



How to cite this article:

Torres Escobar, A. C. (2023). Pensamiento crítico, diversidad e interculturalidad: una interrelación imprescindible en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera. *MLS-Educational Research*, 7(1), 165-183. 10.29314/mlser.v7i1.940

**CRITICAL THINKING, DIVERSITY AND
INTERCULTURALITY: AN ESSENTIAL INTERRELATION IN
THE ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS**

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Abstract. Nowadays, the world needs active people who create innovative and practical ideas to solve social problems effectively and peacefully. Therefore, schools should prepare students to achieve this purpose. This research aimed to identify the importance that educational leaders in Colombia give to critical thinking, interculturality, and diversity in English as a Foreign Language classes. These categories are significant because students can adopt them to become socially responsible citizens. The study applied a systematic review of scientific articles in academic databases. As a result, it identified that the current focus of English classes has a low social impact. The research proposed that teachers focus on aspects of learning beyond grammar, vocabulary, and the traditional four skills. Above all, they should be open to exploring local and global social problems with a critical, diverse, and intercultural perspective. This correlation is vital to strengthen the social commitment of students in the creation and execution of plans and strategies for the benefit of society as a whole.

Keywords: Cultural diversity, interculturality, English, critical thinking.

**PENSAMIENTO CRÍTICO, DIVERSIDAD E
INTERCULTURALIDAD: UNA INTERRELACIÓN
IMPRESINDIBLE EN LA CLASE DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA
EXTRANJERA**

Resumen. En la actualidad el mundo requiere personas activas que generen ideas innovadoras y prácticas para resolver problemas sociales de manera efectiva y pacífica. Consecuentemente, las escuelas deberían preparar a los estudiantes para lograr este propósito. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo identificar la importancia que los líderes educativos en Colombia proporcionan al pensamiento crítico, la interculturalidad y la diversidad en las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera. Estas categorías son significativas porque los estudiantes pueden asumirlas para convertirse en ciudadanos socialmente responsables. El estudio aplicó una revisión sistemática de artículos científicos en bases de datos académicas. Como resultado, se identificó que el enfoque actual de las clases de inglés tiene un bajo impacto social. Al respecto, la investigación propuso que los maestros se centren en aspectos del aprendizaje más allá de la gramática, el vocabulario y las cuatro habilidades tradicionales. Por encima de todo, deberían estar abiertos a explorar problemas sociales locales y globales con una perspectiva crítica, diversa e

intercultural. Esta correlación es vital para fortalecer el compromiso social de los estudiantes en relación con la creación y ejecución de planes y estrategias para el beneficio de la sociedad en su conjunto.

Palabras clave: Diversidad cultural, interculturalidad, inglés, pensamiento crítico.

Introduction

In order to develop meaningful teaching and learning processes, it is necessary to plan and carry out an education that takes into account the realities, routines and contexts of the students and prepare them to face different situations throughout their lives. However, in Colombia, official guidelines suggest contents, times, methodologies and goals that are based on statistical information or on imaginaries about students that are not always in line with the realities of the school population. This responds to the bureaucratic, hierarchical and impersonal nature of the national education system (Quintana, 2018). Those who decide on educational matters are generally administrative officials who do not experience the realities, routines and contexts in which students and teachers develop (Castillo et al., 2018). Consequently, the lack of knowledge about students' strengths, concerns, challenges and expectations makes it difficult for the educational system to train them to assume a meaningful role in their contexts and in society. In fact, in the specific case of the teaching and learning of English, according to Valencia and Vega (2022), the National Bilingualism Plan, which seeks to strengthen the teaching of this language in Colombia, has several errors, such as ignoring the national context and using foreign standards that do not adapt to the reality of the country.

In Colombia, there is a need for English teaching and learning that interconnects three axes: the development of critical thinking, interculturality and diversity (Torres, 2022a). Its purpose is for students to be able to address situations and problems in all contexts (e.g., in the school, personal and work environment) by being aware of reality, its implications, causes, effects and possible solutions. To do this, it is necessary that the subjects learn not to rely on prejudices and stereotypes; think and find a way to interpret and explain problems based on their listening, research and observation skills, their cross-cultural experience and use of resources.

