the pedagogical intervention were part of the learners' music likes) was also a factor that facilitated the relationships that the participants found across their own culture, other cultures, and language learning.

In what concerns the connection (Music-Language Learning/Teaching), some students commented that after having interacted with R&B music throughout the class activities, they found that R&B is dynamic and appealing, and provides an alternative that promotes learning of communicative elements such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and listening skills. Overall, it is a useful lesson for young learners:

“This genre is a very good option to teach, as it is catchy and appealing” (S4-S4). “Songs help us develop our listening and improve our pronunciation or phonetics” (S2-FG8). “[...] it was a creative way to learn English and develop that vocabulary” (S16-S4). “I think it's [R&B] super cool because we like its rhythms and its lyrics, and everything they [singers] say in their songs are useful for us” (S3-S4). Or “I think it's ok (R&B) because it's another way to understand and it's more dynamic” (S10-S4).

Above, students identified the contribution of their interactions with R&B to Language Learning/Teaching and the way this music style could enhance their motivation and communicative

skills. These excerpts also show how learners interacted with music and the connections they found at pedagogical level: through lyric exploration and musical appreciation. Moreover, these answers stress the way using R&B took them out of known spaces and challenged them to discover new learning alternatives (S10-S4, S3-S4).

Although there was not a proficiency test at the end of the study demonstrating how their specific communicative skills improved, the participants' opinions are a manifestation of what they learned and their self-reflection concerning Language Learning. These opinions are relevant because they display the students' views about the potential of music in ELT. Therefore, the learners' voices are an indication of the positive impact of this study which suggests it helped them develop some communicative abilities from the interaction with and analysis of R&B music within a strategy for intercultural language learning. Understanding the benefits of music in Language Learning/Teaching is also supported by similar studies that examined the benefits of music on phonology (Hallam, 2010), vocabulary (Bidelman et al., 2013), and communicative skills (Xi, 2021), the same elements here reported. Despite the exclusive exploration of and interaction with one single musical genre here (R&B), the purpose of this research was to discuss an alternative perspective addressing the affordances of music for Language Learning/Teaching stressing the cultural nature of R&B as an element belonging to the learners' LSs. As a matter of fact, R&B music was chosen due to its cultural content related to afro-descendant people's history in the US, its lyrics (which are full of references to social issues such as racism, gender aggressions, and elitism), and its current attractive power with young people in non-Anglophone communities such as the one where this study was carried out. All these factors were also reported by the participants and are displayed and discussed in this section.

As a consequence, successfully adopting music for Language Learning/Teaching was achieved too because, when asked about the usefulness of music in class, most students (67%) found a deep connection between language learning and music, other ones saw the potential of music to learn languages (25%), and only 6% of the participants manifested that music was indifferent to them, but that they could be open to use it in class (Table 2). These results reflect that interacting with R&B and its cultural nature in class activities helped students experience and see some of the benefits of including music in Language Learning/Teaching in part because they are commonly exposed to music in different styles, spaces, and purposes, which means, in their LSs that are, in turn, connected to their own cultural contexts. Therefore, the connection between the learners' LSs and the impact of this music-mediated experience are connected through the participants' familiarity with music since their LSs paved the way they saw this cultural semiotic resource (R&B) as an important asset in Language Learning/Teaching.

Table 2

Students' Opinion About the Usefulness of Music in Language Learning

Do you think that music is a useful tool for language learning?	
It is a good tool	21
It might be useful	8
It does not encourage me, but I could accept it	2

One of the aspects that allowed students to see the positive side of music in their English lessons was their personal relationship with music. Beyond seeing music only as an option to

develop communicative competences, students connected musical expressions with their realities and their LSs. This connection was tangible in the relevance they attributed to music. In the focus group, this issue was asked and some students said:

“Music represents the freedom we deserve. Music can change bad situations and [it] is the rhythm of life.” (S15-FG9). “[Music] transmits emotions and can also influence people’s character or personality” (S12-FG9). “It’s a way to express yourself and meet others” (S17-FG9). “It’s a way to be happy” (S8-FG9). “[Music] can change our mindsets” (S7-FG9).

