

## **Voices of IB Learners: Social Justice Education in the EFL Classroom – Opening Doors to a More Communicative Approach**

*Voces de los Estudiantes IB: Educación Basada en la Justicia Social en el aula de inglés como Idioma Extranjero—Abriendo puertas a un enfoque más comunicativo*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research article describes a qualitative study conducted with 14 high school seniors currently enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma program at a private educational institution in Cuenca, Ecuador. This article aims to explore the impact of social justice issue-based education on the development of oral communication in the English as a foreign language classroom. As part of the process, it was essential to analyze the participants' perceptions and experiences as integral components of language learning. The data obtained was collected in two phases. First, a questionnaire composed of six questions was applied to explore the students' perceptions of the issue in question. In the second phase, a discussion was held with the intervention of a focus group including five students, which allowed them to openly share their points of view on the subject of this exploration. In this way, it was evident that the topics related to social justice had a positive impact on the development of the student's oral communication and that they constituted a useful learning approach for students to increase their knowledge of English. The results achieved through the present study aim to improve English-language teaching at different levels, and consequently strengthen oral communication development in class.

**Keywords:** Social justice; education; perception; language learning; communication.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo describe un estudio cualitativo dirigido a 14 estudiantes del tercer año de bachillerato, actualmente inscritos y cursando el programa del Diploma del Bachillerato Internacional una institución educativa de Cuenca, Ecuador. El objetivo de este artículo es explorar el impacto que tiene la educación basada en temáticas conectadas a la justicia social en el desarrollo de la comunicación oral dentro de las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera. Como parte del proceso, fue esencial analizar tanto las percepciones de los participantes como sus experiencias, al ser componentes integrales del aprendizaje de idiomas. Los datos obtenidos se recogieron en dos fases. Primeramente, se aplicó un cuestionario compuesto por seis interrogantes con el fin de explorar las percepciones de los estudiantes sobre la problemática en mención. En la segunda fase, se generó un conversatorio en el cual participó un grupo focal conformado por cinco estudiantes, que les permitió compartir abiertamente sus puntos de vista con respecto al motivo de esta exploración. De esta manera, se comprobó que los temas relacionados con la justicia social tuvieron un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de la comunicación oral de los estudiantes y constituyen un enfoque de aprendizaje útil para que aumenten sus conocimientos de inglés. Los resultados alcanzados mediante el presente estudio intentan ayudar a mejorar la enseñanza de inglés en todos sus niveles, y sobre todo fortalecer la comunicación oral por parte del estudiante.

**Palabras clave:** Justicia social; educación; percepción; aprendizaje de idiomas; comunicación.

## Introduction

In today's interconnected and multicultural society, students should apply their language skills beyond the classroom to communicate and work together. For that to occur, learners must acquire intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and global competency to engage in interpersonal interactions effectively (Caballero-García, 2018). Social justice education enables students to define and recognize instances of equity, equality, discrimination, privilege, and marginalization, among others. This knowledge allows them to communicate with people in the target language (TL) more productively (Caballero-García, 2018).

In the meantime, educators must learn to create a culture of dialogue among students in which all individual experiences and interests are highly valued rather than personal opinions exclusively. Frequent debating is found to weaken and obstruct classroom discourse as it constructs the false image of winners-losers among language learners (Sovis & Pancost 2017). A classroom community requires harmonious relationships that are continuously fostered. As a result, students gradually engage in discussions, while their critical thinking skills and conflict resolution abilities are strengthened. Therefore, it is suggested to accept various perspectives, teach discussion, get students involved in class, have them share experiences, and give them the power to speak (Spitzman, 2019).

Despite the increasing incorporation of social justice themes into the educational curriculum in recent years, there is a lack of written knowledge that concretely indicates the impact that social justice education has on the development of oral communication among its learners. Mills and Ballantyne (2016), clarified "Internationally, efforts to incorporate social justice principles, particularly multicultural approaches in education, have been variously evident in policy for the

last 30 years or so” (p. 263). Thus, this study intends to explore the experiences and perceptions of IB students as to how including topics of social justice in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom could trigger oral communication. By examining this relationship, the investigation aims to provide valuable insights into the potential benefits and challenges related to integrating social justice topics and discussions into language instruction, ultimately contributing to the enhancement of language learning experiences for IB students.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Social Justice Education**

Social justice education is an essential component of this study as it serves as the guiding principle for the integration of specific themes and principles into language instruction. Social justice education emphasizes issues of equity, power, and privilege in education (Freire, 2018). At the same time, Gay (2018), has stated that teachers need to understand different cultural intersections and incompatibilities, mitigate the tension, and bridge those gaps generated among the different cultural systems to provide equal opportunity to all learners.

