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Ciencias de la Educación  
Artículo de Investigación

*El Poder Transformador del Aprendizaje Basado en el Contexto: Cultivo de la  
Identidad Cultural y la Competencia Lingüística en Aulas de ILE Interculturales*

*The Transformative Power of Context-Based Learning: Cultivating Cultural  
Identity and Proficiency in Intercultural EFL Classrooms*

*O poder transformador da aprendizagem baseada no contexto: cultivar a  
identidade cultural e a competência linguística em salas de aula interculturais de  
ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira*

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## Resumen

Esta investigación-acción examinó la aplicación del Aprendizaje Basado en el Contexto (ABC) para resolver la "disonancia pedagógica" prevalente en la enseñanza del inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE) en Ecuador, que a menudo depende de materiales importados desconectados de las realidades socioculturales de los estudiantes. Utilizando un diseño de métodos mixtos aplicados, se implementó una intervención de ABC de 12 semanas con 85 estudiantes de secundaria en un entorno rural e intercultural en Riobamba. Los datos pre y post test, triangulados con narrativas cualitativas, mostraron mejoras estadísticamente significativas tanto en la competencia lingüística (ganancia media del 19.35%, con un gran tamaño del efecto) como en la Conciencia Cultural y la Motivación (con un tamaño del efecto muy grande). Los resultados demuestran que anclar el currículo en la identidad local y el contenido cultural transformó el inglés de una materia extranjera a un "puente comunicativo" para la autoexpresión. El estudio concluye que la metodología ABC es un modelo altamente eficaz y descolonizador para lograr una competencia lingüística superior y una conciencia intercultural esencial en contextos latinoamericanos similares.

**Palabras Claves:** Aprendizaje basado en el contexto (ABC); identidad cultural; inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL); competencia comunicativa intercultural; Ecuador rural.

## Abstract

This action research investigated the application of Context-Based Learning (CBL) to resolve the "pedagogical dissonance" prevalent in Ecuadorian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, which often relies on imported materials disconnected from students' sociocultural realities. Utilizing an applied mixed-methods design, a 12-week CBL intervention was implemented with 85 secondary students in a rural, intercultural setting in Riobamba. Pre- and post-test data, triangulated with qualitative narratives, showed statistically significant improvements in both linguistic proficiency (mean score gain of 19.35%, with a large effect size) and Cultural Awareness/Motivation (with a very large effect size). The results demonstrate that anchoring the curriculum in local identity and cultural content transformed English from a foreign subject into a "communicative bridge" for self-expression. The study concludes that the CBL methodology is a highly effective, decolonizing model for achieving both superior linguistic competence and essential intercultural consciousness in similar Latin American contexts.

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**Keywords:** Context-based learning (CBL); cultural identity; EFL (English as a foreign language); intercultural communicative competence; rural Ecuador.

### Resumo

Esta investigação-ação examinou a aplicação da Aprendizagem Baseada no Contexto (ABC) para abordar a prevalente "dissonância pedagógica" no ensino do inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) no Equador, que se baseia frequentemente em materiais importados desligados das realidades socioculturais dos alunos. Utilizando uma metodologia mista aplicada, foi implementada uma intervenção de ABC com a duração de 12 semanas com 85 alunos do ensino secundário em contexto rural e intercultural em Riobamba. Os dados dos pré e pós-testes, triangulados com narrativas qualitativas, mostraram melhorias estatisticamente significativas tanto na proficiência linguística (ganho médio de 19,35%, com um grande tamanho de efeito) como na consciência e motivação cultural (com um tamanho de efeito muito grande). Os resultados demonstram que ancorar o currículo na identidade local e no conteúdo cultural transformou o inglês de uma disciplina estrangeira numa "ponte comunicativa" para a autoexpressão. O estudo conclui que a metodologia ABC é um modelo altamente eficaz e descolonizador para alcançar uma competência linguística superior e uma consciência intercultural essencial em contextos latino-americanos semelhantes.

**Palavras-chave:** Aprendizagem contextualizada (ACC); identidade cultural; inglês como língua estrangeira; competência comunicativa intercultural; Equador rural.

