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# A research trajectory for difficult times: decentring language and intercultural communication

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## ABSTRACT


This study investigates how critical intercultural pedagogy, creative arts methods, inspired by new materialism, can support new forms of language and intercultural learning in contexts of conflict. Colombian university scholarship recipients in pre-service English language education from disadvantaged backgrounds, co-research alongside the researcher/educator to develop drama games for language and intercultural learning directed at teachers and learners in the students' home communities. The transformative, collaborative research approach, drawing on critical pedagogy and 'Theatre of the Oppressed', aims to decentre language and intercultural communication education, and promote a social activist stance among students in the face of local and global uncertainties.

El conflicto, así como la violencia, el desposeimiento y la desigualdad resultantes de él, limitan el acceso a la educación para muchos. Este estudio investiga cómo la pedagogía crítica intercultural y los métodos de las artes creativas inspirados en el nuevo materialismo pueden apoyar nuevas formas de aprendizaje intercultural de lenguas en estos contextos. Esta indagación, realizada en una universidad en Colombia, explora cómo los becarios (SPP) de entornos desfavorecidos, que realizan sus prácticas pedagógicas en la enseñanza del inglés, co-investigán, junto con la investigadora (también su profesora), sobre el desarrollo de juegos de drama (cápsulas de teatro) conducentes al aprendizaje de lengua y al aprendizaje intercultural dirigidos a docentes y alumnos en las comunidades de origen de los SPP. La investigación destaca el valor de la "Pedagogía Crítica" y del "Teatro del Oprimido" como praxis del "pensar-hacer" en la descolonización y descentralización de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés. El estudio demuestra cómo un enfoque de investigación transformador, colaborativo e inclusivo puede promover una postura de activismo social entre los investigadores/educadores y sus estudiantes, que son tanto participantes como co-productores de la investigación. El estudio también tiene como objetivo descolonizar la lengua y la comunicación intercultural en la educación superior mediante una pedagogía que promueve la participación y la responsabilidad de los estudiantes frente a las incertidumbres y desafíos locales y globales.

## KEYWORDS

Conflict; critical intercultural pedagogy; higher education; migration; new materialism; translanguaging

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Conditions of conflict, forced migration, economic marginalisation, and other forms of protracted crises often result in young people's exclusion from or marginalisation within higher education (HE). These conditions mandate the importance for researchers and teachers to engage in educational and pedagogic approaches that directly address conflict in society, and learners' experiences of it. In this paper, we propose that certain research approaches to language and intercultural communication, and their attendant pedagogies, are fit for this task. We argue for the use of new materialist theory and critical intercultural pedagogy as approaches that are cognizant of contemporary ecologies, promote a social activist stance in researchers as educators, and engage young people directly in intercultural communication. In doing so, these approaches provide young people with the resources to confront and contest social injustices and oppression brought about by conflict and resulting inequalities. Our aim is to understand how critical intercultural pedagogy, supported by the concept of new materialism and creative arts methods, transform curriculum and practice in HE to enhance intercultural communication, and a critical, activist stance among researchers and the young people participating in the research.

We draw on one of five case studies within a broader research project undertaken in conditions of conflict 'Building an Intercultural Pedagogy for Higher Education in Conditions of Conflict and Protracted Crises: Language, Identity, Culture' (BIPHEC)<sup>1</sup> that reflects this political and educational engagement. After briefly introducing the project, we discuss key concepts underpinning the broader project and specific study: first, 'new materialism' (Barad, 2007), an emerging trajectory of scholarship in LAIC and elsewhere, that foregrounds 'linguaging' (Phipps, 2011; 2019), 'trans-linguaging' (Canagarajah, 2018; Li, 2018) and local and indigenous languages as communicative resources in an attempt to confront monolingual ideologies (Gramling, 2016) and the globalisation of English. New materialism invites creative arts methods which displace language as the key medium of communication and engagement (Harvey et al., 2019).

Second, we draw on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), a theoretical approach that invites researchers – and those participating in the research as participants and/or co-researchers – to challenge larger power structures, and colonialist languages and legacies as they impact intercultural interactions (Halualani, 2018; R'boul, 2020). Critical pedagogy enables us, as researchers, to decentre 'Global North' research epistemologies; and to dissolve researcher-participant and teacher-student binaries in favour of an activist researcher ethic (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020) that promotes collaboration, active participation, and responsibility among researchers/educators, students, and young people who may be displaced or excluded from education due to forced migration and conflict. We illustrate how these approaches have informed our own research by drawing on a study from within the BIPHEC project, undertaken in HE in Colombia, a context of internal conflict. From this analysis, we suggest a research trajectory that is both ethical and activist for language and intercultural communication research and education, and applicable particularly in contexts where people experience conflict.

## The BIPHEC project and its context

The BIPHEC project was a 1-year multilingual, multinational, multidisciplinary network project that brought together researchers in three universities in Latin America (University of São Paulo, Brazil; University of los Andes, Colombia; and Instituto Federal Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil) and four other universities (Anadolu University, Istanbul University, Turkey; Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine; and Durham University, United Kingdom (UK)). The researchers came from anthropology, applied linguistics, education, ethno-religious and music studies, languages education, and sociology, disciplines crucial in preparing graduates for a complex and uncertain future, and in encouraging them to tackle global challenges imaginatively (Holmes & Corbett, 2021).

