UNIVERSIDAD DE ANTIOQUIA

Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito parcial para optar al título de:

Licenciado en Lenguas Extranjeras

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Medellín, Colombia

2023

Behind the Laughter: The Simpsons and Critical Media Literacy

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November 20, 2023

Abstract

This action research study was conducted at a public institution in Medellín with 30 ninth graders between 14 and 18 years old. It was aimed at exploring the effectiveness of using The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool to foster the students' Critical Media Literacy. Data were collected through a diagnostic questionnaire for inquiring about their habits, beliefs and attitudes regarding mass media and the way they navigate through the information they receive from them; a research journal in which I consigned descriptions and reflections of the implementation; a focus group with eight students selected based on their active participation in the activities and an interview with the CT in order to gather information about their perceptions and opinions regarding the project; and the students' final products which consisted of magazine entries about their opinions on social issues. Data analysis showed that The Simpsons proved to be a useful tool that helped the students develop critical awareness in terms of the recognition of the influence of media and the emergence of connections between the show and their own lives. It also showed that they developed skills for the analysis and production of media messages through the examination of their authorship, format, audience, content and purpose. Further research could focus on the application of the Empowerment Spiral to a single media product in more depth.

Key words: The Simpsons, Critical Media Literacy, Empowerment Spiral

Título en español: Detrás de la risa: Los Simpson y la Literacidad Crítica de Medios

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

Acknowledgements

These six years of academic experience sure were an emotional and vocational rollercoaster, and these months of practicum added even more reasons for that feeling. I got through them thanks to many people.

First of all, my parents, who were always there for any support I needed and who always let me know how proud they are of me. My many classmates who, one way or another, contributed to my personal and academic growth: Gabriela, Hwarang, Julieth, Barrera and Daniela just to name a few. This list would not be complete without Juan David and Mariana, whose friendship, since day one and even after parting ways – at least academically–, is one of the most valuable things this experience has left me.

On the other hand, I would not be the teacher I am today without the help of many teachers, especially Janeth, Cris, Doris, Diana, Mary, Luzma, and Stella. And I will be forever grateful for Astrid, who was one of the reasons of the success of this practicum and research process thanks to her knowledge and human qualities.

Finally, I would also like to thank Adriana, my cooperating teacher, whose advice and guidance more than once kept my feet on the ground when it came to teaching, and my students at INEM; this project would not have been possible without their interest, critical potential and energy.

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Preface

As a teacher-to-be, practicum used to look like the boogeyman, a leap of faith. I was convinced that my first experience at a school would be my downfall and my final realization that teaching was not my thing. Fortunately, I was wrong. One of the reasons for this unexpected turn of events was the fact that I was able to fulfill one of my earliest desires from before I started this academic program: bringing together teaching and learning languages, and The Simpsons. What for some people might look like a foolish thing to do, always made sense to me. As a lifelong fan of the show, I have always enjoyed seeing beyond the jokes in order to learn random facts about the world and popular culture. As a teacher, I knew the potential the show had for approaching students to a new language and the world. As a person who views in education a tool for resistance, I quickly realized it was perfect for fostering discussions about our troubled societies. After culminating this process, I can say that I reached my goal. Not only because that is how I feel, but because one of my students said: "we needed someone who showed us that The Simpsons presents a vision of our society to us (..) and I think it was Santiago who showed us that The Simpsons is a reflection of our true reality".

Description of the Context

Institución Educativa INEM José Félix de Restrepo – henceforth referred as INEM – is a public institution founded in 1970 and located in El Poblado, Medellín, Antioquia. It offers education from preschool to high school to around 3000 students from Medellín and the Metropolitan Area of the Aburrá Valley; its main campus hosts students from fifth to eleventh grade. INEM is one of several "Institutos de Enseñanza Media Diversificada" created in the 1960s with the goal of having a student-centered education. These institutions offer the students the opportunity to explore their vocational outlooks, so that they get involved in higher education or work environments after finishing secondary education.

The mission of the institution is to offer a flexible education founded in values, environmental preservation, and coexistence within a context of democracy and collaboration. Its vision is to become established as a high-quality institution that involves research with the aim of educating critical, autonomous, and creative citizens who contribute to the production of knowledge or to the workforce. To achieve these goals, students go through three different stages from sixth to eleventh grade: *rotación, rama* and *modalidad*, in which they explore different fields of knowledge such as industry, commerce, social promotion and arts, so that they are able to choose a vocational outcome for the last two years of their high school cycle.

The English department at INEM is in charge of teaching the English language to students from 5th to 11th grade in all the three stages described above, and in the English modality which expects students to attain a high level of proficiency that allows them to get more academic and job opportunities nationally and internationally. It is composed of 16 teachers, four of which teach at 9th grade. Adriana Pérez, the cooperating teacher (CT), is in charge of five groups from different "ramas" and "modalidades". She is a translator from the University of Antioquia where she also obtained a master's degree in foreign language teaching and learning. She views language learning as an opportunity to explore other worlds, cultures and mindsets,

since she considers languages to be the best vehicle to explore a culture and understand others' beliefs in a way that allows a healthy coexistence.

This action research was conducted in a ninth-grade group of the academic branch. They have four hours a week of the Humanities and Foreign Languages course in which they learn the English language with the CT, one hour each day. The classroom can accommodate around 35 students and has a television and a whiteboard. The syllabus of the English class for 8th and 9th grade follows the guidelines provided by the national and local governments consigned in the Basic Learning Rights and Guide #22. According to it, the main objective of the English class is to develop communicative activities that allow the students to understand and express themselves in a foreign language. It encompasses several linguistic topics that include a review of present tenses and introduction of past and future tenses, modal verbs, conditionals and vocabulary related to travel, and problems and solutions.

