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Autor

Dany Arbey Herrera Hurtado

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Using Critical Media Literacy (CML) to Promote Students' Critical Awareness in a 10th
Grade EFL Class in the East of Antioquia

Dany Arbey Herrera Hurtado

Research and Practicum Advisor

Carlos Danilo Restrepo Méndez

Magister in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Thesis Advisor

Diana Milena Calderón Vargas

Magister in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

El Carmen de Viboral

June 2020

Abstract

This document reports on an action research project developed through a 10-week term intended to explore how a critical media literacy (CML) unit could foster critical awareness about gender issues depicted in media. The participants were 33 tenth grade students of a public institution in Eastern Antioquia. Data were collected through researcher journals, class artifacts, and surveys and analyzed using a qualitative approach. The results suggest that students started a process of decoding gender issues portrayed in media and became more interested in learning English through the analysis of social issues. Accordingly, this research showed that thinking and acting critically entails a process of production so that awareness does not stay at the level of decoding media messages.

Key words: Critical Media Literacy, gender issues, critical education.

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 El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Preface

Returning to high school classrooms after more than 11 years, now as a teacher, represented a whole new experience for me. As a pre-service teacher, the practicum was the time when I had the opportunity to apply the theoretical bases in EFL teaching that I acquired in all the undergraduate courses. This opportunity was also beneficial for my personal growth as a human being in the sense that I could have first-hand interaction with teenage learners and their different realities, usually conceived as problematic and difficult to understand. Acknowledging the frequent exposure this population has towards the manifold ways of communication, and a scarce problematization of the EFL teaching content, I decided to resort to my interest in media in order to use and analyze some media texts from a critical stance. This allowed me to learn and to be aware about issues such as the embedded and hidden purposes that media creators have and the possible effects on media consumers.

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Description of the Context

The present Action Research (AR) project was conducted at Institución Educativa San Antonio, a public school located in the urban area of San Antonio de Pereira in Rionegro, Eastern Antioquia. This institution includes both a primary and a secondary section which hold a mixed nature (both male and female students are accepted). Its educational population consists of approximately 700 students and around 30 teachers who attend a single shift schedule (Informal interview to CT, August 26th, 2019). Its institutional mission aims at the development of honest, autonomous, and happy citizens who can face the challenges of their settings through respectful attitudes towards diversity. Regarding its vision, by 2020 this school intends to be recognized by the local community thanks to its significant pedagogical practices, educational quality and its contribution to both the social and cultural development of their environment (Institución Educativa San Antonio, 2017). As for its pedagogical model, it is framed under the construction of a model of community, society and people who can convey positive attitudes, foster coexistence and respect the fundamental rights (Institución Educativa San Antonio, 2018).

In regards to the English class, it was a 10th grade course taught twice a week: three hours in total. The classroom had favorable space and lighting conditions for the development of the course (Journal Entry 1, August 5th, 2019). As for the English subject syllabus, the Institution follows a curriculum map framed under the national standards proposed by the National Ministry of Education of Colombia (hereafter MEN, for its acronym in Spanish) and adapted by the English teachers of the Institution (Informal interview, August 26th, 2019; MEN, 2016). This document proposes the contents, competences, activities and the assessment criteria to be followed throughout the four

terms of the school year (Formato Plan de Área, Institución Educativa San Antonio, 2019). As of August 26th, 2019, the teacher started using a textbook that she had never used in this particular class called English, please! Fast Track Edition; a textbook proposed by the MEN in 2016 (Journal Entry 3, August 26th, 2019; MEN, 2016).

Concerning the participants for this study, they were 33 high school students whose ages ranged from 14 to 19 years old. The majority of them lived in San Antonio de Pereira and other places of the municipality of Rionegro, Antioquia, and belonged to the socioeconomic strata 2, 3 and 4. Their interests in learning a foreign language comprehended, mainly, learning about their likes through activities such as miming, drawing and role-playing. In this vein, a reduced number of these students had taken English courses in language academies and programs offered by the Municipality of Rionegro (Students' Survey, February 17th, 2020).

The present research study also counted on the participation of my cooperating teacher (hereafter CT), my practicum and research advisor, and myself, the researcher. The former holds three postgraduate studies in education and a Bachelor's degree in English and Spanish. Besides English, she also taught Spanish and Literacy in the school. She had been a teacher for 20 years, 17 of them in this Institution. Concerning my advisor, he is a professor at Universidad de Antioquia and an English teacher in a public high school. He holds a B.A. degree in foreign language teaching and a Master's degree in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. As for me, I have around five months of experience teaching English and French to children and adults. My interests with regards to language teaching comprise oral skills development and the use of visuals and technology and media in language teaching.