The researchers and educators, in four of the five case study sites (Bogotá in Colombia; Natal in Brazil; Gaza in Palestine; Istanbul and Samara in Turkey) live and work in conflict: Bogotá has been experiencing a protracted civil guerrilla war fomented by drug cartels, socioeconomic exclusion,

lack of space for free political participation, and land ownership rights; Natal State in Brazil suffers internal violence due to economic and social inequality; Istanbul and Samara, like other parts of Turkey, have accepted more than three million Syrian refugees and other displaced peoples resulting from Syria's civil war; the fifth site, Durham, in the North-East of England, has recently become a City of Sanctuary for the settlement of Syrian refugee families.

These historical, socio-political, economic, and material contexts provided the backdrop for our decolonising and decentred approach in intercultural communication research and pedagogy. The studies were undertaken within universities and in their local communities. Thus, they offered sites where young people were engaged in ethical, relational, and dialogic intercultural encounters to address global challenges head on – as ethical and political activists (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020).

The researchers/educators were central in introducing and supporting decolonising and decentring approaches that bypass the knowledge and hegemonic structures emanating from the Global North (e.g. Connell, 2007; Santos, 2018). To resist hegemonic narratives concerning researcher-researched, and teacher-student relationships, we chose to engage the research participants as co-researchers which enabled us to adopt an ethical stance of working *with* and *for* the research participants, not *on* or *about* them (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020; Smith, 2012; Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). In other words, we followed a research transformative activist agenda in which researchers and participants work together and commit to a common project of social transformation. This approach 'focus[es] on conducting research *with* rather than *on* participants, engage[s] participants by giving them voice and providing space for interpreting experiences, and create[s] collaborative spaces for partnership and communication drawing on varied bases of expertise.' (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2014, p. 577; the italics are our emphasis). Furthermore, rather than envisaging local and indigenous languages, cultures, and epistemologies as inferior, or as an exotic supplement to supposedly 'universal' theories of interculturality (R'boul, 2020), we chose to position them at the centre of our work together. As part of our activist stance we adopted a facilitator role, working relationally and dialogically with the students and young people to become the drivers of knowledge creation in their local contexts through mutual co-construction of activities – akin to 'intercultural intersubjectivity' (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019).

Next, we outline the two core theories – creative arts informed by 'new materialism'; and critical pedagogy rooted in social activism – that were influential in shaping our approach in the BIPHEC project, and specifically, our study in Bogotá, Colombia, as an intercultural communication and social justice project.

### Creative arts, new materialism, and their companions

The shift towards the subjective, affective, and symbolic dimensions of intercultural communication, informed by creative arts methods, are gaining increasing interest from researchers who are seeking participatory and collaborative approaches to engage research subjects (often young people in education) in order to bring about intercultural awareness, emancipation, individual empowerment, and social change (for example, within LAIC, see Badwan & Hall, 2020; Frimberger, 2016a; Harvey et al., 2019; Macleroy & Shamsad, 2020; Matos & Melo-Pfeiffer, 2020; Phipps & Kay, 2014; Ros i Sole, 2018; and elsewhere, see Burnard et al., 2016; Fleming, 2004; Frimberger, 2016b; Frimberger et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2020).

Burnard et al. (2016, p. 8) illustrate the potential of the creative arts to challenge systems of power and privilege: 'contemporary artists, researchers and educators, through their critical, socially and ethically engaged, performative and democratizing practices [can] shake up and disturb the continued hegemonic re/production, ownership and re/presentation of knowledge' (p. 8). They take inspiration of from Mignolo's (2011) decolonial stance where border dwellers come together in and beyond the interactive and discursive borderlands: creative arts practices enable the ebb and flow of power relationships, intersubjectively, and intercorporeally in performative encounters.

In contexts of forced migration resulting from conflict and associated crises, the aesthetic dynamics of the creative arts offer new possibilities. Phipps and Kay (2014) state:

[Aesthetic dimensions to language and migration] come to the fore as the displacements involved mean taken for granted and normative dimensions to speech and action have to be made anew, in a different context, and smooth aesthetics are complicated by new interactions and creation of new forms. (p. 276)

These approaches shift the focus from the self/other binary, and the bounded, unitary and often ideologically constructed concepts of culture, language, and identity in intercultural communication to a focus on ecology, agency, creativity, liminal experience, and becoming; they also allow for multiple subject positions, embodiment, and the messiness and complexity of real life encounters between intercultural subjects (Ferri, 2020); and they situate intercultural encounters within the ecologies of lived experience (Canagarajah, 2013). Co-production of language and arts-based practices, as a means to engage hard-to-reach communities such as displaced people, provide a basis for researchers across disciplines, artists, community, and cultural organisations to collaborate to initiate a dialogue towards inclusion, and to mobilise creative arts practices as part of the context, methodology, and outputs for language use, and language and literacy learning.<sup>2</sup>

While scholars of languages and intercultural communication have focused on languages, culture and identity as unidimensional and definable constructs that the researched somehow act enact for the benefit of researchers (Harvey et al., 2019), a new materialist approach refuses the central binaries and hierarchies of Cartesian thinking (Toohey, 2019). Instead, the constructs of language, culture, and identity are embedded in fluid co-constructive, co-creative, meaning-making spaces and processes that enable expression of agency, creativity, and becoming (Harvey et al., 2019). Baynham et al. (2015) refer to this space as ‘transdiscursive’ – ‘the multimodal, embodied space of every practice where people communicate to get things done: how they build their lives, and which they describe as ‘hopeful practice’ (cited in Bradley et al., 2020, p. 4).