The group consists of 30 students, between 13 and 18 years old who live in different parts of the city. According to conversations with both the CT and some of the students, and some observations I carried out, the level of proficiency and engagement from the group is very dissimilar. Some of them have a basic level of the language and are able to express themselves through isolated sentences or expressions and to understand the explanations, while others only know a few words and hesitate a lot if they are asked to speak. However, they are aware of the importance of learning English and have expressed to like music from English-speaking artists and to enjoy watching TV shows and movies. They are also good at understanding written texts and writing short texts but have problems with their speaking and listening skills.

Statement of the Problem

Through some observations of the English class at the IX-6 group, I was able to identify situations with the teaching and learning practices that were worth analyzing in depth. One of those situations I identified was related to teaching practices; the main activities conducted by the CT included short presentations, dictations, reading comprehension of short narrative texts

and writing exercises. Although during reading exercises most of the interactions were in Spanish, the teacher encouraged students to participate by guessing elements of the stories and connecting them to their previous knowledge of the world. The stories used for these activities usually addressed aspects of everyday life that were related to the students' realities, and they participated by sharing their opinions.

These teaching practices led me to identify the need for dynamic and contextualized activities that allowed students to learn English, while acquiring skills that might be useful for their lives beyond the classroom. Even if the teacher intended to focus on topics that were close to the students' lives, I thought their interest could be increased if the activities and materials used in class addressed topics or phenomena that were appealing rather than just common to most of them. This could be done by using authentic materials that presented an appropriate input and brought to life their desire of expressing their opinions and feelings.

In order to support the relevance of this research concern, I collected data from three different sources: a research journal where I recorded the events and development of the classes and some personal reflections, an interview with the CT, and a questionnaire to the students about their perceptions and preferences regarding English language learning.

Regarding my research journal, at the end of February I recorded that the teacher usually gave observations to the students about the importance of their education and their responsibilities outside the classroom, and aspects related to the culture of English-speaking countries. Furthermore, reading activities proposed by the teacher emphasized on having the students make connections between what they knew and what the texts presented, and looking for underlying messages. On another observation in April, students had discussions about some sensitive topics in and outside the class activities which usually became heated because of their strong opinions. This made me think that the common interest among the teacher and the students in learning things other than the mere linguistic aspects of English was very valuable. In addition, finding a common ground between what the students wanted to discuss and what

the teacher expected from them could be more advantageous for their learning process. Furthermore, this would require providing them with appropriate strategies to express their own opinions and respect others'.

From my conversations and work with the teacher, I discovered that she believes in the importance of connecting the classes and materials to the students' experiences and everyday lives. She sees language learning as the perfect vehicle to get a glimpse of other realities and cultures, to get to know different ways of addressing problems and situations, and to understand others in order to better coexist and maximize human skills. On the other hand, when discussing the creation of materials, she remarked the importance of implementing activities that required students to look for hidden meanings or messages in a text using elements from the text itself and their own knowledge of the world.

In order to go deeper into the students' perceptions and preferences, I carried out a questionnaire where I inquired about their attitudes and feelings towards the English language, the activities and topics they would like to include in classes and their perception of the development of critical thinking at school. Regarding English and the class, there were split sentiments towards it; some students answered that they felt satisfaction and even happiness during classes, while many of them stated they felt anxiety, stress, confusion, and concern about not understanding it. Almost unanimously, they responded that learning English was important because of the opportunities they might have in the future in academic or work fields.

In terms of activities, 79% of them chose *music* as one of the materials they enjoyed at the time of learning English and 54% chose *movies, documentaries and TV shows*, and *analysis of oral and written texts*. When asked about the topics, the three most-voted options included *history* (71%), *media and its strategies* (67%) and *consumerism and econom*y (54%). Finally, when asked about the impact the school and education had in their critical outlook towards their environment, many of them manifested that school helped them acquire new knowledge that helped them reflect upon and navigate the situations that life presents to them. However, a few

of them expressed concern over the manipulation of information or the topics of discussions being outdated. From this process, I noticed that there was a degree of interest from the teacher and an inclination from the students to explore topics and situations outside of their immediate context.

Theoretical Background

In the following lines, I will present the main concepts that guide this action research project. First, I will address the concept of Critical Media Literacy (CML) and how it has been applied in Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL) contexts. Following that, I will refer to The Simpsons, its characters and settings, its use of satire and allusions, and how it has been implemented for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes.

Critical Media Literacy

For the last two centuries, the ways in which individuals and societies transmit and receive messages have changed and grown exponentially. In the past, humanity had the means to communicate just among individuals and small communities, and wide-scope messages were difficult to convey. In contrast, nowadays there are a myriad of possibilities for this purpose that include newspapers, radio, television, cinema, art, and the internet. The latter has also brought the possibility for practically every person to have a voice in the global village. Because of this, the traditional concept of literacy as the ability to read and write has become obsolete and new notions have arisen. Nowadays, humans need to develop skills that allow them to process the large amounts of information that surround them and come from different sources other than the traditional printed ones (Arikan, 2002; Esteban, 2016; Thoman & Jolls, 2005).

