

Influence of Colombian Sociocultural Factors in Learning English as a Foreign Language in Medellín

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ABSTRACT

The following article presents an initial analysis of the social and cultural factors that influence the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a private university in Medellín. The research was done through a qualitative approach, attempting to show the different perceptions of students from different social strata and different regions of the country about what aspects from their cultural background, the different contexts where they make part of (family, social and academic groups) could be affecting the learning of EFL, making a preliminary check to revise if it eases or hinders the learning; this study's theoretical background focuses on previous research of key concepts of sociocultural theories and the importance of social and cultural elements for an effective learning. It was found that Colombian students find difficult to learn how to speak, write or listen to EFL components; it was highlighted that the different environmental factors (family, social and academic groups) eases the learning of EFL due to the impact each one of these have in learners; finally, it was revealed that the regional customs that each learner possesses also eases the learning of EFL, considering the region where they are or come from. All these results were obtained through the application of semi-structured surveys and data analysis, showing that, in comparison with other sociocultural factors given from different studies, students' EFL learning is depending on their cultural and motivational background.

KEYWORDS: EFL, sociocultural, social interaction, Colombian culture, learning

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I. INTRODUCTION

The development of foreign language teaching in the modern era can be illustrated in many ways, as an inexhaustible search for new methods to mitigate the difficulties students encounter in their learning process and a continuous effort to promote their general language skills. Among this process, there are strong relations between language and culture, who have gained importance in recent years in the teaching practices of foreign language teaching, because foreign language teaching and learning is a two-way praxis between teachers and students, where different cultures and customs are involved and must facilitate acquisition of English language with progress, skills development and promotion of learning attitudes (Ullah, 2017).

Accepting the assumption that learning foreign languages (in this case, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Colombia not only implies grammar and vocabulary, but more importantly, a wide set of cultural components that are different, based on the context in which they are carried out and a large number of aspects that must be kept in mind (Altamar, 2015), focusing on the type of student in the classroom (Colombian students from different regions) and the different social (social strata) and cultural (place of birth, customs of the place) components that each one of them has embodied. Logically, most of them will encounter elements which might ease or hinder the process of learning EFL under the influence of these components, acknowledging that adaptation to higher education environment and learning pace must be constant and increasing, and that socio-cultural environment has to become neutral between one another. However, incorporating the concept of culture to the classroom is not easy to implement in the classroom, as EFL teachers might be able to discover countless viewpoints and notions (Fandiño, 2014) from their learners as well.

In the present research, the researchers inquired about the different opinions of students from some private universities in Medellín, related to the different social and cultural factors that could improve or slower the EFL learning level in their respective English courses. As evidence of the research, relevant factors about students' cultural and social background in Medellín were displayed, along with some of these having a positive or negative impact on the learner's achievement in his/her foreign language learning, resulting some of them different than those in other previous applied studies.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Regarding the act of learning, sociocultural theory has a universal view. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) research and its relation with social and cultural concepts, some authors such as Ohta (2000), Zhang (2006), Fahim & Haghani (2012), Gutiérrez & Bonoff (2003), Khasinah (2014), Jiang et al (2009), Adwani & Shrivastava (2017), Bonilla (2013), López et al (2014), Tejada & Niebles (2016), Jia, Gottardo y Ferreira (2017), Jang & Jiménez (2011), and Ozfidan et al (2016) have described different key sociocultural factors that influence the learning of a foreign language in students from different regions around the world. But, through all this research, the main background is given by the socio-cultural theorist Lev Vygotsky (1962), who developed this theory about the learning of a language through key components that come out from cultural and social activity and only later becomes reassembled as an individual and psychological phenomenon. Studies performed by Villamizar (2017), Mustafa, Halim Masnan, Alias & MohdRadzi (2017), Eun & Hye (2009), Aliyu & Yakubu (2019), and Aimin (2013) involving the sociocultural theory, provide information about the influence of this theory in the acquisition of a second language.

