https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v24n2.97040

Learning English From a Critical, Intercultural Perspective: The Journey of Preservice Language Teachers

Aprendizaje del inglés desde una perspectiva crítica intercultural: una experiencia de profesores de inglés en formación

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Critical language teaching education has become an inescapable endeavor for language teacher education programs. To contribute to this effort, this paper outlines the implementation of an English course from a critical, intercultural perspective, during the first semester of a language teacher education program in Colombia. It also reports the ways preservice teachers responded to this implementation as evidenced in data stemming from their oral and written outcomes and from course evaluations. Results indicate that this approach to language teaching allowed preservice teachers to affirm their multiple identities as they developed and strengthened their language skills in English. Data also indicate that looking at the world from a more critical perspective entailed contradictions and challenges for preservice teachers and the teacher educator.

Keywords: critical interculturality, critical language education, culture, English as a foreign language, preservice teachers

La formación de maestros de lenguas desde una perspectiva crítica es una labor inevitable para los programas de formación docente. Para contribuir a esta labor, este estudio describe la implementación de un curso desde una perspectiva crítica intercultural dirigido a futuros maestros de inglés, durante el primer semestre de un programa de formación docente en Colombia. Se analizó la participación en clase de los futuros maestros, así como sus trabajos escritos y orales y las evaluaciones del curso y se encontró que la enseñanza del inglés desde esta perspectiva permitió a los participantes afirmar sus múltiples identidades mientras fortalecían sus conocimientos en inglés. Asimismo, se evidenci**ó** que la incorporación de esta perspectiva crítica trajo consigo contradicciones y retos para los futuros maestros y los formadores de maestros.

Palabras clave: cultura, formación crítica de maestros, inglés como lengua extranjera, interculturalidad crítica, maestros en formación

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How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Gutiérrez, C. P. (2022). Learning English from a critical, intercultural perspective: The journey of preservice language teachers. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, *24*(2), 265–279. https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v24n2.97040

This article was received on July 1, 2021 and accepted on May 7, 2022.

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Introduction

In English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Colombia, the concept of culture has been approached through a constant contrast and comparison between the students' culture and the "dominant" cultures associated with English. Moreover, culture has been conceived of as a competence, which can be taught instrumentally, so that students "learn" to relate to English speakers "appropriately". Consequently, issues of race and power, inherent in all cultures, become invisible in the language classroom (Walsh, 2010).

Growing awareness of the need to disrupt relations of power has led critical scholars to advocate for the education of intercultural citizens with a commitment to reading not only words, but also the world critically (Freire, 1968/2000) and unlearning colonial ideals (Walsh, 2010). These scholars also advocate for the promotion of dialogue across differences (Walsh, 2010) and the need to educate students concerned with issues of inclusion (Tubino, 2005). Critical interculturality can greatly contribute to attaining this goal since it offers an approach to language teaching which does not neglect the local cultures and languages, and thus values diverse ways of being. Achieving this transformation in EFL teaching and turning these principles of critical interculturality into actual teaching practices requires a conscious effort in language teaching programs.

Theoretical Framework

Language and culture have organically developed a connection in the English language teaching (ELT) field. This connection allows language learners to see themselves and the Other through their cultural lenses, while learning a language that carries along with it the wealth and ideological weight of the places and cultures where it is spoken. Understanding that neither language nor culture are neutral and objective is the cornerstone of the promotion of interculturality founded on principles of equity and justice. The following section provides an account of how these concepts support this paper and advocates for the incorporation of this critical, intercultural perspective in the language classroom.

Language and Culture

Language has been used as a tool of domination, conquest, and colonization throughout history (García, 2019). In the field of ELT, language has been defined in multiple ways, from a Eurocentric view that sees it as a mere linguistic code, to an "ideational signifying system that plays a central role in how we understand ourselves and the world" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 13). According to Pennycook, moving away from this functional view of language means that content can no longer be approached in a trivial fashion and that uncritically achieving communicative competence cannot be the ultimate goal of language teaching and learning. Because language is not neutral (Janks, 1993; Lankshear, 1994), it constitutes a tool of power that can be used to reproduce and maintain dominant discourses or to challenge and deconstruct them to disrupt the status quo (Shor, 1999). Accordingly, texts are not neutral either; regardless of the mode texts take, they portray social, political, and historical ideologies that position the authors and audiences in specific ways.

