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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Didactic Briefcases as a Means to Foster Colombian Culture in the EFL Classroom**

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**| ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to show the importance of implementing the didactic briefcases (maletas didácticas) from El Museo del Oro in the EFL classroom as a means to foster culture through the use of a Theme-Based approach. To this end, a bibliographical review was carried out by searching different research articles, master's and BA theses in order to know about the implementation of the didactic briefcases in Colombia. Thus, the information presented in this paper is to help EFL teachers to realize how beneficial it could be to integrate the didactic briefcases and Theme-Based Instruction (TBI) in their lessons to make them more didactic, flexible, engaging, collaborative, and dynamic while integrating culture in the curriculum. In fact, some studies showed that the didactic briefcases have been used in different areas of Colombian education, such as Arts and Social Science, but not in English. Finally, the results showed that it is possible to implement the didactic briefcases through TBI because it allows students to open their minds to their own roots and become more critical when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

**| KEYWORDS**

Colombia Bilingüe program, culture, culture awareness, didactic briefcases, Theme-Based Instruction.

**| ARTICLE DOI:** [10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.1.6](https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2022.4.1.6)

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### **1. Introduction**

In Colombia, the cultural legacy left through the years has allowed people to know more about this country, which is known for its cultural diversity. According to the Colombian Ministry of Culture (2010), Colombia has been recognized for its complex and cultural diversity, which shows a variety of identities and cultural expressions coming from its towns and communities. Thus, El Museo del Oro (2004) has been in charge of promoting cultural diversity, which is something valuable and is an essential feature of human beings because it has called the attention to those who want to know and learn more about their origins. In our country, there is a variety of indigenous groups that live today and struggle to preserve their traditions because they represent our past.

Therefore, the didactic briefcases are a series of materials that have allowed teachers in different areas to extend their knowledge about culture in our country. These pedagogical tools were first called "*didactic boxes*" [cajas didácticas] and were finally known as the didactic briefcases. Londoño (2004) claims that these briefcases are tools that allow understanding the cultural diversity in Colombia. Knowing about cultures is essential because it helps to interrelate with people around the world as it enables people to learn about a variety of factors that go from linguistic to social ones. Thus, according to Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004), the cultural aspect is essential when learning a foreign language because people can develop cultural awareness, which involves understanding their own culture and other people's cultures, and how cultures are similar and different from one another. Additionally, Varón (2016) expresses that the didactic briefcases present a variety of activities such as games, stories, and readings. For her part, Galvis (2017) states that each briefcase has a booklet that explains the activities that the teacher can adapt and carry out in any class. Hence, the briefcases are cross-curricular since they can be used in different disciplines from social sciences to languages, enabling teachers and students to be engaged in different activities that include real context and problem-solving tasks.

Consequently, the use of didactic briefcases can generate many advantages in the classes such as lesson flexibility, integration of language and culture through TBI. They can also foster students' motivation and cultural awareness. Nonetheless, even when some Colombian studies have been conducted in subjects such as Arts and Social Science, none has been done in the English class, and so this paper tries to highlight the importance of implementing the didactic briefcases in the EFL classrooms.

## 2. Didactic briefcase: contents and purpose

According to the Colombian Ministry of Culture (2010), the cultural diversity of Colombia has been a worldwide characteristic due to the variety of cultural identities that have been spread in the different regions. El Museo del Oro (2004) has been in charge of promoting this cultural diversity for those who want to know and learn more about their roots through different strategies as the didactic briefcases. Therefore, it is necessary to start explaining what the didactic briefcases are. Thus, Galvis (2017) explains that the briefcases were first called "*didactic boxes*" [cajas didácticas]; later, they were known as "*the museum goes to your school*" [el museo va a tu escuela]. In 1979, the boxes were created and presented at the National Museum of Colombia as a proposal called "*Columbus' journeys*" [Los viajes de Colón]. In 1986, the experts first started creating and designing the Muisca tribe topic; then, in 1988, the boxes appeared in different museums in Colombia. Finally, in 2002 the boxes were modified and included new varied contents, and nowadays, there are 12 different briefcases which contain information about different regions in Colombia. According to Londoño (2004), briefcases are didactic tools that allow people to understand, know, and enjoy the cultural diversity in our country.

