



**UNIVERSIDAD
DE ANTIOQUIA**

VISUAL LITERACY TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING

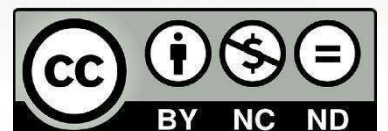
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Abstract

This action research study was aimed at fostering critical thinking skills through visual literacy in a children's EFL course at a university extension program. Data were collected through a research journal, two interviews with the cooperating teacher, a focus group, and a students' production activity. Data analysis showed that static images are an effective tool to foster learners' critical thinking skills considering the students' foreign language limitations and the teaching modality. Analysis also confirmed the importance of the teacher's role in this process to select suitable images and design the appropriate questioning technique that encourages participation and skills development. An interesting option for further research could be using motion images for critical analysis and debate multiple situations in context.

Keywords: critical thinking, visual literacy.

Degree Requirement

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

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Preface

My interest in critical thinking started as an adolescent when I began to become aware of the inequality in society and question the status quo in terms of politics, religion, and economy. I believe that the promotion of critical thinking in education is paramount to raise awareness among young learners about their political, socioeconomic, and cultural reality, so that they can make a stand and question the status quo instead of just settling for it. In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) field, we have plenty of opportunities to foster critical thinking through the topics in which language notions are framed, allowing teachers to not limit themselves to grammar-oriented approaches, but go beyond and turn their students into agents of change empowered to modify their own realities and their communities’.

For this project, I decided to work on static images since I consider they stand for a universal language that can be interpreted beyond our mother tongue. We are being overwhelmed with all kinds of images from Media every day, so providing students with tools to critique, analyze, discern, and take action on that input is essential in society, nowadays. Taking into consideration that this research was carried out with children between nine and eleven years old, I think that images are a more suitable medium to call their attention in a more effective way and teach them how to take a stand regarding social issues from an early age.

Description of the Context

The School of Languages of Universidad de Antioquia is committed to academic excellence, the production of knowledge, respect for diversity, and the strengthening of social values. They critically and ethically serve local needs in the field of languages and cultures. The Extension Department of the School offers language courses to the external communities, and there is a program addressed to children and adolescents called Programa de Inglés para Niños y Jóvenes (PINJ).

Based on the information obtained from the PINJ Coordinator, students of PINJ must be studying between the first and eleventh grade to start the program. They should be motivated to be part of the program, be willing to integrate with their peers, participate in the proposed activities, be respectful, and be responsible with the tasks and activities of the program. Taking into account the cognitive, affective, social, and academic development of the students, in addition to the methodological proposal and the curriculum of the program, it is expected that by the end of their training in the program, they will have developed the communicative competence that allows them to interact in English both orally and in writing. They are expected to speak and write with clarity and coherence, understand the general and specific ideas of simple and everyday texts, give their opinion and information on topics of interest addressed in the classes, and integrate strategies to maintain and improve their language level according to their needs and interests. Additionally, they are expected to reflect on the sociolinguistic practices of the community in which they interact and recognize and contrast other cultures and societies apart from their own.

According to the Professorial Statute of the UdeA, p. 2, chapter 1, article 2; the teachers of PINJ must have professional and ethical commitment to the process of comprehensive training

of students. Through example, they are expected to foster universal values: intellectual curiosity, which allows them to expand their knowledge through their search and investigation; respect for others, expressed in the willingness to listen to them and understand their points of view; ability to express disagreement with others through argumentation in insatiable search and construction of truth in spaces of freedom and equality; and non-discrimination for reasons of race, sex, age, religion, social, cultural and political views. Moreover, they must have an academic background in foreign languages teaching or related programs.

In 2020 with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, the School of Languages began to teach its courses online. 2021 continued with the same modality until the end of the year. The PINJ does not provide its teachers and students with dedicated online platforms for the teaching-learning process. Even though they offer some Zoom premium licenses, this is not the common case; most teachers decide on the platforms they utilize in their courses. In my case, I prefer to use Google Meet for the synchronous sessions and Google Classroom to upload and share materials. The coordination has supported its teachers in the implementation of this modality with different workshops intended to enhance their knowledge and moderation in virtual learning environments.