To this end, the concept of ‘new materialism’ is useful to researchers of language and intercultural communication. Barad (2007, p. 342) explains: ‘[t]o the extent that humans participate in scientific or other practices of knowing, they do so as part of the larger material configuration of the world and its ongoing open-ended articulation’. In other words, humans both constitute and are constituted by that which they observe and communicate: through their encounters with other people, things, matter, speech, and thought, and through processes of intra-action of these things on and with one another.

This ontological positioning highlights the limits of language, and instead, foregrounds the concepts of languaging, translanguaging and relationality. In human communication, language is demoted, and instead, ‘*assemblages*: states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes ... utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs’ (Deleuze, 2007, p. 177; cited in Harvey et al., 2019, p. 453) are the means by which humans come to know the world and one another. Materiality thus transgresses the limits of language for explanation, understanding and knowing, and instead, entangles language with ‘silences, feelings, and imaginings’ (Harvey et al., 2019, p. 463). Phipps (2011) describes languaging as:

... a way of articulating the full, embodied and engaged interaction with the world that comes when we put the languages we are using into action ... [Languagers] engage with the world-in-action, ... move in the world in a way that allows the risk of stepping out of one’s habitual ways of speaking and attempt to develop different, more relational ways of interacting with the people and phenomena that one encounters in everyday life. (p. 365).

While languaging is concerned with the embodied, aesthetic, affective and relational, ‘translanguaging’ is understood as the flexible, creative, and strategic use of a speaker’s full linguistic and non-linguistic (i.e. semiotic) repertoire in hybrid and creative ways in communication with others (Canagarajah, 2013; Garcia & Li, 2014; Li, 2018). Creese and Blackledge (2019) describe translanguaging is a resource for performing identity as communicators bring different biographies, histories, and linguistic backgrounds to the encounter in linguistically and socially diverse environments. In intercultural communication research, translanguaging aligns with languaging in

recognising the ‘multiplicity, fluidity, mobility, locality, and globality of the resources deployed by individuals for engaging in complex meaning-making processes’ (Bradley et al., 2020, p. 2).

The third dimension concerns relationality. Gamble et al. (2019) argue that performative materialism is relational, and these relations are always temporally, spatially, and politically asymmetrical. In this sense, humans are co-constructed and entangled in the interminable movements of their performances. Creative arts practices, through performative encounters, enable the ebb and flow of these entanglements and relationships, intersubjectively and intercorporeally. Relationality also stresses becoming: people, discourses, practices, and things are continually in relation and becoming different from what they were before (Toohey, 2019, p. 937).

To conclude, Phipps and Kay (2014) argue that new materialist approaches enable researchers to invoke the intersectionalities and interstices of languaging and translanguaging experiences to exchange and reposition those experiences and themselves as researchers across borders and boundaries. Through an aesthetics-based approach to languages in migration contexts, meaning making becomes a shared, relational, dialogic process among researchers and researched, and among ‘methods, theories and approaches to the study of language and languages’ (p. 275). These approaches enable researchers to resist orthodox data collection methods heavily invested in language (e.g. interviews, focus groups) as the ‘main professional means of making sense of and to ourselves and others’ (Phipps, 2013, p. 339), and thus demote language from its lead position in the hierarchy of knowledge in HE (Harvey et al., 2019). The research thus becomes a shared endeavour, created dynamically and agentively, among the researchers/educators and researched in the micro-culture of the research context (Borghetti & Beaven, 2018). In our project, this means the researched – the young people in HE – co-creating the research alongside the researchers.

### Critical intercultural pedagogy: intercultural education for ethical and social activism

Contexts of conflict and other forms of protracted crises giving rise to an imbalance in cultural and linguistic capital among local populations, for example, among those who have established themselves as cultural and economic colonisers, and those who have recently arrived as a result of forced migration and conflict. As R'boul (2021) highlights, intercultural communication research and education has an important role to play in offering a ‘decolonized consciousness’ and ‘pluri-perspectivity’ in such socio-politically unbalanced contexts.

Critical pedagogy invites researchers to decolonise their researcher praxis, and question hegemonic narratives, researcher positioning, and power in the research process as they engage with one another and their research participants (Canella & Lincoln, 2018; Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020; Smith, 2012; Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). Critical pedagogy also offers an appropriate emancipatory heuristic to decentre, decolonise, and critique knowledge emanating from the global North (Connell, 2007; Denzin et al., 2008). It allows for the transformation of Eurocentric epistemologies by drawing on local and geopolitical contexts, and local knowledges, languages, and practices, and in the process, delocates from Renaissance and Enlightenment theories of knowledge (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) provides a grassroots transformational praxis that brings education together with autonomy and freedom, and democratic, emancipatory principles of society; it also offers transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities (Farrén, 2016). The educational goals of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020) are important to our work in building a politics of educational hope. In ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ Paulo Freire (1970) sought to help people to understand their own oppression and to take action to overcome it. Freire described a process of ‘conscientisation’, or *conscientização* in Brazilian Portuguese, which refers to ‘the deepening of the attitude of awareness’ (1970, p. 82) as learners develop an attitude of awareness of their own and others’, realities in order to act on them. Through this process, Freire

encouraged oppressed people to develop their human capacity for love and to help one another achieve freedom and thus liberate themselves from structural violence in society. This process requires praxis: ‘reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it’ (p. 85), that is, of unveiling and confronting reality critically (which, in Freire’s case, means forms of oppression), and intervening in it. Walsh, in her introduction to *On decoloniality*, discusses the importance of linking theory with doing, as praxis, understood as thought-reflection-action, rather than allowing theory to rule. She describes praxis as:

the doing-thinking, with the people, collectives, and communities that enact decoloniality as a way, option, standpoint, analytic, project, practice, and praxis; that is, with the activity of thinking and theorizing from praxis. (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 9)

