

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CULTURAL AWARENESS: IMPACT OF BLACK LIVES MATTER IN EFL INSTRUCTION

Andrea Roxana BELLOT¹ , Anca Daniela FRUMUSELU² 

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ABSTRACT *Language Proficiency and Cultural Awareness: Impact of Black Lives Matter in EFL Instruction.* This paper evaluates the effectiveness of a Black Lives Matter (BLM) teaching unit designed to enhance students' cultural awareness and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) skills. Employing a mixed-method approach, the study investigates students' viewpoints through online questionnaires. The methodology integrates pre- and post-questionnaires to analyse the pedagogical impact, drawing on established theories of communicative competence and intercultural pedagogy to contextualize the study. The results demonstrate that the project significantly contributed to students' social consciousness development while also improving their English language proficiency.

Keywords: *Black Lives Matter (BLM); cultural awareness; English language skills; literature & cultural studies; social consciousness*

¹ **Andrea Roxana BELLOT**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of English and German Studies at Rovira i Virgili University (URV) in Tarragona, Spain. She specializes in teaching English literature and culture. Her primary research focuses on language and literature education, as well as the literary and cultural representations of conflict. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0561-2132>. Email: andrearoxana.bellot@urv.cat.

² **Anca Daniela FRUMUSELU**, PhD, is a Serra Húnter lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at University of Lleida (UdL), Spain. Her research interests encompass foreign language learning and teaching, intercultural communication, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and audiovisual translation, the integration of new technologies in EFL education, e-learning, m-learning, gamification, and virtual exchange in language learning contexts. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4395-7841>. Email: ancadaniela.frumuselu@udl.cat.

REZUMAT. Competența lingvistică și conștientizarea culturală: Impactul unității didactice Black Lives Matter în contextul EFL. Această lucrare evaluează eficiența unei unități didactice Black Lives Matter (BLM) concepută pentru a conștientiza studenții la nivel cultural, dar și pentru a le îmbunătăți abilitățile de limba engleză ca limbă străină (EFL). Studiul investighează opiniile studenților prin intermediul unor chestionare online, printr-o abordare metodologică mixtă. Metodologia folosită integrează chestionare aplicate înainte și după desfășurarea unității didactice pentru a analiza impactul pedagogic, bazându-se pe teorii consacrate ale competenței comunicative și pedagogiei interculturale pentru a contextualiza studiul. Rezultatele demonstrează că proiectul a contribuit semnificativ la dezvoltarea conștientizării sociale a studenților, îmbunătățindu-le totodată competența lingvistică în limba engleză.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Black Lives Matter (BLM); conștientizare culturală; abilități în limba engleză; studii literare și culturale; conștiință socială*

Introduction

This paper is based on the implementation of a class proposal concerning the subjects of racism and urban violence to integrate cultural awareness in the English B.A. degree in Spain. The main aims of the study are to foster societal values such as esteem, integration, and acceptance towards the ‘Other’, but also to improve students’ critical analysis and proficiency in English as a foreign language. This would promote EFL learning of cultures in a meaningful way by making use of current day topics in the news, such as the violent demonstrations that took place around the globe in the summer of 2020 to condemn cases of police brutality derived from the homicide of George Floyd perpetrated by police officers in Minneapolis in May of the same year.

This research is a follow-up study of a theoretical and pedagogical proposal developed by the authors (Frumuselu and Bellot 2020) to be implemented in the EFL subject—*Literature and Society*—at university level. The main aspects addressed in this study concern the integration of teaching foreign cultures in an EFL classroom at university level to promote cultural awareness while fostering English foreign language skills. By integrating cultural awareness in the EFL classroom, students are encouraged to develop their critical competence and grasp the current social realities worldwide.

Thus, this paper intends to analyse quantitatively and qualitatively the reactions of university students enrolled in a literature and culture subject taught online during the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic. The gathered data

originated from polls reflecting students' opinions via two online questionnaires, before and after the implementation of the Black Lives Matter (hereafter BLM) teaching unit. This approach enabled an examination of their initial preconceptions alongside their final reflections on the overall experience. The main objectives of this teaching proposal were to promote cross-cultural understanding, improve language proficiency through the analysis of English-language literary texts, and strengthen the use of English for academic purposes. So far, the project has provided a significant avenue for cultivating cultural awareness in the English literature classroom, enabling students to comprehend current social realities worldwide while enhancing their EFL abilities in a meaningful context with current topics.

To further guide the research, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the implementation of the Black Lives Matter teaching unit influence students' cultural awareness in an EFL context?

RQ2: What is the impact of the unit on students' English language proficiency, particularly in terms of productive and receptive skills?

RQ3: How do students perceive the integration of social justice topics, such as the BLM movement, into their EFL learning experience?