The teaching of English in Colombia at the official level has the shortcoming of not developing a proposal that strengthens the social and intercultural aspects based on a critical analysis. In fact, official documents in force from 2016 to the present, such as the English learning meshes for transition to fifth grade and the suggested curriculum outline are two official documents proposed by the MEN that reduce the concept of culture to a series of characteristics and customs. For this reason, they restrict the treatment of cultural topics by proposing objectives that are devoted solely to students describing traditions and festivities (Torres, 2022b).

Educational institutions are living environments in which students interact with different identities, histories and challenges. The idea of a standardized education reduces the possibilities of the teaching and learning process to have a positive impact on at least two areas of students' lives: on the one hand, motivating them to continue learning in their daily lives; and, on the other hand, offering them tools that they can critically and creatively adapt to face different circumstances.

The disconnection between the approaches proposed by the MEN regarding the teaching and learning of English, with the educational and sociocultural reality that is experienced daily in schools and Colombian society creates the need to reformulate the approach assigned to this language at the school level (Castañeda, 2020). The purpose of

this is to generate strategies to achieve an education that is useful to students for different social scenarios throughout their lives. Overcoming the problematic conception of a decontextualized education with little impact on students' lives is a challenge if the ultimate goal is for students to be able to function in a diverse world, enhancing their capacity for innovation and their willingness to listen actively, communicate critically and assertively, and to continue learning and socializing knowledge.

The objective of the literature review was to identify the importance that educational leaders in Colombia provide to critical thinking, interculturality and diversity in English as a foreign language class. With documentary information as input, strategies were proposed to establish an English teaching that prepares students to perform in all areas of their social life, relating critical thinking, diversity and interculturality. In this order of ideas, we explored student diversity in Colombia, the tendency to homogenize the teaching and learning of English despite the different cultural and socioeconomic particularities of the students and their schools. In response, it was proposed to chart a path towards critical, intercultural and contextualized English teaching and learning.

It was concluded that it is unavoidable to propose a new notion of education that contributes not only to the integral development of students in the national context, but also in the global context, which is equally complex and diverse. Therefore, effective education goes beyond technical preparation; it must foster the internal transformation of students into citizens with the capacity for critical thinking and dialogical relationships with beliefs, cultures and worldviews that are not always the same as their own, but whose interaction constitutes an opportunity to approach and propose solutions to social problems from different perspectives.

Method

Documentary research was carried out with the help of ATLAS.ti software, which was useful for organizing, analyzing and interpreting the information collected. Its paradigm was qualitative based on Creswell's (2014) approaches to identify the relationship that the educational system in Colombia and its educational policies make on the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language with critical thinking, interculturality and diversity.

A systematic review of scientific articles published in journals located in academic databases such as Google Scholar, Redalyc, Scielo, Science Direct, EBSCO and Scopus was carried out. This made it possible to recover accumulated knowledge in a reflective, critical and proactive exercise (Galeano, 2004). In addition, contrasts were made between the current situation of English teaching and learning in the country with the desired situation: to guide the learning of this language by preparing students to think critically about information, personal, local and global issues, cultures and diversity of identities, thoughts and perspectives to curb all types of discrimination, stereotyping and false and biased information; to self-regulate and develop their metacognition and creativity to develop confidence in their own ability to explore and come up with ideas that benefit society.

The key words used in the search for articles were "diversity", "critical thinking", "interculturality", "culture", "English teaching in Colombia", "National Bilingualism Plan", "National English Program", "English learning curricula for transition to 5th grade" and "Suggested curriculum outline". English grades 6 to 11". The research categories were coded in order to track them, find relationships between them in a structured way and perform the data analysis (Table 1). Articles published in both English and Spanish were selected to provide their position and analysis of governmental and/or institutional approaches to the teaching and learning of English in Colombia. Once the results were obtained, a specific selection was made of the articles that analyze the way in which the

English curriculum is approached and conceptualized in the country, taking into account the selected categories.

Table 1
Coding

Coding	Concept
DIV	Diversity
PENS-CRIT	Critical thinking
INTCLRD	Interculturality
CLTRA	Culture
EI	English language teaching in Colombia
PNV	National Bilingualism Plan
PNI	National English Program
MLLS-PRM	English language learning frameworks for transition to 5th grade
ESQ-CRR	Suggested curriculum outline. English grades 6 to 11

Note. the table shows the coding applied in the analysis of the research corpus.

