Community-based explorations and visual literacies:
A key interplay to enhance writing skills in early high school students

Exploraciones basadas en la comunidad y literacidad visual:
una conexión clave para mejorar las habilidades escritoras en estudiantes de básica secundaria

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Abstract

This paper presents the outcomes and findings of a qualitative study aimed to describe the effects of combining visual literacies with Community-Based Pedagogies (CBP) to enhance writing skills in early high school learners. The data was gathered through community mapping reports, a needs analysis instrument, students' artifacts, a focus group, and teacher's field notes. This action research revealed how students, through systematic and consistent work, were smoothly guided in the writing process with the help of visual elements that served as triggers or supporters to produce short texts in which their voices were relevant by exploring their context and portraying their realities. The triangulation of the different instruments within the grounded analysis (Saunders et al., 2012), indicated a rise in the students' quantity and quality of the writing production in the foreign language and a learners' genuine interest in writing assuming an active role. Based on the available findings, they contribute significantly to nurturing English language teaching practices in public schools by boosting students' writing skills through the cognizant use of information about the surrounding contexts combined with visual stimuli as a valuable source.

Keywords: Community-Based Pedagogy (CBP); Critical Pedagogy; Visual Literacy; Writing.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados y hallazgos de un estudio cualitativo destinado a describir los efectos de combinar literacidad visual con Pedagogías Basadas en la Comunidad (CBP) para mejorar las habilidades escritoras en estudiantes de básica secundaria. Los datos se recopilaron a través de informes de mapeo comunitario, un instrumento de análisis de necesidades, producciones de los estudiantes, un grupo focal y notas de campo de los maestros. Esta investigación-acción reveló cómo los estudiantes a través de un trabajo sistemático y consistente fueron guiados fluidamente en del proceso de escritura con la ayuda de elementos visuales que sirvieron como provocadores o soporte para producir textos breves en los que las voces de los estudiantes eran relevantes al explorar su contexto y retratar sus realidades. La triangulación de los diferentes instrumentos dentro del análisis fundamentado (Saunders et al., 2012), indicó un aumento en la cantidad y calidad de la producción escrita en lengua extranjera por parte de los estudiantes y un interés genuino en ellos por asumir un papel activo en los ejercicios de escritura. Con base en los hallazgos disponibles, se contribuye significativamente a fomentar las prácticas de enseñanza del idioma inglés en las escuelas públicas, al impulsar las habilidades de escritura de los estudiantes a través del uso consciente de la información sobre los contextos circundantes combinados con estímulos visuales como una fuente valiosa.

Palabras clave: Pedagogía Basada en la Comunidad (CBP); Pedagogía Crítica; Literacidad Visual; Escritura.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os resultados e achados de um estudo qualitativo destinado a descrever os efeitos de combinar letramento visual com Pedagogias Baseadas na Comunidade (CBP) para melhorar as habilidades de escrita em estudantes do ensino médio básico. Os dados foram coletados através de relatórios de mapeamento comunitário, um instrumento de análise de necessidades, produções dos estudantes, um grupo focal e notas de campo dos professores. Esta pesquisa-ação revelou como os estudantes, através de um trabalho sistemático e consistente, foram guiados de forma fluida no processo de escrita com a ajuda de elementos visuais que serviram como provocadores ou suporte para produzir textos curtos, nos quais as vozes dos estudantes eram relevantes ao explorar seu contexto e retratar suas realidades. A triangulação dos diferentes instrumentos dentro da análise fundamentada (Saunders et al., 2012) indicou um aumento na quantidade e qualidade da produção escrita em língua estrangeira por parte dos estudantes e um interesse genuíno deles em assumir um papel ativo nos exercícios de escrita. Com base nos achados disponíveis, contribui-se significativamente para fomentar as práticas de ensino da língua inglesa nas escolas públicas, ao impulsionar as habilidades de escrita dos estudantes através do uso consciente das informações sobre os contextos circundantes combinados com estímulos visuais como uma fonte valiosa.

Palavras-chave: Pedagogia Baseada na Comunidade (CBP); Pedagogia Crítica; Letramento Visual; Escrita.

Introduction

Based on the Common European Framework and the Suggested Curriculum (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016), early high school learners are supposed to reach level A2. Following the Standards for English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006), the students can write short texts in which they express relations of contrast, addition, and cause and effect among ideas; write short messages with different purposes about everyday situations with a basic level of competence. In correlation to the Basic Learning Rights (DBA [because of the acronym in Spanish]), students at level A2 are capable of writing short and simple texts about familiar actions, experiences, and plans using a sequence of images and pre-established models in addition to describing activities related to a subject in their family or school environment by using simple sentences and visual aids.

Even though the Standards and DBA establish a basic level of competence, learners show underachievement, struggle with making word choices and writing down their ideas coherently, and their attitude to writing tasks is usually rejected. Students limited prior knowledge, low motivation, and lack of connection to the school environment negatively influence their attitudes and disposition toward the learning process. Other factors, such as the Colombian educational context policies, driven instructional practices combined with the reality of large classes, very little interest in learning, few hours of English classes a week, school dynamics, and students' growing demotivation, make it difficult to take real actions to overcome problems.

These facts nurtured the possibility of transforming the teacher's researchers' practice to impact learners positively, to increase their understanding of their school lives and learning, and to arouse their motivation to learn English through the implementation of new alternatives in which raising awareness about the sociocultural implications that can permeate all pedagogical practices (Giroux, 1997; Freire & Macedo, 2005). Consequently, critical pedagogy has supported this intervention, in which renewed literacy practices that advocate students' active role have emerged. These practices address sociopolitical issues involving students' communities that may lead them to a more critical development of agency and engagement. In addition, classroom practices might become meaningful opportunities to create peaceful environments in which empathy, reflection, and transformation play a remarkable role (O'Brien & Comber, 2020; Vasquez, 2014). For these reasons, we increased our interest in the incorporation of meaningful activities in which language goes beyond the development of isolated skills to interplay with content and knowledge, opening the door to inquiry, communicative, and problem-solving abilities that facilitate them to become more competitive agents in society while improving their writing skills through critical literacy practices (Vasquez et al., 2019).

