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EFL Learners' Critical Literacy Development Using Sketchbooks

Desarrollo de la Literacidad Crítica en Estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera mediante el Uso de Cuadernos de Bocetos

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the use of sketchbooks as a multimodal learning strategy in promoting Critical Literacy (CL) among teenage English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in rural Antioquia (Colombia). Using action research methodology, the study was conducted in a public rural institution, integrating multimodal pedagogy and texts to foster critical engagement with their own socio-cultural realities. Data was collected through observations, student-created sketchbooks, and focus group discussions. Three key findings emerged: (1) The influence of students' involvement with sketchbooks on CL development; (2) The correlation between context-specific materials and learners' sociocultural awareness; (3) and the double-edged role of native language in foreign language acquisition. This research underscores the need for innovative approaches to language learning that encompass critical engagement with socio-cultural realities; thus, it proposes the use of sketchbooks and encourages future researchers to explore additional implementation cycles that balance Critical Literacy (CL) development and EFL proficiency in rural contexts.

Keywords: Sketchbook, Critical Literacy (CL), Multiple Literacies, English as a Foreign language.

Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo explorar el uso de los cuadernos de bocetos como una estrategia de aprendizaje multimodal para promover la Literacidad Crítica entre adolescentes que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera en zonas rurales de Antioquia (Colombia). Utilizando una metodología de investigación-acción, el estudio se desarrolló en una institución pública rural, integrando pedagogía y textos multimodales para fomentar un compromiso crítico con sus propias realidades socioculturales. Los datos se recolectaron a través de observaciones, cuadernos de bocetos creados por los estudiantes y discusiones en grupos focales. Surgieron tres hallazgos clave: (1) La influencia de la participación de los estudiantes con los cuadernos de bocetos en el desarrollo de la LC; (2) La correlación entre materiales específicos del contexto y la conciencia sociocultural de los estudiantes; (3) y el papel de doble filo de la lengua materna en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera. Esta investigación subraya la necesidad de enfoques innovadores para el aprendizaje de lenguas que incluyan un compromiso crítico con las realidades socioculturales; por ello, propone el uso de cuadernos de bocetos e incentiva a futuros investigadores a explorar ciclos adicionales de implementación que equilibren el desarrollo de la Literacidad Crítica y la competencia en inglés como lengua extranjera en contextos rurales.

Palabras clave: Cuaderno de bocetos, Literacidad Crítica (LC), Literacidades múltiples, Inglés como lengua extranjera.

Resumo

Este estudo teve como objetivo explorar o uso de cadernos de esboço como uma estratégia de aprendizagem multimodal para promover o Letramento Crítico entre adolescentes que aprendem inglês como língua estrangeira em áreas rurais de Antioquia (Colômbia). Utilizando uma metodologia de pesquisa-ação, o estudo foi realizado em uma instituição pública rural, integrando pedagogia e textos multimodais para fomentar um engajamento crítico com suas próprias realidades socioculturais. Os dados foram coletados por meio de observações, cadernos de esboço criados pelos alunos e discussões em grupos focais. Três achados principais emergiram: (1) A influência do envolvimento dos alunos com os cadernos de esboço no desenvolvimento do LC; (2) A correlação entre materiais específicos ao contexto e a conscientização sociocultural dos alunos; (3) e o papel ambivalente da língua materna na aquisição de uma língua estrangeira. Esta pesquisa enfatiza a necessidade de abordagens inovadoras para a aprendizagem de línguas que envolvam um engajamento crítico com as realidades socioculturais; assim, propõe o uso de cadernos de esboço e incentiva futuros pesquisadores a explorar ciclos adicionais de implementação que equilibrem o desenvolvimento do Letramento Crítico e a proficiência em inglês como língua estrangeira em contextos rurais.

Palavras-chave: Caderno de esboço, Letramento Crítico (LC), Multiletramentos, Inglês como língua estrangeira.

