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Promoting Dialogic Action through the Expansion of Language Learners' Communicative
Repertoires

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Abstract

This action research project intended to foster dialogic action through the expansion of language learners' communicative repertoires in a 6th grade class in a public school in Marinilla, Antioquia. During the English lessons, different modalities of representation and linguistic resources were included aiming to reflect about learner's own realities. The analysis of journals, learners' interviews and artifacts allowed me to understand the diverse and differential communicative repertoires of learners, how they played with available representations to transform meanings, and how their often violent and competitive interactions remained unchanged during the intervention. Findings show the emergence of some elements of dialogic action, reflected in the creation of spaces for reflection and transformation of meanings through the use of diverse representational forms.

keywords: Critical literacies, Communicative repertoires, Dialogic action, Multimodality, Visual representation.

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

There are things that are so ordinary that seem to have always existed. Such seems to be the naturalization of the endeavour of English teaching in Colombia. We know that there is a national policy of bilingualism and that English has been taught in public and private schools for generations. Yet, why do we teach English in public institutions? What do we teach English for? Are learners going to use English in the future? Are they using it now? How? Why is there a subject exclusively dedicated to English? What is left behind in the English class? What else are we teaching apart from English? Is the classroom the only space for learning? Are our classes “communicative”? What does it mean to be “communicative” in our context anyways? We should admit that for most of these questions the answer is either inconclusive or non-existent, which is not a problem. The problem would be not to keep these questions alive.

This action research, that I conducted in my very first experience as an English language teacher in a public setting, was motivated by a myriad of questions and doubts I still have about my own endeavour. It seems to me that we are taking many things for granted in our practices as language educators, and in the conceptual elaborations of the field of language education. This study allowed me to live in between the tensions of theory and practice. Many reflections emerged from this process, some of my prejudices about public schools, and some of my assumptions about language teaching were challenged.

In this study, I was able to explore what communication could mean in a situated English class, I could give a sense to the exercise of teaching English in this context, and I was able to create spaces for learning, communication, reflection and dialogue. I invite the reader to explore how I attempted to go through these reflections while I took them to action.

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Description of the Context

I conducted my practicum and this action research project during two semesters in two different 6th grade classes at the Institución Educativa Técnico Industrial Simona Duque, in Marinilla, Antioquia. Marinilla makes part of the eastern region of Antioquia, a zone that was historically affected by the Colombian armed conflict and a territory of tensions between two opposed cultural projects: one that represents rurality, traditional values and conservatism, and another that represents urbanity, modernity and diversity (INER, 2013). Precisely, the institution promotes the former project through a competency-based model on technical education for work that seeks to contribute to modernization and international competitiveness, including some specializations in crafts such as electricity, automotive mechanics, and metallurgy (Manual de Convivencia MC, 2007). Additionally, the institution seeks to promote analytical, complex and critical thinking aiming to prepare students to live in a diverse democratic society (MC, 2007).

The institution is located in the busy streets of Marinilla downtown. The facilities of the institution consist of a three-story building and two sport courts that barely have green areas. The secondary school location includes learners from the 6th to the 11th grades. As for the resources, the institution has internet connection in some rooms, video beams, speakers, tablets for students that include an English textbook, and a computer room with internet connection.

The 6th grade English class emphasized vocabulary learning, grammatical structures, and translation, which is coherent with the institutional official syllabus and institutional assessment system. Learners participated in three hours of English per week, distributed in two sessions. These sessions were mainly devoted to individual activities that promoted

vocabulary learning and pronunciation, the translation of sentences, the reading and production of sentences and short texts, and the explanation, analysis and use of different grammatical structures. Regarding oral production, learners lacked confidence when speaking, did not show willingness to speak and usually needed the support of their notebooks to do it. That is why, Spanish was used as the language of interaction in the classroom, and English was used mainly in rehearsed classroom routines. In addition, I observed few group work activities, and the activities that addressed speaking and listening were limited to reading aloud exercises. These activities were aligned with the official English curriculum that seeks to develop reading and writing skills mainly (Malla Curricular Inglés MCI). Similarly, the institutional examinations presented reading comprehension, and grammar exercises. These tests were designed by a group of English teachers from the institution, it was taken 4 times per year and had a great influence on the contents that were addressed in the class.

The two 6th grade classes in which I conducted this research project were composed of 40 students on average, from 11 to 14 years old. Most learners belonged to middle and low social strata, and some of them came from different regions of the country and Venezuela. Even if some of the students were receiving psychological support from the institution, most of them were participative and disciplined in general terms. They had basic knowledge of simple grammar structures and vocabulary, and they were able to write short texts describing activities related to their interests. As for learners' interests, generally they liked sports, video games and popular music. In addition, learners often interacted very violently during the lessons, and sometimes the classes were very noisy.

