EFL Learners' Perceptions About Language Learning and Culture When Using Telecollaboration

Percepciones de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera acerca del aprendizaje del lenguaje y la cultura mediante la telecolaboración en el aula

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This phenomenological study explores students' perceptions about the relationship between foreign language learning and culture when using telecollaboration. Three main concerns underlie this work: the lack of studies that explore how students perceive the relationship between foreign language learning and culture in the local context, the need to explore the incidence of culture in language learning, and the role of telecollaboration in cultural exchange. Data were collected through questionnaires, focus groups, video recordings, field notes, and students' artifacts. The findings show students' understanding of the nature of language situated within functional and humanistic perspectives. Furthermore, participants alluded to the importance of language learning as a means to understand the scope of culture and cultural identity.

Keywords: cultural awareness, English as a foreign language, language learning, telecollaboration

Este estudio fenomenológico explora las percepciones de unos estudiantes sobre la relación entre el aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero y la cultura, mediante la telecolaboración. Tres problemáticas guiaron este trabajo: la falta de investigaciones sobre cómo perciben los estudiantes la relación entre el aprendizaje de idiomas y la cultura dentro del contexto local; la necesidad de explorar la incidencia de la cultura en el aprendizaje de idiomas; y el papel de la telecolaboración en intercambios culturales. Los datos se recogieron de cuestionarios, grupos focales, videos, diarios de campo y trabajos de estudiantes. Los hallazgos muestran que los estudiantes comprenden la naturaleza del lenguaje en perspectivas funcionales y humanistas. Además, los participantes reconocen la importancia del aprendizaje de idiomas como medio para entender el alcance de la cultura y la identidad cultural.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje de una lengua, conciencia cultural, inglés como lengua extranjera, telecolaboración

Introduction

One theoretical issue that has dominated the study of human social interaction concerns the relevance of language and communication as key aspects of cultural development and awareness. The debate about how language acquisition may influence cultural changes and development is still taking place in the field of language education. On account of this increased interest in the role of cultural identity and awareness, the acknowledgment of learners' perceptions regarding the relationship between language learning and culture has contributed to the understanding of foreign cultures and the recognition of local ideologies (Álvarez & Bonilla, 2009).

The emerging role of culture in language learning nowadays acknowledges that communication implies the recognition of cultural aspects and diversity (McConachy, 2018). In Colombia, authors like Turizo and Gómez (2006) suggest that the relationship between language learning and culture in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context has been overlooked and barely observed. In addition, as stated by Álvarez and Bonilla (2009), one of the most frequent problems in foreign language teaching is that students' engagement in English learning seems to be far from the recognition of Otherness and the development of their cultural identity.

Statement of the Problem

The lack of opportunities to learn the foreign language together with culture was the case of the private school we chose as the setting of this research. Although it is not a bilingual school, it places an emphasis on English and students are exposed to this foreign language ten hours per week. Based on our observations and the analysis of the main principles established in the bilingual scheme of the school's educational project, we perceived that school policies were more concerned about developing communicative competence rather than about

giving students opportunities to engage in cultural understanding.

The problem is supported, understandably, by the school's particular interest in preparing students and requiring teachers to invest a lot of class time in national and international examinations. Besides, the school policies favor methodological approaches like total physical response, the natural approach, and the communicative approach, which barely help students and teachers to explore the critical role of culture as a component in the construction of learners' cultural identity. Due to the lack of opportunities to use language for intercultural purposes, students seemed to be more interested in learning the language to obtain economic benefits, develop professional potentials, or build international relationships.

This qualitative research attempted to look into students' perceptions about the relationship between language learning and culture in the EFL context, and to enrich the recognition of the local culture in the learning setting. Understanding the methodological approach of our study, and the basis of its development, we set the following research question: How do sixth graders at a Colombian private school perceive the relationship between language learning and culture when using telecollaboration in an EFL context?

We also established the following objectives: (a) to identify and describe students' perceptions about language learning, (b) to identify and describe students' perceptions about culture, and (c) to describe the relationship that students make between language learning and culture.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Considerations Related to the Notion of Language Learning

Historically, the assumptions for teaching and learning have directly influenced and expanded the

scope and nature of language learning and language itself. Theorists have associated the notion of language learning with different areas of discussion, and widely varying perceptions of the concept have emerged. This attempt to define how languages are learned, assessed, and promoted has its roots in theories such as behaviorism (Skinner, 1957) and the universal grammar (Chomsky, 1959). The initial perspectives on language learning were understood as the mastering of linguistic components such as grammar, phonology, or vocabulary.

Although this linguistic view of language is still outstanding within the theories of language, more recently, other factors influencing language learning have addressed a myriad of perspectives on the nature of language. Tudor (2001), for example, examines the scope of the notion of language not only constituted as a linguistic system but also as grounded in functional, humanistic, and cultural perspectives. According to Tudor, the variety of beliefs, attitudes, and experiences that students bring to the classroom are paramount in their understanding of the nature of language itself and how language learning is perceived.