Culture, like language, has been defined differently throughout history and is no longer conceived of as unchangeable and homogenous (Atkinson, 1999; Canagarajah, 2006). In the language classroom, the concept of culture has had numerous connotations such as cultural competence (Byram & Risager, 1999), intercultural competence (Byram, 2000; Byram et al., 2009), and intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Feng, 2005) to name a few.

Many of these connotations, however, have been criticized for treating culture as a skill that can be objectively taught and assessed (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2001; Dervin, 2010, 2015; Kramsch, 1993). Along with this critique, Kumaravadivelu (2003) contends that the incorporation of an "objective" approach to culture in the language classroom results in the denial of the

cultural diversity that students bring to the classroom and ascribes them to a single national and linguistic identity. All these critiques make the growing need to incorporate culture in the language classroom from a more comprehensive perspective evident. Consequently, several scholars have challenged this static notion of culture with myriad propositions that surpass stereotypical attributes and acknowledge its complexity (Dervin, 2016). Thus, it is no longer enough to grasp factual information about the Other, but to recognize how they have come to exist in their diversity which is central to an intercultural encounter (Abdallah-Pretceille, 2001).

Critical Interculturality and Language Teaching

Critical interculturality has its foundations in the decolonial turn (Maldonado-Torres, 2010; Mignolo, 2010) and focuses on the analysis of how power relations have systematically kept underserved communities and their languages and cultures in unprivileged conditions. At its core, decoloniality denounces coloniality as a pattern of structural, colonial, racial power in which different peoples, cultures, knowledge, and territories have been hierarchized through relations of domination (Restrepo & Rojas, 2010). Disrupting this pattern requires an *epistemic decolonization* (Mignolo, 2010) in which peoples' cultures, experiences, and knowledges are centered in education.

Hence, critical interculturality becomes a pedagogical lens for social critique of our societies and their colonial, naturalized power relations of racialization which are intended to strengthen and encourage the ways of life and knowledge that have systematically been hidden and annihilated through coloniality (Walsh, 2009, 2010). From this perspective, social exchanges in our multicultural societies are no longer grounded on the assimilation of marginalized groups into the dominant cultures (Tubino, 2005). Instead, critical interculturality challenges the role educational settings continue to play in a colonial society in which only Western knowledge, values, and cosmogonies have a place (Caicedo & Castillo, 2008). Furthermore, it allows students and teachers to reflect on the hierarchical relations among languages, the ways such relations have been naturalized, and the unequal relations among speakers of different languages (García-León & García-León, 2014).

Literature Review

Initial understanding of what culture meant resulted in equally reductionist approaches to teaching culture in the form of *cultural celebration*, which downgrades its complexity (Sleeter, 2012). This approach to culture also fails to discuss theories of domination and results in a lack of understanding of how some powerful groups, languages, and literacies came to be in power (Janks, 2000). This reality is not unlike Colombia, where a study done by Ortiz et al. (2020) demonstrated that English language teachers and learners notice the lack of a critical incorporation of issues related to students' own cultures and local languages. Students in a similar study reflected on the need to tailor course content so that it is more meaningful and allows their identities to become visible (Gutiérrez et al., 2021).

Another study done at Universidad de Antioquia found that Indigenous students faced constant discrimination in the education system and, although they feel compelled to learn English, some of them fear their languages and cultures might be further endangered (Usma et al., 2018). In line with this finding, a study done by Arismendi-Gómez and Ramírez-Jiménez (2019) established that, to fight this process of assimilation, language teacher educators play a significant role in sustaining Indigenous students' identities in the foreign language classroom.