After the revision of previous studies, here are the 3 components studied and obtained as the theoretical background of this research: Sociocultural theory, Culture and society in Learning a second language, and Colombian culture in Learning EFL.

1. Sociocultural theory approach in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Considering the concept of sociocultural, the theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1978) describes the learning process as a social process and the beginning of the development of human intelligence in society or culture, where the social interaction becomes a key part in the development of cognition through the interaction with others, integrating this into the individual's mental structure, and reaching a zone of proximal development (ZPD) where the learner is cognitively prepared but requires social and assisted interaction to achieve a full development (Briner, 1999).

Lantolf (2000) took Vygotsky's work and developed two complementary approaches: L2 (second language) mediation and internalization of L2, where the mediation consisted in analyzing how three cultural factors (activities, artifacts and concepts) could be mediated for learners to learn a second language; and the second approach consisted in appropriating the symbolic artifacts employed in communication, and converted into psychological artifacts that mediate learner's mental activity for applying in social environments and the learner's self.

The term sociocultural, based on Webb et al (2002), contains two concepts: culture as an assortment of different elements which, as a whole, model the behavior of a group of participants, to whom it influences in the perception of reality in different ways along with the different interests respecting the place they take up in society (Brislin, 1993); and the social side of the concept, based on the study performed by Bourdieu (1976), which is described as an objective structure that reproduces the behavior built from groups such as the family, the educational environment, and so on.

Sociocultural theory has also become a main approach in the process of learning a second language, and that is, students need to get along with other peers within a social environment, in order to successfully learn the language they wish to learn (Hedge, 2000). In short terms, the sociocultural theory mentions that a language can be acquired using social activities and communication in real-life based contexts and, to make this a successful process, it must be directly influenced by key factors in learners such as the motivation, the attitude and the age; moreover, when learners have a reason to speak the language they desire, they become more engaged to use the respective language in a social context (Saville-Troike, 2006) and they might not be limited regarding their cultural identity (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

In this sense, it is possible to say that the cultures involved in the language learning process could have shared or experienced different aspects which may facilitate cognitive associations or cause issues during the process (Kramsch, 2008).

2. Influence of culture and society on learning English as second language

The influence of culture and society for learning a second language goes directly associated with the customs and different cultural aspects of a country, especially when the focus is given on the way people communicate in English or any other language among a group of people. Based on Terenzini (1993) and Engle (2007) studies, students often require learning and adaptation to new academic and social systems; this is because these are not part of their family and cultural traditions, and these are challenges learners must face in order to establish social interactions and cultural interchange using the English language. Whenever we want to communicate, we know that establishing relationships, socializing and exchanging information is mandatory, so this will be shared or transferred through different languages or even cultures, positioning English as the first option as a foreign language, because nowadays it is necessary to handle English as a global communication

tool, so it can be easy to understand that there is an essential demand (Martinez & Caisaguano, 2017) at a worldwide scale.

Fageeh (2011) in his work explained that cultural perception is an important step to give for learning a language, and the different concepts involved in learning English as a Foreign Language (acculturation, cultural competence and cultural awareness) are the first steps to give, in order to communicate effectively. Of course, it is to be considered that language is an essential component and a product of culture likewise, and as culture itself, this is an acquired and developed behavior which can be eased or improved through direct or indirect context and acculturation (Chikaodi, 2016).

Summarizing these previous studies, it could be said that the cultural and social background from learners plays an important positive role in developing all skills; hence, the proper knowledge of other cultures helps learners in understanding the language adequately because, the more they can interact with people from different cultures, the more they will learn how to act and socialize, including the assimilation and understanding of foreign cultural and social customs. Gudykunst & Kim (2003), in their work, discussed that our cultures affect our conduct straight in the norms and rules we regularly follow to model our behavior when we relate with others. Certainly our cultures indirectly affect our communication through individual features, and also learn when we are socialized into culture.

