


Raising Rural EFL Students' Intercultural Awareness Using Gender-Contextualized Materials


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Abstract: This action-research study was focused on implementing contextualized materials coined as “gender-contextualized materials,” conceived and designed by the authors with the aim of raising EFL students’ intercultural awareness. It was conducted in a rural school in Oiba, Santander, with 22 eighth graders. Data were gathered through students’ artifacts, field notes, and a focus group, and then analyzed following some principles of Grounded Theory. The results revealed that by working through contextualized materials, students not only connected emotionally and reflexively with the narratives of six Oiban historical women but also recognized their contributions to the town. The results also revealed how students were dynamically involved in the English classes, using their foreign language knowledge to reflect on their own identities as members of society.

Keywords: Contextualized materials; materials development; intercultural awareness; gender awareness; rural education.

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*Creando conciencia intercultural en estudiantes rurales
de inglés como lengua extranjera mediante materiales
contextualizados con enfoque de género*

Resumen: Este estudio de investigación-acción se centró en implementar materiales contextualizados, concebidos y diseñados por autoría propia, denominados “material de género contextualizado para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera”, con el objetivo de fomentar la conciencia intercultural de los estudiantes. Esta investigación se realizó en una escuela rural de Oiba, Santander, con 22 estudiantes del grado octavo. Los datos se recolectaron a través de artefactos de los estudiantes, notas de campo y una entrevista de grupo focal y se analizaron después siguiendo algunos principios de la Teoría Fundamentada. Los resultados revelaron que, al trabajar a través de materiales contextualizados, los alumnos no solo se conectaron emocional y reflexivamente con las narraciones de las seis mujeres históricas oibanas, sino que también reconocieron sus contribuciones a su pueblo. Además, los resultados también revelaron cómo los estudiantes se involucraron dinámicamente en las clases de inglés, mientras utilizaban sus conocimientos de la lengua extranjera para reflexionar sobre sus propias identidades como miembros de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: materiales contextualizados; desarrollo de materiales; conciencia intercultural; conciencia de género; educación rural.



Introduction

In this article, we aim to display the process we went through when raising rural EFL students' intercultural awareness. This study focused on implementing contextualized materials of our own conception and design, which were coined as "gender-contextualized materials" since they aimed to highlight the contributions of six women to the development of the rural town of Oiba, Santander, Colombia. Contextualization played a key aspect in this study as it enabled rural EFL students to recognize their local historical women through contextualized EFL materials, which happened to be printed in color. We argue that contextualization enables us to transition to a new scenario where visualizing oppressed realities becomes our main need.

Even though there is a growing tendency in different fields, including education, to approach women's voices through EFL textbooks, the few of them who appear in these materials tend to be the most known women in anglophone countries, leaving aside some opportunities for students to connect and relate at the same time with their own Colombian heritage. Indeed, education should always be *transformative* and absent of neutralism (Freire, 2000, p. 25); thus, Ramos Holguín and Aguirre Morales (2014) argue that "there is [not only a] need to explore the effects of designing materials by Colombian teachers for their specific contexts" (p. 135), but also a need to connecting learners to their local realities and developing a sense of belonging and healthy pride in students (Ramos & Aguirre, 2016, p. 8). This, in turn, is an element that facilitates understanding realities in the context of social transformation (Freire, 2000).

According to Tomlinson (2012), over the past 30 years, materials development has established itself as a field of study. Nevertheless, Núñez-Pardo (2020) affirms that EFL textbooks in Colombia "do not respond to the specific affective, academic, sociocultural, economic and aesthetic needs of the students" (p. 14). In this regard, some authors such as Aguirre Morales et al. (2022), Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2012, 2016), Núñez and Téllez (2015), Núñez et al. (2012; 2017a; 2017b), Núñez-Pardo (2018a, 2018b), Ramos and Aguirre (2014), Tomlinson (2003), and Vásquez-Guarnizo (2020) have

highlighted the importance of working toward the incorporation of contextualized materials into the classrooms as a way of responding to “ground realities of everyday-human life” (Núñez & Téllez, 2018, p. 37). We argue that the field of materials development in Colombia has been permeated by cultural hegemony, which portrays supremacy over realities that are not even considered when designing EFL materials.

In fact, Tomlinson (2013) noted that “the background, needs and desires of the learners” (p. 42) must be considered when developing the material since they can help “students to make sense of learning a foreign language in context, develop a balanced set of language skills, and internalise content related to subject matters” (Núñez-Pardo, 2020, p. 19). Additionally, this study encouraged students to become culturally aware of their surroundings; precisely, since “oppression is domesticating” (Freire, 2014, p. 51), the contextualized materials contributed to highlighting women’s historical background. Accordingly, Quappe and Cantatore (2005) affirm that “cultural awareness is the foundation of communication [which] involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions” (p. 1). We see that it is by giving the opportunity to share the narratives of those women through contextualized materials that students could find another piece to embrace and feel proud of a context that, unfortunately, appears to have been erased and forgotten.

Rural areas in Colombia often seem relegated to a place of inferiority. Rural education is positioned as a sensitive issue that requires urgent attention in terms of policy, rights, equal opportunities, and access to education. Ramos and Aguirre (2016) highlighted several factors of considerable strength that are particular to rural areas, which they refer to as “challenges.” Namely, in terms of adaptation, teachers encounter difficulties, as well as in matters of school infrastructure, which sometimes make it impossible for them to develop their teaching practice in an ideal way. In fact, Parra et al. (2018) claim that Colombian governments have been more focused on efficiency than on generating foundational principles for rural education.

Ramos et al. (2021) reaffirm that the government’s definitions of the concept of rurality have enabled us to view it from a technical and instrumentalized perspective, which does not encompass the humanistic view of ruralities. In this sense, these authors invite us to think of *ruralities* as “a single definition would not portray the richness of the word ruralities” (p. 22). For them, “The term ruralities is a concept that encompasses a set

of ideas, living conditions, and subjectivities that are far from any definition a group of scholars can provide” (Ramos et al., 2021, p. 22). Therefore, the plural form of this concept encompasses a holistic perspective, enabling a deeper understanding of what it means to be rural.