Therefore, Kapur (2019) argues that cultural education fosters historical awareness and creative attitudes that are beneficial because it helps the formation of people's identity. If students learn about the culture in their elementary and secondary education, they will be able to follow cultural interests. In addition, she states that there are a lot of instructional strategies to promote cultural education, and those can be implemented through arts and crafts, music, singing, dancing, and other activities. Once individuals are able to understand cultural traits, they can be useful members of a society since they can bring improvements to their community and establish good relationships with others. For that reason, culture in the field of education is helpful for the overall system of education.

Varón (2016) expresses that the didactic briefcases consist of interactive presentations with a variety of activities such as games, stories, readings that are attractive for students. In addition, one advantage is that students can handle the archeological replicas and some original fragments made of ceramic and bone which are old. Also, Galvis (2017) asserts that each briefcase has a booklet that explains the kind of activities the teacher can conduct in the class. Consequently, these briefcases are not only to teach social sciences, but they can also foster reading, research, environment, and other subjects offering teachers a variety of activities to implement in class. Lastly, the briefcases are available throughout Colombia in the different Museo del Oro branches: Armenia, Barranquilla, Bogotá, Bucaramanga, Buenaventura, Cali, Cartagena, Cúcuta, Florencia, Girardot, Honda, Ibagué, Ipiales, Leticia, Manizales, Medellín, Montería, Neiva, Pasto, Pereira, Popayán, Quibdó, Riohacha, San Andrés, Santa Marta, Sincelejo, Tunja, Valledupar, and Villavicencio.

Furthermore, Varón (2016) claims that the activities included in the briefcases can be implemented from preschool students to university ones. Moreover, Varón (2016) explains that the briefcases foster the care of cultural heritage and highlight the importance of cultural diversity. Besides, it shows students the similarities and differences among indigenous groups, to recognize their gastronomy and handicrafts, etc., and most of all, students can interact with those objects because, in most of the museums, the archeological objects are in showcases and cannot be handled. To sum up, Londoño (2004) explains that teachers are responsible for choosing, adapting, and implementing the materials that fit their class, responding successfully to the students' needs.

Finally, Galvis (2017) claims that students have had positive experiences with the didactic briefcases because students have been able to interact with the objects the briefcases contain. On the other hand, teachers can explore and create a more didactic, enjoyable class. They can also know about a culture that they can be unaware of, and by means of the objects included in the briefcase, teachers can recognize themselves as part of the pre-colonial past of the Colombians because Brown (2007) suggests that culture is the group of beliefs, customs, principles, arts, and instruments that describe a determined society through the time. Consequently, Sowden (2007) deems culture as a group of traditions that include societal, esthetic, and cognitive aspects linked historically with a particular group.

Simply put, culture involves everything that can be communicated from one generation to another and differentiates one group from another. In addition, Johnson (2013) states that through time, culture has played an important role in permitting people to deal with a number of problems in different contexts. Also, people have been able to exist in a variety of environments because of their capacity to adapt to the changes.

### **2.1 Previous studies using the didactic briefcases**

Some research has been done to analyze the use of didactic briefcases in Colombian schools. Nonetheless, there is a significant qualitative study conducted by Varón (2016) in Santiago Vila Escobar, Liceo Juan C. Rocha, and Liceo Nacional schools directed to children between 7 and 12 years old. The aim was to facilitate learning about pre-Hispanic cultures settled in Tolima, articulating the Museum and the school in the Social Science class. In this study, there were three methodological phases; in the first one, students were able to show their perceptions and notions related to the museum and pre-Hispanic cultures through some surveys. In the second phase, activities that included the use of didactic briefcases were implemented. Finally, there was also a phase of the description of the evaluation process carried out through surveys.