Fortunately, evidence indicates that a growing number of scholars in the field of ELT in Colombia has joined the quest for a more just, critical, intercultural education. (Álvarez-Valencia, 2014; Álvarez-Valencia & Bonilla-Medina, 2009; García-León & García-León,

2014; Gómez-Rodríguez, 2015; Granados-Beltrán, 2016; Usma et al., 2018). These scholars have made explicit connections between language learning and critical interculturality, thus making a case for the incorporation of this perspective in the language classroom and enabling practical applications. These practical applications have taken the form of the exploration and analysis of texts to scrutinize "the discourses that lie beneath the cultures that engage in interaction, the subjects, and the wider society" (Álvarez-Valencia & Bonilla-Medina, 2009, p. 163). They also engaged in critical analysis of issues of deep culture using foreign multicultural stories (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2015) while developing students' language skills.

From these studies, we can conclude that critical interculturality can be a powerful pedagogical tool in language education as it connects to a view of English teaching and learning as political activities (Pennycook, 1989). We can also conclude that scholars and language educators have advanced the field of ELT toward the construction of a more just society, through an approach to language teaching and learning that results in enhanced linguistic skills and critical understanding for students, and in a joint effort to build a more equitable society in which all languages, cultures, and identities are valued. Achieving these goals calls for the envisioning of critical language teaching programs and teacher educators committed to pushing the boundaries in EFL.

Method

This study aligns with a critical research paradigm (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), and is framed as an interpretative case study (Stake, 2010; Yin, 2011). From this perspective, issues are approached in a particular context and the participants' points of view and values are at the core, which allows centering their voices in the study. This design also allows for multiple sources of information to be incorporated (Yin, 2003). The following paragraphs describe the process of data collection and analysis, the context and participants, and the pedagogical unit.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in this project included preservice teachers' (PST) oral and written class productions, anonymous institutional course evaluations which ensured that PST did not feel pressured to answer the questions in a given way, and class recordings of lessons that took place during remote learning. Participants were asked for consent to use and analyze their class productions and course evaluations and to record the lessons and conversations in breakout rooms. In addition, the language program committee consented to the use of course evaluations for this study.

Following Richards (2003), data analysis was done through a descriptive and interpretative analysis of participants' views and experiences as manifested in their class productions and course evaluations. Additionally, class recordings were transcribed and analyzed inductively, followed by memo writing. At the end of every semester, data were displayed using charts which were systematically compared and contrasted using NVivo. Once initial patterns began to emerge, a deductive analysis was done that resulted in the creation of three main categories: (a) affirmation of PST's life stories, which indicated the personal connections participants made to class topics; (b) linguistic development, which referred to the multiple ways participants perceived their linguistic growth; and (c) responses to critical reflections, which contained PST's reactions to the critical perspectives that framed this course.

Context and Participants

This study was done in an English course offered to PST during the first semester of a language teaching program at a public university in Medellín, Colombia. This course is part of a curriculum renewal framed in critical literacies and interculturality and it is intended to equip foreign language teachers with strong aca-

demic literacies and to spark in them a commitment to social justice. Due to the university strike that took place in 2019 and COVID, classes were interrupted and the duration of the semesters 2019–2 and 2020–1 was extended. This caused a significant decrease in the number of participants who enrolled or were able to continue in the program. Thus, the total number of PST who participated in this study and signed their consent form was 35 spread across five academic semesters between 2018–2 and 2021.

Participants in this study came from diverse social and economic backgrounds and had English proficiency levels ranging from emergent knowledge about vocabulary to high written and oral commands of the language. They came from multiple urban and rural territories and, in a few cases, from Indigenous Reservations located throughout the country. Their ages ranged from 17 to 45 and most participants did not have any teaching experience; the few who did, taught private lessons or worked hourly at private language institutes.

Pedagogical Implementation

This section describes the pedagogical implementation that took place over the course of three years in the first semester of this language teaching program. Although the main text type suggested for this course is descriptive and focuses on present tenses, the materials chosen and explored did not necessarily follow discrete grammar items or vocabulary. Speaking, writing, listening, and reading were included and, to meet students at their English levels, modeling, scaffolding, and autonomous work were fostered consistently. In addition, to tackle the challenges brought by dissimilar English proficiency levels, whole class discussions were limited, and a variety of grouping strategies were implemented so that PST could at times be paired with classmates who had a similar English proficiency or act as support for those whose linguistic proficiency was emergent. This was enforced by consistently positioning PST both as teachers and students. Finally, all PST's outcomes served as examples for PST entering the program the following semester, which set the purpose and audience for their outcomes.