From the universe of 94 research papers, 53 papers located in indexed journals and journal articles were selected for the period from 2015 to 2022, which spans 8 years. The decision to select this period responds, essentially, to the fact that in 2015 the National English Program 2015-2025 in Colombia came into force, which would eventually raise discussions about its approaches, processes, applications in school classrooms and results both expected and obtained to date. A categorical matrix was prepared in which the title of each article, the author(s), the year and country of publication, the methodology used and the conclusions drawn were recorded and systematized. The matrix was interpreted by questioning and comparing the data obtained and a thematic analysis was carried out, taking into account the patterns that the documents followed in each of the study categories, which made it possible to understand the phenomenon in question, its progress, mistakes and gaps.

Based on this information it was possible to answer the research question: what importance do educational leaders in Colombia place on critical thinking, interculturalism and diversity in English as a foreign language classes? Taking into account this questioning and the lack of integration of this triad to form active and socially committed citizens, the research generated new contributions to the episteme, proposing that, at the curricular level, the teaching and learning of English should establish as central objectives to form innovative, inventive and discovering subjects. At the same time, to train them to be able to exercise criticism by checking for themselves the approaches that are made socially to different cultures, countries, communities and subjects; not accepting all information they receive in their daily lives, media and textbooks simply because people in positions of authority such as teachers, rulers or journalists so determine. This is achieved by teaching and practicing English through students' curiosity, questioning and

research on issues that concern society, and encouraging them to learn about the social world and different perspectives, as well as to analyze, synthesize, verify and evaluate the information they gather through their observations, readings, experiences, interactions and reflections, becoming active protagonists of their own learning. Thus, the art of thinking for oneself, exalting the value of diversity and responding skillfully to the solution of social problems is achieved through the intentional and planned combination of three categories: critical thinking, diversity and interculturality.

Results

Student diversity in Colombia

In Colombia, students come from different backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2022a), in 2021, 82% of students were enrolled in the public sector while 17% in the private sector. Of these, 75% are in the urban area and 24% in the rural area. Private schools in the country host mostly students from middle and high socioeconomic strata, while public schools receive mainly students from lower socioeconomic strata (Guarín, Medina, & Posso, 2018; Montes, 2017; Radinger, Echazarra, Guerrero, & Valenzuela, 2018).

On the other hand, according to the *Diario de la República*, referring to Colombia, "in private education there are 16 students for every teacher; in public education, the figure increases to 25 students" (Gaviria, 2022, p. 1.). Then, in general, there is less crowding of students per classroom in private schools, which facilitates a personalized interaction between students and their teachers, allowing the latter to focus on attentively addressing the academic and social strengths and difficulties that students present (Araújo et al., 2016; Gómez, 2018; Guarín et al., 2016; López et al., 2015; Silveira, 2016). Added to this, in 2021 "the performance gap between public and private schools grew 7 points, in favor of private schools" (El Espectador, 2022). Students, especially from rural sectors or located in the outskirts of cities, did not have access to the Internet during the pandemic and about 16% had to work during the pandemic, which led to an increase in school dropout rates (Gómez et al., 2022; El Espectador, 2022).

Therefore, it is not possible to generalize the situation faced by the Colombian school population. Not everyone enjoys the same opportunities. In addition, school dropout occurs more in students with low socioeconomic conditions, with little access to technology and school transportation, with neglect or disinterest on the part of their parents in the educational process and with the need to work to help meet family needs (Gómez et al., 2022).

Public schools, on the other hand, have been severely affected by the limited budgetary resources granted by the State and the centralized allocation of these resources. As a consequence, in some public educational institutions, students do not have access to a variety of educational materials, transportation and complete school meals. This is detrimental to the quality of life of many of the students, who already face a complex economic situation at home. Added to this is the fact that, according to UNESCO (2022), in Colombia, public primary and secondary schools have formally enrolled 198,000 migrant students from Venezuela in order to guarantee their right to education. However, many of the schools do not have enough teachers to handle the high number of local and migrant students. Similarly, there are situations of overcrowding in classrooms, for cases of face-to-face education, and difficulties in accessing digital education due to lack of connectivity and technological tools (Gómez et al., 2022; López et al., 2018). A summary of the 15 articles investigated is shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Researchers' contributions on student diversity in Colombia*