The PINJ program implements a task-based approach for teaching. The course in which this action research was implemented was a Course 2, composed of ten students, seven girls and three boys between nine and eleven years old. In the course syllabus, we can find the topics to develop in every course as well as the grammatical notions to learn and some questions intended to address the topics from a critical perspective. The program syllabus is easy to understand and follow by the teacher. It has some reflection questions intended to have students reflect on the class topics from a critical perspective, although their implementation is not mandatory.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned above, the PINJ has a syllabus that intends to foster critical thinking through some reflective questions about the course topics. Nevertheless, these are advisable but not mandatory, thus it depends on each teacher to include activities that promote critical thinking or not. For example, in Course 2, they suggest questions about the stereotypes of healthy or unhealthy people, other ways of becoming healthy, why mental health is important, how routines change according to social classes, and how students would imagine the routine of an immigrant that is their age. Taking into consideration that I will develop this project in a children's course, I consider visual literacy a suitable option for reaching this objective. I think that focusing on a single type of material such as static images could allow assessing its effectiveness concerning the objective of promoting critical thinking, among students, more easily.

In order to provide evidence of this situation at PINJ, I applied a survey through Google Forms in which the students were asked about their perceptions on the promotion of critical thinking in the course with a scale from 1 to 5, being 1 the lowest and 5 the highest. In one of the questions, they were asked whether the reading activities carried out in class helped them improve their vocabulary and comprehend different meanings of concepts like personality traits, understanding that every person thinks and acts differently. All of the students had a positive perception, rating 5 (67%) and 4 (33%). They were also asked whether the images displayed by the teacher helped them comprehend different meanings of concepts like family and understand that all of them are different. All of the students had a positive perception, rating 5 (89%) and 4 (11%). In the last question, students were asked whether they had the opportunity to give their opinion about the class topics without fear of being judged. Just like in the previous questions, all of the students had a positive perception, rating 5 (78%) and 4 (22%).

Another source of evidence of reflection activities by means of images was self-observations through class recordings. In the opening class of the course on February 6th, I showed a slide with several flags and asked students what they had in common. All of those flags belonged to English-speaking countries, some very popular among Colombians like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, as well as some others not that well-known like Nigeria and Jamaica. Since they could not guess the answer, they were told that they all speak English and were asked about the reasons why they decided to learn this language. All the students provided positive answers such as traveling, moving to a foreign country, getting a better job or study opportunities, or just because they love English.

Later, on April 24th, students were introduced to the types of families. They were initially asked if all families are the same and they answered that they are not because every family has different members with different personalities. I subsequently presented a photo for every type of family, including the traditional, single-parent, extended, childless, step, grandparent, and homoparental families. While displaying each photo, students were asked about the members that composed that family and how they were different from the traditional family. Students were very participative during the activity, talking about the family members, providing examples regarding their own families or families they know, and giving their opinion. They had a positive opinion about the differences they perceived and did not judge because of this.

Finally, I interviewed Laura Pérez, who is an English teacher at PINJ and the cooperating teacher of this project to have her opinion regarding the promotion of critical thinking in the EFL classroom. Laura thinks it is important to promote critical thinking today because we do not need people who repeat information but people who analyze and propose. She is very interested in the cultural aspects of both English and Spanish because learning a language is not only about

learning grammar and vocabulary, so she invites her students to reflect on the way we can express ideas in both languages. She claims that our mother tongue is connected to our essence, so she encourages her students to observe and reflect on our language and what it tells about the Colombian culture instead of focusing on the American or English-speaking culture. Concerning the PINJ syllabus, she thinks that there are topics such as types of families intended to promote critical thinking and questions designed to discuss them critically with the students. Regarding types of materials to promote critical thinking among children between 3rd and 5th grade, she considers that questions leading to reflection represent a very powerful tool since children are very curious and spontaneous. Moreover, appropriate images, videos, and readings that narrate a story with characters and situations that students can feel identified with can have them question themselves about the way things happen. Finally, she remarked on the importance of collaborative work to foster critical thinking because students not only learn from the teacher but also from each other.

Theoretical Background

I think that critical thinking skills are paramount in today's education since it offers students the possibility to raise awareness and take a stand in regard to the social and political issues that affect them in their daily lives. The implementation of some strategies to develop visual literacy may help foster critical thinking among young learners given that images represent a universal language so the language proficiency level would not be a constraint to interpret them. These are the underlying concepts within this research proposal that will be implemented at PINJ. Next, I will elaborate on them.