This ‘doing-thinking’ is important in the ecology of the classroom and in the relations and communication between researchers/educators and their students. According to Giroux (2020), students must have the space and freedom to raise and define questions outside of their disciplinary boundaries if necessary, to have the possibility of speaking openly and critically. For educators, this means ensuring that the operations of power and authority (e.g. from governments, corporate infiltration, and even welfare cuts) do not deny, constrain, or exclude young people from speaking in specific ways, and expressing their own agency – to think critically and act differently; participants are given a voice that is listened to seriously, and access to different worlds through intercultural encounters. Educators have a creative and critical role in promoting quality education that ‘validat[es] students’ heritage and local knowledge’ (Corbett & Guilherme, 2021, p. 447). Thus, critical pedagogy can educate for intercultural awareness, responsibility, critical citizenship, and public life by ‘provid[ing] the conditions for students to learn in diverse ways how to take responsibility for moving society in the direction of a more realizable democracy’ (Giroux, 2020, p. 146). Such a praxis takes HE in the direction of creating young people who are able to collaborate and transform – to come to understand one another’s realities, to reflect, and take action: to be ‘critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way’ (Giroux, 2020, p. 1) towards a democratic polity as promulgated by United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 (United Nations, 2021).

Within our own research, we aimed to confront and intervene into the realities of young people whose lives have been transformed by forced migration, violence, and conflict. Through a new materialist lens and creative arts methods, and critical pedagogy we engaged young people in creating the guidelines for their action. Freire refers to this process as ‘cultural synthesis’ (1970, p. 155); as young people encounter, commune, and dialogue with one another, they can come to know one another as human beings and begin to transform their conditions in society towards equality. Dialogue can only occur where there is mutual trust, which is based upon a horizontal relationship founded upon love, humility, and faith. Dialogue is also rooted in hope, which emerges from communion with others. Finally, dialogue requires critical thinking, ‘thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, ... which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved’ (Freire, 1970, p. 65).

To illustrate this theoretical approach we draw on a case study from our project that brings together these lines of inquiry into a critical intercultural pedagogy in practice. The study, undertaken by the second author, Peña Dix, explores how pre-service English language teachers in Bogotá, Colombia (re)created their own intercultural development and communication while designing English language education resources for mediation thereby reflecting their own experiences of conflict and inequality. Peña Dix’s study was also an example of youth engagement in the co-construction of knowledge and expertise, thus challenging orthodox learning contexts in which the relationship of teacher-learner or researcher-researched prevails (Melo, 2019; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2014). Infused in Freirean emancipatory pedagogy, critical intercultural pedagogy helps create nontraditional dialogic spaces that foster intercultural communication, and it allows students to be agents of political action and social change.

## Implementing a research trajectory for difficult times: reflecting on inequality and conflict in pre-service English language education

The case study employs the concepts described above – critical intercultural pedagogy and new materialism – with the addition of Theatre of the Oppressed (TdO) to transform language classrooms into spaces in which intercultural communication is at the core of language teaching and learning. The participants in the case study – pre-service English language teacher trainees who were recipients of the Colombian government’s scholarship programme ‘It pays to be clever’ (*Ser Pilo Paga*) – used short drama games and plays (Boal, 1979; 2002) to recreate real situations that prompted continuous reflection on their experiences of living in conflict and inequality.

Colombia has experienced more than five decades of civil war, conflict with guerrillas, crime, drug trafficking, and corruption. The breach between public and private education has reproduced exclusionary relationships and inequalities that have impeded the effective enjoyment of the rights of disadvantaged social groups – women, ethnic groups, people from rural areas, people with disability, and collectives. In Bogotá, as in Colombia more broadly, there is a segregationist educational context, or ‘educational apartheid’ (García Villegas & Quiroz López, 2011), that constrains access to quality education, since each social class studies separately and the rich receive a better quality education. This situation aggravates the problems of social mobility and contributes to reproducing existing social hierarchies (Álvarez-Rivadulla, 2019). The *Ser Pilo Paga* (SPP) scholarship programme, although not without strong critiques, was designed to mitigate this segregation by enabling high performing students from the lowest *strata* to gain access to better quality HE.

In keeping with the emancipatory nature of critical pedagogy, Peña Dix, as researcher/educator, deliberately invited participation from SPP recipients; twenty volunteered to take part in the study. SPP recipients learning English in a HE setting face the long tradition of imposed discourses of foreign language teaching methods and language learning materials (emanating from the global ‘North’) that lead to instrumental uncritical language learning (Fandiño-Parra, 2021). For this reason, a decolonising pedagogy that fosters critical understanding of intercultural communication offers these students real opportunities to approach the language (Grosfoguel, 2011). Rather than reproducing colonial vertical structures of knowledge and power in the teaching and learning of English, instead, Peña Dix invited the SPP students to work alongside her as participant co-researchers, rather than students, thereby placing the students at the core of dialogical learning, problem-posing language education, and critical, decolonial praxis that form the theoretical foundations of emancipatory, action-oriented education (Melo, 2019). For participant co-researchers, understanding (and experiencing) that pedagogy is not neutral but political, and is intertwined within the acquisition of agency, within the construction of knowledge and identities; authority within particular relations of power (Giroux, 2021) aided the development of critical cultural awareness in and outside the English language classroom. Participant co-researchers transformed the traditional English language classroom into a classroom ecology that provided a way of expressing – via languaging and translanguaging – their own social backgrounds, experiences, feelings and personal stories. Thus, the participant co-researchers appropriated English to ‘language’ and ‘translanguage’ real and meaningful purposes and responses to contexts of conflict and inequality – through critical intercultural pedagogy and TdO drama games inspired by new materialism and creative arts methods.