Statement of the Problem

Language learning has been commonly understood by some language theorists as the mastering of a set of universal patterns and rules (Van Dijk, 2004). However, these notions have evolved along with the understanding of what learning a language means, moving from the mere comprehension of those rules towards a view where the learner is more engaged in communicative tasks. Nonetheless, this evolution has translated into a reduction of language to a system for merely transmitting messages, where the social, cultural, political and historical implications of language teaching are usually missed (Pennycook, 1990; Akbari, 2008). This might happen, in part, due to either a superficial or nonexistent analysis of the content of the language lessons, an aspect seldom discussed in the field of language teaching and learning (Cook, 1983).

This phenomenon was evidenced in the context where this study was developed. Based on classroom observations and on informal interviews with the cooperating teacher (CT), I noticed the lack of emphasis on activities that promoted further discussion or analysis around the content addressed in class (Journal, October 16th, 2019). Although most of the students seemed to be proficient in terms of writing — approximately A1 based on the CEFR descriptors— (Council of Europe, n.d), and in the command of grammatical structures (Journal, September 18th, 2019), there was a weak emphasis on the rest of the linguistic, and critical thinking skills (Journal, September 11th, October 16th, 2019). This might happen due to the emphasis on grammar and writing exercises proposed by the teacher: On the one hand, the students were frequently asked to create mind maps, to answer questions, to transcribe readings from a textbook and to write during a whole class (Journal August 5th, August 21st, August 26th, September 18th, 2019). On the other hand, the

teacher expressed that she worked solidly on grammatical structures with the students during the first part of the school year (Informal interview with CT, August 26th, 2019), which shows the aforementioned overemphasis on grammar.

In accordance with this issue, it is important to consider the types of activities, as well as the content addressed in the EFL classroom in order to avoid an exclusionary vision of the world. In this regard, Pennycook (2016) asserts that rather than being neutral, English is also an “exclusionary class dialect” (p.26) which favors particular groups, cultures and chances of development. Moreover, neither the school culture nor the English language is totally neutral (Canagarajah, 2002). According to Canagarajah (2002), this impartiality is usually manifested in the forms of “sexism, classism, and racism in classrooms” (p. 134). In this regard, a case of racism was evidenced in the class when a group of students started telling racist jokes about Africa, “*¿Por qué los misiles no caen en África? Porque no dan en el blanco*” (Journal, November 6th, 2019). Although the previous case was not strictly related to the EFL learning process, the lack of problematization and exploration of the teaching content might favor these issues to happen in this particular class.

Regarding the linguistic aspect, the students were not usually challenged to produce oral language in a free manner. When they were asked to use oral English in class, it was generally with the purpose of producing isolated sentences that they reproduced verbatim after writing them on their notebooks (Journal, September 18th, 2019). In addition to this, the students were not usually exposed to the target language by the teacher. In this sense, she considered it as useless the utilization of English during the whole class (Informal interview with the CT, August 26th, 2019). These two situations, along with the

overemphasis on grammar and writing, might impede the production of students' spontaneous oral language inside the classroom.

Acknowledging that the proliferation of mass media has reached the capacity to shape society (McQuail, 1977), I intended to resort to the notion of Critical Media Literacy (CML) as a means to bring teaching content that includes issues to which students might be exposed in our context. In this regard, according to Kellner and Share (2005), CML involves the development of the intellectual tools and skills to extensively participate in culture and society through the reading, interpretation and production of certain types of texts and artifacts. It sets forth “models of practice that embed the process of meaning-making – as opposed to the media (or its various forms of content)” (Kendall & McDougall, 2012, pg. 2). In this vein, this study explored the ways in which CML can help students to become critical towards the content found in different media texts.