Author	Summary
Guarín, Medina and Posso (2018) Montes (2017) Radinger, Echazarra, Guerrero, and Valenzuela (2018)	The country's private schools receive mostly students from the middle and upper socioeconomic strata, while public schools receive mainly students from the lower socioeconomic strata.
DANE (2022a)	82% of students are enrolled in the public sector and 17% of students are enrolled in the private sector.
Gaviria (2022)	In classrooms, there are 16 students per teacher in the private sector and 25 students per teacher in the public sector.
Araújo et al. (2016) Gomez (2018) Guarín et al. (2016) López et al., (2015) Silveira (2016)	In general, students in the private sector enjoy a more personalized and less crowded education compared to students in the public sector.
El Espectador (2022)	There is a performance gap between public and private sector students, with the private sector achieving better performance.
Gómez et al. (2022)	The causes of student dropout are low socioeconomic conditions, difficult access to technology and school transportation, and parental neglect or disinterest in the educational process.
UNESCO (2022)	198.000 Venezuelan students in Colombia are enrolled in the educational system. However, some 260,000 children and young people are still out of school.
Gómez et al. (2022) López et al. (2018)	It is common for official school classrooms to be overcrowded. On the other hand, low-income students suffer from poor connectivity and low access to technological tools.

Note. Sources related to student diversity in Colombia.

Homogenization of English language teaching

The bilingualism guidelines, policies, programs and plans proposed by the MEN have not taken into account the contexts of the schools, nor the sociocultural characteristics of the student body (Cruz, 2017; Díaz and Rúa, 2016; Miranda, 2021; Roldán and Peláez, 2017; Suárez, 2017). Although a humanistic, intercultural and sociocultural approach is promoted in official documents, in Colombian educational practice there is a constant homogenization of contents, behaviors, skills, abilities, skills and identities (Izquierdo, 2018; Pineda and Loaiza, 2017); since there is a tendency to homogenize the social logos and everything that deviates from this model is related to subversive (Chacón, 2022).

The curricular proposals in Colombia have been marked by a standardized, academicist and vertical notion of teaching, focused on memorization and repetition of content and not on the development of skills so that students can construct their own arguments and questioning on the topics addressed in each class. Therefore, education in the country does not prioritize the formation of critical subjects, but rather the fulfillment

of administrative requirements such as the execution and coverage of academic content within a given period of time (Torres, 2022a).

The educational rationality underlying the curriculum in Colombia conceives teachers solely as executors of previously prescribed and normatively and quantitatively monitored teaching practices (García and Reyes, 2022; Peláez and Usma, 2017). In this way, the concept of education is reduced to traditional, transmissionist, hierarchical and training pedagogy. This type of mechanistic approach does not provide opportunities for students to raise questions, investigate, analyze and contrast different sources of information, going through different paths to reach knowledge and building conclusions based on the relationship they establish with their environment. This approach focuses on training subjects who know how to repeat, but not how to question, create, debate and solve problems. Therefore, to combat such a situation, it is imperative that teachers guide their students to be critical, comprehensive and reflective (Ferreira and Almeida, 2019; Oses et al., 2022).

The MEN lacks more in-depth knowledge of the pedagogical and linguistic competencies of local English teachers; in fact, it does not involve them in the process of designing pedagogical policies for the teaching and learning of English (Méndez et al., 2020). In addition, the application of bilingualism policies focused on this language has not been successful. Its implementation is "a cold didactic act" (Garavito de Archila and Azevedo, 2021, p. 1.) This has resulted in students becoming demotivated to learn the language, as they cannot appreciate its usefulness in the development of their life projects (Castillo et al., 2018; Fandiño and Bermúdez, 2016a, 2016b; Gallego et al., 2020; Gómez and Guerrero, 2018; Hurie, 2018; Mejía, 2016; Méndez and Clavijo, 2017; Suárez, 2017; Viáfara, 2016a, 2016b). For example, in rural areas of the department of Antioquia, Roldán and Peláez (2017) have pointed out that:

The municipal educational agents conceive the language policy (of bilingualism) as an ethereal discourse, well structured, but unattainable for the remote populations of the country, and conceive the use of English as irrelevant and unnecessary in the current situation of the municipality, due to the lack of adaptation to the context and local needs. (p. 131)