As follows, a thorough review of the existing literature on the topic will be presented, together with the contextualization of the key concepts, terms and ideas used to support the implementation of the research study. Additionally, current pedagogical models are being added as a means to provide an insightful view of the theoretical background chosen to develop the topic. After that, the research methods are pointed out, together with the instruments used to gather and analyse the data. The choice of the teaching material is thoroughly justified and references to the course texts used for the implementation of the BLM unit are being made. Finally, the findings of the study are being revealed, together with their implications and impact on the material design and on learners' linguistic and cultural competences. The concluding remarks section summarizes the results of the BLM pedagogical proposal and offers a model-like example for future material designers and practitioners at university level.

Literature Review

The process of culture learning in the classroom can become complex and highly personal. Learners are faced with the challenge of construing, inferring and interacting with new forms of cultural behaviours, mindsets and perspectives. According to Brown, "culture learning is a process of creating shared meaning between the cultural representatives" (Brown 2000, 182).

This means that this process is deeply linked to past experiences which may influence one's way of thinking, feeling and behaving. The process of learning a second/foreign language requires the acquisition of a second identity, being prone to orient towards a new culture, also known as 'acculturation'. Acculturation involves adopting aspects of a secondary or additional culture, in contrast to enculturation, which is the process of deeply connecting with one's original culture. This concept was initially introduced by Damen in 1987 and later discussed by Tran-Hoang in 2010. Enculturation is meant to construct cultural and social identity, fostering strong beliefs and grounded values aimed to generate recurrent means of living and ethnocentrism. Acculturation, on the other hand, entails detachment from the ethos of the first culture and adaptation to new forms of reality and societal moulds. Being involved in a process of acculturation may produce a culture shock, given that one's self-identity, mentality, feelings and means of expression could be dislocated when getting in contact with another culture (Brown 2000). Learning a foreign culture is a 'hermeneutic process' (Kramer 2009). This may encompass a clash between students' own cultural views and identity and the features of a new language and culture. Therefore, fostering learners' cultural and cross-cultural awareness in the foreign language classroom is crucial for sparking their interest in the cultural distinctions between the two languages they encounter.

Cultural awareness involves becoming aware of the values, beliefs, and perspectives of different cultural groups, a concept explored by Cortazzi & Jin in 1999 and later by Tran-Hoang in 2010. In order to develop cross-cultural awareness, learners should be aware that culture is compelled by behaviours, beliefs and values (Knutson 2006). Understanding and exploring one's own cultural patterns and behaviours is integral to gaining cross-cultural perspectives, an idea initially put forward by Damen in 1987 and discussed in Tran-Hoang's work in 2010. Moreover, as Kramersch (2014) states, in order to develop cross-cultural awareness, learners need favourable circumstances to get in contact with the target culture, discover the novelty, and reflect on the similarities and differences between their own culture(s) and the target one(s). Thus, various people belonging to different cultural backgrounds could jointly create a culture with mutual meanings. Kuang (2007) mentions 4 levels of cultural awareness. The first one shows how people are solely focused on their vision and way of approaching things, ignoring other cultural differences. The second one refers to people who are conscious of other cultures, but they still believe their way of acting is the only valid one, neglecting other cultural differences. The third level deals with people who are aware of their own and other cultural values and ways of acting, but they choose the one they consider fit in a certain context. Finally, the fourth one highlights individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds

collaborating to establish new rules and directions tailored to the needs of a specific situation. In this way, moving from the first to the fourth level of cultural awareness abovementioned entails gradually migrating from the stage of 'cultural ignorance' to 'cultural competence' (Tran-Hoang 2010).

An in-depth cultural exploration at the introductory level of a Spanish as foreign language class was carried out by Mitchell (2018, 583) by using the social media tool Pinterest to explore diverse cultural perspectives in the classroom and develop learners' cross-cultural awareness. The results revealed that establishing a personal connection with the target culture is the key element to an increased cross-cultural awareness level, in particular the use of pedagogical practices that focus on learning about the people of the culture, their differences and similarities and why these should be viewed as something positive, be appreciated and acclaimed by the learners. The author also stresses out the importance of the relational aspects of a culture, highlighting that the personal type of connection is what makes cultural learning come to life for students and help them connect to the target culture(s) at a deeper level and not view culture as a mere set of facts to be memorized. The current pedagogical approaches in the EFL classroom promote the inclusion of cultural elements in a dynamic way rather than in a static one, as "culture learning is seen not as the acquisition of facts but as a process of discovery, social construction, and meaning negotiation" (Su 2011, 74). Teachers play a crucial role in encouraging students to develop knowledge through social interaction and authentic experiences, nurturing them to become socially active, creative, and aware of both constructed realities and of their own perspectives. This concept was highlighted by Abrams in 2002 and discussed further in Su's 2011 work. To this end, instructors should provide an authentic environment and context that would enable learners to engage in meaningful and enriching activities for their learning experience.