Recently, the language learning view has shifted from a grammatical system to a notion that addresses the learners' interaction in diverse cultural contexts and how communication is shaped in response to the phenomenon of globalization (Scarino, 2014). Scarino states that the nature of using and learning languages nowadays recognizes the students' diversity, the diverse languages they speak, and the variety of contexts where the learning goals are meant to be achieved. This assumption relates to Tudor's (2001) point of view about the importance of taking into account what students bring to the classroom, and also resonates in Vygotsky's (1978) interpretation of language as a social construction which emphasizes the exchange, interpretation, and creation of meaning embedded to the recognition of cultural phenomena and practices of the individual.

From this perspective, the conception of language learning is not reduced to the production of words or sentences in the target language but focuses on the process of interpretation (Scarino, 2014). However, Scarino also highlights the importance of expanding the views of learning, language, and culture as different but correlated notions in language learning. While learning refers to the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge itself, language addresses the understanding of linguistic codes and systems. However, the notion of culture stands as the basis for the creation and exchange of meaning within language learning.

Culture

As the review of the literature shows, the construct of culture has been studied from different perspectives. For the presentation of our results, the conceptualization of culture is informed by the understanding of *how* it is acquired, *what* aspects it is composed of, and *why* is it important to know about it. The first one describes that culture is directly or indirectly transmitted and individually or cooperatively transferred from one generation to another. The second one relates to the cultural aspects that individuals recognize from the geographical position, the national or local attributes, and some characteristics like beliefs, values, and behaviors. Finally, the third aspect conceives the importance of understanding individuals' emic and etic perspectives about one's and others' cultural ideologies.

Culture is not homogeneous and established; it constantly changes, and it is important to understand its transformation (Trujillo, 2002). However, only in the past two decades have studies of language acquisition directly addressed the critical role of culture through language teaching and learning (Baker, 2009; Barletta, 2009; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Kramsch, 2013). The importance of learners' language performance in relation to their understanding of the target language culture and their own is an increasingly important area of concern for language learning nowadays.

Culture in Language Learning

As noted by Kramsch (1998), the historical and social layers of culture have combined to address the sociocultural context of language study, and so, culture plays a crucial role in language learning and teaching. In Gulbinskienė and Lasauskienė's (2014) words, when studying foreign languages, learners convey the internalization of both linguistic and cultural systems. Moran (2001) situates the cultural dimension by means of *products*, *practices*, *perspectives*, *communities*, and *persons*, which correlate to the use of language as depending on those scenarios.

Since it has been positioned within the understanding of individuals' social interaction, the conceptualization of culture is of interest in language education. In this study, we aim to explore and understand participants' perspectives on language learning and culture as a result of their own experiences as learners and the development of cultural reflections in the process.

Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom in Colombia

Of particular concern in our study is to explore how culture has been approached in the foreign language classroom, as well as the inclusion of cultural goals into the curriculum of language teaching in Colombia. Since language has been acknowledged to be a social process, the essence of the study of culture in language learning and teaching is related to cultural products framed within geography, celebrations, or history. Nonetheless, a variety of definitions of culture has currently addressed and recognized social and humanistic perspectives. The recognition of individuals' experiences, their ways of thinking and beliefs are now remarkable in defining culture (Ariza, 2007).

The notion of culture in language learning then has shifted to a new perspective in which learning is not only understood from the perspective of individuals' internalization of linguistic systems but also from their acknowledgment of others' and their own cultural values in the process of learning.

Telecollaboration

The phenomenon of the Internet has increased the need to understand and explore virtual experiences such as intercultural interactions where people from different countries get closer (Liaw & Bunn-Le Master, 2010). Authors like Guth and Helm (2010) and O'Dowd (2007) describe telecollaboration as a virtual exchange between two groups from distant locations. However, a virtual exchange is an umbrella term that includes telecollaborative exchanges within its scope. Not all virtual exchanges are telecollaborative, the latter term often involves mutual reflection settings within learning environments. O'Dowd and Waire (2009) place telecollaboration exchanges in the foreign language setting through projects or the development of tasks that involve the exchange and comparison.

Likewise, the purposes of telecollaboration emerge from the lens of the study or researcher. From a psycholinguistic perspective, telecollaboration can be a medium *to understand linguistic features and language functions*, yet, from the sociocultural theory, the virtual interactions are not merely linguistic but *pragmatic*, *dialogic*, and *intercultural*. Telecollaboration in this study is linked to the exploration of language learning and culture correlation to understand commonalities and differences of both concepts among different interlocutors.