Therefore, this study endeavors to portray three main principles. First, implementing meaningful writing tasks in the EFL classroom, where literacy instruction places students at the center of the learning process. Second, language learning is essential in developing socially situated literacy practices through community-based tasks that might nurture the construction of socio-cultural knowledge present in students' school communities. Third, the influence of using visual literacies to arouse the building knowledge processes intentionally and support students' production.

Fundamentally, the focal point of this research study was motivated by the search for a strategy to enhance not only the acquisition of language but also the collaboration, inquiry, and reflection in the English language class. For those reasons, this research integrated the socio-cultural dimension of language and an inquiry-based learning approach to propose writing as a socially situated practice and visual literacy as an enhancer of learning. We tried to examine how written competence could improve by implementing tasks that led to exploring the school context and how using visual tools could stimulate meaning-making processes. Moreover, researchers sought to determine the student's level of engagement in these tasks and the type of reflection they can reach when they play active roles and become agents of change in their communities.

Building on this context, the strategy aimed to enhance learners' writing skills through the use of visual and locally relevant inquiries, reflecting the highly visual nature of contemporary texts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001, 2004, 2005). This approach aligns with more contextualized experiences, where students depict their own realities, consistent with Clavijo's (2015) work, who observed that:

When teachers inquire in the local community to identify valuable resources to establish connections with the curriculum, it is possible to broaden the opportunities for meaningful learning and to recognize multiple literacy practices used by learners that account for their local knowledge, surpassing the traditional practices promoted by schools. (p. 33)

Another relevant aspect of this research study deals with theoretical and methodological contributions that an inquiry-based approach brings to the EFL classroom. In this line, CBP fosters writing from a more integrative perspective, where learners and teachers co-construct the language curriculum, considering common interests and valuing local knowledge as sources.

This action research study embraces the design of an innovative pedagogical space inside the classroom where learners can receive visual input utilizing images, photographs, or drawings and publish their written production. This dual purpose intends to develop students' writing skills by focusing on the different stages of the process when they write short texts as a result of exploring community issues. Another paramount aspect to consider is the enhancement of the learners' abilities of observation, reflection, analysis, discussion, and cooperation.

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In light of the study's aims, the following research question emerged: To what extent could the use of Community – Based Learning activities and visual literacy foster writing skills in early high school students?
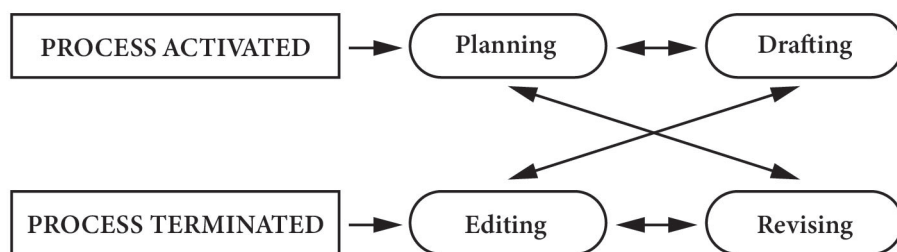
Literature Review

Writing to enhance Learning

According to Nunan (2003), writing is a physical and intellectual activity in which the authors must find their ideas, conceptions, and perspectives and make the necessary considerations about expressing and arranging them into a clear statement or paragraph to be understood. White and Arndt (1991) describe writing as a form of problem-solving that demands mental effort; it involves such processes as generating ideas, discovering a "voice" to write, planning, goal setting, monitoring, and evaluating, among others. In this sense, Cumming (1998) asserts that "writing" refers not only to text in the written script but also to the acts of thinking, composing, and encoding language into such text; these acts also necessarily entail discourse interactions within a socio-cultural context. These definitions pinpoint that writers are challenged to express their thoughts and look for effective forms to organize them into a good composition. Writing requires the integration of ideas systematically through the thinking processes of planning, sequencing, and transmitting messages.

In recent decades, new trends have emerged in teaching writing, considering the text, the writing process, and the social perspectives on its nature. In this respect, Cumming (1998) and Silva (1993) focused their attention on L2 writers as complex individuals who approach writing in unique ways. Connor (1996) and Hinkel (2002) emphasized the products of writing and provided principles to guide writers in structuring the text, while keeping the context and the reader's expectations in mind.

Due to the nature of a product-oriented approach that downplays creative thinking and writing, it has shifted to an approach in which writing is conceived as a personal and innovative activity, paying particular attention to literacy as a social practice and conceiving writing as a developmental process (Elbow, 1973, 1981; Murray, 1985; Flower & Hayes, 1981a; Zamel, 1983; Leki, 2000; Hylland, 2004). In the writing process, learners are engaged through modeled and shared instruction, taking into consideration their level. It is necessary to model all aspects of the writing process as many times as possible until students become familiar with each stage through specific strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Seow, 2002). It is essential to teach these four stages of the writing process, and despite it being shown in sequence, it is also vital to help students understand that writers can continuously alternate between the steps as they write.

Figure 1. Four stages of the writing process.