### Introduction

In an era characterized by constant mobility, global interconnection, and sociocultural hybridity, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has evolved from a purely linguistic endeavor into a complex intercultural practice. The challenge for educators today is not merely to teach the grammatical or lexical components of English, but to create meaningful learning experiences that connect language to identity, community, and local realities.

Within the Ecuadorian context, where linguistic diversity coexists with deep-rooted cultural traditions, English learning must transcend the acquisition of communicative skills to become a bridge between global communication and local identity (Camacho et al., 2023; Kramersch, 2021). Unfortunately, EFL instruction in the region continues to rely heavily on imported materials and standardized methodologies that rarely mirror students' sociocultural backgrounds, resulting in what

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Nieto and Bode (2020) describe as “pedagogical dissonance” between learners’ lived experiences and the content they encounter in classrooms.

Recent discussions in applied linguistics emphasize that language education cannot be separated from the cultural and contextual dimensions that shape learners’ understanding of the world (Byram, 2021; Risager, 2022). When the cultural reality of learners is ignored, the classroom becomes a space of alienation rather than empowerment. For Ecuadorian students, especially in rural and intercultural contexts, English may be perceived as a foreign imposition rather than a tool for intercultural dialogue and self-expression (Morocho & Camacho, 2023).

To respond to this tension, pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and integrate learners’ sociocultural contexts have gained increasing attention. Among them, Context-Based Learning (CBL) offers a particularly promising pathway, as it situates language learning within real-life, culturally relevant situations that foster both communicative competence and cultural awareness (Bondarenko et al., 2020; Özer Şanal, 2023).

CBL is rooted in the principles of constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, which view learning as an active, contextually situated process of meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 1984). Rather than transmitting information, teachers act as facilitators who guide learners through experiences that connect abstract knowledge to their lived realities. Within EFL settings, this means designing learning environments where students use English to explore their communities, express their cultural identities, and engage with authentic communicative purposes (Torres, 2021).

In this way, CBL transforms language classrooms into laboratories of cultural exchange, spaces where local narratives and traditions coexist with global linguistic practices. As Kramsch (2014) points out, language learning is not simply about mastering a code; it is about developing a “symbolic competence” that allows learners to interpret, negotiate, and recreate meanings across cultures.

In the Ecuadorian education system, where interculturality is a constitutional principle (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008), methodologies like CBL align with the broader goals of the Intercultural Bilingual Education System (SEIB). This model seeks to preserve indigenous knowledge and promote the harmonious coexistence of cultural worldviews under the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* (well living). Integrating contextualized English instruction into this framework allows language education to become an instrument for strengthening, rather than diluting, cultural identity (Herrera & Montaluisa, 2022). When students engage in CBL activities, such as role-playing community interactions, designing bilingual cultural projects, or solving local challenges through

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English, they not only learn the language but also reinterpret their place in a multilingual world (Abdel-Wahed et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence reinforces the transformative potential of CBL in fostering engagement and identity construction. Studies in diverse educational contexts demonstrate that when learners perceive a direct link between classroom content and their sociocultural environment, motivation, retention, and language performance improve significantly (Wasriep, 2023; Yin, 2022). In Latin American EFL classrooms, project-based and problem-based contextual tasks have been shown to promote deeper cognitive processing and intercultural awareness (Jiménez-Liso, 2019; Yusi, 2023).

These methodologies encourage students to connect their own experiences, values, and traditions with global discourses, leading to what Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman (2010) term “identity-enriching learning.” In this sense, CBL does not merely transmit linguistic knowledge, it nurtures reflective, socially conscious learners capable of using English to articulate both personal and collective identities.

The role of educators in this process is pivotal. Teachers must transition from the position of knowledge transmitters to cultural mediators who design learning experiences anchored in authenticity and relevance (Gay, 2021). Through contextual tasks such as community mapping, local storytelling, or intercultural dialogues, teachers can help students perceive English not as a foreign subject, but as a communicative bridge that validates their cultural roots while connecting them to global opportunities. This perspective aligns with current frameworks in intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 2021) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 2018), both of which advocate educational practices that empower learners to question, interpret, and transform their social realities through language.