Hence, educators and instructors should bring forward cultural and cross-cultural issues in the classroom, relevant social topics aimed to develop their communicative skills both at a personal and interpersonal level. Our main objective when designing this BLM Unit was to debate topics related to anti-racism urban protests, i.e., the BLM civil movement, to promote social consciousness and help students be aware of sensitive topics in relation to racial injustice. This would make young people become more open, tolerant and respectful to racial and ethnic diversities and identities inside and outside the university classroom.

A similar initiative was carried out by Ordem (2022) at a Turkish university, in which the teacher-researcher and sixteen learners collaborated to design a mini-syllabus to promote the inclusion of Black Lives Matter (BLM) anti-racial movement in the EFL classroom as a means to trigger students' meaningful actions and to foster their oral skills. The findings reveal that this reflective

practice addressed in the classroom made learners state their opinions freely in a democratic setting and enriched their lexical knowledge with topic related vocabulary and phrases. Building on the Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP), their proposal aims to deconstruct the discursive constituted syllabus of EFL textbooks and instead, provide a free space for debate of real-life situations that bring forward socio-political topics in the United Kingdom and the United States (Ordem 2022, 184). The theoretical framework known as Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP) emphasizes teaching second, additional, heritage, or other languages through the lens of social justice values. It is based on Freire's (1967) theory of education, and it promotes the values associated with democracy, i.e., liberty, equality, and solidarity, social justice and current socio-political issues (Crookes 2021, 247). CLP is intended to include in the curriculum topics that are usually not approached in the mainstream EFL textbooks. Thus, foreign language teachers should be encouraged to implement the CLP approach in their classes, question the power relations within society and motivate learners to get involved and take actions for a better world through collaboration and dialogue (Ordem 2022, 176). Students should not only gain theoretical knowledge in their fields of interest but also develop the social skills necessary to navigate the global marketplace and thrive in an interconnected world. To become global citizens, they must cultivate intercultural communication competencies, social responsibility, an understanding of global crises, and active participation in social movements at local, national, and international levels. (Kaowiwattanakul 2020, 294).

In exploring modern communicative contexts, our study draws upon the foundational work of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995), who developed a pedagogically motivated model of communicative competence with detailed content specifications. Their model includes the concept of sociocultural competence, a sub-component of communicative competence, highlighting the integral role of cultural understanding in effective communication. Furthermore, the updated model proposed by Celce-Murcia in 2008 offers a refined perspective, emphasizing the evolving nature of communicative competence in contemporary educational settings. These theoretical frameworks provide a valuable lens through which to examine the impact of the Black Lives Matter teaching unit on students' development of sociocultural and linguistic competencies.

Drawing upon *Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms* by Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), the approach of our BLM teaching unit mirrors the advocated principles of fostering emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement in language learning. This unit not only enhanced linguistic and cultural competencies but also embodied the engagement dimensions highlighted by Mercer and Dörnyei. By creating a learning environment that nurtures active

participation, the BLM unit exemplifies effective educational practices aimed at promoting learner autonomy and positive emotions, essential for a responsive and dynamic classroom setting.

By applying the BLM unit in a literature subject, we aim to promote an understanding of cultural diversity and to tighten the relationship between our students and the world around them. Thus, as Kaowiwattanakul (2020, 295) sets forth, literature studies have the potential to enhance student global mindedness while encouraging them to collaboratively undertake the role of responsible global citizens in a global community. The types of texts and material chosen are essential to accomplish this scope and to make learners see themselves as members of the wider community and critically reflect on their active role at a social, political, religious and educational level.

The 'intercultural perspective' in this study refers to the capacity to understand, respect, and engage with cultures other than one's own. It encompasses an awareness of cultural differences, the ability to empathize with different cultural viewpoints, and the skill to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. This perspective is intrinsically linked to language competence as language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture. Proficiency in a foreign language, therefore, extends beyond mere linguistic ability; it includes the understanding of the cultural context in which the language operates. In this way, language competence and an intercultural perspective are interdependent – effective language learning involves developing an understanding of foreign culture issues, while an enriched intercultural perspective enhances the depth and efficacy of language use. Language and culture are both in constant change, as Schauer (2024, 147) states, thus, if our goal is to make our learners able to communicate appropriately today and in the future, teachers need to make them aware that cultural norms, values and language use may change and adapt throughout time. This means they need to be prepared for these upcoming changes and be equipped with adequate skills, knowledge and information in order to be effective intercultural communicators.

As follows, the methodology section will be detailed, the participants involved in the study, the procedure and the material employed, and the instruments used to collect and analyse the data.