### **Critical pedagogy**

The field of critical pedagogy has been growing and changing as it provides a theoretical framework for understanding the transformative potential of social justice education (Meister, 2017). Based on the findings of Freire (2018), critical pedagogy advocates for a student-centered approach that encourages critical thinking, reflection, and dialogue. It seeks to empower students as active participants in their learning and agents of social change. Parallel to Freire’s ideology is Crookes (2012), who established that critical pedagogy in language teaching is a perspective in language curriculum theory and instructional practice that supports and advances teaching and the study of languages in ways that would promote social justice.

### **Language learning theories**

It is essential to incorporate the concept of language learning theories to reach a better understanding of the relationship between social justice education and speaking skills development. One prominent theory is the sociocultural theory of learning, proposed by Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014). According to this theory, learning occurs through social interactions, language use, and participation in cultural practices. By integrating social justice education into language instruction, students engage in authentic discussions, debates, and collaborative activities that promote speaking skills development. Furthermore, the theory of communicative

language teaching (CLT) is relevant to this study. CLT emphasizes the importance of communicative competence and the ability to use language in real-life situations. The integration of social justice education can provide meaningful and authentic contexts for students to practice their speaking skills, as they engage in discussions and express their opinions on social justice issues (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

### **Social Justice Education and Language Acquisition**

According to White (2023), no language is taught in isolation. When acquiring English as a foreign language or any other language, it brings along all the notions and conceptions such as the culture, beliefs, and ideas of race and religion as a whole. In other words, to claim that English can be taught 'alone' is erroneous.

Aligning with this perspective, Freire (2018), acknowledged the interconnectedness between language learning and broader societal concepts while insisting that students should learn to acquire critical thinking tools to help them understand how institutions of power function to deny them the equality and fair treatment they deserve.

Focusing on social justice while implementing English language acquisition enriches students' learning experiences and expands their learning potential, giving them the chance to participate in positive changes and develop improved attitudes toward performance and accomplishments. In addition to this, it is education based on social justice that enables teachers to prepare English language learners to refute and speak up against all kinds of injustice and irregularities that take place in the community (Hossain, 2018). Brandon (2019) claimed that incorporating social justice into a language curriculum requires conversation and inclusion with the students rather than having them dominated by an external influence. As a result of this interaction, students develop higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Similarly, Anwaruddin (2019), indicated that the plurality of voices is a required condition to comprehend the significance or truths that become known through dialogues. In the same way, as students participate in challenging conversations about power, critical reflections on their positionalities, collaboration, and dialogue, despite their differences, instructional practice, and classroom projects (cultural profile, global reading circles, discussions, and reflection entries) provide numerous opportunities for problem posing and praxis (Freire, 2018). Caballero-García (2018), also found that "students as creators and innovators respond to new and diverse perspectives. They use language in imaginative and original ways to make useful contributions" (p. 134). Therefore, students are more likely to be motivated and successful in participation when they perceive their teachers to be supportive, respectful, and empowering (Meister, 2017, p. 92).

Alternatively, promoting social justice education in the EFL classroom brings along several challenges for educators; it is not until they experience a positive evolution in their students' learning that they begin to modify their teaching strategies and behavior (Sánchez Auñón & Férrez-Mora, 2021, p. 56). In the same line, Schoorman et al. (2019), found the following:

Our goal was to interrupt the traditional power dynamics of the classroom that framed students as passive recipients of fixed knowledge and to facilitate a democratized instructional space where students saw themselves as responsible agents of change. (p. 8)

## Literature Review

According to Rodas and Osborn (2016), language facilitators must devise strategies and approaches to eliminate any discouraging issues and give learners the full opportunity to blossom. This is because individuals from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds may enroll in English language education programs and face unjustified circumstances and feelings that hinder their ability to succeed in language acquisition. Before the procedures involved in speaking, there is the communicative intention that suggests that giving students meaningful communicative tasks related to relevant topics is crucial to facilitate willingness and a reason to speak in class, which can then stimulate communication and interaction. This is based on analyses of communicative opportunities in the EFL context (Rodas and Osborn, 2016). Consequently, empowering students to enhance their speaking abilities through various contexts and interactive exercises would boost their self-assurance and, eventually, their communication skills (Fernández-García & Fonseca Mora, 2019). Earlier research on the impact of social justice education highlights the positive results brought to the English language learning settings. According to Randolph (2017), social justice teaching, when done effectively, fosters a community in which students can actively share opinions, solutions, and strategies, allowing them to confront authentic problems and issues