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┌──────────────────────┐      ╭──────────╮        ╭──────────╮
│  PROCESS ACTIVATED   │ ──►  │ Planning │ ◄────► │ Drafting │
└──────────────────────┘      ╰──────────╯        ╰──────────╯

┌──────────────────────┐      ╭──────────╮        ╭──────────╮
│  PROCESS TERMINATED  │ ──►  │  Editing │ ◄────► │ Revising │
└──────────────────────┘      ╰──────────╯        ╰──────────╯
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Source: Seow (2002, p. 315)

In conclusion, the process of teaching writing is a powerful tool that allows learners to reflect on their compositions, interpret and analyze their contexts, and engage in inquiry, providing them with opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Regarding these conceptions and principles about the writing process, the Community-Based Learning approach emerges as a practice that profoundly impacts students' retention and engagement by offering authentic learning experiences. These kinds of activities encourage reflection processes in which students start envisioning potential real-life problems and become part of possible solutions from their teenage perspective. For this study, written production, and multimodal texts are manifestations of how students were guided to read their worlds differently, make sense of them, and take a stand to contribute to transforming their environments. That is the value of the situated nature of critical literacies, where the students depart from local realities, relate them to global ones, and, when encouraged, use different modes of written expression in which they realize they can take action.

Community-Based Pedagogy (CBP)

A community, in the context of this action research, refers to the classroom, school dynamics, or the place where students live, spend time, share ideas, learn, and play together. In a broader sense, a community is part of the intertwined platform of social structures, power relations, and critical literacies (Trigos-Carrillo et al., 2022). According to Warburton and Martin (1999), "Community-Based Pedagogies include the way people observe and measure their surroundings, how they solve problems and validate new information, and the processes through which knowledge is generated,

stored, applied, and transmitted to others" (p. 1). Sharkey and Clavijo (2012) define CBP as "an asset-based approach that stresses local knowledge and resources as the basis of the curriculum standards that teachers must address in teaching and learning processes" (p. 41).

Regarding these definitions and our educational setting, CBP might become an opportunity to construct meanings inside and outside the classroom. This approach empowers students to play an active role in the learning process by giving them the possibility of engaging in meaningful experiences and reading their community critically using English. This study focused primarily on the classroom and the school as settings to be explored, considering that the scope of community-based experiences embraces the classroom, school, and neighborhood. Following Sharkey and Clavijo's claim (2012) about the importance of considering the urban communities "as rich resources for curriculum and see their students as inhabitants of communities with multiple linguistic and cultural assets" (p. 9). Likewise, these learning experiences let teachers posit the community as a curriculum resource to foster learners' personal, interpersonal, and social development (Cummins et al., 2006).

According to Canagarajah (2005) and Murrell (2001), community teachers must know the contexts where they serve to create pedagogies that value local knowledge. As community teachers, we might give prevalence to thought-provoking tasks and materials to which the students can attach their funds of knowledge, identities, and needs to bring improvement to the communities. Teachers also have the responsibility to design purposeful learning experiences that reflect our understanding of the school context's socio-economic background and the curricula' awareness. Regarding these considerations, teachers' practices and students' roles are paramount in breaking boundaries, as critical literacy underlies alternative ways to build knowledge. In the case of this article, it expands the view and learning opportunities for developing writing skills in school learners.

Understanding the implications of this approach demands an effective school mapping strategy. This strategy must help students raise awareness and consciousness of their realities and react to their immediate world. In this way, the incorporation of visual literacies emerged as a response due to the powerful role that images play in boosting meaning-making processes.

Visual Literacy to enhance critical thinking

Since one of the core constructs of this research concerns visual literacy, different authors have provided multiple definitions. Deebs (1969) coined the term and gave the earliest definition that refers to "a group of visual competencies that enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret a visible number of elements from the

environment and the improvement of these competencies is fundamental to enhance learning and communication" (p.26). The poet Simonides defines literacy as "words are the images of things" (as cited in Benson, 1997, p. 141); similarly, Aristotle stated that "without an image, thinking is impossible" (as cited in Benson, 1997, p. 141). Wileman (1993), defines visual literacy as "the ability to 'read,' interpret and understand the information presented in pictorial or graphic images" (p.114). Associated with visual literacy is visual thinking, described as "the ability to turn information of all types into pictures, graphics, or forms that help communicate the information" (p.114).

Following these ideas, Ausburn and Ausburn (1978) listed potential benefits. Visual literacy facilitates self-expression and ordering insights and increases students' motivation and interest in all subjects and levels. The use of visuals involves a pedagogical intention because they promote inclusion as they serve to teach students with diverse needs and learning styles. In this sense, developing visual literacy skills will also increase the ability to better comprehend today's world and its relationships, enhancing critical viewing and thinking. On the other hand, from a more contemporary view, Powers and Powers (2019), define visual literacy as:

> the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, extending the meaning of literacy, which commonly signifies interpretation of written or print text. Visual literacy is based on the idea that pictures and their meaning can be "read" and understood. The basic objective elements are line, shape, form, value, space, texture, color, composition, and perspective. The subjective elements have to do with interpretations of the subject matter, the context in which the image is seen, and the viewer's emotional state and depth of knowledge. (p.311)

By incorporating these strategies, all learners are considered "equals," receiving recognition for their contributions and having the opportunity to personalize the possible outcomes. Whether students can assume different roles and accept new responsibilities, they would bring innovation and tangible changes to the school. Moreover, learners can improve the quality of their written texts and develop a sense of connectedness, active involvement, and personal investment in the learning process. We have recently witnessed an increasing rate of technological advancements, bringing multifaceted change to education and language learning. Particularly, this unveils both opportunities and challenges as a significant body of recent research documents. These developments open the door to novel ways to prompt thinking through visual information and express meaning through diverse written forms. Technological resources, like the use of apps and social media, among many others, were not regarded in the configuration of this study due to limitations such as participants' age and access to technology. However, ever-changing technology demands that such a myriad of resources be incorporated into the language curriculum and capitalized on for the benefit of students' situated learning and the development of communicative skills.