In fact, it can be pointed out that cultural background is an essential part of a personal identity which interacts with the education a learner receives in a specific society, thus the values acquired in previous education may not be correlated with the cultural and educational values acquired in society.

3. Colombian culture in Learning EFL

The cultural environment in Colombia is enriched and affected by the different idiosyncrasies and by the different customs and languages that are handled within the different regions of the country, because the country already has an immense cultural and linguistic richness, which makes it a multicultural and multicultural country that recognizes its native and creole languages, while it opens doors to the development of a global citizenship through foreign languages (Colombia Aprende, 2015). This also does not exempt Colombian learners in the educational part, more specifically in learning a foreign language such as English.

The Colombian government has established a bilingualism program called "Colombia Bilingüe (Bilingual Colombia)" which promotes the strengthening of the teaching and learning process of foreign languages in Preschool, Basic and Middle Education in order to guarantee comprehensive training, development of skills of global citizens towards the 21st century, and promote the generation of cultural, academic, social and professional opportunities according to the needs of educational institutions and regions. This program goes accompanied by the National Bilingualism Program, created in 2015, with which the Colombian government pretends to cover foreign language teaching and learning to all the CEFR levels, apply a rigorous control on the EFL learning system, and gradually revamp the language programs and curricula based on certification of learners, teachers and schools (Usma, 2009).

According to the National Bilingualism Program (2015), bilingualism policies are focused on three main pillars: language, communication and culture, since language learning is also considered as cultural learning. Socializing with the other, tolerating differences, having the ability to communicate effectively with members of other cultures and knowing how to value their own culture in front of other foreigners, are considered articulating axes of the program. (Altablero, 2005). These policies have been proposed with the sole purpose of developing citizens capable of communicating in English, under current international standards, that include the country in communication processes at the international level, in the global economy and that allow cultural openness abroad.

According to the guidelines established by the National Ministry of Education for foreign languages, an internal factor and an external factor come into play in the development of communicative competence in a foreign language. The internal factor constituted by the knowledge and appropriation that the speaker has of his/her language and culture and by his/her expectations in relation to other cultures and other languages. The external factor is constituted by the interactions between languages and cultures.

Both factors are reflected within the different higher education institutions, where students from different regions of the country with different customs and with different jargons are located when communicating in this language, since the use of colloquial language has become very common today. This leads to the idea that the use of a second language can be reflected in the different idioms or expressions of another language at the time of establishing a conversation, both in a social, family and academic environment. For this reason, as Rico-Troncoso (2012) mentions, it is clear that every language learner must develop not only communication skills but must understand the ways in which subjects interact based on language and in specific social and cultural contexts.

III. METHOD

The present research was conducted in a private university located in Medellín (Colombia). The institution offers different English courses to all students from different faculties (Law, Engineering, Health Sciences). The main purpose of all courses is focused on a communicative approach, where the main goal is to promote students to work overseas and become integral professionals. The professors from the department are well qualified, with expertise in teaching EFL in all academic levels, and always available to attend students' needs in terms of improving their English language knowledge.

In this study, a qualitative research method was applied, primarily because the purpose was to gain an understanding of the different reasons, opinions, and motivations, and the different findings related to the field of study to develop ideas for a future quantitative research.

Instrument

The research questions applied for this study are exploratory in nature. For this reason, a qualitative framework was used in the study, as Evans (2001) points out that, for this type of studies, a quantitative framework or a statistical analysis won't allow researchers to see beyond students' minds about what they feel or think. This is why the data collected was mostly textual, which focused on the participants' views of the phenomenon, and findings were reached following an interpretative process. These characteristics made the study qualitative (Dörnyei, 2007).

In this study, the main data-gathering instrument was an online questionnaire which consisted of 10 questions and distributed among the students of the University, combining questionnaires and semi structured interviews (Dörnyei 2007) regarding the background of the participants, their feelings about the subject and the influence of social and cultural factors in learning English as a Foreign language.