After the first phase was carried out, it was determined that there were some inconsistencies in the notions and historical competencies of the students; therefore, the didactic briefcases: San Agustín and Amazonas were implemented as a means to strengthen these inconsistencies. Each box contained a teacher's booklet, which thoroughly explained the objectives and different activities that could be carried out depending on the topic. For instance, the San Agustín didactic briefcase aimed to spread archeological knowledge about the life of a pre-Hispanic society from 2.000 years ago in the Tolima region. The box contained elements such as: "orejeras", statues, pendants, sleigh bells, a cup, a clay jar, a nose ring, diadems, a mortar, and so on. This box had a series of didactic activities and proposed different topics as San Agustín's life, where learners studied the concepts of death and cosmogony.

The results of the aforementioned study showed that most students would like to learn topics related to religion and magic pre-Hispanic societies as their customs, ways of life, civilization, food, body adornments, and so on. Likewise, it was proved that the didactic briefcases are important elements that teachers can use in order to make their classes more dynamic; moreover, the children faced new experiences that highlight the patrimony and culture. The didactic briefcases are not designed only for Social Science; they can be used interdisciplinary.

Therefore, El Museo del Oro is one of the institutions available for a great number of populations that wants to study patrimonial and archeological matters (Galvis, 2017). According to Guayara (2015), the didactic briefcases promote group work, dialogue, and critical thinking; furthermore, in the analysis of the guiding principles and the diverse perspectives, the highlighted elements are patrimony, cultural identity, and coexistence that are essential for society and people's education. However, the best of a didactic briefcase is that the teacher has the capacity to choose and adapt the content and topics of the box to the learners' real needs. One example is the creation of a didactic briefcase in the art class where pedagogic strategies are elaborated to understand the conceptualization of it with the processes of children's sensitivity and exploration. The aim is to approach learners to be particular and universal cultural subjects promoting an attitude of interests and cultural legacy (Aguiar & Triviño, 2015).

Similarly, an action research study conducted by Alvarado et al. (2018) at Instituto Pedagógico Nacional addressed the use of the didactic briefcases from El Museo del Oro and sought to approach cultural scenarios to educational institutions in order to strengthen the concepts of patrimony, identity, cultural diversity, and coexistence. Thus, the didactic briefcases were implemented in the 1-4 levels in special and primary education, and the aim was to identify how the didactic briefcases could support the deep understanding of the aforementioned concepts through Arts and Social Science. From the different analyses corresponding to the application and inquiry, the didactic briefcases of "Los Muisca" were created considering that this culture is characterized within the categories of subject, territory, and culture. For this, students' needs were considered as well as the teacher's role as a mediator, agent, promoter, leader, and generator of learning settings and pedagogic strategies. The results showed that learners' everyday experiences built the notion of patrimony, giving value to the didactic briefcases from El Museo del Oro. Thus, the patrimony generated in students a sense of protection and ownership. The concept of identity was evident through the recognition of the participant's capacities and skills in the interaction with the context. Similarly, the construction of healthy coexistence was established from the creation of norms and values in the interaction with others. Additionally, it was identified that teachers must strengthen, research, ask, and delve into the topics and concepts used in the implementation of the didactic briefcases.