Methodology

Participants

The BLM teaching unit was implemented as part of the subject *Literature and Society* from 19th April to 18th May, in the spring semester of 2021. The participants were undergraduate students from the English Bachelor

degree in a Catalan public university. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all classes were held online via Microsoft Teams. The total number of students registered for the subject was sixty-two ($N=62$), but not all the students participated actively in this project, as some of them missed some classes, others quit or never attended the online sessions. For the sake of obtaining reliable data for the present study, we included only information from the students who attended regularly all the classes and did all the tasks related to the unit. The data were collected from the students through two online Google Forms questionnaires, administered as pre-BLM questionnaire ($N=48$) and post-BLM questionnaire ($N=35$). Despite the instructors' constant reminders to fill in both the pre and the post-BLM questionnaires, the number of students' responses was uneven. Thus, this aspect was taken into consideration when carrying out the statistical analysis and a non-parametric statistical questionnaire was chosen to limit the downsize of uneven responses between the BLM pre and post questionnaire.

Students' age ranges from 18 to 26 years old, however the mean age of the students is 18 years old (54.2%) and they live near de university or in the outskirts of Tarragona, while 1 student's home is in the south of Spain, Jaén (Andalusia). When asked about their gender, 37 students identified as female (77.1%), 10 students as male (20.8%) while only 1 student opted for the 'prefer not say' option (2.1%). Regarding their mother-tongue, the majority of the students indicated that they are bilingual in Spanish/Catalan, while some other languages mentioned are Romanian (3), Arabic (3), German (1). When asked about what foreign languages they speak other than English, their choices cover French, German, and Italian.

Teaching Materials and Implementation of the BLM Unit

To expose students to different text types, the project integrated a variety of sources, including journalistic articles, videos, political speeches, personal essays, and novel excerpts. This broad range of sources allowed the project to cover a wide array of topics related to the BLM movement, as well as the historical perspective on racism and racial segregation. Other themes addressed in class included human rights, immigration, multiculturalism, integration, Otherness, police brutality, civil unrest, violent demonstrations, gender equality, domestic violence, women and writing, and black writers (for a more detailed description of the project topics, texts, and classroom elements, see Appendix 1).

The BLM unit was implemented over a period of five weeks. Every week, the lecture would start with a brief theoretical explanation of the main themes of the session: e.g., racial segregation, human rights, the roots of the BLM

movement, etc. Then, students were introduced to BLM excerpts, photos, videos and articles from mass media as a warm-up. Then, they were given the readings of the given text(s) to be discussed on that session. After that, students were invited to actively engage in class debates, role plays, group discussions, using the newly acquired concepts, vocabulary items and ideas. Additionally, they would reflect on the broader implications of the themes discussed in the texts. At home, students were recommended to read critically the texts to be analysed in the next class and to extract the main lexicon. It is important to underline that the teachers' role was not to dictate or impress ideas on to the students, but to offer texts and theoretical methodology and allow them to question and construct their own thoughts, beliefs, and doubts.

Instruments and Data Collection

Two questionnaires, comprising both open and closed-ended questions, were developed using Google Forms to gather data. The objective was to explore students' perceptions on topics such as racism, urban conflicts, immigration, and multiculturalism before and after the implementation of the BLM teaching unit. Additionally, the questionnaires aimed to assess the impact of the unit on students' English language skills in a relevant and contemporary context. The five thematic categories in the surveys are explained hereafter:

- *Language & Literacy Skills and Materials Use:* This category assesses how the BLM teaching unit influences students' English language and literacy skills, particularly focusing on the effectiveness of the materials used in the unit.
- *Cultural Awareness:* This section explores students' understanding and sensitivity towards different cultures, particularly how the BLM unit has impacted their awareness of cultural diversity.
- *Global and Intercultural Competence:* This category evaluates students' ability to navigate and engage with diverse cultural contexts and perspectives, crucial for understanding global issues like racism and immigration, as highlighted in the BLM unit.
- *Attitude towards the Target Culture and Immigration:* This focuses on students' perceptions and attitudes towards the cultures and communities discussed in the BLM unit, especially in the context of immigration.
- *Identity and Values in Relation to Racism and Urban Conflicts:* This area delves into how students' personal identities and values intersect with themes of racism and urban conflicts, subjects central to the BLM discourse.

These categories collectively aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how exposure to the BLM teaching unit impacts students' language skills, cultural awareness, and perspectives on critical social issues.

They are designed to measure both the linguistic and sociocultural outcomes of the educational intervention.