Participants

The participants of the study were 181 EFL learners including males and females between the ages of 16-64; these participants belong to three different sections of the same course. The participants of study were studying different careers (veterinary, medicine, nutrition, engineering, and law).

Data Setting and Procedures

The data was collected by means of interviews and observations. The interviews were conducted in the classroom through virtual means. All of the collected answers and most of the informal conversations sustained were re-written in a formal manner.

In addition to these observations, the first interviews were centered on family, community and travel, language acquisition, motivation from the different groups they make part of, and cultural identity. All interviews were saved through a Google Drive form, and then transcribed and converted into flexible categories for being analyzed and after that, creating the different charts of the results.

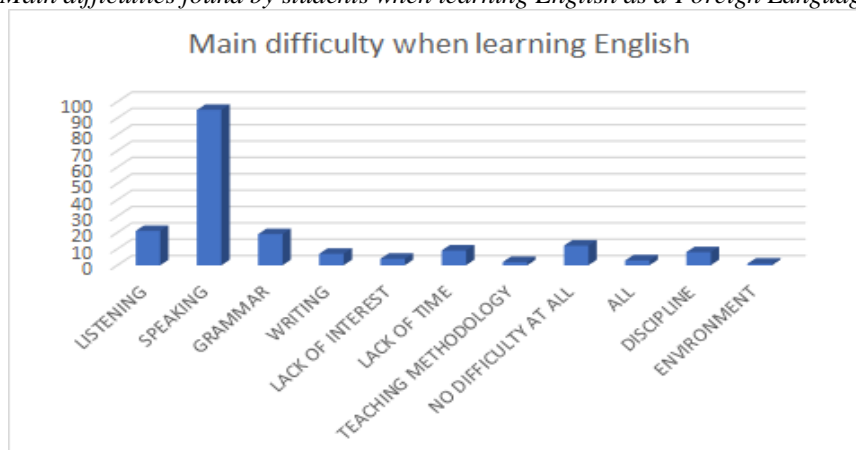
IV. RESULTS

Among the results obtained, we can see the following charts which describe different factors (considering social and cultural) speaking of Medellín territory, which influence the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Difficulties found when learning EFL

Figure 1

Main difficulties found by students when learning English as a Foreign Language



According to the results obtained from this question, we can see that a big number of students found difficulty in the speaking skill when learning EFL. This is due to the different accents and the different countries that speak English, which for students is difficult to manage an accent or a way of speaking (British, American, Australian) when they are in the learning process, as González (2010) states that Colombian learners can vary their attitudes towards choosing American, British or Australian English. However, there is a higher tendency for choosing the American diversity in spelling and pronunciation skills. Moreover, the listening and the grammar located as the other categories with high numbers and that are considered difficult for students, are linked to the speaking skills because when they develop these previous skills, you are able to understand different accents from different regions around the world, and attempt to mimic these in order to communicate.

