

# EFL Learners' Intercultural Competence Development Through International News<sup>1</sup>

El Fortalecimiento de la Competencia Intercultural de  
Estudiantes de Inglés Mediante Noticias Internacionales

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## Abstract

This case study analyzed how a group of English learners built critical intercultural awareness through the discussion of cultural events as reported in news media such as *The New York Times*, *the U.S. News*, and *The Telegraph*. Learners' critical reflections on controversial social conflicts related to injustice, gender inequality, and stereotypes in different cultures constituted the core data collected through field notes, logs, and one questionnaire. Findings revealed that English learners not only gained new knowledge about beliefs, values, and behaviors that cause conflict in other cultural communities, but compared them critically to their own culture. This research concluded that integrating news in EFL education can be a salient instructional material to help EFL speakers become more critical intercultural individuals through topics belonging to deep culture.

*Key words:* intercultural communicative competence, news, English as a foreign language, EFL learners surface culture, deep culture

## Resumen

Este estudio de caso examinó cómo un grupo de estudiantes de inglés construyó conciencia intercultural crítica mediante la discusión de eventos culturales reportados en varias noticias de periódicos internacionales tales como *The New York Times*, *The U.S. News*, y *The Telegraph*. Las opiniones críticas de los estudiantes sobre temas sociales controversiales como la injusticia, la

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desigualdad de género y los estereotipos en diferentes naciones constituyeron los datos centrales que se recogieron mediante notas de campo, diarios y un cuestionario. Los hallazgos indicaron que los estudiantes de inglés no solamente adquirieron nuevo conocimiento sobre creencias, valores y comportamientos que causan conflicto en otras comunidades culturales, sino que los compararon críticamente con su propia cultura. Esta investigación concluye que la incorporación de noticias en la enseñanza del inglés puede ser un material importante para preparar a los estudiantes a ser individuos interculturales críticos por medio de temas pertenecientes a la cultura profunda.

*Palabras clave:* competencia comunicativa intercultural, noticias, inglés como lengua extranjera, cultura superficial, cultura profunda.

### Resumo

Este estudo de caso examinou como um grupo de estudantes de inglês construiu consciência intercultural crítica mediante a discussão de eventos culturais reportados em várias notícias de jornais internacionais tais como The New York Times, The U.S. News, e The Telegraph. As opiniões críticas dos estudantes sobre temas sociais polêmicos como a injustiça, a desigualdade de gênero e os estereótipos em diferentes nações constituíram os dados centrais que se recolheram mediante anotações de campo, diários e um questionário. As descobertas indicaram que os estudantes de inglês não somente adquiriram um novo conhecimento sobre crenças, valores e comportamentos que causam conflito em outras comunidades culturais, senão que os compararam criticamente com a sua própria cultura. Esta pesquisa conclui que a incorporação de notícias no ensino do inglês pode ser um material importante para preparar os estudantes para serem indivíduos interculturais críticos por meio de temas pertencentes à cultura profunda.

*Palavras chave:* competência comunicativa intercultural, notícias, inglês como língua estrangeira, cultura superficial, cultura profunda.

## Introduction

*I*ntercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been a focus of inquiry in EFL education over the past two decades, since one of the current learning goals is to train EFL learners to build intercultural communication with individuals coming from multiple cultural settings. Verbal communication and linguistic forms are no longer the only aspects to be learned in the language classroom. Lázár (2003) states that foreign language teaching should emphasize “intercultural consciousness and intercultural skills” of “discovery of ‘the other’” (p. 7). Similarly, the CEF<sup>4</sup> (2001) states that learning a language implies “to discover otherness— whether the other is another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge” (p. 12). Thus, there is a need to prepare language learners to become interculturally competent in an increasing globalized world (Byram, 1997; Lázár, Lussier, & Christian 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2003; Moeller & Nugent, 2014).

Framed within an intercultural perspective, this research study claims that one significant way to help EFL learners develop critical intercultural awareness is through the discussion of international news, since news articles contain controversial issues belonging to the level of *deep culture*, namely social inequality, power, racism, and prejudice in many countries. Furthermore, this research study claims that news is authentic language that can enable EFL learners to use the foreign language more meaningfully while building ICC at a critical level. In this sense, four EFL learners took part in this case study who engaged in building their ICC with the support of news articles from *The New York Times*, *the U.S. News*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Telegraph*, all available in the Internet. An in-depth description of how these learners started to develop ICC in the target language through issues of deep culture is analyzed here.