Visual Literacy

According to Avgerinou and Ericson (1997), the way we learn and remember has a sound connection to the way our senses work. It is accepted that the visual sense is the primary and therefore the most relevant; this is why teachers should focus and take advantage of the visual sense by means of the promotion and development of visual literacy. A plethora of images fills our surroundings in different forms, employing different routes of visual communication. Not only TV but also films, publicity, and new printing and reproduction technologies are to blame for this inundation of visual messages. Nowadays, children spend more time watching TV and playing with their computers than attending school. Hence, it is hard to understand why traditional education does not focus on teaching students to interpret and comprehend visual input when a lot of what they are demanded to learn could be effortlessly learned from visual sources. Therefore, the need for visual instruction is more understandable now than some years ago. These authors remark that the development of visual literacy can lead to the improvement of the capacity to better understand today's world (pp. 287-289).

In accordance with Bamford (2003), visual literacy implies the development of skills to interpret the content of visual images, analyze their social impact, and identify their purpose. It also entails making judgements of the reliability, validity, and value of images, and promotes the ability to be aware of the underlying ideological and manipulative intentions within them. This author claims that visual images are becoming dominant as learning and teaching resources; they even outnumber text in ratio. Images are so abundant that visual literacy has gone imperative to get information, build knowledge, and reach successful academic results. Ausburn (1978), (as cited in Bamford, 2003) affirms that this is a time in which visual culture affects our attitudes,

beliefs, and lifestyle. Visual literacy permits people to differentiate and understand visual actions, objects, and symbols that they find around their environment (pp. 1-3).

In addition, Messaris (1995), (as cited in Bamford, 2003) states that a viewer becomes more resistant to manipulation through images in publicity and other contexts when they comprehend their implications. Bamford states that images are strong at an individual and collective level. Visual literacy implies problem-solving and critical thinking in every learning area. Critical knowledge is best developed through exposure to intriguing and diverse images, and reflective and provoking questioning and discussion. The goal is to educate learners who are both receptive to visual sources and aware of the capability of images to manipulate (p. 5).

According to Roswell, McLean, and Hamilton (2012), “Visual literacy refers to the ability to make meaning from information in the form of the image. The “reader” of this image has the competence or ability to interpret, evaluate, and represent the meaning in visual form” (p. 444). They claim that asking exploratory questions and generating class discussions among students are some of the steps to apply one’s teaching to the visual. For instance, a photo of some food may begin a discussion about chains of food production and distribution, or the effects of consuming some types of food on people’s health. Accordingly, analyzing texts critically in the classroom can invite students to do it out of the classroom as well. The development of visual literacy encourages students to provide their insights and criticize visual texts in their daily lives such as websites, publicity, announcements, novels, TV shows, among others (pp. 445-446).

They also state that students’ daily lives as consumers and creators of texts can connect with visual literacy strategies applied in the classroom. It aids them to scrutinize and examine the webs of meaning in which the images exist. Visual images show specific details that make them immediately comprehensible in a different manner from verbal texts. At a glimpse, the viewer

can get into a conversation with the image, use it as a guide for exploring personal meanings, and continue to connect them with bigger issues. Visuals have not been as common as written texts in the classroom for historical and technical reasons; however, today there are different means to explore their potential more completely (p. 447).

In this respect, Sarmiento (2010) conducted a qualitative study with third graders from a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. The author focused on the promotion of children's critical thinking skills through a program for guided reading of images supported on the revised Bloom's taxonomy, revised by Anderson and Krathwohl. She collected data through field notes, childrens' homework and workshops, and questionnaires. She concluded that if teachers encourage children to analyze and interpret meaning from different images contextualized in a cultural background allowing them to identify a purpose, their mental processes can be activated. These processes can also help children to visualize images and develop critical communicative and visual reading skills. Additionally, she found that the critical thinking level reached by the students depended on the type of questions posed. If images and topics are related to the visual readers' lives, better results could be acquired (pp. 82-83).