The *Pre-BLM Questionnaire* comprised 25 questions in two sections. The first section gathered demographic information (name, gender, age, mother tongue, place of residence, other languages spoken) through open-ended questions. The second section, with 18 questions, aimed to understand students' perspectives on BLM-related topics and their foreign language skills. Fifteen questions were closed-ended, requiring students to choose agreeable options or rate their language abilities on a 5-point Likert scale. The remaining three open-ended questions sought detailed views on BLM topics and foreign cultural issues. Questions were grouped into five themes: Language & Literacy Skills and Materials Use; Cultural Awareness; Global and Intercultural Competence; Attitude towards the target culture and immigration; Identity and values related to racism and urban conflicts. The questionnaire was distributed via email a week before the BLM unit began, with voluntary participation and confidentiality assured. A total of 48 responses were received.

The *Post-BLM Questionnaire* had 17 questions, mirroring the pre-BLM format to assess shifts in perceptions or language skills post-exposure to the BLM unit. The first section included a single open-ended question for identification. The second section included 14 closed-ended and 2 open-ended questions designed to compare pre- and post-exposure responses, focusing on changes in intercultural perspectives and foreign language skills. The response rate for this questionnaire was 35, indicating some dropout from the initial respondents.

Results

The responses to the questionnaire were analysed using a mixed approach method, both quantitatively and qualitatively, since we were interested in the general tendency of the responses, but also in their overall experience and perceptions in relation to the content of the teaching unit. For the sake of the length and scope of the current paper, only the first two categories will be thoroughly analysed and presented, i.e., Language & Literacy, and Cultural Awareness.

In the case of the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were run with the SPSS statistical software to analyse the data gathered from the pre- and post-questionnaire in relation to students' perceptions of their language skills improvement. As for the qualitative analysis, special attention was given to the items related to students' pre and post cultural awareness after experiencing with the BLM content, but also to their deep knowledge on the topic and the impact it had on their personal and social life. The questions were separated into five main categories: (1) language

and literacy skills; (2) cultural awareness; (3) global and intercultural competence; (4) attitude towards the target culture and immigration; and (5) identity and values in relation to racism and urban conflicts. The items analysed for the first two sections will be described in detail below and the overall results will be reported accordingly in order to identify any specific trends before and after implementing the BLM teaching unit for a period of five weeks.

Language and Literacy Skills

This section aimed to reveal students' perceptions of their language and literacy skills development before and after the BLM teaching unit. The pre-BLM questionnaire included seven items, while the post-BLM had six, with additional questions about the appropriateness of the materials used. Students were also asked which linguistic and lexical areas they believed authentic materials would help them develop most during the BLM unit. The first question in both questionnaires assessed students' perceptions of their EFL speaking and writing (productive skills), listening and reading comprehension (receptive skills), and lexical and grammatical proficiency before and after the BLM unit. Students rated their abilities on a 1 to 5 Likert scale (1 being beginner, 5 being proficient). The collected data were analysed using SPSS statistical software for descriptive statistics and the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to identify any significant increases in their EFL skills.

The pre-questionnaire analysis reveals that students' average results for productive skills were lower compared to the post-questionnaire. For the pre-questionnaire, the mean score for speaking skills was 3.67 (SD=0.66), and for writing skills, it was 3.88 (SD=0.64). In contrast, the post-questionnaire results showed a mean score of 3.66 (SD=0.72) for speaking skills and 3.97 (SD=0.66) for writing skills, given the ratio of responses (see Table 1 below). Although the difference in means between the speaking skills pre- and post-questionnaire results seems almost the same, even slightly higher in the pre-questionnaire, the number of responses was lower in the post-questionnaire, so this means that according to the ratio of students that answered the post-questionnaire, the results are still considered statistically significant. This is also reinforced by the p-value of the questionnaires which is lower than 0,05 ($p < 0,001$). This means that there is a notable perceived improvement in students' productive skills after being exposed to the content of the BLM unit over a period of five weeks.

Table 1. Productive Skills. Descriptive Statistics and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Questionnaire Results

LANGUAGE SKILL	PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE			POST-QUESTIONNAIRE			99% CONF. INTERVAL P-VALUE
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
	Speaking Skills	48	3,67	0,66	35	3,66	
Writing Skills	48	3,88	0,64	35	3,97	0,66	<0,001

Likewise, the data analysis carried out for the receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension) follows a similar trend. The findings reveal that students' listening and reading comprehension average results in the pre-questionnaire ($M= 3,90$; $SD= 0,83$ for listening comprehension and $M=4,08$; $SD=0,79$ for reading comprehension) were lower than in the post-questionnaire ($M=4,11$; $SD=0,71$ for listening comprehension and $M=3,26$; $SD=0,85$ for reading comprehension) (see Table 2 below). The p-value of the questionnaires is also lower than 0,05 ($p<0,001$), which shows a statistically significant perceived improvement in students' receptive skills after being exposed to the content of the BLM teaching unit.