Previous studies about the development of writing skills from the perspective of community–based pedagogies and visual literacies

Recognizing the importance of these theoretical approaches, previous studies and investigations that validate, expand, and support the procedures and constructs of this action research have defined Community-Based Pedagogy and its implications in developing transformative practices (Giroux and McLaren, 1992); the concept of writing as a social and situated practice; and the tools that visual literacies provide to enhance writing skills. In action research, Sánchez (2017) presents a pedagogical experience in a school in Bogotá where students collaboratively investigated their surroundings through literacy practices from a sociocultural perspective. This experience demonstrates how the school community offered alternatives for students to develop their language and literacy skills through meaningful learning environments. Students assumed roles as community researchers, employing multimodal literacy practices to express their ideas. In a similar effort, Orjuela (2017) describes a series of activities that include cooperative learning, task-based learning, and a descriptive writing approach encouraged through activities grounded in students' communities, incorporating CBP projects as a valuable strategy that gives students opportunities to work on their context, using the target language as a tool rather than an end in achieving English writing competence.

Shifting to writing as the central construct of this research, Chala and Chapetón (2012) present relevant perceptions about writing as part of a social and situated practice that seeks to provide students opportunities to stand their voices so that they express, communicate, share, and negotiate their views of the world and feelings through the written text. Also, the authors argue that literacy goes beyond the mere development of skills and the mastering of linguistic forms to make the writing event a significant experience that contributes to transformation. These theoretical contributions align with our research interest since they perfectly suit the study's objectives, highlighting the power of writing to reflect the writer's skills, needs, and voice. Additionally, they emphasize the strong connections between writing and the social and cultural context in which the authors produce their texts.

Additionally, a study by Ariza (2005) shows how English teachers can guide students in developing their texts. The author demonstrates that the best pieces of writing involved pictures because learners showed great interest, and better outcomes resulted from images rather than words. Furthermore, using visuals as a starting point during the brainstorming stage proved effective in generating ideas and developing vocabulary. This strategy enabled students to express their views based on different interpretations, illustrating that visual literacy provides a significant stimulus during this phase of the writing process. In parallel with these studies, the work of Larrota and Pedraza (2016) offers critical insights focused on in-context photography and

Community-Based Learning Activities. The authors' results indicated that integrating these two elements enhanced students' ability to introduce new vocabulary and accurate language chunks while lowering their affective filters, significantly influencing their performance.

To sum up, writing as a process-oriented approach, community-based pedagogy, visual literacy, and the relevant considerations stated in these previous studies serve as the theoretical foundations for the present research. Although some studies considered the local knowledge of students' communities to develop writing practices from a socio-cultural perspective, none of them precisely follow the complete process of writing or demonstrate the effectiveness of using visuals for different pedagogical purposes. For all these reasons, conducting our work was relevant and appropriate since it potentially contributes to the EFL field.

Methodology

Type of Study

This study is part of classroom action research that aims to tackle an identified issue to generate possible alternatives. According to Burns (2009), action research is a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring one's teaching context. It can be defined as an approach used by educational practitioners and professionals to examine and ultimately improve their pedagogy and practice (Clark et al., n.d.). The present study embraces the design of an alternative strategy that allows students to communicate effectively by focusing on writing short texts resulting from the exploration of different community issues according to their level, needs, and interests so that they could react to their realities and raise their awareness about school life by expressing their teenage stance. The schema presented by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) of reflection, planning, action, observation, and subsequent reflection to close the cycle was the path that better suited the purposes and nature of this study. The innovation was implemented through two extended cycles.

In the initial cycle, students were exposed to a "Pre-writing task" designed to diagnose the real students' level. This first cycle encompassed several substages in which students identified messages, words, pictures, and illustrations on the walls and desks of the classroom. As a result of this activity, we created a new space called "OUR VOICES" inside the classroom for the students to post their written products. In a subsequent substage entitled "Mapping my Classroom," students classified the gathered information and discussed findings based on observation, interpretation, and analysis of the pictures taken from the classroom. Following this, they used a first graphic organizer to brainstorm and organize their ideas within small groups.   As a result of the reflection within the process proposed in the schema followed, the preliminary

findings from Cycle 1 showed both achievements and limitations that made us realize that it was necessary to reinforce the type of visual stimuli to trigger a student's deeper understanding regarding the topics as well as to provide more extensive linguistic input to facilitate the accomplishment of the written tasks. Considering the emergent gaps presented in the first cycle, we incorporated these insights into the design of the second cycle to capitalize more on writing skills development and the benefits of community-based pedagogy principles and visual literacies.

The second cycle focused on a school community exploration for the students to examine their surroundings, find potential environmental problems, and raise their awareness about situations that could affect them. Working in groups, students took pictures, classified the photos according to the issues identified, and discussed how these findings impacted them and how they could propose a solution. Afterward, students brainstormed ideas about the problems identified. They shared their opinions to generate a first draft using a template in which they wrote down their points of view and possible recommendations to prevent the issues. Throughout the revising and editing phase, with the teachers' assistance, students strengthened their texts and built their final production, "How could we make our school a greener place?". To conclude, students decided to exhibit their findings to the broader community by using a visual source to increase awareness of environmental challenges within the school, supported by the pictures they took at the beginning of the exercise.

Throughout this process, we collected and analyzed data that progressively showed seventh graders' growth in developing writing skills, expanding their knowledge, and improving their comprehension of local situations. It is worth noting that all the topics chosen for this implementation were aligned with the syllabus in terms of content and the competencies outlined in the DBA and Standards in every cycle. These topics were condensed into a curricular unit, where the procedures, activity descriptions, and aims of the sessions were integrated into each stage.