Theoretical Framework

Taking into consideration that the focus of this study was the lack of exploration, problematization and analysis of EFL content in class, I framed its implementation on the critical paradigm; namely, under the frame of critical literacy and critical media literacy (CML). In this section of the report, I first present the concept of critical literacy as the theoretical lens that guided this action research. Second, I introduce CML and some of the principles and models that were used during its implementation. Finally, I briefly present some CML studies that have been carried out and the necessity of media literacy education in our context.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an instructional approach whose roots may be traced to the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire who empowered Brazilian and Chilean peasants to become critically conscious of their oppressing realities through the introduction of vocabularies related to their daily experiences (Fajardo, 2015). Through his literacy program, Freire (1974) established a relationship between the act of teaching how to read and the awakening of people's consciousness. In this sense, literacy is understood as more than just reading and writing. It entails a focus on the connection between literacy and power (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, as cited in Fajardo, 2015). Shor and Freire (1987) also posit that the focus of critical literacy is on ideology critique and on how the world is portrayed in media, literature and texts. Additionally, it seeks to question the historical and current privileging and exclusion of groups of people and ideas in mainstream narratives instead of promoting any particular reading about a particular group (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

As for its aims, CL encompasses the use of language as a tool for raising awareness in people's contexts. According to Janks (1999), this can be done through a detailed textual analysis as to denaturalize ideologies in texts and to show how the existing power relations systematically advantage some groups over others (as cited in Luke & Dooley, 2011). Pedagogically, this implies resorting to language as an object of conscious awareness, making an explicit instructional emphasis on teaching how texts work ideologically (Fairclough, 1989). According to Luke and Dooley (2011), this can be done by analyzing several text genres, paying special attention to their lexico-grammar structures, their ideological content, and discourses.

Critical Media Literacy

Critical media literacy (CML) is a teaching approach framed under the critical literacy tradition. It is based on the Freirean notion of *praxis* — a combination of theory and practice — that encourages “students [to] create their own media representations for audiences beyond the classroom walls” (Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013, p. 111). According to Kellner and Share (2007), it is also an educational response that “deepens the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information, and power.” (p. 60). Besides this analysis, the core purpose of CML deals not only with the critical evaluation of different forms of communication, but it also “focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, resistance, and pleasure” (Kellner and Share, 2007, p. 62). According to these authors, when students are able to understand how media construct people’s meanings and how they influence the audiences by imposing their messages and values, they become critically aware (Kellner and Share, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the aforementioned definition was considered in order to explore students’ critical awareness.

CML in the classroom. In terms of classroom instruction, CML has its own principles and models. These models are enclosed under the conception of having alternative media production as an essential item, as well as on the idea that it allows students to empower and challenge media narratives through the creation of their own messages in the form of counter texts (Garcia, Seglem & Share, 2013).

The model that was followed throughout the implementation of this study relies on the *Empowerment Spiral* proposed by Thomas and Jolls (2003). Such spiral is a four-stage framework intended to organize media literacy learning and teaching in class. According to these authors, this model has proven to be an appropriate process for opening a spiral of inquiry that leads to greater comprehension, critical thinking “and ability to make informed judgments.” (p. 31).

The stages are organized as follows: 1) *Awareness*: activities where students do observations and personal connections to media in order to be conscious of the different media they encounter in their lives. 2) *Analysis*: It implies activities and questions intended to help students to better understand the complexity of an issue, “what” happens in the media producer-audience exchange, and the influence of the “construction” of any media product on the meaning people make of it. 3) *Reflection*: It encompasses activities and questions that consider the influence of philosophical, religious and ethical principles in group decision-making; and 4) *Action*: In this step, students are given the opportunity to conceive action ideas in the form of activities that represent increased awareness (Thomas and Jolls, 2003).

As for the principles, Kellner and Share (2005) propose the five core tenets of CML: 1) Principle of Non-Transparency: All media messages are “constructed”; 2) Principle of Codes and Conventions: Media messages are made using a creative language with its own norms; 3) Principle of Audience Decoding: Different people experience the same message differently; 4) Principle of Content and Message: Media have embedded values and points of view; 5) Principle of Motivation: Media are arranged to gain profit and/or power.

Additional to these principles, Kellner and Share (2019) introduced what they called a “Critical Media Literacy Framework” (p. 1) as the theoretical underpinnings for CML. Such framework consists of six conceptual understandings based on different fields of cultural studies and critical pedagogies. Each of these fields comprises key questions belonging to each one of the core principles, which are intended to inform the different understandings of media artifacts in scopes such as social constructivism (“who are all the possible people who made choices that helped create this text?”); language/semiotics (“*how* was this text constructed and delivered/accessed?”); audience/positionality (“*how* could this text be understood differently?”); politics of representation (“*what* values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing from this text or influenced by the medium?”); production/institutions (“*why* was this text created and/or shared?”); and social and environmental justice (“*whom* does this text advantage and/or disadvantage?”) (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 2). In general terms, those are the theoretical foundations I adhered to during the implementation of the present study.