Grounded in this conceptual framework, the present study adopts an applied approach that moves beyond theoretical exploration toward the implementation of Context-Based Learning (CBL) in real classroom settings. It seeks to apply and analyze CBL strategies that connect English teaching with learners’ cultural realities, promoting meaningful communication and identity development. By integrating contextualized tasks such as project work, role-play, and community interaction, the study aims to transform English instruction into an interculturally grounded, context-responsive practice. In doing so, it aligns with contemporary educational priorities of inclusion, diversity, and sustainability, reaffirming that learning English is both a means to engage globally and a pathway to rediscover one’s own culture (Norton, 2023; Kramersch, 2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Foundations of Context-Based Learning in EFL

Context-Based Learning (CBL) has evolved from constructivist and sociocultural theories of learning, emphasizing that knowledge is constructed through experience, interaction, and meaningful engagement with real-life contexts. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a key foundation, suggesting that learning occurs through social interaction and the mediation of cultural tools, language being one of the most important. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle complements this by positioning experience as the starting point for reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Together, these theories position learners as active participants who build knowledge through situated practices rather than passive recipients of information.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), CBL integrates these principles by grounding linguistic learning in the learners' own sociocultural realities. When students engage with authentic, contextually meaningful tasks, such as community projects, storytelling, or problem-solving, they move beyond memorization toward applying English as a communicative and cognitive tool (Gilbert, 2006; Bennett, Lubben & Hogarth, 2007). Recent studies reaffirm this connection between contextual relevance and deeper learning. For instance, Yin (2022) found that thematic and contextualized tasks significantly improved EFL students' communicative performance and motivation by linking language to cultural practices. Similarly, Abdel-Wahed et al. (2024) demonstrated that role-play and scenario-based learning foster critical thinking and collaboration, competencies central to 21st-century education.

From a Latin American standpoint, contextual learning is not only a methodological choice but also a cultural imperative. Educational traditions in the region have long valued the integration of community knowledge and lived experience as sources of learning (Freire, 2018). In Ecuador, this philosophy resonates with the national principle of Sumak Kawsay (Buen Vivir), which envisions education as a holistic process that connects individuals with their culture, environment, and community (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). Therefore, CBL aligns conceptually with Ecuador's intercultural and inclusive educational framework, where the goal is to empower learners to construct meaning through culturally relevant and socially transformative experiences.

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**Intercultural Communicative Competence and Cultural Identity**

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Language and culture are inseparable. Every act of communication is shaped by the cultural frameworks that give meaning to words, gestures, and social norms. As Kramersch (2021) argues, language is a symbolic system through which identity is constructed and negotiated. This view underpins the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), developed by Byram (2021), which includes knowledge of one's own and other cultures (*savoirs*), attitudes of curiosity and openness, and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). For EFL learners, ICC entails more than understanding foreign customs, it involves relating to others while maintaining and valuing one's own cultural identity.

Empirical research in Latin America underscores the importance of integrating ICC into English education. A recent systematic review by Driscoll and Mondaca-Rojas (2024) across 12 Latin American countries concluded that while policy documents promote intercultural objectives, practical classroom implementation remains limited. Teachers often acknowledge the value of interculturality but lack training and resources to translate these goals into concrete classroom practices. In Ecuador, Camacho et al. (2023) observed similar trends, noting that many teachers rely on imported textbooks that portray foreign cultural realities disconnected from local contexts, thereby constraining opportunities for identity affirmation and critical reflection.

Cultural identity plays a crucial role in this dynamic. Norton (2023) and Kramersch (2021) stress that language learning always involves identity negotiation: learners must reconcile how they see themselves with the social meanings attached to the target language. When students are encouraged to use English to express their own experiences, values, and traditions, language learning becomes an act of empowerment rather than assimilation. For Ecuadorian learners, especially in rural or intercultural contexts, this approach helps to reclaim English as a bridge for intercultural dialogue rather than a symbol of cultural dominance.