Participants

This study was conducted with a group of thirty-one seventh graders from a public school in northeast Ibagué-Tolima (Colombia). There were 19 boys and 12 girls, ages 10 to 12 years old. Students struggled with low motivation to accomplish academic tasks because they were dissatisfied with school practices and the disconnection between contents and their realities. They attended 4 hours of English lessons per week structured in two sessions of 110 minutes in which the pedagogical instruction and classwork usually focused on isolated activities about grammar, reading, and writing. Despite the weekly hours of class, they showed apathy in acquiring a new language. They declared that they were not interested in learning English due to the apparent irrelevance of this subject in their future expectations.

Data Collection Instruments

The research data was collected through different procedures during interactions with the students and the implementation of the various study phases in and outside the classroom. Initially, a needs analysis served as a point of departure to enquire about the students' perceptions of the school and their sense of belonging, interest in communicating their ideas, and attitudes regarding writing. Subsequently, focus groups were carried out at the end of the interventions, in which students assumed different roles and shared common ideas related to three main aspects: the use of visual elements, the student's level of engagement in the activities, and the path walked during the writing process. Additionally, the researchers implemented field notes in order to keep a record of students' attitudes, responses, and reactions to the strategies or activities developed during the implementation. They also encouraged ongoing teacher reflection on teaching practice and helped us keep track of the teachers' perspectives on classroom dynamics. Finally, students' written and visual artifacts, including written tasks, creative projects, and photographs taken by the students, contributed to understanding classroom and school dynamics. Students developed these artifacts during the two pedagogical implementation cycles of this study. In conclusion, using all the data mentioned above was intended to triangulate and maximize the validity of the findings. Parental informed consent was sought for the students' participation in the project.

Data Analysis

Considering the methodology presented, categories emerged from the data and were grounded to strengthen the study. Data collected from the four instruments (students' artifacts, focus group, photos and videos, and teacher's field notes) were analyzed using an open coding technique. Interrelationships appeared, providing important insights during this systematic and schematic process. Then, the information was grouped into two categories, and seven subcategories emerged as a whole interpretation (Freeman, 1998).

This data analysis was conducted by employing Grounded Theory, which guided the research process, data collection, and detailed procedures for analysis. This approach helped identify and conceptualize the underlying social patterns of interest through constant comparison (Scott, 2009). Besides, "Grounded theory helps develop an understanding of phenomena that cannot be explained with existing theories and paradigms" (Saunders et al., 2012). The initial research questions were determined to draft and compile data by theoretical sampling. Afterward, researchers transcribed the collected information and categorized it into extracts using open encoding, enabling further analysis to create new axial coding groups. During this process, constructs were labeled with keywords and grouped based on core concepts and subthemes

related to the research areas, such as writing, visual literacies, and Community-Based Pedagogies. Finally, a central idea was defined to guide the analysis of the problem question initially posed.

To ensure the inclusion of valuable information and avoid potential bias, we conducted data analysis using both grounded analysis and ATLAS.ti. We also analyzed the data through traditional and computer triangulation to offer validity to our research by contrasting data gathered through different data analysis instruments and methods. Data triangulation, as defined by Denzin and cited in Freeman (1998, p. 97), refers to the use of various data collection instruments that, in turn, contributed to adding weight to this study. Each data collection method and instrument was defined and designed according to the research objectives and population characteristics. Since triangulation also implies the reduction of data during the analysis of the instruments, there was abstraction and interpretation of the information collected during the different implementations in each action research cycle. This involved gradually identifying coding systems and themes that guided us in reflections, interpretations, and even adjustments to the subsequent implementations when necessary.

Findings

The systematic analysis of the collected information revealed two main categories that gave us a broader comprehension of the relationship between situated visual prompting and students' writing dispositions and gradual improvement. We classified the information into two categories that were aligned with the research question and responded to the specific objectives of our research study as follows:

To analyze how students may engage in writing tasks when portraying their own contexts through community-based learning activities.

To determine the use of visual literacies as a tool in the English classroom to improve students' writing skills.

Consequently, in the following category, students scaffolding their path for writing and its subcategories, such as brainstorming, togetherness, a social analysis under the teenage gaze, and writing gear, follow the order of the first objective as they reveal the connection between the local and situated resources and the way the students unfolded their process in the development of writing skills. In contrast, the second category, students reading a visual world, relates to the second objective of this study as it was centered on incorporating visual elements to arouse students' interest in their community and provoke the development of critical thinking skills and multiliteracies.

Students Scaffolding their Path for Writing

This category indicates that successful enrollment in the writing process occurs when we depart from students' surroundings. Students' artifacts and the teachers' fieldnotes show that discussing ideas and opinions about students' interests and familiar topics can facilitate the students' embarking on a journey that takes them from a brainstorming step to the publication of their writing outcomes.

The writing approach in this research involves several stages, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, and publishing. Through this process, students must think, organize their ideas, revise their texts, and post their writing pieces. Despite being scarcely promoted in classrooms, the results of this study evidenced a growing students' interest as a point of departure for engaging them in meaningful writing tasks. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness about the significance of the writing process in education. Additionally, students should be encouraged to initiate their writing based on their environment, fostering a habit that integrates significant elements from their realities.

The students' written tasks required aligning their language needs with the curriculum. This fact demonstrates the current need in our Colombian educational system to incorporate writing into the Basic Standards of Learning and Basic Rights of Learning. Indeed, integrating these aspects fostered improving students' writing skills through community participation in learning activities in which visual literacy played a meaningful role.

In the following excerpt, the students spotlighted the benefits of following steps to scaffold the writing path when they desired to communicate their ideas about specific topics (Table 1). In effect, students recognized not only the improvement in their skills to produce pieces of writing but also how they faced the process.

Table 1. Focus group. Participant 1.

"Antes no sabía bien cómo escribir párrafos, y en la lluvia de ideas y los otros pasos que hacemos, yo pude mejorar la escritura."
"Before I didn't know very well how to write paragraphs, and in brainstorming and the other steps we do, I improved writing."