Introduction

Currently, as education seeks to transcend the mere transmission of knowledge, it is crucial to foster critical thinking and social consciousness in students. Authors such as Freire have associated, in their theoretical proposals, ideas that motivate individuals to become agents of social change through critical theories; this idea is also mentioned in the text Building a Culture of Peace through Critical Literacy with the Net Generation by Adunyarittigun (2017) in which the author refers to the importance of Critical Literacy and Critical Consciousness in students as a means to promote peace. Moreover, the implementation of multimodal texts plays a crucial role in this research, as they served both as the means of data collection and as a strategy to promote social reflection among students; Lim et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of multimodal literacy, including diverse of multimodal text to potentiate critical literacy according to specific interest and teachers' objectives in specific contexts. Accordingly, critical thinking and social consciousness in the classroom, in this research, go beyond the transmission of knowledge.

In order to promote teachers' active participation and students' social reflection and transformation, the Critical Emancipatory Research Paradigm was selected, and an action research methodology was used. According to Ramírez et al. (2013), the Critical Emancipatory Research purpose is to eradicate the social injustices and transform society; besides, this promotes a constant reflection and modification in teaching practices helping students to develop critical thinking, which is why the ultimate purpose of this paper is to serve as a proposal to innovative strategies, such as the use of the multimodal texts, to address both the academic and socio-cultural dimensions of education in specific rural environments.

Previous studies have discussed the nature of these social reflections and critical thinking development by considering that critical literacy (CL) in the EFL/ESL context is often separated from the process of learning English, resulting in most teachers not implementing CL in their instruction. (Novianti, et al., 2020; Fajardo, 2015). Following previous studies, Adunyarittigun (2017), associates the idea of Critical Literacy with Paulo Freire, whose critical theory establishes that individuals are fundamental agents of social change. Moreover, Lim et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of literature examining issues related to multimodal pedagogies in the EFL classroom in which the authors show a comprehensive review regarding the potential of multimodal pedagogies in expanding critical literacy within the curriculum and promoting meaningful changes in EFL education. Finally, Yi (2014) examines the practical applications and benefits of multimodal approaches in EFL contexts and its emphasis on the practical benefits of multimodal literacy that leads to a consideration of the role of multimodal texts in language learning.

Despite these theoretical foundations, several research gaps remain. Hidaya, et al. (2020) showcase a perspective in which they refer to the implementation of CL in the EFL class and the lack of didactic resources in the EFL classroom to face CL. Moreover, Novianti et al. (2020) refer to the complexity of Critical Literacy (CL) and the clarifications that English teachers need regarding this concept. During this research process, these gaps were considered through the implementation of sketchbooks as Critical Literacy tools.

The context of this study is characterized by various challenges that significantly affect the educational environment. On one hand, violent patterns within the community, including in families and schools, are seen to shape educational dynamics, as these tensions are reflected in interactions among students, teachers, and parents. Consequently, power dynamics often lead to verbal and physical disagreements, which impede the creation of a harmonious learning environment. On the other hand, temporary or permanent dropout is identified as a key issue, as students are frequently required to balance educational goals with economic responsibilities, which, in turn, disrupt their academic progress. In response, the potential of Critical Literacy to foster social awareness and positive change is investigated.

The challenges identified in the context of this study, including violence within educational environments, power dynamics resulting in conflicts, and the frequent necessity for students to prioritize economic responsibilities over academic goals, underscore the need for innovative educational approaches. Consequently, Critical Literacy (CL) has been recognized as a promising tool to address these issues by fostering reflection, social awareness, and empowerment. Nevertheless, gaps in its implementation have been highlighted by researchers such as Hidaya et al. (2020) and Novianti et al. (2020), who emphasize the lack of didactic resources and the conceptual complexity that teachers must address. Furthermore, while the potential of multimodal approaches in EFL classrooms has been extensively demonstrated by Lim et al. (2022) and Yi (2014), their practical applications remain underexplored, particularly in addressing socio-educational challenges. Therefore, a Critical Emancipatory approach combined with multimodal strategies, such as the use of sketchbooks, has been proposed to bridge these gaps. By focusing on rural EFL students and employing contextually relevant materials such as local newspapers, popular Colombian novels, testimonials from well-known community members (e.g., a coffee seller, the shopkeeper, the learners' grandparents and relatives), images representing community roles such as a bus driver, a coffee picker, or a housewife among others, as well as the learners' own personal narratives, this study aims to contribute to the development of Critical Literacy and English language proficiency, ensuring that the specific needs of this population are effectively addressed and that meaningful educational transformations are promoted.

