Constructing Sociocultural Awareness from the EFL Classroom[1]

Construyendo Conciencia Sociocultural Desde la Clase de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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Abstract

This article reports an action research project carried out with a group of 24 undergraduate students in a private university in Ibagué, Colombia. The study aimed to characterize the development of university students' sociocultural skills, to analyze their perceptions and to examine the teacher's procedures and possible implications required to implement the *Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy* taken from the Postmethod Pedagogy. To reach these objectives a series of interconnected tasks were designed and implemented in three different stages. To collect the data, five data collection methods were used: the students' artifacts, teacher's field notes, questionnaires, video recordings and a focus group. The findings revealed that these university students became gradually aware of the importance of having the opportunity to develop tasks that allowed them to connect the English classroom with the local and global context. Furthermore, students suggested that this type of pedagogy should be an explicit component of the curricula of their professional programs. A review of the literature also showed that in our local context this kind of sociocultural study with a postmethod orientation is scarce, thus this study intends to bridge this gap in the Colombian ELT field.

Key words: Postmethod Pedagogy, macrostrategy, sociocultural skills, local and global context.

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Resumen

Este artículo reporta un proyecto de investigación acción realizado con un grupo de 24 estudiantes de pregrado en una universidad privada colombiana en la ciudad de Ibagué. Los objetivos del estudio fueron caracterizar el desarrollo gradual de las competencias socioculturales, analizar las percepciones de los estudiantes universitarios, examinar los procedimientos del profesor y las posibles implicaciones requeridas para implementar la Macro-estrategia *Incrementando la Conciencia Cultural* seleccionada de la Pedagogía del Posmétodo. Para alcanzar estos objetivos, fue necesario diseñar una serie de tareas que se implementaron en tres ciclos. Los instrumentos que se utilizaron para recolectar la información fueron los materiales hechos por los estudiantes, las notas del profesor, cuestionarios, videos y un grupo focal. Los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes universitarios comenzaron gradualmente a ser conscientes de la importancia de tener la oportunidad de desarrollar actividades que les permitieron conectar su clase de inglés con el contexto local y global, también sugirieron que esta pedagogía debería ser parte de sus currículos en sus diferentes programas de formación profesional. Además, se evidenció que en el contexto local este tipo de estudios con la orientación de la Pedagogía del Posmétodo son escasos, por lo que este estudio intenta contribuir a llenar este vacío en el campo de la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia.

Palabras claves: Pedagogía Posmétodo, macro-estrategia, conciencia sociocultural, contexto local y global.

Resumo

Este artigo reporta um projeto de pesquisa-ação realizado com um grupo de 24 estudantes de curso de graduação numa universidade colombiana na cidade de Ibagué. Os objetivos do estudo foram caracterizar o desenvolvimento gradual das competências socioculturais, analisar as percepções dos alunos universitários, examinar os procedimentos do professor e as possíveis implicações requeridas para implementar a macro-estratégia *Incrementando a Consciência Cultural*; a qual foi selecionada da Pedagogia do Posmétodo. Para alcançar estes objetivos, foi necessário desenhar uma serie de tarefas "tasks" que foram implementadas em três ciclos. Os instrumentos utilizados para recolher os dados foram: os materiais feitos pelos estudantes, notas de campo do professor, questionários, vídeos e um grupo focal. Os resultados revelaram que os estudantes universitários começaram gradualmente a ser conscientes da importância de ter a oportunidade de fazer atividades e conectar sua classe de inglês com o contexto local e global, eles também sugeriram que esta pedagogia deveria ser parte de seus currículos nos diferentes programas de graduação. Além disso, se evidenciou que no contexto local este tipo de estudos com orientação da Pedagogia do Posmétodo é escasso; por isso, este estudo intenta contribuir a encher esse vazio no campo do ensino de inglês na Colômbia.

Palavras chaves: Pedagogia Posmétodo, macro- estratégia, consciência sociocultural, contexto local e global.

Introduction

Good communication skills in English is one of the demands in this globalized world of permanent evolution and changes that have affected our thoughts, beliefs, behavior and interests. Consequently, the way we teach and learn, as it has been said by many researchers and scholars. These trends and changes imply the development of new pedagogies and approaches in the EFL classroom to give students the opportunity to develop their linguistic skills and sociocultural competence to better prepare them for life.