A summary of the 27 articles investigated is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Researchers' contributions on the homogenization of English language teaching in Colombia

Author	Summary
Cruz (2017) Díaz and Rúa (2016) Miranda (2021) Roldán and Peláez (2017) Suarez (2017)	Educational policies ignore the real needs of the student body.
Chacon (2022) Izquierdo (2018) Pineda and Loaiza (2017)	There is a constant homogenization of content.
Torres (2022)	The objectives of teaching and learning are focused on coverage, but not on the formation of critical subjects.
Garcia and Reyes (2022) Pelaez and Usma (2017)	There is a disconnect between bilingualism policies and social realities.
Ferreira and Almeida (2019) Oses et al. (2022)	It is necessary to develop a critical education that contributes to the construction of a peaceful society.
Méndez et al.(2020)	It is necessary for the MEN to open spaces for English teachers at the school level to participate in the design of policies related to the teaching and learning of English.
Garavito de Archila y Azevedo (2021)	English teaching in Colombia tends to be impersonal.
Castillo et al. (2018) Fandiño and Bermúdez (2016a, 2016b) Gallego et al. (2020) Gomez and Guerrero (2018) Hurie (2018) Mejia (2016) Méndez and Clavijo (2017) Suarez (2017) Viáfara (2016a, 2016b) Roldán and Peláez (2017)	Public policies focused on the teaching and learning of English in Colombia need to adapt their contents and activities to the different contexts, needs and interests of students.

Note. Sources related to the homogenization of English teaching in Colombia.

Towards a critical and intercultural English language education

Teaching English as an end in itself is not enough. It is of utmost importance to associate it to the life of the students, as a means for them to develop in all dimensions of life. The challenge facing the teaching and learning of English in Colombia is the reformulation of public policy and the concept of school in order to understand this process as a space in which students can get to know themselves and others, developing their creativity and achieving an active and social commitment to humanity. In order to learn and use different languages, subjects need to be open to new perspectives, including those that differ from their own ideas. Through contact with different languages, students are expected to be able to interpret and analyze problems from multiple scenarios, through different cultures and voices.

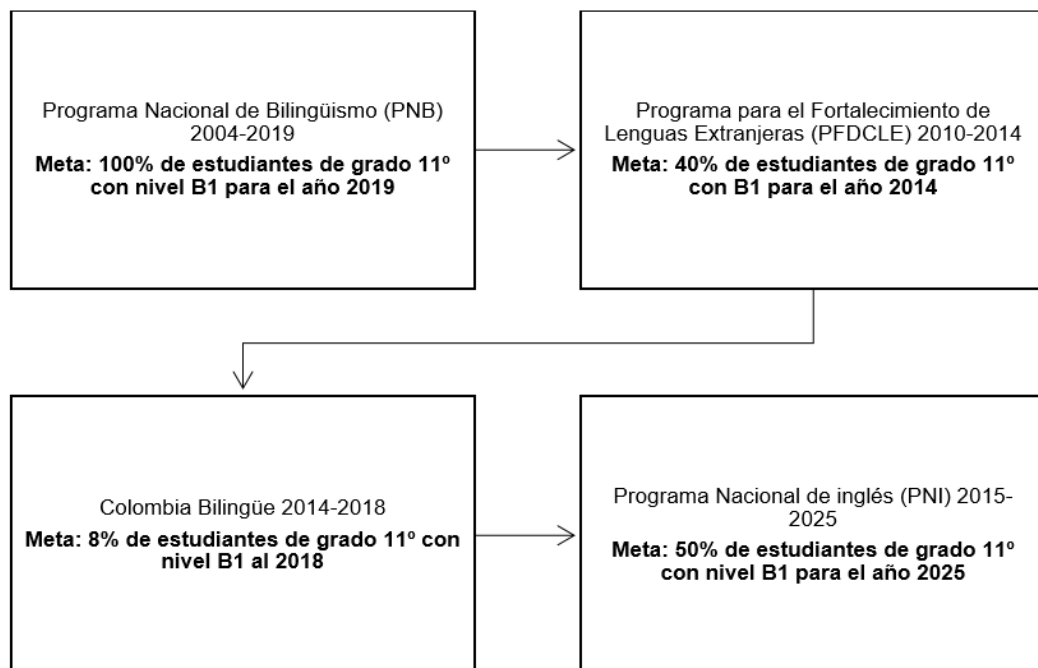
Another challenge associated with the teaching and learning of English is the need for methodological innovation, as traditional methods currently predominate. Many