For us, rural students deserve equal chances in education, especially when learning a foreign language. In this way, contextualizing rural realities proves to be a means of representing the cultural diversity of those territories. We argue that representation matters; thus, it is time to stop underestimating ruralities. As a matter of fact, Ramos et al. (2018) argue that education in rural areas is linked to a set of human challenges such as lack of transportation, families' chores at home, motivation to stay at school, lack of proper health care, inadequate employment; therefore, working toward ruralities in Colombia should be a need to achieve equity. Consequently, we argue that the first step in this direction is to recognize the diversity of rural territories and address the unique challenges rural students face in English language teaching, ensuring their realities are accurately reflected and well-represented.

Methodology

This research study was conducted with 22 students from Grade 8-3 at a rural school in Oiba, Santander. It aimed to answer the following question: What does the use of gender-contextualized materials reveal about EFL students' intercultural awareness in a rural school? Thus, the contextualized materials were structured into six units, one for each of the six Oiban historical women, plus a final production activity. The units were framed under input activities (listening and reading) and output activities (writing and speaking), which were integrated into the women's narratives. Likewise, simulation, creative, and dynamic exercises were proposed to provoke students to reflect on themselves and on the realities of others.

This is a qualitative study as this approach “locates the observer in the world while reviewing things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4). Similarly, this study followed the cyclical steps proposed by Kurt Lewin: analysis, planning, acting, observation, and reflection (Dickens & Watkins, 1999, p. 133) since action research is “situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical (...) and the results of the

inquiry have immediate local application” (Efron & Ravid, 2020, p. 60) in the educational field. We understand action research as a powerful method of English language teaching in Colombia, as it allows English teachers to make a sociocultural contribution. Consequently, this study relied on the importance of knowing the effectiveness of the contextualized materials in the classroom in order to adapt them to the particularity of the context and continue working on finding improvements to the issue.

Data Collection Instruments

The first instrument we used was *students’ artifacts*. Nonetheless, they took the form of gender-contextualized materials; that is, students’ production in the materials was analyzed. Students were confronted with specific “learning tasks,” which provided “natural interactions and different types of data that were determined by interests, objectives, and the research questions” (Canals, 2017, p. 394). This allowed us to consider the individual performance of each student and their relationship with their peers in completing the tasks. Undoubtedly, it was the basis for understanding how gender-contextualized materials may have influenced the students’ experience. It also helped to get to know their different points of view in a more intimate way, as the production was genuine and the participants would carry it out through the activities. Moreover, students’ productions, whether written or oral, were taken into consideration within the research study, not only to validate what they could produce in class but also to gain a broader perspective in relation to the data.

The second instrument we used was *field notes*. They “are detailed descriptions of what you see, hear, and sense during the observation” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 88). Field notes enabled us to understand and focus on specific aspects presented by the population, as they facilitate reflection on what happens in the classroom after the work is completed. This was particularly significant in this study, as it enabled the tracking of each participant’s progress. Notably, the development of the material allowed us to establish the ways in which it was working and the possible paths to modify and improve it.

The third instrument we used was a *focus group*. Considering that this study was centered on a certain group of students, what was intended was to know their specific perspectives “... opinions, assertions about beliefs,

expressions of agreement or disagreement with other participants ...” (Canals, 2017, p. 396) while working on culturally contextualized EFL materials. This focus group was conducted in a one-hour session, and it proved to be fundamental in the data analysis process, as it provided students with an opportunity to share their voices.

Data Analysis

In the same important way, some principles of Grounded Theory, proposed by Corbin and Strauss (1990), were considered in this process. When this procedure is carried out, correlated data are organized into categories based on commonalities in order to achieve an interconnected relationship with the social and humanistic parts of qualitative research. This coding system, which Böhm (2004) referred to as “stages,” is divided into “open coding,” “axial coding,” and “selective coding.” The first stage, *open coding*, consists of organization since “conceptually similar events/actions/interactions are grouped together to form categories and subcategories” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). In this study, we began by familiarizing ourselves with the answers obtained from the students. Then, we decided to put all the data into the Excel program in order to find the commonalities and contrasts among them.

Afterward, in *axial coding*, as Williams and Moser (2019) explained, the data “can be sifted, refined, and categorized with the goal of creating distinct thematic categories in preparation for selective coding” (p. 50). In our case, we classified the common points in the students’ answers by color, and subsequently, categories were created to encompass those commonalities found in the first stage. Finally, in *selective coding*, researchers classify categories into one major category or core (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14), which then becomes subcategories. For our part, after organizing the commonalities by color in Excel, we transferred them to another sheet, linking each to its corresponding subcategory. Eventually, we identified two main categories and assigned names that provided brief and dynamic descriptions of their content. It is worth mentioning that these names were inspired by some of the insights shared by the students, as well as by the intended research projection of the content, for instance, some hypothetical statements by the historical women.

Therefore, the data was organized into one main category with three subcategories and another main category with two subcategories, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of the Analysis

Research question	Research objective	Categories	Subcategories
What does the use of gender-contextualized materials reveal about EFL students' intercultural awareness in a rural school?	To describe what the use of gender-contextualized materials reveals about EFL students' intercultural awareness in a rural school	Our town, through contextualized EFL materials	Learning about the English language
			Discovering the outside of what is known
			Understanding our Oiban identity
		May our legacy stay with all of you	Our names in your mind
			Our traces in your identity

Findings

Our Town through Contextualized EFL Materials

This category encompasses the three particular features that were strengthened within students. The first one is the linguistic facet and the process of improvement in the foreign language. Secondly, it was possible to note their recognition of what was unknown until the moment of the application of the material. Finally, through the material, students were exposed to diverse cultural angles within their town, which allowed them to appreciate it on a deeper level.