As a result, from this huge demand in teaching and learning English, methods and approaches with a sociocultural orientation have evolved and emerged in an attempt to meet the fact that learners' needs and interests have changed too. In this regard, Johnson (2009) emphasizes that today it is important to reflect about who teaches English, who learns English and why. Also to know about the sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts in which English is taught.

In response to these challenges and responsibilities for school, university and teachers regarding the English learning process, an action research project was undertaken during the second academic semester in 2016, at a private university in Ibagué, with a group of 24 students from different undergraduate programs. The study aimed to characterize the development of students' sociocultural skills, to analyze their perceptions and to examine the teacher's procedures and possible implications. To achieve these goals, the *Raising Cultural Consciousness* Macrostrategy and its guiding principles were implemented in the English classroom. This macrostrategy was taken from the Postmethod Pedagogy framework, which is considered by many scholars such as Stern (1992), Allwright (1984), Giroux (1988), Johnson (2009), and Byram (2002), a sustainable approach to language teaching around the world due to its sensitivity to local particularities and the involvement of critical awareness of local conditions and needs. Furthermore, some local researchers as, Fandiño (2014), Aldemar & Bonilla (2009) and Ramos (2013) have manifested that this is a suitable pedagogy for Latin America.

The outcomes of the study evidenced that by gradually empowering students to go beyond the walls of the classroom, they were able to expand their global and local knowledge. Foucault (1984) suggests that being able to read the community critically is part of the learning process; it means questioning reality, raising awareness, transforming self and rewriting the world.

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In this paper, I present a discussion and description of the theoretical constructs that supported the study, the implemented methodology, the results and, finally the conclusions and pedagogical implications.

Literature Review

Understanding the Postmethod Pedagogy

The main construct of this project is the Postmethod Pedagogy. This pedagogy emerged as an answer to the teachers and teacher educators' voices of dissatisfaction with prescriptive methods of teaching and as part of the ELT evolution and the new challenges the new millennium has brought. These changes have gradually evolved over the years thanks to the critical thinkers that have questioned not only the pedagogical limitations but the insidious, sociocultural and political agenda that have permeated our educational system. Macedo (1994) called for an "anti-methods pedagogy" he said that any pedagogy should include a critical understanding of the sociocultural context that guides teachers' practices (p.8).

Kumaravadivelu (2003) defines the Postmethod Pedagogy as "a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method" (p. 32). He considers that alternative methods are primarily products of top-down processes and alternatives to method are mainly products of bottom-up processes. In other words, teaching practices and policies should emerge from the daily-classroom activities. He assures that the postmethod condition empowers practitioners to construct personal theories of practice that gives teachers autonomy.

Following these ideas, Kumaravadivelu and other scholars recognize that "the nature of any language pedagogy should be socially-realistic and contextually-sensitive" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, P.32).

Grasping the Pedagogic Wheel and the Macrostrategies

The Postmethod Pedagogy proposed by Kumaravadivelu can be visualized as three-dimensional system or framework consisting of three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility. He designed the Pedagogic Wheel to show how the three parameters interweave and interact with each other and the systematic relationship among the ten macrostrategies. As illustrated in the Pedagogic Wheel. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.41):

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"These three parameters are based on social, cultural, economic and political dimensions that have permeated the process of language teaching; at the same time those parameters are complemented by ten macrostrategies or classroom principles" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.41).

This framework encompasses the most relevant elements that surround people's life; for this reason, teachers are required to be aware of the students' sociocultural background as well as their linguistics needs. Kumaravadivelu states that it is the teacher's discretion to implement one, two, or whatever macrostrategy as needed, or experience teachers can even create their own ones. I explored all of them to seek which one was the most appropriate to develop my project, and I selected the *Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy*, which appeared to be the most suitable according to the needs analysis and the students' characteristics.

The Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy

As it is well known, teaching culture has been an integral part of language class and it is viewed as a cognitive component. The Postmethod Pedagogy, proposes that the cultural dimension as "an obligation we, language teachers, have to our students" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 284). In this sense, Stern (1992) points out that teaching culture should include three components: the cognitive, affective and behavioral to help students to gain an understanding of the native speakers, their cultural values, attitude and diversity.

This macrostrategy also indicates that the global cultural consciousness is a requisite in the English language teaching and learning process. Kumaravadivelu (2003) asserts that nowadays teacher should not be considered as the sole cultural informant; teachers need to treat learners as cultural informants as well. Teachers can encourage learners to be engaged in a process of participation by identifying the cultural knowledge learners bring to the classroom and share their own individual perspectives with the teacher as well as with other learners; such a multicultural approach can dispel stereotypes that create and sustain cross-cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications, as it was evidenced in this study.