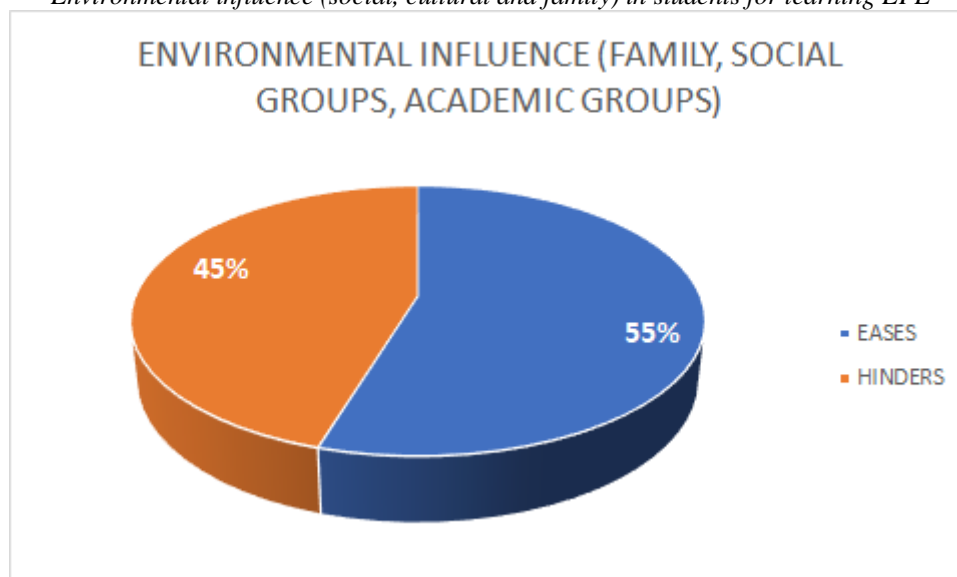
Most of the participants from this study belong to different regions of Colombia, where different accents and modisms are managed when communicating in social or academic groups. For many regions where the mother tongue is spoken fast (Caribbean or Pacific Coast), the English learning process becomes easier to do despite of the omission of letters or the contraction of words, and it is simpler to nullify their Caribbean accent with the pronunciation of general words; while, in the middle and bottom area of the country, the language is spoken slowly and easy to understand, but with a slight difference in the accent of words or phonemes. For this population, it is sometimes easier to learn it, but requires some practice in order to nullify their accents or the pronunciation of some words. That is, as Ridhah&Fatin (2017) suggest, EFL teaching must lead to a full understanding of and a vision from the learner's culture, considering these aspects and practicing them in the classroom.

Looking at other regions around the world (Asia, Africa or Europe), it can be seen that a high percentage of the population can speak EFL his/her own way, using their language accents and modisms, managing to pronounce words in the best possible way so it can be heard naturally. However, most of them could find difficulties in the pronunciation of English phonemes or even general words, because one of the keys that Tejada Cerda & Niebles (2016) state, is that for everyday life there is always a possibility of making incisions that appeal to homogenization and that can take into account the meaning of learning a new language, managing to complex motivation related to having success and make an opening to new horizons in the learning process.

Environmental influence for learning EFL

Figure 2

Environmental influence (social, cultural and family) in students for learning EFL



Note: The results obtained from this question shows that a 55% of the students said that their environmental influence (family, social groups and academic groups) eases the process for learning EFL, while the other 45% of surveyed students commented that it hinders the process of learning EFL.

These results indicate that learners are probably not sure whether being involved in a group of relatives or peers can really affect their EFL learning process in a positive or negative way. However, there are things that need to be clarified regarding these results, and that is, to cover these three groups separately, due to the fact that each group can have its own impact on learners for easing or hindering the learning of the English language.

It is clear that in a family context, students will look for punctual support (relatives who have knowledge in the language) for practicing or even looking for the necessary motivation to continue improving in their

learning process. It is important to remind that family is the core and the main engine of students to start learning or studying what can be motivating for them; if the family is absent, students could automatically quit any project they want to begin with and the demotivation comes into play.

