

VISIONS OF THE EARTH: COLOMBIAN INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEARNING ENGLISH FROM A GENDER-BASED AND MULTILINGUAL PERSPECTIVE

VISIONES DE LA TIERRA: APRENDIZAJE DE INGLÉS POR MUJERES INDÍGENAS COLOMBIANAS DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA DE GÉNERO Y MULTILINGÜE

VISIONS DE LA TERRE : DES FEMMES INDIGÈNES COLOMBIENNES APPRENANT L'ANGLAIS SOUS UNE PERSPECTIVE DE GENRE ET MULTILANGAGIÈRE

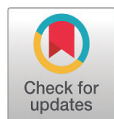
VISÕES DA TERRA: APRENDIZADO DO INGLÊS POR MULHERES INDÍGENAS COLOMBIANAS DESDE UMA PERSPECTIVA DE GÊNERO E MULTILÍNGUE

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ABSTRACT

This case study is the result of a pedagogical intervention within the project Visions of the Earth in which 18 Colombian Indigenous women participated. Participants came from diverse Indigenous communities across different regions of Colombia. The project, Visions of the Earth, emerged as an initiative in collaboration with the Colombian Network of Indigenous Women in the Academia (RedColmia) and Universidad de Caldas. The project aimed to strengthen participants' academic English through a year-long online program. Bi-monthly sessions were conducted by university professors and international guests, exploring visions of the Earth through texts by Indigenous writers who addressed historical exclusion and discrimination faced by Indigenous women in academia. Data were collected through two semi-structured surveys and participants' artifacts. Despite debates on language erosion, participant perceptions underscore the importance of learning English as an empowering tool. Findings reveal that learning English under an Indigenous women gender-based perspective and multilingual approach is a medium for cultural appreciation, identity redefinition, and a means to share their unique perspectives on the Earth. This study provides insights into the intersection of language development, cultural identity, and academic empowerment for Indigenous communities.

Keywords: cultural identity, English language learning, Indigenous women gender-based perspective, multilingual approach, pedagogical intervention

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RESUMEN

El presente estudio de caso se derivó de una intervención pedagógica en el marco del proyecto Visiones de la Tierra, que contó con la participación de 18 mujeres indígenas colombianas pertenecientes a diversas comunidades indígenas de varias regiones de Colombia. El proyecto Visiones de la Tierra surgió como iniciativa en colaboración con la Red colombiana de mujeres indígenas (RedColmia) y la Universidad de Caldas. Dicho proyecto buscó reforzar el inglés académico de las participantes en un programa en línea desarrollado a lo largo de un año. Profesores universitarios e invitados internacionales dirigieron las sesiones bimestrales, explorando visiones de la Tierra mediante textos de autores indígenas que abordaban la exclusión y discriminación históricas que han enfrentado las mujeres indígenas en la academia. Los datos de este trabajo se recolectaron por medio de dos encuestas semiestructuradas y artefactos creados por las participantes. A pesar de los debates sobre la erosión lingüística, las percepciones de las participantes hacen énfasis en la importancia del aprendizaje del inglés como herramienta de empoderamiento. Los hallazgos revelan que el aprendizaje del inglés bajo una perspectiva de género y un enfoque multilingüe posibilita la valoración cultural, la redefinición identitaria y es un medio para compartir las singulares miradas indígenas sobre la Tierra. El presente estudio ofrece claridades en la intersección entre el desarrollo de la lengua, la identidad cultural y el empoderamiento académico de las comunidades indígenas.

Palabras clave: identidad cultural, aprendizaje del inglés, perspectiva de género en mujeres indígenas, enfoque multilingüe, intervención pedagógica

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude de cas est issue d'une intervention pédagogique dans le cadre du projet Visions de la Terre, qui a eu la participation de 18 femmes indigènes colombiennes appartenant à diverses communautés indigènes de plusieurs régions de Colombie. Le projet Visions de la Terre est né d'une initiative en collaboration avec le réseau colombien des femmes indigènes (RedColmia) et l'université de Caldas. Le projet visait à renforcer l'anglais académique des participantes dans le cadre d'un programme en ligne tout au long d'une année. Des professeurs d'université et des invités internationaux ont animé les sessions bimestrielles, explorant les visions de la Terre à travers des textes d'auteurs indigènes qui traitent de l'exclusion et de la discrimination historiques auxquelles les femmes indigènes ont été confrontées dans le monde universitaire. Les données de ce travail ont été recueillies par le biais de deux enquêtes semi-structurées et d'objets créés par les participantes. Malgré les discussions sur l'érosion linguistique, les perceptions des participantes soulignent l'importance de l'apprentissage de l'anglais en tant qu'outil d'autonomisation. Les résultats révèlent que l'apprentissage de l'anglais dans le cadre d'une approche sexuée et multilingue permet la valorisation culturelle, la redéfinition de l'identité et constitue un moyen de partager des points de vue autochtones uniques sur la Terre. Cette étude permet de mieux comprendre plusieurs thèmes dans l'intersection entre le développement de la langue, l'identité culturelle et l'autonomisation académique des communautés indigènes.