Finally, although the critical approaches are not specifically thought to be used in the field of foreign language teaching and learning, the inclusion of critical work in language instruction has grown (Pennycook, 1990). In this sense, there is evidence that students exposed to media literacies have enhanced their critical awareness (Zárate, 2016; Camargo, 2017), as well as their communicative skills in a foreign language (Giraldo, 2016). However, the evidence of such enhancement in our specific context is still scarce.

Research Question and Objectives

Research Question

How may a CML project promote critical awareness on a group of tenth graders in their EFL class?

General Objective

To examine how the implementation of CML education may foster students' critical awareness about gender issues portrayed in different media texts.

Specific Objectives

- To explore how the principles of CML may have an influence on students' points of view in regards to social issues portrayed in media.
- To determine how the Empowerment Spiral may provide students with opportunities to formulate action ideas aimed at responding towards gender issues depicted in media.
- To help students develop the necessary technological and multimedia skills to produce and edit a simple audio-visual artifact.

Action Plan

The purpose of the present action research project is to promote EFL students' critical awareness about social issues depicted in media, namely sexism and gender roles. It had a duration of 10 weeks in which students would perform different activities following Thoman and Jolls' (2003) *Empowerment Spiral* model for CML education. This is a four-stage model that proposes activities for *Awareness, Analysis, Reflection* and *Action* regarding media texts. In this section I present the teaching actions, objectives and data collection techniques that I intended to implement for carrying out this project.

The first action would involve some activities for the *Awareness* stage. During the second and third week of the implementation, I intended to introduce some of the most common platforms and media formats where the different types of media can be found. This action aimed at helping the students to identify and to be aware of the types and amount of media they usually consume in a daily basis, presented in the form of a written reflection.

Subsequently, in the fourth and fifth week, I would work on the *Analysis* step of the spiral. Its purpose is to analyze what happens in the exchange between the media producer and the audience and how it influences the meaning that the students make of any media product, as Thoman and Jolls (2003) propose. For this purpose, we would review some advertising techniques in order to help students understand how those strategies may influence a person's meaning-making and analyze media content under the light of the CML five key questions.

As for the *Reflection* stage, during the sixth and seventh week, discussions and activities aimed at inquiring about the possible principles and reasons that guide media producers' and consumers' decision-making would take place.

Finally, we would work on the *Action* stage during the following two weeks. During this stage, we would agree in choosing a multimedia format in which the students would present a response to the content analyzed in the previous stages. This action also included teaching about media production in regards to the chosen format, in case the students agree on presenting in digital formats.

As for the data collection procedures, I used my journal entries, class artifacts of students' production and homework assignments, and I intended to carry out a focus group

with four to six students. These techniques would allow me to collect the information to analyze and explore whether there was an impact of this CML unit on students' critical awareness or not, triangulating with my theoretical framework.

Development of Actions

Although the initial plan included the four stages that Thoman and Jolls (2003) propose for the implementation of the Empowerment Spiral, the Reflection and Action stages could not be carried out due to the dynamics of the institution during the COVID-19 quarantine.

In the first week of implementation, I carried out a survey (see [Appendix A](#)) intended to inquire about students' interests concerning their preferred topics and activities, among other aspects about themselves in order to update the context section of this report. After that, I started with the Awareness stage. During this step, I developed a brainstorming activity intended to elicit what students understood by media. I subsequently introduced some of the existent media texts and platforms, with the aid of printed images. As a product for this stage, students wrote a short text in which they explained to what extent the activities they perform on a daily basis include the use of media, either voluntarily or involuntarily in the form of advertisements seen in the street, radio and TV programs, etc.

During the third and fourth weeks, my CT requested me to work on grammar activities that included the use of linking words and the introduction of vocabulary related to hobbies and sports.

In the fifth week, face to face classes were suspended nationwide by the National Government of Colombia due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2020). After that week until the end of this study, the implementation was made

through two workshops in Word documents in which I mixed grammar activities and items pertaining to my project. Such items consisted mainly in pieces of advertisements displaying sexist messages and portraying gender issues that students analyzed under the light of Kellner and Share's (2005) five key questions in order to activate the Analysis step of the Empowerment Spiral. Due to other activities proposed by the institution and my CT which did not include working on the workshops, the second document was not shared with the students until the tenth week of the implementation.