Method

Considering elicitation data collection methods as useful for identifying and characterizing the participants' perspectives, we note that this study relied on a qualitative research approach. Creswell (2007) claims that one of the reasons for conducting qualitative research is to empower participants to share their stories and make their voices heard, as well as to understand the setting in which individuals experience the phenomenon under study. Since qualitative research relies on the importance of protecting participants' identities, in this study we asked the participants to choose a nickname that was

used to label the instruments and to represent their voices in the data analysis process.

Since we found a qualitative research approach as particularly useful in understanding students' perspectives, we decided to undertake a phenomenological study as the type of qualitative research aligned to the idea of describing and exploring individuals' connotations of those experiences (Creswell, 2007). This view of research related to our study since the understanding of the context through interaction gave us insights into the participants' perception of language learning and their conceptions of culture.

Participants

The participants in this study were six 6th-grade students from a private school in Rivera (Colombia), and two international partners from France and Sweden who participated in the telecollaboration stage. Based on the principles of phenomenological research study, and to analyze a phenomenon from the perspective of a homogeneous group of individuals, the selection of this population was guided by the acknowledgment of international and Colombian students' similarities as language learners. The group of Colombian participants consisted of four boys and two girls, whose ages ranged from 10 to 12 years old. A group of 19 students took part in the needs analysis stage and in the telecollaborative sessions. However, only six students were chosen as a "purposeful (or purposive) sampling" (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 268) in data analysis, and as the participants in the last focus group.

Through questionnaires and focus groups our participants in Colombia manifested having had access to private education and the possibility of attending private schools since they started their academic life. Moreover, they expressed having had the opportunity to live valuable traveling experiences or the possibility of taking extra English lessons to reinforce their English level.

Additionally, to understand our Colombian participants' co-creation of experiences as language learners, a 12-year-old boy from France and a 12-year-old girl from Sweden took part in this study too. These international students volunteered to participate and shared similarities with the ones in Colombia like age range and the condition of being language learners who have had similar learning experiences.

Procedure

We undertook this study from three instructional stages: *direct instruction*, *telecollaborative interaction*, and *reflection* (see Figure 1). These stages were conducted within two cycles, each cycle as follows: The first stage (direct instruction) was implemented in two sessions, and the second and third stages (telecollaborative interaction and reflection) were developed in one session each.

Figure 1. Intervention Cycle
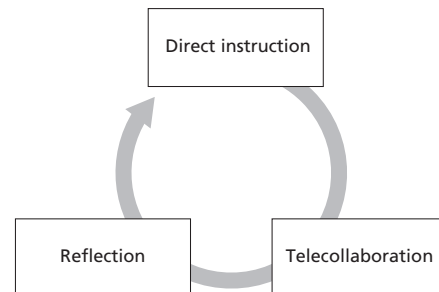
Direct Instruction Stage

During this stage, we took advantage of the regular English classes with the participants in Colombia where the teacher adjusted the topics and grammar from the lessons and gave the students the possibility to contextualize these learning experiences within their local setting. However, as we wanted to picture our learners' insights of culture and learning from a global perception as well, we decided to include participants from abroad who shared similarities with the ones in Colombia and who were willing to discuss those concepts with them. Thus, some topics were chosen

during this stage to offer the students information to exchange during the telecollaborative sessions with the international participants.

Telecollaborative Interaction

To find telecollaborative partners was not an easy task. However, we managed to find a professor who helped us to contact two students (and their parents) of different nationalities (French and Swedish) who were also learners of EFL, and who had similar ages as the Colombian participants. We invited them to voluntarily participate in video calls with our students and sustain conversations with them. The participation of the French and Swedish students only took place during this stage.

In contrast, the Colombian participants' task during the interaction consisted of collecting information from their international partners while identifying commonalities and differences about their cultures. Students shared and discussed ideas concerning cultural differences and compared the international and the local setting by asking questions related to daily routine, traveling experiences, celebrations, food, and leisure activities. Although some topics had already been set in the teachers' lesson plans, our participants could lead the conversation towards topics of their interest, especially if those fostered an intercultural interaction.

Reflection

During this stage, the Colombian participants had the possibility to reflect on the encounters and complement their insights when participating in the focus groups (see Appendix A) and thinking routine activities (see Appendix B). We guided the discussions and thinking routines workshops and inquired about the cultural aspects that students identified during the encounters, which helped us to answer the research question. These sessions were developed after the first and second telecollaborative encounters.

Data Collection Instruments

We used instruments such as questionnaires, focus groups, video recordings, students' artifacts, and field notes to collect data. During the direct instruction stage, we chose 10 from a group of 19 sixth-grade students as a representative sample of the Colombian participants to pilot the questionnaires regarding culture and language learning perceptions. Accordingly, the corresponding improvements were made and two large questionnaires were applied to a purposive sampling of six students (see Appendices C and D). The first one was a Likert scale that consisted of scaling questions related to cultural notions and the second was an unstructured questionnaire that involved open and close-ended questions related to students' language learning experiences.