Source: Seventh-grade student. Public School from Ibague – Tolima

Brainstorming: Departing from Students' Surroundings

This category highlights the students' capability to explore, critique, and reflect upon their contexts by reading images and photos. The materials and tasks I used stimulated the students' transition from passive agents to active and empowered actors involved in transforming their communities.

Brainstorming techniques are commonly incorporated in classrooms to retrieve ideas and elicit students' previous knowledge about a specific topic. Introducing this resource inevitably encourages students to build on existing schemas and knowledge while discovering new ways to organize the information. During group brainstorming, the mutual stimulation motivates students to generate new ideas and develop creative thinking skills. This approach also allows students to offer several opinions on a given topic, which may support writers in developing ideas while seeking strategies to facilitate the writing process.

The participants in this study brainstormed ideas and vocabulary about their likes, favorite activities, healthy eating, and environmental problems in the school in a template (Figure 1). This shows evidence that providing students with new opportunities to access and share information can support the development of their ideas during the writing process. One of the observed advantages of this strategy was that the use of graphic organizers assisted students in the mental process of bringing back ideas and recalling their previous knowledge in a structured template. This proves that after using such templates, students can effectively familiarize themselves with the proposed exercise to generate a written production.

Finally, the introduction of brainstorming activities in the early stages of writing showed how teachers and peers could help each other develop creative and critical thinking skills by identifying possible solutions to the posed problems. These activities provide opportunities for students to exchange ideas, adapt existing knowledge, and integrate new information into their existing knowledge. Additionally, this stage fosters the development of life skills that allow students to become more adaptable learners through social interaction, allowing them to freely communicate their ideas and appreciate diversity as they have plenty of knowledge to share.

Figure 2. Student's artifacts: Brainstorming exercises
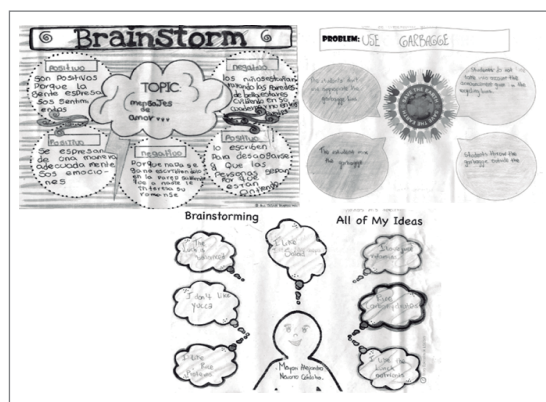
Source: Seventh graders. Public School from Ibague – Tolima

Togetherness: a key ingredient in collaborative writing.

The second subcategory of this research study was related to constructing a strategy based on collaborative work. It focused on the idea of scaffolding students' writing. Vygotsky (1989) stated, "What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow" (p. 189). In classroom terms, this means that a student's language develops first socially and then individually. When students share their perceptions, discuss their ideas, and convey meaning through social interaction, togetherness becomes a motivating force that facilitates English language learning development and promotes higher-order thinking skills, leading to the construction of a strategy based on collaborative work (Figure 2).

Regarding the writing process, teachers do not traditionally promote collaborative learning through group work since it is usually neglected daily in language teaching. Consequently, there is a recognized need for methodological change. The data supporting this claim demonstrates the positive impact of encouraging collaborative writing among students. After engaging students in different collaborative activities, they remarked on the benefits of peer feedback, peer writing, and collaborative writing as allies in the composition of written texts. They underscored the effectiveness of sharing their ideas within groups and correcting mistakes to enhance their compositions and to grow students' trustworthiness concerning their peers. At the same time, they simultaneously have the possibility to work synergistically and independently.

In addition, students highlighted the advantages of collaborative work, recognizing that each individual's contribution can produce better and more enriched texts (Table 2). Notably, they acknowledged the dynamics of teamwork as assistants for writing, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

Table 2. Focus group. Participant 3.

"Estas actividades me han ayudado a compartir primero mis ideas con mis compañeros de clase, luego corregir los errores y así mejorar mi escritura"
"These activities have helped me to first share my ideas with my classmates, then correct the mistakes and thus improve my writing."

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

A Social Analysis Through the Teenage Gaze

Integrating resources from both classrooms and the community enables students to research and write about issues confronting their surroundings. Faced with this statement, designing and implementing community-based learning activities at school provided a foundation for students to understand their contexts. Consequently, by focusing on community problems, the writing process within the English class serves

as a platform in which students can engage actively in becoming aware of their role in society. Furthermore, a vital component of this research project was that students played the role of researchers without noticing it. This confirmed that students show enthusiasm when tasks take place outside the classroom. Moreover, by assuming the role of researchers, students conducted a school mapping to identify potential problems inside the school.

The inquiry process showed that when students engage in school explorations, they turn information and data into useful knowledge for their benefit. The data revealed that the realization of mapping and self-reflection exercises through the search for problem-solving exhibits that implementing CBP enhances effective writing processes and outcomes through meaningful opportunities for learning inside and outside the classroom (Table 3).

Table 3. Focus group. Participant 5.

"Gracias al proyecto ambiental que desarrollamos en la clase de inglés, entendí que estos problemas también se originan en la escuela, en los hogares y en otros lugares. Por ejemplo, aquí en la escuela, los estudiantes no se sienten responsables de tirar basura, y no usamos los tres contenedores de basura de manera adecuada."
"Thanks to the environmental project that we developed in the English class, I understood that these problems are also originated in the school, at homes and elsewhere. For example, here at school, students do not feel responsible for littering, and they do not use the three garbage bins properly."

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

Similarly, at the beginning of the process, students acknowledged the teacher's role as an enhancer who creates appropriate learning environments. They also perceived changes in the way the teacher conducted the lessons and recognized the inclusion of useful strategies to involve them in the class. Thus, as the following excerpts support (Figure 3), students were able to examine and evaluate the information they obtained from images.