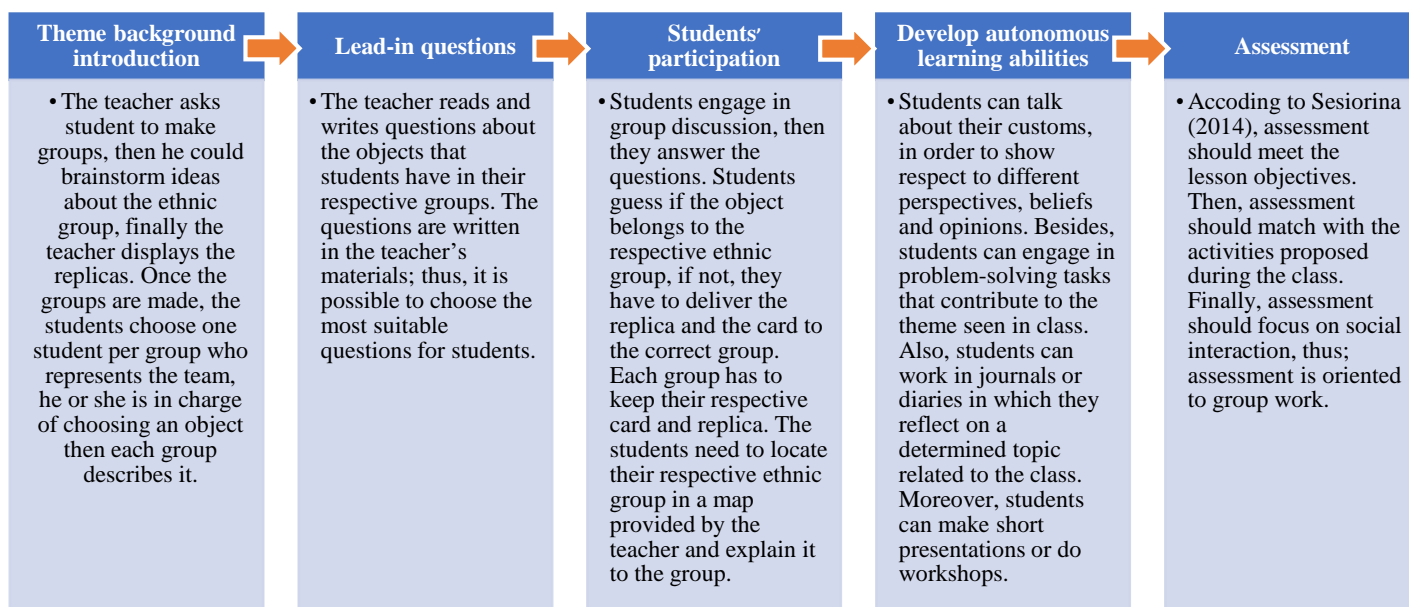
### **2.2 Integrating the didactic briefcases in the English class**

Based on the studies previously mentioned, it is important to notice that the studies carried out by Galvis (2017), Varón (2016), among others, were carried out in Spanish and specifically for Social Science and Arts. Thus, one effective way to implement the didactic briefcases in the English class can be conducted through Theme-Based Instruction (TBI), which appears as an option to foster language learning using a didactic element inside the class to teach about culture. TBI has its origins in Content-based Instruction (CBI). According to Snow (2001), the principles that support CBI origins, as well as TBI, are based on Second Language Acquisition research, Communicative Approaches, and Cognitive Psychology. Therefore, TBI focuses on communicative principles like natural language use, learners' needs, authentic materials, motivation, and communication. Thus, Richards & Rodgers (2001) expresses that TBI is a flexible teaching model that can be applied in both EFL and ESL contexts; of course, it is necessary to analyze factors like the type of setting, audience, and objectives.

In addition, Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that TBI is effective since the information given to students is perceived as interesting, meaningful, and aims at a determined goal. In this manner, students learn more successfully because language instruction focuses on students' needs. Moreover, Cameron (2001) explains that TBI organizes lessons around topics that are linked across other areas of the curriculum following the principle of "integration". According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), integration takes place when the topics foster continuity and coherence across skill areas and language is used in connected discourse instead of isolated pieces of language. Therefore, Theme-Based courses include knowledge, language, and thinking skills.

According to Brown (2001), there are no standard Theme-Based formats available for teachers; however, several important elements should be deemed in a lesson plan. Thus, if teachers want to implement the didactic briefcases in an EFL context, there are some models they could use to organize their classes. First, Yan (2005) proposes a teaching model which follows these steps: theme background introduces, text explain, text retell, theme discuss. Then, there is Hua's (2009) model, which includes: deciding a theme, setting tasks, organizing classroom activities, integrating teaching, and developing autonomous learning abilities. Finally, Xiao (2009) expresses that Theme-Based must include: preview forward, lead-in questions, students' participation (debate; group discussion and presentation; role-play; whole-class participation, etc.) back to text. The previous models can be used as a guide to organizing a class since each step has a set of activities that are connected to meet the objectives of the class.