The cooperating teacher (CT) is licensed in Spanish but was assigned the English class four months before I started this project. She also holds a master's degree in education, and she is currently studying a doctorate program. She has 13 years of teaching experience, and does not feel very confident about her proficiency in English, even if she has studied the language and would like to continue learning it. She conceives language learning as a process that requires a lot of discipline and study, and considers that it is important to transcend reading and writing and address also listening and speaking.

Statement of the Problem

Communication is a widespread label in the field of language education. In Colombia, this concept has a pervasive presence in academic research, linguistic policies and curricula. However, this concept has traditionally been understood in a very restricted and centralized manner (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Consequently, it is necessary to revisit this concept in our language teaching and learning contexts.

In the class, I observed a very restricted conception of communication, in the sense that language was conceived more as a prefixed set of rules, than as a dynamic and creative process that involved the use of different forms of expressions to convey meaningful and ideologically charged representations about our realities. For instance, the class was centered on activities and contents related to vocabulary learning, the manipulation of grammatical structures, and the translation of sentences and short texts. In one of the classes I observed, “the teacher asked them [students] to transcribe (...) the uses of the past continuous tense” (Journal 05/08/2019). These activities focused on the written forms of the language and learners mainly worked with sentences and paragraphs. The dynamic of the class was in line with the official syllabus of the institution, the institutional and national assessment, the

teacher conceptions about language learning, and the learners' demands. Nevertheless, as grammatical structures were the main criteria for the selection and creation of texts, often oppressive ideologies and decontextualized cultural contents entered inadvertently the class. For instance, in one of the classes, learners were presented a text about touristic places in Miami without any contextual information (Journal 23/07/2019). Additionally, according to the data I have collected, learners engaged in very particular communicative practices. They used a variety of linguistic resources from English and Spanish to communicate in online and offline environments. In addition, they used different kinds of media, and they were used mainly to audiovisual modalities related to very specialized interests such as gaming and TV series. In this vein, it was necessary to expand the concept of communication in language education to take into account the cultural contents of communication, and to include learners' contextualized communicative practices, and their use of different linguistic and semiotic resources.

Furthermore, in traditional communicative theories, communication is thought as a process that takes place in a vacuum disregarding the personal relations that are built among learners through interaction, the power relationships that are established in the classroom, and the need to use language to create dialogue and transformation. Precisely, in my classes, I observed some problematic ways in which learners communicated and interacted. On the one hand, class activities tended to be individual and there was a very competitive environment. When working in groups, learners tended to reject low achiever students, and conflicts arose frequently among them. In one of my journals, I described this situation when I implemented a group activity: "I realized that some students were rejected by all their classmates" (Journal 12/08/2019). Additionally, sometimes there was a very noisy environment, and learners usually did not listen to the teacher's instructions, nor to their classmates contributions. On

the other hand, instead of dialogue, violent interactions often appeared as a way to process conflicts in the classroom. When I asked one of the interviewed learners about this situation she claimed: “[boys] don’t talk, they just fight” (semi-structured interview 03/09/2019, translation by the researcher). Although for some learners these interactions were just a game, they constantly ended up being real fights. In this sense, it was necessary to revise the ways in which communication was taking place in the classroom among learners.

Taking learners communicative practices into account, during the first action research cycle, I carried out some activities aiming at including some communication formats they were familiar with such as memes and the creation of visuals. Additionally, I implemented different strategies for learners to listen to each other and share their experiences with the class. In these activities, they were very engaged and were able to communicate some of their ideas using visual and oral modalities. Although these activities evidenced the use of different forms of representation, they did not necessarily fostered a critical reflection around learners’ realities, and there was not necessarily a transformation in learners personal relationships.

To conclude, it was necessary to take into account the need to conceive communication as a holistic process that includes both diverse practices and forms of representation, and the relationships and meanings that are negotiated in the language learning environment. For this reason, in this project I intended to foster dialogic action among language learners through the expansion of their communicative repertoires.

Theoretical Background

In this section, I present some of the theoretical approaches and concepts that will illuminate this study. In the first place, I briefly define the traditional concept of communication in the field of language education and outline some criticisms to the concept

of communicative competence. Then, I describe how traditional conceptions of communication could be expanded from a critical and post structuralist perspective of language. Finally, from a critical perspective of literacy, I argue that it is necessary to conceive language education as a dialogic process in which we need to take into account the contents, the roles and the purposes of communicative practices in and outside the classroom.