CBL contributes to this identity work by offering contexts that legitimize learners' local realities. When EFL instruction is connected to familiar cultural practices, such as traditional festivals, oral storytelling, or environmental knowledge, students see their culture as a valid source of content and expression. As Gay (2021) asserts, culturally responsive teaching validates the cultural capital that students bring to school, transforming diversity from a challenge into a pedagogical asset. Consequently, the fusion of CBL and ICC frameworks offers a transformative approach to EFL education that fosters both linguistic proficiency and intercultural consciousness.

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**Empirical Perspectives from Ecuador and Latin America**

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Ecuador's national curriculum for English as a Foreign Language emphasizes communicative competence, cultural awareness, and integration of content across disciplines through CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) principles (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). However, implementation has faced persistent challenges. A literature review by Herrera and Montaluisa (2022) found that despite policy advances, many teachers still depend on decontextualized methods, largely because of a lack of contextual materials and limited professional development in intercultural pedagogy.

At the same time, several innovative experiences have begun to bridge this gap. For instance, projects implemented under the Intercultural Bilingual Education System (SEIB) have promoted bilingual literacy through local narratives and indigenous epistemologies. These efforts demonstrate how integrating ancestral knowledge into language learning can reinforce students' sense of belonging and pride while developing communicative competence (Morocho & Camacho, 2023). In similar fashion, Bondarenko et al. (2020) identified "thematic immersion" as a powerful strategy for contextual learning, in which thematic units, such as local festivals, crafts, or environmental issues, anchor the use of English in meaningful community practices.

In Latin America more broadly, evidence supports the effectiveness of contextual and intercultural methodologies. A Chilean study by Ponce and Cortés (2023) revealed that EFL learners who participated in community-based projects showed greater cultural awareness and more positive attitudes toward language learning than those who followed textbook-centered lessons. Similarly, Brazilian research by Gomes da Silva and Pereira (2024) showed that emotionally resonant, community-linked experiences led to deeper engagement and memory retention, confirming the neurological benefits of meaningful learning. These studies suggest that applied interventions, such as the one proposed in the present research, can successfully merge cognitive, cultural, and affective dimensions of language education.

Nonetheless, persistent challenges remain. Teachers often express uncertainty about how to assess intercultural learning outcomes or integrate identity-focused activities into prescribed curricula (Herrera & Montaluisa, 2022). Furthermore, access to training and resources is uneven across rural and urban schools, which limits the scalability of such initiatives. These findings highlight the urgent need for applied studies that not only theorize but demonstrate how contextualized pedagogies can be effectively implemented within Ecuadorian EFL classrooms.

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### Strategies and Pedagogical Components Supporting Contextual and Intercultural Learning

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The literature identifies several core strategies consistent with both CBL and ICC frameworks that are particularly relevant for applied classroom implementation in Ecuador:

**Project-Based Learning (PBL):** This method engages learners in extended, real-world projects that integrate language, content, and cultural inquiry. In Ecuador, PBL aligned with local cultural themes, such as food traditions or environmental conservation, has shown positive effects on student motivation and collaboration (Torres, 2021; Herrera & Montaluisa, 2022).

**Role-Play and Scenario-Based Learning:** These activities simulate authentic communication contexts, allowing students to apply linguistic and cultural knowledge in realistic interactions. Studies in Asia and Latin America alike have documented improved communicative competence and empathy through this strategy (Abdel-Wahed et al., 2024; Yeh & Lan, 2019).

**Community-Based Language Projects:** Rooted in Freirean pedagogy, these projects connect classroom learning with community needs. For example, students might design bilingual posters for local tourism or create oral histories in English. Such initiatives strengthen community ties while situating English as a functional and meaningful tool (Freire, 2018; Camacho et al., 2023).

**Reflective and Comparative Tasks:** Encouraging learners to compare cultural practices, both local and global, enhances critical cultural awareness, a key dimension of ICC (Byram, 2021). Reflection journals, interviews, and portfolio work allow students to articulate how English learning shapes their understanding of self and others.

**Integration of Technology and Multimodality:** The use of digital storytelling, virtual exchanges, and multimedia tools can extend contextual learning beyond the classroom. According to Yin (2022) and Wasriep (2023), these resources enable learners to express identity through multiple semiotic modes, enhancing engagement and inclusivity.