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Addressing Culture in the EFL Classroom

Brown (2007) argues that culture is an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. It means that culture involves a series of cultural patterns and customs that shape the way we think and understand the world around us. Williams (1976) defines culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language because it "brings to mind different images to different people…such as the mental habits, personal prejudices, moral values, social customs, artistic achievements, and aesthetic preferences of particular societies" (p.87).

Additionally, Kramsch (2013) describes culture as the meaning that members of a social group give to the discursive practices they share in a given space and time and over the historical life of the group. "She states that language learners learn who they are through encounters with the Other. They cannot understand the Other if they don't understand the historical and subjective experiences that have made them who they are" (p. 61). In this regard, the term Third Place is seen as a place of contact or encounter between speakers from two different countries. Learners occupy a position where they see themselves both from the inside and from the outside; and that is what she has called a "third place" of symbolic competence that regards to language-in-context for the making of meaning. Kramsch (2005) uses the term "Thirdness" as a way of seeing the relation of language, thought and culture.

The above concepts and thoughts helped me to create encounters in and outside the classroom, where students had the opportunity to reflect about them and the Other, and were able to expand and to understand the concept of culture as it is evidenced in the outcomes of the project. On account of these kind of sociocultural encounters with the Other the intercultural competence merged as it will be explained in the next section.

Tackle the Intercultural Competence in the English classroom

The term 'intercultural' emerged in the eighties in the fields of intercultural education and intercultural communication. Both are part of an effort to increase dialogue and cooperation among members of different national cultures within a common European Union or within a global economy (Jackson, 2012; Kramsch, 2001).

Byram (2000) visualizes intercultural competence as the ability 'to see relationships between different cultures – both internal and external to a society – and to mediate, that is interpret each in terms of

the other, either for themselves or for other people'. It also encompasses the ability 'to critically or analytically understand that one's own and other cultures' perspective is culturally determined rather than natural.' (p.10). He states that globalization has put individuals in contact with one another at an unprecedented scale. It has brought forth a general challenge to traditionally recognized boundaries of nation, language, race, gender, and class. For this reason, Byram (2000) and others like Kramsch (2011) consider that teachers should promote the intercultural skill in the classroom.

Sociocultural Perspective

Another important construct of the study was the sociocultural perspective that views human learning as a dynamic social activity that is situated in physical and social contexts and it is distributed across persons, tools, and activities (Vygotsky, 1978).

According to Johnson (2009), a sociocultural perspective assumes that human cognition is formed through engagement in social activities. This perspective refers to the social relationships and the culturally constructed materials, signs, and symbols that mediate those relationships that create uniquely human forms of higher-level thinking and as a consequence of it. This means, that learning takes place in interactive processes mediated by culture, context, language, and social interaction.

Community-based Pedagogy

Community-based pedagogy is a perspective inspired on the work of educators such as Freire (1988) and, more recently, Murrell (2001). Freire insisted that curriculum be locally generated and generative and that learners and their worlds be invited into the project and process of education. A community-based pedagogy curriculum reflects a close link between the community and school. Furthermore, Murrell (2001) observes that this pedagogy is informed by sociocultural approaches and that teachers are called to research the knowledge of the cultures represented by children, families and communities.

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Thus, I based my study on this approach because one of the aims was to encourage students to inquire about their surroundings; such as their neighborhoods, inside and outside the university, etc. In order to connect the EFL classroom to the local context and to expand their awareness, experiences and very likely to take action on what they found needed or feasible.

Teacher's Decision-making: Moving from Theory to Practice

As part of the advent of new approaches and pedagogies, the teacher's role in the EFL classroom has also changed and evolved. Zeichner & Liston (1996) suggest that the notion of the teacher as a self-reflective, inquiring, and critically motivated practitioner is required today. Allwright & Bailey (1991) have stated that this tendency is accelerating interest in research in ELT environments.

However, it is important to consider that every teacher has her/his personal theory of teaching and learning, which Kelly (1955) calls personal constructs. "Teachers make decisions to act on the basis of his/her sense and understanding; in order for teachers to transform the personal constructs, they need to adapt them to reach a common understanding together with others" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 28). Furthermore, Freeman (1998) called such a reflective thinking inquiry-oriented teacher research. He defines as "A state of being engaged in what is going on in the classroom that drives one to better understand what is happening—and can happen—there" (p.14).