According to Hobbs (1998), media literacy (ML) has been defined as the process of critical analysis and acquisition of skills to create personal messages in traditional and digital means emphasizing the use of mass media texts for teaching and learning them in school contexts (p. 16). Even if media literacy has also been considered an umbrella concept due to the plurality of principles, approaches, and models that have been conceived by different

authors, most of these perspectives agree on some basic concepts that constitute the core of

ML: recognizing information as a constructed product, analyzing the codes, languages and

genres of texts, exploring the role of audiences and their perceptions, uncovering issues related

to power and ideology, and examining the motivation of the actors that create media (Kellner &

Share, 2007).

One of these models is Thoman and Jolls's (2005) *Empowerment Spiral,* a model based

on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire that can be applied for the design of lesson plans

or group activities, and consists of four steps: *Awareness, Analysis, Reflection* and *Action.* In

the first step, students start to discover things they had not noticed before in the media they

consume by connecting them to their personal experiences; in the *Analysis* step, they examine

and reflect upon the message's author, format, audience, content and motive; in the *Reflection*

step, students look for deeper questions related to their role and the actions they should take

regarding the messages, and finally, in the *Action* step, students take action by producing their

own pieces of media following the principle of "learning by doing" (pp. 198-200). The authors of

this model also emphasize that teachers do not require extensive knowledge about media, but

skills for facilitating student-centered learning.

However, the evolution of communication and the emergence of new media has brought

to light the persistence of global issues and inequalities that requires teachers to become

transformative intellectuals "who develop counterhegemonic pedagogies that not only empower

students by giving them the knowledge and social skills they will need to be able to function in

the larger society as critical agents, but also educate them for transformative action" (Giroux,

1988, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 13). This recognition of the relevance of a critical

component within media literacy gains importance when we consider that just having the tools

for analyzing and creating media is not enough for the goal of generating social changes, since

this is an ability that any other group opposed to change can also achieve (Kellner & Share,

2007).

In the same vein, Kellner and Share (2007) define CML as "an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies. It deepens the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information, and power" (p. 60). CML takes advantage of the broadened access and knowledge children and teenagers have regarding media to foster a participatory and collaborative approach to teaching. Through this approach, they acquire the necessary skills to express and question their views, and explore social issues related to concepts such as gender, race and class presented in the media they consume. This becomes relevant when considering that in CML, media and media texts are not neutral and can reproduce or challenge power relations (Robertson & Scheidler-Benns, 2016). These ideas are rooted in Giroux's (2005) definition of critical literacy as the awareness of one's role in a moral and political project that connects meaning creation to the possibility for human agency, democracy, and social transformation (p. 10).

Giroux (2005) also mentions that, for Paulo Freire, the role of language is fundamental for the construction of experience and the organization and legitimization of social practices available to social groups (p. 5). Even if Freire probably referred exclusively to the learning process of a first language, I consider that his view might also be relevant for foreign language teaching, since by learning how to communicate in a different language, we also learn how to navigate through a new set of beliefs, values, and customs, which requires us to have an open and reflective eye upon the similarities and differences between the components of our own culture and the new one. In this respect, Arikan (2002) states that ML studies in TESOL contexts have often overlooked this critical stance. He also recognizes that bringing CML into EFL classrooms can be advantageous, since it constitutes an attempt to give a real-life environment to students who live in contexts in which English is not a dominant language, or where the resources are not the appropriate ones to have a cross-cultural dynamic in the class.

Despite a perceived shortage of studies that connect CML to TESOL contexts, there are some instances that have incorporated ML in EFL classes. For example, Neiva-Montaño (2021) conducted a qualitative descriptive case study with 15 students at the Language Institute at Universidad Distrital in Bogotá, with the goal of discovering the strategies students use to promote oral interaction when working on media literacy activities and their perspectives regarding those strategies. For this, she adapted Thoman and Jolls's (2005) Empowerment Spiral; during the adapted stages of the model, students worked on radio workshops and created a radio program for the Action stage. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, recordings of the radio workshops, and field notes. The analysis of these data led to the conclusion that the students were able to develop oral interaction skills through strategies such as prompts, humor and peer feedback. Some problems encountered by the researcher was the degree of participation of some students in the elaboration of the workshops and the difficulty to connect the radio workshops to the curriculum.

The Simpsons

Even though, by the end of the 1980s, American television was flooded with family sitcoms such as The Cosby Show or Golden Girls, there was not a big comedy in the prime-time spot. Two weeks before the start of the new decade, this changed with the premiere of *The Simpsons* on Fox. It was a new show created by Matt Groening, with its roots in The Tracey Ullman Show in the form of shorts, which would later become an international phenomenon achieving a cult status among people from different ages and demographics (Ortved, 2009). The show follows the shenanigans of the members of the titular middle-class family: Homer, the alcoholic and increasingly dimwitted father; Marge, the long-suffering wife; and their children Bart, the rogue first-born; Lisa, the activist 8-year-old daughter; and Maggie, the silent one-time deadly baby. The show takes place in the fictional town of Springfield and includes a wide array of secondary characters, many of them fulfilling different roles of the people in an average city; for more than 750 episodes in the span of 33 years, it has told almost every type of story from

the simplest to the most absurd, addressing all kinds of topics, thus emerging as a popular culture staple not only in the United States, but worldwide.