teachers are not sufficiently prepared linguistically to teach English, make excessive and inadequate use of textbooks and reduce bilingual communicative competence to the formal level of the language, leaving aside interculturality. The latter, according to Torres (2021) is of crucial importance in education, since it allows students to learn to value, know and respect their diversity and that of others, in order to achieve a more dialogic, critical and inclusive society. Failure to establish relationships between English and current social life generates that students lose interest in learning the language and knowledge of cultural diversity is not promoted (Bastidas, 2017; Bastidas and Muñoz, 2017, 2018, 2020; Galindo and Moreno, 2019). Therefore, it is urgent that teachers take action to guide their students to value their own roots as well as those of other subjects, and to combat, through research, questioning and reflection, all types of discrimination and cultural hierarchies.

Due to the unsatisfactory results of bilingualism policies in Colombia, the MEN is constantly issuing documents related to the National Bilingualism Plan (Figure 1). However, this is done unilaterally and no spaces are opened to socialize the discussion with teachers from different regions of the country who are assigned to teach English (Méndez et al., 2020). In addition, some of the current projects are in contradiction with the new objectives and strategies proposed. This juxtaposition of guidelines generates confusion among teachers, as there is no programmatic clarity about which goals to achieve, since they differ from each other.

Figure 1

Initiatives and goals for strengthening English in Colombia



Note. The figure compiles the English learning goals proposed by the Colombian Ministry of Education.

Like interculturality, diversity has also not been conceptualized as a central component of the educational process that would enrich students' worldview by bringing their traditions and identities into dialogue with those of other communities. In fact, in Colombia, the term "cultural diversity" is generally conceived in a restrictive way to deepen the gap between the indigenous and the Western, as if it were the only expression of diversity. Sarrazin (2018) identified that the concept is approached in a very simplistic

way because when alluding to cultural diversity, the most salient example given is indigenous people; leaving aside other cultures.

At the school level, in Colombia it has been identified that students of indigenous origin are frequently discriminated against because of their culture, customs and skin color (Alayon, 2020). Their peers assign them pejorative nicknames, even referring to them as "other", "inferior", "vulgar" and "different". This fact reveals that, although the Colombian State defines interculturality as "the ability to know one's own culture and other cultures that interact and enrich each other in a dynamic and reciprocal manner, contributing to shape in social reality a coexistence under equal conditions and mutual respect" (Congress of Colombia, decree 804 of 1995, Art. 2), there is a deep void about what this implies in educational practice. The little attention that has been paid to fundamental values such as diversity and inclusion seriously harms society as a whole. By standardizing thoughts, ideas, expectations and projections, educational practice produces passive subjects, without greater engagement with their environment. In this regard, Moya et al. (2018) identified that the emphasis assigned to interculturality in Colombia is functional, does not drive the development of critical thinking, promotes a limited vision society, characterizes speakers as monolithic entities, and perpetuates a narrow vision that tends to discriminate languages and communities. However, diversity is a fundamental characteristic of all human beings and is a key factor in their development as individual and social beings (Muñoz and Saiz, 2022). Therefore, it is essential that teachers bet on continuously renewing and rethinking their work, promoting dialogue, encounter, gaze and gesture in a pedagogy of encounter (Restrepo, 2017). The summary of the 11 articles investigated can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Researchers' contributions on critical and intercultural English language education in Colombia

Author	Summary
Torres (2021)	The development of interculturality contributes to the formation of a more dialogic, critical and inclusive society.
Bastidas (2017) Bastidas and Muñoz (2017, 2018, 2020) Galindo and Moreno (2019)	Failure to address interculturality in the classroom results in students not delving deeper into cultural diversity.
Sarrazin (2018)	A simplistic definition of the concept of "diversity" prevails in education.
Alayon (2020)	In Colombia, there is often discrimination against students of indigenous origin at school.
Moya et al. (2018)	The emphasis on interculturality in Colombia is functional.
Muñoz and Saiz (2022)	Diversity is a key factor in the individual and social development of every human being.
Restrepo (2017)	It is essential to promote a pedagogy of encounter.