### Statement of the problem

Despite the fact that almost 20 years ago influential authors, including Kramsch (1993), Byram (1997), and Lázár (2003), stated the importance of fostering ICC in EFL education, more work needs to be done in the present to ensure that our teaching practices in Latin American countries not only place special emphasis on the study of grammar and communicative functions, but also on intercultural communication. Many EFL classrooms have failed to incorporate intercultural topics to prepare learners to become part of a global society (Mai Hoa, 2011; Hesar et al. 2012) because teachers mainly teach *surface culture*, underlining static, representative, and visible elements of the target

culture such as festivals, tourist destinations/landmarks, celebrities, and typical food (Hinkel, 2001). However, these visible aspects of culture will never prepare learners to encounter cultural identity, difference, and culture shock in real communication. Hanvey (1979), cited by Shaules (2007), affirms that superficial or “shallow intercultural experiences,” i.e. tourism, food, and architecture only “involve the explicit” (p. 98) understanding of facts that other cultures proudly celebrate. Therefore, there is an imperative need to recognize that culture cannot longer be studied from celebratory perspectives only, assuming that it is always fixed, archetypal, and happy. Quite to the contrary, EFL teachers must start preparing EFL learners to observe that, as Greenblatt (1995) and Levy (2007) suggest, culture is transformative and evolves in time and, in many occasions, is chaotic and conflictive up to the point that it revolts long-established norms. Such is the case of traditional conceptions on women’s chastity and the sacred value of marriage which have not only changed significantly over the past 50 years, but have caused conflict and resistance among older and younger generations that strive for keeping or refusing those cultural rules.

In order to adopt a more critical and realistic approach to the study other cultures in the foreign language, this research study attempted to enhance a group of EFL learners’ ICC through international news, authentic materials that portray deep cultural content, ideologies, and beliefs that differ from one country to another. Radio, TV, printed, and Internet news keep people informed about the social, political, and cultural events that happen around the world. Hence, they can be useful material to enhance critical ICC.

## Theoretical framework

### Deep Culture

Deep culture or invisible culture can be understood as those complex meanings related to the norms, worldviews, beliefs, values, and ideologies that, in general terms, are shared by a group or community (Hinkel, 2001, p. 444). These cultural meanings are complex and many times conflictive because the fact that they are adopted and sometimes imposed in a given community does not necessarily mean that all the members of that community accept and obey them. There is always exception to the cultural norm depending on diverse social, economic, ideological, and even personal views and circumstances. For instance, there is the cultural value in many countries that children have the right to education. However, because of poverty and social disadvantages, many children are forced to work long hours in order to support their

family subsistence. Therefore, while many families value education as a privilege for children to succeed in life, and have the means to afford it, some others, who do not have money, value hard work as an honest and dignified cultural practice to make the most of their lives. Hence, deep cultural meanings are relative because they are transformed by people over time (Greenblatt, 1995) and can be whether individual or collective, context-dependent, and transformative as they are not always suitable and homogenous for all the members of a nation.

### **Intercultural communicative competence in EFL education**

ICC is a difficult term to define because it is part of an ongoing discussion conducted by several authors and fields (Moeller and Nugent, 2014). In EFL/ESL<sup>3</sup> education, ICC is understood as “the ability to cope with one’s own cultural background in interaction with others” who “hold different linguistic codes” and “different sets of values and models of the world” (Lázár, 2004, p. 9). It involves language learners’ capacity to accept other perceptions of the world and be aware of other peoples’ differences and ways of seeing life (Byram 1997; Byram et al., 2009). According to Byram (1997), ICC is developed in social interaction during the process of communication. The language learner necessarily has to use the foreign language to learn about and cope with deep, maybe strange, and even conflictive cultural values during the process of meaning negotiation.

ICC cannot be enhanced by just identifying and learning by heart lists of general facts of surface culture such as tourist places, holidays, historical events, food, etc. By contrast, ICC requires a deep and “dynamic interactive process of intercultural relationships” as individuals from different cultures confront “a relatively more abstract level of cultural difference, ...develop empathy (the ability to look at things from the perspective of our cultural hosts), and learn to construct cultural difference better” (Shaules, 2007, p. 100).