Introductory Unit: Being Critical Starts From the Self: My Name, My Identities

This unit aimed at providing spaces for PST to learn about themselves and about their classmates, and to uncover the stereotypical ideas we often construct and perpetuate. To achieve this, this unit explored the ways their identities and names are connected and covered a number of oral and written texts that delved deeper into what comes with a name: history, a story, a life. This theme exploration began by reading an adaptation of the text "My Name" from *A Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela (1995). The following is an excerpt of this text:

> On the first day of school, my teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave each of us an English name. This was the custom among Africans in those days and it was due to the British influence of our education. The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture, British institutions, were automatically assumed to be superior. African culture was not important. (p. 3)

Aside from considering the origin of their names and its relationship to coloniality, PST discussed other aspects of colonization, abroad and in Colombia. After analyzing this text and the similarities they found with our own country, PST researched the history and the story of their names, both of which are usually unknown by them. In addition, they analyzed and adapted a version of a research article explaining the impact stereotypical representations have on people due to their names (e.g., teachers and how they grade students, white/black sounding names and opportunities to advance in society) and discussed how this topic could affect their perceptions about their own students.

Finally, PST watched the first minutes of the TED Talk *The Muslim on the Airplane* (Kassir, 2016). The following is an excerpt from this TED Talk:

> My name is . . . unapologetic Muslim woman, Syrian, American, hijabi . . . my name is writer, teacher . . . but at the airport, my name is random search. And on the street, it's terrorist . . . oppressed. On the news, it's ISIS . . . suspect. (1:03)

This also allows the stereotypical representations expressed by the speaker to be connected to the ones about our own country which is a smooth transition to the next unit about countries, languages, and cultures.

Unit 1: Debunking the Myth of Monolithic Countries

To uncover the multiple stereotypes we have about countries, which have historically been reinforced by media and education, PST examined a PowerPoint presentation portraying diverse-looking people and attempted to answer the question: Where are these people from? After looking at the actual information and challenging our biases, they analyzed why we tend to associate one country with one physical appearance and one language. To gather more evidence on this topic, PST do research on countries such as Australia, Nigeria, and Colombia and find information about the languages spoken in those countries and the presence of Indigenous communities. This research is intended to connect PST to the exploration of colonization, its influence on language loss, and the role of education in perpetuating single-sided stories of countries, languages, and cultures. Through this, PST attempt to debunk the idea that countries are monolithic and ask why our knowledge about our own country and languages is so limited.

In this unit, PST were also troubled about the idea of English as the language of success while they explore the texts *No Speak English* by Sandra Cisneros and the picture book *I Hate English* by Ellen Levine. Aside from questions to check their understanding of main ideas and specific information, these texts set the ground for questioning why some people are afraid of losing their languages, why some people might resist learning English, the connections between languages and cultures, and the consequences of language loss. In addition, this unit explores countries, nationalities, and factors that affect routines in Colombia and abroad such as access to water and electricity. Finally, PST analyze which communities are systematically affected by these factors.

Unit 2: Family–Families

Aside from describing family members and their professions, this unit leads PST to ask why diverse family structures become invisible in school contexts. After examining myriad family structures, PST read the picture book *Families Are Different* by Nina Pellegrini and answer questions such as: What types of families are represented in this story? What families are not included? Why do you think these families are not represented? What family structures are usually invisible in schools/books? What family structures are common in our society? To further this conversation, PST read an adapted version of the online text "The 'Perfect' Family" (https://bit.ly/3EryumA) which allows them to question common myths surrounding family structures such as "harmony is the rule," or "the nuclear family is the norm." This unit closes by having PST write a text and create a video about their family.