Note. Sources related to critical and intercultural English language education in Colombia.

Discussion

Research proposal: a critical, diverse and intercultural teaching and learning of English

In order for English classes to contribute significantly to students in their integral formation to become active citizens in the plural world, it is necessary to make an epistemological shift in which educational institutions strive to strengthen critical and social pedagogy in English classes, introducing topics that allow students to investigate, learn and discuss social, political, economic, cultural and academic issues in their immediate environment, as well as national and global level. The teaching of English should not be reduced to the merely linguistic field, nor to the reproduction of stereotypes, but should be oriented to generate personal and social changes that contribute to combat all types of discrimination, annulment, violence and exclusion within the school and in society. These are necessary steps to transform the vision of students towards interculturality, recognizing the importance of each language, culture and territory.

It is essential that English classes open the possibility for students to peacefully resolve conflicts through a comprehensive understanding of situations, attitudes, behaviors, actions and contradictions in order to overcome the roots of social problems. In the teaching and learning of English, students should be encouraged to intentionally make efforts to understand others, respecting their thinking even if they do not share the same point of view; it is also relevant to propose actions to defend human rights and human dignity from a critical social perspective.

To strengthen critical thinking, it is crucial to go beyond uniform curricula. Schools must create spaces for democratic exchange and participation that welcome all students, their interests and needs. Flexible curricula should be created that favor diversity and can be modified according to the students, the critical and contextual approach to

social realities and problems at different scales, the autonomy of teachers and the optimization of the learning process.

The utilitarian approach to the curriculum not only ignores the realities of the schools, the characteristics of the students and their generational group, but is also based on different prejudices, biases and generalizations. When a vertical curriculum is imposed, it targets a type of student incorrectly called "standard," "ideal," or "normal." The fundamental purpose of this type of curriculum is to homogenize the "different" or those who are outside the "norm". However, this always comes into tension with the fact that in school there is no single way of being, constructing identity, thinking, relating and interpreting. It is important to recognize the spaces, times and contexts that differentiate one student from another.

For example, although the younger generations are currently technologically inclined, it is not possible to say that this is true in all cases. Many students do not have access to all available media and technological tools, which makes them the "info-excluded" of society. In fact, in Colombia, in 2021, the percentage of households that owned a desktop, laptop or tablet computer was 37%, while in populated centers and dispersed rural areas 91% of households did not have these tools (DANE, 2022b).

Education needs to be approached differently from the schooling notion in order to minimize social, educational and technological gaps. Decrees, speeches, descriptions, documents and strategies alone are not enough, especially if they are decontextualized from the realities of each territory. The school must break with standardization aimed at training a competitive workforce. It is necessary to create inclusive curricula that take into account the social, cultural and economic characteristics of the students. It is essential for schools to welcome students, recognizing the richness of their sociocultural, ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, and to take advantage of it pedagogically for their benefit.

Although individuals share generational identities with people of contemporary ages, each human being and environment are unique. Therefore, there is no single standard that is applicable to all students at the national or international level. Therefore, it is necessary to provide students with an education that at a macro level requires them to know and critically analyze different social situations and, at the same time, establish relationships with their lives, contexts, experiences, needs and talents. With this, students are expected to be prepared to face diverse situations in the social scenarios in which they develop, making critical analysis, arguing, raising ideas, asking critical questions and solving problems.

The decontextualized way in which the MEN formulates the English curriculum corresponds to most traditional school cultures that conceive of the student as a receiver who needs to be filled with information. The "democratic" management of education at the state level treats students as dependent beings without the possibility of emancipation. Subjects who must comply with the pedagogical guidelines assigned to them, regardless of the fact that they often find them empty, meaningless and that they do not provide them with elements to develop in their daily lives, or tools that they can adapt and evolve throughout their lives. Society is in continuous transformation and requires propositional, innovative and creative subjects, not mere spectators who are in charge of reproducing what the majority dictates.

The top-down approach to English language teaching is limiting. Teaching has become the fundamental act of the school, with teachers unilaterally exposing their knowledge, while learning has been restricted to the act of receiving information, remembering facts and reproducing grammatical structures, or simply managing to communicate in another language, but without generating creative, argumentative, critical and propositional content. This banking concept of education establishes a culture that does not allow for questioning and innovation, but rather for silence and replication.