Because ICC is necessarily linked to the process of communication, EFL teachers in Latin-American countries might think that ICC development is a hard, almost impossible task to be accomplished, since the majority of learners have a few or no opportunities to interact with citizens from other cultures of the world to establish real intercultural communication. Moreover, it is a fact, that most of English teachers in EFL settings are neither native speakers, nor members of the Anglo-Saxon culture. Therefore, creating actual intercultural relationships and communication in EFL education is still complicated.

<sup>3</sup> EFL: English as a foreign language/ ESL: English as a second language.

However, Byram (1997) clarifies that in educational contexts the intercultural speaker can actually make evaluative analysis of “documents” and “events” to become aware of conflicts and ideologies, and understand “explicit and implicit values” in one’s own and others’ cultures (p. 63). Not only learning about culture through oral interaction, but also through reading and analyzing culture-based “documents” (such as news featuring real language and “cultural events”), constitute a point of departure to help learners develop ICC in EFL classrooms.

As ICC is still a topic of constant debate and research, it has been lately associated with the notion of *global literacy*. In fact, Kumaravadivelu (2008) calls it global cultural consciousness, Bennet (2008) and Fantini (2010) call it global competence, and Focho (2011) names it global literacy. Bennet (2008) and Fantini (2010) clarify that although ICC is being used with diverse names by authors from different fields, those names ultimately aim at accomplishing a shared goal: the ability to cope with cultural differences in a more globalized society. In this sense, ICC or global literacy involves the social skills to acquire critical understanding of current national and international events in order to function effectively as a “world-minded person” (Schuerholz-Lehr, 2007, p. 183). It represents a social concern about global controversial conflicts that affect humankind in general regarding race, religion, gender, and social clashes. That is why several researchers, including Nakamura (2002), Revelo (2008), and Focho (2011), support intercultural awareness and global communication in EFL classrooms so that students are instructed on democratic values, human rights, and respecting “difference” in a world that is still intolerant and prejudiced.

### **The *saviors* of intercultural communicative competence**

Byram’s (1997) ICC, an educational model designed for foreign language teaching, consists of three components or *saviors* (Byram, 1997):

1. *Knowledge* of surface culture (emblematic and easy observable elements) and knowledge of deep culture (not easy observable beliefs, values, and ideologies).
2. *Skills of discovery, of relating, and of interpreting* that enable the intercultural speaker/reader to compare and contrast cultural meanings that are different and unknown to him/her.
3. *Attitudes* (openness, readiness, and curiosity) that lead the intercultural person to appreciate and deal with strange cultural practices in a more flexible and positive way.

With these three *saviors*, all interrelated and interdependent, ESL/EFL intercultural learners should build an additional *savoir* that Byram (1997) calls *critical intercultural awareness*, which is the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and others' culture.

### **The role of news in EFL education**

Most of published research on using news in EFL education has been mainly directed to help learners improve the four language skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) as well as grammar and vocabulary (Gebhard, 1996; Nunan, 1999). Such are the cases of prominent EFL teacher (Teng, 2015; Bahrani and Tam, 2012; Cross, 2011; Berber, 1997) who have conducted relevant research on how news articles can support communicative competence development.

However, Moglen (2014) says that because of the limited inclusion of news in ESL/EFL learning processes, further research is required. Hence, Moglen's statement led this research study to examine the integration of news articles in the EFL classroom from a different standpoint: one that was not only concerned about how international news could contribute to improve language competence, but also build EFL learners' critical ICC, since little research has been conducted from this intercultural perspective. News can motivate EFL learners to listen to, read, speak, and write critically about the problems of real life in different nations because one of their "main advantages" is to include "authentic cultural information" (Berardo, 2006 p. 64). Byram et al. (2002) equally suggest that "newspapers with different political or cultural perspectives" can be a "rich source" to "promote the intercultural dimension" (p. 23) when learners are encouraged to examine them from a critical perspective. Similarly, Peterson and Bronwyn (2003), Kukulaska-Hulme (2010), Dema and Moeller (2012), and Bastami (2013) indicate that news articles, magazines, and videos are authentic sources to analyze cultural events that happen in other nations of the world.