Between the fifth and tenth weeks, I worked on the elaboration of the second workshop and in the creation of a blog to upload some activities I had planned (see [Appendix B](#)). As for the workshop, it included activities in which students had to express their point of view concerning what men and women can or cannot do according to them, as shows the figure 1 below.

2.3- Imagine an alien arrived to Earth and it does not know anything about live here. It goes to your house and asks you what activities he can do to have fun. What would you recomend if it was a man? What would you recommend if it were a woman? You can also talk about what you consider he/she should not do. You can follow the example below:

Imagina que un alien (extraterrestre) llega hoy a la tierra. Este no sabe nada de la vida de este planeta. Imagina que llega a tu casa y te pregunta qué actividades puede hacer para divertirse. ¿Qué le recomendarías si el alien fuera un hombre? ¿Qué le recomendarías si fuera una mujer? También puedes poner lo que consideres que no pueden hacer. Puedes seguir el siguiente ejemplo:

Figure 1. Workshop 2, April 27th, 2020.

The main activity included a cartoon of *Condorito*® showing a message where two men laughed at a woman (see figure 2). In this activity, students had to describe what message they perceived in the image and to write a new script in which a different message was portrayed.



Figure 2. Condorito Cartoon. Retrieved from www.pinterest.cl

These activities intended to activate the Reflection and Action stages of the spiral. However, the workshop was developed by only four students who had to solve it in order to have a passing grade for the school term. As the final step for the data collection process, in the last class of the implementation I shared an online survey aimed at inquiring students' perceptions related to the process.

Data Analysis

This research project aimed at exploring how a CML project may promote critical awareness towards gender issues depicted in media in a group of EFL learners in a public educational institution. The main objective was to explore how the principles of CML may have an influence on their points of view in regards to social issues portrayed in media. In order to analyze and report the results of this study, I collected and analyzed data from journals, students' artifacts, and an online survey administered to students. Data were firstly compiled into separate documents where I selected the useful information based on my theoretical framework, and subsequently organized and triangulated using ATLAS.ti™ software for assigning codes and defining categories, which were later discussed with my research advisor. Most of the data were collected in a virtual scenario in the form

workshops in Word documents developed by students from their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings and Interpretations

After several revisions to the data, final categories emerged, which were: a) decoding gender issues depicted in media, b) consuming media more carefully and c) fostering language learning through critical approaches. This section presents the evidence that pertains to these findings and my interpretations.

Decoding Gender Issues Depicted in Media

Collected data evidenced how students showed signs of awareness about gender issues depicted in different advertisements and media texts. The signs were manifested mainly in the ability for reading and unveiling embedded gender messages conveyed in pieces of advertisement.

Uncovering gender roles portrayed in media. Data from this research allowed me to evidence that students showed a capacity to decode and to identify hidden philosophies and values that are socially assigned depending on each person's gender. This could be noticed during one class activity where students analyzed a set of images in a Carrefour advertising for children's day (see figure 3). They questioned how the the media text was to assign certain roles to boys and girls as it is evidenced in the next excerpt:

“The boy benefits and the girl is disadvantaged. The problem is that the company has a huge error in not realizing that in the statements there is a clear and marked assignment of roles, which shows inappropriate sexism in advertising” (Students' class artifact, May 19th, 2020).

The previous excerpt shows how students could identify sexist roles conveyed through the advertising items they analyzed. Thus, they showed signs of understanding how media share specific values and points of view by assigning a specific set of roles depending on the gender. In this respect, one of their five key principles proposed by Kellner and Share (2005) states that no media text is innocent and that every text is loaded with specific embedded values and points of view. In this sense, Thoman and Jolls (2003) add that when students are able to ask even simple questions on the content they consume, this is the starting point to the process of awareness. In terms of media literacy, this reveals that students noticed how media narratives can either privilege or exclude groups of people and ideas, which is one of the issues that critical literacy intends to question (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).



Figure 3. CARREFOUR ad. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2ALrhmg>

Similarly, students were able to identify stereotypes portraying women. While analyzing a TV advertisement related to two soap brands sold in Colombia, students could notice that they depicted the stereotyped idea that women must be housewives and that they are the ones in charge of washing and cleaning, as evidenced in the following comment: “Of course I have, the main characters in the commercials are women and they are talking about washing and cleaning, it is clear that they mean that that is a women’s job”. Another student expressed the following, “It has stereotypes of gender, appearance, nationality. The

protagonists are women. The women are mothers and housewives” (Students’ class artifact, May 19th, 2020).