The present qualitative study, thus, aimed to answer the following question: How does the use of sketchbooks as a multimodal learning strategy influence the development of Critical Literacy and English language learning among teenage EFL students in a rural institution of Colombia? To address this question, the main objective is to describe how the use of sketchbooks as a multimodal learning strategy influences the development of Critical Literacy and English language learning among teenage EFL students in a rural institution. To further elaborate, specific objectives include identifying how the use of contextually relevant materials in the sketchbook shapes students' reflection on their own reality; exploring how the use of the sketchbook as a learning strategy influences the development of English language skills in EFL students; and analyzing the influence of the construction of the sketchbook on the development of Critical Literacy in rural EFL students.

Theoretical framework

Critical literacy education in the EFL classroom is grounded in a multifaceted conceptualization that integrates the principles of critical pedagogy with the acquisition of language skills. This approach acknowledges that literacy extends beyond the basic ability to read and write; it encompasses the capacity to decode, question, and challenge the power structures embedded in written and spoken language. As Freire (1973, 1974) emphasized, dialogue serves as a vital process for uncovering ideologies and power relations, as well as for understanding how individuals are positioned within these systems. Furthermore, Critical Literacy Pedagogy transcends individual cognitive development to prioritize fostering social awareness and transformation by interrogating social and cultural practices that sustain inequalities, biases, and injustices. In this context, students are encouraged to reflect on the broader societal implications of these narratives, a reflection that often becomes a catalyst for activism and social change. This is accomplished by equipping students with the tools to challenge ideologies and advocate for social justice, aligning with Hawkins and Norton (2009), who observed that "because language, culture, and identity are integrally related, language teachers are in a key position to address educational inequality" (p. 3). Ultimately, the objective of this pedagogical approach is to cultivate language learners who are not passive consumers of information but rather critical interpreters and active contributors to the ever-evolving discourse communities they inhabit as stated by Sharkey et al. (2016) "curriculum be locally generated and invite learners to critique and transform their realities" (p.3). According to Pessoa and Freitas (2012), hegemonic cultural and ideological discourses structure societies in ways that constrain critical reflection and limit opportunities for transformative social change.

Critical literacy education in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is grounded in a multifaceted conceptualization that integrates the principles of critical pedagogy with the acquisition of language skills. This approach acknowledges

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Multiple Literacies in the EFL Classroom

The concept of multiple literacies in education has gained significant traction in response to the evolving nature of 21st-century communication, given that "Literacy in the 20th century was about extracting and processing pre-coded and – for school students – usually carefully curated information; in the 21st century, it is about constructing and validating knowledge." (OECD, 2021:3). In contemporary education, students encounter multiple ways in which information is presented and knowledge is constructed which demands advanced cognitive skills and critical thinking to navigate and interpret their rapidly changing world. Building on this, Bezemer and Kress (2016) define multimodal pedagogies as "the ways in which the teacher can deliberately design learning experiences using a range of multimodal resources" (p. 45), which aligns with the concept of multiple literacies understood as the intentional integration of diverse semiotic tools in educational settings. Implementing multiple literacies is particularly valuable in EFL contexts, as it can address common challenges such as student disinterest and low motivation by fostering critical engagement with learners' realities, thereby empowering them to transform their environments and moving beyond a focus solely on grammar and vocabulary.

> "When students develop language and literacy skills alongside each other, they become truly equipped to navigate the opportunities and challenges in front of them by gaining a better understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world they live in, engaging critically with important issues, and feeling empowered to make positive change for people and the planet. (p. 5)

Further expanding on this, Yi (2014) describes multimodal literacy learning as involving "the development of multimodal communicative competence, exploring identities, improving academic literacies, and developing critical perspectives" (p. 158). Similarly, Lim et al. (2022) argue that multimodal pedagogies involve "designing opportunities for students to explore and perform ideas and identities using a range of meaning-making resources" (p. 8). These perspectives underscore the necessity for education to adapt to the multimodal nature of modern communication, particularly within diverse sociocultural contexts. Specifically, the integration of multimodal texts in EFL classrooms plays a vital role in promoting critical literacy. As stated by Silver & Blue (2024):