The use of contextualized EFL materials design also seeks to rescue obliterated histories and to oppose hurtful social conventions and relationships of power largely disseminated throughout traditional materials. In regards to this, Núñez-Pardo (2018) claimed that “the textbooks have not integrated the diversity of experiences in the lives of students from multicultural backgrounds and have presented stereotypes, invisibilities and unrealities” (p. 235). That is why, when designing our own didactic materials, considering the uniqueness of the students can lead to a process of critical analysis and reflection. As Núñez et al. (2013) stated, it could

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be “socio-cultural resources that facilitate not only linguistic interaction but also cultural exchanges between the various human groups” (p. 10). In addition, it is through the diffusion of cultural and social awareness that the flow of knowledge is possible in different contexts, just as student MIDRI commented, “*Aprendí nuevas palabras y frases en inglés y mucha información sobre las mujeres de Oiba que no sabía*” [I learned new English words and phrases and a lot of information about the women of Oiba that I did not know] (Focus group, October 26th, 2023).

Based on MIDRI's response, it is possible to note that for him, the constant work on the activities from the materials allowed him to learn a duality, since on the one hand, he acquired knowledge in the foreign language and, on the other hand, through that same material, he discovered new facts about a set of historical women from his town, embracing them as a part of history he was not aware of. Therefore, he is able to identify the use and the objective of the class, as well as to recognize other functions that learning English could entail.

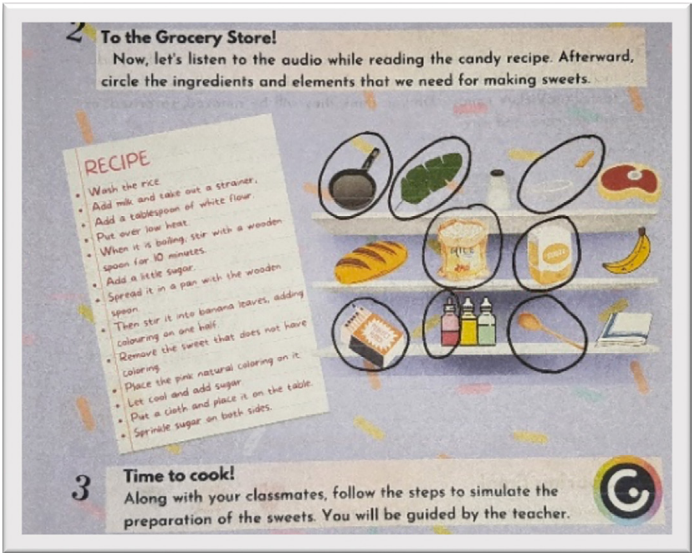
Moreover, the culture is integrated into this category, considering that students could perceive English and the life stories of women they did not know, and consequently, understand those anecdotes as part of their own by being citizens of Oiba. In that way, “instead of receiving a version of culture,” the students embraced “a critical position in the face of cultural realities” (Nuñez-Pardo, 2018, p. 245). On this subject, student CARMA mentioned, “*Aprendí de cultura y de inglés. También aprendí muchas cosas en el tiempo que pasamos*” [I learned about culture and English. I also learned many things in the time we spent together, and the pages were very interesting] (Focus group, October 26th, 2023).

In this category, three subcategories emerged, which address the different aspects related to the materials in English, the consciousness about the town of Oiba, and the construction of their identities through contextualized learning.

Learning about the English Language. This first subcategory encompasses the improvements and interests that students acquire in the English language. This was evident in the process by which students gradually accepted the language. This is because, at first, they were not interested in learning and had attitudes of rejection and laziness; however, as the units were implemented, their process of accepting English as a language allowed them to understand and learn new topics. Equally, as

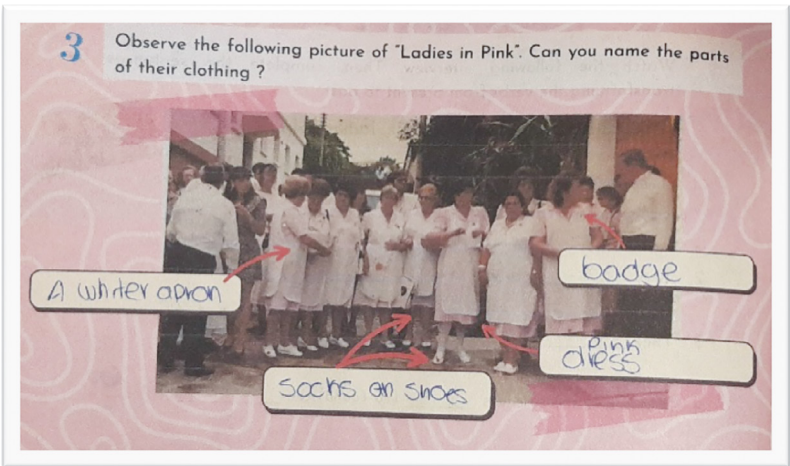
depicted in Figures 1 and 2, activities were proposed that could stimulate previous knowledge and connect it with information from some historical women.

Figure 1. *Following the Recipe*



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 1, Activity 2, developed by JAICOR.

Figure 2. The Uniform of the "Ladies in Pink"



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 3, Activity 3, developed by KEINA.

The above demonstrated what Kramsch (2013) claimed as a clear focus on connecting the learning of a new language, which the students considered meaningless for them, with a context that, although they did not know at all, they had some glimpse of knowledge and, by implementing this bond in the classes, the English language they were learning become the means to arrive to a more appealing culturally point. This latter is referred to by Kramsch (2013) as a “symbolic system” associated with a “relational” and “historical” process, in which culture is defined as the core and the foreign language serves as the intermediary (p. 71). As such, as students progressed toward knowledge, they smoothly acquired language skills and competencies in the wayside and almost unconsciously. This is reflected in the following excerpt when student LUFEMASIL was asked about what she learned, “*En parte aprendemos inglés y aprendemos de las mujeres históricas*” [Partly, we learn English and about the historical women] (Focus group, October 26th, 2023).