Two elements that are key for the success of The Simpsons are its satirical nature that pokes fun at aspects of American culture and politics, and the allusions to popular culture. The latter, as defined by Irkin and Lombardo (2022), are intentional references that urge the viewer to make associations that go beyond the mere substitution of a referent, transposing it to the context of the new product. These allusions often refer to cultural or historical products such as movies, other TV shows, music, journals, photographs or paintings, which require the viewer to have a certain intellectual knowledge to understand and enjoy them, creating a sense of community between those who do in the process. Allusions in The Simpsons may come in the form of single jokes and frames, or complete plots of episodes. For example, in Lisa the Beauty Queen, Lisa receives the title of Little Miss Springfield in the same form that Lyndon B. Johnson was invested as president after the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Martin & Kirkland, 1992), and the episode Bart of Darkness is a parody of Alfred Hitchcock's Rear Window, in which a leg-broken Bart, after spying through his window, suspects Ned Flanders killed his wife (McGrath & Reardon, 1994).

Regarding the satirical element of the show, Thrall (1960) defines satire as a literary device in which humor and wit are combined with the objective of critiquing and encouraging change in human institutions and humanity (p. 436), and this is something that The Simpsons does quite usually, using exaggeration, parody, sarcasm and irony to mock the values of American and Western culture. However, as Matheson (2022) mentions it, the show's critique has an ambiguous nature since it avoids taking a final stance towards conservative or liberal values, for example, involving plots that sometimes highlight family values while other times subvert them. For instance, in the episode Bart Gets an Elephant, the titular elephant runs into the Republican National Convention, where there are banners reading "WE WANT WHAT'S WORST FOR EVERYONE" and "WE'RE JUST PLAIN EVIL", to then run into the Democratic

National Convention where banners instead read "WE HATE LIFE AND OURSELVES" and "WE

CAN'T GOVERN" (Swartzwelder & Reardon, 1994). This ambiguity of position has allowed the

show to ridicule everything and anything, thus allowing viewers from all across the political

spectrum and different fields of knowledge to laugh at their jokes or, as Armstron (2005) puts it:

> It is this ambivalence on meaning and significance that makes *The Simpsons* so
>
> successful, since it requires the viewer to engage with the images, text and soundtrack
>
> in order to make meanings, to consider all possible interpretations and theories of
>
> meaning that are necessary for democratic consciousness. (p. 5)

Because of this ambivalence and the variety of topics that the show has treated, The

Simpsons has been used as a pedagogical tool in several fields of knowledge or study, such as

sociology (Scanlan & Feinberg, 2000), mathematics (Greenwald & Nestler, 2004), economics

(Chu, 2014), social psychology (Eaton & Uskul, 2004), and political theory (Woodcock, 2006),

achieving generally positive outcomes in terms of student motivation and engagement. The use

of sitcoms and specifically The Simpsons is not new in the field of TESOL. Larrea and Raigón

(2019) argue that in today's globalized world, developing intercultural communicative

competences has become a necessity, and that TV shows and sitcoms are a useful tool thanks

to their authentic nature that offers a natural context for seeing language in use, while also

providing cultural information (p. 38). They also highlight the practicality of sitcoms in the EFL

classroom that stems from their short-running time and the closed nature of episodes that make

it easier for teachers to include them in lessons. Taking this into account, The Simpsons

constitutes an appropriate piece of authentic material that helps students understand more

about the target culture while also contributing to the development of communicative skills

(Rucynski, 2011). Depending on the content to be taught, teachers can choose from a wide

range of episodes that span different topics such as sex roles and gender issues, environmental

issues, health and lifestyle, educational issues and gay rights. However, it is also necessary to

be aware of the challenges of using a comedy that uses parody and satire in order to choose strategies carefully to make the show accessible for non-native speakers.

Regarding the use of The Simpsons in EFL educational contexts in Colombia, Esteban (2016) carried out a qualitative case study at a public school near Tunja, Boyacá in which she aimed at providing ten tenth graders with spaces and activities to develop critical television literacy skills. She designed a series of workshops that aimed at teaching linguistic topics but also exploring the students' critical television literacy skills through the observation and analysis of episodes of The Simpsons and The Fairly Odd Parents. Data collection methods included "artifacts" – the records kept by students –, interviews to expand the information from the artifacts and group discussions. Through the analysis of the data, she found that the students started developing critical television literacy skills by associating their own family and personal experiences with those lived by the characters, and by comparing their own realities with the ones in the sitcoms they watched. This is evinced in quotes from the students such as *"my father no se preocupa por mi estado, creencia u opinión sobre la vida. Así como Homero, es muy impulsivo al momento de tomar decisiones, sin contar con los demás integrantes de la familia"* (p. 240). They also highlighted the appropriateness of television shows to find new ways of solving problems and learning more easily. In the end, she concluded that the students discovered the importance of analyzing the messages coming from the media, but that the balance between the use of English and the students' first language had represented a challenge.

<div align="center">**Research Question**</div>

To what extent does using The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool foster ninth graders' Critical Media Literacy at a public school in Medellín?

Objectives

General Objective

To explore the effectiveness of using The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool to foster ninth

graders' Critical Media Literacy

Specific Objectives

To identify the students' abilities and knowledge regarding media literacy.

To promote the analysis of messages and rhetorical devices conveyed in an animated sitcom.

To foster students' reflections upon issues and situations related to their experiences and

contexts.

To evaluate the students' ability to create media products following a critical perspective.

Action Plan

In order to explore the effectiveness of using The Simpsons to foster ninth graders'

Critical Media Literacy, I planned to implement the following actions: First, I would disclose the

objectives, rationale and stages of the research proposal with both the students and the CT for

them to be aware of what was expected. Once the information was clear, I would design and

deliver a consent form describing the main information of the project, which the students and

their parents would sign as a proof of their approval to participate in the project. This was

necessary for ethical reasons and data transparency.