Additional explorations manifest that quality teaching necessarily concerns social justice issues, not by direct instruction (indoctrination), but rather through interactive teaching, where students examine their own lives and experiences to reach their conclusions while being continuously questioned by teachers (Mills & Ballantyne, 2016). In line with a current literature review (Meister, 2017), critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice have been acknowledged by the research community as the best teaching approaches for students, particularly diverse students from historically marginalized populations and communities that are frequently found in urban and urban-like settings.

## Methodology

This study applied a qualitative approach, defined as an objective and methodical procedure that allows researchers to obtain a general comprehension of human experiences, processes, events, or a circumstance (Delgado-Hito & Romero-García, 2021). Consequently, the collection of the data was separated into two phases. In line with Creswell (2017), “by using two phases, a researcher may be able to give voice to diverse perspectives to better advocate for participants or to understand better a phenomenon or process that is changing as a result of being studied” (p. 213). The first part consisted of the application of an individual questionnaire made up of six open-ended questions to gather the participants’ perceptions and experiences regarding the inclusion of

social topics, as well as how these may have fostered the development of their oral production during EFL classes. The second part of the data collection was carried out through a focus group discussion in which five members of the study population were randomly selected and brought together to unveil their perceptions regarding social justice topics being taught within the EFL class (Nyumba, et al., 2018). The target population included all the senior students currently enrolled in the English IB Diploma Program who attend a private international school facility in the city of Cuenca, Ecuador during the school period 2023- 2024. However, the study population being a subset of the target group was formed by 14 Ecuadorian EFL senior students from the IB program. The participants chosen for the current investigation were a convenience sample (Creswell, 2017), based on the fact that the author of the research had been designated to work as the English teacher of this class from the beginning of the school year 2023-2024. The group was made up of eight female and six male participants aged between 17 and 18 years old. They have English B classes at the Standard level, four hours per week, in congruence with the IB curriculum and its requirements, reflecting a level of English proficiency equivalent to a B2: independent user (International Baccalaureat, 2016). All participants in this research were required to have a signed informed consent granted by their parents. In contemplation of ethical standards, the data collected during this research has been kept strictly confidential; therefore, names were not used, but rather codified as Students, 1, 2, 3 for the questionnaire, and Participants A, B, C... for the discussion (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). In the same way, to ensure a correct understanding of the questions while providing the opportunity for the participants to express their perceptions more genuinely, the questionnaire as well as the discussion were conducted in the students' native language, Spanish. The questionnaire was sent to the participants through Google Forms, and via mail whereas the discussion was held presentially in a separate classroom. The focus group was recorded, transcribed, and finally translated into English for later analysis.

## Results

The study's results show the perceptions of English B senior high school students on how including social justice topics in the EFL classroom could impact the development of their oral communication abilities. The participants' judgments and personal experiences regarding the subject matter are highlighted in this section (Rivano Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017).

### Questionnaire

To initiate the process of data recollection, a questionnaire made of six open-ended questions was applied to the study population. The instrument was structured in such a manner that it emphasized three distinctive categories: the impact generated by imparting topics related to social justice on oral communication willingness, motivation, and personal experiences.

## Impact of Social Justice Topics in the EFL Classroom and Oral Communication Willingness

Positive effects are the most common way that students described how including social justice topics in the English class affected their communicative competence. A significant proportion of students indicated that the conversation about social justice had been helpful in encouraging them to participate fully in class discussions. For instance, student 1 claimed: *“It has helped me to express my points of view on what is right or wrong, but at the same time it helps me broaden my vision on certain topics of which I do not have much information”*.

They emphasized the benefits of their capacity for opinion expression, perspective expansion, and confidence-building when engaging in discourse on international issues. In this sense, Student 2 and Student 3 said: *“It is quite entertaining to bring out various ideas and analyze how they are expressed in different languages.”* *“As these are global issues, most of us are familiar with these topics, which makes it more interactive, knowing the subject strengthens our confidence to express our ideas”* (Student 3).

Students also highlighted how engaging these conversations were, with one stating that talking about social justice problems improved their ability to think critically, *“Social justice themes in class have helped me improve my critical thinking skills”* (Student 9).