*Figure 3.* Students tackling the school issues.

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

Writing Gear

Building upon Silva's ideas (1990) in L2 writing, the process-oriented approach seems to suggest a progressive, systematic, persistent, flexible, scaffolding, and contextual organization of collaborative workshop environments in which the teaching premise is learner-centered. Following his ideas, it was evidenced that the writing process requires a positive, encouraging, and collaborative setting within which the interaction of different components is crucial. In line with this approach, teachers are encouraged to act as facilitators, helping students develop feasible strategies for finding topics and generating ideas during the writing process, enabling multiple drafts, and adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas throughout the editing phase.

Figure 4. Students' Artifacts. Pre and Post Writing tasks
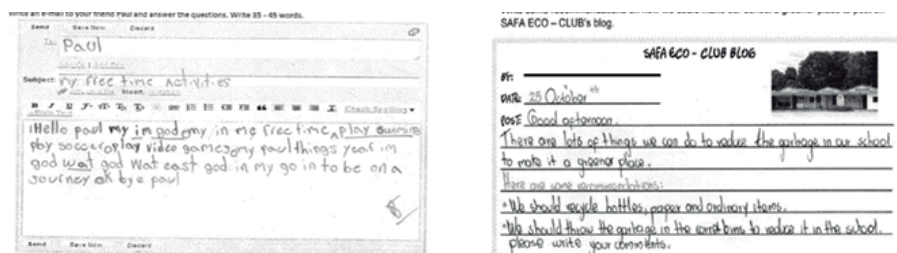
Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué - Tolima

Based on the analysis of the data analysis and students' behaviors, it was evident that students consistently used the writing process with slightly different graphic organizers corresponding to the writing stages. Students were more familiar with the brainstorming stage. They revised their first drafts and corrected mistakes using the dictionary while I gave support. The students provided clear evidence of the step-by-step in which they gradually were immersed in how they coped with the writing process throughout the implementation. Students enjoyed embarking upon the writing tasks without realizing they were following a process. For these reasons, students expressed their satisfaction in doing these types of activities, and they commented on the possibility of understanding different topics through dynamic and creative activities like graffiti design, lap books, the simulated wall in the classroom created with the purpose of posting the students' written production, and feedback from the teacher and peers that facilitated learning, as shown below:

Table 4. Focus group. Participant 2

"La escritura se ha vuelto más fácil al utilizar algunas plantillas que nos dio la profesora, luego pudimos compartir ideas con los compañeros para corregir y mejorar nuestros textos."
"Writing has become easier by using some templates that the teacher gave us, then we were able to share ideas with classmates to correct and improve our texts."

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

Students Reading a Visual World.

Upon thorough analysis of the data, it is evident that the incorporation of visual elements generates a twofold process directly impacting students' learning opportunities. First, images promote students' comprehension, and second, they trigger the students' ability to read their surrounding world critically. Furthermore, incorporating community-based learning activities and visual literacy invigorate the learning process by facilitating the construction of meaning and a sense of belonging inside and outside the classroom. Building upon the experts' ideas in the field of Community-Based Learning, this learner-centered approach promotes the development of knowledge, critical thinking skills, and attributes of community members. This is achieved through fostering awareness of their roles by engaging students in seeking, discussing, prioritizing, and solving potential surrounding social issues (Melaville et al., 2006; Sharkey & Clavijo-Olarte 2012; Villani & Atkins, 2000).

Figure 5. Poster: "School lunch" and school mapping

Source: The author

When students become aware of specific situations in their community, they begin a reflection process that positions them as transformative agents in their world. This study found that integrating visual elements acted as catalysts, strengthening the students' written texts and enhancing their ability to understand their environment. With these activities, the students' image interpretation skills improved, facilitating

memory and allowing for better expression of their thoughts. Consequently, tasks and classes turned into more meaningful, interactive, and dynamic learning experiences.

The aforementioned points become relevant as they highlight the advantages of incorporating visual aids in the educational context. Using images facilitates the association and visualization of word images and the retrieval of prior knowledge. Notably, students responded positively to the visual stimuli displayed in the classroom and found it advantageous in assisting the production of sentences.

Figure 6. Visuals as supporters

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

During the analysis, it was evidenced that visual tools served as previous knowledge activators or as visual input to introduce new topics and new vocabulary; they increased comprehension or aroused students' interest in the English class. These tools demonstrated that students found it easier to interpret and convey meanings and facilitated the expression of their preferences using English. They also became a visual source to reinforce their points of view. These visual aids were displayed inside the classroom and around the school, serving as a source of appreciation for others. In the light of Freire and Macedo (2005), "Reading the word and learning how to write the word so one can later read it is preceded by learning how to write the world, that is having the experience of changing the world and touching the world" (p. 12). This assertion underscores the significance of critical engagement, which questions reality, raises awareness of issues, transforms the self, and rewrites the world, demanding a deeper understanding of the community's concerns. As teachers, we have the opportunity to contribute to this process from our classrooms by utilizing writing as a transformative learning element.

Table 5. Focus group. Participant 4.

"Las imágenes me han ayudado a comprender los temas fácilmente y cuando escribimos los párrafos es más fácil recordar las palabras."
"The images have helped me understand topics easily and when we write the paragraphs it is easier to remember the words."

Source: Seventh graders. Public School Ibagué – Tolima

Discussion

This study exemplified the symbiotic relationship between students' improvement in writing skills, community-based learning activities, and visual stimuli, which served as resources to progressively expand and strengthen the students' views and understanding of the writing process. To this extent, the findings emphasized the deliberate need to foster connections between students and communities, recognizing the mutual benefits derived from this interaction and making the school community the object of the study (Comber, 2013). Likewise, the findings highlighted the opportunity to connect the students' everyday lives with the curriculum, a fact that is in line with Clavijo-Olarte & Sharkey's work (2018).