Mots clés : identité culturelle, apprentissage de l'anglais, perspective de genre par des femmes indigènes, approche multilingue, intervention pédagogique

RESUMO

Este estudo de caso foi derivado de uma intervenção pedagógica no âmbito do projeto Visiones de la Tierra, que envolveu 18 mulheres indígenas colombianas pertencentes a várias comunidades indígenas em diversas regiões da Colômbia. O projeto Visiones de la Tierra surgiu como uma iniciativa em colaboração com a Rede Colombiana de Mulheres Indígenas (RedColmia) e a Universidade de Caldas. O projeto buscou fortalecer o inglês acadêmico dos participantes em um programa on-line com duração de um ano. Professores universitários e convidados internacionais conduziram as sessões bimestrais, explorando visões da Terra por meio de textos de autores indígenas que abordavam a exclusão e a discriminação históricas que as mulheres indígenas enfrentaram no meio acadêmico. Os dados para este trabalho foram coletados por meio de duas pesquisas semiestruturadas e artefatos criados pelos participantes. Apesar das discussões sobre a erosão do idioma, as percepções das participantes enfatizam a importância de aprender inglês como uma ferramenta de capacitação. As descobertas revelam que aprender inglês em uma abordagem de gênero e multilíngue permite a valorização cultural, a redefinição da identidade e é um meio de compartilhar visões indígenas exclusivas da Terra. Este estudo oferece percepções sobre a interseção entre o desenvolvimento do idioma, a identidade cultural e a capacitação acadêmica das comunidades indígenas.

Palavras chave: identidade cultural, aprendizado do inglês, perspectiva de gênero em mulheres indígenas, foco multilíngue, intervenção pedagógica

Introduction

English has historically been perceived as a language of colonialism since it has often been utilized as a tool to maintain dominance and control over colonized societies, serving as a means of communication and as a tool for shaping the cultural and social dynamics of colonized societies (Smith, 2005). However, the view of English has been changing significantly over the last decades. Since several former colonies have adopted English as a lingua franca, trading, multiculturalism and diplomacy have been facilitated through the use of English, as stated by Phillipson (2016). Its concurrent presence in business, science, arts, and popular culture has given English a new role: a medium that facilitates understanding and exchange across the tapestry of global cultures and geographies (Jenkins, 2007). Given this transformative shift, it is imperative to dig deeper into the potential of English as a unifying force and bridging tool in diverse contexts to unlock more opportunities. Exploring how it can be channeled to forge connections, foster collaboration, and open a variety of possibilities in our increasingly interconnected world should be an objective in the new English Language Teaching (ELT) arena (Kachru, 2020). In other words, English needs to be decolonized to make it more accessible to all. Hence, it's crucial to seek strategies to change the viewpoints of educators, students, and the broader academic community. Byram (2008) states that:

The teachers ... they have to think about how their teaching is not only focused on practical skills but also creates a sense of living in a specific time and place, in a specific country, in a specific nation – state; language and identity are inseparable. Those who teach second and foreign languages have to think about how the language is offering a new perspective, a challenge to the primary language of identity and a different vision of the culture(s) in which they live, and they have hitherto taken for granted. (p. 2)

From this perspective emerged a project named 'Visions of the Earth: Academic Discussions of Indigenous Women Mediated by the English Language'. This project was created in partnership

with a public university in Colombia and the Colombian network of Indigenous Women in the academia (Red Colmia). The project had 18 female participants from a variety of regions, municipalities, territories and communities in Colombia. The call for this project was made through Red Colmia and different channels of the public university. The purpose of the project was to provide a space for Indigenous women from different municipalities of Colombia to learn or enhance their knowledge in English for academic purposes under a multicultural and gender-based approach to access higher education opportunities. Hence, for this study, the following research question was proposed: How do Colombian Indigenous women perceive the process of learning English through multicultural discussions about visions of the Earth and an Indigenous gender-based perspective?

The need to learn English through a multicultural and gender-based approach was made evident through the voices of the Indigenous women who belong to Red Colmia. They expressed their frustration due to the barriers to educational and economic opportunities faced by Indigenous women in Colombia. For instance, limited bilingual education, a common issue in rural areas, restricts their access to many ventures including higher education (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística —DANE, 2020). Furthermore, compared to the national average, they have lower enrollment and higher illiteracy rates due to factors like traditional domestic labor burdens (Rodríguez, 2017). This educational gap, compounded by historical marginalization and discrimination, creates a situation of vulnerability impeding their access to education (United Nations, 2010).

To tackle these difficulties, the project Visions of the Earth emerged as an alternative to provide indigenous women with a space to vindicate their indigenous women's rights and guide them in the educational ventures made available to them through learning English under a multicultural

and gender-based approach. These approaches empower them to access more educational and economic opportunities, participate more fully in public life, share their cultural perspectives with a broader audience, and maintain their cultural identity and Indigenous languages.

This article provides an overview of teaching and learning English from a multicultural perspective. It begins with a theoretical framework covering Critical Race Theory, Cultural Identity, gender-based approach and gender perspective in education, and decolonization of ELT. Following the theoretical framework, the methodology of the study is described, including the context, participants, sessions, and an explanation of the data collection instruments used. In the concluding sections of the article, a thorough analysis of the findings and a discussion will be found.

Theoretical Framework

To explore and understand the perceptions of Indigenous women towards learning English for academic purposes, this paper relies on a theoretical framework mobilizing areas of expertise such as critical race theory (CRT), gender-based approach and gender perspective in education, cultural identity frameworks, and decolonization of English language teaching.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) first originated in the legal field; however, its principles and concepts have been applied in various disciplines, including education, sociology, literature, and cultural studies (Ford & Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Lawrence & Hylton, 2022; Lin, 2023). In these fields, CRT is used to examine how racism operates in institutional practices, policies, and cultural representations so as to identify and challenge racial inequalities, advocate for racial justice, and promote more inclusive and equitable social systems.