> "'Text' can now describe conversations, videos, infographics, and photographs. Our use of the word 'read' has also expanded: just as we 'read' a written text, we also 'read' visual and multimodal content such as photographs, illustrations, graphics, or videos. In addition, we 'read' social situations, interpreting body language and facial expressions, and we 'read the world,' learning about our planet and local and global communities." (p. 9)

This perspective aligns with Martínez-Lirola's (2016) definition of multimodality as the integrated use of different semiotic resources (e.g., language, image, sound, and music) in texts and communicative events. This definition provides a framework for understanding how diverse texts can be incorporated into language learning to enhance both linguistic competence and critical thinking skills. Martinez-Lirola (2016) also argues that, as the multimodal texts reflect on social matters, "students can be aware of their important role in society if they see themselves as active citizens by analyzing the texts under analysis from a critical perspective." (p.80). This highlights the unique potential of multimodal texts to foster critical engagement with complex ideas. By integrating various types of texts, such as images, audio clips, videos, and podcasts, into the EFL classroom, students are provided with opportunities to interpret, explore, and comprehend diverse perspectives, thereby developing their critical literacy skills when facing social and cultural issues in their own contexts.

Sketchbook as a tool to promote critical literacy in the EFL

This research proposes the implementation of sketchbooks as a specific multimodal tool to promote critical literacy in EFL contexts. Moate et al. (2019) describe that "The sketchbook extracts document the way personally meaningful understanding unfolds as an open-ended dialogue with self and other" (p. 170). This characterization corresponds with our study's objectives, as it highlights the potential of sketchbooks to facilitate introspection, social memory construction, and deep reflection on relevant aspects of students' contexts. The sketchbook, as a personal journal where students can graphically represent their interpretations of reality and narrate it deeply within the

framework of EFL, serves multiple purposes in this study. It acts as a learning tool for language acquisition and social transformation, providing a space for deep reflection and discussion of relevant aspects within students' contexts. Simultaneously, it serves as a data collection instrument, enabling the documentation of students' dialogical encounters while encouraging critical and thoughtful thinking.

By incorporating sketchbooks into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, this study suggests that learners may develop enhanced capacities for questioning assumptions, raising awareness, and ultimately transforming their perspectives on their own realities. This multimodal tool has the potential to foster not only language learning but also critical literacy development. It is anticipated that this innovative approach will promote a deeper understanding of linguistic structures and cultural practices among learners, both in the target language and their native tongue. Furthermore, this method could facilitate more profound reflection on implicit sociocultural norms in language, thus encouraging greater learner autonomy and more active engagement in the knowledge construction process. This research seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on multimodal approaches in foreign language education, exploring how sketchbooks can serve as catalysts for critical thinking and transformative learning in EFL contexts.

Methodology

Research design

This study followed the Critical Emancipatory Research Paradigm, which aligns with a qualitative approach. The research utilized Action Research methodology to promote the active participation of educators and students in social transformation through educational practices. Action Research involves a self-reflective, critical, and systematic investigation of teaching environments (Burns, 2010). The aim was to implement the principles of the critical emancipatory paradigm, which, according to Ramírez et al. (2013) seeks to "abolish social injustices, achieve social changes, and transform society" (p. 426). This methodology facilitates continuous reflection and adjustment of teaching strategies, fostering students' development of critical literacy and social consciousness. Frydaki and Katsarou (2013) explored how the use of a sketchbook could serve as a tool for students to engage with and reflect on social issues, aligning with the study's objectives of fostering exploration and critical thinking about these issues.

Participants

The study focused on 22 eighth-grade students from a rural public school in Colombia, aged between 11 and 16 years, including both male and female participants.

To ensure the population was representative of the local community, participants were required to have resided in the rural area for at least two years. This criterion helped capture insights from students with stable ties to the region. Additionally, most students were below the A1 level of proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The school serves 459 students across preschool, primary, and high school levels from both the local area and a nearby village. Operating with around 20 teachers, it follows a humanistic pedagogical model. While the school is equipped with essential facilities like televisions, computers, tablets, boards, a soccer field, and a cafeteria, it lacks reliable internet access and drinking water. It is supported by a local community action group that plays an active role in advocating for the students' welfare and overseeing educational processes.