In the following figure, I summarize the process and the challenges I had to tackle as a teacher researcher in order to connect the theory and practice and to accomplish the aims of the project. The Figure 1. includes the theoretical framework and the six main dimensions that I explored in order to design the curricular units for each cycle in order to get students sociocultural aware.
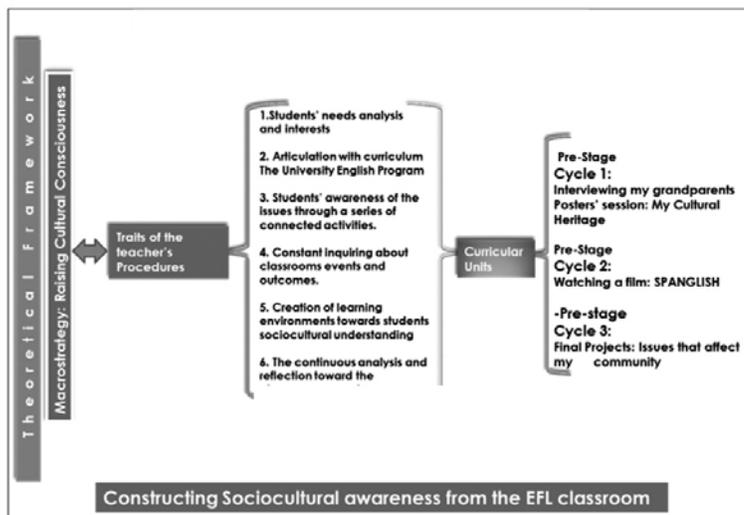

Figure 1. Teacher's Decision Making

Background

The Postmethod Pedagogy is considered a sustainable approach to language teaching around the world including Latin America, mainly, because it is sensitive to local particularities and involves a critical awareness of local conditions and needs. However, after searching for similar studies; I realized that most of them are focused on discussions, analysis of theory and the way of teaching English and culture in the EFL classroom influenced by the Postmethod Pedagogy.

Nonetheless, I selected two practice-oriented studies that have been carried out in Latin America: The first one was reported in Argentina by Porto & Byram (2015) that aimed to combine the language teaching and education for citizenship; she called her study intercultural citizenship. This project is part of a network of projects coordinated by Michael Byram. Findings revealed that Porto's project is scarce in Latin America and her study intends to fill an empirical gap; thus, it has given me some elements to refine my study, which is also a contribution to bridge the existence gap in the sociocultural studies in Colombia with a Postmethod Pedagogy orientation.

The second study was held in Colombia by Fandiño (2014), whose work has been influenced by the Postmethod Pedagogy and the sociocultural approaches. He proposes five strategies to facilitate a better understanding and implementation of culture in the Colombian EFL classroom to help teachers to understand and become aware of the social conditions. This study enhanced my view of teacher's agency, freedom and autonomy, which led me to design activities to foster students' awareness with respect to culture in our local context.

Methodology

Research Design

This project was based on Action Research methodology, which is defined as a process that is characterized as a spiral or cycle of movements between action and research. It suits the specificity and particularities of every teaching context and situation through permanent and systematic actions of reflection, observation, planning, action and evaluation (Johnson & Christensen 2004; Burns, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

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Based on this methodological design, the project aimed to answer the research questions:

Main question:

What does the implementation of the Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy, taken from the Postmethod Pedagogy, show with respect to the development of a group of university students' sociocultural skills in their English learning process?

Subquestions:

1. What do university students' perceptions reveal regarding the implementation of the Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy?

2. What characterizes the teacher's decision making when implementing the Raising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy in the English classroom?

Context and Participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Ibagué, during the second academic semester in 2016. The participants were 24 students from different undergraduate programs who attended English classes every Monday from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. for 16 weeks. The students' ages ranged between 18 to 24 years old. They were in the third level of English, which is a requirement to graduate. Each English level is characterized by a predetermined set of language competencies students are expected to achieve according to the curriculum.