After obtaining the students' consent, I would design a short questionnaire inquiring

about their habits, beliefs and attitudes regarding mass media and the way they navigate

through the information they receive from them. This would allow me to identify the strategies

students use when presented with a piece of media and whether they take a critical stance

towards the information, the means and their creator. The collected information would serve as

a diagnosis for the strategies that would be developed in the following stages, and as a starting

point for the analysis of the progress students would make throughout the implementation.

I planned to carry out a three-stage process adopting and adapting the *Empowerment Spiral*, the model proposed by Thoman and Jolls (2015), with the second and third stages being merged into a single one. In the *Awareness* stage, I would present episode twenty-two of the fifteenth season of The Simpsons, Fraudcast News. The episode, which showcases characters Lisa and Mr. Burns in a struggle for freedom of speech, would serve as a starting point for introducing the concept of media as a constructed product with specific objectives and underlying perspectives that are worth analyzing. This stage would consist of a series of lessons in which the students would watch the episode divided by acts and analyze the elements of the plot that refer to freedom of speech, press and media conglomerates.

The second stage, *Analysis and Reflection*, consisted of introducing the core concepts and key questions regarding media literacy presented by Thoman and Jolls (2005) to the students. With this in mind, I planned to design and implement five lessons, each focused on one of the core concepts and its key questions. Through the lessons, students would be introduced to the concept and questions, they would watch a short scene or an act from an episode of The Simpsons, and then they would answer the questions based on the information presented in the excerpts with the guidance of the teacher. This would be done with the objective of providing students with the tools to analyze the messages they encounter, and having the opportunity of applying them to a piece of authentic material that presents a certain set of beliefs concerning relations of power.

In the second part of this stage, the students were expected to watch the sixteenth episode of the seventh season of The Simpsons, Lisa the Iconoclast. In the episode, Lisa discovers and unsuccessfully tries to reveal the truth about the founder of Springfield, Jebediah Springfield. Following the same process as in the previous part, the students would analyze the plot elements, dialogues and characters from the episode with the concepts and key questions previously presented. This would allow the students to apply what they learned to a complete media product, and to develop critical autonomy. During these first stages of the Spiral, the

students would work on different workshops proposed by the teacher that would be collected for subsequent analysis; this would serve as a source of information of the CML skills they were developing.

For the final stage, *Action*, students would engage in the creation of a media product based on the alternative story of a historical event or figure. Doing a similar activity to the one done by Lisa in the episode, the students would research about different views on a historical element to then create a piece of media such as a podcast, a news report or a short documentary, making public their findings and their opinions on them; this product would be collected and analyzed. This would be done to comply with the principle of ML of action as a synonym of activism or advocacy, which allows the students to come to voice, explore and expose issues that concern them.

Finally, I planned to carry out a focus group with eight of the students and an interview with the CT to gather information about their perceptions and opinions about the outcome of the project. This would be done with the objective of taking into consideration the views of the participants as they were a central part of the project. Furthermore, throughout the development of the action research, I would write a research journal in which I would consign thoughts and reflections that might arise in the process.

As a final action, I would analyze the data collected from the focus group, the interview, the products the students created in the final stage, the questionnaire they answered at the beginning of the project, and the research journal. The main purpose of this triangulation is to have different perspectives that allow me to have a more nuanced and complete understanding of the outcome of the research project.

Development of Actions

On the second stage of the practicum, I carried out the activities planned during the first semester. During the first week, I disclosed the project to the students in form of a presentation in which I explained the rationale and stages of the proposal. I also had conversations with the

cooperating teacher (CT) who suggested keeping in mind the coherence between the course

contents, the project and the final product, which was considered in the development of the

plan. For ethical reasons, I delivered the consent form to the students who handed it back

signed by their parents and themselves.

During the second week, I developed the diagnosis stage of the process in which I

implemented a questionnaire that inquired about the media the students consume, how they

relate to it and their critical stance towards it. The responses provided me with relevant insights

regarding the purposes behind the students' consumption of social media and television, and

their perception of the influence of media in their critical thinking.

The following weeks were devoted to working on the stages of the Empowerment Spiral.

Stemming from the recommendations provided by the CT, the Spiral stages were conducted in

the form of thematic units, each focused on the core concepts and its key questions with a

specific topic serving as the basis of the unit. Each unit consisted of three to five classes: in the

first classes of the week, we addressed a linguistic aspect and the main theme of the episode

as a lead-up to the final classes; in these, the students watched and analyzed the episode

assigned for that week using guiding questions and completed some production activities.

During the subsequent two weeks, we worked on the Awareness stage with the aid of

the episode Fraudcast News as planned, and with the topic of the week being news and

journalism. During the following seven weeks, we worked on the Analysis and Reflection stage.

The thematic units were carried out with linguistic topics including a review of tenses, modal

verbs and vocabulary, and each unit included the analysis of one of the key concepts from the

Spiral. The episodes used in each unit were Sideshow Bob Roberts, Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy, A

Star Is Burns, Homer's Phobia and Fraudcast News and the themes were politics, gender

issues, cinema, sexual diversity and climate change, respectively.

Because of time constraints, some changes were necessary for the final Action stage.

The original plan for the creation of a media product based on the alternative story of a historical

event or figure as a final product could not be carried out. Instead, the students created entries

for a group magazine about the issues covered in the units, in which they described the

evolution of these issues in their city and expressed their opinions about it. Even with the

midstream changes, the main objective of complying with the principle of media literacy of

action as a synonym of activism or advocacy was fulfilled.