International news is the product of many cultural groups that can lead learners to identify deep-rooted social aspects and social struggles that members of a community are not even aware of (Frank, 2013). Learners can be encouraged to identify which values, beliefs, and ideologies on race, gender, power, sex, morality, etc. influence or dominate foreign cultures. Also, news can motivate learners to analyze how those cultural ideologies transform and evolve in time and space and differ from one country to another. These contents can help

learners to enhance intercultural awareness critically as they can start to consider how to eradicate expressions of hatred, exclusion, and human rights violation, while, in turn, become intercultural speakers of modern civilization.

## Methodology

### Research design

Based on Merriam's (2004) and Yin's (2003) guidelines on research design, this was a qualitative case study that examined in-depth and analyzed how a small group of Colombian EFL learners fostered their ICC while being asked to provide critical reflections on several controversial cultural issues reported in international news sources (see Table 1). The research question leading this study was: How could international news enhance a group of EFL speakers' intercultural communicative competence?

### Participants

Four Colombian university EFL learners participated in this case study, all having different degrees and lifestyles, but sharing a common reason to study English: They wanted to improve their English level because they had been offered jobs and study opportunities abroad. Margarita<sup>4</sup> was a 30-year-old English teacher who was planning to travel to the USA to pursue a master's Degree. Violeta, was a 28-year-old computer technician who had been offered a job in the USA. Anahí was a 26-year-old student of modern languages at a university who was doing the paperwork to apply for a University in England. Camilo was a 28-year-old student who needed to study English as a requirement to finish his undergraduate studies. These learners had an intermediate English proficiency level (B1<sup>5</sup>) according to the CEFR because they had already taken several English courses in the past. However, they still needed to improve accuracy, fluency, and pronunciation.

<sup>4</sup> The names of the participants are pseudonyms as their real identity has been protected for ethical and research reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Level B1: According to The Common European Framework of References to Languages, B1 indicates that the speaker "can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken ... Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans." (2001, p. 24).

## Setting

This case study was conducted in the context of a conversation club where participants addressed critical discussion of cultural contents as depicted in international news. The conversation club was scheduled on Saturdays' afternoons from Mach 05 to May 07 of 2016. In the first meeting, students were invited to start creating awareness of how they could become better intercultural speakers, and were tutored on some initial notions of the term ICC based on Byram's model. Then, they were informed that they were going to read authentic news from *The New York Times*, *the U.S. News*, *CNN*, and *The Washington Times* (See Table 1) in English as a means to start building ICC.

**Table 1.** News discussed in the conversation club

Session	Topic/ news	News articles discussed	News source/Materials
1	Understanding The concept of ICC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Definition of ICC</li> <li>- How we can foster ICC</li> <li>- Why it is important to become a critical intercultural speaker in a globalized world.</li> </ul>	Teacher's presentation and students' participation
2	Race relations in the USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "America has a big race problem" (Nesbit, 2016).</li> <li>- "Race and Reality in America: Five key findings" (Agiesta, 2015)</li> </ul>	<i>U.S. News</i> <i>CNN</i>
3	Islamic Sharia <sup>6</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "The ugly truth about Sharia law" (Riddell, 2016)</li> </ul>	<i>The Washington Times</i>
4	Teens' views of marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "Marriage 'no longer the foundation stone of family life'" (Bingham, 2013)</li> <li>- "Now, the Bad News on Teenage Marriage" (Kershaw, 2008)</li> </ul>	<i>The Telegraph</i> <i>The New York Times</i>

## Data collection instruments

In the follow-up sessions, participants came prepared with the reading of the news (See Table 1) as they had previously done reading tasks in some worksheets (artifacts) containing questions that arose concern about topics of deep culture. They read the news individually in order to start creating cultural awareness and come to the conversation club with initial reactions and opinions to share with and analyze with their partners. Through the analysis of different news, they started to understand and discuss cultural ideologies, values, and beliefs, and gradually became more reflective intercultural learners while using the foreign language. Three topics were chosen at random to be analyzed in this article (see Table 1). However, students discussed other topics during the experience.

<sup>6</sup> Islamic Sharia: a religious law of the Islamic tradition. Sharia means "God's divine law." Its application in modern times has caused debate between traditionalist and reformist Muslims.

