



## C A P Í T U L O 4

# DEVELOPING CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

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**ABSTRACT:** This chapter reports the results of an action research study aimed at developing cultural awareness (CA) about racism as a social phenomenon. The development of CA about racism was addressed through the implementation of pedagogical practices for teaching English and was treated as part of the integration of cultural issues and interpersonal interaction in an English as a foreign language course. The study participants were young adult males and females, all English language learners at a public university in the city of Veracruz, Mexico. The study involved the design and implementation of strategies for teaching English with a cross-cultural approach for CA. The data collection process was carried out through classroom observations, surveys, qualitative interviews, and documentation of the activities and linguistic samples generated by the students (essays, homework, etc.). Data analysis included a thematic analysis under the qualitative paradigm through data coding and categorization, as well as identification of themes and generation of assertions. Finally, the results of the analysis showed that the intervention had a positive impact on developing awareness about racism among students and English language learning.

**KEYWORDS:** Social justice education, cultural awareness, racism, intercultural communication.

**RESUMEN:** El presente capítulo reporta los resultados de un estudio investigación-acción cuyo objetivo fue el desarrollo de la concientización cultural (cultural awareness CA por sus siglas en inglés) sobre el racismo como fenómeno social. El desarrollo

de CA sobre el racismo fue abordado a través de la implementación de prácticas pedagógicas para la enseñanza del inglés y fue tratado como parte de la integración de temas culturales y de interacción interpersonal en un curso de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los participantes del estudio fueron adultos jóvenes, hombres y mujeres, todos estudiantes de inglés en una universidad pública de la ciudad de Veracruz, México. El estudio comprendió el diseño e implementación de estrategias para la enseñanza del inglés con un enfoque intercultural para el CA. El proceso de recolección de datos se llevó a cabo mediante observaciones de clase, encuestas, entrevistas cualitativas y documentación de las actividades y muestras lingüísticas generadas por los estudiantes (ensayos, tareas, etc.). El análisis de los datos incluyó un análisis temático bajo el paradigma cualitativo mediante la codificación y categorización de datos, además de la identificación de temas y generación de aserciones. Finalmente, los resultados del análisis demostraron que la intervención tuvo un impacto positivo para desarrollar conciencia acerca del racismo entre los estudiantes y el aprendizaje del inglés.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación para la justicia social, concientización cultural, racismo, comunicación intercultural.

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding and reflecting on social and cultural issues is an integral part of foreign language learning. In this vein, students should be aware of socio-cultural dynamics that promote or hinder intercultural interactions. These dynamics can include power relations amongst people and generate conflicts based on differences in attitudes, beliefs, values, etc. Therefore, it is important to integrate topics of cultural and social relevance regarding societies around the world.

From an approach to education that promotes effective intercultural communication and social justice, it is argued students need to be exposed to some critical stances to inter- and multiculturalism and social relations (Francis et al., 2011). According to Hackman (2005), social justice education motivates students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating critical, democratic, and empowered educational environments. Hackman (2005) also argues that social justice education not only examines difference or diversity, it also pays attention to systems of power and privilege that enhance social inequality, and motivates students to critically examine oppression at institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change.

To address the issues above stated, this research study aimed to develop cultural awareness (CA) about racism as a social phenomenon. The development of CA about racism was addressed through the implementation of pedagogical practices

for teaching English and was treated as part of the integration of cultural issues and interpersonal interaction in an English as a foreign language course. To address the challenge of developing awareness of racism with a social justice perspective through English language instruction, this study proposed a pedagogical intervention (action research) in which the participant students were able to explore the social and cultural dimensions of racism. In addition, the study incorporated surveys and activities to measure the impact and perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching methodology implemented.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM

Lack of reflection about social and cultural practices can result in misunderstandings or conflicts when people engage in intercultural communication. Based on our teaching experience as English teachers in Mexican universities, it can be observed that language classes are highly focused on the development of skills and knowledge of the “formal” linguistic system (i.e. grammatical rules) rather than delving into the reality of social and cultural practices of the contexts where English is used. Similarly, the lack of cultural focus is evident in materials such as textbooks, which rarely cover social and cultural issues explicitly in any of their texts. In addition, the curriculum in Mexican universities focuses mainly on the development of language skills or the accreditation of standardized tests and examinations.

Nault (2016) asserts that English is used globally in diverse cultures, so English teachers will not only need to be more culturally and linguistically aware, but also able to design curricula with an approach that includes contexts that embrace the local and the global. Racism, in its various forms, being a prejudice that has existed and continues to exist in societies around the world, should not be ignored by foreign language learners. Likewise, Byram et al. (2020) argues that what the teacher should be asking is not how much additional information about a country and its cultures can be included in the curriculum, but how can he or she develop those other competencies that will help learners interact successfully with people from other cultures and identities.