Instruments

Data was collected using three techniques: observation, sketchbook analysis, and focus group discussions. Seven observation sessions, each lasting 1.5 hours, documented students' participation, reflections, and interactions during sketchbook activities. Sketchbook analysis occurred over seven sessions, also 1.5 hours each, capturing students' creative expressions and reflections on personal and social topics in three stages. Finally, three focus group discussions, conducted after each stage and lasting 1.5 hours per session, explored students' feedback on the sketchbook process, their reflections on social issues, and its impact on their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning.

The sketchbook was a primary tool for students to express their understanding and creativity through text, images, videos, and audio. This approach, supported by Moate et al. (2019), allowed students to reflect on their lives and convey their thoughts through multimedia, promoting personal awareness and social transformation. As stated above, this was developed over three stages: In the first stage, "A Trip Down My Street," students explored their neighborhood's history and social dynamics by interviewing community elders and observing local interactions. They documented the development of their village, the relationships among its members, and the roles of local leaders. The second stage, "My Roots," involved personal reflection where students illustrated their family members and wrote about their childhood and family history. They also interviewed their parents to create a story about their family's past. In the final stage, "Plow and Sow," students identified social issues in their community, developed projects to address these issues, and proposed solutions. They presented their projects at an institutional fair to assess the impact of their work on critical literacy and English language.

Data Analysis

Following the application of data collection instruments, including observations, focus groups, and sketchbooks, with eighth-grade students from this rural public institution, the analysis was conducted through coding, categorization, and triangulation. Consequently, this process facilitated the identification of key patterns and themes within the collected data and was informed by various theorists, whose conceptual frameworks guided the interpretation of findings. Moreover, from the coding of journals, focus groups, and sketchbooks, both inductive and deductive codes were identified. These codes, in turn, were subsequently organized into categories, which were related and integrated to generate overarching themes. Thus, the themes proved fundamental in understanding how Critical Literacy was promoted in EFL students through the construction of the sketchbook as a learning strategy.

Findings

This study, as stated before, aims to describe how the use of sketchbooks, as a multimodal learning strategy, influences the development of critical literacy and enriches language learning in rural teenage students. After conducting a thematic analysis of the collected data, three central findings emerged, each shedding light on how critical literacy (CL) development and English language learning can be influenced in the research rural context which can lead readers to better understand their interconnection.

Firstly, the study revealed that CL development is significantly influenced by students' engagement and interest in the sketchbook's construction during the learning process. This finding emphasizes the crucial role of student motivation and active participation in the effectiveness of multimodal tools for fostering critical literacy. Observations revealed a spectrum of engagement levels, with some students expressing reluctance or disinterest, as evidenced by comments like:

> **S5**: "No profe, yo no lo traje, eso es muy pesado y no me cabe en el bolso"
>
> ("No teacher, I didn't bring it, it's too heavy and doesn't fit in my bag")
>
> (Journal 4, April 8th 2024)
>
> **S9**: "Ay, eso a mi siempre se me olvida" ("Oh, I always forget that").
>
> (Journal 4, April 8th 2024)

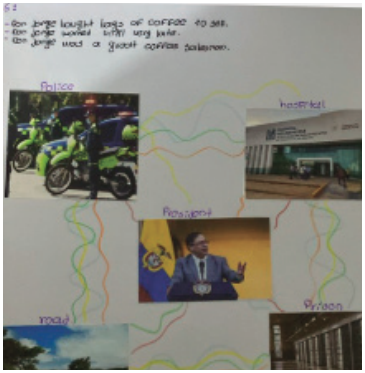
Figure 1. Photograph of the sketchbooks provided to each student.

Firstly, as shown in Figure 1, although the sketchbooks provided to each student served not only as creative spaces but also as tools to observe their engagement and ownership of the learning process, many students were not engaging with them due to their size, the format or the difficulty of carrying them. This suggests that the mere introduction of such tools does not guarantee involvement. These findings align with literature emphasizing the importance of student engagement in multimodal learning approaches, such as Lim et al. (2022), who highlight the potential benefits of integrating multimodal texts like sketchbooks into the classroom. However, the results reinforce the necessity of developing strategies that foster students' motivation and sustained participation.