The ideas above reflect the learners’ diverse and personal representations of music, the salient presence of music in their LSs, and the ways they connect with it. Seeing music as an element of freedom, emotion, peace, and coexistence shows the extent to which learners value music as a means of expression. In addition, their recognition of the potential that music has to influence people’s perspectives calls our attention towards the power they assign to music: S8-FG9, S7-FG9, S12-FG9. These ideas echo the ways students engaged in this learning experience and the closeness they showed with R&B: “Most students identified some R&B artists and expressed their liking towards them. Students were eager to participate... Many students wanted to take the risk of participating by sharing their points of view about music” (O-S3).

What Author Two reveals in her observation is the learners’ interest in participating in class when music is brought to their classroom as a teaching alternative. She noticed that R&B was not unknown to the students and this familiarity with the music style built a bridge between the lesson and the learners. When learners identify some R&B artists and get encouraged to discuss their opinions about music, they unveil the way R&B is part of their LSs. This connection was important to promote intercultural skills and to create a bond between the students and the class. This bond was essential to guide the experience through an exploration journey of the multiple meanings of music and the ways R&B could contribute to Language Learning/Teaching. Although the learners do not always speak explicitly about R&B, their pedagogic-based contact with this musical style in class was the portal to jump into a wider landscape of the cultural and individual meaning of music.

Hence, the connection between the students’ emotions and music is another reason that made this experience meaningful. This claim can be seen in some of the participants’ opinions about their engagement in the project:

“What I liked most was that [Author Two] was creative. She gave us songs that include cultural content, and we learned many things” (S18-FG1). “I liked that we learned about other cultures” (S2-FG1). “What I liked the most was the way each song gave us a lesson [...]” (S5-FG1). “What I liked the most was that I learned about other topics, other songs, and the Anglophone culture” (S13-FG1). “I liked that we did different things, we stopped using books and readings. That helped us to interact and lose fear to talk” (S16-FG1).

The previous excerpts unveil that some students saw the potential of music to enhance Language Learning/Teaching and were encouraged by the emotions awoken by rhythms, sounds, and lyrics. Studies in this area have stressed the power of music in EFL because of its effects on motivation and affective factors. Another benefit identified by the participants was the change in the learning procedures (S16-FG1), the cultural content from every song, and the life lessons discovered through the activities of this pedagogic proposal. All these factors encouraged students to engage in class and explore language learning from a cultural lens to go beyond a mere

instrumentalist perspective of languages only directed at general purposes. An element that learners highlighted was the cultural dimension and content revealed in their lessons, which stresses the intercultural perspective of this research and the ways in which LSs (R&B) might enhance Language Learning/Teaching through syllabus adaptation and intercultural-oriented interventions. Therefore, this experience adds another example to prior literature that pushes for the exploration of music in ELT and the role of LSs in the recognition of cultural identities. In sum, students identified the benefits of music for Language Learning/Teaching in particular areas such as vocabulary, pronunciation, listening skills, cultural discovery, and motivation. Similarly, the learners' recognition of music as a composing element of their LSs facilitated its successful integration as a cultural semiotic resource in language learning. These findings stress the usefulness of music in the English classroom as an alternative for bilingual education to embrace one's own culture and contribute to the exploration of other areas such as the identification of social issues in music.

Music to Address Social Issues

Another of the aims of this study was to find spaces to discuss social issues and promote critical thinking from the class-based interaction and analysis of R&B music. Here, social issues such as gender inequality, racism, and stereotypes were recognized. Gender discrimination, particularly, was one of the major topics addressed:

Some [...] students shared their opinions, expressing their disagreement about the unequal role that Colombian women have [...], due to the media and social networks, which are currently responsible for disrupting or modifying people's behavior and perceptions of the world in which they [are]. (O-S5)

Author Two noticed how students reacted towards unequal gender roles. Students manifested that part of gender inequality comes from social configurations embedded in the cultural milieu. This opinion was reinforced when some students admitted that women's social roles are paramount: "[Women's roles are] very important because [they are] the base of society and [they] have many good things that inspire us" (S13-R5). "[Women] are important because they like to work in the daily life, fighting in all moments, making them beautiful" (S14-R5). "It is more important because a woman is the essence of the love, of the fight, of the winner" (S1-R5). "Because they [...] give stability in the family" (S7-R5).