As it is visible in the excerpts above, students were able to identify and question the common ideology portrayed by some media advertisers that women are born to be housewives. In that regard, Kellner (1995) explains that when students have the ability to question an ideology, they gain greater understanding of their realities and the world around them, which is shown in a form of critique towards the mainstream media and the ideology, power and domination present in every media that they consume. In this sense, acknowledging that the participants of this study live in a context mostly permeated by chauvinist and sexist ideologies, they are frequently exposed to a reality which may translate into an externally acquired way of acting, which is influenced by assumptions and detached from any critical view. That is why it is crucial to talk about gender stereotypes as a component that should be addressed in schools since, according to the Council of Europe, the role of the school is fundamental in promoting gender equality, being an instrument for positive change by raising awareness and confronting misinformation (2014).

Consuming Media More Carefully

Results from the data show signs of awareness in terms of students’ understanding towards what media portray, which is translated in a different way of consuming media. This was evidenced in a survey carried out during the last week of the implementation where participants had the opportunity to express their perceptions towards what they had learned throughout the process. In this sense, a student asserted that now she consumes media in a more thorough manner, paying closer attention to the different points of view that they present. The following entry in the survey exemplifies this assertion:

“Le doy un análisis muchísimo más profundo a los diferentes puntos de vista que se aparecen en frente por medio de publicidad y otros medios, he llegado a identificar más fácilmente las actitudes de machismo sexismo y discriminación que muchas veces e estos se dan.”

(Online survey to students, May 29th, 2020).

The fragment above shows how students became more conscious when they consume different forms of media, either in pieces of advertising they may find or in other formats. In this case, the student expressed that she can now identify sexist and discriminatory attitudes in media content more easily, which allows her to make a deeper analysis towards what media portray. In the same vein, another participant affirmed that now she is more careful with the information she shares in social media, avoiding making others feel bad, “He aprendido a leer más y entender para luego no hacer sentir mal a alguien con lo que comparto en redes sociales o en casa” (Online survey to students, May 29th, 2020).

These answers show that, at least at the level of students’ perception, this study had a positive effect on the way that students act and react towards media and analyze them. In this respect, Gainer (2010) asserts that when media audiences are capable of doing such analysis through the decoding of media messages, they gain the ability to create their own meaning from the texts, which is sometimes reflected in readings that challenge dominant ideologies. It would be interesting, however, to see if these students act accordingly to what they expressed. Nonetheless, considering the purpose of this study, I believe that these comments do reflect a positive impact in the sense that the participants seem to be critically aware towards the social issues they find in the media when they consume them.

Fostering Language Learning Through Critical Approaches

Although critical approaches in EFL teaching have been criticized for focusing merely on social and political issues and neglecting the process of language acquisition (Rashidi & Safari, 2010), results from this study reveal that, at the level of students' engagement, analyzing social issues in class had a positive impact in the sense that some students became more interested in learning English.

Gaining interest in learning English. Data gathered during the last weeks of the implementation showed that analyzing social issues in class had a positive influence in terms of students' interest in learning English. This was evidenced in an online survey in which students had the opportunity to express their opinions towards the inclusion of the topics that I addressed during both the face to face and the distance learning scenarios. According to some participants, analyzing social issues in class benefited their English learning process while increasing their interest about gender issues:

“Me parece muy bien porque ponemos en práctica nuestro análisis, nuestro conocimiento y a la vez nuestro inglés y nuestra capacidad de argumentar y entender lo que pasa a nuestro alrededor pero aprendiendo en un diferente idioma, entonces es muy interesante”

“Bien, son buenas actividades que ayudan a aprender mucho más de inglés”, “Me gusta porque dan más ganas de aprender de esos temas y más inglés” (Online survey to students, May 29th, 2020).

As it is illustrated above, students reacted positively to the idea of addressing social issues as teaching content in the EFL class, which derived into interest in broadening their learning of both the content itself and the English language. A possible reason for this is

that most of the activities developed during this study included students' making personal reflections and analysis of different media texts, in which they were given the opportunity to use the language in a more natural and free manner than it would be by answering isolated grammatical questions.