The case study was shaped around three training workshops with their corresponding post-workshop reflection sessions. During the workshops the participant co-researchers wrote four journal entries and participated in a semi-structured interview at the end of the project (cf. Silverman, 2017). They co-created a ‘Toolbox’, a set of intercultural resources based on drama and theatre games (which they labelled ‘drama capsules’). The drama capsules were performed in front of three public secondary school teachers and their pupils, who participated in the final phase of the project – which the participant co-researchers labelled the ‘Mirror Project’. The three teachers were also interviewed. Data were analysed thematically to organise diverse subject matter and uncover fine detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006).



## Theoretical applications: implementing critical intercultural pedagogy

In this study, critical intercultural pedagogy offered a transformative pedagogy which aimed to create conditions that supported researcher/educator and participant co-researchers in co-constructing understandings through dialogue, peer-to-peer interactions, and collaboration. Grounded in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), critical intercultural pedagogy enabled Peña Dix to combine education with autonomy, freedom, and the democratic, emancipatory principles of society, in addition to transformative social action in the interest of oppressed communities (Farren, 2016) – crucial educational foundations in Colombia's fractured society where internal conflict and violence have led to inequality and traumatised groups. Peña Dix's approach allowed the participant co-researchers, who are also teacher-trainees, to enquire into their practice (Farren, 2016), and thus resist colonial/Global North epistemologies and practices. It also embodied Walsh's notion of praxis as 'doing-thinking' (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018), and praxis as underpinned by collaborative teaching and learning (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Zhou et al., 2011). Thus, critical intercultural pedagogy provided the participant co-researchers with the resources to interrogate the ways in which the traditional language curriculum reproduces Westernised and/or colonial knowledge with specific power relations in the classroom, knowledge appropriation, and behaviours (Dervin & Layne, 2013; Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2016).

Critical intercultural pedagogy is also a relational pedagogy, focused on the relationship between teachers and students and the intercultural dialogue happening among them. Relational pedagogy allows the transgression of vertical power relations in the classroom. It also implies 'the relation between different ontologies and epistemologies, the historical-cultural contexts within which these are formed and the hegemonic structures that privilege one group over another' (Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2016, pp. 21–22). Thus, it is intercultural, decolonial, transformative and relational by nature. According to Giroux (2020), critical intercultural pedagogy supports individuals in their in-depth understanding of the world beyond superficial meanings, and enables them to unveil contradictions between social and political realities.

To implement critical intercultural pedagogy in their case study, from the start, Peña Dix and the participant co-researchers employed decolonising, decentring, and ethical principles in the classroom. The participant co-researchers made important decisions affecting the research design and procedures. For example, they decided to base their 'Toolbox' of intercultural activities on their imaginary or life experiences of the socio-cultural-political conditions of Colombia; and they decided upon the Mirror Project (described below) as the final phase of the study.

Languaging and translanguaging were a major consideration. Participant co-researchers were free to choose the language (Spanish or English) of the workshops, communication, and their journal entries to make meaning and shape their experiences. They used sociolinguistic, multimodal, and performative resources flexibly to make sense of learning and acting in both languages. For example, they used Spanish frequently to plan and organise the toolbox of intercultural activities, and English to create and rehearse the drama capsules. Journals were written in both languages. Through their various roles – as language learners, pre-service English language teachers, co-teachers with their former English language teachers, co-researchers in this case study – they were immersed in a bilingual language reality in which English and Spanish are not seen as two separate entities or systematic translation but rather, as dynamic and integrated processes to mediate understanding, speaking, literacy, and learning (Lewis et al., 2012), that is, as a translanguaging experience (Garcia & Li, 2014). Thus, translanguaging provided an empathetic and relational strategy to generate trust and confidence as they endeavoured to make sense of learning and acting in English.

The participant co-researchers were also free to re-elaborate concepts, and try to adapt them *in situ*. For example, the definition of *Critical Intercultural Pedagogy* was at the core of one of the workshop discussions. They decided to organise a focus group to redefine and contextually shape the concept, and thus decolonise the Anglophone tradition of developing theories and concepts and then applying them extensively and uncritically. In doing so, they were enacting the praxis

of ‘doing-thinking’ (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). During the session they had decided to speak in English and they co-constructed the following definition in English:

Critical intercultural pedagogy is an integrative approach to teaching that seeks to generate spaces for reflection through awareness of intercultural encounters that enhance in students the recognition of difference and the openness necessary to generate third spaces for intercultural dialogue. These encounters raise intercultural awareness so that students can potentially transcend limitations of their own cultural views. Critical intercultural pedagogy implies responsibly exposing students in a safe environment to activities that promote the analysis of their own perceptions and the series of behaviours and beliefs that these generate in them. This can be done through drama role-play, drama games and performance where students have the opportunity to be emotionally involved in intercultural encounters and thus develop ICC [intercultural communicative competence] necessary to cope with these encounters. The critical intercultural pedagogy teacher, being in charge of enhancing the above skills and knowledge in their students, should be an example of a critical intercultural mediator. S/he must possess skills, attitudes and knowledge to dialogue with the diversity present in different linguistic-cultural contexts, as well as the flexibility, openness and empathy to recognise that different “Other” that is sometimes equal to her/him. Meanwhile, the critical intercultural pedagogy teacher must carry out a process of reflection and self-diagnosis of possible prejudices and stereotypes before designing materials and activities dictated by critical intercultural pedagogy. When possible, these materials should be checked by a third party to unveil possible stereotypes or bias that may go unnoticed by the teacher. (Statement, originally composed in English)

The participant co-researchers decided on the idea of the ‘Mirror Project’ for the final phase, where they ‘tested’ their drama capsules with their former teachers in their classrooms. Returning to their home communities enabled them to ‘give back’, to perform as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2020) and social activists (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020), by bringing new meanings to English language education in their former secondary school contexts – neighbourhoods characterised by disadvantage, social segregation, exclusion from societal power structures, and the scars of violence resulting from conflict.