Secondly, the study found that students' understanding of their own realities depends on the use of authentic material and their L2 competences to produce social reflections. This finding illuminates the interplay between contextually relevant materials and language proficiency in facilitating critical reflection. For instance, during a memory game featuring historical aspects of their community, students demonstrated increased engagement and recognition, noting that the statements were related to their village. As Adunyarittigun (2017) stated, "Students develop and increase their ability to think systematically and critically once they face different activities." Engaging with different types of activities helps students apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations, encouraging deeper reflection and fostering the development of critical thinking skills. Figure 2 illustrates one of these instances, where students' personal narratives emerged in response to local newspaper stories, blending linguistic expression with social reflection. This observation directly addresses our research objective of identifying students' understanding of their own reality, while also highlighting the potential of authentic, context-specific materials in fostering critical awareness.

Figure 2. Page from students' sketchbooks showing their personal narratives in response to news from local newspapers.

Figure 3. Page from students' sketchbooks showing their personal narratives in response to news from local newspapers.



As seen in Figure 3, students expanded their reflections by combining visuals and short texts to represent shared community experiences, showing a deeper level of social and linguistic awareness. Conversely, the research revealed that the English learning process is influenced by the use of L1 for translation and by the lack of English knowledge during the use of the sketchbook. This finding underscores the complex relationship between first language (L1) use and second language (L2) acquisition in the context of critical literacy development. A common difficulty in the implementation of CL is the lack of resources and the linguistic competence of students, according to Hidaya, et al. (2020). The observations showed students participating orally in both Spanish and English, often relying on L1 to negotiate meaning and translate concepts. This phenomenon directly relates to our research

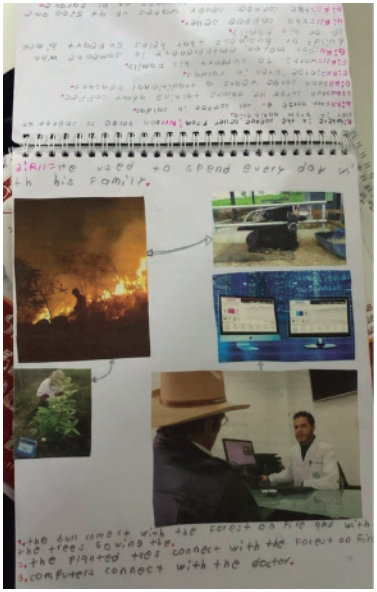
objective of exploring how the sketchbook influences the English learning process, revealing both the challenges and potential strategies in integrating critical literacy development with language acquisition.

The findings reveal interconnected aspects of Critical Literacy (CL) development in a rural Colombian EFL context. Initially, it becomes evident that CL development is influenced by students' engagement and interest in the sketchbook's construction during the learning process, aligning with broader theories about the role of multimodal texts in language learning and critical thinking development. However, our results evidence a more complex picture than what is often described in literature. While Lim et al. (2022) argue that such tools can enhance interest and promote CL, the predominantly low engagement observed challenges assumptions of automatic effectiveness, where deeper cultural and contextual factors such as students' perspectives facing English learning, their level of community involvement, and school time management may explain this outcome, aligning with Pessoa & Freitas (2012) view on hegemonic ideologies shaping educational processes.

Furthermore, the previous finding allowed researchers to see that students' comprehension of their realities is shaped by the implementation of context-specific resources, while their second-language abilities, to generate social reflections, strongly align with the critical literacy educational approach outlined in our conceptual framework. As Freire (1973, 1974) emphasized, dialogue is essential for uncovering ideologies and power relations. In our rural Colombian EFL context, the use of authentic materials facilitated this dialogue, even when students' reflections primarily occurred in their mother tongue given that students demonstrated increased engagement and understanding when presented with materials that resonated with their lived experiences as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5, students represented their community's history based on stories shared by their families where they showed a high level of identification, connection, and awareness; This is in line with Adunyarittigun's (2017) observation that contextually relevant activities promote systematic and critical thinking.

Figure 4. Page from students' sketchbooks illustrating their community's history as narrated by their families.