Field notes were taken during the telecollaborative interaction and the reflection stages of the intervention to register our observations and descriptions of the events in the context (Burns, 1999). During these same stages, we collected students' artifacts (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) which helped us understand their reflections and thoughts about the concepts of language learning and culture. These products resulted from thinking routines workshops (Project Zero, 2016) where the participants represented the concept of culture through pictures and symbols, formulated questions, and wrote about their experiences through the telecollaborative interaction (see Appendix B).

Finally, during the reflection stage and at the end of the telecollaborative sessions, we conducted focus groups to explore participants' views, beliefs, and perceptions through the interaction (Richards, 2003). Respectively, we used video recordings to back up the notes taken during the telecollaborative interaction and the reflection stages and to transcribe students' voices in the focus groups (Heigham & Croker, 2009). These video recordings allowed us to capture the students' expressions and reactions when commenting on their language learning experiences and their perceptions of culture during the reflection stage.

Data Analysis

To triangulate data, we used instruments such as questionnaires (Q1 and Q2), the transcript from the telecollaborative (T1 and T2) and reflective stages (FG1, FG2, and FG3), teachers' field notes (TFN), and students' artifacts (thinking routines: AR1 and AR2). We started the data analysis by systematizing, exploring, reading, and getting familiar with the instruments. Afterward, we followed an inductive-interpretative process (Creswell, 2012) to create codes and groups from the gathered information. The categories were positioned within three rounds as a strategy to label the perceptions that better answer our research question in connection with theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). We used the color-coding technique (Stottok et al., 2011) and designed a color scale to represent and organize the information in an inductive reasoning process where we analyzed learners' personal experiences and finally encoded the group of general perspectives. Subsequently, three categories with their corresponding subcategories emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1. Final Coding

Categories	Subcategories
Learners' Understandings of Language	Language learning as a tool for worldwide communication
	Language learning as a means for self-expression
	Language learning understood from a functional perspective
Learners' Cultural Understandings	Culture as products
	Culture as practices
Language Learning Through Telecollaboration as a Means to Promote Culture and Ideology	Language learning through telecollaboration to identify and compare others' and individuals' own cultures
	Telecollaboration as a means to reflect upon culture and language
	Language learning through telecollaboration as a gateway for experiencing the scope of culture

Findings and Discussion

Learners' Understandings of Language

The Colombian participants in this study have mostly experienced the process of language learning through the lens of English instruction. Correspondingly, we drew on the following subcategories while considering our participants' perceptions about language learning in regard to their experiences as English learners.

Language Learning as a Tool for Worldwide Communication

To consolidate this subcategory, we started by acknowledging that the status of English as one of the world's most dominant languages has influenced students' perceptions about language learning experiences and perpetuated the idea of this language as useful and important. During the reflection stage, our participants' insights supported this assumption when they worked on the thinking routine "color, symbol, image" and related the language learning notion to a symbol, color, and image. The following is an example from participant Crack:

> My experience learning English has been good because I had the opportunity to learn this language as the world language. The language that most people speak. (FG1)

Since their experiences as language learners is connected to a language that is recognized and valued worldwide, students perceived language learning as an enriching instrument to broad worldwide communication. With respect to the reasons for learning a language, Nana referenced:

> There are some languages (like English) that help us having economic development, getting job opportunities and that stuff. (FG3)

This postulation also implies the advantages participants manifested as part of the foreign language

learning experience. In these examples, positioning the language learning experience as a facilitator of financial and employment opportunities also shows a direct correlation between the acquisition of language skills and the economic and professional development of the country where it is spoken. In this case, for example, although English is the official language of more than 50 countries, only three (The USA, Canada, and England) were recognized by our participants as tied to the notion of learning English. These associations were partly explained by the relationship participants established between English and colors such as blue and red, or images like countries' flags (e.g. the USA flag; see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Artifact From Participant: Symbol and Image (AR1)
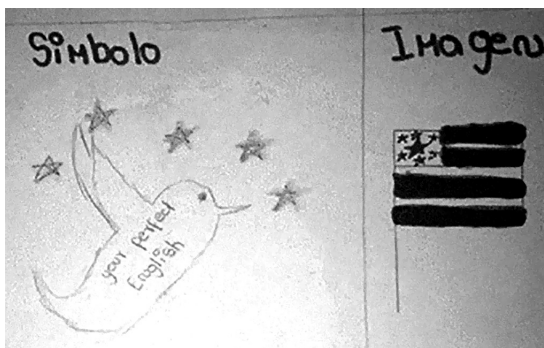
Correspondingly, participants' explanations helped us understand this comparison; Nick and Crack stated:

> My color is blue, when I think about English I think in blue because of the flag. (Nick, FG1)
> I chose the colors red, blue, and golden because English is like a light in my life, red and blue because of England's and the u.s.'s flags. (Crack, FG1)

The learners' drawings and insights situated the concept of language learning not only as a worldwide communication instrument but also as an essential means for economic and professional development. This assumption may allude to how English is viewed as the language of the most powerful and economically developed nations whose language needs to be learned to understand the reasons they succeed (Mahboob, 2011).