Finally, in the closing weeks of the project, I carried out the remaining data collection

tools. The focus group with the students was conducted by a fellow student-teacher in order to

give the students participating in it a freer space to express their views on the project; the

information obtained from it was one of the most complete and useful for the assessment of the

project. On the other hand, the interview with the CT did not provide much relevant information

since she expressed she did not have enough elements to give an opinion of the outcomes. In

the final products, the students had a final opportunity to express themselves in the topics

covered during the whole project. Additionally, all throughout the implementation, I kept a

research journal which provided extensive insight about the classes and the student's progress,

especially during the Analysis and Reflection stages. All these data were later analyzed in the

last weeks of the implementation.

Data Analysis

The data collected during the implementation were analyzed following the principles

presented by (Saldaña, 2009) who considers coding as a heuristic and cyclical act in which

instead of simple descriptions, the data are constantly compared, linked and refined in order to

transcend from data to theory. First, the responses from the questionnaire, the interview with the

cooperating teacher, the entries from the journal, and the focus groups with the students were

transcribed in separate Google Docs documents; the final products were scanned and uploaded

to a Google Drive folder (see appendix A). Then, the data were organized through the creation

of codes which in turn were grouped in categories with similar themes, to later, result in the

emergence of concepts that were interpreted based on the theory supporting the study. Finally, the findings and interpretations are reported in the present document.

Findings and Interpretations

The main purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool for the development of Critical Media Literacy. After the implementation of the action plan, the collection of data and their subsequent analysis, two main findings emerged: The Simpsons proved to be a useful tool that helped the students develop critical awareness, who at the same time developed skills for the analysis and production of media messages. The evidence of these findings will be shown and interpreted in light of the theoretical fundamentals of this action research project.

"The Simpsons Is Like the World Itself"

The use of The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool for the development of Critical Media Literacy resulted in the students' recognition that behind every piece of media, regardless of how vacuous it may seem, there are underlying messages and ideologies waiting to be unveiled, and that those messages or situations are usually a reflection of their own realities. As mentioned in the theoretical background, this usefulness stems from the wide variety of topics the show has treated in its 34-year history (Rucynski, 2011).

The Simpsons as More Than a Comedic Cartoon

As part of the diagnostic questionnaire, the students were asked about the types of media they consumed, their objectives for consuming them and how often they analyzed and questioned them. The option *Television* had 27 out of 29 students stating they consumed it; 24 of them stated they consumed it for entertainment purposes, nine for information, four for forming opinions and seven for education. Furthermore, two and 16 stated they never and sometimes analyzed and questioned the content from it, respectively; while, only three and five said they frequently or always analyzed and questioned it (See figure 1). This finding is relevant

because it shows that, at the beginning of the process, the students were not aware of the

power television has outside of mere entertainment.

Figure 1

Consumption of Television by Students
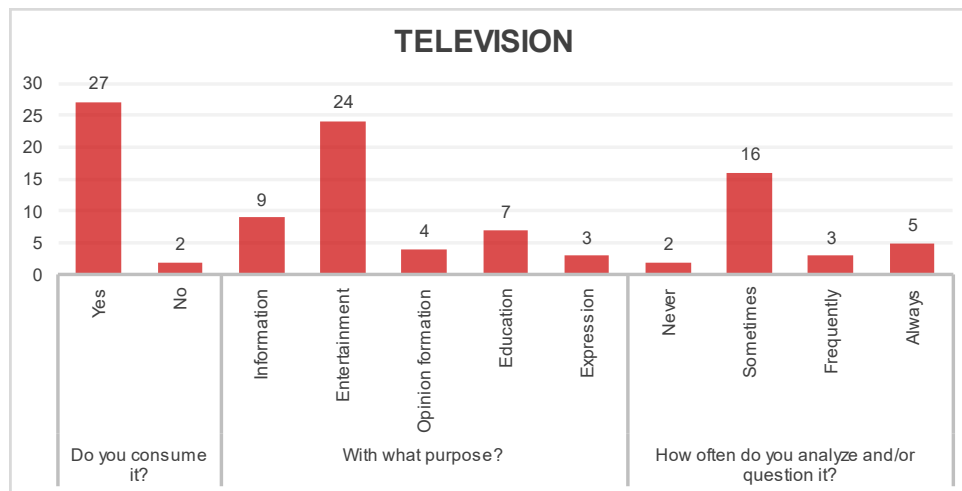
The aforementioned unawareness also translated into their perception of The Simpsons.

During the first weeks of the project, I led a session introducing the show to the students in

which I inquired about what they knew about it and its characters. In the research journal entry

of August 7th, I wrote that "many of them mentioned the alleged ability [the show] has to predict

the future, and some responded that they had never seen it". After the students watched several

episodes of the series covering different topics, they showed greater awareness of the universal

nature of the stories presented in the show. During the focus group, some of the students

manifested that thanks to the activities, they were able to see The Simpsons as "not just a

simple cartoon, but as something worthy of reflection", that "despite being a mockery, the show

has real-life themes" and that "although it is a comedy, the show covers very important topics

and raises awareness in an entertaining and funny way"[1]. This evidence goes in line with

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[1] All data from the focus group were collected in Spanish and translated by the author.

Rucynski's (2011) claim that The Simpsons is a "treasure trove" of material for EFL classes due to the presence of lighter cultural topics or deeper social issues.