Similar ideas are presented in the work of Anya (2021) when she states that, in the field of Applied

Linguistics, educators are concerned about promoting social justice and equity in the classroom, with the purpose of “sharing social resources, benefits and power” (p. 1067). Hence, this author proposes a systematic examination of programs, materials, and syllabi to diversify learners, teachers and institutions. In this sense, CRT has recently become a priority in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). According to Bonilla and Finardi (2022), CRT in ELT has helped teachers, curriculum designers, and policy makers analyze the dominant role of the English language over other languages and minority groups.

Following previous conceptions, ELT scenarios have perpetuated methodological approaches that lead to ideas of power and domination (Lopez-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014). This has negatively affected the way in which English language learners perceive their mother language, which worsens among Indigenous students (Usma et al., 2018). Therefore, CRT in ELT constitutes a way of analyzing and understanding power structures, language and identity, linguistic discrimination, social justice, advocacy, and marginalization to promote a decolonization of the curriculum (Wong et al., 2018). For instance, Fandiño-Parra (2021) asserts that:

In the last three decades, the English language in Colombia seems to be put in a privileged position with respect to Spanish (L1) and aboriginal languages. This privileged position appears to be based on the central role English has had in the latest educational reforms and curriculum projects promoted by the most recent governments. (p. 167)

In this sense, Ligget (2014) points out that the implementation of CRT in ELT requires ongoing self-reflection, professional development, and a commitment to creating equitable and inclusive learning environments. Through the incorporation of CRT principles into language teaching, educators can foster a more just and empowering educational experience for all students, regardless of their racial and cultural backgrounds. Likewise, Ordem et al. (2022) explain the paramount role

that CRT plays in decolonizing ELT practices. These authors argue that “the normalizing discourses regarding whiteness ought to be criticized and displaced by adopting the tenets of critical race theory” (p. 111).

As Von Esch et al. (2020) state, there is a need to continue doing research that nourishes the understanding of race in language teaching to foster anti-racist pedagogies, approaches, and decision-making to open the door to a more raciolinguistic equity¹ in language education. Rosa and Flores (2017) argue that understanding the raciolinguistic perspective is crucial for addressing race and language issues in the English classroom. They emphasize that instead of accepting existing racial and linguistic categories, we should examine the processes behind their co-naturalization to challenge white supremacy. In a subsequent study, Flores and Rosa (2023) stresses the urgency of including this raciolinguistic perspective in critical pedagogy and sociolinguistics to disrupt dominant narratives and create inclusive, socially just classrooms.

Gender-Based Approach and Gender Perspective in Education

Gender-based studies into teaching English to Indigenous women in Colombia are crucial for addressing educational, social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Different difficulties often prevent Indigenous women from getting education in Colombia, such as language, cultural and gender inequality (DANE, 2020, Giraldo-Martinez et al., 2024). Karlsson (2009) mentions that there is an interrelationship between gender inequality, poverty, and education. The author points out that it is unfortunate that the poorest places have the least access to education, and it is

1 According to Rosa and Flores (2017), raciolinguistic equity combines principles of racial equity and linguistic justice. It refers to the fair treatment and equal opportunities for individuals of all racial and ethnic backgrounds in relation to their linguistic practices and language use.

even more unfortunate that women are the most affected. Identifying and dealing with these obstacles through a gender perspective in education can help to provide access to equitable learning opportunities.

According to the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (2010), despite the efforts to promote equal education among Indigenous groups around the world, their right to education has not been fully achieved in many countries; a situation that is even more problematic among Indigenous women who are “more disadvantaged than Indigenous men” (p. 1). Therefore, the Gender-Based Approach in education is an alternative created to help women advocate for equal access to educational opportunities. This focuses on understanding and addressing the impact of gender on educational outcomes and experiences. It aims to promote equity and equality by recognizing that gender affects how individuals experience education and how educational systems function (Lendák-Kabók, 2023).

Preece (2008) states that the gender-based approach in education aims to ensure fairness and justice for all genders by addressing historical and current disparities that affect access to qualified education. However, this author suggests that language education has a gendered dimension within Indigenous communities, as norms portray Indigenous women primarily in terms of marriage, motherhood, and the responsibility to teach Indigenous customs, traditions, and languages to their children. Consequently, most Indigenous women cannot access formal educational systems because their main job is to transmit knowledge and preserve their Indigenous culture.

Authors such as Mayorga-Muñoz et al. (2017) argue that to empower people and reduce gender inequality, the gender-based perspective is necessary not only in education but also in work, health, politics, and the economy. In the case of Indigenous women, Brant (2023) asserts that the

gender-based perspective must be addressed from “a decolonial feminist lens” (p. 29). This means that Indigenous women need to empower themselves to critically analyze their dynamics from an Indigenous cosmivision. They need to think of strategies such as Indigenous women-centered praxis and sharing circles that enable them to construct scenarios of sorority. In educational settings, Brant (2023) points out the need for Indigenous women-centered curricula and “strength-based approaches to reconciliation education” (p. 39). These strategies encourage reflection on the need to challenge and dismantle the interlocking systems of colonialism, patriarchy, and other oppressions.

Cultural Identity

Since the purpose of this research is to analyze the perceptions of Indigenous women on learning English under an Indigenous, gender-based and multicultural approach, it is paramount to define what cultural identity means. According to the Ministry of Social Development (2016), cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and identification with a particular cultural group or community. It is the recognition of shared values, traditions, customs, beliefs, language, history, and practices.