### Methodological applications: new materialism and ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’

Critical intercultural pedagogy enabled Peña Dix and her students to transform the language classroom from a colonial linguistic-centred space into a classroom ecology that centralised intercultural communication and dialogue, but also included the affective, aesthetic and performative aspects invoked in languaging (Phipps, 2011) and translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2013; Li, 2018). These approaches enabled the participant co-researchers to (re)create – through creative arts approaches – real situations that prompt continuous reflection on reality. Together, Peña Dix and participant co-researchers, as (self) educators at all levels, struggled against the mere development of skills-based knowledge which aims to preserve institutionalised and legitimised existing systems and vertical structures of knowledge, power and pedagogical language praxis. In this study, both parties built on the Freirean *emancipator educator* (Freire, 1970) who questions colonial ideologies and mediates intercultural communication and dialogue, thereby placing students’ voices and creativity at the centre of the language classroom. Critical intercultural pedagogy includes ‘new literacies’ (e.g. methods informed by new materialism) that challenge traditional language teachers’ roles into ‘a more encompassing professional identity as practitioner-researchers and leaders with moral consciousness’ (Farren, 2016, p. 7). Earlier, we highlighted how new materialist approaches invoked intersectionalities among the aesthetic, affective, situational, and liminal (Phipps & Kay, 2014). In this study, these approaches enabled the fusion of languages, culture, and identity not as unidimensional and definable constructs, but as embedded in fluid co-constructive, co-creative, meaning-making spaces and processes that enable expression of agency, creativity, and becoming (Harvey et al., 2019). Next, we illustrate these approaches and processes through the application of Boal’s (1979) ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ or TdO (after its Portuguese acronym, from *Teatro do Oprimido*), and the participant co-researchers’ co-creation of drama capsules.

Boal (1979; 2002), a Brazilian playwright, actor, director, and theatre educator, promoted social education using interactive and popular drama techniques that prompted critical analysis, which he

argued, developed responsibility and autonomy in individuals. Exercises, games and theatrical techniques create a ‘third space’, and thus serve as instruments in understanding and searching for alternatives to social and interpersonal problems, stimulating participants to reflect on the past, transform reality in the present, and create a future. Santos (2015) called TdO a ‘theatre of dialogue’ since it promotes the exchange of experiences, leading up to an analysis of the conflicts experienced by the characters in the drama. TdO is also a transformative pedagogy that recognises the need for social critique within the classroom setting and through an embodied performance process. Thus, as a critical intercultural pedagogy, TdO aids teachers and learners in developing the capacity to accept greater responsibility for teaching and learning. Through their mutual interactions they make sense of the world around them.

The participant co-researchers developed intercultural activities that aimed to decentre orthodox English language learning materials and teaching methodologies, and thus foster ‘real’ intercultural communication. Instead of drawing on pre-established role-play activities, they co-created drama capsules, which, based on the transformative power of TdO, aimed to give voice to those silenced by the conflict and dominant systems in Colombia that resulted in educational and economic marginalisation and deprivation. With the freedom, flexibility and creativity of expression, the participant co-researchers were able to experience the language they were teaching differently: rather than reproducing the language based on its mere linguistic dimension in order to communicate with Anglo-speaking communities, they co-constructed and shaped realities *with* English, engaging in their immediate context and sharing this perspective with former English language teachers and young learners. Thus, the TdO drama capsules provided original intercultural events to prompt situated intercultural dialogue and engage learners in conflict resolution.

*The drama capsules.* The participant co-researchers formed small groups to create, design and perform TdO drama games – short theatrical scenes containing allegoric or real intercultural experiences – which they invited their teachers to act out and/or modify in the final ‘Mirror Project’ phase. Here we discuss two of these drama capsules. The first, *The singer and the mute*, inspired as much by a fairy tale as by the actual tensions in Colombia, takes an allegorical approach to conflict, and is synthesised as follows:

A couple, Sam and Annie, fall in love. Sam is from Noisy York. In this city, everybody sings when they speak. Noise is everywhere and nobody takes turns to speak. Sam loves singing loudly and playing the guitar. Annie, however, is from Whispartown. People from this city hate noise, and they communicate through sign language. Her family thinks noise is disgusting and people are upset by the least noise. Together, Sam and Annie want to break ‘all the rules’ that keep them apart.

For this activity, the group taught themselves Colombian sign language, which brought to the project a new linguistic dimension and further reflections on diversity and intercultural communication. The group acted out the conflict scenario and recorded it in a 3-minute video (see [Figure 1](#)) to present for guided reflection and discussion, first to their teacher (back in their community), and then later to the pupils of their teacher.