Connecting The Simpsons to The Real World

Another remarkable aspect of the use of The Simpsons in the EFL classroom, which actually stems from the previous point, is that it allows students to reflect upon their own experiences in light of the plots and themes present in the episodes. For example, one of the students participating in the focus group highlighted that, after watching and analyzing Springfield's mayoral campaign from the episode Sideshow Bob Roberts in class, he was able to draw connections between the episode and the mayoral campaign in Medellín, which was in course during the implementation of the project. He stated: "I felt the political campaign in Medellín was based on attacks and defenses (…) it polarized the city and that was also shown in The Simpsons, where people started hating each other because of the news, events and discussions; the same thing happened in our city during the electoral campaign". Another student mentioned that she became aware of the sensationalism of newspapers and that it reminded her of the things she saw in The Simpsons. Finally, one of the students remarked that "you can in fact draw comparisons to reality. As absurd as it may be, The Simpsons is like the world itself". This finding bares resemblance to Esteban's (2016) results in which her students also connected the things they saw on television with the experiences they had with their families.

"Water Causes Cancer": The Empowerment Spiral in Action

After the implementation of the Empowerment Spiral (ES) in class, which included the analysis of *mise-en-abyme* elements from the Simpsons episodes, the students were able to develop skills that allowed them to analyze other pieces of media they consume. Throughout the project, the students showed greater awareness of the power of media and the presence of embedded messages in them, reflected upon and analyzed the concepts of authorship, format,

audience, content and purpose of media, and were able to create their own pieces of media

expressing their views on several social issues.

Awareness

Even since the beginning of the project, the students already showed a somewhat

critical stance towards media and recognized the power it has in influencing individuals and

society. In the diagnostic questionnaire, when asked about the possible influence of media in

their thoughts and behaviors, some of them mentioned manipulation by "large entities" and

creation of standards and stereotypes. However, according to the same questionnaire, they

predominantly viewed television and cinema as means for entertainment, and most of them only

sometimes questioned the content they got from them (see figures 1 and 2). On the other hand,

they were more analytical towards social media as their purposes for using them were more

varied. (see figure 3).

Figure 2   **Figure 3**
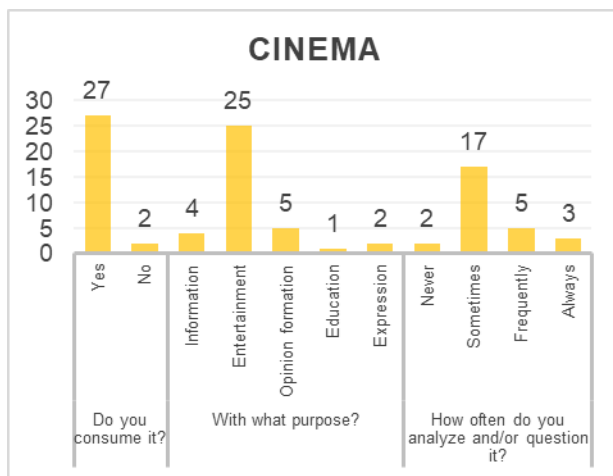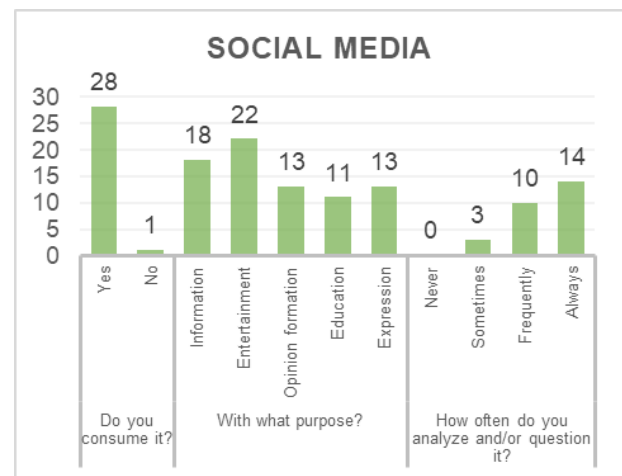
Consumption of Cinema by Students   *Consumption of Social Media by Students*

After the implementation of the project, they showed increased eagerness to find things

they had not noticed before in the media they consume. In the focus groups, one of the students

mentioned that, after the interventions, he remembered newspapers, television and radio still

existed and realized they influenced society. Another student said that "when *Barbie* came out, I told myself 'Let's analyze this movie, because if Santiago is teaching this to us, it is because we need to be critical'" and that now he sees content in social media from mainstream Colombian press and notices they manipulate people. These responses and attitudes from the students show that, as mentioned by Thoman & Jolls (2005) "awareness activities provide the 'ah-ha' moments that unlock a spiral of critical inquiry and exploration that are the foundation of media literacy pedagogy" (p. 198).

Analysis

Thanks to the work based on the key questions and concepts from the ES, the students became aware of the different components of the media they consume and acquired new elements to analyze them. For example, according to the journal entry of September 11th, the topic of the week was gender issues, and the key concept was format; the students worked in groups dissecting a short documentary of Malibu Stacy and I wrote that "they focused a lot on the fact that the purpose of the documentary was to sell the doll, and many thought it was a commercial. They emphasized a lot on the sexist nature of the doll and its depiction". Likewise, in the week of October 2nd, the topic was sexual diversity, and the key concept was content; the students were able to identify the stereotypes about gay people present in the episode and, at the end, some of them remarked the deceptiveness and the danger behind those beliefs.