Instructional Design

The instructional design involves all the process and the interconnected activities that were implemented in each of the three stages of the study. Figure 2 summarizes all the process, the implementations done and the instruments used in each stage. Each cycle was divided in alignment with the three academic periods. In the first cycle students started to raise their sociocultural awareness, in the second cycle students continued expanding their sociocultural awareness, and in the third cycle, they were able to take action about sociocultural issues that affect their community.
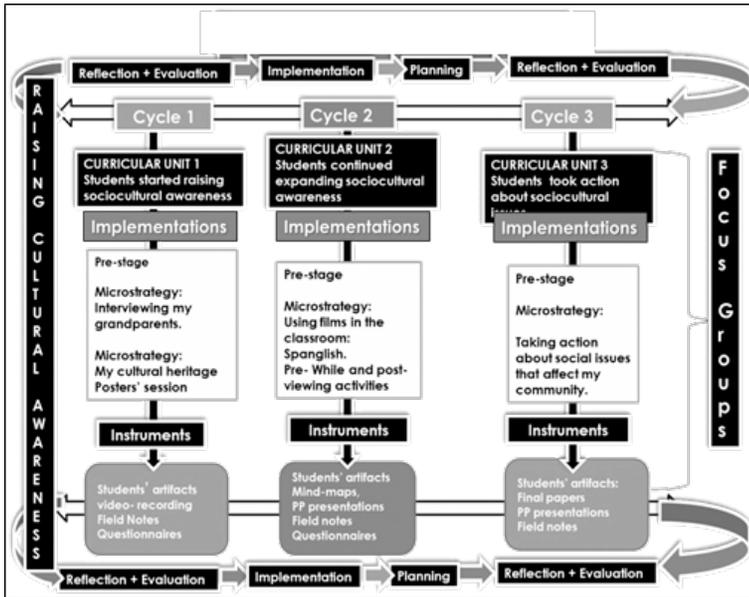
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Figure 2. Action Research Process

Data Collection Instruments

To collect the data, five data collection methods were used: the students' artifacts, teacher's field notes, questionnaires, video recordings and a focus group. All the data gathered through these instruments helped me to analyze and triangulate the information to find out to what extend the research questions were answered.

The students' artifacts were collected and analyzed in each cycle of the process. They reflected the students' sociocultural awareness development during the whole process. Then, questionnaires in Spanish were applied at the end of each cycle. This instrument was very valuable to know the students' opinions and impressions about the different tasks done in class. The teacher's field notes were taken during each class to analyze reactions, interactions or behaviors during or after the implementation of the different activities.

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In addition, most of the activities were recorded, which was very useful because it let me go back as many times as I needed to analyze the students' opinions or to discover new insights of the project. Finally, a focus group was held to give students the opportunity to discuss and give their opinions freely about the different activities and strategies

implemented by the teacher during the whole process, and to reconfirm previous data collected with other instruments.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

According to Burns (1999), the reflexive nature of Action Research means that analysis occurs over the entire investigation; she adapted a framework from McKernan (1996) to shape the overall processes of analysis. Burns says that throughout a process of constant checks that lead the analysis and triangulation, the data provide the evidence for the research insights or outcomes. Thus, the data analysis and interpretation of this study was based on the grounded theory that allows concepts and categories emerge from the data and produces knowledge as stated by Glaser & Strauss (1999).

Table 1 illustrates the four categories and the subcategories that merged from the data in order to answer the research questions.
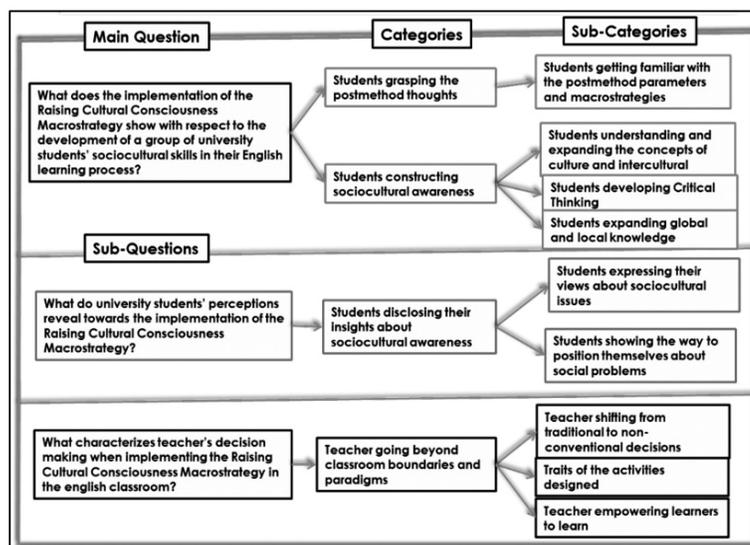

Figure 3. Categories and Sub-Categories regarding the Research question

Students grasping the Postmethod Pedagogy

To answer the main question, since the very beginning, students were initialized in a process of raising their sociocultural awareness, then they continued expanding their sociocultural awareness and in

the last stage, they were able to take actions about sociocultural issues. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), students should be aware of the complex connection between language use and cultural identity to sensitize themselves to better understand and value the cultural richness that surrounds their lives. For this reason, one of the first activities aimed to recognize the students' understanding of global culture. They started to analyze the status of English in this global world and the relation with their lives as citizens and future professionals in order to develop an awareness of empathy regarding the English language.