Taking into account the didactic briefcases, the Banco de la República (2008) provides teachers with a series of booklets which are called "cartilla para maestros", where teachers can arrange their classes, each briefcase includes one. An advantage is that the Theme-Based models and the booklets are similar in the way the materials are presented. Therefore, it is possible to create a model which teachers can implement in their classes, including the different steps found in the aforementioned models:



**Graph 1.** A teaching model including Theme-Based and didactic briefcases. Source: own authorship.

The previous graph shows how a teacher can create a class using TBI and the steps to follow. It can be seen that it is possible to take some elements from the different models proposed by Yan (2005), Hua (2009), and Xiao (2009) to get a model which meets students' needs. Then, according to Weiwei (2016), the fact to include activities such as discussion, presentations, problem-solving tasks enable students to become autonomous at the moment of developing activities, and they can improve their skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

### 3. Advantages and disadvantages of implementing the didactic briefcases and TBI

#### 3.1 Lesson flexibility.

According to Mumford (2000), there are four steps to plan a good and organized theme course. The steps include choosing a topic or theme, then planning ahead, putting the plan into action, and finally evaluating. When planning the topic, both students and

teachers have the opportunity to work together by choosing a determined didactic briefcase. Then, teachers need to set objectives, plan activities and evaluate the activities assigned that increase students' curiosity, interest, and motivation for the topics included in the briefcase. In addition, Cameron (2001) states that TBI is useful since the language elements and strategies are interconnected because one specific idea connects to a more general topic, then students are able to understand a topic more completely.

Thus far, we have seen some important topics regarding the importance of culture and language and how advantageous it is since it helps both teachers and students to be more critical at the moment of interacting with another culture. However, in some EFL contexts, it is necessary that institutions prepare teachers to understand the impact of globalization and how students can start learning about their own culture and share those principles, beliefs, and opinions with other people.

In addition, Penna-Baskinger (2018) claims that teachers are enabled to implement a variety of subject knowledge into lessons to help learners make connections between subjects incorporating TBI and cross-curricular planning. Therefore, Brown (2001), as cited by Sesiorina (2014), describes a lesson plan as "a set of activities which represent steps" (p.149) because every lesson is linked to the main topic, and the teacher must prepare the topics and evaluate them. Besides, Woodward (2001) suggests that lesson planning goes beyond the written form because it can be everything a teacher can prepare for the next lesson, such as reading resources, visual aids, or topic discussions. In this manner, teachers can use all the elements contained in the didactic briefcases during the class, making the class more dynamic and interactive.

### ***3.2 Use of different learning strategies.***

Richards and Rogers (2001) claim that Theme-Based Instruction uses two basic planning techniques. First, there is "Brainstorming" this strategy consists of a mental process in which the teacher writes one topic, and then students have to give ideas related to the topic creating spontaneous links. Second, it is "webbing", in which students need to write down ideas that connect with each other going from general ideas to more specific ones. Thus, Cameron (2001) asserts that both strategies permit the connection of ideas and add elements that teachers and students want to know about the topic. Consequently, Brown (2007) argues that topics that are challenging can engage students' curiosity and motivation because they can deal with real-life topics which can range from simple to complex.

Mumford (2000) and Bourke (2006) express that implementing a class using TBI, teachers need to plan ahead how the structure of the class will be. Then, teachers need to establish objectives and determine evaluation strategies, they must also consider an introductory activity to start the unit and how students would work during the lesson (whole class activities, small group activities, individual projects or assignments), and a wrapping activity to show that the unit ends. As the didactic briefcase includes the material to work, teachers must be creative and make the class interesting for students by using reading tasks, open-ended discussion questions, videos, interviews, conferences, blogs, and students' journal.