Table 2. Receptive Skills. Descriptive Statistics and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Questionnaire Results

LANGUAGE SKILL	PRE-QUESTIONNAIRE			POST-QUESTIONNAIRE			99% CONF. INTERVAL P-VALUE
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
	Listening Comprehension	48	3,90	0,83	35	4,11	
Reading Comprehension	48	4,08	0,79	35	4,26	0,85	<0,001

Apart from the productive and receptive skills, two additional language elements were analysed, i.e., vocabulary and accurate grammar usage. The data analysis reveals a similar trend among the participants' responses, with statistically significant results between the pre- and post-questionnaires. The average pre-questionnaire results ($M= 3,54$; $SD= 0,65$ for vocabulary usage and $M=3,63$; $SD=0,64$ for accurate grammar usage) were lower than the post-questionnaire ones ($M=3,83$; $SD=0,85$ for vocabulary use and $M=3,71$; $SD=0,62$ for grammar use) (see Table 3 below). The p-value of the questionnaires is also lower than 0,05 ($p<0,001$), which shows a statistically significant perceived improvement in students' lexical and grammatical usage after being exposed to the content of the BLM teaching unit.

Table 3. Lexical and Grammatical Elements. Descriptive Statistics and Kolmogorov-Smirnov Questionnaire Results

LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL ELEMENTS	PRE- QUESTIONNAIRE			POST- QUESTIONNAIRE			99% CONF. INTERVAL P-VALUE
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Vocabulary Usage	48	3,54	0,65	35	3,83	0,85	<0,001
Accurate Grammar Usage	48	3,63	0,64	35	3,71	0,62	<0,001

To sum up, it seems that the statistical results of all the language skills and lexical and grammatical elements are significant and encouraging after students were exposed to various types of tasks, texts, vocabulary items and grammar structures as part of the BLM unit over a period of five weeks (see Figure 1 below). They seem to perceive their receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension) the most proficient ones, given that the pre-questionnaire scores were the highest among all the other skills. Similarly, their post-questionnaire results keep the same tendency with the highest scores among all the other language skills. This seems logical because they were exposed to a considerable number of BLM-related reading and listening texts (short stories, news articles, speeches, news reports, etc.) throughout the teaching of the unit. However, the highest increase in their perceived scores is in the use of vocabulary with a difference of 0.29 between the pre-and post-questionnaire mean scores. The result can be understandable given that their vocabulary exposure and usage has increased significantly by being in contact

with a variety of texts and vocabulary items that had to be used appropriately in meaningful tasks related to the topic of the unit. The speaking skills and the use of grammar were the elements that revealed the least increase among the participants' pre-post-questionnaire mean scores. The focus of the subject in which the BLM unit was implemented was literature and culture, so the main target was to expose students to a variety of text genres and their specific vocabulary items and not so much on developing their speaking and grammar skills in context.

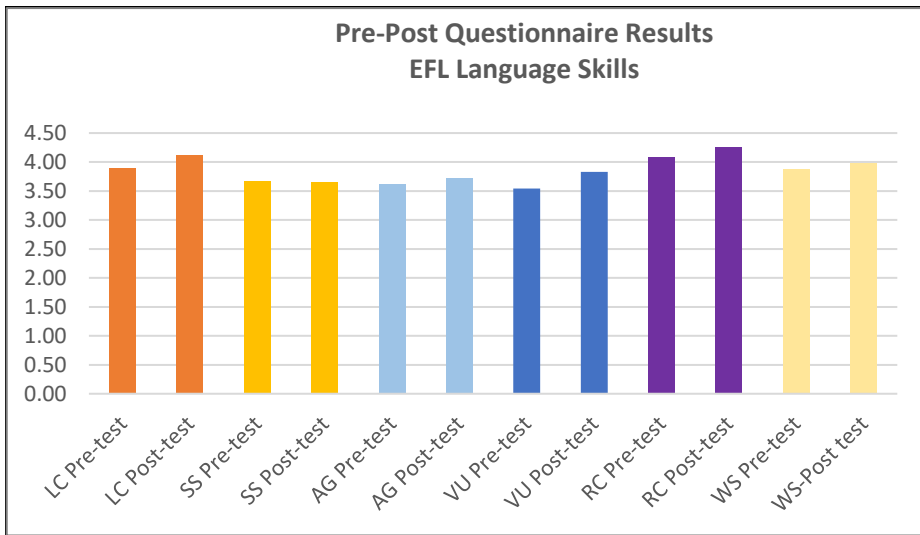


Figure 1. Outline of the pre-post questionnaire scores for all language skills and elements