Communication is a label that has become pervasive in the field of language education. Specially, the concept of communicative competence has exerted a strong force and shaped every aspect of language pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). In Colombia, linguistic policies (MEN, 2006) have included this notion from the CEFRL (Council of Europe, 2001). Despite the great acceptance of this concept, some scholars have pointed to the restricted concept of communication that this model conveys, presenting idealized conversational situations, and compelling language learners to adapt to the “native speaker” communicative patterns (Kramersch, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2016). Consequently, it is necessary to reexamine this concept in language education, taking into account the real and contextualized communicative practices of learners and their use of different linguistic and semiotic repertoires (Canagarajah, 2017) inside and outside the classroom, in online and offline environments.

In the last two decades, as a response to the criticisms to the idea of communicative competence, some post structuralist theorizations of language and culture have emerged in the field of critical applied linguistics that have dramatically expanded the concept of communication in various ways. From these conceptions, language is no longer conceived as an abstract competence placed in the speakers mind, but as a social practice that is localized historically and spatially (Canagarajah, 2017). In this vein, there has been an expansion in the

conception of the resources for communication in two main ways. On the one hand, languages are not assumed as distinct entities with clear borders, but as linguistic resources that could be used indistinctly to communicate through **transglossic practices** (Dovchin et al., 2018). On the other hand, critical conceptions of literacy have sought to cope with the new communication environment brought about by social realities such as multiculturalism, multilingualism and the extended use of information and communication technologies. One of them is **multiliteracies**, that theorizes on how new communication practices draw upon different modes of meaning such as the oral language, visual representations, audio representations, tactile representations, gestural representations and spatial representations (Cope & Kalantzys, 2009).

According to this understanding of communication, in this study I will draw from the concept of design, proposed by Cope and Kanlantzys (2009) as a conception of representation that understands communication and meaning making as a dynamic process. In this sense, **designs** are both a structure and a process of creation. That is to say, in any of the modes described above, there could be 1) **available designs** as found representational forms, 2) **designs**, as the appropriation and revoicing of available designs, and 3) **redesigns** as the transformation of the world and people through the act of designing. Accordingly, in my practices I tried to understand how learners used available linguistic and semiotic forms to convey their own meanings, and how that process could allow them to redefine and transform those designs.

Apart from an expansion of the concept of communication from a linguistic and semiotic point of view, it is also necessary to consider the contents, the roles and the purposes of such communicative practices in language education. In this sense, it is necessary not to

restrict the role of communication in language education to the use of the linguistic resources of a particular language, but to understand how education in general in any subject area could be considered a process of communication. From critical pedagogy, we conceive education as a process of dialogue (Freire, 2018) in which different cultural elements are brought to the conversation between the participants in the educational process. From a Freirean perspective, the content of these conversation should come from the contextualized realities of the particular groups that participate in the educational process, and the ultimate purpose of dialogue is the emancipation of the oppressed and the oppressors (Freire, 2018). In that sense, from a critical orientation to literacy, language education should go beyond the acquisition of the ability to exchange information through the encoding and decoding of different modalities; instead, communicative repertoires should serve the purpose of critically analyzing the unjust contexts and realities of language learners to transform them.

From this perspective, dialogic action is a contra hegemonic force that seeks to overcome antialogical forces, by creating public spaces for participation and deliberated action. Accordingly, for Giroux (2001) schools should constitute democratic public spheres where learners could exercise discussion and participation in order to constantly question the hegemonic assumptions in society. By so doing, dialogic action allows the oppressed to emancipate themselves through trust, cooperation for the transformation of the world, union for liberation, organization and systematic and deliberate action (Freire, 2018). This allows overcoming the oppressive forces of antialogical action that prevent the humanization of peoples, by neglecting their right to use the word to construct their own realities, and dividing oppressed peoples through individualism, manipulation and cultural invasion. Embracing a dialogic perspective of education in my practice, I intended to observe whether communication in the English class allowed the construction of dialogic action evidenced in

the reflection of learners about their own realities, cooperative work, conflict resolution, and understanding among participants.

Research Question

How to foster dialogic action through the expansion of English language learners' communicative repertoires in a sixth grade English class in a public school in Marinilla, Antioquia?

Objectives

General Objective

To understand how the use of different communicative repertoires could foster dialogic action among learners in a sixth grade English class in a public school in Marinilla, Antioquia.