Language Learning as a Means for Self-Expression

Since the nature of language is a broadly explored notion, we wanted to inquire about a more humanistic perception of language learning too. From this perspective, including feelings, personal emotions, and social reactions to the learning process, emerges a strategy to allow students' expression of their context, and as a possible factor affecting communicative goals (Tudor, 2001).

Some of the questionnaire statements (see Appendix D) related to the students' *affective variables* (Clément & Gardner, 2001) influencing language learning. All participants agreed with the postulation that learning English was relevant for their lives. Additionally, our observation field notes gave us insights to report the students' high motivation towards the foreign language due to their positive experiences as English learners. Participants expressed their interest in learning English because they felt happy or motivated when using this language in other settings rather than the school:

> Students feel motivated towards English. When asked about that motivation, they associated it with past learning experiences at school: "It has been interesting how we were taught, and very useful too." Traveling, work, and school are some of the reasons, however, having opportunities to use the language when they travel abroad, or that they parents congratulate them for using English is better than getting good grades in the subject. (TFN)

Throughout the focus groups, some propositions also characterized the correlation learners established between language learning and self-expression. Some participants expressed that learning English evokes happiness in their lives, while others considered that learning this language relates to different things they like or enjoy:

I feel happy when I speak English and I think is like a funny language. (Nick, FG1)

I think the same as [student] because when I speak, I can express my feelings and I feel happy. (Dry, FG1)

These results provided further support for understanding that students' perspectives on language learning are built by means of what they can express when using it. In general, students defined language learning as something they liked or enjoyed since the experience of learning a new language was interesting no matter what advantages it could offer.

Language Learning Understood From a Functional Perspective

The emerging insights of participants throughout the focus group discussions showed a position in which students indicated that language operates within the purposes of the situation where it is used. Responses that illustrate this perception included Lala's:

It's the ability to speak in a different language and to be able to communicate with other people who speak that language too. (FG3)

This perception is defined by Tudor (2001) as the *functional perspective* which emphasizes the development of skills that learners conceive as useful at some point in their learning process. That is, learning a language can generally be expressed in terms of the functions learners need to achieve academic, professional, or personal aspirations. In this regard, Dry expressed:

Learning a language is knowing how to write or speak if you want to travel or study in that country; or, for example, read a book that you like but it is in English. (FG3)

As described by Dry, students established connections among language learning, language functions, and skills development. Although this relationship was not particularly prominent, we could infer that the idea of language learning is still assumed as strictly related to learners' internalization of grammatical structures, and the ability to use them in specific situations. In this case, language learning was perceived as the process of internalizing aspects of the target language that learners can use whenever it is necessary: "It is about expressing, writing, buying things. I mean, use the language in context" (Nana, FG3).

From this functional perspective, language advocates the mastering of certain pragmatic goals (Tudor, 2001). The understanding of language develops from the specific skill or function that learners perceive as useful in the learning context.

Learners' Cultural Understandings

As a result of the data analysis about the concept of culture, participants demonstrated their perception of culture from the visible and invisible aspects informed by cultural components and dimensions.

Culture as Products

This subcategory represents the participants' perceptions of what is visible in a community (history, celebrations, dances, places, and food). With respect to these aspects, participants like Gandal thought that: "culture is the group of history, arts, typical food, dances, and representative things of a country" (FG1).

These claims emerged during FG1 when commenting about the understanding of concepts such as cultural awareness and culture. The answer represented 70% (4) of the Colombian participants' replies to the questions related to cultural perceptions. After the two telecollaborative and reflective sessions we observed that some participants conceived culture as products.

Similarly, artifacts from the thinking routine "color, symbol, and image" pictured the idea of culture as represented by colors such as brown, golden, and green which, for them, resemble the history and some representative places. Learners supported this idea by drawing symbols and images such as flags, soldiers,

shields, restaurants, or monuments that exemplified their perceptions about culture.

These examples demonstrated that part of the students' perceptions about culture was based on national and regional artifacts, which are created and promoted by the country or region as a national patrimony that represents them (Kramsch, 2013). The permanence of these elements in individuals' lives through time prompt the perception of culture as a visible or intangible product. In this sense, culture is conceived only through its superficial components and it may frame the desire of nations to expand its "legacy" and sell it as a product that other nations can possibly consume.