These strategies are not mutually exclusive but complementary, forming a coherent framework for applied language teaching that connects cognitive development, affective engagement, and cultural affirmation.

### Gaps and Implications for the Present Study

Despite the theoretical and empirical advances, the literature reveals notable gaps that justify the applied focus of the current research. First, most studies emphasize teacher perceptions or theoretical models rather than classroom-based implementation. Second, there is a lack of research in rural and

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intercultural Ecuadorian contexts, precisely where contextualized and identity-oriented pedagogies are most needed. Finally, few studies examine how CBL specifically fosters cultural identity development as a learning outcome.

The present study addresses these gaps by applying CBL strategies within real educational contexts in Ecuador, seeking to document both linguistic and intercultural outcomes. By integrating classroom action, teacher reflection, and community engagement, this research contributes to a growing movement toward culturally responsive English education in Latin America. Ultimately, the literature suggests that when learners are invited to use English to narrate, question, and celebrate their own identities, language education becomes not just an academic pursuit but a form of cultural empowerment (Norton, 2023; Kramersch, 2021).

### METHODOLOGY

#### Research Approach and Design

This study followed an applied mixed-methods approach within an action research design. The aim was to implement and evaluate Context-Based Learning (CBL) as a pedagogical innovation in real EFL classrooms, assessing its effects on students' language proficiency and cultural identity. According to Creswell (2021), mixed approaches allow researchers to obtain both measurable outcomes and deep qualitative insights.

The research unfolded in three sequential stages: **Diagnostic (Pretest)**: identification of students' linguistic level, motivation, and cultural awareness. **Intervention**: application of CBL through contextually relevant lessons and projects. And **Evaluation (Posttest)**: measurement of progress using statistical analysis and qualitative interpretation.

#### Type of Research

The study is **applied**, because it tests a pedagogical intervention in a real educational setting; **descriptive**, since it characterizes language and cultural learning before and after the intervention; and **transformative**, because it aims to improve practice by linking English teaching with cultural identity development (Maher & Dertadian, 2022).

#### Methods, Techniques, and Instruments

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used.

In the Diagnostic Phase, an English Proficiency Test was adapted from the national EFL curriculum (Ministerio de Educación, 2016), for assessing grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

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Besides, a Cultural Awareness and Motivation Survey including 20 Likert-scale items (1–5) for measuring students' attitudes toward learning English and valuing their own culture. And finally, a Teacher Interview to identify current teaching strategies and challenges.

In the intervention Phase for twelve weeks, researchers implemented CBL units on local festivals, traditional food, and community life. Activities included project-based learning, storytelling, role-play, and community tasks connecting English with real-life cultural contexts. Reflective journals from teachers and students captured personal growth and attitudes throughout the process.

To conclude, in the Evaluation Phase, after the intervention, the same language test and survey were reapplied. Additionally, focus group interviews with students and teachers explored perceptions of change.

### **Population and Sample**

The study took place in a rural public secondary school in Riobamba, Chimborazo (Ecuador). The sample consisted of 85 students (ages 13–16) and two English teachers, selected intentionally for their availability and interest in innovative teaching. The context is intercultural, where Spanish and Kichwa coexist, offering rich cultural content for applied learning.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

Pretest and posttest data were analyzed using SPSS 25 and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and percentage gains) summarized performance in English proficiency and cultural awareness. Furthermore, inferential analysis employed a paired-sample t-test to determine whether posttest means differed significantly from pretest results. The effect size (Cohen's *d*) was calculated to estimate the magnitude of change.

#### **Qualitative Analysis**

Interview and journal data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Codes such as motivation, collaboration, cultural pride, and confidence in speaking English were identified and grouped into broader themes reflecting the human impact of the intervention. Triangulation of test scores, surveys, and reflections ensured validity and coherence.

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### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the institution and parents. All participants gave informed consent, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. Cultural themes were chosen collaboratively to ensure respectful representation of community values.