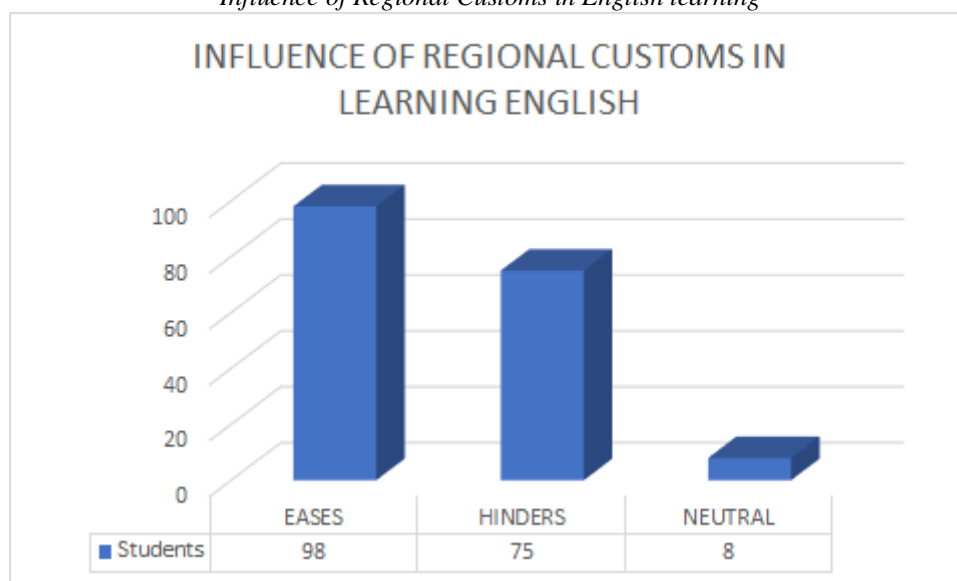
Boarding the social groups, it is also important that learners create and search for the interaction with friends or other peers using slang expressions or the common greetings in English that can be easy to understand and learn. Using slang expressions is one of the first steps for students to learn the language and adapt more words to their regular vocabulary to be used later on in different contexts. Social interaction, as sociocultural theory describes it, is one of the keys to share not only information between learners, but also multicultural knowledge among their different environments. For instance, a student from the Caribbean coast can share cultural expressions similar to those of the Pacific coast with people from the Andean area or the Amazon area, or even from other regions of the country, because one of the things that Colombian learners do when they start learning EFL is to take their own cultural language and translate it into the English language for communicating. This element can ease or hinder their EFL learning in terms of motivating them to acquire more vocabulary and socialize it, or desist from learning the language because it doesn't cover the context or communication zone they desire.

Finally, getting to the academic groups, it could be considered that this scenario is one that defines an effective collaborative learning or a left-alone learning loss for learners, due to the fact that even though there are students with high capabilities to learn in an autonomous way, there are other who require help from their classmates; hence, teachers as class leaders should foment collaborative work so students can feedback themselves through the process and learn EFL mutually at their own pace, no matter the English level each one of them has; additionally, the teacher must foresee and prepare the learning conditions in this context, which may suggest adjustments in the curriculum, so that this can happen (Sánchez & Obando, 2008).

In the EFL learning process, the cultural roots from each student facilitate the process in terms of developing one another's skills (speaking, writing, listening): for instance, where a student who speaks faster can assist one who speaks slower, or a student who writes faster can provide tips to another one who has difficulties in the writing process, and so on. However, it's seen that students who have done their studies in private schools have a big advantage over those of studying in public schools, and that is an aspect teachers should consider and dissipate in the classroom, managing different dynamics where they can share not only the acquired knowledge, but also to get to know each other, knowing their different backgrounds and sharing the different customs and traditions from each other's cultures. Besides, it is also a teacher's challenge to propose a strong cross-cultural component in the academic curriculum, so that teachers can promote intercultural awareness (Cárdenas, 2006).

Figure 3

Influence of Regional Customs in English learning



Note: According to the results obtained, 98 students agreed that the influence of regional customs (traditions from each department in Colombia), eases the learning of EFL, while 75 students disagreed with the premise that their culture hinders the EFL learning process.

The previous results indicate that the cultural background from each student, by a small margin, can determine the easiness of learning of EFL in learners; therefore, it is relevant to detect which cultural elements

from these regional customs affect the learning process. This is where the "universality" of English is put into test within the Colombian context; for instance, a child in a remote area in Colombia may not recognize English as an universal language because his/her environment and regional context contradicts with the context in which English is the only language (Guerrero, 2008).

When elements from regional customs and the cultural background from learners are taken into consideration, we must take a closer look on what regional customs are and the different aspects they cover in an individual's personality and how it influences learning, because as Wang (2011) states, in English learning, students also boost the cultural background knowledge of the country and other countries as well throughout the process.