Sarmiento's findings were divided into three phases. In the initial phase, students sorted information and built meaning from words, images, and signs through observation. By doing this, they were able to recognize and make meaning behind words, images, and signs. In the subsequent phase, students processed information obtained from deeper observations of images, and worked on reasoning by interpreting and drawing. She states that whenever we make predictions, judgments or reach conclusions, we are inferring; having students discuss the meaning transmitted by images is the best manner to make inferences in visual reading. By means of the analysis of a picture book that compares how people celebrate a child's tooth fall,

two students inferred that they were able to learn a new way to celebrate and that customs are different everywhere. In the final phase regarding comprehension and creation at a higher level, students worked with the information and meaning from texts and images used in the workshops. When students evaluated the meaning of images, they had to justify their decision, and when they created, they generated new ideas, products, or views. Students chose the most representative image from a set of pictures to utilize in a save-water campaign. For example, one student drew a tap with falling drops and a container to collect it. They created a new manner to encourage people to save water, but also presented a standpoint. Moreover, they understood the underlying meaning in the set of images observed initially and planned a way to aid the visual reader to comprehend what they wanted to convey. According to Bloom's revised taxonomy, creating is a cognitive skill that accounts for the highest level of critical thinking (pp. 80-81).

Critical Thinking

According to Pineda (2004), critical thinking implies recognizing questions worth replying to, focusing your own search on answering those inquiries, developing the understanding that knowledge is debatable, and supporting your arguments with evidence. Therefore, critical thinking is not constrained to just achieving and keeping information. The author states that apart from knowledge, critical thinking implies other cognitive abilities such as inference and evaluation (p. 49).

Pineda states that knowledge relates to the capacity to bring suitable material to mind when solving a problem that normally entails memorizing and identifying. Inference is the mental ability that involves identifying and securing elements that permit logical outcomes. Subsequently, these outcomes, materialize suppositions and hypotheses to investigate relevant information and allow to deduce the result from standpoints, data, principles, and beliefs.

Evaluation refers to the ability to judge the quality of ideas, masterworks, approaches, materials, and so on. It entails employing sound basis to determine the validity of claims (p. 50-51).

Anderson and Krathwohl's Taxonomy as cited in Gómez and Bernal (2015) define creation as "the ability to reorganizing the knowledge and information coherently in order to produce new knowledge. In involves putting elements together to generate further knowledge" (p. 233).

Furthermore, Gainer (2010) affirms that in our worldwide information society, it is not enough to teach pupils to read and write just with letters and numbers. We live in multimedia times where most information comes from built visual images, elaborate sound arrangements, and varied media designs instead of print sources. The aforementioned changes in terms of technology, media, and society demand the development of critical media literacy to allow learners and citizens to properly understand media messages and create media on their own to become active members of a democratic society (p. 364).

Moreover, Beyer (1985), (as cited in Fuquen and Jiménez, 2013) states that critical thinking involves the capacity to collect, analyze, and utilize information efficiently. Moreover, Fuquen and Jiménez (2013) claim that critical thinking also implies thinking skills like comprehension and evaluation of different points of views, judgement, questioning, and problem-solving. You become critical when you can see beyond the evident, make associations, examine results and their consequences. Critical thinking means not to assume things but to be aware and develop the ability to problematize and strengthen our own stands by using our inquisitiveness, encouragement, and mental abilities. Consequently, teachers must stimulate their students and help them work on thinking skills to comprehend social, political, and cultural issues related to all human dimensions both in and out of the classroom (p. 148).

In this regard, Gómez and Leal (2015) carried out a qualitative study with eleventh graders from a public high school in Bogotá, Colombia. Students were used to grammar-oriented English lessons, so they had negative stances towards reading. As part of the project implementation, they were encouraged to read about urban legends in order to motivate them to talk about social issues connected to the difficulties of the dangerous and defenseless neighborhood where they lived in Bogotá. Data were collected from teachers' observations, interviews with students, and worksheets in a pedagogical intervention. They found that "learners fostered critical thinking as they criticized human behaviors, generated solutions to correct questionable behaviors, and produced knowledge based on previous information in the foreign language" (p. 229). Additionally, students expressed critical opinions about the issues contained in the urban legends that were related to their own lives and knowledge of the world. They were also able to criticize questionable decisions by thinking about solutions and creating knowledge from previous information by means of the reading of urban legends. These findings suggest that practices different from grammar study should be taken into consideration by teachers to help their students think and speak with a critical eye (p. 241).

This research describes three main findings. First, students criticize fictional characters' irresponsible behaviors and their own. Students "evaluated the questionable behaviors of the characters in the urban legends and related these to their own lives as they critiqued the negative influence of fashion and mass media on younger generations" (p. 237). Critiquing people's actions was one of the most intricate critical thinking skills that learners employed to support their points of view. One of the students claimed that the society and fashion establish beauty rules and people cannot decide about their own likes, tending to follow fashion without thinking well about risks (p. 237).