Unit 3: Our Communities

This unit provides PST with the linguistic repertoire to describe and compare places in their communities. These linguistic goals are addressed as students write, read, listen, and talk about diverse people and places in different communities. The great bulk of these goals are scaffolded as students read an adapted version of the story *The Dirty Kid* by Mariana Enriquez. The following is an excerpt from this story:

> But if you know how to handle yourself, if you understand the dynamics, the schedules, it's not that dangerous. Or not as dangerous. I know that, on Friday nights, if I approach Plaza Garay, I may get trapped in a fight between various combatants: the small-time drug dealers of Ceballos Street, the brain-dead addicts who attack one another with bottles, the drunken transvestites determined to defend their stretch of pavement. (p. 2)

Over the last few weeks of the semester, PST discuss how this text relates to their communities, how transvestites are represented in this story, and the reasons behind these issues. This story also opens the door to talk about ways in which people can make a difference in those communities. Hence, this final unit leads PST to plan an interview of a leader or someone who is usually marginalized in their communities. Finally, it is important to mention that PST are allowed to do these interviews in Spanish. Aside from furthering their linguistic development in English, the purpose of this unit is to learn about the diversity of their communities and the multiple ways people are marginalized and/or contribute to building a better society. To attain both goals, all videos must contain subtitles in English; this undoubtedly requires a lot of support from the teacher, but this experience allows PST to expand their linguistic knowledge as they go beyond the linguistic boundaries of this unit.

Findings

Results from this implementation indicate that the incorporation of a critical perspective in language teacher education programs opened spaces for future educators to grow aware of and affirm their multiple life stories. Secondly, it resulted in great development of PST's language skills. Finally, it made it evident that becoming critical of oneself and of the world around us is not a simple, straight path. Instead, it is a path full of contradictions, challenges, and vulnerability.

Affirming PST's Life Stories

The implementation of these units created safe spaces for PST to affirm their life stories, be vulnerable, and openly write about and discuss some of the struggles they had encountered previously in relation to their names and belonging to diverse family structures. As evidenced in the following excerpts from students' texts, by approaching class topics critically, conversations and class assignments became spaces in which PST confronted, affirmed, and embraced their identities.

> For example, I love my mother's name, it is Yanuba del Carmen. Yanuba is an indigenous name from the Quimbaya tribe. However, it was not always like that. I remember that when I was young, I was ashamed of saying my mother's name because the kids in the school would laugh at it. (Pablo,[1] written text, 2020)

> I was one of the first people who started getting separated from the religion imposition. It was a Christian catholic school so my partners and even one teacher started calling me "Mateo *el ateo*" [Mateo the atheist]. (Mathew, written text, 2021)

Like these examples above, there were multiple instances in which PST stated how they had grappled with stereotypical representations about their names and personal backgrounds. Nonetheless, aside from bringing their stories to the classroom, class conversations encouraged them to think critically about their own stereotypical representations and the power educators have to revert or perpetuate harmful prejudices in the classroom: "I think we have to reflect and inform ourselves about the lies we accept as truths…as teachers, any relevant decision could be in our hands, and if we are full of stereotypes, we will probably ruin someone's life" (Dani, written text, 2021).

Similar realizations were evident during the exploration of the unit about families. Every semester, when the myth of the perfect nuclear family was

1 All students' names are pseudonyms.

challenged, PST consistently began opening up about their own family struggles and embraced vulnerability talking about their multiple family compositions and stories.

> My parents used to argue a lot, so it is better for everyone the way it is now. Like this, everything is more peaceful . . . We are a good example of how single parent families can be just as functional as nuclear families—and sometimes even more. (Vero, video script, 2018)
>
> I believe that the fact of living in a *Resguardo Indígena*[2] doesn't make us very different from other families. (Jack, video script, 2019)

In addition, as shown in the course evaluations, this class provided opportunities for students to affirm their own identities and honor their life stories: "This language has developed self-value in me, starting from inside to outside, I mean, to know myself to then know others"[3] (Pedro, course evaluation, 2019). Likewise, embracing vulnerability led to reflections about the multiple stories that their future students will bring to the classroom and the need to affirm and validate them through teaching practices responsive to their needs and diversity.

In this line of thought, by consistently positioning PST as educators, they began to envision themselves as educators even in this beginning stage of the teaching program: "[This course] has made more intricate my perspective and identity as a future teacher" (Manu, course evaluation, 2019–1). "This has been a great way to start my major, I have started to have clearer foundations on what I want to do in my teaching career" (Juan, course evaluation, 2019–2).