Considering the students' proficiency level, teachers can use KWL charts for beginner students in order to write how much they learned during the lesson in a more organized way; of course, the teacher works as a guide and has to explain the steps to follow at the moment of filling up the worksheet. If students have a higher level, Frank (2013) suggests that after every session, students should keep a "culture journal" in which students can reflect on the experiences they have discussed in class. Besides, the journal can be an alternative for students to communicate their opinions to the teacher, or it can be shared with their classmates. The purpose is that students write (in English) and reflect about their learning experiences about culture and their feelings, as they become more aware of their own culture. Finally, the goal of the journal is that help students gradually become intercultural elements through their opinions, feelings, and attitudes to the activities they have seen inside the classroom.

### ***3.3 Fostering motivation among students.***

Besides, by dividing the class into topics, students can feel motivated to learn about cultural diversity considering that there are 12 briefcases in which teachers can feel free to choose and implement them in class, making the process of lesson planning a bit easier. Eventually, the briefcases provide the content to create a variety of learning activities, activities that aim to integrate aspects of other subject areas such as language learning, music, arts, and culture learning, among others.

### ***3.4 Increasing cultural awareness.***

Brown (2007) suggests that culture is the group of beliefs, customs, principles, arts, and instruments that describe a determined society through time. Similarly, Sowden (2007) deems culture as a group of traditions that include societal, esthetic, and cognitive aspects linked historically with a particular group. In this regard, Frank (2013) explains that one way to call students' attention to culture is to have a collection of information which could include movies, music, literature, currency, toys, musical instruments, and magazines. Those are elements the didactic briefcases have, and both teachers and students can benefit from them. By interacting with those elements, teachers can increase students' cultural awareness because students can handle the elements the briefcase contains as teachers explain their purpose. Indeed, the cultural aspect is crucial in the EFL classroom because

learners can work on their cultural awareness that consists of understanding their own culture and other people's cultures as well as their similarities and differences (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004). Of course, Theme-Based Instruction is the means to conduct the class since it helps students to understand the similarities and differences that might exist between two different cultures. Then, students are more comprehensive when establishing effective communication with members of another cultural group.

### **3.5 Integrating culture in the curriculum.**

Besides, another aspect to take into account is the inclusion of culture in the curriculum; Offorma (2016) states that curriculum can be a means to attend to the demands and aspirations of society. The purpose of education is to transmit opinions, facts, abilities, values, and opinions, and the curriculum reflects the culture of the people. In addition, Offorma (2016) claims that planning a curriculum; there are a lot of elements to consider, those are; the learner, the teacher, the society, principles of education, learning methodology, examinations, economy, resources, and values. These elements are linked to the culture, and culture is maintained and modified through education. According to Penna-Baskinger (2018), curriculum reform in schools centred on Theme-Based concepts, teachers and educators would ensure relevance, connect to meaningful domain skills and topics, and enhance real-life experiences when they implement Theme-Based lessons.

### **3.6 Relation of language and culture.**

Kramersch (2013) considers language as something important when it comes to recognizing cultural aspects. Thus, language is not only the use of certain words forms in cultural reality. We can find it in the real world. Besides, Kramersch (2013) adds that language and culture coexist if we add meaning to food, places, and lifestyles that constitute culture. Moreover, Kim (2003) asserts that language and culture need to be interconnected because these two elements are necessary to ensure that knowledge and experiences are effectively expressed and transmitted; if there is no language, culture cannot exist. In addition, Kim (2003) claims that language is a continuous process that allows people to acquire new knowledge, express, transmit, keep their own culture, and acquire a new one.

### **3.7 Effect of TBI on students.**

Consequently, Penna-Baskinger (2018) asserts that students can increase their engagement during lessons through implementing TBI and the didactic briefcases into the classroom, and teachers can change their teaching pedagogy. Moreover, Lam et al. (2012) suggest that a student can enhance their engagement level, increase their collaboration among peers and change their perspective on teaching pedagogy with TBI lessons because students are thoroughly committed to the tasks they have to work through the lesson, and they start increasing their interest in the Colombian indigenous cultures.