These excerpts confirm that this group of students already possessed a sociocultural background and knowledge about the world and it was easier for them to become familiar with the postmethod thoughts.

> *"Most of the students considered that by learning English they can have better job opportunities and can have access to international business. Others thought about the possibility to travel abroad to study". (Field notes, august 15, 2016)*

> *"These group of students recognized that globalization affect our lives in many ways, such as the language the world speaks, the way we communicate, dress, and so on". (Field notes, august 15, 2016)*

Students Getting Familiar with the Postmethod Parameters and Macrostrategies

Let me recall that the selected macrostrategy for the purpose of this study was the R*aising Cultural Consciousness Macrostrategy.* To implement this macrostrategy, I designed some microstrategies that I called activities or tasks to develop their sociocultural skills and give them the opportunity to create knowledge.

Therefore, in the second stage of this study, I designed a microstrategy based on a comedy movie called *Spanglish*. It contains a lot of nonverbal communication and relevant cultural and cross-cultural information. After analyzing the students' opinions about this activity, it was found that students enhanced their understanding of culture and identified other aspects of culture such as language, cultural barriers and stereotypes. They stated that the movie helped them to understand the difficulties and problems an immigrant has to face when travels to another country to pursue a dream and commented that some of them knew a person that has experienced the situation of being illegal in another country. Students recommend the movie as a way to expand

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their intercultural competence and recognized how important is to speak English in a foreign country.

The following excerpts were taken from a video recording after the film activity:

S1. "Esta actividad nos ayudó a practicar, pronunciar y mejorar el inglés y aprender sobre diferentes culturas".

S3."Recomiendo la película pues permite tener una visión más amplia de la cultura de otros países y reconocer la importancia de hablar bien inglés".

S4:"Me ayudó a tener una visión más amplia de mi cultura y de la cultura de otros países".

Students Constructing Sociocultural Awareness

Social awareness involves both the will and the skill to interact with others, involving motivation, attitude, self-confidence, empathy and the ability to handle social situations (Byram 2002). This category shows how students became conscious and expanded their knowledge about the difficulties their communities have and even took part in possible solutions.

When students presented their final papers and oral presentations regarding local and global issues, data showed that they have expanded their social and cultural awareness, were ready to explore global and local issues, and were able to take action about problems related to their communities, such as the university, neighborhood and the city. The following five questions, students attempted to answer in their final tasks, is an example of it:

1. *We are concerned about how to develop awareness in the university directors about the drug addiction?*

2. *What can be our contribution to reduce the amount of garbage in the streets of Ibague?*

3. *How to improve security in Ibague city, especially near the Cooperativa University?*

4. *This group of students was concerned about the corruption that has been affected our country and especially this city, which is considered one of the biggest sicknesses of this century.*

5. *What can we do to reduce domestic violence in the city of Ibague?*

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Students understanding and expanding the concept of Culture

Students understood and expanded the concept of culture during the development of different cultural oriented tasks. The tasks involved observation and reflection about other's cultures thus students had the opportunity to cross the borders from their local to the global culture with computer and technology to gained intercultural competence.

My Cultural Heritage, a posters session, was one of the activities that helped students to expand their understanding about culture. The first step of this activity comprised that students worked in small groups and drew mind maps to express their understanding of culture. This task involved observation and reflection about other's cultures and the face-to-face interaction with the native assistant who is part of the English language program.

Students Developing the Intercultural Competence

According to Stewart (2007), the intercultural competence is the continuous evolution and transformation of the society as a result of science, technology and globalization, that force intercultural objectives to evolve and reflect to be able to respond to the needs of modern citizens and communities. This appreciation, confirms that today's students are modern citizens whose learning habits are permeated by the facts already mentioned. For this reason, I also included technology in the classroom. A good example on how these students expanded their intercultural skills was when they watched the movie Spanglish and in the post-viewing stage, they drew some mind maps and made a contrast between three cultures; Colombian, Mexican and American. The mind maps showed that language is the main barrier to get a good job in a country like the United States. They found that Colombian and Mexican cultures are more traditional than Americans' culture. Also, that Mexico and Colombian have faced similar social problems such as the violence, trafficking and corruption.