In general, students thought that social justice themes were a useful addition to their English classes since they promoted a welcoming atmosphere for free speech and a range of viewpoints. For instance, Student 11 highlighted, *“It is a space in the classroom where diversity of opinion is valued and respected”*.

### Motivation

The participants offered helpful criticism on motivation for spoken communication. They acknowledged that by having more interesting debates and discussions, they better their conversational skills, and greater enthusiasm for the topic. For example, Student 10 replied, *“The integration of social justice issues has positively influenced my desire to express my opinions and ideas openly in class, among my peers”*. Pupils drew attention to the fact that confronting social justice concerns necessitates critical thinking, which improves language analysis and encourages deliberate language use. Students were also inspired to contemplate and have conversations about subjects other than their usual everyday subjects by the debates on these subjects. It was generally agreed upon that including social justice issues greatly enhanced their capacity to actively engage in class discussions. Student 8 remarked, *“I feel if we address issues of social justice, there is a personal need of wanting to share my opinion and have my peers consider my point of view as valid.”*

## Personal Experiences

The last category includes the individual experiences of pupils with activities that promoted their spoken language development. Students mentioned a range of activities, including group discussions, oral presentations, debates, documentaries, audio, and audiovisual production. These exercises were found to be essential for improving their communication skills, especially the ones that dealt with subjects like prejudice. Student 8 claimed, “*Collective conversations, oral presentations, audiovisual production, for instance, related to certain topics such as discrimination have strengthened my communicative abilities*”. It was emphasized that exposure to real language via a variety of media is essential for improving spoken English. The results of this questionnaire part demonstrated the beneficial effects of a variety of engaging and varied activities on the language development of the students, underscoring the significance of real-world, practical language experiences in EFL classrooms. In the same way, Student 11 mentioned, “*debates, discussions, and oral presentations have been very useful.*” Following this point of view, Student 10 also commented, “*Documentaries, audios, and group discussions are fundamental as we are exposed to authentic language which allows us to improve our spoken English.*”

## Focus Group Discussion

To accomplish the main purpose of the study, five students from the study population were randomly selected and asked to participate in a focus group discussion. Additionally, a list of questions was generated by the facilitator as a guide to ensure the group’s dynamic. The questions were designed to obtain students’ perceptions of the effect that social justice issue-based education in the EFL classroom has on their spoken performance in class (Nyumba et al., 2018). The themes supporting the discussion were held around the impact of social justice topics and oral communication development, student engagement and personal experiences.

## The impact of social justice topics and oral communication development

According to participants, incorporating social justice concerns into EFL classes improved the way students communicated and engaged with one another. Participant A emphasized the value of having conversations about subjects that are not often discussed in daily life and stressed how doing so allows students to express their perspectives as well as their own. The student connected social justice to valuing differing viewpoints and fostering an atmosphere that encourages intelligent discourse. Participant A mentioned,

I feel that these are topics that sometimes may not be addressed in everyday life, so the fact that we discuss them in class generates, that is, it opens our opinions on the subject because we not only hear our thoughts but also those of our classmates. Social justice is also understood as respecting the opinions of others and with that basis, we are more open to having fluent conversations.



Participant B reinforced this point of view by saying that social justice subjects forced students to speak well in English even in the face of sporadic language hurdles. These straight quotations imply that social justice education improves students' expressive speech and interpersonal connections. Participant B added,

*The fact that social justice brings interesting themes to class, makes us be able to try, although we occasionally do not know how to effectively communicate in a foreign language, which is English, it is a non-native language in my case, I feel that it forces us to converse and improve, so in that sense it is positive.*

### **Personal Experiences**

The participants talked about unique classroom experiences—particularly those that had to do with social justice issues—that helped them improve their spoken English language abilities. Participant B shared a good experience she had with the subject of feminism, pointing out that the conversation enabled them to investigate other viewpoints, even though at first, they couldn't agree on them. Participant C highlighted how, in line with current trends, teaching social justice themes helps students improve their oral communication abilities by introducing language from Anglophone culture. Participant D emphasized the value of classroom debates, saying they give students a forum to express differing opinions and encourage them to speak freely. These answers emphasize how social justice issues play a part in a variety of classroom settings that support language reinforcement. Participant B remarked,

a cool experience here in English class was regarding the topic of feminism. I'm not very familiar with the topic, and I'm not much of an expert either, but I don't agree so much, so thanks to the fact that we were able to discuss it in class it opened me up a bit more to other perspectives and now I know more about the topic and it helped me a lot to communicate in English and I think to build more confidence.