Specific Objectives

- To propitiate spaces for the dialogue of learners around problems that affect their own realities through the use of different communicative resources.
- To analyze how learners engage in dialogic action through the reflections about their own realities, collaborative work, and negotiation with their partners.
- To explore the ways in which learners interact and address conflicts in the classroom during the implementation of the actions.

Action Plan

In order to promote dialogic action through the expansion of language learners communicative repertoires, for the second part of the action research cycle, I proposed the following actions to be implemented during 10 weekly sessions of 2 hours each. Since violent

interactions were a recurrent situation I observed in the institution, I decided to explicitly address violence in order to foster a dialogue around learners realities through the use of visual modalities of representation. Firstly, I planned to conduct some preliminary activities aiming at understanding learners' communicative practices, and sensitizing them towards the topic we were going to address. Secondly, I planned to conduct four workshops that aimed at allowing learners to 1) express their feelings in the class, 2) to recognize physical and verbal violence, 3) to analyze violence in media, and 4) to reflect about bullying and cyberbullying. In each of these activities, learners were going to create a reflection using a different design of visual representations, for example, infographics and bubble speech drawings. After that, learners were going to share these creations with their partners.

Additionally, I planned to conduct a project with learners in which they could reflect about violent situations in media, their neighborhoods or school. This project was organized following the steps proposed by Legutke and Thomas (as cited in Mesa & Frodden, 2004) namely, opening, topic orientation, research and data collection, data processing, presentation, and evaluation. Aiming at promoting cooperative work, learners were going to work in groups to construct a visual representation of their choice (infographic, collage, poster). In this activity, learners were also going to include other voices in their creations looking for information, taking pictures or interviewing key people about the violent situation they would like to address. Through these visual representations learners were going to be able to reflect around their own realities from the use of communicative resources from English, Spanish and visual modalities.

Development of actions

In this section I present the actions I carried out in order to achieve the purposes of this action research. Since I developed this action plan with a new group of learners, I made

some adaptations to understand the group better and to fit better their needs. Aiming at understanding the particularities of learners linguistic and semiotic repertoires and their communicative practices, I carried out an activity in which learners interviewed each other about their patterns of media consumption and their favorite media products. According to the analysis of learners communicative practices I decided to ask learners to create different formats of multimodal communication such as drawings, memes, chats, and comics.

During the first weeks of this intervention I had to negotiate my action plan with some requirements of the official grammar-centered syllabus in the school. Given this circumstance, it was not possible to conduct all the workshops that I had planned for the first five weeks of the action plan. However, I could adapt some activities to include collaborative work and interaction among learners about their daily life experiences. This allowed learners to interact more during the English class. Additionally, I could observe their interactions, their use of English in the class, and collect some artifacts from the activities developed in class.

After the 5th week of my intervention, a sanitary emergency was declared in Colombia as consequence of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, all students went on vacations during a month and the classes were resumed after being redesigned to be conducted through a distance-learning modality. Accordingly, I redesigned two of the workshops to be developed independently by learners. The instructions were sent via Whatsapp, and in some cases copies were sent to the learners that did not have access to internet connection at home. I also collected some of the work of learners sent as pictures via Whatsapp. The distance modality posed many challenges for the implementation of the actions because some learners had no access to internet connection, which made communication with them difficult. Additionally, some learners manifested being

overwhelmed with the homework sent by their teachers, so I decided to send very few short activities. At the end of my intervention I made a maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2012) in which I selected two learners to be interviewed, according to their level of access to technological resources during quarantine. I conducted two short interviews via telephone call and video call and asked learners about their education process during the lockdown.

Data Analysis

With the aim of reaching my research goals, I implemented the following process of data analysis. Firstly, I collected the artifacts of the survey activity and compiled the information of learners' responses on a matrix. Then I applied simple descriptive statistics measures to have a general picture of learners communicative practices and patterns of media consumption. For journals, class artifacts, and learners' interviews, I applied Miles and Huberman (1994) process of coding and categorization to data assisted by a software called QualCoder (Curtain, 2020). This process was inductive and deductive, since I defined some pre-established categories based on the first cycle of data analysis and some theoretical concepts, but I also openly coded some data that emerged and I considered relevant regarding the research question. I applied the process of coding to journals and learners' interviews, after having read them carefully. I also purposefully selected some class artifacts according to theoretical concepts and coded them following the pre-established categories. After coding and categorization, I displayed the emergent codes and categories visually to identify relations among them. From this process of interpretation, I could identify some themes that were emerging in data which are presented below.