Discovering the Outside of What Is Known. Once the acceptance of English had been established, the learners became more interested in what was transmitted in that foreign language, meaning the anecdotes of the historical women. Brooks and Brooks (1993) asserted that “we construct our own understandings of the world in which we live. We search for tools to help us understand our experiences. To do so is human nature” (p. 4). This statement gives an idea of the importance of helping students to develop the ability to reflect but that it does not happen by itself, for it unfolds when perceiving essence and meaning in the environment since “each of us makes sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 4).

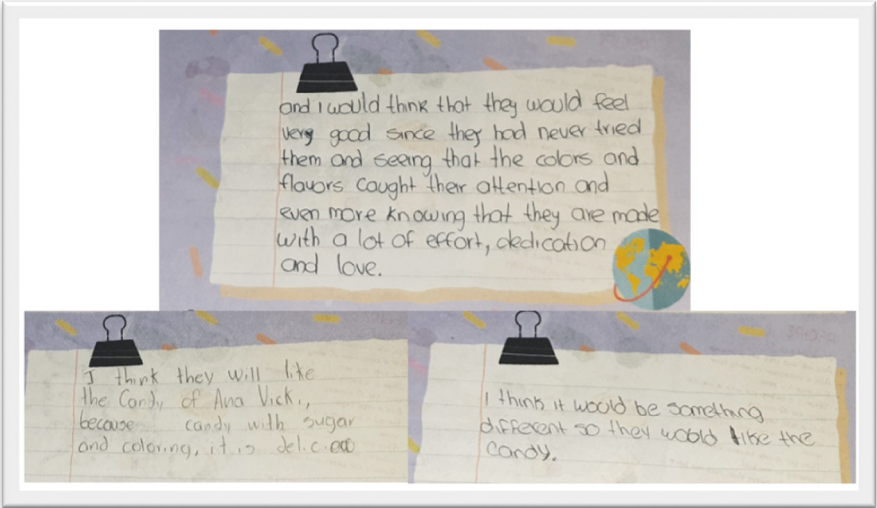
Consequently, sharing those histories, which are often silenced or forgotten, could be the key for students to go beyond and be inspired by other life anecdotes. As a matter of fact, they stated,

Pues aprendí mucho porque no sabía nada de ellas y pues me parece muy interesante porque me gusta mucho saber sobre ellas y de lo que hicieron [Well, I learned a lot because I didn't know anything about them, and I find it very interesting because I really like to know about them and what they did]. (DEYAGOJI, focus group, October 26th, 2023)

Aprendí sobre cosas que creí que nunca conocería, sobre las cosas que ellas hacían [I learned about things I thought I'd never know, about the things they did].
(CARTE, focus group, October 26th, 2023)

Related to this, Figure 3 displays the answers given by the students when asked to think about how people in other countries would react to something from their own context.

Figure 3. Three Students Expressed How Asian People Would React to Ana Vicky's Candy



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 1, Activity 5, developed by CARTE (above), CARMA (left), and CAMALBI (right).

The social component was also included by means of a voting simulation exercise in Unit 6 about Ofelia Uribe De Acosta, since women's right to vote was her great concern. On that account, they learned how to mark the ballot, read the proposals of two candidates, and cast their votes in a ballot box. We considered it important to approach them on this issue because, at that time, the Mayor's Election was at its peak, and it was a convenient opportunity to facilitate their understanding of how democracy works. This is because when designing materials, it is important to consider that they "are also a reflection of the context of the situation and the context of the culture in which they are created and in which they operate"

(Tomlinson, 2013, p. 73). Moreover, as presented in Figure 4, we decided to briefly integrate the topic of countries, the reading of the years, and information on the year in which women were finally granted the right to vote.

Figure 4. Women's Right to Vote



Note. Students' Artifacts, Unit 6, "Something to Know" activity, developed by KAMELGA.

However, this not only included the material in the paper, as Tomlinson (2013) points out, but also the teacher is a material, so it was a duty to raise awareness and combat the harmful and eroding preconceptions that some students also possess from their contexts. As a way of illustrating the aforementioned statement, there were some male students who made sexist comments in class. For instance, one student shared, "*¿igual qué podía hacer cuando el marido le pegaba?*" [What could she do when her husband hit her anyway?].

This situation, in particular, was an opportunity to promote a dialogue about women's rights; that is why I replied to him that she (Ofelia) was so strong that she knew about her rights as a human being and, precisely, fought for a better world for all the unprotected and left behind women. Then, the student realized that his comment was not appropriate and could even be harmful.

Understanding Our Oiban Identity. This third and final subcategory presents the process by which students explored the cultural and historical aspects of their town and progressively built and complemented their identity as inhabitants, including history, some emblematic elements, and the contributions of different Oiban women to social and economic domains. By doing this, learners became aware of the importance of understanding their

contexts, their place of growth, and, thus, their realities. On account of this, some thoughts were expressed,

Aprendí que debo aprender más de mi pueblo [I learned that I must learn more from my town]. (KEINA, focus group, October 25th, 2023)

Es necesario saber un poco acerca de nuestro pueblo donde vivimos y nacimos [It is necessary to know a little about the town where we live and where we were born]. (ADACAO, focus group, October 25th, 2023)

The previous comments reflect the self-consciousness about the lack of awareness in their own context. Hence, when student KEINA mentioned that he should know more about the place where he lives, it showed the impact of the material regarding intercultural competence as this one “involves the ability to analyze, explain and elaborate one’s awareness” (Liddicoat & Kolher, 2012, p. 80). Furthermore, the student ADACAO stated the need to learn about one’s origins, where one is born, and where one has roots, which indicates a sense of belonging.

All that entails that “language learning becomes a process of exploring the ways language and culture relate to lived realities—the students’ own as well as that of the target community” (Liddicoat & Kolher, 2012, p. 79). To such a degree, students delved into the knowledge about their town while completing tasks that made them feel part of it, as well as accepting their diverse identities as inhabitants of Oiba, and as an example, assigning a name to the emblematic Ana Vicky’s sweets, as illustrated in Figure 5.