Culture as Practices

Although 70% (4) of the Colombian participants expressed that culture was the historical, typical, and visible products of a country or nation, 30% (2) of them claimed that culture also implies aspects such as understanding of what is natural (common) and respecting differences. Additionally, the teacher's field notes during the telecollaborative encounters registered participants' signs of respect when expressing their opinions about the different topics addressed while interacting. Accordingly, Nana and Nickname highlighted that culture relates to the respect and recognition of the different ways of thinking, acting, and all the aspects that some countries do not have in common:

> Cultural awareness is when you know the things that they do and you respect those things. (Nana, FG1)
> It is the characteristic of every community, things different from the typical (food or music) such as beliefs…Beliefs in a superior being or atheism. (Nickname, FG2)

From these segments, we suggest that participants' perceptions are not only built upon the products of culture (Kramsch, 2013; Seelye, 1984) but also perceived from symbolic and invisible aspects, which involve ways of behaving, customs, beliefs, and values (Kramsch,

2013). Likewise, by drawing on the relationship between language and the culture's dimensions, our participants' insights relate to Moran's (2001) claims in which this correlation corresponds to products, practices, and perspectives of culture where language is used as a means to define cultural products, to get involved in cultural practices, and to recognize and explore cultural ideologies.

Language Learning Through Telecollaboration as a Means to Promote Culture and Ideology

Sercu et al. (2004), remark upon the importance of exploring the transcendence of language learning when prompting meaningful communication through the internalization of cultural realities of the target and foreign language, and the acknowledgment of its significance. One of the goals for foreign language teaching and learning should also encompass the understanding of learners as characters of culture, and whose learning expectations are highly determined by the dimension of cultural backgrounds. The participants in this study contributed to this assumption by observing language learning and culture as interrelating concepts and noted that the fact of being aware of cultural issues is necessary to enhance the language learning process. In reference to the previous statement, participants commented:

> Language itself is part of culture. As culture is everything that represents a country, language also represents a country. (Gandal, FG3)
> Learning a foreign language not only helps us understand that language but also how people behave in a different country. (Crack, FG3)

Our participants' insights evidenced the extent to which language and culture can interact in language learning. The representation of culture in the classroom, therefore, may provide a means for students to understand how language learning convey cultural insights.

Language Learning Through Telecollaboration to Identify and Compare Others' and Individuals' Own Culture

This subcategory involves participants' perceptions about elements beyond the surface of culture that refer to diversity and singularity recognition as important when using the language within different settings.

Participants' perceptions highlighted that people from foreign countries are different, but sometimes, there could be commonalities among those variances. However, regardless of this fact, the respect and the recognition of the other must prevail. As evidence of this, Lala expressed:

> It is what we have in our minds and what we know about another country. The respect for the differences because not all the countries are similar, they do have differences. (FG2)

We could identify that this particular interest to find commonalities represents Colombian participants' intention to negotiate meanings with their telecollaborative partner by using the language to express their ideas and thoughts. Besides, the fact that our respondents previously emphasized the importance of recognizing individuals' particularities indicates the act of perceiving how others and their own identities are constructed.

What the participants expressed led us to recognize the relevance of two concepts: *otherness* and *myness*. The former refers to the recognition of diversity and the importance of showing respect towards the differences, and the latter explores the understanding of an individual's own culture (Álvarez & Bonilla, 2009). Through Álvarez and Bonilla's concepts, we highlight that culture is learned and built through the individual's interaction with others in their closest contexts (family, friends, and teachers). In this subcategory we identified how the participants started to recognize singularity and diversity when confronting another culture.

Telecollaboration as a Means to Reflect Upon Culture and Language

Telecollaboration became a valuable tool that facilitated interaction between our students and their international partners, Thomas and Anika. Students had the opportunity to engage in conversations and expand their thoughts about their own and other cultures. The telecollaborative experience allowed spontaneous reflection when Colombian participants compared themselves with Anika and Thomas, or when researchers asked thought-provoking questions. As a result, some initial perceptions were complemented and expanded during this process.

During and after the telecollaborative exchange, participants' perceptions did not change substantially but in some cases, changes occurred. Participants Migue and Gandal showed a shift in their perceptions about culture and language through their speeches (see Table 2).

Table 2. Shift Perceptions in Two Colombian Participants

Participant	Before telecollaboration	After telecollaboration
Migue	Culture is the typical food, the sports, the most popular places and the food. We use the language to communicate that. (FG1)	Let's say I am at the United States and I mention something about the Twin Tower's attack; it would be sad if they experienced that event. (FG3)
Gandal	Culture can be typical food of the country, typical dances, arts and with the language I can communicate with other people. (FG1)	At first, I was not interested in culture, but then I started to do it because it is our history, I searched about it and I discovered that it is not just our history but all that we are. Language itself is part of the culture. (FG3)

These speeches showed that the telecollaborative experiences stimulated curiosity and reflective thinking by helping participants recognize that culture does not only refer to a product, but to the understanding that other cultural dimensions include singularities, commonalities, ways of thinking, empathy, and historical backgrounds. Finally, Migue and Gandal reflected upon their conversations to the point of expressing that language is naturally and politically part of a culture and acknowledged that language has to be properly used to understand cultural singularities and diversity (see Table 2).