Mexican universities, both public and private, can be excellent environments to develop this type of studies. Similarly, it is in the university environment where there is room for reflection and change of perspectives and attitudes for better intercultural communication. Among the limitations to approaching such issues is the fact that there may be some resistance, due to the visible polarization of ideologies in social networks. However, it is in the classroom where ideas are debated, and it is important that students of any age develop critical cultural awareness while they learn another language.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that guided the implementation in this study were:

What is the impact of the intervention on the students' development of cultural awareness about racism?

What are the students' perceptions about the intervention regarding cultural awareness in learning and developing English skills?

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to develop CA (awareness of the phenomenon of racism) in university students through the process of learning English to build a more just, reflective and non-discriminatory society.

## OBJECTIVES

To raise students' awareness of racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and structural/systemic racism, considering their culture and that of others.

Develop skills to identify racism in context and in their daily lives.

Change students' attitudes about racism and better understand racism and the inequalities that arise because of racial differences.

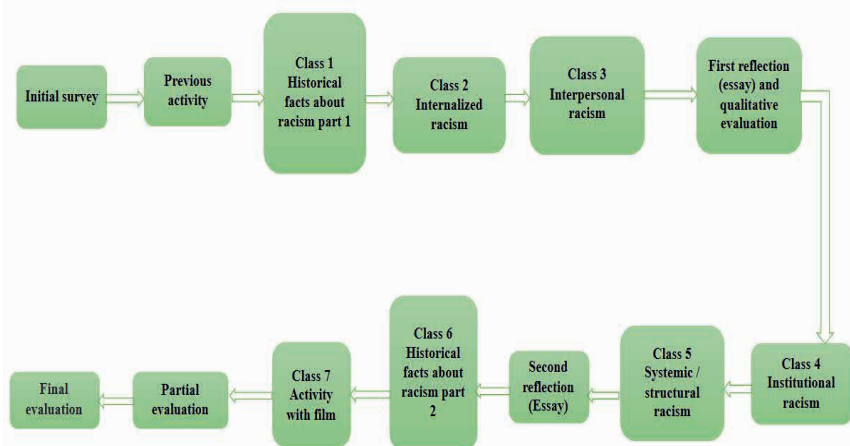
To learn students' perceptions of the intervention as a means of learning English.

## METHODOLOGY

Action research was the methodology implemented, as suggested by Burns (2009) for studies focusing on contexts of foreign language teaching (Burns, 2009). In this sense, the methodological stages of identifying a problem were followed, actions were planned, the plan was implemented, and based on the results, reflections were generated to improve teaching practice and students' learning experiences. The intervention included a series of classes and activities to build a more inclusive educational environment and develop awareness of racism (see Figure 1).

This study was conducted at a public university located in the city of Veracruz, Mexico. The group comprised 16 engineering students enrolled in a B1 level English course. The ages of the students ranged from 20 to 24 years old, and the group included 11 females and 5 males.

Figure 1 - Intervention design



## DEVELOPMENT

In this section, the phases which comprised the intervention are described:

**Survey and pre-activity:** the survey consisted of 8 questions that explored prior knowledge about racism. During the pre-activity students researched milestones in the life of a historical figure to have their first contact with the topic of race and racism.

**Lessons:** All lessons included 2 approaches: Social Justice Approach (EJ) and Linguistic Approach (EL).

**Class 1: Historical facts about racism 1.** EJ: Participants interpreted images about apartheid, followed by answering the question “What is racism? They then watched a video, identified racist situations they had experienced, and completed a biography. They viewed a second video, worked on a reflective activity, and finally made a list of racist experiences, which they shared with the class. EL: Use of verb tenses to talk about the life of Nelson Mandela. Students practiced past simple, past continuous, present simple, and present perfect by completing the biography.

**Class 2 Internalized Racism:** EJ: Participants viewed an experiment conducted in Italy and reflected on the reactions of the children. They conducted a reading comprehension and watched another video about the same experiment in Mexico. They reflected on the results of both experiments, defined internalized racism and developed proposals to combat it. The: They made use of the second conditional to answer some questions that included internalized racism. They used modal verbs to write solutions and give advice to fight against this type of racism.

Class 3 Interpersonal Racism: EJ: Students watched a video and defined the concept in their own words. They reflected on a case of racist aggression on an airplane. They conducted a reading comprehension and shared example of microaggressions. They watched a video about another racist incident and reported a few sentences. Finally, they wrote a short text explaining why people engage in racist behavior. EL: Students made use of reported speech to report phrases that a racist person said during an interview.

First Reflection: Students wrote an essay to reflect on interpersonal and internalized racism. They included their own definitions, examples, reasons, comparisons and reflections on both concepts.