In light of this, the concept of identity is conceived in a plural sense because each student living in the rural zone, as well as their own context, is unique. In the case of rural areas, although sometimes they share some aspects in terms of territory and difficulties, their ways of living are not universal. Ramos et al. (2021) named this set of identities “ruralities” and established that each of them is unique and not comparable. For instance, the realities of Boyacá are not equal to those of Santander. The authors also expressed a connection between rurality and some primary problematics, including the “socioeconomic conditions ... the limited access to education, the low levels of education and the diversity of cultural backgrounds” (Ramos et al., 2021, p. 22). This is what particularly determines the uniqueness of each rural part of the territory and, therefore, of each of its inhabitants.

Figure 5. Giving Names to the Candy



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 1, Activity 4, developed by JAICOR (left) and ADACAO (right).

May Our Legacy Stay with All of You

The gender-contextualized materials implemented with students were structured in six units, one per woman, which contained activities based on their histories told by themselves or by their families. For that reason, this second category will present the impact of each of the protagonists of the units applied during the class sessions on the students' awareness of the cultural, social, political, and educational domains.

The teaching of foreign languages is an experience that can give students the ability to observe realities different from their own, and that can also help them develop their critical capacity to face the world. However, sometimes, it seems that teachers tend to prioritize those foreign realities, leaving behind the ones from the learners. Some academics have stressed the importance of prioritizing the culture of students in bilingual programs as illustrated by Cárdenas (2003, as cited in De Mejía, 2006), who announced that "a bilingual strategy would have to privilege, in equal conditions, the treatment given to the first, or the majority language of the population, as well as the language which is being promoted for academic or competitive goals..." (p. 154). Then, in the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classrooms, the teacher cannot be merely focused on raising the foreign culture while leaving behind and, therefore, diminishing that of the territory where it is being taught.

The aforementioned prioritization of foreign culture is closely related to the dynamics of power, and it is consequently noteworthy to oppose it with Freire's critical pedagogy, which, as Samacá Bohórquez (2012) expressed, "is directly concerned with social transformation and educational change" (p. 197). Nonetheless, the transformation envisioned requires a

shift in the way teaching is conducted and the manner in which knowledge is imparted. This could be reflected in the response of student JAICOR, who mentioned the word *legacy* when referring to the Oiban Historical women, and in turn, he declared critically and reflexively that what is learned about the past has an influence on the future. He noted, “*Aprendimos sobre mujeres que dejaron un legado. Aprendimos sobre la historia de ellas para conocer el pasado para vivir el futuro*” [We learned about women who left a legacy. We learned about their history to know the past in order to live the future] (Focus group, October 25th, 2023).

Moreover, through his comment, it is possible to notice the importance of raising awareness of interculturality. On this basis, it could enforce a social transformation through contextualized and contemplative learning, “environments in which students can reflect upon culture and cultural diversity” (Ramos Holguín, 2013, p. 210). Further, Byram (1997) stated that cultural aspects “should be the focus of the skills of discovery, interpretation and relating to otherness” (p. 47). As a result, the narratives of women who contributed to the construction and development of different fields in Oiba were highlighted. These women may be considered “oppressed” and “dehumanized” (Freire, 2014) since their lives and narratives would be consigned to oblivion. That being the case, in this research study, it was decided to strive against this *oppression* through education on intercultural awareness.

Accordingly, the students were enlightened with the stories of each of the six women: Ana Victoria Salcedo de Cristancho, Ana Josefa Ramírez Otero, Aliria Silva de Ramírez, Evelia Vargas de Martínez, Isabel Corredor, and Ofelia Uribe de Acosta. Eventually, when students had already strengthened their knowledge of them through English activities, they developed empathy, recalling their names, histories, and their significant contributions.

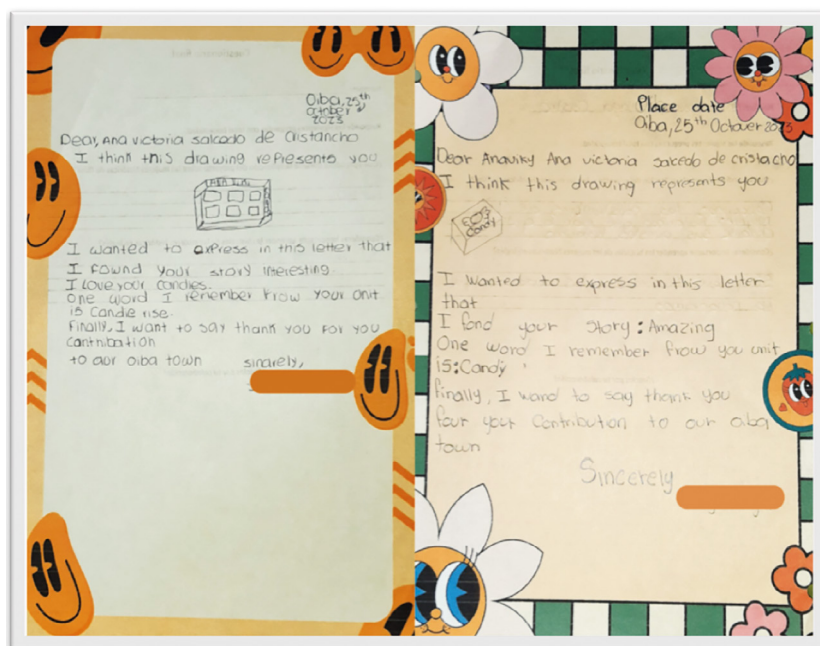
Our Names Are in Your Mind. This first subcategory conveys the impact of the units on students about historical women. However, emphasis is placed on those who did so to a much wider degree, either because learners felt more impressed, connected, or inspired by their life stories. Thus, the activities proposed for the class were established with clear and feasible objectives to be achieved, as well as a special emphasis on strengthening communicative competence, such as writing and speaking, since these were among their most notable deficiencies in the English sessions. Finally, as a generator of interest, the narratives, written exercises, and letters were proposed, focused on the historical women whom students may have seen

or heard of in the town. The impact of the three women included in this subcategory will be presented below.