Seeing themselves as educators takes significant relevance given that, often, a number of PST begin to position themselves as such at a later stage in education programs. In addition, findings indicate that, although this course was not explicitly oriented toward building PST's teaching repertoire, they saw it as a model they could use for their future teaching practices: "This course has helped me to think as a teacher and place myself in the teacher's shoes, which has helped me to visualize myself and to want to learn more how to be a good teacher" (Sara, course evaluation, 2020). "This course is not only based on how to teach English and increase our skills, it is also about learning how to teach what we are learning" (Ivan, course evaluation, 2019–2). This finding indicates that a recurrent engagement in language learning from a critical perspective might have an impact on future language teachers' practices and contribute to a more just education as PST enhance their English learning.

Language Development

As PST dove into the exploration of myriad topics, they advanced in their writing, reading, speaking, and listening beyond the grammar boundaries set in the course. The videos, class discussions, and written texts they produced as well as the complexity of their responses to listening and reading comprehension workshops provide countless instances of this linguistic development. Moreover, PST repeatedly commented on this:

> Despite having an advanced English level, this class helped me notice many mistakes I didn't know I was making . . . It helped me to have a basis in English not centered just on its grammar and production but more connected to the world. (Samu, course evaluation, 2019–2)
>
> I started this class from scratch, and I have made great progress. (Vale, course evaluation, 2019–1)

As noted, regardless of their English proficiency levels, PST grew aware of their language enhancement. This, by no means, indicates that all students reached a similar language proficiency level. It does mean, however, that students who entered the program with a high

2 Politically recognized Indigenous lands.

3 Quotes from course evaluations are originally in Spanish. Quotes from written and oral texts are originally in English and are kept as uttered by the participants.

level of proficiency in English were still challenged to further their thinking and language use while students whose English level was emergent advanced in their linguistic development to meet, and often exceed, the linguistic and content objectives of the course.

This disparity in English proficiency did not always come without challenges, though. For students who enter the program with basic knowledge of English, participating in class conversations can at times be a daunting and frustrating experience. Nonetheless, students found that the supportive environment created in the classroom eased this learning experience: "The teacher . . . has bolstered bonds between us and has instilled a sense of support and understanding with those who know less" (Jero, course evaluation, 2019). This finding might mean that, by positioning PST as teachers as they interacted with their classmates, they engaged in a more caring, trusting environment to learn.

However, when it came to peer-assessment, PST perceived this strategy differently: "Correcting each other's work is not always the best way to realize our mistakes" (Mariana, course evaluation, 2018–2). "With the teacher's support we help each other and correct our mistakes, which has helped me realize my strengths and weaknesses" (Pilar, course evaluation, 2019–2). These responses might indicate that PST will experience this strategy differently, depending on their expectations from the teacher.

In sum, this finding indicates that language teacher educators can reconcile literacy development in English with critical, intercultural reflections although this road can be full of contradictions as will be further discussed.

Responses to Critical Reflections

Although PST demonstrated high levels of reflection about their own biases and stereotypes related to names toward the end of the introductory unit, once the unit about countries began, a new set of stereotypes emerged. For instance, to the question: "What do Colombians look like?", which was intended to show our long-held multiple stereotypical representations, students readily began answering and describing a unified physical appearance which, for obvious reasons, did not even reflect half of the people in our classroom. An example of this can be evidenced in the following whole class conversation:

> Teacher: What do Colombians look like?
>
> Manuela: They look like the woman in the first slide (dark skin, tall).
>
> Dylan: They look like the eighth guy (light skin, tall).
>
> Teacher: OK. Let's see. So, do all Colombians look like them?
>
> Manuela: Well, not all, many…well, some! (Everybody laughs)
>
> Teacher: So, Manuela, you are not Colombian.
>
> Manuela: (She laughs) Teacher, according to my theory, no, I'm not Colombian. (Everybody laughs)

This conversation triggered discussions about the reasons why, even in light of overwhelming evidence, we are invested in repeating and perpetuating our long-held misrepresentations and essentializing versions of the world. At this point, many PST agreed that media has a role in creating these ideas and laughed at the absurdity of repeating these unquestioned beliefs. Nonetheless, as soon as they started working in small groups, some students often attempted to reinforce stereotypical representations about entire communities, both local and foreign. This, however, did not always go uncontested by their classmates.