Secondly, students generated solutions to correct questionable behaviors. It can be inferred that the students were capable to think about solutions to correct careless and immoral behavior that they considered similar to those they were already familiar with from their own experience. The students learned about and thought about handful moral lessons to enhance their lives. A student stated that the inclusion of urban legends in the English class makes it more interactive and allows learners to learn something else besides English, like honesty, respect, and those kinds of things.

Lastly, students created new knowledge based on previous information. “EFL learners used the foreign language as a vehicle to produce meaning through their own inventive capacities” (p. 240). Besides, the transactional reading approach motivated students to listen to others’ standpoints, and, most importantly, to associate the events of the urban legends with their own lives. Utilizing a creative literary process, they planned and generated reflections on their questionable choices in the past. The participants did not just read the urban legends isolated to finalize a reading comprehension task, but they were able to establish close relationships between the happenings in the urban legends and their experiences and knowledge of the world as they recreated, improved, and completed the urban legends from a critical and creative learning point of view. One student stated that working with urban legends in English class allowed her to teach others how one’s acts can bring good or bad consequences. When asked about the way urban legends were discussed in class, another learner said that he gives his opinion, listens to the opinions of others, and complements and relates it to his own life; he has lived that before and reflects on that again (p. 240).

For the implementation of this research project, Anderson and Krathwohl’s Taxonomy of Critical Thinking Skills was taken into consideration. The skills included in this taxonomy are

remembering, understanding, application, analysis, evaluation, and creation. Remembering helps to keep knowledge in long-term memory. Understanding indicates comprehension to make connections between previous and new knowledge. Application is used to understand and put into practice the information for some purpose. Analysis is a more intricate cognitive capacity to split information into several components to establish connections among them. Evaluation involves the ability to make judgements based on criteria and evidence. Finally, creation is the skill to reorganize the knowledge and information in a coherent way to produce new knowledge (p. 233).

Research Question

How can the development of visual literacy foster students' critical thinking in a children's EFL second level at an extension program of a Colombian university?

General objective

To examine to what extent the development of visual literacy can foster students' critical thinking in a children's EFL course 2 at an extension program of a Colombian university.

Specific objectives

To display varied types of images that allow students to uncover their different meanings.

To encourage students to analyze images from a critical perspective through questioning.

To allow students to make judgements based on their understanding an analysis of images.

To prompt students to produce new knowledge based on the images and input they have been exposed to.

Action Plan

In order to answer the research question and achieve the objectives of this action research project, I planned some strategies. First, I would select the images, related to class topics before

the implementation. The subsequent actions would begin the first day of class with the socialization of the research proposal for students and parents to be aware of the project objectives and activities to be implemented along the course. Moreover, I sent the consent form to the students and parents for them to send it back signed, to avoid any ethical and legal issues that may come up. The same first week, I would interview Laura Pérez, the cooperating teacher, to have her initial thoughts, opinions, and recommendations before the research implementation of the project.

Throughout the course, self-observations would be registered in the research journal, describing the activities carried out and reflecting on the process. At least ten visual literacy activities were planned to be implemented along the course to answer the research question; class recordings were available to go back to any specific activity to analyze it if necessary. The implementation of the activities aimed to develop visual literacy would go from the third to the thirteenth week so that I would have enough data to properly judge if the proposal was successful or not. On the seventeenth week, I planned a focus group with the students to learn how they felt during the research process and if they made any progress in regard to their critical thinking skills.

On the eighteenth week, I would have a second interview with the cooperating teacher to have her insight and feedback regarding the visual literacy activities carried out along the course. We agreed she would watch as many activities as she could by means of the class recordings to have enough information to provide meaningful feedback. The data analysis would begin on the fifteenth week because by this time I would have enough artifacts and elements to do it, and would go until week nineteenth.

Development of Actions

First of all, I selected and collected images related to the class topics —daily routines and healthy-unhealthy lifestyles—. I tried to look for images that could also facilitate students making contrasts between different ethnicities and social classes in our context. The first day of class I socialized the research proposal for students and parents to be aware of the project objectives and activities that would be implemented along the course. Most participants remained quiet and just one parent asked if it was possible to send them the final version of this paper. All of the parents signed the consent form and agreed on their children to participate in this research. Before the first class of the course, I interviewed Laura Pérez, the cooperating teacher, to have her thoughts and opinions before the research implementation. She provided some recommendations concerning the images selected, the type of questions to elicit information, and the possible production activity to be implemented at the end of the research process. This information was very useful to restructure the questions initially designed and to think about a suitable production activity to conclude the visual literacy implementation.