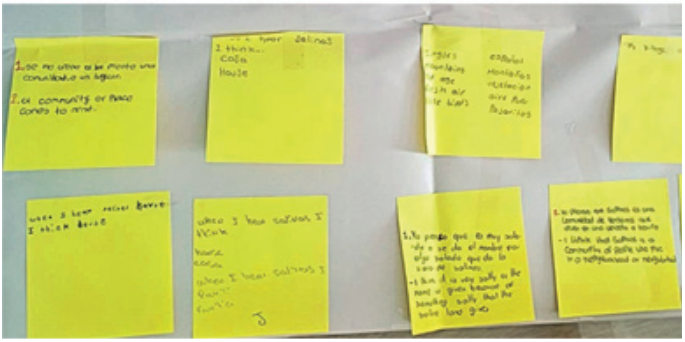
Figure 5. Page from students' sketchbooks illustrating their community's history as narrated by their families.



A tension emerged between the depth of reflection and English use, as reflections occurred predominantly in L1. While this supported critical engagement, limited English proficiency restricted students' ability to articulate complex ideas, a dynamic

feature also observed by Hidaya et al. (2020). As Moate et al. (2019) noted, sketchbooks foster meaningful connections, but without sufficient linguistic support, their potential as EFL tools is constrained. Bezemer and Kress (2016) argue that L1 use in multimodal learning should be understood as part of a broader meaning-making process rather than as an EFL failure. As shown in Figure 6, although students' language expression was limited and the use of their L1 frequently emerged, this did not impede meaning making during activities such as focus groups. In fact, the keyword they used to define their village carried significant meaning for them, demonstrating that L1 can play a valuable role in constructing and expressing understanding. Similarly, Yi (2014) emphasizes that multimodal practices help learners negotiate identities and engage critically. This reliance on L1, shaped by barriers such as fear of mistakes, reflects Fajardo's (2015) assertion on the need to address sociocultural contexts in CL implementation.

Figure 6. Insights emerging from the first focus group.



Ultimately, this study outlines the need to analyze the mediation of the mother tongue in foreign language acquisition, as it served as a learning strategy for this particular group of students to transition to English expression. The reliance on L1 appears to be a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors, including affective barriers such as the shame of committing mistakes or perceived insufficient knowledge, which hindered students' comfort in using English. This is in line with Fajardo's (2015) observation that "the implementation of critical literacy in EFL requires careful consideration of sociocultural contexts and students' experiences" (p. 45). Moreover, the use of L1 in this context can be seen as a scaffolding tool that supports students' engagement with critical thinking tasks while they develop their English language skills.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the integration of sketchbooks as a multimodal learning strategy fostered significant progress in students' critical literacy (CL) development and English language learning. In line with Adunyarittigun (2017), the results demonstrate that when learners engage with authentic and contextually relevant materials, they are encouraged to reflect critically on their realities and socio-cultural environments. Similarly to what was observed in the study *Developing a Deeper Understanding of Community-Based Pedagogies with Teachers: Learning With and From Teachers in Colombia* the implementation of socially relevant classroom projects revealed that "their projects increased student engagement and motivation, fostered or enhanced existing student-teacher relationships and school-family engagement, and increased student and teacher awareness and appreciation of local knowledge and its value as a curriculum resource" (Sharkey et al., 2016, p. 8). However, consistent with Gómez (2018), this study also indicates that meaningful engagement depends on the learners' motivation, the contextual adaptation of pedagogical tools, and the teacher's ability to guide critical discussions within a supportive learning environment.

The sketchbook emerged as a powerful multimodal tool for combining linguistic, visual, and reflective dimensions of learning. Its use prompted students to observe, narrate, and reinterpret their community and family dynamics, thereby promoting social awareness and agency. These outcomes align with Freire's (1973, 1974) conception of education as a dialogic and emancipatory process. Students' reflections within the sketchbook allowed them to 'read the world' critically an idea reinforced by Silver & Blue (2024), which emphasizes that "when students develop language and literacy skills alongside each other, they become truly equipped to navigate the opportunities and challenges in front of them by gaining a better understanding of themselves, their communities, and the world they live in, engaging critically with important issues, and feeling empowered to make positive change for people and the planet." This perspective underscores how sketchbooks served as an avenue for multimodal expression that extended beyond linguistic boundaries.