### RESULTS

The analysis of the data collected across the diagnostic (pretest), intervention, and evaluation (posttest) phases reveals the transformative impact of the Context-Based Learning (CBL) intervention on both students' English language proficiency and their cultural awareness and motivation. The findings are presented in three parts: quantitative outcomes for proficiency and cultural awareness, and a thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

#### Quantitative Outcomes: English Proficiency and Cultural Awareness

##### English Proficiency Test Results

The English Proficiency Test, administered as a pretest and posttest, assessed students' grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The descriptive statistics show a notable improvement in the mean scores after the 12-week CBL intervention.

**Table 1:**

*Descriptive Statistics for English Proficiency Test Scores (N=85)*

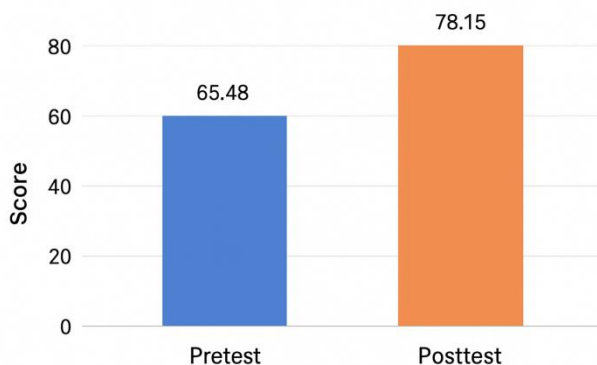
Test	Mean Score (Out of 100)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Percentage Gain
Pretest	65.48	8.21	-
Posttest	78.15	6.55	19.35%

The mean score increased from 65.48 to 78.15, representing a significant percentage gain of 19.35%. To confirm the statistical significance of this improvement, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted. The analysis yielded a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores ( $t(84) = -15.92, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, the calculated effect size, Cohen's  $d = 1.48$ , indicates a large magnitude of change, suggesting that the CBL intervention had a substantial positive effect on the students' linguistic performance.

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**Figure 1:**

*Comparison of Mean English Proficiency Scores (Pretest vs. Posttest)*



**Source:** pre and post test results

**Cultural Awareness and Motivation Survey Results**

The Cultural Awareness and Motivation Survey (20 Likert-scale items) measured students’ attitudes toward learning English and, critically, their perceived value of their own culture. Higher mean scores indicate greater motivation and cultural awareness.

**Table 2:**

*Descriptive Statistics for Cultural Awareness and Motivation Survey ( )*

<i>Survey Component</i>	<b>Pretest Mean (Out of 5)</b>	<b>Posttest Mean (Out of 5)</b>	<b>Change in Mean</b>
<i>Cultural Awareness (Local Culture Value)</i>	3.51	4.38	+0.87
<i>Motivation toward EFL Learning</i>	3.65	4.49	+0.84
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>4.44</b>	<b>+0.86</b>

The data shows a strong positive shift in both components. Cultural Awareness saw a large increase from a mean of 3.51 to 4.38, indicating that students felt a greater connection between their EFL learning and the affirmation of their local culture following the contextualized tasks. Motivation also increased considerably, moving from 3.65 to 4.49.

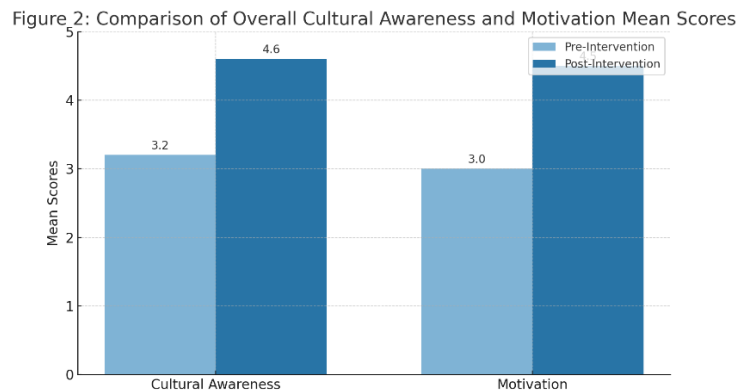
A paired sample *t*-test on the overall survey scores confirmed a statistically significant increase ( $t(84) = -22.10, p < 0.001$ ). The effect size, Cohen’s  $d = 2.41$ , confirms a very large effect, suggesting

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that connecting English to students' lived experiences and local realities was highly successful in improving affective and identity-related outcomes.