In this respect, Giraldo (2016) expresses a relationship between the implementation of critical literacies and the interest in learning a language when she claims that, "while they (students) are excited about what they are doing, they are unconsciously acquiring a second language and improving their communicative competences" (p.10). This assertion shows that although CML and critical theories are not specifically envisioned to be implemented in the field of language teaching and learning, they play an important role in the way learners are engaged or not towards critical analyses. In this sense, acknowledging that addressing the linguistic aspect is one of the roles of pre-service teachers, I consider that any teaching methodology that may foster students' critical thinking abilities at the same time they learn a language represents a gain, as the previous comments made by students illustrate it.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This study had as the main objective to examine how the implementation of CML education may foster students' critical awareness about gender issues portrayed in different media texts. After finishing all the process, I conclude that the stages that I could implement during the project helped students develop the process of reading and analysis of gender issues and stereotyped representations in media texts such as videos and images. This was reflected in students' capacity to question the content they consume, which is the starting point to becoming critically aware as theory suggests. Additionally, they seemed to

be aware of the importance of consuming media carefully. However, it would be essential to see students' responses towards hegemonic media texts in the form of creation of content, which could have been explored through the implementation of the whole cycle, namely through implementation of the Action step. This means that although students showed signs of awareness in terms of message-decoding and analysis, it would be necessary to see if they act accordingly to their comments, or if they stay in the analysis stage. In this respect, although the activities of analysis and production can happen independently, there would be more gain if both activities were combined in a cohesive way. Bearing this in mind, I also consider that becoming critical is an ongoing process that can be hardly proved in a single-term unit with acceptable levels of reliability, especially with the constraints that this specific study had. I hence consider that more data would be necessary to prove a gain in critical thinking or acting by students.

Apart from the objectives, this project comprised some implications for pre-service teachers' pedagogical practices and pedagogical training in this context. To begin with, I consider that teachers using a model to analyze media such as the Empowerment Spiral should be very careful when planning the lessons. That is to say, they should be aware that the implementation of their projects, and teaching might be permeated by completely unexpected situations that may hinder or delay the planned teaching steps. To continue with, teachers interested in implementing critical approaches should know that this process demands a lot of preparation and time. For example, they must be very committed in regards to gaining the ability to interpret any advance or change made by the students in terms of critical thinking or acting. Sometimes those changes are subtle in a way that they could be unperceived by the teacher-researcher. To finish with, I consider that teachers

interested in embarking into critical approaches should work in exploring different ways to make the learning process appealing to students because sometimes bringing social and sensitive contents to the class may have a counterproductive effect in terms of a possible lack of interest by students in learning. This could be done by reflecting on their own processes, considering students' reactions, as well as sharing information with other teachers that had worked under similar methodologies before.

This study provides a better understanding of a positive impact of activities related to critical analysis of media content and showed students' acceptance in bringing and analyzing the teaching content. Nevertheless, another suggestion for future actions following similar stances is to investigate more thoroughly how these actions may have an influence in the way students behave in their own contexts, as well as in the possible benefits these types of actions could have in linguistic aspects such as the communicative skills.

Reflection

Conducting this action research study as a pre-service teacher mostly during a period of pandemic times posed a wide variety of challenges, but it also allowed me to reflect and learn about my role as a future in-service teacher.

Concerning research, I learned about the importance and value of having face to face classes for the aim of collecting and analyzing data. I found that doing action research does not necessarily mean having a perfect project where the teacher-researcher can implement all the procedures proposed in the teaching methodology and initial plan. Additionally, considering the main objective of my project, I believe that fostering critical

awareness on gender issues is a process that would take more time and actions to be developed and even more time to be observed under closer contact with participants.

Regarding teaching, I also refer to the importance of a face-to-face scenario for providing further explanations and instructions regarding what students are asked to do in each activity. During this study, the instructions had to be given in short lines of a Word document, which sometimes meant that students developed the activity differently to what was proposed. Similarly, I understood that listening to the students is fundamental for any teaching process in order to be aware of how the students react towards aspects such as the nature of the activities, their length and the clarity of the instructions. In this specific study, this could only be done during the first month of implementation.

Learning from those difficulties represent only a little portion of the challenges that teaching in both face to face and distance learning scenarios may bring along, especially when the change from one environment to the other occurs almost overnight. However, I see all these situations as a meaningful learning that allowed me to have a reference point to have an insight on what I would have to do differently in future opportunities in order to grow and develop my own experience as a teacher.

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