To answer the research question, three data collection instruments were used: The researcher took field notes every single meeting supported by audio-recordings. After each session, the notes and the recordings were reviewed several times in order to complement the notes related to learners' critical comments on culture generated during the discussion of the news. Artifacts (worksheets) were the second data collection instrument (see Appendix A) on which participants wrote personal opinions about the news before and after each club session. These artifacts contained a link to the news available in the Internet and several questions that headed participants to express their personal reactions about conflictive cultural topics reflected in the news. The third instrument was a questionnaire that encouraged participants to respond freely open and closed-ended questions linked to the main subject being investigated (Wallace, 2006). This instrument was administered when the conversation club finished.

### **Data analysis**

Content analysis (Dawson, 2002) was used to analyze the data collected. Field notes were analyzed first, a step that required reading the data many times until patterns related to participants' similar reflections on aspects of deep culture were identified. For instance, data showed participants' repetitive and similar comments on the new cultural information that they were learning through the news and that they did not know about before. Thus, the researcher grouped and classified these patterns into an initial category called: *Learning about unknown cultural practices and beliefs*. Initial categories represented the sets of patterns found and associated with ICC development in the conversation club. As triangulation (Freeman, 1998) is a required procedure in the analysis of qualitative data, the patterns in the field notes were later compared to participants' opinions in the artifacts and in the questionnaire in order to confirm if similar patterns and initial categories related to ICC were present in all the three data collection instruments. Once having a set of patterns and pre-categories, final categories arose which were lastly refined and restated as findings.

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### **Findings**

*News helped EFL speakers to learn about controversial beliefs and practices that belonged to deep culture.*

A significant finding was that, instead of simply learning about emblematic and "shallow" (Shaules, 2007) information of surface

culture such as holidays, tourist places, and typical food, the learners recognized that they learned about controversial cultural traditions and complicated beliefs of deep culture that are popular and socially accepted in other nations, but that these learners did not know about and found them difficult to understand and appreciate. For example, when discussing the news on race relations in the US, Anahí affirmed that after reading the news articles “America has a big race problem” (Nesbit, 2016) and “Race and Reality in America: Five key findings” (Agiesta, 2015), she learned that there had been a civil war in the US in the past because of race issues. She also said that after doing more research about this topic, she found out that this war had been caused because of ideological positions about slavery as a legitimate institution in southern states. Anahí said that the “southern states approved slavery because whites saw black people as inferior beings while northern states defended the abolition of slavery because it was an unjust practice” (field notes, March 26).

Similarly, Violeta said that this news article mentioned the words “Jim Crow Laws” in the sentence “We’ve certainly made substantial progress since the repeal of the Jim Crow laws. But we also clearly have substantial work to do in America” (Nesbit, 2016). She admitted that although the news explained the current racial tension between whites and African-Americans in the USA, the “Jim Crow Law” was not a clear term for her. So, she needed to do research to understand it. She said that she had found out that this law was a “policy of segregating or discriminating against black people at public places, on public transportation, or employment from 1876 and 1965” based on the idea that “black people were seen as inferior and animals” (field notes, March 26). She also reported that the article denounced that racist and segregating attitudes towards black people still continued in the USA in the present times as Americans’ ideologies about whites as a superior race hadn’t changed much since then.

New knowledge about controversial topics of deep culture was also gained when learners read the news “The ugly truth about Sharia law” (Riddell, 2016), since learners affirmed that they had never heard about this law before. For instance, Camilo commented that he had learned from the news that the “Sharia law was a legal code based on the Quoran that controlled the lives of people living in the middle east like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan” (field notes, March 26). Margarita equally stated that she had learned that “the Sharia law was a strict law that punished Muslims with death if they disobeyed religious beliefs listed in the Quoran” (Margarita’s worksheet, March 26).

The previous examples evidenced that these EFL learners started to develop ICC through international news as they were aware that these documents enabled them to gain new cultural knowledge about contentious viewpoints and behaviors related to race, segregation, domination, and religion as conceived by other groups different from their own cultural environment. As proposed by Byram's (1997) model of ICC, these learners became intercultural speakers who gained the *savoir knowledge* as they learned about sociopolitical facts when being encouraged to confront abstract and ingrained elements of culture in the news, instead of dealing with celebratory and easy observable elements of culture. In fact, data in the questionnaires showed learners' recognition of the significant role of the news as authentic material to help them build new intercultural knowledge:

I knew there was slavery in the USA in the past, but I had never known about the division between the southern and the northern states and about the Jim Crow law, and how that law had influenced racist attitudes in the present times. All that information is new for me, and is hard to deal with (Violeta's questionnaire, May 7).