I registered my self-observations in the research journal all along the course, describing the activities carried out and reflecting on the results obtained. It helped me identify the students' progress in terms of their critical thinking skills and analyze their production at the end of the course. At least ten visual literacy activities with static images were initially expected to be implemented in the course to answer the research question, although only nine were finally carried out, being the last one, a production activity focused on the creation skill, which was not initially planned in the research proposal. The first eight activities did not include a written production component, although it implied students' oral production, which was guided by a questioning technique to elicit information regarding the image displayed. Those questions were

intended to examine the student's development of critical thinking skills, such as understanding, application, analysis, and evaluation, based on Anderson and Krathwohl's Taxonomy.

Concerning the production activity, it was aimed at examining the development of the students' creation skill through a problem-solving exercise in which students had to make a drawing and write a solution to a situation they identified in one of the four images they were given, from the perspective of the profession they want to follow in the future. Most students were able to identify the different situations represented by the four images displayed.

Surprisingly, in the writing production section, even those students who had not been very participative in the previous visual literacy activities came up with solutions to the problem they selected, although the development of each critical thinking skill was variable.

Class recordings were available to go back to any specific activity to analyze it and look for further information when necessary. Even though the visual literacy activities were initially planned to go from the third to the thirteenth week, they finally took from the second to the eleventh week to be performed. The focus group with the students to learn about their perceptions on the progress made regarding their critical thinking skills was performed on week twelfth. Through this focus group, I learned that most students perceived an increase in their abilities to analyze images critically and generate solutions to problematic situations that are common in our environment.

Later on, a second interview with the cooperating teacher was planned for week eighteenth, but it was finally carried out on week thirteenth, giving me more time to analyze data. By means of this conversation with Laura Daniela, I elicited valuable information and feedback regarding the research implementation process, taking into consideration that she watched all the visual literacy activities performed during the course, including the production

activity and the focus group. She considered the images utilized meaningful and the questioning approach correct; she also highlighted the sequencing of the images that allowed students to make contrasts among them and the evolution of their skill to analyze images critically. The data analysis began on week fifteenth since by this time I had collected most of the data required.

Data Analysis

I carried out the data analysis process of this study, taking into consideration the stages described by Burns (2009). First, data were gathered through the research journal entries, interviews, a focus group, and a students' production task, and assembled for further analysis. Next, data were coded and categorized to identify patterns. Later, through comparison, patterns and connections could be identified to triangulate the information for validity purposes. This led to the data interpretation stage, where I made sense of data by drawing some findings that could explain the phenomena recorded and analyzed throughout the whole research process. Finally, a report of the outcomes was prepared both in writing and orally.

Findings and Interpretations

Data analysis demonstrated that the development of visual literacy through static images can effectively promote critical thinking skills among young learners in an EFL classroom. However, it is necessary to take into consideration the foreign language limitations that students might have, which could stand as an obstacle for them to convey their ideas and thoughts regarding the images they are exposed to. Additionally, evidence also showed that the role of the teacher in this process is crucial because even before the implementation; it is their responsibility to select the most suitable images to utilize and design a questioning technique that allows them to elicit meaningful information from students. Next, I will elaborate on the aforementioned findings.

Promotion of Critical Thinking Skills Through Static Images

This study was intended to promote students' critical thinking skills through static images by following up their progress throughout the development of the course. The first step to follow before the implementation of this study was the image selection. For this purpose, I took into account the topics to be addressed in the course and images that students could relate to. These images had to offer different social and cultural perspectives of people and their environments, and at the same time allow students to find contrasts among them (see Appendix A). In this regard, Sarmiento (2010) states that if teachers encourage children to analyze and interpret meaning from different images contextualized in a cultural background allowing them to identify a purpose, their mental processes can be activated.