Based on these commentaries, we noticed that songs motivated talks about social issues which determined the students' critical positions. Noticeably, the songs discussed in sessions three, four, and five (Table 1), promoted these views and encouraged students' assessments of their own realities. These ideas call our attention to the identification and analysis of social issues in music. Beyond describing music as a static product, the aim was to explore its sociocultural connections and nature as a semiotic resource that, as part of the participants' LSs, shapes people's understanding of reality. Therefore, using music to engage students in discussions about social issues, particularly the role of women in our society, was an alternative to catalyze learners' interpretation of their own culture and comprehend the complex nature of social relationships. In the example of the observation, we noticed the students' opposition to gender inequality and the treatment that some women receive due to gender misconceptions.

S13, S14, S1, and S7 explain that women are very relevant for shaping communities (notably families) due to their functions in supporting, caring, and educating others, which determines their role in social cohesion and identity formation. In fact, tranquility, love, support,

and organization are highlighted as key features that comprise women's engagement in the construction of social cohesion:

“It is very important, the role of women, in society because we are men's support but [for] some people. We are tranquility, we are organized” (S3-R5). “Women perform [an important] role [in] the life of the person. For example, [they] take care, educate, bring up, etc.” (S4-R5). “They are important because they [are] the base of the society” (S10-R5).

These excerpts summarize what students thought about the importance of women and the need to overcome structural inequalities. Although more critical views and deeper analysis are required to explicitly see the manifestations of gender inequalities (Zuluaga et al., 2021) and go beyond a subsidiary/supporting role of women, recognizing and valuing women as community/family builders is a step towards the adoption of a transformative lens. In part, this achievement was reached due to the presence of gender views in the learners' LSs and the way this dimension is addressed in their local contexts. Exploring these dimensions is part of the skill of critical cultural awareness which stresses the relevance of developing personal positions towards socio/cultural phenomena (Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002). Developing awareness about social issues and their implications at local level is a necessary move to reach skills of intercultural citizenship (Wagner & Byram, 2017) that imply critical analysis of social realities and social engagement through political awareness.

Students' Own Cultures

One of the major elements studied in this pedagogical experience was the recognition of local realities through the use of music as a component of the students' LSs. In this sense, while some students wanted to discover different cultures, others considered it necessary to start with their own culture: “No, I don't think we should learn from other cultures if we don't know ours well” (S3-FG2). Away from being an attitude against intercultural language learning, this commentary stresses the importance of exploring the diversity and symbolism of one's own culture since intercultural competence promotes developing knowledge, attitudes, and skills about one's own and others' cultures (Baker, 2011; Byram, 1997). Consequently, understanding the own culture and LSs before the multimodal and semiotic elements of a foreign culture is a manifestation of the eagerness that some students show to interpret their own context in order to acquire cultural and semiotic references that permit them interpreting manifestations and events from other cultures.

Likewise, the students' songs showed preference for their own culture:

- “I feel pride in my homeland
I feel his joy in me,
being eternally with
you my beloved homeland” (Students' song #3)
- “Colombia a very colorful land
With its ups and downs
But, at the end, my dear” (Students' song #4)

In both excerpts, we notice a focus on the students' own culture (in terms of nationality) as a key element to comprehend their social background and LSs. From the songs they wrote, only one

was about another cultural context, but three out of the four songs composed were about Colombia. It calls our attention to see how students represent their own culture in terms of land, nationality, values, and resilience, which are elements present in the students' LSs. The first element is the clear identification that students manifest as members of Colombian culture. These excerpts show acceptance and affection towards their national heritage by expressing pride, love, and joy. The mention of Colombian resilience is salient when describing its ups and downs as part of a natural process of adaptation to the numerous situations to undergo in our daily socio/political realities.

This indication of national love, despite some problems, explains how students were aware of some local challenges and the relevance of admiring their own national culture no matter the situation, which entails resilience and circumstantial adaptation. These examples manifest how participants focused on their own culture to understand the nature of culture and social interactions from a critical point of view in the context of Language Learning/Teaching. Another paramount element here was the role the LSs played since these songs displayed elements connected to the sounds, melodies, and messages present in the learners' everyday contexts, signaling the importance of their LSs in the construction of cultural semiotic resources in the English class. All these elements are key in the development of bilingualism and in the adoption of policies aiming at integrating diverse languages at national level.