Related ideas about cultural identity are presented by Hill (2012) and Pitre and Clarke (2017). These authors argue that cultural identity encompasses recognizing and valuing the diversity of cultures and worldviews in the world. They emphasize that cultural identity shapes an individual’s self-image, behavior, and interactions influenced by factors like ethnicity, citizenship, religion, language, and customs. They conclude that cultural identity is dynamic, adapting as individuals or groups encounter new situations or interact with different cultures.

Regarding cultural identity in Indigenous groups, this holds significant importance as it forms the foundation of their unique existence

and distinct place in the world (Shepherd et al., 2018). For Indigenous peoples, cultural identity encompasses their ancestral heritage, traditional knowledge, spirituality, customs, and ways of life that have been passed down through generations (Houkamau & Sibley, 2010).

Besides traditional knowledge, harmony, and customs, Indigenous cultural identity is associated with the strong bond Indigenous peoples have with mother Earth. Indigenous cultures often have a profound and spiritual connection to their ancestral lands. Niigaaniin and MacNeill (2022) explain that the land is not just a physical space but holds deep cultural, historical, and sacred significance. Their relationship with nature is interconnected, as they believe in living in harmony with the environment and respecting its resources. Likewise, Abas et al. (2022) share similar views on Indigenous cultural identity and its connection to the land. They say that “they [Indigenous peoples] tend to have a reciprocal relationship with nature, rather than viewing nature as existing to serve humans, as much of modern culture has historically regarded things” (p. 2).

Decolonization of English Language Teaching

When teaching English in regions such as the Global South, which are usually regions marked by a background of marginalization and disenfranchisement in social and intellectual spheres (Makoni et al., 2022), English is often recognized as a valuable language in these regions due to its importance in international business, tourism, and higher education. However, it is in this internationalization that a challenge lies. According to R’boul and Bueno-Alastuey (2022), the internationalization of the English language has mired the Global South into scenarios of powerful imbalances with the Global North. The authors express that “one manifestation of these power inequalities is the supremacy of Anglophone cultures and their possible hegemony over local languages and

cultures” (p. 9). In this line of thought, Samacá (2020) states that:

We, English teachers, have been denied being ourselves, because the nature of our profession has been conceived by Western thought. We have forgotten about ourselves as we have been subjected to Westernized theories. We have not thought about English language teaching from our local perspectives. (p. 171)

Following these ideas, it is pertinent to emphasize the importance of decolonizing English language teaching practices to advocate for cultural sensitivity. This involves designing educational models, approaches, and materials that value local culture, identity, and context when learning the English language (González, 2007). In other words, decolonizing English language practices requires teachers to be mindful of local customs, traditions, and ways of communication to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment. English teachers should adopt a contextualized approach to teaching, incorporating critical perspectives, local examples, and themes in their lessons.

Dasli (2012, cited in Liddicoat, 2020) explains that language learning must be a medium for understanding languages and cultures. The main challenge for the Global South is to decolonize language practices and implement more multicultural educational processes that recognize the value of students’ native languages and cultures and create an environment that fosters the development of both English language skills and their mother languages (Makoni et al., 2022, & R’boul, 2024). That is why there is a need to teach the English language favoring students’ own identity and culture and avoid cascade models that perpetuate the domination of the English language over minority languages (Dasli, 2012).

Moreover, authors such as Fandiño-Parra (2021), Shin (2022), Lynch and Motha (2023), and Álvarez Valencia and Valencia (2023) emphasize the need to decolonize ELT education. Fandiño-Parra (2021) proposes several strategies for decolonizing ELT, including designing materials

based on local and sociopolitical needs, restructuring teachers’ educational programs to enable them to generate their own knowledge, and conducting research that is more aligned with the needs of local communities. Shin (2022) stresses the importance of building solidarity among Indigenous students in Canada as they enter educational programs. Lynch and Motha (2023) argue against associating English language teachers’ identities with colonial ideologies that still promote traditional English language methodologies as ideal for students in the Global South. Additionally, Álvarez Valencia and Valencia (2023) assert that decolonizing ELT in Colombia requires promoting intercultural dialogue among students, incorporating cultural semiotic resources to facilitate the use of students’ diverse linguistic backgrounds in learning English, and adapting ideas from critical pedagogy.

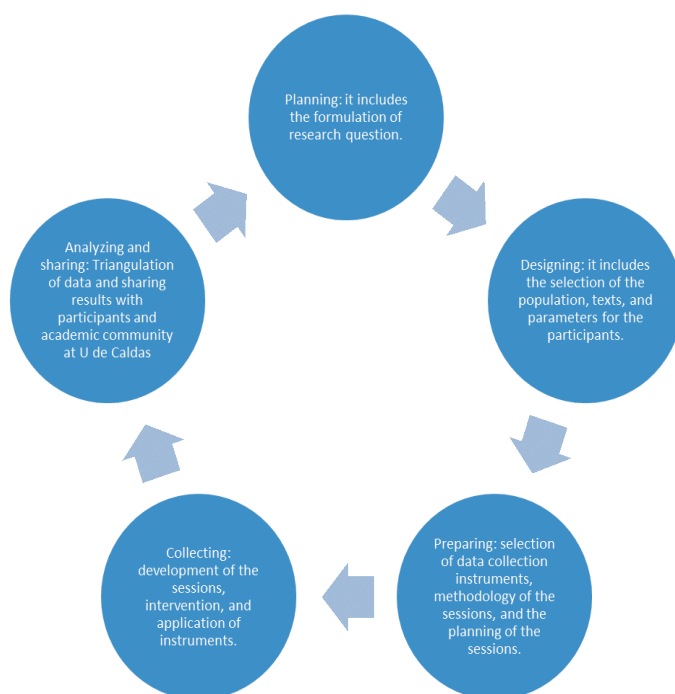
In this sense, Latin American researchers such as Arismendi (2022), Echeverri-Sucerquia (2020), Giraldo-Martinez and Ramos-Carvajal (2021), Velásquez-Hoyos (2023), and Windle and Amorim-Possas (2023) talk about intercultural education, task-based instruction, inclusive education, critical pedagogy, Etnoenglish² and translanguaging as alternative approaches that can be implemented and adapted to favor students’ own identity and culture, and decolonize English in this context. These types of approaches promote community-based projects and initiatives in which students see the inclusion of their immediate context in the English classroom to develop student engagement and active learning (Jaraba Ramirez & Arrieta Carrascal, 2012).