Class 4 Institutional Racism: EJ: Students described images and gave their own definition of institutional racism. They watched a video, wrote down unfamiliar words, and answered questions related to the video. They then reflected on whether the same situations in the video occur in Mexico and made a list of examples. After reading a text, they identified key terms from three different definitions of institutional racism and shared ideas. EL: They used modal verbs to suggest ways to prevent institutional racism.

Class 5 Systemic / Structural Racism: EJ: Images were analyzed and ideas were shared. After watching a video, they discussed the video and identified examples of this type of racism. Followed by a reading comprehension, students shared experiences related to the concept. EL: Use was made of the third conditional to hypothetically reflect responses to this type of racism. They shared ideas on the question: what would you have done if you had experienced something like that?

Second Reflection: focused on institutional and systemic/structural racism. They included their own definitions, examples and personal reflections on both concepts.

Class 6 Historical Facts about Racism 2: EJ: Students described images, watched a video about Martin Luther King and made a list of milestones in his life. They commented on a video about the origin of racism in the United States and shared their ideas. A discussion was held about racism in Mexico. EL: Wrote five sentences using various forms of the future to predict how racism will evolve in Mexico.

Class 7 Film activity: Identified scenes of racist acts. Classified the scenes into the four types of racism, creating a list of each to demonstrate their understanding in context.

Evaluation procedures: Formative evaluation: as can be seen in Figure 1, activities related to the evaluation of participants' individual and group progress were implemented. The evaluation included qualitative and quantitative aspects. For example, guided reflections on concepts reviewed in class (essays) and rubrics were used, as well as two exams (partial and final) and feedback was provided on the results obtained.

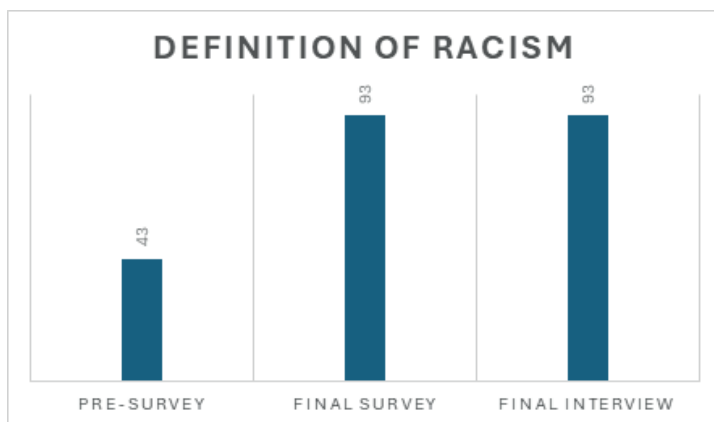
## RESULTS

The results of the implementation of the pedagogical intervention are described in this section in the form of four assertions following the thematic analysis used in the study.

Assertion 1: Students improved their understanding of racism by learning key concepts.

Before the intervention, half of the students could not correctly define racism. For example, in the pre-survey, only 40% were able to provide a relatively accurate definition of racism, and only 33% identified examples of racism in their daily lives. At the end of the study, 81% of participants were able to adequately define the term and connect it to situations in their daily lives. This can be confirmed by the interviews, where 100% of participants stated they had learned more about racism, for example: "I didn't know there were different types of racism, and now I am more aware of whether I commit racist acts or not," "Now I can identify the types of racism and differentiate them." Furthermore, several participants described the concept more precisely, using terms such as discrimination, prejudice, ideology, and violence.

Figure 2 - Percentage of students who correctly defined the concept of racism



Assertion 2: Most students were able to define and differentiate the different types of racism and provide real-life examples.

Before the intervention, none of the participants were familiar with the different types of racism. However, in the final survey, 93% of students demonstrated competence in correctly defining the concept of racism, 81% correctly defined the concept of internalized racism, 50% correctly defined interpersonal and systemic/

structural racism, and again 100% demonstrated competence in defining institutional racism. Furthermore, 100% of participants demonstrated competence in defining racism, internalized racism, interpersonal racism, and institutional racism in the essays, and 83% correctly defined systemic/structural racism in this task. Similarly, 66% to 100% were able to provide examples of each of the different types of racism in the essays, 78% to 90% were able to provide correct examples of each type of racism in the final survey, and 68% to 100% of participants were able to provide examples of each type of racism in the interview.

Table 1 - Students' performance understanding concepts and providing examples

	Correct definitions provided			Correct examples provided			
	Pre-survey	First reflection	Final evaluation	Pre-survey	Essays	Final evaluation (Survey)	Final Evaluation
Racism	43.75%	Essays 100%	(Survey) 93.75%	62.5%	-	-	-
Internalized	0%	100%	81.25%	0%	100%	84.37%	87.5%
Interpersonal	0%	100%	50%	0%	83%	87.5%	68.75%
Institutional	0%	100%	100%	0%	100%	90.6%	100%
Systemic/ structural	0%	83.33%	50%	0%	66.66%	78.12%	68.75%

Assertion 3: The intervention promoted learning about topics related to social justice and the English language.