Findings and Interpretation

The data analysis described above, allowed me to conclude that enabling learners to use different communicative repertoires and express themselves, created spaces for the

reflection and transformation of meanings about their own realities. In this section, I present the themes I could identify namely, 1) Learners communicative repertoires: diversity and difference, 2) Playing with forms and transforming meanings, and 3) Swimming upstream: keeping relationships among learners untouched at school.

Learners Communicative Repertoires: Diversity and Difference

One of the aims of this study was to identify language learners communicative practices and repertoires. Contrary to restricted conceptions of communication in traditional methodologies of language education, the conception of communication in this study includes different forms of representations and meaning making, the linguistic resources from various linguistic codes, and different modalities of representation such as the written language, the oral language, and audio, tactile, gestural, and spatial representations (Cope & Kalantzys, 2009). In this theme, I describe how learners' communicative repertoires and practices are diverse as their interests and cultural backgrounds, and how they have a differential access to these resources.

Diverse communicative practices and repertoires. From the analysis of collected data, I could identify a great diversity among learners in terms of age, gender, socioeconomic background and geographic origin. This diversity was also reflected on a varied list of communicative repertoires and interests. For instance, during interviews and class activities, learners manifested being familiar with different forms of media including social networks, instant messaging, video games, video streaming platforms, music, films and television. Despite this wide range of communicative practices in the group, individual learners were not interested in all of these forms, but tended to concentrate on very particular formats of communication and had very particular personal interests. For example, some learners reported being very interested on rap music, youtubers, anime, and gaming. When I asked

one of them about his preferred ways of expression, he answered: “I like to sing mentally (...) the music that I like (...) I like heavy metal and rap music and so on” (Interview with Santiago 03/09/2019, translation by the researcher).

Despite the diversity of forms of communication, an element was common to most of them, namely the visual modality. According to Kress (2003), this predominance of visual forms of representation is explained by the transition from the page to the screen as the dominant site of representation, where the logic of the image dominates semiotic organization of different texts. In this vein, learners not only showed being acquainted with visual representations in their reports about their preferred media, but they also were more engaged during different activities that included the reading and creation of visual representations. For example in one of the classes “I walked through the classroom and saw that many students were engaged drawing using colors” (Journal entry 07-02-2020).

From all the diversity of communicative practices, I could also identify the use of different linguistic resources among learners. Inside the classroom, I could observe that Spanish was used as the language of interaction and instruction, and English was used mainly in rehearsed classroom routines. Nevertheless, outside the classroom, some learners reported using some words from English in their interactions in instant messaging, listening to music in English, watching videos in English, and interacting with English speaking people through video games: “I have an Xbox, so I have some friends that speak English, so I speak with them to learn” (Interview with Andrés, 03/09/2019, translation by the researcher).

From the previous analysis, it is apparent that the diversity in learners communicative repertoires and practices comes not only from the use of English and Spanish in the classroom, but also from their use of different tools and media in online and offline

environments. In the next section we will explore how the access to different material resources could also create differences in learners communicative repertoires.

Differential access to communicative repertoires. The differential access to material resources emerged as one of the factors that could explain the differences in the communicative repertoires of learners. This was particularly evident during the development of some activities in a distance learning modality, as the communication with some learners was limited because of their lack of access to the internet, or technological devices. These learners needed to do their activities in paper, and in some cases I was unable to receive the work of some of them. For example, in a journal entry I described how from a total of 44 learners “So far we have received 15 workshops from students. I don’t really know how many students are going to send the workshops in paper” (Journal Entry, 06/05/2020).

In the two interviews I conducted at the end of the implementation, it was apparent that some differences in the access to material resources such as internet connection or electronic devices had an impact in the communicative repertoires to which learners had access. One of the learners that participated in the interview did not count with internet connection at home. He reported using his dictionary to look up for words when working at home. When asked if he had internet connection at home, he replied: “I don’t, so I go to a stationary store to look up for the answer” (Interview with Juan 11/05/2020, translation by the researcher).

On the contrary, another learner manifested that he had a cellphone, a computer and internet connection at home. This learner also expressed that when working on the activities: “We do research, or we also have a lot of books, or sometimes the things that mom knows” (Interview with Tomás 12/05/2020, translation by the researcher). He usually looks up for vocabulary on an online translator and reported having studied English and French in his

former private school. The use of these linguistic repertoires was also reflected in the work of a number of learners, who had have access to English courses in private settings or in their former public schools, and some of them were able to transcend simple formulaic sentences (see figure 2), to present more elaborated ideas (see figure 3).