Contrary to a narrow vision of education or curriculum, an education that defends plurality, vindicates human relations, and encourages imagination and discussion from different points of view should be encouraged. A transformative, open and interactive education between all the subjects immersed in it and their environments, as part of a continuous process. Teaching and learning are not isolated events. Both are interwoven from the central influence of language, culture, interaction and social and historical contexts. Thus, the work to be done with students is not to give them a series of contents and ensure that they can reproduce them, nor does it consist of them replicating cultures or opinions coming from a curriculum and a pedagogical practice that is foreign to their lives. Finally, it is vital that, in the process of teaching and learning English and its practice, teachers take care to guide students in the path of discovering the explicit and implicit objectives of oral and written discourses; in addition, it is pertinent that they are allowed to investigate the background of the sources of information and their authors to discover the reasons why they defend, omit or are against certain approaches; determine the validity and veracity of sources and information; distinguish facts from opinions, the illusory from the valid and true; identify gaps, carry out alternative research, discuss the different meanings of texts; contrast different points of view, demystify ideologies and construct their own opinions, questions, arguments and formulations.

In this order of ideas, this article proposes that, during the process of teaching and learning English, teachers should follow the following strategies:

1. To attract the attention and curiosity of students based on their own realities.
2. Encourage students to explore their environment and its issues.
3. Pose questions for students to describe their situations and make contrasts with other realities and cultures exposed in news, networks, books and press, and research on local and global challenges.
4. Propose exercises in which students inquire about theoretical elements that help them identify the origin of the problems and their consequences. At the same time, it is essential that they confront their beliefs and those of society with analyses that go beyond the merely explicit and literal, managing to read between the lines.
5. Encourage students to express their points of view, their questions and criticisms, and to raise possible solutions that dignify the value of the subjects, their diversity and their different cultures.
6. Encourage spaces for students to communicate their findings and ideas through images, dramatizations, and written or oral communications.

Conclusions

The research aimed to identify the importance that educational leaders in Colombia give to critical thinking, interculturality and diversity in English as a foreign language class. Although officials and researchers in the area emphasize that it is urgent to provide students with a comprehensive education, it has not been proposed how to achieve this by combining these three elements at the same time; rather, they are approached in a fragmented manner, without establishing dialogical relationships among them. Through a documentary study, it was identified that in the country in question there is a conception that learning English consists of speaking the language fluently and understanding it, mainly to meet school requirements or to access academic and professional opportunities. Therefore, the research proposed that, if language learning is combined with the development of critical thinking, diversity and interculturality, students not only develop their language skills or general knowledge about countries or

cultures at a narrative and informational level, but also have the opportunity to go further and explore different cultures, social realities and issues based on their questions and research rather than on comments without arguments or credibility; unmask prejudices and false approaches; value the diversity of identities, ways of communicating and relating; question their own assumptions and those of others; contrast different perspectives, narratives and voices; see what lies behind the issues and, with creativity, develop their own viable approaches to arrive at solutions that transform social realities.

There is an unavoidable need to rethink English curricula that do not take into account the students and the context in their design, planning and implementation. Educational tasks and goals set at the official and institutional level should not have as their main objective to cover as many topics as possible, but should focus on the way in which these topics are relevant and applicable in different scenarios of students' present and future lives. Therefore, both MEN and educational institutions, including educational leaders, should implement participatory strategies and methodologies to get to know students and their life histories more deeply.

The world is in continuous transformation. Therefore, teaching and learning processes must provide tools for students to adapt to ever-changing situations and teachers must contribute to the development of their critical thinking. This higher-order thinking is extremely useful for students to form well-grounded political and social opinions, growing holistically and learning to be socially engaged, empathetic, curious and proactive. Progress towards a more participatory society goes hand in hand with the exercise of an active citizenship that solves problems in a peaceful, dialogic, democratic and successful manner, mitigating all types of violence, manipulation and constraint. In order to achieve this ultimate goal, which is transcendental for the well-being of humanity, critical thinking, interculturality and diversity are pillars that must be included in the teaching and learning of English in a particularly important way.

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Date received: 22/11/2021

Revision date: 19/01/2023

Date of acceptance: 02/03/2023