Even though the movie Spanglish is a funny comedy, students addressed critical opinions to social and cultural differences:

S1:"Recordaré la película como una actividad diferente y al contrastar las culturas me llama la atención como cada país ve al otro, dependiendo del STATUS de éste". (Questionnaire, October 10, 2016)

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S2. "Recomiendo la actividad de la película porque nos ayudó a ser capaces de ser más conscientes de las diferencias con otras culturas" (Focus group, November 14, 2016)

S3. "Mexico and Colombia, pensé que no debían ser muchas las diferencias, pero cuando comencé a investigar habían diferencias culturales, en la forma de hablar el español. (Field notes, October 10, 2016)

S4. "Así estén cerca hay muchas diferencias entre México y los Estados Unidos, por ejemplo en la película las dificultades que tiene que afrontar la mujer son por no conocer la cultura y no hablar el idioma. (Field notes, October 10, 2016)

Students developing Critical Thinking

The students were immersed in a series of activities that were sociocultural and political oriented as suggested by Halpern (1996) who asserts that "A forward –looking education must be built on the twin foundations of knowing how to learn and knowing how to think clearly about the proliferating information with which we all have to contend" (p.4). The decisions teachers make in the classroom will affect not only the class, but also generations that come; our students.

Therefore, in the third cycle of this study, I took advantage of a crucial moment our country was facing up, the Peace Process in Colombia, which has been a controversial topic of discussion during the last years. The first thing I did was to elicit information from the students to see how much they knew about it. Since most of them were not well informed about this process, I asked them to be followers of this process during two weeks, just before the plebiscite, and to be ready to participate in a round table session. During the round table students discussed about this topic that requires they move to a higher-level of thinking. The following excerpts correspond to some teacher's field notes and some opinions students wrote in Spanish to answer a questionnaire:

S1. "Yo si estoy más enterado del proceso de paz" (Field notes, October 16, 2016)

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S2. "Es muy difícil decirlo en inglés, porque en español para mí no es tan fácil, pero se aprende mucho" (Questionnaire, October 24, 2016).

S3. "Aparte de aprender sobre este proceso de paz, aprendí mucho vocabulario nuevo en inglés y soy más conciente de la importancia de votar". (Questionnaire, October 24, 2016)

S4. "Me considero una víctima indirecta y directa porque es nuestro país y nos afecta todo lo que pase en el" ((Questionnaire, October 24, 2016).

The above extracts evidenced the students' awareness about events that surrounded their lives, even though most of them had never debated or participated in political issues.

Students expanding local knowledge

Canagarajah (2005) indicates that local knowledge is a "process rather than a product and it is constituted by the beliefs and practices of the past […] the most important is the locality that shapes our social intellectual practice" (p. 3).

Reflecting on Canagarajah's appreciation, I noticed that the development of the sociocultural competence in these students who were strongly influenced by their previous knowledge. It means that students brought to the English classroom knowledge from their fields of study. Let me recall that this group of students belongs to the programs of Civil Engineering, Veterinary and Accounting. Then, they shared in class their personal beliefs, values and experiences during the different activities, and finally their global and local knowledge that includes all the information they possess and express regarding their communities and the world.

In this sub-category, I will highlight some instances, where students expressed their global and local knowledge about social issues:

S1: "Cuando analizamos los diferentes problemas sociales, recordamos que tenemos muchos, lo bueno es que intentamos sugerir soluciones"(Focus group; November 14, 2016)

S2: "Observamos que algunos compañeros están consumiendo drogas, o la han consumido en el pasado, por eso nos llamó la atención este problema".(Field notes; October 17, 2016)

S1:"We know that drug-addiction is a global problem. It does not only happen in Colombia or Ibague" (Field notes; October 31, 2016)

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Teacher shifting from traditional to non-conventional decisions

This project could not be done without considering the teacher's role during the process. Kumaravadivelu (2001) observes that the most relevant key component and the heart of the Postmethod Framework is to empower and promote the teacher's autonomy. It gives him/her the elements to become more confident and able to empower learners to construct their own knowledge.