The contrast between these two cases shows how the material access to resources such as electronic devices or internet connection plays a role in the symbolic access to differentiated communicative repertoires. Following Janks (2010), “access to discourse is highly regulated and that system of exclusion produce distinctions which privilege those who get through the discourse gates” (p. 133). In this sense, this author points to the way different discourses, literacies, and linguistic codes are differentiated, in the sense that they have different status. At the same time they are differentiating, in the sense that they classify subjects according to the discourses to which they have access.

Playing around with Forms and Transforming Meanings

In the previous section I addressed the importance of taking into account language learners communicative practices. In this section, I will explore how embracing those practices and resources in the English class created spaces for learners to manipulate various forms of representation and to transform meanings.

Using and breaking molds. When manipulating the available designs that were introduced in the lessons, there were various degrees of transformation both in the linguistic forms and in the visual representations. Provided with the same available design, learners responses were very different in terms of the way they manipulated it. According to the data, I could identify that these differences could be attributed to some extent to the different attitudes towards the English language and the diverse and differential communicative resources of learners.

On the one hand, during my interventions I could observe how some learners' attitudes and beliefs about the English language did not favor their participation in the class and their ability to use the language more creatively. Since the class and the official syllabus was centered on grammar, some learners tended to think of language as a fixed set of rules, and thus they were fearful of committing mistakes. On the other hand, the differential communicative repertoires of learners could explain how some of them were very attached to the models presented in class, while others were able to make more significant transformations to them.

Nonetheless, the fidelity to the available design, or its redesign was also evident when working with visual representations. In one of the to-do-at-home workshops, I presented learners some Marvel superheroes I knew they were familiar with, and asked them to create their own superheros. Some of them, created their own versions of Marvel superheros, others, created superheroes that consistently kept their mainstream characteristics, but some of them created more human and close versions of superheros. When I asked one of the learners about the process of creation of his superhero he told me that he was inspired by his pet that is a rabbit, an also by "Dragon Ball, or other movies that I have watched with my cousin, for example Batman, Superman, or movies that we have like the Justice League" (Interview with Tomás 12/05/2020, translation by the researcher). As explained by Dovchin et al. (2018), the engagement of young adults with different forms of popular culture not only provide content to the conversations but also voices and linguistic resources.

Although the limited English linguistic resources of some learners could prevent them from expressing complex ideas, in some cases they were able to use visual representations or Spanish to do so. For instance, after reading a comic about bullying in English one of the learners wrote this reflection using Spanish: "The reflection could be that sometimes

problems could be solved with a smile and talking, we cannot discriminate other people, and maybe give a hand to those who need it can help us find a new friend” (Class artifact 18/05/2020, transcription and translation by the researcher). This is consistent with the experience of Janks (2010) in a third level class in a multilingual context in South Africa, where she found that the limited linguistic ability of children “limits what can be said” (p. 131), and that they could convey more meaning by using visual representations.

Transforming meanings. The analysis of different class artifacts allowed me to identify that the redesign of available visual and linguistic representations served the purpose of transforming the meanings conveyed in those representations. In some cases the available designs that were presented in the class were transformed in order to express facts about learners realities. For example, one learner created a more human superhero that could help save lives during the covid-19 pandemic (see figure 1).

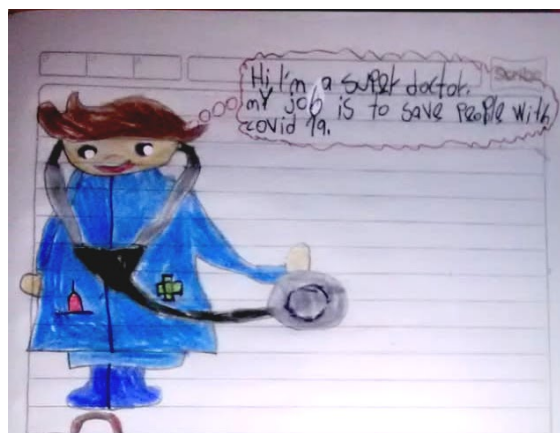


Figure 1. A learner presents a medical doctor as a superhero. [Hi, I’m super doctor my job is to save people with covid 19] (Class artifact 19/05/2020).

Sharing these visual representations with the class was a very interesting exercise as other learners started creating new transformations to this design. Some learners made modifications to available designs in order to create something they could identify with. Some of them reported having imagined themselves as superheroes in the process of creation

of their superhero. One of them, created a version of a doctor she could identify with and named her “doctora” in Spanish, which allowed her to make her gender explicit (see figure 2).