### **Motivation**

Participants agreed that discussing social justice concerns in the classroom encourages critical and engaged dialogue. Participant E emphasized how these subjects are contentious, which encourages students to undertake in-depth research and leads to contentious debates. Participant E commented the following,

The fact that social justice topics are controversial leads us to a debatable confrontation, it pushes us to do a lot of research. This way, our discussions or debates become more educated and correctly founded. I don't know, at least in my case I have been able to research a lot more about feminism, which has led me to discuss in a more confident and structured way.

Consequently, this leads to conversations that are more informed and grounded. This realization implies that studying social justice issues helps students become more adept researchers and critical thinkers. In conclusion, participants reported that by introducing social justice topics as an EFL learning approach, they felt more motivated and confident to express their ideas and thoughts because it improved their vocabulary, fluency, and general knowledge about current issues that affect the global community today. Participants also mentioned how reflection and class conversations improved their speech abilities and increased their ability to communicate on a variety of subjects.

### Interpretation

The study focused on student's perceptions on how including social justice issue-based education could impact their spoken performance in the EFL classroom. The study's findings were consistent with previous research which proved that bringing up these topics in class leads to more constructive and structured communication making it more engaging for students' participation. Furthermore, the research also supports earlier studies (Hossain, 2018) by showing that including social justice concerns in EFL classes can help students perform better in spoken language, increase their vocabulary, become more fluent speakers, and gain confidence. This aligns with the convergence of qualitative and quantitative findings from a mixed methods research study that showed how justice-oriented training programs might improve the classroom behaviors of EFL students.

Conversely, a few students disagreed that teaching social justice themes has helped them improve their oral production, which resembles Hossain's (2018) findings,

Most of the participants agreed to have enjoyed the lessons on social justice in the EFL classrooms to various extents while a minority disagreed to have had the same feeling. About asserted the fact that their confidence regarding individual capabilities increased due to the social justice-related issues in the class sessions. (p. 12)

The study's results, however, disagreed with other research that contends that carrying out frequent debates can make pupils feel uneasy and anxious while obstructing language development. In this regard Sovis and Pancost (2017), claimed "I needed them to skip the refuting portion in efforts to avoid a debate mentality; while I naturally wanted to refute evil and prejudice, I couldn't obstruct discourse by establishing a win/lose mentality in the classroom" (p. 47). This discrepancy may have resulted from variations in the research population, cultural background, and the methods used to teach the subjects in the classroom.

## Conclusions

The integration of social justice subjects in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), classrooms has yielded useful insights, as demonstrated by results of this study. Three main elements have surfaced: the influence on oral communication willingness, classroom motivation, and individual experiences.

There was a constant favorable response on the participants' desire to communicate verbally. Students were encouraged to voice their thoughts freely and participate in fluid conversations when social justice subjects were discussed. Incorporating varied viewpoints not only expanded their comprehension but also promoted tolerance for one another's dissenting beliefs. Through the study of social justice concerns, the classroom environment became more conducive to students feeling comfortable expressing their ideas in English, even in the face of possible criticism or misjudgment.

The participants emphasized that the inclusion of social justice concepts led to an increase in motivation. These topics, which were thought to be interesting and relevant, made the learning environment in the classroom livelier and more instructive. In addition to increasing vocabulary, the emphasis on modern movements like feminism also pushed students to explore subjects that they might not have otherwise discussed in class. Because social justice issues are contentious, students were encouraged to engage in debates and develop their research and critical thinking abilities.

The sharing of personal experiences demonstrated how different classroom activities, such as discussions, debates, and reflections on social justice issues greatly aided in the reinforcement of English-spoken language abilities. A key factor was being exposed to real language through audio, movies, and group conversations, especially when it came to topics such as discrimination. The current research highlights the benefits of incorporating social justice subjects in EFL classrooms, which adds substantial knowledge to the body of literature already available on language instruction. It emphasizes how crucial it is to provide inclusive and stimulating language learning environments that address broader societal challenges in addition to language proficiency.

Overall, the inclusion of social justice themes in EFL classes has demonstrated a positive impact on student's motivation, readiness to communicate orally, and personal experiences, according to the findings of the qualitative analysis of questionnaire responses and a focus group discussion. The results offer insightful information to the field of language instruction, notwithstanding the limits of the study. In accordance with the study, including social justice topics improves students' language proficiency while also encouraging empathy, critical thinking, and a broader awareness of international issues. To validate and expand on these findings, future research with bigger and more diverse groups is advised.

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