Following these thoughts, as a language teacher at a higher educational institution, I am aware that one of the challenges we have is to promote competences university students need to improve their quality of life. For these reasons, I generated opportunities for the students to develop a series of interconnected tasks that were designed and implemented according to their needs, English level and the articulation with the English university program. It was necessary the creation of learning environments that foster the students' sociocultural understanding and to continuously analyzed and reflected about the results of each of the tasks. This ongoing process guided me to accomplish the project.

The following excerpts correspond to students' opinions about the change from traditional to non-traditional class:

S1. "Pues a mí me llaman mucho la atención las actividades que realizamos, porque es una forma más de desarrollar la habilidad lingüística y cultural. Si, en lo particular me gustó el cambio es más significativo." (Focus group, November 14, 2016)

S2. "En general aprendimos mucho, sobre todo vocabulario, que en una clase tradicional nunca lo hubiéramos hecho. Si fue una experiencia única." (Focus group, November 14, 2016)

S3. "Pues pienso que es muy bueno, pues algunos de esos temas son interesantes para nosotros y abordarlos en inglés es todo un reto. Digamos, lo cultural, lo político y esto nos obliga a trabajar mejor el idioma. Fue una experiencia significativa y fuimos progresando paso a paso". (Focus group, November 14, 2016)

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Results

Regarding the main question, the findings revealed that this group of university students became more aware of the importance of having the opportunity to develop tasks that led them to connect the

English classroom with the global and local context. They expressed that it should be part of their learning process as future professionals. Additionally, data showed that through the development of the different sociocultural oriented tasks, students activated their previous knowledge, expanded their intercultural competence, and positioned themselves regarding social issues.

With respect to the second question, these students demonstrated that by connecting the English class with their surroundings there were unlimited opportunities for them to move to a higher level of thinking, to create meaningful learning, and to become independent learners (Johnson, 2009). They also recognized that this type of sociocultural activities offered them a unique opportunity because they had to face challenges that led them to generate and expand their linguistic skills and raised their sociocultural awareness.

In relation to the third and last question, the data indicated that teacher plays an important role in the creation of learning environments that should give students the opportunity of exploring, discovering, analyzing and evaluating meaningful information. These were the main features of the tasks and microstrategies implemented during this process to reach the aims of the project.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

After the implementation of the *Raising Cultural consciousness Macrostrategy* taken from the Postmethod Pedagogy through a series of interconnected activities along the academic semester; this group of university students demonstrated a deeper social consciousness about different local-context realities that they brought to the class because they are part of their sociocultural background. They evidenced improvement in the process of being better citizens by opening their minds to social issues. They recognized that they went beyond the classroom walls and found the English learning process more meaningful and challenging. Students believed that this project provided a unique opportunity to share and compare their ideas, values and beliefs about their culture and others' culture.

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Furthermore, students changed their perceptions of the English class. During the execution of the final task, students did not only analyze social issues, they applied surveys, sent letters to official institutions, talked to community's leader and to university's directors; in sum they thought of possible solutions to a problem. Even though some students admitted, it was really challenging to them to do oral

presentations of sociocultural topics, some of them also said, *"We will never forget this experience"*.

From the teacher's perspective, this pedagogical experience has changed my point of view about my role as a teacher, the way I teach, and the way I view students. After this unique experience, I will never be the same teacher. Although, there were some limitations such as the lack of experience in this kind of projects, the time constrains due to the amount of work I had to do. One of the biggest challenges I had to face was how to start the process of raising the students' sociocultural consciousness, and at the same time be in alignment with my institution English program.

To sum up, being an innovator and a critical thinker in education is not an easy job. There are some boundaries in our context; such as, some local policies, lack of resources, similar studies, learners' attitude or interests, time constrains; despite that I started to walk into the sociocultural perspective and I was able to connect the classroom with the global and local context. Thus, when one of the students said *"Teacher esa proeza que tu hiciste de salirte del libro, del tablero, de combinar de llevarnos a un plano más actual, de hacernos pensar como ciudadanos y futuros profesionales, creo que fue lo que hizo más atractivo y se diferenció tu clase de los demás compañeros. El hacer que pensemos más acerca de lo que estamos viviendo y percibiendo creo que ha sido lo más novedoso de lo que nos has enseñado". (Focus group; November 14, 2016).*

I was very excited because in a way he summarized the complexity that implies to become a kind of pioneer innovator in this particular field of the ELT process. Even though, Kumaravadivelu (2003) does not consider the higher education population in his work, and in our local context, these kind of sociocultural projects with a postmethod and sociocultural orientation are scarce. This study shows the process, the results and implications in the Colombian context with undergraduate students.

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