### Figure 2:

#### Comparison of Overall Cultural Awareness and Motivation Mean Scores



Source: pre and post test results

### Qualitative Outcomes: Thematic Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the reflective journals, teacher interviews, and student focus group interviews was essential for adding depth to the statistical findings, helping to explain *how* the CBL intervention generated the observed changes. Three major themes emerged, reflecting the human impact of the contextualized pedagogy.

#### *Theme 1: English as a Tool for Local Expression and Identity Affirmation*

A key finding was the shift in students' perception of English, from a "foreign subject" to a "communicative bridge". Students in the intercultural context of Riobamba reported feeling empowered by using English to talk about their own lives and community.

One student, participating in a project on local festivals, stated:

*"Before, English was just about a life in a different country, things in the textbook that I didn't know. But when we used English to write about the Pase del Niño Rey de Rereys, our festival, it felt like my story was important. I wasn't just learning words; I was telling my history in a new way."*

A teacher's journal entry underscored this change:

*"It was powerful to see. When we did the role-plays for the local market, using Kichwa and Spanish words for products, and English for the main dialogue, the students were suddenly confident. They didn't fear mistakes because the topic was theirs. It strengthened, rather than diluted, their cultural pride."*

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This aligns directly with the study's aim to connect language to identity and community, affirming the idea that the classroom became a space of empowerment.

### ***Theme 2: Enhanced Collaboration and Active Engagement***

The contextualized tasks, such as project-based learning and community-based assignments, fostered a noticeable increase in student collaboration and active engagement, which the data analysis coded as a central theme. The move away from traditional, teacher-centered instruction turned the classroom into an active 'laboratory of cultural exchange'.

A focus-group participant shared:

*"In group projects about environmental challenges in our area, we had to really listen to each other in English to divide the work and present the solution. It wasn't just the teacher telling us to work together; the problem required us to communicate. I spoke more English in those three weeks than the whole last semester."*

The teacher interviews highlighted their changed role as a "cultural mediator" rather than a knowledge transmitter:

*"I spent less time giving information and more time guiding. The students were bringing their own knowledge, about plants, about local legends, and their challenge was figuring out how to articulate that in English. They were the experts of the content, and I was the facilitator of the language. This shift was key to their ownership of the learning process."*

### ***Theme 3: Deepened Reflective and Critical Thinking***

The CBL intervention encouraged reflective and comparative tasks, which are integral to Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Students reported that connecting local narratives with global English gave them a new critical lens.

Reflective journal entries demonstrated this critical awareness:

*"When we learned about global tourism in English, we then had to describe our own community to a tourist. I realized that our town is important, not just the famous cities in the book. Using English to talk about what we have made me think about my community's strengths and problems in a new way. The language is for describing the world, but also for asking questions about our world."*

The qualitative results consistently triangulated with the quantitative data, confirming that the CBL strategies successfully merged cognitive development (proficiency) with affective engagement (motivation) and cultural affirmation (identity). The intervention helped the students to internalize

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English as a means of articulation for their personal and collective identities, moving toward becoming the "reflective, socially conscious learners" that contextualized pedagogy aims to nurture.

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this action research confirm the significant pedagogical benefits of integrating Context-Based Learning (CBL) and an explicit focus on interculturality within the EFL classroom, particularly in the unique, bilingual setting of Riobamba, Ecuador. The data robustly supports the core premise of this study: that aligning language instruction with students' local identities and lived experiences is the most effective pathway to achieving both linguistic competence and affective engagement.

The quantitative results provide compelling evidence of the method's efficacy. The statistically significant leap in English proficiency (from a mean of 65.48 to 78.15, with a large effect size of Cohen's  $d=1.48$ ) clearly indicates that using local content, such as festivals, community issues, and cultural narratives, as the vehicle for language practice did not detract from linguistic gains; rather, it amplified them.

This outcome strongly corroborates recent research in applied linguistics, including studies focusing on active learning in the region (González et al., 2025), which confirm that student-centered, dynamic strategies are fundamentally more effective than traditional methods in improving comprehension and communication skills. The crucial mechanism here is that students, already experts in the topic (their own culture), were free to focus their cognitive effort on linguistic production, leading to deeper and more immediate language use.