Ana Victoria Salcedo de Cristancho. Unit 1, which focused on Ana Victoria, taught the history of preparing the emblematic sweets of Oiba. Then, it could be evidenced that even though students did not know much about her life, they recognized her picture, her work, and even her name because it appears on the candy boxes. Afterward, when they saw the video about her interview, they were immensely excited to see Ana Vicky sharing the origin of her candy. In fact, when they saw her telling her story, they listened attentively to the explanation of the process that they had already observed in photos, and showed a significant interest in what she commented on about her childhood, youth, marriage, and family.

In addition, she was one of the most remembered figures in her history and was recalled by students in the letters, as can be seen in Figure 6. This shows great progress in motivation, as there has been an evolution and acceptance of English, not as an obligation, but as an element that allows self-expression and connection with other people.

Figure 6. Letters for Ana Victoria

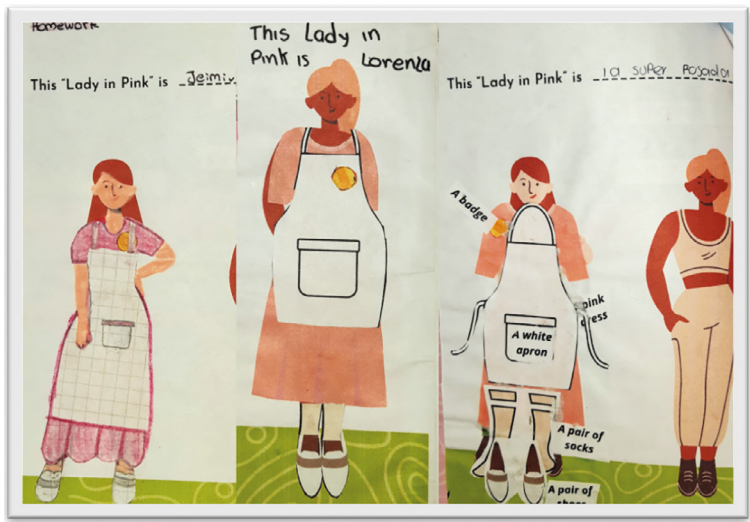


Note. Students' artifacts, final task, letters from MACORGA and ALLYOCAS.

Aliria Silva de Ramírez. In Unit 3, different activities related to the history of the foundation of the “Ladies in Pink” by Aliria in Oiba were carried out. By examining the house in the data presentation about her, the students recognized the location because some of them had passed by that building, but did not know much about its past function as the headquarters of the “Ladies in Pink.”

Similarly, many students were surprised to see the pictures and the logo; even for some of them, it was new to know them and their work, although the “Ladies in Pink” is a Colombian charitable association. Then, in Activity 4, learners created their own “Lady in Pink” and dressed her in her uniform. Further, as presented in Figure 7, the students gave an identity to their character, with a real name and even a noun that described its essence or mission, for example, “The super pink,” highlighting the feature of good contributions based on what the “Ladies in Pink” did for others in Oiba.

Figure 7. This “Lady in Pink” Is...



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 3, Activity 4.

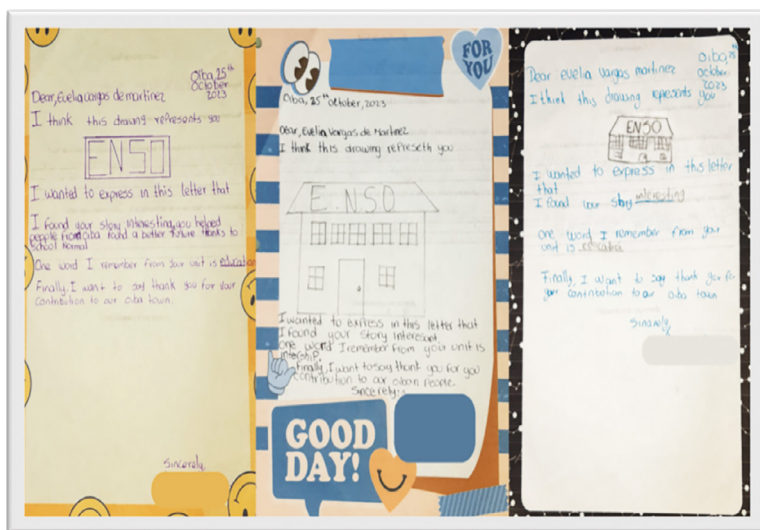
Likewise, a few students addressed their letters to Aliria, where they expressed their opinions on her life story and her work in the association.

Notably, it should be mentioned that some students expressed their gratitude to Aliria independently. Just to highlight one of those: “I want to say thank you for your contribution to our Oiban people who needed

it.” This demonstrates that written English was used by students as an emotional mechanism to establish a bond with her. According to Osadcha (2015), when empathy is applied to students, “it has cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects and facilitates successful communication and interaction” (p. 117). Accordingly, it could be established that it makes them feel interested in aspects of other people’s lives and transmit messages in a more fluid way, even in a foreign language.

Evelia Vargas de Martínez. The predominant theme of Unit 4 was education since it was Evelia who made it possible to have the first school in the town of Oiba, which is known as the Escuela Normal Superior de Oiba (ENSO). Thence, she was one of the women most of the students recognized in their letters, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Letters for Evelia



Note. Students’ artifacts, final task, letters from LUFEMASIL, ANPAMAR, and ANSOBA.

Similarly, considering that Evelia was the principal of her school for 30 years, there was an activity where each of the students could share with her the aspects they liked and disliked of their own school.