Cultural Awareness

As regards students' familiarity with the BLM movement in the pre-questionnaire, the majority (57,4%) reported they were familiar with the movement, while 42,6% mentioned they did not know anything about it. This was quite surprising, given that the movement had been widely made public on TV channels, social media and written and online press. This is proof that despite being a well-known and highly spread current social movement, a vast number of students were not familiar with it, so it is important to bring these social movements to class, although most of the group was aware of it. This idea is reinforced by the answers received in the post-BLM questionnaire when they were asked if they learned new aspects about the BLM movement and related topics due to the implementation of the unit in their regular class. 54,3% of the participants

reported that they learned lots of new things about BLM and related topics and 42,9% stated they still learned new things about the movement although they were already familiar with the topic. There was only one participant that mentioned he/she did not learn much because he/she was already familiar with the topic. Similar answers appeared in the pre-questionnaire when they were asked whether they believe that the upcoming BLM project would help them raise awareness regarding societal characteristics and societal values (see Figure 2 below). A predominant majority (87,2%) responded 'yes' to this question, while only 2 answers (4,3%) were reported as 'not sure', and 4 (8,5%) answers as 'maybe'.

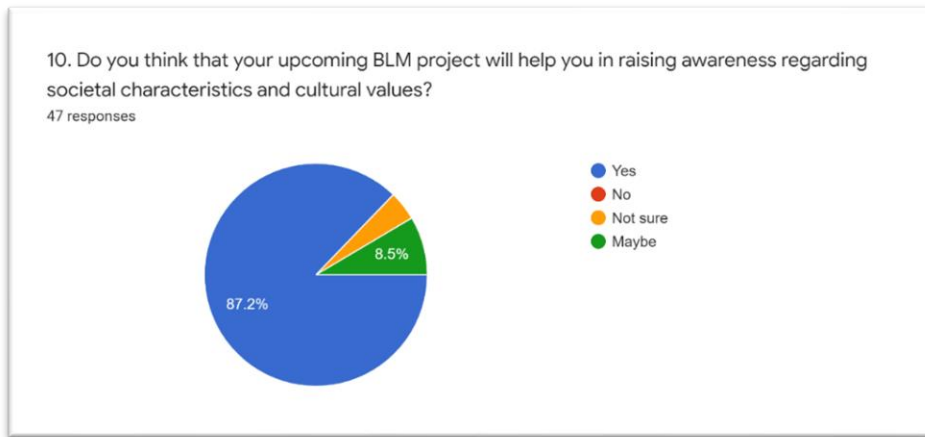


Figure 2. Pre- BLM expectations about raising awareness regarding societal characteristics and cultural values.

When asked in the pre-BLM questionnaire to tick the aspects regarding cultural awareness they think this project will help them the most, the widely voted option referred to learning new things about racism and multicultural perspectives (88,4%). The second most voted option was when asked about being more aware of their own societal characteristics and expanding their knowledge about the target culture (72,1%). These options were also the most voted ones in the post-BLM questionnaire.

Participants were also asked about what they knew about BLM and what type of knowledge they expected to get out of the upcoming learning unit. This was an open-ended question, so the majority replied they found out about the movement from social media, and they knew it was an activist movement concerning racist acts against people of colour. Some of them even mentioned they expected to learn more about the history and some ways to get involved and be more socially active. Some of the most representative replies are displayed below:

What do you know about BLM and what do you expect to learn during this unit dedicated to BLM movement? (Pre-BLM Questionnaire, Question 9)

I have seen the hashtag #blacklivesmatter on social media. It is an activist movement dedicated to fighting racism against Black people. I hope to learn more about this and contribute to social justice (Student 1).

I know it's a fight for the rights of black people which has gone on for a long time and is still going. I expect to learn more about their history and be given tips on how to help them and get involved (Student 2).

BLM is an important movement that reflects the injustices that black people have suffered and continue to exist in the present and I expect to know more in depth about the subject (Student 3).

I've been following the BLM movement in the social networks, and I know that is something very important for all of us to be able to build a better community without racism or violence. I expect to learn about its origins and how can I contribute to the movement (Student 4).

In the same line, when asked in the post-BLM questionnaire whether they found the implementation of the unit an effective way to learn about the culture of the foreign language being studied, the majority state this was a great opportunity to learn not only about the language, but also about the culture and be aware of the origin of the movement and its implication to society. Some of the most representative answers were the following:

Was the implementation of the BLM topic a fruitful way to learn about the culture of the foreign language you are studying? If yes, mention briefly why? (Post-BLM Questionnaire, Question 10)

Yes, it was great to see their culture in the real world, with their own social problems (Student 1).

Yes, it helped us know the historical background in order to understand what is happening and why (Student 2).