Method

The method used in this qualitative research project was a descriptive case study. According to Creswell (2013), a case study needs to be focused on a deep exploration and analysis of a phenomenon, an individual or group of individuals in their

2 The teaching of English based on Indigenous and Afro-Colombian students’ needs (Jaraba Ramirez & Arrieta Carrascal, 2012).

Figure 1 Research Cycle



Source: Adapted from Yin (2012)

natural setting. According to Yin (2014) using such a model in research implies to “describe a phenomenon in detail in its real-world context” (p. 7). Additionally, Hatch (2023) asserts that the main purpose of doing qualitative research is to explore human behavior in their everyday lives and interactions to understand the perspectives of those living in that unique world.

To achieve the objectives of this research, we followed the six stages of the research cycle proposed by Yin (2012). These stages are planning, designing, preparing, collecting, analyzing, and sharing as explained in Figure 1.

The participants of this project were 18 Indigenous women who belonged to different Indigenous reservations or communities of Colombia. They were invited to become part of the project through the Facebook page of the Network of Indigenous Women in Academia (*Red de Mujeres Indígenas en la Academia RED ColMIA*). The invitation included the requirements for registering and participating in the project. These requirements were:

firstly, to self-identify as an indigenous woman and secondly, to have been selected through a test and an interview in English in which they were asked to demonstrate level A2, according to the Common European Reference Framework. Thus, eighteen indigenous women from all over Colombia were selected for the purpose of this project. Table 1 describes the region of provenience, the participants’ level of education and the Indigenous reservation or community they belong to. As seen in Table 1, there was diversity in terms of their level of Education and community of origin, factors that did not have any relevant impact on the study.

The sessions were conducted via the Zoom platform every fifteen days, with each meeting lasting two hours. The main purpose of these sessions was to generate research debates around Indigenous perspectives on the earth through the study of texts written in English by Indigenous authors, thereby enhancing the participants’ competence in academic English (eap). In total, there were 15 sessions (See Table 2) carried out from March to

Table 1 Participants' Profile

Participant	Region of Colombia	Educational Level	Indigenous Reservation/Community
1	Nariño	Undergraduate degree	Pastos
2	Nariño	Undergraduate degree	Pastos
3	Nariño	Undergraduate degree	Pastos
4	Nariño	Undergraduate degree	Pastos
5	Nariño	Master's degree	kamëntsá
6	Caldas	Undergraduate degree	Embera Chamí
7	Caldas	Undergraduate degree	Embera Chamí
8	Caldas	Technical studies	Embera Chamí
9	Bogotá	Undergraduate degree	Muisca
10	Bogotá	Undergraduate degree	Muisca
11	Bogotá	Undergraduate degree	Muisca
12	Putumayo	Undergraduate degree	Inga
13	Putumayo	Technical studies	Inga
14	Amazonas	Master's degree	
15	Cauca	Secondary school	Inga
16	Cesar	Secondary school	Kankuano
17	Valle	Undergraduate degree	Pastos
18	Huila	Secondary school	Inga

10

Table 2 Session's Topics and Reading Texts

Session Name	Reading Text and Author
Welcoming session	N. A.
The power of words	<i>The Arrow Maker</i> , Scott Momaday
Writing from the body	<i>Luz en lo oscuro</i> , Gloria Anzaldúa
Native attitudes towards the environment	<i>Native American Attitudes to the Environment</i> , Scott Momaday
Sound worlds beyond the Western boundaries	<i>Defining Ethnomusicology</i> , Luis Alejandro Villanueva
An overview on the representation of the other	<i>A Brief Overview of the Representation of the Others</i> , Ruth Elena Cuasialpud Canchala
A story of the Kiowa language	<i>The Way to Rainy Mountain</i> , Scott Momaday
Educating the others	<i>Educating the Others</i> , Ruth Elena Cuasialpud Canchala
Sacred images	<i>Sacred Images</i> , Scott Momaday
Academic space as a place of negotiation	<i>Academic Space as a Place of Negotiation</i> , Rosas et al.
The influence of Indigenous authors in literature	<i>The Native Voice in the American Literature</i> , Scott Momaday
Manifiesta no saber firmar	<i>Manifiesta no saber firmar</i> , Esterilia Simanca Pushaina
Illusions of an empire	<i>Illusions of Empire: Amartya Sen on What British Rule Really Did for India</i> , Amartya Sen
Closing session	N. A.

November 2022. They were planned by the academic coordinators of the project: One Indigenous professor from the Department of Philosophy from Universidad de Caldas, a professor from the Department of Foreign Languages at the same university, the president of the Network of Indigenous Women in Academia, and a Colombian PhD student from the University of Vienna who belonged to the Red ColMIA.