I like playing soccer in my school. I think the uniform is horrible. (JUPAGAR, students’ artifacts, Unit 4, Activity 4)

I like studying in my school because I can share with my colleagues. What I do not like that much is waking up early. (ADACAO, students' artifacts, Unit 4, Activity 4)

I like learning to become a professional. (CAMALBI, students' artifacts, Unit 4, Activity 4)

I like studying in my school because I learn. What I do not like is that I don't like (sic) some teachers. (JAICOR, students' artifacts, Unit 4, Activity 4)

Our Traces in Your Identity. This second subcategory presents the impact of three historical women with whom students generated a connection that can be related to their development as integral beings and as part of society. By learning their histories and completing exercises and activities, the students gained a deeper understanding of the cultural and social significance, which fostered intercultural competence that could lead to increased awareness. These women, through whom the aim of transformation and consciousness was achieved, are presented below.

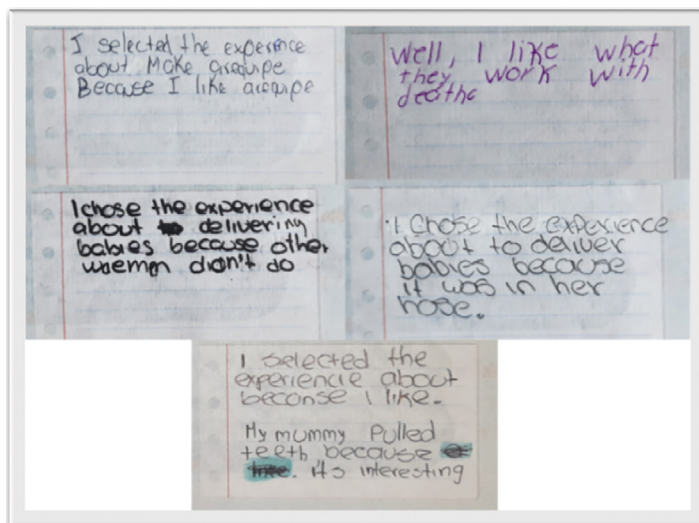
Ana Josefa Ramírez Otero. In Unit Two, learners were introduced to the various jobs and professions that Ana Josefa held throughout her life. This was a fact that caught learners' attention, for it was possible to notice it through some comments they made,

Hacía de todo [She could do anything]. (Field note #4, September 14th, 2023)

Era una mujer muy ocupada [She was a very busy woman]. (Field note #4, September 14th, 2023)

Me gustaría probar el arequipe que ella hacía [I'd like to try the arequipe she used to make]. (Field note #4, September 14th, 2023)

Thus, they felt interested in learning about her and even expressed that they would have liked to know her legacy in life, as evidenced by the manifested interest in the caramel that she had prepared. Taking advantage of this motivation, activities were proposed that would challenge students to pay attention to information in English, and then, they would write about what had impacted them most (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Ana Josefa and Her Multiple Jobs

Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 2, Activity 2.

Additionally, the above can also be complemented by what Krashen (2004) stated, that in a relaxed and stress-free environment, learners can strengthen their language acquisition by understanding messages, or what he denominated as “comprehensible input.” Thus, throughout the application of the units, we sought to promote a “relaxed class” without pressure, but with clear objectives and an open acceptance of questions and mistakes.

Indeed, by applying this integrated vision in conjunction with the pursuit of intercultural awareness, calmer behaviors were observed, and students became even more concentrated and determined to listen and participate in the activities. Moreover, the answers were more genuine because they were conceived by the students using their own resources and knowledge, and they were not done for a grade, but rather to express themselves.

Isabel Corredor Corredor. Unit 5 was focused extensively on a very culturally important woman in Oiba named Isabel. All her life, she has lived in the countryside and has always preserved her traditions, especially that of her distinguishable and colorful clothing. Notably, this is what makes her very unique, because nowadays, it seems that most young people do not retain those culturally remarkable aspects, which was the situation with the students in this research study. Nonetheless, when the units were delivered, most of the class immediately recognized the woman in the photo. They did

not know much about her life or even her name beyond her nickname, “The Traitor,” but they acknowledged her great smile and overwhelming energy at parties, for they mentioned that she was always present at each of the social and political events in Oiba.

One of the exercises applied to the students was to explore the answers to the question of why Isabel was usually called “The Traitor.” As a result, political, infidelity, and betrayal were among the most common responses. However, these replies were striking because they ranged from simple conceptions based on the assumption that she was a funny woman to more stereotypical ones, such as her alleged manipulation of men.

Her family and friends call her like that. Also, in every election, she does not know who to vote for. (JAICOR, students’ artifacts, Unit 5, Activity 1)

She plays with men. (ADACAO, students’ artifacts, Unit 5, Activity 1)

It was pertinent to make this exploration so that the students could recognize what they knew and later contrast it with the answer given by Isabel in the interview. Then, it was followed by a creative activity, as outlined in Figure 10, where, based on what they learned about Isabel, the students could design a typical costume for her.

Figure 10. Designing for Isabel



Note. Students’ artifacts, Unit 5, Activity 4.

It was pleasant to note that the students were engaged with the goal of doing something nice and enjoyable, as if they were actually dressing Isabel. Many of them added details and even messages that allowed her to infer a connection with her. Further, drawing activities are very relevant because “at an inter-contextual level, drawing links cultural practices and concepts with ways of being or actions taken” (Brooks, 2009, p. 24), which is shown in the students’ decision to design a hat, a colorful dress, a necklace, and other accessories and the price assigned in some examples. Likewise, it seems that by understanding Isabel’s manner of dressing, learners were able to become aware of part of her identity and, further, appreciate her cultural, historical, and social significance.

Ofelia Uribe de Acosta. Unit 6 had feminism and the defense of women’s rights as a fundamental basis. Ofelia was the pioneer in Colombia in fighting for the freedoms of women in aspects of respect, expression, economics, social and political domains, and mainly the right to vote, which became a reality in 1954 when women got organized into a large campaign in Colombia and, in 1957, they voted for the first time.

To teach about feminism throughout the unit, it was of major value to implement dynamic activities that integrated student participation, with the aim of motivating and dispelling their preconceptions about the topic. The foregoing is evidenced by hearing some male students make sexist and derogatory comments about women, which were approached and corrected in a calm and dialogue-based manner and were seen as a learning opportunity since “they can help students learn the boundaries regarding jokes and comments by explicitly discussing the problem of inappropriate or unjust jokes” (Vandrick, 1995, p. 6).