Most of the participants agreed during the interview that the sessions allowed them to develop cultural awareness and improve their English skills. Students noticed an improvement in their vocabulary at the end of the intervention, especially in vocabulary related to emotions and social aspects. For example:

"It was helpful to expand vocabulary and learn more about cultural aspects," "informative and useful in changing people's perspectives," "It was more than just learning about racism; I learned English in a more interactive way," and "They are necessary because people are not aware or sensitive to situations that still exist; some don't even know they are committing racist acts."

Assertion 4: The students were able to identify racist practices in context and in their daily lives, reflecting on their actions and developing a sense of social justice.

The students' understanding of the phenomenon was not limited to theoretical issues; They were also able to identify exemplary cases of the phenomenon during a practical activity. That is, in the film activity, 55% of participants were able to identify internalized racism, 88% correctly identified interpersonal racism, and 100% were able to correctly identify both institutional and systemic/structural racism. Similarly, in the final survey, 81% correctly identified internalized racism in different contexts,

62% correctly identified interpersonal racism, 93% correctly identified institutional racism, and 75% correctly identified systemic/structural racism. In the final interview, all participants stated they were able to identify racism in their daily lives and felt more aware of the phenomenon.

Example: "I am more aware of the attitudes that contribute to racism," "I am more careful with my actions and realize that I cannot normalize many things as I used to," "I know that I can identify and be able to help in any situation," "I can identify if I am racist or if another person is racist towards me even if it is not intentional," "I used to justify certain acts that are racist because they were normalized."

Figure 3 - Performance of students in the activity focused on identify racist practices in context and in their daily lives, reflecting on their actions and developing a sense of social justice.

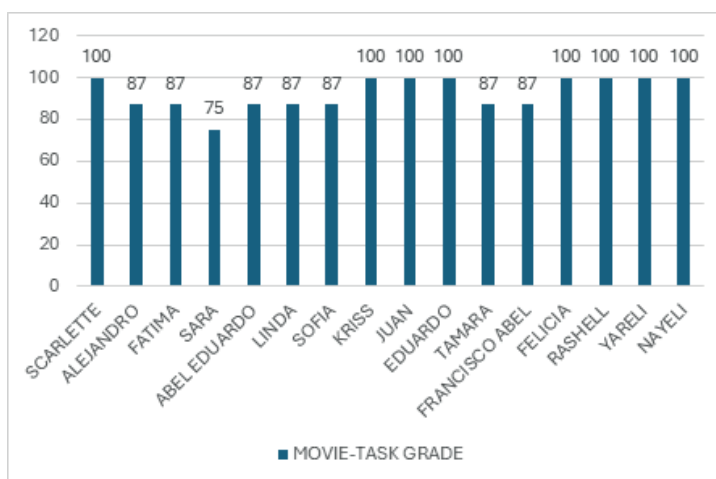


Table 2 - Identification of types of racism in context and daily life

	Pre-survey	Movie-Task	Final evaluation (survey)
Racism	56.25%	-	81.25%
Internalized R	0%	55.55%	81.25%
Interpersonal R	0%	88.88%	62.5%
Institutional R	0%	100%	93.75%
Systemic/structural R	0%	100%	75%

## CONCLUSIONS

Through the intervention the students were able to explore racism in different dimensions and contexts, successfully developing a sense of awareness of the phenomenon. This is supported by the information collected through the pre-survey, essays, interviews, activities, final survey, and exams. Although the process of teaching using this approach to CA may be challenging, it is necessary to foster cultural awareness by sensibilizing students to embrace these issues with ease, thus avoiding controversy or confrontation. Likewise, teachers must be informed and have knowledge about cultural or social phenomena. The results also showed that students perceived the intervention in a positive way both for learning about cultural and social issues and for learning English. Students agreed that they acquired vocabulary and had the perception of using more authentic, real-life English.

Hackman (2005) asserts that social justice education requires examining systems of power and oppression combined with a prolonged emphasis on social change and student agency in and out of the classroom. Participants showed significant shifts in their understanding of racism, not only learning theoretical concepts, but reflecting on their own experiences, rethinking and reevaluating their perspectives, behaviors, attitudes, and values. The development of cultural awareness is not limited to racism; language learners can develop awareness of issues such as gender, norms, lifestyles, religion, traditions, sexual identity, disabilities, etc. It is evident that more research related to cultural awareness needs to be conducted in language classrooms with the aim of building a more just, diverse, inclusive and equitable society.

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