There was a sequence in the exposure to the images in which I displayed an image that portrayed people in an unfavorable condition to then move to an image of people in better condition in the next class. This way students were able to identify differences in terms of physical appearance, clothing, hygiene, and environment, and at the same time hypothesize on how different their routines and healthy or unhealthy habits might be. According to Sarmiento (2010), these processes can help children to visualize images and develop critical communicative and visual reading skills. Evidence of this emerged in the focus group when Melissa¹ claimed: "I liked the images because they depict situations that happen in real life like poor and homeless people, and working children"². The author also mentions that if images and topics are related to the visual readers' lives, better results could be acquired. Melissa liked the activities because they encouraged them to give their opinions on the images. In this regard, in the second interview with the cooperating teacher, she stated that the images used were connected to the

¹ Pseudonyms were used instead of students' real names.

² Quotes were originally in Spanish and were translated by the researcher.

themes covered in the course and its language objectives. She also highlighted the contrast between the situations portrayed in the images as a positive aspect to allow students to compare different contexts and establish a hypothesis.

The questioning technique employed was another key factor since this was the means to elicit information from the images that students were exposed to. In her study, Sarmiento (2010) found that the critical thinking level reached by the students depended on the type of questions posed. Concerning this, one of the most important suggestions provided by the cooperating teacher before the implementation of the strategies planned was to use open-ended questions since they allow students to elaborate their own ideas without being constrained by the structure of a closed-ended question.

After the implementation of these activities, the cooperating teacher underlined that despite being designed before every visual literacy activity, some questions also emerged from the reflection and dialogue with the students; she stated: “I noticed that there were questions that arose informally from the same reflection and from the same dialogue of the students that perhaps were not stipulated in the presentation that you shared, but that rescued a bit that which was emerging at the time of the class”. Roswell, McLean, and Hamilton (2012) claim that asking exploratory questions and generating class discussions among students are some of the steps to apply your teaching to the visual. Moreover, the question posed in the second section of the production activity encouraged students to go further and imagine how they could help to solve a person’s difficult situation from the perspective of their desired profession, obtaining meaningful results that will be described later on in this section.

Additionally, data evinced a significant improvement of most students’ critical thinking skills in the light of Anderson and Krathwohl’s Taxonomy. *Understanding* indicates

comprehension to make connections between previous and new knowledge. The research journal records evidence that most students had previously developed this skill since they could associate the images displayed with past experiences. When an image of a street vendor boy was displayed, Sandra said: “I have seen children like that on the street and under the bridges”. When exposed to the image of a homeless man, Melissa said that while on the metro, she had seen people like him living in houses under the bridge.

The next skill is *analysis*, which is a more intricate cognitive capacity to split information into several components to establish connections among them. This skill had a meaningful improvement throughout the course. The analysis of the focus group revealed interesting information concerning this improvement since most students commented that they felt their ability to analyze images in Media had changed after the visual literacy activities carried out in this course. Most of them state that now they pay more attention to details and try to think about the reasons for those situations to happen, as well as possible solutions to solve those problems.

In the focus group, Camilo said that he just saw the images, but now he is able to think about the problem depicted in the image and a possible solution. Ingrid said: “the images allowed me to realize that everyone is different, that not everyone has access to the same things, and that we must learn to appreciate it because many people do not have what we do”. The cooperating teacher also perceived some improvement in the students’ ability to analyze images more deeply, think about hypotheses, and provide solutions, although their level of critical thinking skills development may be variable. *Evaluation* involves the ability to make judgements based on criteria and evidence. After half of the course, this skill could be evinced through the judgements made by some students towards some situations they could infer in the images. While reflecting on the image of a homeless man, Sandra hypothesized that he may consume drugs, which is bad.

Ingrid complemented that drugs are dangerous and cause disease because they are bad for the body; according to her, drug consumers can harm others. While analyzing the image of a young woman smiling while looking at her cellphone, Camilo was asked if he thought that she could have any unhealthy habits. He answered that she could be stuck to the phone, which is not healthy because it can make her an addict, damage her eyes, and make her neglect other activities.