The analysis of the interplay of the core components of this study let us see that in order to enhance writing skills in early high school learners, it is imperative to redesign the teaching practices focusing on scaffolding writing through process-oriented methodologies that foster in the students the development of better-quality writing and adopting better writing behaviors (Richards and Nunan, 1990). In this regard, guiding students through the writing process by implementing stages such as brainstorming, drafting, editing, and publishing might be a powerful tool for improving English writing skills. Notably, students' productions exhibited a progressive improvement in their written work, as shown in Figure 4. This progression can be accomplished by modifying and adapting prompts according to the tasks' nature and presenting useful language and expressions that facilitate learners' production In terms of the reasons the students had to write, a socially situated Barton and Hamilton (Carrillo, Diaz, and Lyons 2023) environment to activate the students' disposition to write was crucial to stimulate them to focus on the different tasks proposed that could be pleasurable, transformational, and pedagogical (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber 2019) and, in our view, disruptive.

The integration of visual literacies combined with Community-based Pedagogies in English classes offered a high number of worthwhile opportunities to improve English teaching practices. As a result, these new educational experiences facilitated "transformational growth," positioning students as active participants who may read,

interpret, and act upon their community issues, fostering positive social change and nurturing a new and fresh perspective of themselves as learners, citizens, and human beings. Hopefully, some of the insights presented in this research study could contribute to the field of language teaching and learning concerning the effectiveness of incorporating visual components, the student's response to initiatives of local inquiry, the writing process, and its impact on language teaching within schools. Nevertheless, to expand on the nature of future similar studies and be in tune with the contemporary pervading changes in the digital era, we cannot disregard, as P., R. (2024) suggests, that language educators nowadays must prioritize ongoing professional development focused on integrating technology into writing instruction as a strategic challenge in the 21st century.

To sum it up, our pedagogical intervention brought to the surface the connection between community-based pedagogies and multimodal practices for the development of critical thinking skills among students. From this framework, the students observed, explored, and raised their voices, boosting their literate repertoires, evidenced in the form of emails, posters, blog posts, and graffiti. Furthermore, incorporating individual and collaborative dynamics within the classroom contributed to this progress. Through structured writing tasks and teacher guidance, early students had the chance to play the role of researchers in their contexts, exploring their schools locally, increasing their awareness about their realities, and becoming active agents of their language learning process. Consequently, learners could reflect on issues that affected their lives at school, recognize the importance of the local, and establish a relationship between it and the global to build new knowledge together.

Conclusions

To address the research question that guided the study, two main factors could influence the outcomes of this exploration. First, students embarked on meaningful writing tasks that involved exploring their context and portraying their realities to produce short texts in which their voices were relevant to achieving the goal. Second, students were progressively and systematically guided through the writing process with the assistance of visual elements that served as triggers or supporters in accomplishing the writing tasks.

The results demonstrated the students' capability to accomplish the written tasks when certain conditions converge in the English classroom. The teacher must provide the necessary linguistic input regarding vocabulary and grammar structures to comply with this. In addition, the use of prompts and the incorporation of visual stimuli tailored to the selected topic are vital to facilitate written production. Furthermore, the encouragement of collaborative work has evidenced that students can learn from

peers, and it promotes the development of personal and interpersonal skills throughout the interaction. Integrating these elements gave students more opportunities to discuss their ideas, feelings, and points of view before they embarked on the writing process. Consequently, these outcomes underscore the necessity of providing students with training in reading and decoding visual elements, as well as in the consistent and progressive presentation of realistic and situated learning activities within the multiliteracies perspective in the EFL classroom.

Going beyond, using visuals in our classes serves different practical purposes. Images hold power when used as input, catalyzers, or resources that encourage learners' motivation, make classes and activities more meaningful and interactive, facilitate word-image association, and support or reinforce the texts authored by the students. Accordingly, the integration of visuals has demonstrated their effectiveness in stimulating students' memory, maximizing the opportunities to examine, contrast, and evaluate information to communicate their ideas and thoughts, thereby developing higher-order critical thinking skills. These results are consistent with the strategies presented by Trigos-Carillo et al. (2019) for fostering peacebuilding through essential literacy practices among young children.

As researchers, this was an opportunity to see how the students could develop higher critical thinking skills, active engagement, and a sense of belonging by participating in a systematic and structured language-learning process. The findings of our study reveal that students can position themselves in their communities and transform their realities when they assume the challenge of playing active roles in learning experiences. Therefore, we emphasize the necessity of encouraging students by providing them with opportunities to construct strong arguments that depart from their interests and realities. This outcome represents a foundational responsibility we should assume as 21st-century language teachers when we address emerging challenges and orchestrate the processes students must go through when engaging in literacy practices within the classroom and school.

Limitations and future directions

Some constraints and limitations were evidenced during the present study, leading to improvement in future related research, having to do with the challenge of taking the students out of their comfort zone to encourage them to participate in purposeful individual and collaborative writing tasks. In such a way, some ideas for further research could be focused on the systematic incorporation of multimodal forms of expression to channel the students' voices and the use of AI tools in the language classroom to promote meaningful learning experiences through authentic linguistic interactions and peer collaboration in the EFL scenarios.

Even though visual literacy is not a recent area, it still presents breakdowns in its implementation, like the lack of teachers' preparation on the topic, because it demands supportive criteria for the selection of materials as well as the design of meaningful tasks that involve particular ways of questioning and elicitation of information from images and visual representations; in fact, during this implementation, not all the students responded equally to the challenges of reading images and visual representations with a critical perspective, which in turn become areas to focus further attention Guo et al. (2019) in both classroom practices or research endeavors.

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