Regarding the structure of the sessions, each of them included a presentation of the agenda, warm-up, vocabulary check, reading check, a discussion of the reading (see list of readings in Appendix 1), conclusions of the session, and in some meetings, students did oral presentations.

Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

The instruments used to collect data were two semi-structured surveys and artifacts such as audio or written records of the participants' reflections. This variety of instruments was selected to increase the validity and reliability of the information collected.

The first instrument employed was a semi-structured survey conducted via a Google form at the beginning of the project, while a second survey was administered at the end. Both asked about the participants' views on learning English from a female Indigenous perspective; the second survey asked about their perceptions of the sessions once they were finished. Bryman (2016) suggests that surveys reduce bias during the data collection process since they can be standardized.

The last instrument used was the participants' artifacts such as audios or written evidence of the participants' reflections. This was done through compiling the session recordings and the participants' written productions. It is paramount to clarify that some of the excerpts taken had a few grammatical mistakes; therefore, the researchers corrected them, but they always tried to keep their original meaning.

Regarding ethical considerations, the participants of the project completed a Google Form in which they received information about its purpose and a statement clarifying that their names would not be revealed. Therefore, this study employed conventions to refer to the participants and they gave their informed consent to participate in the project.

To analyze the perceptions of the participants, we used grounded theory, in which, according to Morales (2015), the researchers should follow a systematic approach to organize data and better analyze it. For this research, we started the process with open coding, wherein the perceptions of the women were meticulously examined, broken down into meaningful segments, and assigned initial codes. Additionally, we followed axial coding, where relationships between codes were identified, leading to the development of categories and subcategories. Finally, we included a selective coding in which we integrated concepts into a framework to generate comprehensive theory that encapsulates the underlying patterns and themes within the data.

Findings and Discussion

After analyzing data, three main categories emerged: Learning English in alignment with their visions of the Earth, learning English to vindicate Indigenous women's identity and their wisdom, and perceiving the English language as an academic space for Indigenous women to discuss and express their opinions.

Learning English in Alignment with Their Visions of the Earth

This finding reflects the impact of English discussions related to Indigenous women's visions of the Earth. It is impossible to deny that Indigenous women have long held a unique and invaluable perspective on the Earth. Their experiences, wisdom, and traditional knowledge are deeply rooted in the lands they inhabit. English discussions

surrounding Indigenous women’s world viewpoints serve to bridge the gap between Indigenous communities and the broader global audience. For instance, Participant 1 in session 3 provides a reflection about the importance of the environment for Indigenous communities, not only in Colombia but in other countries.

Excerpt 1: *Native Americans’ attitudes to the environment* is a text that explores ethno-cultural diversity and the profound connection between people and landscape. As Indigenous individuals, our territory encompasses our entire being, reflecting culture, customs, thoughts, and life—emphasizing the Earth as our mother. (Participant 1 in session 3)

This excerpt demonstrates that the planned reading for this session enabled the participant to share her beliefs and insights about the environment and how the cosmovision of her community is paramount in the existence of the human being. She uses words such as “Earth is our mother” to put emphasis on the crucial role nature plays in her Pastos³ community.

Additionally, learning English through a focus on visions of the Earth allowed participants to share some stories related to their oral traditions; particularly, their own myths and legends and how they conceive the origin of the universe and sacred places. To illustrate this, Participant 1 in session 14 explains one of the most important myths of the Pastos Indigenous community:

Excerpt 2: In the southern part of the Nariño department of Colombia, in the municipality of Cumbal; there is a “Resguardo Indígena del Gran Cumbal⁴” [Indigenous Reservation in Gran Cumbal] where the Pastos community lives. They are located near the

3 “Over 3,000 meters above sea level in southern Colombia, among Andean páramos, two volcanoes, lagoons, and water sources, live the Pastos indigenous people. Their society comprises three reserves: Panan, Chiles, and Gran Cumbal. They also have a presence in Ecuador”. (Varela, n. d.) taken from: <https://tierra.fimi-iiwf.org/indigenas-pasto.html#:~:text=El%20Pueblo%20Pasto%20habita%20en,terrenos%20adyacentes%20a%20sus%20viviendas>

4 Name of the indigenous reservation

volcano and the “laguna de la bolsa⁵”. The volcano and the lagoon are gods to this community as they represent the origins as evidenced in Pastos oral tradition. They are considered the parents where the first families were born many years ago. The story says that when the Volcano (father) and the lagoon (mother) were married, they had their first children that were named: Alpala, Tarapues, Chinguad, Chirán, Mitis, Cuaspud, Irua. It is said that the conexión [connection] to the lagoon (placenta) is located on one side of the lagoon near “la piedra de los Guacamullos - The stone of the Guacamullos”. In this place, nature and water transmit tranquility, and the beginnings of Cabildo’s⁶ mandate is sometimes celebrated. (Participant 1, session 14)

From this excerpt, we can see how stories like the one narrated by the previous participant allow them to reinforce a sense of belonging and shared heritage with other participants and the course instructors.