Furthermore, this study corroborates findings from Lim et al. (2022) and Yi (2014), who argue that multimodal pedagogies enhance critical literacy by engaging students through multiple semiotic resources. Nevertheless, it challenges the assumption that multimodality inherently guarantees engagement. In this study, a noticeable gap in students' participation revealed that sociocultural and affective factors such as low English proficiency, fear of making mistakes, and limited confidence may hinder full participation. This finding resonates with Fajardo (2015), who highlights that CL implementation in EFL settings requires addressing sociocultural constraints and learners' affective barriers.

The reliance on the first language (L1) emerged as both a facilitator and a limitation within the CL process. As Bezemer and Kress (2016) explain, L1 use forms part of a broader meaning-making process rather than a failure in second language acquisition. In this context, students' use of L1 enabled deeper reflection and comprehension of complex social realities, supporting their critical engagement. However, excessive dependence on L1 restricted opportunities for oral communication in English. This dual role reflects a dynamic tension between cognitive support and linguistic challenge in rural EFL classrooms. Thus, while the sketchbook successfully promoted critical thinking, its full potential as a language learning tool requires scaffolding strategies that progressively build confidence in L2 production.

In summary, the study extends previous research on multimodal and critical literacy pedagogies by demonstrating how sketchbooks can bridge the gap between students' linguistic development and social awareness. It highlights that meaningful CL learning occurs when tasks are contextually relevant, multimodally rich, and grounded in learners' lived experiences. This reinforces the need for EFL teachers, especially in rural settings, to act as mediators who integrate authentic materials, foster dialogue, and design opportunities for students to construct knowledge through critical reflection.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study faced several limitations. The first was the limited duration of the intervention, which constrained the depth of student engagement with the sketchbook and restricted opportunities for longitudinal observation. The second limitation was the students' limited English proficiency, which reduced their ability to express reflections in L2 and led to frequent reliance on their native language. The third limitation involved affective barriers, such as fear of making mistakes and resistance to English use, which limited oral participation.

These constraints suggest that future research should implement extended action research cycles, ideally within bilingual or immersive environments where the teacher student bond is strongly present. Such settings would ensure greater continuity, linguistic support, and a deeper engagement with students' lived realities through the use of sketchbooks. As stated by Sharkey et al. (2016), *"Parents and community members became linked to the curriculum" and "the teachers and students' increased awareness of and appreciation of local knowledge and its legitimate, useful role in the curriculum*" (p. 9) which illustrates how educational practices can bridge classroom learning with community realities. These insights emphasize the transformative potential of involving local knowledge and stakeholders in the curriculum to promote more culturally responsive and participatory pedagogies. Additionally, teachers should employ systematic scaffolding strategies to progressively enhance learners' confidence

and competence in English. Finally, continued incorporation of contextually relevant and authentic materials is recommended to sustain engagement, strengthen critical literacy, and promote meaningful educational transformation in rural EFL contexts.

Conclusions

This research, focused on the description of learners' critical literacy development and language learning through the use of sketchbooks, makes significant contributions to the fields of critical literacy, multimodality, and EFL learning, particularly by deepening the understanding of these concepts within rural educational contexts. Addressing gaps in literature, it challenges the widespread assumption that multimodality automatically enhances engagement. Instead, the findings underscore that without intentional, relevant, and authentic connections to students' experiences, multimodal texts risk becoming mere tools devoid of meaningful impact. Aligned with Hawkins and Norton's (2009) assertion that language, culture, and identity are inherently interconnected, this study emphasizes the pivotal role of teachers in addressing educational inequalities.

Furthermore, it introduces the sketchbook as an innovative multimodal learning strategy, extending its traditional applications by incorporating authentic materials. This approach broadens the scope of multimodal texts, demonstrating their potential to facilitate self-exploration, foster community awareness, and promote critical reflection. By encouraging learners to critically engage with their realities, the study provides valuable insights and actionable recommendations to navigate and address the challenges associated with this tool, as highlighted throughout the analysis.

This study employed an action research methodology, characterized by multiple cycles of development, with this being the initial cycle. It offers valuable insights into the implementation of Critical Literacy in rural EFL Colombian contexts benefiting both current readers and future researchers. While challenges were evident, the findings provide actionable guidance. Future research could further investigate the role of multimodal pedagogies, the strategic integration of L1, and the inclusion of locally relevant materials in enhancing both language development and critical literacy skills.

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