Conclusions

In the context of a South American country that has devoted energetic efforts in the design and implementation of a bilingualism plan which has centered mainly on developing English skills, this report described the results of an action-research project aimed at using R&B as an element from the participants' LSs to discuss the role of music in Language Learning/Teaching, the comprehension of social issues, and the exploration of local cultures.

Students reported that this experience opened a path to consider the limitless possibilities that music, at pedagogical and intercultural levels, offers for language learners and for their bilingual paths. Participants noted that among some of the strengths of music for English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary, pronunciation, and oral comprehension were highlighted and helped learners to get motivated because of the affective nature of music and its emotional connection. These factors indeed pave the way to explore alternative roads in which bilingual programs and initiatives might be undertaken in diverse urban settings. Furthermore, the close connection of music with the students' LSs was a major element that shaped this experience and the learners' engagement with R&B.

The goals of the intervention discussed here have the potential to inform the national policy by providing an alternative to facilitate Language Learning/Teaching which incorporates the learners' own culture at the center of pedagogical interventions. Such kinds of interventions aim at discovering novel places in education and in policymaking to incorporate the learners' cultural and local contexts and, more specifically, to adopt a bottom-up approach in national policy design that motivates changes from the learners and teachers' perspectives. By informing national policies, teachers and learners might be empowered and encouraged to actively participate in the construction of public initiatives beyond the educational realm, which, in turn, may guide students and teachers to public commitment and social participation leading to democratizing pedagogies and learning.

Exploring R&B in an English classroom promoted discussion about current issues such as gender violence and discrimination, racism, and stereotypes. Critical awareness was promoted

through open talks regarding the manifestations of inequality, and students took a stance against gender violence by declaring their views in favor of more equal relationships aimed at building healthier societies. Discussing these topics also invited learners to develop intercultural skills such as critical cultural awareness and wonderment about their role in social transformation and the ways they might change their societies since these elements were also part of their LSs.

Finally, music was used to explore some manifestations of the participants' own culture which are tangible along the students' LSs. Through discussions and class exercises, learners examined their own perspectives concerning their places and contexts of origin which emphasized the presence of music as a paramount feature of their LSs. This reflection posed the question about the balance between knowing others' and one's own cultures. Some students agreed that it was necessary to study and know their own culture before moving towards other cultural systems. Similarly, learners manifested a high level of self-identification with their national identity and multiple views about their cultural origins and local context in their songs. Students acknowledged positive ideas about their country; however, they were also aware of the several challenges that Colombia still faces. Nonetheless, these issues did not hinder their positive attitudes and perceptions towards their own culture. To a great extent, the learners' closeness to their own country is also due to the type of music immersed in their LSs, a symptom revealed in the data here discussed.

Despite these uplifting findings, there are still numerous areas to cover and issues to solve. Among them, the examination of LSs in the development of communicative skills requires further attention. Discussion about the limitations of bilingual education lacking multimodal and contextual approaches such as LSs is a must in the agenda of EFL practitioners. In the same fashion, the structural integration of intercultural language teaching from a critical and multimodal view are areas that should be addressed by further research in order to deepen the vast field of Language Learning/Teaching in the postmodern era. In fact, the exploration of LSs from a critical perspective addressing learners' identities within language learning contexts is another area to address.

Moreover, this study poses a set of questions regarding the processes of bilingualism in Colombia and in Latin American countries: what is the impact of bilingualism plans and policies at micro levels in EFL research? What is the pre-service research agenda for bilingual education from an intercultural perspective in Colombia? What is the connection between LSs, intercultural language teaching, and bilingual education in urban and rural settings? How can a LSs approach be adopted to further bilingual education at elementary, middle, and high school levels? How can universities promote bilingual practices that are sensible to critical and intercultural views?

Other authors now have the mission to create spaces for social construction and reflection through the inclusion of diverse multilayered initiatives encompassing bilingual education, intercultural language teaching, and LSs. It is up to our audience to accept the call for action and to look for alternative ideas aiming to social construction and transformation.

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