Furthermore, learning English in alignment with their worldviews represents a unique and culturally sensitive approach to language education that recognizes the importance of traditional knowledge and values. During this process, participants have also appreciated the role of their Indigenous languages and how reading stories related to their cosmovision promotes a more holistic understanding of the language and its use in diverse contexts as observed below:

Excerpt 3: In this session, the stories in English and in our Indigenous languages transmit feelings. When we read or listen to them, the words touch our sentiments; for this reason, it is crucial to communicate our ideas efficiently since a word can determine our destiny as a ‘man made of words’. In the session, we highlight the power of words in real life through oral and written stories. We use language to declare, question and plea. For that, using language implies risk and responsibility. (Participant 3, session 1)

As seen in excerpt 3, this participant explains that languages are intimately connected to culture and that traditional knowledge is embedded when

5 Lagoon located in the South of Colombia

6 Cabildo is the political authority of an indigenous community.

stories are shared in different languages. Thus, this participant highlights that storytelling in English and in their Indigenous languages helps keep Indigenous women's traditions and languages alive, favoring a multilingual approach.

Learning English to Vindicate Indigenous Women's Identity and their Wisdom

This finding reflects on the Indigenous women's perceptions about learning English to vindicate causes such as female identity and wisdom which have been historically neglected by the colonial world. The following excerpts give insights about the relationship between language development, cultural preservation, and gender dynamics among the Indigenous participants of the project as explained further in this category.

On one hand, most of the participants in the study believe that, through English, they can make their Indigenous identity known to others. They think that being able to relate their own culture to others' highlights their status as Indigenous women, and their need to defend their rights to access several opportunities. The following excerpt demonstrates these arguments:

Excerpt 4: [...] Learning a new language is vital to make our cultures known to the farthest corners of the world. Through these spaces, we can strengthen our rights and responsibilities as ethnic peoples, ensuring that future generations are fruitful in independent thinking, in defending the territory, and in caring for the environment, which is what characterizes us. (Participant 1, survey 1)

Moreover, participants study English to preserve and share their oral tradition, which is also another venue for vindicating their Indigenous identity. For these Indigenous women, learning English becomes a form of cultural reclamation, allowing them to negotiate the contemporary globalized world while still cherishing and safeguarding their heritage. Participant 5 describes the claim above:

Excerpt 5: The first session has a lesson for me, the power of words is important because through them we

can transmit, manifest, express family traditions from generation to generation, not only traditions but one's cultural identity. A misplaced word might change the meaning of the whole sentence. I like this session because this session helped me have another perspective of the meaning of the words. (Participant 5 in session 1)

On the other hand, the Indigenous participants also find English to be a tool that uplifts the role of women in their communities and celebrates their traditional wisdom which has been forgotten in contemporary societies. Through English, these women become powerful advocates for their communities, bridging cultural gaps and challenging stereotypes, as seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 6: My name is XXX. I am Indigenous woman from Pastos People. My great-grandmother is XXX, my grandmother XXX and my mother XXX. These women link my past, present and future because they preserve my roots and identity as Indigenous woman through Indigenous practices and traditions, namely: knitting (*tejido*). *Tejido* is one of the Indigenous practices that conserve our beliefs, thoughts, experiences and philosophies that means our view of the world. (Participant 3 in survey 2)

Additionally, most participants recognize the value of learning English to fight against multiple forms of marginalization. The challenge is that many Indigenous women find themselves equipped with just a basic knowledge of foreign languages. This linguistic limitation becomes a barrier to their progress, preventing them from accessing opportunities related to their skills and rights. Despite possessing leadership qualities and intelligence, these women often encounter obstacles in providing and acquiring knowledge. It is evident that the potential for growth and recognition exists, but the access to equal opportunities remains distant. The following excerpts exemplify this argument sufficiently:

Excerpt 7: It is important for women to broaden their knowledge in the field of the English language since it opens many spaces for political participation. (Participant 7, survey 1)

Excerpt 8: English can contribute to academic education, but at the same time, it is a means to open more

spaces within communities, allowing for their recognition and the construction of an inclusive society. (Participant 2, survey 1)

All this evidence suggests that the project visions of the Earth was a platform for the participants to redeem their female Indigenous cosmovision and wisdom and amplify their voices with a broader community.

Perceiving the English Language as an Academic Space for Indigenous Women: Discussing Opinions and Improving Academic Skills

In this project, we found that English is not seen as a threat, but as a tool for Indigenous women to share their cultural roots and even preserve their language. Thus, we delve into the significance of English as a medium for Indigenous women to articulate and share their perspectives within an academic context. This finding highlights the empowering potential of diverse language learning approaches in creating a space that enables Indigenous women to share their opinions. It provides them with a platform for meaningful discourse and expression, mediated by an Indigenous gender perspective while incorporating a multilingual approach to learning languages: Indigenous languages, English, and Spanish.

In the sessions held, Indigenous women narrated their stories, viewing this opportunity as a way to share their emotions regarding society, colonialism, and racial discrimination, which aligns with gender-based perspectives in education. For instance, Participant 11 in session 8 explained that these academic spaces are good for reflecting, learning, and socializing with other Indigenous women who are in academia, as shown in the following transcript:

Excerpt 9: This type of projects and academic spaces are good for us to share our knowledge and learn the English language which is also good for expanding our knowledge and letting people know that we, as Indigenous women, exist. (Participant 11, session 8)

Besides viewing the English language and this project as a space for Indigenous women to share their knowledge, we also found that English is seen as a tool to access academic opportunities, highlighting the importance of gender perspectives in language education. Participant 17 in survey 2 wrote:

Excerpt 10: This project has allowed us to learn English from our Indigenous perspective; it is something that we like and that it is not imposed. We know that English now is important, and we see it to access to scholarships and academic spaces. (Participant 17, survey 2)

This participant asserts that this project, which facilitates learning English from an Indigenous perspective, is viewed positively by the participants. They express that while English is recognized as crucial for accessing scholarships and academic spaces, it is also seen as a tool to share their Indigenous wisdom and foster cross-cultural understanding with diverse cultures and people worldwide.