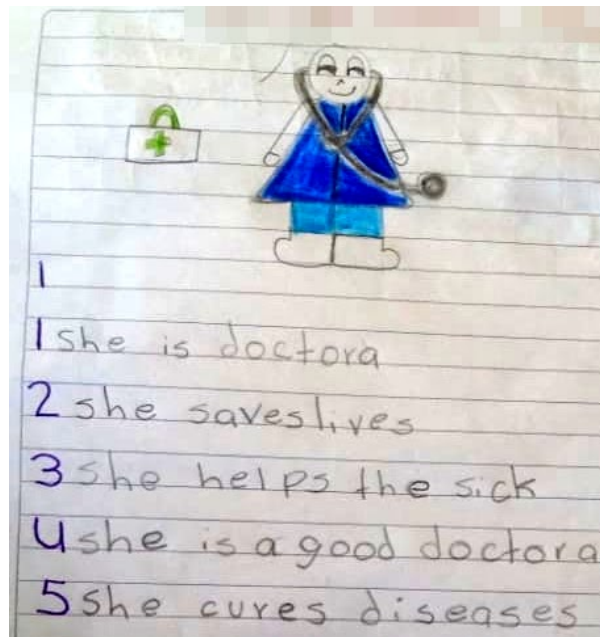


Figure 2. A learner creates a female doctor she identifies with. [1 she is doctora / 2 She saves lives / 3 she helps the sick / 4 she is a good doctora / 5 she cures diseases] (Class artifact 19/05/2020).

In other cases, these transformations took place in order to present more complex reflections using Spanish or English. One learner created a short comic story in which she compared Superman with a doctor, and presented doctors as superheroes explicitly with words (see figure 3).



Figure 3. A learner create a comic that presents a reflections about superheroes.[hi my name is tom / hi my name is superman and i am a super hero / i am doctor / unbelievable so you are the true super hero] (Class artifact 19/05/2020)

The way in which learners transformed designs in order to convey new meanings is also interesting because it shows that some elements of dialogic action were emerging. This dialogue involved different voices such as mine as their teacher, media's, and learners' themselves. In some cases, the dialogue implied a critical reflection about learners own realities, in the sense that they were able to express facts about their lives, challenge the messages of mainstream media and create new meanings. Even if this kind of dialogue did not always take place, these examples show how the creation of spaces for learners to play with available designs creatively, could lead them to express their reflections about doctors in society in a time of emergency.

Swimming Upstream: Keeping Relations Among Learners Untouched at School

One of the aims of this project was to transform some problematic interactions among learners. The reflections about violence, bullying and conflict resolution intended to change the violent physical and verbal interactions, and the competitive attitudes I had observed and foster more peaceful conflict resolution among learners. Some of the classroom management

strategies sought to foster group work, listening, and participation during the lessons. However, during the implementation of a distance learning modality, I was not able to observe these interactions during an important part of my intervention. Additionally, during the time of quarantine, the interactions among learners were considerably reduced. In one of the final interviews with learners, I asked one of them about his contact with their partners: “Well, with my partners I don’t [have contact], just with one, that I have on my father’s Whatsapp” (Interview with Juan 11/05/2020, translation by the researcher). Nonetheless, during the weeks I conducted the actions at school, the interactions I had observed did not change significantly. Even if some classroom management strategies helped listening during certain activities, and lessened violent interactions, as they continued to be recurrent during the time I carried out the action plan.

In this sense, although some elements of dialogic action were emerging at the level of reflection, transformations of meaning, and conversations about learners own realities, dialogic action was not reflected on a change of learners’ attitudes and their relations in the classroom. Apart from the own limitations of my intervention, this could be due to the fact that antialogical action exercises a pervasive force that explicitly and implicitly preserves the relations of oppression in society (Freire, 2018). Critical pedagogy has pointed to the way schools play a role in the production and reproduction of social relations of power in society through the hidden curriculum, that is to say, the norms and values that are implicitly taught at schools that legitimate the hierarchical power relations in society (Apple, 2004). In that sense, some of the school practices I observed such as individual assessment, the segmentation of knowledge, and the promotion of competition among learners exercise a constant force that could prevent dialogic action to take place. Nevertheless, following Giroux (2001) this force is not deterministic and could be resisted if we construct an

emancipatory curriculum that creates spaces for dialogue in which all the participants voices could be heard, where the unjust relations of power of society could be constantly questioned, and our agency could be exercised to transform our unfair realities.

Conclusions

This action research project aimed at understanding how the expansion of a group of English language learners communicative repertoires could foster dialogic action among them. After the process of data collection and analysis, it is possible to claim that the expansion of communicative repertoires in the English language class favored the creation of spaces for dialogue and transformation of meanings around learners own realities. This points to the emergence of some elements of dialogic action in the class, although some characteristics of antidialogical action did not significantly change during the intervention.