This study focused on exploring participants' understanding of language learning and culture from a sociocultural perspective in telecollaboration where participants were part of a dialogic process, and the foreign language became a tool to exchange and discuss ideas (O'Dowd, 2007). Telecollaboration then triggered meaningful group and individual reflections that provoked a shift in some of our students' understandings of the relationship between language learning and culture.

Language Learning Through Telecollaboration as a Gateway for Experiencing the Scope of Culture

As noted above, the extent to which students conceive the process of language learning indicated a common view amongst interviewees which highlighted the importance of learning a broadly spoken language as an instrument to communicate with other people around the world:

> By speaking English we can deeply know about the culture and explore a new world, not only here…now you can say there are more things to explore. (Gandal, FG3)

From their experiences as English learners, we could draw on the relationship participants established between language learning and culture since it was reported as a tool that favors global interaction and cross-cultural communication in different settings. During the

reflection stage Colombian participants acknowledged that it was possible to identify and compare some cultural aspects with their international partners because they could both speak English:

> Before knowing Thomas, I wanted to ask some questions to him like: How is the culture of France…He said their culture was different because they celebrated different things during the year. He has French accent, we have Colombian accent. (Migue, AR2)

This evidence may suggest that "language learning is one of the essential gateways to cultural understanding and a necessary means for experiencing culture" (Godwin-Jones, 2013, p. 8). As expressed by some of our participants, learning a foreign language like English represents an opportunity to share their own culture as well. When asked about the importance of learning a foreign language, Nana stated: "It's about sharing our history around the world, not only in Colombia but also in different countries and other continents" (FG3).

The relationship that our students perceived between language learning and culture was framed within the use they give to a foreign language as a tool to raise understanding of global settings, and also, as a means to strengthen local, national, and regional identity. As noted by Godwin-Jones (2013), this claim is undoubtedly relevant since language learning may encourage learners' self-reflection upon their own and the target culture. Yet, current approaches on cultural learning in foreign language learning disregard students' own culture. According to Sercu et al. (2004), "low importance is given to help students reflect on their own cultural identity and on how it relates to foreign cultures" (p. 99). Correspondingly, understanding the socio-cultural component of language may provide alternatives for creating significant language learning environments where learners experience the real dynamics of language and where cultural objectives are as important as the linguistic ones.

Sercu et al.'s (2004) claim that the recognition of otherness as well as the acquisition of skills in the target language can be determined by learners' identification of cultural aspects and connections. For these authors, getting to know oneself and one's own culture is as important as the attainment of linguistic objectives. Likewise, these claims bring to the discussion particular considerations about the gap between the vision of language and the cultural goals that must be set in responding to the learners' context when learning a language. The objectives of foreign language education nowadays should encourage learners' reflection upon the target language culture as well as promote learners' own cultural identity.

Conclusions

The main goal of this study was to understand the relationship that learners established between language learning and culture. Considering that individuals' perceptions are influenced by many factors, culture and language learning can be described regarding the specific language students have been learning as well. The analysis we presented relied on students' shared experiences as English learners.

The data collected indicated that students perceived language learning (a) as a tool for worldwide communication, (b) as a means for self-expression, and (c) understood it from a functional perspective. These participants' interpretations and own experiences as language learners lead us to conclude that they related language learning to the influence and perpetuation of a global language like English, and to the importance of learning a foreign language to facilitate economic and employment accessibility. On the other hand, from a humanistic view of language, students' understandings of the phenomenon of language learning were imbedded to positive experiences that allowed them to express their emotions, feelings, and reactions in the context of learning. However, the perception of language as a system of linguistic skills was evidenced in our participants' insights too.

For this study, we implemented telecollaborative sessions with international French and Swedish partners who shared similar characteristics with the Colombian participants such as ages, academic grade, and experiences as language learners. The telecollaborative sessions aimed to trigger students' interpretation of intercultural experiences when learning languages. Here, we explored the notion of culture which was described by the students as shaped through their learning experiences in the school, the relationship with their family, and the opportunities they had to directly and indirectly interact with others. Participants acknowledged culture (a) as products and (b) as practices which involve visible and invisible aspects of cultures and constitute the way a community or an individual behaves, and the distinct aspects of human beings' essence.