Without a doubt, culture plays a central role in the teaching and learning of foreign languages (Fandiño, 2017). In this regard, Brown (2006) mentioned that culture is an integral part of the interaction between language and the learner's thoughts, where elements such as cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life mold the way learners think and understand the world around them and complementary, this is reflected in the way they use the language.

In the field of language teaching involving cultural components, Hinkel (2001) described the concepts of invisible and visible culture, in which the visible culture incorporates all about cuisine, festivals and traditional customs, while the invisible culture is reflected in socio-cultural rules, general view of the world, basic assumptions about how people from other countries live, and life values. In the end, all these perspectives and aspects are what define learners as citizens of the country and the world, where their traditions and customs are what define them on how they behave, how they speak and how they face reality.

To summarize this discussion from the results obtained, we agree with Vaca Torres & Gómez Rodríguez (2017)'s statements, that learners can make pronunciation and grammar mistakes while they interact in English because it is a normal part of the learning process, and successful EFL learners can manage to find their own strategies to improve their speaking skill (Shen & Chiu, 2019), indifferent from the region, the social strata or the environmental influence they are involved in. Moreover, it is important for teachers to encourage learners to practice more EFL skills not only inside, but outside the classroom without considering their spelling mistakes and their different accents, so that pronunciation and fluency become better for communicating in English, and the learning process can be complemented with a good motivation from peers and family, and also the foment of a motivating environment from the educational institutions where everyone can interact with one another.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Through this paper, it was attempted to focus on the way sociocultural factors can influence the learning of English as a Foreign language, considering the different cultural and social elements which are reflected in Colombian society. It has been highlighted that, no matter the Colombian region students belong to, this will remark their cultural roots above the foreign language they want to learn, rather than the traditional customs English-spoken countries manage. Through these customs, students attempt to reflect and show their knowledge and traditions using all covered English skills, not even covering the ones overseas, because their culture is what makes them be and what prevails over any other culture; this thought, additionally, is one that many Colombian students manage whether it is in a local or an overseas context.

It is clear that, throughout the years, there has been an increasing interest by Colombian students for learning English as a Foreign Language regarding their professional careers, but maybe their cultural roots along with their social strata, might be a hindrance to perfect the language, due to the variety of accents that can be found in Colombia and the different methodologies and coverages that teachers apply for teaching students from all regions. That is why it is required a complementary study to be executed, in order to obtain more remarkable data that could specify in detail, which sociocultural factors can ease or hinder the learning of EFL in private universities.

Based on the results gathered and the discussion given, we might conclude that:

1. We believe that English teachers should encourage students with strong accents or coming from public schools to reinforce their EFL skills through special and complementary courses throughout the academic semester or year, so this language breach can be reduced in terms of EFL knowledge and the cultural approach.
2. More studies involving family and regional customs' influence in students' learning of English, due to the fact that little or no research has been considered for these two items. Both aspects could be researched more in depth because, in Colombia, the family and the regional customs have a big impact for public or private school students who are willing or are in process of learning English.
3. Teachers should enable two types of previous knowledge when introducing new topics in English: the knowledge of the language and the knowledge of worldwide cultures in relation with Colombian culture. Both types can ease EFL learning in all skills, especially when Colombian students are devoted to each other's

cultures (no matter from which region they come from) and how they are able to associate worldwide expressions with their cultural expressions, so that this could make the process easier in the classroom.

4. The promotion of more collaborative activities in the class should have a bigger impact in the classroom, due to the fact that, the more students interact with other peers from other regions, the cultural enrichment will be higher and the motivation will rise up between them for practicing EFL.

5. Considering Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, there should be a special focus on the regional customs, which at some point might not be seen as relevant, but highlight the most important characteristics of learners in terms of how he/she is, how the behavioral aspect is, and where and how he/she lives in their different environments (social, academic or familiar).

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