The news about the Sharia law in the Middle East is new information for me. I never paid attention to the news reporting about problems of domination in Saudi Arabia and Syria due to religious beliefs that control and subject people unjustly . . . That news were not important for me then. (Margarita's questionnaire, May 7).

According to data, learners admitted that they had never paid attention to those conflictive behaviors and ideologies reported in foreign news because they had never been interested in intercultural issues. Moreover, data indicated that learners started to be interested in global issues, leading them to become more world-minded citizens who were concerned about unjust conflicts that have affected humankind through history. The four speakers stated that this was the first time in their lives that they had learned about cultural clashes in other foreign cultures in a deeper and more realistic way, this being evidence of their initial ICC development in the foreign language as they became aware of other cultural realities that are not always congratulatory and emblematic in other nations.

*News led EFL learners to interpret and evaluate controversial ideologies from other cultures.*

These participants not only gained *knowledge* of other cultures' practices, but *interpreted* and *evaluated* critically the events reported in the international news by expressing their opinions about implicit meanings of deep culture. Such was the case when learners read the

news “The ugly truth about Sharia law” (Riddell, 2016), since they assumed a critical position about the fact that the members of the Islamic group ISIS<sup>7</sup> used the Sharia law to murder homosexuals through cruel and inhumane practices. Camilo said that it was shocking for him that “ISIS was a powerful militant group that pushed gays from the roofs or stoned them to death in public places in Syria” (Field notes, April 2). As a language learner dealing with complex cultural ideologies about sexuality and gender, Camilo was critical to say that it was unjust how straight men manipulated a religious law to kill, in the name of God, those who had a different sexual orientation. Anahí also pointed out critically the following:

The news says that children were incited by angry mobs to stone homosexual to death in Syria. I don’t agree with how adults involve children in these cruel practices that go against human rights. Children should not learn to be cruel and hate others who are different (Anahí’s worksheet, April 2)

These critical reflections show that learners questioned how complex ideologies about gender and sexuality, already adopted by many Muslims through the Sharia law, were used to exert power and violence against minority groups. Anahí questioned the fact how deep-rooted traditions about sexuality in other nations perpetuated the cultural belief that sexual diversity was immoral. In her opinion, it was a mistake that adults encouraged children to murder those neighbors who were different.

Violeta, on her part, was critical about another conflictive gender issue reported in some news:

I read in other related news that the Sharia Law also oppressed women in Muslims countries, and that many men have distorted the meaning of this law to dominate women. I think this is a dangerous practice because Muslim women will never have the right to be independent in their own countries (Violeta’s worksheet, April 2).

Violeta’s critical statement referred to how some Muslims cultural groups have twisted the initial principles of the Sharia law in order to establish patriarchal hegemony on women through intimidation and physical abuse. These reflections showed that learners analyzed how the Arab world has different cultural viewpoints and values about human rights, respect for life, equality, and justice, and how many children are indoctrinated by the cultural construct that homophobia and misogyny are normal ideologies of their national identity.

<sup>7</sup> ISIS: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

ICC was also developed critically with topics of deep culture that were more closely related to learners' own lives and expectations. When reading the news "Marriage 'no longer the foundation stone of family life'" (Bingham, 2013) and "Now, the Bad News on Teenage Marriage" (Kershaw, 2008), learners were also critical about marriage as a deep-rooted tradition in many cultures. Margarita stated that the news informed that the traditional belief in having sex and children only after getting married had almost disappeared in Great Britain because young generations had become more individualistic and had embraced their own moral code about marriage (field notes, April 9). Camilo added to the discussion that, according to the news, 48% of teenagers in Great Britain who married before 18 tended to divorce within 10 years. Clashing views took place about this topic because, while Margarita and Anahí believed that teenagers should follow the traditional norms to have sexual relations and children after getting married, Camilo and Violeta argued that marriage was just an imposed norm, and that there should not be any kind of impediment for young couples to have sexual relations before getting married. Similarly, Margarita and Anahí defended the idea that "if a couple really loved, they should marry because it was a serious decision to confirm real love and commitment." Camilo and Violeta counter-argued that "real love did not require a legal marriage, and that marriage never guaranteed true love and happiness" (Field notes, April 9).