While *The singer and the mute* adopted an indirect approach to conflict resolution by situating the conflict in an allegorical scenario, the group that designed *Two siblings, two worlds* chose to draw directly on the recent military conflict between the Colombian government and FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) rebels. The synthesis is as follows:

After the first peace treaty in Colombia was signed in 2018, the disarmament and reintegration into society of former FARC guerrilla members gradually started. Many military troops, who had been confined to distant rural districts in anti-war operations, also returned to their homes. This drama capsule is based on a scenario in which two young siblings, who had left their homes and become separated from each other, are returning to their home. One of them volunteered for the Colombian Army and became a professional soldier. The other was forcibly recruited by the FARC guerrillas. Now, after the cease-fire, they meet again during the peace building meetings. As they meet, they start to talk knowing that they are both going home for Christmas to their parents. In this drama capsule, the siblings are put in two different situations: the first describes a



**Figure 1** Performing and recording the drama capsule *"The singer and the mute"*.

scene where they choose separate pathways and have no interest in re-establishing dialogue and their family connection; the second illustrates a positive encounter where they exchange ideas and opinions about their life experiences in the Colombian Army and FARC respectively.

These drama capsules illustrate how creative arts activities enable the participant co-researchers to transcend languages, and generate meaning and shared understanding through social interaction and by languaging in their deployment of semiotic, affective, and relational resources. Harvey et al. (2019) argue that drama can be a semiotic and pedagogic resource to encourage students to understand learning as a relational and performative process of becoming, whereby relationships become visible to the students through the drama, and thus enable them to see a different understanding of their reality. In Harvey's study, university students explored ideas around internationalisation, and through drama, were able to go beyond the 'oppressive binaries which pervade international HE' (p. 467). The authors concluded that the decentring of language in their research methodology offered 'different forms of knowing and create[d] space for knowing differently, through knowledges which can unsettle the dominant forms and systems of knowledge produced by the 'Westernised' academy' (Harvey et al., 2019, p. 467).

In a different vein, Najar (2016) drew attention to the context in which the intercultural research is undertaken – the 'intercultural field'. She argued that intercultural learning is as much an interweaving of human actors, practices, and objects, the relationality they share with the places they inhabit and the elements within them, and the spatial-global dynamic that, like performative new materialism, 'understands heterogeneity as an essential human need for variety and change' (p. 160). And Badwan and Hall (2020) used a 'walk along' where the researcher directs research subjects' attention to the 'dynamic interplay between humans, objects and spaces [which] invokes emotions that are then attached to objects and spaces to make them 'sticky' and saturated with affect' (p. 225–226). These sticky places – dynamic, aesthetic, and affective – create emergent spaces for sharing intercultural experience.

Similarly, the drama capsules opened up creative spaces for knowing differently and for addressing the difficult emotions resulting from separation due to conflict – whether through allegory, dialogue, or performatively. They enabled the participant co-researchers, as future English language teachers, to create sticky places saturated with affect, and thus, to experience intercultural communication and personal experience of conflict aesthetically, affectively, and relationally. Through these methods speakers can establish human connections in intercultural encounters, and experience personal transformations which may involve highly intense emotions (Badwan & Hall, 2020; Najjar, 2016; Phipps & Kay, 2014; Ros i Sole, 2018). Peña Dix, the participant co-researchers, and the teachers in the final phase (The Mirror Project) had the possibility of experiencing new learning, new theorising, and new understandings of one another and contexts of conflict. This ‘entanglement’ (MacLure, 2010) – among language, (trans)linguaging, and other semiotic resources, and through critical intercultural pedagogy as a transformational and relational pedagogy – enabled those involved to experience and access the multiple voices and multiple truths of their lived experience in the context of the conflict and inequality of contemporary Colombia.

The drama capsules also enabled the participant co-researchers to adopt an ethical and social activist stance where they all learned with and from one another – through the allegory and role play – by illuminating multiple subject positions, narratives of disruption, miscommunication, acknowledgement of power imbalances, and recognition of injustice (Ferri, 2020). Through embodied performance processes evidenced in the drama capsules, the participant co-researchers became agents of critique and transformation, and their bodies became sites of ideology and intercultural communication (Harman & McClure, 2011).

The adoption of drama strategies, coupled with critical intercultural pedagogy, prompted the participant co-researchers to undergo deep processes of analysis and reflection – as doing-thinking (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018) – on their teaching practices and their surrounding realities of conflict. As a result, intercultural communication and mediation happened naturally. TdO served as an emancipatory, empowering, and transformative act in which all stakeholders’ voices could be heard and valued (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2004). The crucial experience of co-teaching with their former English language teachers in the Mirror Project highlighted for the participant co-researchers the importance of co-constructing spaces for intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding and negotiation. The emergent intercultural language pedagogies offer resources for (language) teacher education programmes, and for Colombian people’s appropriation of English as an instrument for mediation in the context of Colombia’s internal conflict.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to illustrate how the theoretical lenses of critical intercultural pedagogy and new materialism, informed by creative arts methods, offers a research trajectory for language and intercultural communication in difficult times, particularly where young people experience trauma from internal conflict, and resultant marginalisation and social inequality. Through a specific case study – part of the broader BIPHEC project where these approaches were embedded – we have shown how critical intercultural pedagogy opens up dialogic, but also affective, aesthetic, and relational spaces for intercultural communication. Critical intercultural pedagogy is also capable of transforming the intercultural communication curriculum and practice in HE, and of promoting a critical activist stance among learners when they are invited to be participant co-researchers. We have demonstrated how critical intercultural pedagogy, informed by Freire’s (1970) ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ and Boal’s (1979) ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’, provides a praxis of ‘doing-thinking’ (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) as both researchers and students as participant co-researchers actively participate in their own learning and enquire into their own practices. Through their participation, they resisted colonial/Global North forms of language education, and adopted decentred and aesthetic approaches that embodied their local lived experience and enabled them to confront experiences of conflict. Thus, critical intercultural pedagogy is transformational in

that it creates conditions that support individuals to enter into a dialogue or aesthetic intercultural encounter, develop an understanding of one another's realities, and (re)engage in their communities.