In addition, when asked about their roles towards media after the project, one of the students in the focus group manifested that the clout of social media influencers relies on the creativity of their products; she then shared a hypothetical case: if an influencer told her that water caused cancer in an entertaining video, she would be more likely to believe it than if it was a classmate saying the same thing. This fictional example shows that she is aware of the relevance of the format of a message and proves that, as Thoman & Jolls (2005) mention, "the power of media literacy lies in figuring out how the construction of any media product influences and contributes to the meaning we make of it" (p. 199).

Reflection

During the implementation, the students also had the opportunity to share their opinions about the episodes. In the week devoted to covering LGBTQ+ issues and after identifying the stereotypes about this community present in the episode Homer's Phobia, one of the students said she would not show it to a child because they would think those stereotypes to be true. Also, during the week devoted to talking about cinema, the students shared their opinions about a short film that was part of the episode's plot and their movie preferences. Additionally, in the week whose theme was politics, the students were asked to create campaign posters for the candidate participating in the mayoral election in Springfield as if they were part of the campaign teams. From their work in class and creations, I wrote in the journal that I noticed they usually "took a satiric stance towards the candidate they chose and mocked them while campaigning for them". This shows that the students are not only able to dissect and identify the components of media, but also to react and take an active stance towards it, fulfilling the purpose of the Reflection stage by questioning themselves about their role towards media in light of their own values and beliefs (Thoman & Jolls, 2005).

Action

Even if the Action stage was the last stage of the project, the students demonstrated their ability to make their voices be heard all throughout the course. They created posters for political campaigns in a subtly satirical way, had passionate discussions about gender equality and, finally, created magazine entries with their opinions about social issues. These entries showcased their awareness of the history of oppression women have gone through, the responsibility of governments and organizations in the preservation of the environment, their own responsibilities as young people for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, among other opinions (see appendix B). In addition, when asked how they would feel about creating their own media products after the implementation of this project, one of the students expressed his desire for transmitting emotions, avoiding manipulation and fostering critical thinking, while

another said she would have a wider and more critical opinion. Finally, the CT mentioned in the interview that she noticed the students are "a little bit more eager to talk about these topics, like LGBT community and gender, race, many other things". These findings match Thoman & Jolls' (2005) description of Action in the ES as the opportunity for students to formulate constructive action ideas in a space where all points of view are taken into consideration, equating it to activism or advocacy.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This study was aimed at exploring the effectiveness of using The Simpsons as a pedagogical tool for the development of Critical Media Literacy. First, the show proved to be successful at awakening the students' awareness of the presence of messages and ideologies in the media they are exposed to by connecting the plots and themes to their own experiences and reflecting upon issues that are relevant to them. Second, the students were able to develop and use their knowledge and abilities for analyzing the different components of media products, problematizing their own perspectives towards them, and creating their own media artifacts in which they came to voice and expressed their own views.

The nature and organization of the institution and the course where this study was conducted allowed the successful implementation of the project. The vision of the institution focused on educating critical and autonomous citizens, the inclusion of democracy-related topics in the English curriculum and the high frequency of weekly classes made it possible. In other contexts, it would be possible to focus on fewer or a single episode of the show or a different piece of media (a journal article, a short film, a song, a short story), or addressing a single social issue in order to conduct a more in-depth analysis with the goal of developing Critical Media Literacy.

Reflection

As I mentioned in the preface, I always knew that the teaching practicum would be a challenge for me as a student and as a teacher. Even if it indeed was, it was also a very

rewarding experience. I had already been working as a teacher at an academy for almost a year when I started this process, but I feel that teaching at a school was a very different experience that has left me some foundations for any future opportunities at schools. The whole process of sharing my knowledge with a new generation and helping them in the process of becoming critically literate was something that I always looked forward to, and I can say that I was successful at it. Not only did I learn from my students, but also from my cooperating teacher who guided me through the experience of teaching English at a public school and through the dynamics and complexity of such an institution.

As a researcher, I was able to acquire new skills and knowledge that I hope will help me become a better teacher and, maybe, continue doing research in the field of critical pedagogy and media literacy. Engaging in an action research process was perhaps the most challenging aspect of this practicum; there were moments where I did not know what direction I was heading in the project or where I thought it would not work out because of time constraints or other external factors. However, I am satisfied with the final result, and I know that now I have more elements to make any future research project more navigable.

In general, I think that this practicum was an excellent final lap of this long process as a student. I was able to fulfill one of my earliest desires as a teacher and can now look at the future with at least a little bit of hope through the inevitable uncertainty.

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Appendix A

Data collection tools: questionnaire, final products, research journal and focus group

These can be found in the following link: [Behind the Laughter: Simpsons and CML - Google](#) [Drive folder](#)

Appendix B

Extracts from the students' entries for the final project

Our opinion .

Gender violence in Colombia has been a historical problem that has included domestic and sexual violence and armed conflicts. Despite legal and social advances, gender violence persists as a major challenge. For the future, cultural changes, greater awareness and participation of civil society are needed to promote gender equality and combat violence. The process will be continuous and will require long-term efforts.

General opinion

We as students want a world in the future where can live healthily, we think that this city needs a better civic culture and that organizations such as the government and companies support and take mearsures to help the enviroment, all for our future and for a better future.

In our opinion, sexual diversity is an important issue for our time, it is not just about loving differently we are all humans with rights and it is ... (The youth) who must build a more respectful and tolerant future and present