It can be observed that the news caused adverse reactions based on participants' individual and collective values on marriage. The fact that two participants defended traditional views on marriage and the other two had more liberal opinions constituted a clear example of how learners addressed conflictive topics of deep culture, since they discovered that beliefs about marriage have changed over time, and that marriage is not always a fixed, congratulatory, and shared cultural practice. In the questionnaires, learners wrote that this topic was an important deep cultural issue that enhanced their ICC because they were influenced by their cultural and personal views on marriage.

198 In general, this finding showed that learners interpreted and evaluated critically controversial themes and values from other cultures associated with power, discrimination, gender, and marriage. They not only became intercultural learners through the incorporation of news in the English learning process, but were able to use the foreign language to discuss those complex cultural meanings at a critical level.

News empowered learners to compare cultural practices between their own and other cultures.

Data in the field notes and the questionnaire showed that learners, as intercultural individuals, were able to compare cultural values and behaviors among other cultures and their own as presented in the news while questioning what they believed were morally right or wrong. For instance, the news about racism and racial tension in today's US, allowed them to analyze how stereotypes imposed on African-Americans were similar to those imposed on black people in their own country, Colombia:

Many American think that blacks are dirty, lazy, and less intelligent than whites. It is a similar opinion we have of blacks in our country (Field notes, March 26).

We are racist when we reject black people and say they are lazy and "bullisiosos." We create bad opinions about them and these classifications ruin their life conditions without better opportunities ... Also, Americans have similar unjust opinions about blacks (Camilo's artifact, March 26).

Learners were able to discuss cultural stereotypes assigned to black people in two different cultural sites associated with low levels of intelligence and negative traits of their personality. Learners recognized that they, like many other people, created pejorative and insulting perceptions of other cultural groups without justification. They became aware that the spread of these generalized stereotypes ultimately defamed and marginalized blacks, and that their opportunities to improve their life conditions in a world controlled by the western white hegemony were reduced due to racist labels. Learners concluded that Colombia was also a racist country that despised and marginalized minority groups such as blacks and indigenous people.

Furthermore, the discussion about the current racial tension in the US and the historical research that these learners did about slavery in the American south in the past, led them to establish relationships about the history of slavery in Colombia:

There was slavery in Colombia, too, as you know. Spanish people brought many African people as soon as they colonized us, I think in the XVI century. Spanish not only slaved Africans, but all the Indian tribes, and they raped women and killed blacks and Indians who disobeyed their rules (Camilo, Field notes based on audio recordings, March 26).

Learners found out and compared similar ideological, but unfair and questionable views about slavery and racial discrimination imposed and practiced as normal precepts in two distinct cultural settings in

the past. The fact that they criticized those ideological precepts show how these learners were able to discuss deep and conflictive cultural concepts about race that have transformed through the history of these two nations, but that still affect negatively the situation of many African-Americans and African-Colombian citizens who continue being discriminated in the present because of racist attitudes that still prevail in today's societies.

Interestingly, Margarita and Anahí said that in the same way that some Colombian people discriminated against other ethnic communities, including blacks, indigenous groups, and *mulatos*, Colombians and Latinos were, in turn, discriminated against by whites in the US, since Latinos often suffered from derogatory stereotypes and were looked down when they went to that country (Field notes, March 26). Moreover, learners discussed that racist positions in the US were even worse than in Colombia because the news reported several cases in which some white Americans had killed black people in the US, like the case in South Carolina where a white man went into a black church during a bible study and killed nine black parishioners in 2015. This event led learners to not only discuss that racism is a problem in many nations, including their own culture, but that hatred was an immoral practice that generated murders against minority groups in the US. Learners analyzed how an overdeveloped country such as the US still had conflicts related to race and multiculturalism.

Another example that showed how learners made comparisons between their own culture and the British culture was when they discussed the two pieces of news about the decline of marriage in England:

I conclude that young generations in England and in Colombia have more liberal views on marriage. Many don't want to marry and they have sex before getting married. The concept of the family has changed. Young people want to have sex and enjoy life before they marry (Margarita's artifact, April 9).