Further, as an 'intersubjective encounter' (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019) among researchers/educators and students in HE and those marginalised or excluded from it, our broader research trajectory, as exemplified in the BIPHEC project (see Holmes & Corbett, 2022), also represents an ethical and social activist stance. The case study engaged pre-service English language teachers as co-producers of the research (through the co-creation of drama capsules) and disseminators of knowledge (in the Mirror Project) within their communities. These processes are crucial in breaking down disciplinary, linguistic, and other borders that delineate and bind individuals into positionings that limit their potential to shape their environment; they also permit social participation and responsibility towards inequalities and other forms of social injustice in the face of local and global uncertainties and challenges.

By embracing language and intercultural communication as aesthetics, which foregrounds the affective, relational, and performative and where named languages provide supporting roles, we have presented a research trajectory that aligns with posthumanist thinking that enables theory to 'get in the way: to offend and interrupt' (MacLure, 2010, p. 277). In the post-colonial context of English language education in HE in Colombia, this theoretical approach allows for new forms of language learning, meaning-making and new understandings of one another as the participant co-researchers adopted multiple subject positions (as language learners, co-creators of research through the drama capsules, teachers back in their communities), and as they invoked narratives of disruption, acknowledged power imbalances, and recognised injustices (Ferri, 2020; Pennycook, 2018).

Our critical intercultural pedagogy approach has several implications. First, it invites researchers to decolonise their researcher praxis and question their own power in the research process (Freire, 1970; Phipps, 2019; Smith, 2012; Walsh & Mignolo, 2018). Instead, researchers can engage with their research subjects as co-researchers who understand what it means to be human in the face of conflict and other forms of protracted crises. In doing so, researchers may attune to the languages, knowledges, cultural practices, and heritage of local and indigenous peoples in their local contexts, and thus, hear and listen to the voices of the disenfranchised, disaffected, and dispossessed. In this study, the participant co-researchers have demonstrated their ability to find novel solutions to the intercultural and other communication challenges they face.

Third, researchers need to take a social activist standpoint to confront the linguistic, cultural and social hegemonies, inequalities, and other forms of injustice emerging from conflict and displacement (Canella & Lincoln, 2018; Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020; Smith, 2012; Zhu, 2020). As shown in our study, this standpoint is crucial in addressing the issues, controversies and difficult questions in language and intercultural communication research and teaching. We add that the research participants, too, must be given the freedom and power to become social activists (e.g. as co-researchers) – to shape their environment and tackle local and global challenges imaginatively.

The study is not without its limitations, especially since it took place in a privileged university in Bogotá and among SPP scholarship holders, albeit from disadvantaged backgrounds. The trans-linguaging in the study involved colonial languages (Spanish and English); local and indigenous languages, for unknown reasons, were missing. Not all of the participant co-researchers were able to take their drama capsules back to their school communities due to the pressure of examinations. Not all their former teachers were interested in participating in the Mirror Project (e.g. due to time pressures in their school). Some of the participant co-researchers were not welcome back in their schools due to the vertical power relations that are still present in Colombian education.

Future research might investigate the impact of critical intercultural pedagogy, and the co-created drama capsules, on the teachers it is aimed at, and the experiences of the pupils in receiving it. The study might also be undertaken in rural contexts beyond Bogotá to fully understand the impact of the pedagogy on communities where violence and conflict are more deeply embedded. Transfer

to other contexts of conflict may offer further transformations of critical intercultural pedagogy and creative arts methods that are informed by local and indigenous cultural, linguistic, heritage, and other practices. Following Freire (1970), the pedagogy could be shared with NGOs to support their work in promoting intercultural learning in disadvantaged and hard-to-reach communities where there is oppression and conflict, and where people are excluded from education.

In conclusion, our researcher-researched praxis of critical intercultural pedagogy and new materialism is an attempt to dent ‘the epistemological politics of knowledge and research into languages and cultures’ that decentres the West–East and – we add – North–South nexus (MacDonald, 2020, p. 567). It also foregrounds the importance of intercultural communication education as a route to ‘tackl[ing] sensitive and complicated issues such as power imbalances in terms of knowledge, language and being’ (R’boul, 2021, p. 144; see also Shome & Hedge, 2002; Asante & Miike, 2013). We do not offer a panacea, or an easy solution. Rather, we offer a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1994) that has the potential to decolonise and decentre language and intercultural communication research and education for other researchers and educators to follow.

## Notes

1. A description of the BIPHEC project, undertaken in 2019, and its five case studies can be found at <https://biphec.wordpress.com/>. We thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council Global Challenges Research Fund (AH/S003967/1) and United Kingdom Research Innovation for funding this research project.
2. Examples of arts-based research groups are: UNESCO Art Lab led by Amina Hamshari, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/learning-live-together/art-lab>; Learning at the Intersection of Language and the Arts (LILA) led by Lou Harvey, [https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/homepage/122/school\\_of\\_education\\_learning\\_at\\_the\\_intersection\\_of\\_language\\_and\\_the\\_arts](https://essl.leeds.ac.uk/homepage/122/school_of_education_learning_at_the_intersection_of_language_and_the_arts); Praxis Art Lab led by Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke, <https://changingthestory.leeds.ac.uk/praxis/>; Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts (RILA) led by Alison Phipps <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/unesco/>

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