Indeed! Thanks to the speeches, articles and stories that I have been reading, I feel closer to the English culture now. Analysing them in class has been helpful because we have been able to share our points of view and understand them better. (Student 3).

The BLM topic was a wonderful opportunity to learn more about English and the English speakers. We have been able to study language skills from different perspectives while learning about racism. (Student 4).

Yes, as I have been able to see the origin of a movement that has united many people to fight an injustice. That says a lot about the people they are (Student 5).

Yes. Because even though I knew about the BLM movement, after studying this topic in class I realized that I wasn't fully informed, and I didn't know enough about it (Student 6).

Discussion and Conclusions

This study presents the findings of a teaching unit centered on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, implemented in the Bachelor of English Studies program at Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Catalonia, Spain. Drawing from English literature, cultural studies, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this five-week unit aimed to enhance students' cultural awareness while developing their EFL proficiency. To achieve this, students engaged with a variety of authentic English texts, designed to foster cultural sensitivity through an exploration of issues such as racism and violence against people of color. The data collected via online questionnaires were analyzed using a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research tools. The statistical findings indicate a notable enhancement in students' self-perception of all the English language skills and lexical and grammatical elements after having been exposed to a variety of tasks, texts, vocabulary items and grammar structures as part of the BLM unit. The qualitative findings align with the quantitative results, highlighting that the BLM teaching unit effectively enhanced students' cultural sensitivity and social awareness. Additionally, the project holds significant social implications, empowering young people to become critical observers of societal realities. This equips them to set informed opinions and advocate against discrimination based on race and ethnicity, while fostering cultural diversity and tolerance. Responses to the open-ended questions demonstrated that students found the experience valuable, not only for improving their English language skills but also for deepening their cultural understanding of the origins and ongoing impact of a topic that remains highly relevant in contemporary society. Being exposed to the BLM unit has also reinforced their position in relation to urban violence. By getting to know the depths of the movement, they became more aware of its consequences, especially in the case of the discrimination acts against people of colour.

The overall findings from this study underscore the pivotal role of culturally relevant teaching units like BLM in enhancing linguistic and cultural competencies. The marked improvement in students' English language skills, coupled with their heightened cultural sensitivity, signifies the efficacy of integrating contemporary social issues into language learning. This approach

not only aids language acquisition but also fosters critical thinking and a deeper understanding of global issues.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse in educational pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of materials that are not just linguistically enriching but also socially and culturally relevant. The positive student feedback underscores the value of such educational interventions in fostering a well-rounded, socially aware, and empathetic learner profile.

Looking forward, these insights can be instrumental for educators and curriculum designers. Incorporating socially relevant themes like BLM into language teaching could be a significant step towards creating a more engaged, informed, and socially responsible student body. This study, therefore, extends beyond the confines of linguistic improvement, touching upon the broader impacts of education in shaping societal attitudes and cultural understanding.

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Appendix 1: Outline of the BLM Teaching Unit

What follows is a detailed description of the project elements as they were implemented in class:

DATE	SESSIONS/TOPICS & MATERIALS
WEEK 1	<p>BLM pre-questionnaire Session 1: Texts discussed in class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I have a Dream" Martin Luther King (1963) (speech) • "Rivers of Blood" Enoch Powell (1968) (speech) <p>Topics: racism, racial segregation, human rights, Black Lives Matter (BLM), immigration, multiculturalism, integration, otherness</p>
WEEK 2	<p>Session 2: Newspaper articles, videos and pictures about the movement BLM and the violent demonstrations from summer 2020 around the globe.</p> <p>Texts discussed in class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Black Lives Matter, what statues have been removed and why". Lifegate (Bracelli, 2020) • "#BlackLivesMatter: the birth of a new civil rights movement." The Guardian (Day, 2015) • "Black Lives Matter protests: Why are statues so powerful?" BBC Culture (Grovier, 2020) • "Black Lives Matter: Birth of a Movement." The Guardian (Rowery, 2017) • "Hundreds Join March to Protests against Systemic Racism in the UK," The Guardian (2020) • "Slave Trader's Statue Toppled in Bristol as Thousands Join Anti-Racism Protests," BBC News (2020) • "Protests in UK Tear down 17th Century Slave Trader's Statue," ABC News (2020) • "Who Was Slave Trader Edward Colston and Why Was His Statue Pulled Down?" The Independent (2020)
WEEK 4	<p>Session 3: Texts discussed in class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Their Eyes Were Watching God" Zora Neale Hurston (1937) (novel fragment) • "Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space" Brent Staples (1986) (essay) <p>Topics: Literature + Race, gender, domestic violence, women and writing, black writers</p>
WEEK 5	<p>Session 4: Language Focus on the texts covered on previous sessions. QUESTIONNAIRE on BLM (Moodle Questionnaire) BLM post-questionnaire</p>