Accordingly, the recognition of *otherness* and *myness* in the process of language learning illustrates our participants' effort to understand the complexity of human beings and the recognition of individuals' and community's diversity and singularity. Thus, from the findings of this study we identified the importance of language learning as a means to promote culture and ideology where students understood (a) telecollaboration as a means to reflect upon culture and language, (b) language learning through telecollaboration as a means to identify and compare others' and individuals' own culture, and (c) as a gateway for experiencing the scope of culture. The study provided spaces for cultural understanding by giving individuals the possibility to access experiences in a globalized world and to promote the local culture. Since cultural factors have been found to be influencing foreign language acquisition and learners' performance of the language itself, the articulation of students' own culture needs to be strengthened as a valuable process in which learners also shape their identity by understanding and fostering cultural awareness. Finally, we acknowledged that more than exploring our participants' perspectives on the role of

culture in language learning and its relationship, it is relevant to recreate and analyze their insights while having a real and meaningful exposure to language in regard to its socio-cultural nature.

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Appendix A: Focus Group 2

Note. The original language was Spanish. Translation was made for publication purposes.

After the telecollaborative encounter No. 1

- What did you find most interesting during the encounter?
- What previous knowledge did you have about your telecollaborative partner's culture or country? How and where did you learn it?
- Did your previous conceptions about your telecollaborative partner culture change during or after the telecollaboration? Explain.
- How did you feel when your telecollaborative partner highlighted some Colombian culture aspects?
- What common aspects or differences did you find between both cultures?
- How learning a foreign language like English can help you to share aspects of your own culture?

Appendix B: Picture of Thinking Routine 2

Complete the thinking routine using three ideas or facts that you think were more relevant during the Skype encounter (Thomas– France). You can include information about any aspect you think was important or interesting for you. Follow your teacher's instructions.
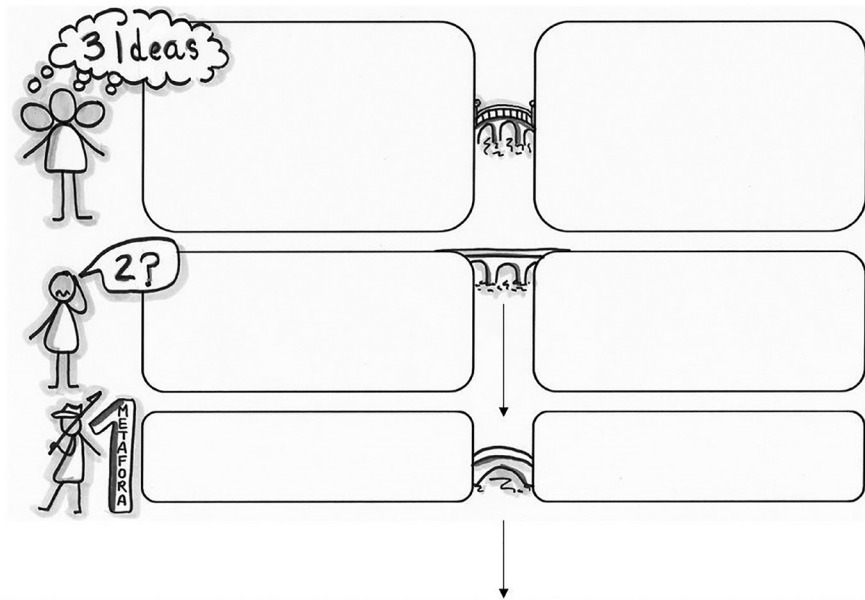
Appendix C: Likert Scale Questionnaire– Culture

Choose the option that better expresses your opinion about the following statements:

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Learning about culture is important in my language learning process.					
Culture is related to past experiences.					
Culture is learning about who I am.					
Culture is learning about dates, celebrations, people, and important places of a country.					
Learning about my local culture is more important than learning about other cultures.					
In the language learning process, it is more important to learn about foreign language culture than my own.					
During the English classes I have learned about other cultures and the local one.					
I speak/write English to talk about my country's culture.					

¿What is your motivation to learn a foreign language? Choose only one option.

☐ Travel and meet people

☐ Communicate with native speakers of the target language

☐ Know about the target culture

☐ Talk about my culture

☐ Have job opportunities

☐ Have academic opportunities

Other: _____

Appendix D: Questionnaire– Language Learning

Note. The original language of the Likert scale and the questionnaire was Spanish, but translation was made for publication purposes.

Answer these questions taking into account your experiences, attitudes, feelings, and opinions about language learning.

Motivation

1. Learning English is:
☐ Very important
☐ Important
☐ Not important

2. Choose one option for the following statements:

Statement	Yes	No	Sometimes
I feel motivated to learn English.			
I think learning a foreign language is difficult.			
I know about the culture of the language I am learning.			

3. Choose one option to indicate the frequency you do the following activities:

	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
Travel to a country where English is spoken			
Watch TV in English			
Read the newspaper or magazines in English			
Read books in English			
Use internet to practice English			
Use English in social networks or online games			
Listen to music in English			

4. How has the experience of learning English influenced your life?