The findings of this study present multiple implications and challenges for language education in Colombia, where the heterogeneity of learners' communicative repertoires could be explained by both a great cultural diversity and the wide social and economic disparities. Findings point to the need of embracing learners communicative practices and repertoires in language education processes. This implies opening spaces for the modalities of communication to which learners are engaged and bring all those voices to a broader conversation in the class. Nonetheless, this does not mean limiting the possibilities of communication to the resources that are already available to learners, but to constantly increase those resources so that more complex ideas and reflections are possible to express. This could be challenging as it faces us with what some authors have named the access paradox: providing learners with access to the dominant forms of communication could lead them not to question their hegemony, yet only recognizing the diversity of their communicative practices could expose them to different forms of exclusion (Janks, 2010).

This study also challenges some of the assumptions and ideologies that have prevented language educators and curriculum designers from implementing critical literacies in language education (Fajardo, 2015). Firstly, the segmentation of linguistic codes has promoted the idea that the mother tongue should be banned from the English class (Philipson, 1992), and that the limited linguistic resources could prevent reflection about complex social and moral issues in the English class (Lau, 2012). Secondly, the segmentation of language from other forms of communication has compartmentalized modes of representation in different subjects in the school curriculum (Cope & Kalantzys, 2009). Finally, communicative competence theories have traditionally understood the relation between form and meaning as an opposition, in which different language teaching methodologies privilege one of them at the expense of the other (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This study shows that integration of multiple linguistic codes and forms of representation created spaces for reflection about complex topics of learners' realities. Additionally, the work of designing and redesigning in which both learners and I engaged made clear that the transformation of meanings required necessarily the transformation of linguistic and representational forms.

The impact of this action research project was limited by different factors. First of all, the time constraints of the class and the need to cover the grammatical contents in the official syllabus provided limited space for conducting some of the activities I had planned. There were conditions that I could not negotiate in my setting that could have influenced the impact of the intervention, for instance the institutional evaluation system, the segmentation of knowledge areas, and the official syllabus. The school resources and my lack of knowledge did not allow me to work with music, audiovisual, kinesthetic or other forms of representation. Additionally, implementing the distance learning modality after the covid-19

outbreak was very challenging since providing explanations and feedback to learners was not always possible due to their limited access to internet connection.

Finally, this study also opened the landscape for new teaching and research initiatives. New lines of inquiry should consider including other modalities of representation, the work on cross curricular projects, and more sustained interventions and studies that could have a greater impact in the actions and transformation of learners realities.

Reflection

This practicum has been one of my first teaching experiences, and my very first experience teaching in a public setting. In general terms it has been a very enriching experience both personally and professionally, in which I have felt very accompanied by both my cooperating teacher, and my research and practicum advisor.

In this experience, I faced some of the challenges of working in a public institution. For instance, it has been a challenge for me to work with many students, having few available resources, and negotiating with the restricted institutional assessment policies and the official curriculum. Particularly challenging was the fact of having to adapt to a distance learning modality during the Covid-19 pandemic. All these conditions made evident the difficult situations and conditions teachers in public institutions need to deal with everyday.

Despite these difficulties, it has been very rewarding to see how it was possible for me to create new spaces in the class for interaction and dialogue about our realities. It was very interesting to see how learners engaged in different ways of communication, and how they played around with them in the class, making the process of learning a new language more dynamic, creative and meaningful for them. Learners were very participative and most of them were very motivated to learn English. I consider I was able to make some changes in the

class by fostering collaborative work, and engaging learners in more meaningful communicative practices in the class.

This project has made me feel that many of the, sometimes abstract, concepts I believe in in such as empowerment, dialogue, action, emancipation, participation among others, could be recreated in our practice in a particular context. I feel very motivated to continue embracing critical literacies in my practices and conceiving myself as a public intellectual with the agency to transform education.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Activity: survey about learners' patterns of media consumption:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1U-9YsGw6QFxrVmenXEyveQ6OnD7Pzmqe>

Appendix B

Results survey about learners' patterns of media consumption:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1sNYcmxkRME5fLajo2x2Y3N9fBrOZtrLi>

Appendix C

Lesson plan activity about superheroes:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1WvycLAXe0UbAFvVUNqo17hitDdtAwch1>

Appendix D

Lesson plan bubble speech activity:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1jScQp-MAjPzNCxbF_qNO4WrGmmiuAes2

Appendix E

Questions final interview with learners:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1LWa1mCLTheiN1xBxlF5Dvvvff8GihKig>