Furthermore, the data reveal a profound transformation in the affective domain, which is perhaps the most salient finding in an intercultural context. The substantial increase in both Cultural Awareness and Motivation (overall  $d=2.41$ ) directly addresses the "pedagogical dissonance" identified in the literature, where reliance on foreign materials often alienates local learners.

The qualitative narratives vividly illustrate this shift: students articulated that English transformed from a "foreign subject" to a "communicative bridge" used to express "*my history in a new way*." This empowerment validates the claims of scholars focusing on the relationship between language, culture, and identity, suggesting that learning English, when contextualized, is not an act of cultural replacement but one of identity affirmation (Frontiers, 2023).

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This approach effectively counters the monocultural bias in traditional EFL materials often criticized by researchers (Revistas Científicas UNED, 2025) by making the students' own world the center of the curriculum. The qualitative data demonstrates that using English to write about local festivals or discuss community challenges instilled a tangible sense of ownership over the learning process.

The success of the intervention was inherently tied to its methodological design as Action Research. This cyclical approach allowed the teachers to evolve from "knowledge transmitters" to "cultural mediators," continuously adjusting tasks based on the students' reflective journals and needs. This collaborative environment fostered a notable increase in peer-to-peer collaboration and critical thinking (Themes 2 and 3), as the contextual problems required genuine communication to solve. This finding is particularly relevant to the regional call for studies that focus on the interaction between motivation and cultural factors in Ecuadorian EFL instruction (Soto, Espinosa Cevallos, & Rojas Encalada, 2025).

In summary, this study demonstrates that by anchoring the EFL curriculum in the students' local realities and embracing active, project-based methodologies, educators can simultaneously achieve superior linguistic results and cultivate essential intercultural communicative competence and socio-critical awareness. The model presented offers a replicable, decolonizing strategy for making EFL education a powerful tool for self-affirmation and community engagement across similar intercultural contexts in Latin America.

### Conclusions

This action research study conclusively demonstrates that implementing a Context-Based Learning (CBL) methodology, explicitly prioritizing local culture and identity, is a transformative and highly effective approach for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction within intercultural contexts, specifically in rural Ecuador. The quantitative results provide unequivocal evidence of success, showing a statistically significant improvement in students' linguistic proficiency (evidenced by the large effect size,  $d=1.48$ ), while the qualitative data confirmed a substantial, parallel surge in Cultural Awareness and Motivation ( $d=2.41$ ). This successful triangulation of data validates that when students are empowered to use the target language to articulate their own realities—such as local festivals and community challenges—the classroom transcends its traditional function and becomes a true space of both linguistic and cultural affirmation. The narratives from participants reveal a

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critical shift in perspective, transforming English into a practical tool for self-expression rather than a symbol of foreign imposition.

The primary contribution of this work lies in offering a viable model to counteract the pervasive "pedagogical dissonance" prevalent in global EFL education. By integrating local Ecuadorian cultural content as the curricular core, this study operationalizes key principles of intercultural communicative competence, showing that language acquisition is most profound when it reinforces, rather than marginalizes, the learner's identity. Furthermore, the reliance on active methodologies within an Action Research design underscores the vital role of the teacher as a "cultural mediator" and reflective practitioner. This model highlights that effective teaching involves the iterative co-creation of knowledge between the teacher and students, positioning the learner as an expert in their own context and fostering the critical thinking necessary to engage with global issues from a foundation of local strength.

Moving forward, the success of this CBL intervention demands its scaling and adaptation to other intercultural settings across Latin America. Future research should focus on conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term retention of both linguistic gains and enhanced cultural awareness beyond the initial intervention period. Specifically, there is a need to explore how this CBL model can be effectively integrated into national curriculum standards without compromising its student-centered, reflective nature. Ultimately, this research provides a powerful argument for pedagogical practices that view the language classroom not merely as a venue for transmitting a foreign code, but as a critical space for promoting social equity, cultural preservation, and the emergence of globally conscious citizens rooted firmly in their local heritage.

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