Additionally, through this project, Indigenous women expressed their opinions and experiences in academic scenarios such as going to university for the first time and how this helped participants resignify their conception of being an Indigenous woman in academia. Participant 9 reflected that:

Excerpt 11: [...] I know that many Indigenous women who would like to enter university feel ashamed to say that they are Indigenous just for social prejudice, so we need spaces like Cabildo Indígena Universitario and this types of projects like Visions of the Earth to find academic spaces and break down stereotypes, learn, and have more access to educational environments. I think learning English is a great way to do it because when we learn another language, we understand and value more our native language. (Participant 9, survey 1)

Discussions among Indigenous women also reveal improvements in their academic English, particularly in their speaking skills—a crucial ability for participants to articulate and express opinions within academic spaces. This project prioritized a multicultural and multilingual approach in

English classes under a gender-based perspective. For instance, Participant 1 in survey 2 alludes to this:

Excerpt 12: When we read texts in Spanish such as the one by Esterilia Simanca and we discussed in our sessions using some words from our Indigenous languages to express our opinions in English, we can see the harmony of all languages and how this contributes to improve my speaking. (Participant 2, survey 2)

As the purpose of this project was to strengthen the academic skills of Indigenous women, the following excerpt shows that through this process the participants have made progress in their English and language skills, while maintaining a connection with their cultural roots and languages. Additionally, the project not only focuses on the development of speaking skills, but also on providing participants with reading strategies to succeed in academic scenarios as seen below:

Excerpt 13: This project contributes to reading comprehension. The texts we read and the reading strategies we had in the sessions really made me improve my reading. (Participant 5, survey 2)

Furthermore, participants expressed that the course improved their vocabulary related to activism, feminism, and colonialism, and that this focus motivates them to advocate for Indigenous women's rights.

Excerpt 14: In the sessions, we learned words such as women's rights, privilege, inequity, racism, manifestation, consciousness, ethnocide, white supremacy, colonialism, among others, which helped improve my vocabulary in English and even in Spanish. These sessions also revived my spirit to fight for my rights and the rights of other Indigenous women from the Pastos community. (Participant 3, survey 2)

Previous excerpts demonstrate how learning and discussing these topics have profoundly impacted participants' personal empowerment and advocacy for Indigenous gender equality. These discussions and readings have also enabled them to improve their speaking, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, which in the long run will help them to better develop themselves within academic spaces.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our purpose in this qualitative case study was to analyze Indigenous women's perceptions of learning the English language through discussions based on their visions of the Earth. The data collected suggests that Indigenous women's perceptions regarding learning English, including their Indigenous cosmovision, have a positive impact. This impact is evident in vindicating their Indigenous identity and gender equality, finding academic spaces to share their stories, and connecting and sharing their language and visions of the Earth with a wider community. English became a channel through which project participants could effectively compare their own perspectives with those presented by the authors of texts that served as focal points for discussions. This new way of perceiving a hegemonic language was a meaningful way of enriching their learning path through the texts' insights.

This study also demonstrates the need to provide Indigenous women with academic spaces to learn foreign languages in order to transform their reality. The spaces created by the project offered Indigenous women a "decolonial feminist view" (Brant, 2023), encouraging them to affirm their individual identities and articulate their opinions in a foreign language. This achievement was made possible through their engagement in learning English from a gender-based perspective and a multilingual approach that focuses on the views of Colombian Indigenous women on the world. As a final outcome of this project, we collected several written experiences from the participants and published them in a digital booklet (Giraldo Martínez, 2023) to amplify their voices. (Brant, 2023).

As well as learning English, Indigenous women need a multilingual approach and an Indigenous women-centered curriculum (Brant, 2023) that do not threaten their Indigenous languages and identity over languages such as Spanish and English. A gender, multicultural and multilingual

perspective for learning foreign languages could guarantee access to enhanced education and a wealth of information disseminated through various media, thereby empowering Indigenous women to transcend linguistic barriers and claim their rightful place in the global discourse. As stated by Liggett (2014), Ordem et al. (2022), Von Esch et al. (2020), and Brant (2023), there is a need to implement more CRT and Indigenous women-centered praxis initiatives that would help in the promotion of more socially just educational practices.

We assert that future studies should center on pedagogical interventions for true English beginners as well. While this project aimed to empower Indigenous women to enhance their English knowledge, we encountered a significant number of Indigenous women eager to participate who, unfortunately, were unable to do so due to their limited English skills and lack of connectivity. These obstacles hindered their access to educational opportunities, including this initiative and other scholarship programs.

Finally, this case study demonstrates that when the English language is not imposed and is taught based on their needs, Indigenous women have a more positive mind set toward learning it. They see English as a tool for vindicating their Indigenous rights, sharing their culture, and understanding and valuing more their Indigenous languages, visions of the Earth, and other cultures (Abas et al., 2022; MacNeill, 2022). Therefore, English language educators need to reflect on what it means to teach English in the Global South, embrace cultural and linguistic diversity, and think of decolonial ELT strategies to strengthen and not menace this diversity.

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Appendix 1. List of Readings in the Course Visions of the Earth Indigenous Writers

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Cuasialpud-Canchala, R. (2022). *Educating the others*. [Unpublished document]. Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Momaday, N. S. (1997). *The man made of words*. St. Martin's Griffin.

Nelson, M. K., & Shilling, D. (2018). *Traditional ecological knowledge: Learning from Indigenous practices for environmental studies*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108552998>

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