Another significant finding indicates that PST began to see how colonialism influences our perceptions of languages. This can be shown in the following conversation about language loss when answering the question: "Why do some languages become more powerful than others?"

> Juli: I think that, maybe, because they become easier, for example the English, hmm, *pero es que no sé cómo explicarlo* [But I just don't know how to explain it].

> Mauro: I believe is more like the consequence of like the colonization, 'cause like, maybe you think Spanish is more difficult because some ways and things like that, and English is more practical, that doesn't mean our main language is English just because is more practical.

These are a few instances of the ways PST began to unpack language ideologies around English. Similarly, PST engaged in conversations that questioned the role of education in sustaining colonial views of the world while making indigenous languages and cultures invisible. The following is a conversation between two students in a breakout room in April 2021:

> Mateo: The way we are educated at the school like, the teachers don't usually tell us like "hey, preserve this country and find the principal things about… (He's interrupted by his classmate)
>
> Diego: Yeah, they don't say about languages, about Indigenous languages, the teachers never mention them, like you only know because like, you investigated by yourself…
>
> Mateo: Yeah, just the English and that is all.
>
> Diego: Yeah, you're right.

Likewise, some of them understood how necessary it was to take specific actions such as learning ancestral languages, to allow Indigenous communities to become visible and valued.

> Something that I think is very relevant is, for example, the things that the Language School is doing, because they teach Creole, Embera, and like, preserving that is very important. Because is another way, is what we should do to comprehend, not help, but make those communities be seen because we forget them. (Dani, breakout room, March 2021)

These findings also seemed to indicate that approaching language learning from this perspective allowed PST to see it in explicit connection with culture: "This class has been very significant because, thanks to it, I have strengthened my knowledge about English and I have integrated it with culture; something I hadn't done before" (Isabel, course evaluation, 2019–1). "You integrate the language and the world, so you understand more the culture you know and others in the same language" (Santi, course evaluation, 2019–2).

The incorporation of this critical perspective also seemed to spark a desire in PST to vindicate marginalized or misrepresented communities. Instances of this were recurrent as they chose to interview myriad people such as a street vendor, an immigrant from Venezuela, a transgender language teacher, and a teacher from Putumayo (a region in the southern part of Colombia) who supports fellow teachers whose basic resources are scarce. These are only a few of the examples of all the experiences and communities we learned from by engaging in this class assignment: "All the activities we've done have addressed not just technical content but spaces to reflect and analyze cultural or personal situations" (Jhoan, course evaluation, 2019–1). "Beyond advancing my knowledge about English, this class has allowed me to know about other contexts and realities I had stereotyped before" (Maria, course evaluation, 2019–1).

Finally, although this has not been a recurrent finding, it is worth noting that the exploration of certain themes from a critical perspective represented a challenge specifically for a student with strong religious beliefs who argued that, for instance, the composition of gay families was against the laws of God. In this particular conversation, PST asked me for help to "explain to him why his belief was not right." This situation led me to continue reflecting on the ways PST's view of the world and multiple identities, and my own, could in some ways clash, and how necessary it was to constantly fight the urge to find consensus in the classroom. Hence, instead of finding an ultimate answer, we all engaged in conversations around what factors shape our worldviews, why it might be difficult to transform our perspectives and how, as teachers, those perspectives might be oppressive to other people.

In sum, although this was not a linear path, findings suggest that approaching class topics from a critical perspective provided spaces for PST to interrogate and expand their worldview in conversation with that of their classmates. This approach also created opportunities to reflect on the influence of colonialism in education and language ideologies. At the same time, these findings demonstrate that foreign language learning can make available myriad opportunities to critically connect students to their own realities and affirm their life stories, as they increase their linguistic repertoire in English.

Discussion

The above-mentioned findings show that the road to achieving social justice and critical language development can take multiple forms. It might take the form of encouraging students/PST to question their worldviews and challenge their stereotypes as they approach texts critically. It might also happen through the creation of spaces in which they affirm their identities and learn about their own and other contexts (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009), or it can be enacted through "an evolving repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation" (Comber, 2013, p. 589).