According to the United Nations (2004), “the history of human rights tells a detailed story of efforts made to define the basic dignity and worth of the human being and his or her most fundamental entitlements” (p. 11). For that matter, it was essential that activities would allow students to be in contact with the fundamental rights that were possible thanks to Ofelia. Consequently, we decided to organize a small simulation of a Major Election, which was held in close proximity to the actual election date in the village. Indeed, bearing in mind the humanist vision underlying this research study, the activity implemented was carried out in the most realistic way possible. For this, a ballot box was prepared, posters simulating the political campaigns of the candidates in the unit were displayed, the proposals



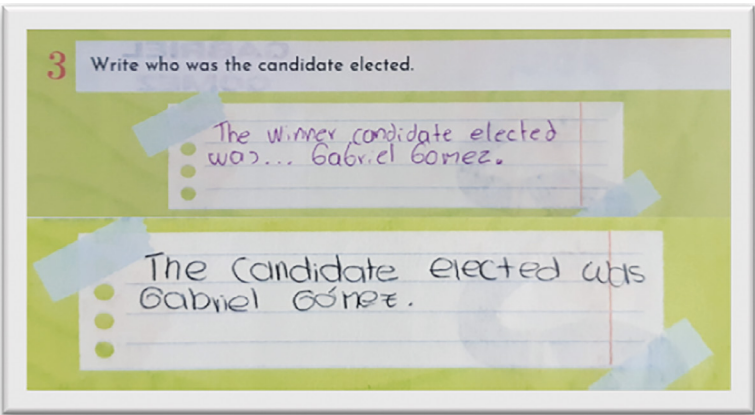
were read, and, eventually, students were instructed on how to vote. Then, two supervisors of the democracy were randomly selected, and voting commenced afterward. Finally, the votes were counted, and the supervisors announced the name of the candidate elected (Figures 11 and 12).

Figure 11. The Voting Session



Note. In the first image, one student could be observed voting. In the second, the two *Supervisors of Democracy* are counting the votes.

Figure 12. The Candidate Elected



Note. Students' artifacts, Unit 6, Activity 3.

Particularly, these moments of expression were significant because, although the simulation could be considered a game, it contributed to the healthy construction of the students' identities, as games become roles, which in turn become behaviors (Freijo, 2020, p. 85). In this way, students were able to better understand their environment and the women who have contributed to making it more respectable, decent, and livable. As MAJERCO commented,

También aprendí sobre una mujer que hizo que todas las mujeres pudieran votar, porque, antes ellas no podían [I also learned about a woman who made all women vote because, before, they could not]. (Focus group, October 26th, 2023)

It is in this sense that social transformation occurs. Based on Vásquez-Guarnizo (2022b), a sociocultural transformation could be carried out “through the daily and consistent contribution to education” (p. 129). This is why “Teachers in Colombia cannot let this transformation process remain on paper” (Vásquez-Guarnizo, 2022a, para. 4). Consequently, this research study moved forward in taking action about it by integrating foreign languages with intercultural themes. Gender-contextualized materials celebrated women who, in the past, faced different obstacles and whose life stories deserved to be shared and appreciated by current generations.

25

Conclusions

This study aimed to answer the following research question: What does the use of gender-contextualized materials reveal about EFL students' intercultural awareness in a rural school? The conclusions obtained are described based on the students' artifacts, field notes, and focus groups, which were the data collection instruments employed.

Firstly, the contextualized materials applied revealed the power to transform other realities since students were capable of acquiring knowledge of their town through the narratives of six historical Oiban women. It was possible for students to uncover their town based on what the units displayed about the Oiban women. Likewise, they adjusted to a new system by being exposed to a different method of teaching English, as they were

familiar with the traditional method, which involved materials and textbooks that did not match their interests and contexts.

Secondly, by encountering this culturally and dynamically rich assembly within their English class learning processes, the students were able to understand their own identity as members of Oiba. In like manner, it was also revealed that through the use of gender-contextualized materials, learners could relate and connect critically and emotionally with the narratives of six Oiban women, whom mostly they never heard of or saw in their lives, but that when knowing their histories, they highlighted and supported the rescue of a legacy that should not be forgotten. That being so, they recognized them as part of the construction and development of their own environment in various domains, including cultural memory, health, social, education, politics, and the defense of human rights.

Finally, this study highlights the power of contextualized materials in visualizing rural realities and disrupting cultural hegemony in EFL education. We gave voice to women who had remained unrecognized simply because they were female. Therefore, we argue that engaging students in a more inclusive and meaningful learning experience is essential to challenging dominant narratives. In this way, learners connect on an emotional level with the narratives of the historical Oiban women presented in the units. This connection influenced their particular perceptions of the English class, as it ceased to be an obligation or a requirement and became a critical, cultural, participatory, and dynamic space.

Pedagogical Implications and Further Research

During the conduct of this research study, several obstacles were identified, primarily related to the students' motivation, their level of understanding of English, and some sexist preconceptions. Nonetheless, instead of burdens, they were considered opportunities to maximize the potential of intercultural and linguistic competencies within students, as triggered by gender-contextualized materials. Similarly, this was also one of the reasons for developing and applying it, as it is paramount to begin transforming society through schools and the teaching of foreign languages, focusing on education and awareness of various topics, in this case, the forgotten life stories and memories of women.

After reading this study, we urge teacher-educators, researchers, and policymakers in Colombia to take action in developing contextualized materials that contribute to sociocultural transformation. English teachers have the power to engage students with social realities and unheard voices. Thus, we argue that it is time to see rural education as a space for social change. English teachers play a crucial role in encouraging students to think critically, reflect on their realities, and shape their own identities and perspectives on the world. Consequently, further research is needed on the development of contextualized materials as contextualization enables not only other ways of reading wor(l)d (Freire & Macedo, 1982) but also other ways of transforming sociocultural realities for democratic education (Freire, 1971).

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