### **3.8 Effect of TBI on teachers.**

This aspect has to do with teacher preparation since TBI is a demanding teaching method; Brown (2007) suggests that creativity and organization are the keys when they plan their classes. Also, TBI demands that teachers plan their lessons in advance. They can make a list of topics and activities for each lesson, ensuring that the integration of the four language skills is used in class and motivates students to take part in the class. Moreover, Catalano (2014) recommends that teachers need to connect students' learning to their literacy level and make adjustments when teachers explain a determined topic and teach students how to think to learn in order to achieve the task they have to do.

However, there are some drawbacks at the moment of implementing the didactic briefcases since the culture component is not well explained, and the aim of the program cannot be clear. In an EFL context such as Colombia, it is necessary to mention the Colombia Bilingüe program; this program was proposed by the Ministry of National Education (2014) as a strategic plan to foster English language teaching and to improve the quality of education policy at the different levels of proficiency (basic, intermediate, and advanced). Some of these drawbacks are reviewed.

### **3.9 The cultural component is not clear.**

Fandiño (2014) explains that the principles of culture and intercultural competence are not clearly defined. Moreover, it can be seen that learning goals, teaching objects, and people who work as ideological interlocutors tend to be imprecise or varied. He also explains that including a linguocultural approach in the EFL classroom can be more positive than a linguistic-oriented approach because when learning about the culture, it is necessary to know about our culture our origins to start understanding others and develop intercultural competence. In addition, Barletta (2009) considers that most foreign language methods tend to be more mechanized. The teaching of culture is sometimes biased, creating stereotypes and routinizing the learning processes. Therefore, the process of learning a foreign language is just based on adopting a new culture regardless of the customs, beliefs, and traditions of our native culture possess.

### **3.10 Exclusivity in the English language.**

We can see that the bilingual program is focused only on English, and the aim is competitively in international markets. Nonetheless, according to de Mejía (2006) and Gómez (2017), the cultural component is not clearly defined in this program which should be essential to ensure an appropriate understanding of the new language to be learned. Some of the drawbacks found in the bilingual program can be both administrative and educational, coming from the Ministry of National Education. Thus, Fandiño-Parra et al. (2012) argue that the government has deemed English as the only language which can benefit economic empowerment, disregarding other options and strategies. Finally, Gómez (2017) mentions some misconceptions as to the development of bilingualism in Colombia because most people consider the term "bilingualism" only to learn Spanish and English, but they are not aware of the variety of indigenous languages spoken in Colombia.

### **3.11 Issues inside the EFL classroom.**

Inside the classroom, Cárdenas (2006) expresses that some problems educators may encounter are: a limited number of hours language teaching, there are not many resources available, classes are large, the number of qualified teachers is low, and the use of English language in authentic communication is scarce. Also, Gómez (2017) explains that one drawback found in the bilingual program regarding cultural competence is that bilingualism has been considered as the process of learning two separated linguistic codes neglecting the cultural and social components. Eventually, Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016) assert, "it is a source of concern that the government refers to bilingualism in Colombia as a concept that can be detached from Spanish" (p. 190). Taking into account these issues regarding teaching culture in Colombia, it is very important to consider the experts' opinions, who are continuously evaluating the bilingual plans and presenting ideas that might be useful for the Bilingüe program.

## **4. Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to highlight how the implementation of the didactics briefcases in EFL Colombian settings can foster culture through TBI. Therefore, after a carefully detailed review, it can be stated that there are significant advantages of implementing these pedagogical tools in EFL classrooms. First of all, both teachers and students can learn more about their indigenous people who represent their roots and culture. Secondly, teachers could provide students opportunities to recognize and explore cultural differences, which can promote cultural awareness. Thirdly, classes tend to be more flexible and dynamic, which eventually could make learners feel more engaged and motivated. Moreover, the different activities that can be carried out with the implementation of the didactic briefcases could foster collaboration and group work. However, at the moment of using them, it is necessary to organize the topics, activities, and tasks that might be included, considering the group's needs and context. Finally, the success of TBI implementation not only depends on teaching a target language but also on providing adequate conditions and motivating students to start learning about their own culture in order to transmit those experiences to other people and become cultural ambassadors. It is important to mention that future research could be conducted to identify the impact after implementing the didactic briefcases in the EFL classrooms.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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