This endeavor does not require the search and selection of specialized texts or the incorporation of texts that explicitly address social issues. In fact, because texts are never neutral, any issues or topics that relate to students' life experiences and interests can be used to build curriculum that advances their critical literacy development (Vasquez et al., 2019).

These findings also demonstrate that approaching topics from a critical perspective allows subjectivities to emerge as students and educators make sense of class content (Pessoa & Urzeda-Freitas, 2012). This allows us to bring forward buried life stories such as those about diverse family structures most of us belong to but are often ashamed to speak about in spaces where family trees portray a universal nuclear family. Along this line, Echeverri-Sucerquia (2020) contends that, to push the boundaries of second language education, educators and students should engage together in understanding their own realities in order to "foster awareness of our own identities and what shapes them" (p. 27). Likewise, conversations about indigenous languages and cultures demonstrated that even spaces in which a colonial language such as English is learned can provide powerful opportunities to interrogate PST's own cultures and languages. That is to say, foreign language education does not need to (and should not?) shy away from taking an active role in interrogating, affirming, and sustaining students' identities as they learn another language (Arismendi-Gómez & Ramírez-Jiménez, 2019). In fact, "because language, culture, and identity are integrally related, language teachers are in a key position to address educational inequality" (Hawkins & Norton, 2009, p. 32).

Conclusions

This implementation is far from perfect, and I am convinced educators committed to the construction of a better society can think of myriad ways in which these units could be done better, include better materials, be scaffolded better, and more. What I offer here is not a recipe of how to do critical, intercultural language teacher education, but a reflection of the tiny steps I took in this direction and the ways it impacted my students.

Teaching this class during the past three years has consistently shed light on the potential language teaching education programs have to make language teachers aware of their power (and responsibility?) to contribute to the construction of a fairer society. This does not mean all PST achieved the same levels of reflection or demonstrated the same dispositions toward the themes explored, but becoming a homogenous whole was never the goal. An attempt to do this would have denied that our lived experiences will always inform the way we understand the world. Thus, teacher educators should be aware that looking at the world from a more critical intercultural perspective is a bumpy journey that can

often be fraught with contradictions, resistance, and eye-opening moments, both for PST and teacher educators themselves. There is no straight path for becoming critical, just as there is no definite bar set to claim one has become critical. This is a never-ending process in which, once we uncover ways in which we oppress and have been oppressed, new forms of oppression become visible, just as new ways to contribute to build a better society do.

In addition, PST bring along with them multiple beliefs, values, and identities, which might create discomfort during interactions. In fact, these conversations might be uncomfortable for teacher educators themselves who also bring a realm of beliefs and life experiences to the classroom. This realization should take us then to the understanding that exploring the multiple perspectives that converge in texts and in people's interaction rather than indoctrinating students or homogenizing our understanding of the world is what lies behind. This takes particular relevance not only as educators, but as teacher educators whose demeanor and modeling often has an impact on PST.

Implications

Although findings indicate that this implementation positively affected PST's critical understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world around them, this approach to language teaching cannot be relegated to a single course. Instead, language teaching education programs should place critical literacies and interculturality at the core of their syllabi. As a result, PST can be continually encouraged to question their own worldviews and the ways these might impact their future teaching practices. Likewise, constant exposure to this approach might not only result in PST's stronger literacy development in English but also in an understanding of this language as a pedagogical tool to contribute to the construction of a more just society. Additionally, teacher educators can impact PST by becoming models of language teaching from a critical perspective. This might instill in future teachers a desire to build a teaching repertoire throughout their major and find alternatives to the years of colonial education they have received throughout their schooling.

Finally, transforming language teacher education programs from this perspective will imply drawing on teacher educators' dispositions to transform their teaching practices and to engage in continuous self-reflection about their beliefs and values and how they influence their selection of class materials, the questions they ask and choose not to ask when exploring texts. This might bring to the surface their own biases and contradictions, a process that is needed to understand how teaching practices are shaped. This might be a contested transformation because some language teachers might find that their beliefs do not align with critical literacies and interculturality aims. Hence, further research could delve into the struggles and gains language teachers find in teaching this way as they also navigate their own understanding of critical theories in language teaching. It could also explore the impact this critical perspective has on PST's teaching practices.

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