Our culture is influenced by the liberal views on marriage in other countries such as England and the US. Marriage is not the first option to have a family. Many have sexual relations and have children without getting married. Thus, marriage is not that sacred like it was in the past (Violeta's questionnaire, May 7).

Data indicate that language learners were able to compare deep cultural meanings and practices as they questioned how England, the US, and Colombia have changed strict traditions of marriage and the concept of the family through time. These comparisons generated

controversial discussion about how younger generations are breaking traditional moral standards and how culture transforms over time. These cultural comparisons also evidenced how EFL learners developed ICC when being encouraged to study conflictive and deep cultural topics through critical approaches based on debate and contestation, rather than studying neutral and representative aspects of surface culture.

### **Limitations of the study**

The short time to collect data was one of the main limitations due to the fact that participants lacked time to meet more often. They had to work and study during week days, so the only possibility was to hold the conversation club on Saturdays. However, this case study represents a further practical step of how EFL learners can enhance critical ICC through different materials and resources.

It is also important to clarify that this research project identified aspects that indicated how participants were able to enhance initial levels of intercultural awareness because it cannot be assured that they became complete intercultural learners with this single experience. The conversation club was an educational space, a sort of artificial context that attempted to create awareness of diverse cultural beliefs and ideologies belonging to deep culture. ICC is fluid and context-dependent, and participants were not exposed to real intercultural exchanges with people from other cultures in which they might have behaved and reacted differently as intercultural speakers. Therefore, in EFL classrooms, intercultural competence should be understood as “a model for the acquisition of ICC in an educational context [that] includes educational objectives because it has educational dimensions; it includes specifications of locations of learning and of the roles of the teacher and learner” (Byram, 1997, p. 70). In fact, the conversation club in which this study was conducted held educational specifications and objectives: The role of news articles as authentic culture-based materials to enhance English learners’ ICC in an EFL context. More research on incorporating news and other documents in EFL education to develop ICC is needed in larger educational settings in Colombia.

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### **Conclusions**

This research study indicates that including news in the EFL context can enhance learners’ ICC development at a critical level. News are authentic language in use that can increase cultural understanding of controversial events and ideologies of deep culture,

namely discrimination, racism, misogyny, homophobia, prejudice, and stereotypes that continue affecting human relationships in a so-called globalized society.

This study showed that the news reported by *U.S. News*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Times*, *The Clarion Project*, and *The Telegraph* helped EFL learners to develop relevant aspects of their ICC. They acquired *knowledge* of the current political and social climate and identity of several countries. They enhanced some *critical skills*, including interpreting, comparing, and analyzing individual and collective behaviors, actions, and beliefs in their own culture and other foreign cultures, such as England, the US, and Syria. The third aspect is that learners created *attitudes*, namely readiness and empathy for other human beings that not only suffered from social injustice and prejudice, but whose lives were subjected to strict cultural norms.

This research claims that encouraging learners to become intercultural through controversial topics of deep culture and through the incorporation of real world events reported in the news should be a more common practice in EFL education. It is a fact that EFL materials and topics to learn about target cultures often include emblematic, happy, and surface elements of culture, but those materials rarely encourage learners to discuss issues of identity, prejudice, social injustice, oppression, and power which also shape and transform all cultural groups worldwide. Helping learners foster their ICC requires more work in the English classroom. News is one of the potential options that can facilitate it. However, the debate is open to find other possible resources that may enhance ICC so that students can be prepared to participate actively in intercultural communication. Learning a language does not only mean to learn the linguistic system, but to act as intercultural speakers that understand, deal with, and resist, if necessary, cultural boundaries in a world that is still a long way from really being an intercultural and a more inclusive globalized space.

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## Appendix A

Sample of data collection instruments, Artifact: Worksheet 1

### Topic: Race relations in the US

Read the news about race tensions in the US today in the following web page:

“America has a big race problem” (Nesbit, 2016).

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-28/america-has-a-big-race-problem>

### Critical opinions based on reading

1. What cultural information does the news article contain about issues of race in the US?
2. What causes the race tension between whites and African-Americans in the US? Why does this tension continue in the present?
3. What stereotypes have been created about African-Americans' identity and race? Why?
4. What is your personal opinion about the race conflicts in the US? Is it right or wrong?
5. What information was new for you in terms of ideologies and beliefs about race in the US?