The ultimate skills are *application* and *creation*; *application* is used to understand and put into practice the information for some purpose, whereas *creation* is defined as the skill to reorganize the knowledge and information in a coherent way to produce new knowledge. There was evidence of both in the production activity performed by the students. They were asked to identify the situations depicted in four images. Later, they were asked to choose one of those images and provide a possible solution from the perspective of the profession they want to follow when they grow up. Fuquen and Jiménez (2013) affirm that teachers must stimulate their students and help them work on thinking skills to comprehend social, political, and cultural issues related to all human dimensions both in and out of the classroom

In this activity, Luisa was able to think about a coherent solution from her role as a psychologist to one of the situations in which a boy works as a juggler on the street. She said: “I would give him a free appointment to ask him how he feels doing that job and why he has to work instead of his parents”. Her solution was connected to her drawing depicting herself listening attentively to the juggler boy (see Appendix B). Sofía chose the image of children studying in a school without a roof and walls. She said that as a journalist, she would spread the news about the school to collect funds in order to improve the facilities. Camilo chose the same image as Sofia and as an engineer, he proposed creating an application with all the information

children need to study; it would not need an internet connection because it would have all the information available offline (see Appendix C).

All of this process intended to develop students' critical thinking skills is consistent with Fuquen and Jiménez's (2013) claim that critical thinking implies thinking skills like comprehension and evaluation of different points of views, judgement, questioning, and problem-solving. You become critical when you can see beyond the evident, make associations, examine results and their consequences.

Relevance of the Teacher's Role to Foster Critical Thinking

The teacher's role in this study was not limited just to image selection and questioning since there were other important factors to consider. Given that this is a level 2 course for children between nine and eleven years old, it was important to take into consideration their foreign language limitations. Hence, students were encouraged to use English as much as possible but were also allowed to turn to Spanish when necessary to be able to convey their ideas and thoughts. By doing this, students felt more encouraged to participate by making their contributions blending both languages or even sometimes using only Spanish. Even though language could stand as an obstacle for communication, the possibility to utilize their mother tongue allowed most students to express their ideas as they developed their critical thinking skills. In Camilo's production activity is evident how he uses English to provide a solution to the situation he selected but fills in the gaps of the unknown words in English with words in Spanish (see Appendix A).

The production activity carried out in this study demonstrated that students were able to produce meaning in English despite the language level limitations. Similar results can be found in Gómez and Leal's (2015) study, in which they list as one of their findings that despite the

students' initial difficulties with English, in the end, they were able to create new knowledge based on previous information: EFL students utilized English as a medium to construct meaning by means of their own creation skill.

Another relevant aspect that affected the implementation of the visual literacy activities was the covid-19 pandemic outbreak since because of this, the course in which this study was performed was adapted to virtual modality. The cooperating teacher in the second interview at the end of this course stated that some environmental factors at the students' place may affect their performance in class activities, such as distractions or noise. Besides, during the visual literacy activities, students had their webcams turned off, preventing the teacher from perceiving their body language and expressions, or even acknowledging if they were actually there behind the screen. It poses an additional challenge to the teacher in charge because they have to inquire into the students' reasons for lack of participation or low performance in the proposed activities deeper than in face-to-face modality, where they can be aware of the students' attitudes, expressions, and body language.

Students' Participation in the Visual Literacy Activities

Participation levels in the visual literacy activities were high from the beginning, although one of the exceptions was Sofia, who initially showed reluctance to take part in these activities. Nevertheless, her attitude changed over time to the point of volunteering to participate and make meaningful contributions in these activities. Her participation in the last visual literacy activities, as well as the results of her production activity, evinced that she reached a high level of analysis and creation skills, being able to provide a coherent solution to a problem related to her context. In the focus group carried out with the students, she claimed: "at the beginning, I did

not understand the images, but later I learned through listening and started to talk about the images”.

Luisa was another particular case because in spite of having a good language proficiency level for this course, she would not participate very often in the visual literacy activities and her contributions were not meaningful regarding the critical thinking skills examined in this study. However, her performance in the production activity was outstanding, showing a high level of development in every critical thinking skill. In the focus group, she was asked about her lack of participation in the aforementioned activities, and she said: “it was because even though I understood the images, I did not know how to explain them. While listening to my classmates, I learned how to explain the images”.

Students like Camilo, Germán, Sandra, Melissa, and Ingrid were very participative in these activities from the beginning and their production activity confirmed that they developed their critical thinking skills. In the focus group, Luisa and Sandra remarked that both liked the images displayed throughout the course because they promoted participation and imagination. Most students highlighted that they felt that their ability to analyze images had improved after the activities carried out in this course.

Another interesting option for further research could be the use of motion images instead of static images. According to Avgerinou and Ericson (1997), nowadays, children spend more time watching TV and playing with their computers than attending school. Moreover, Roswell, McLean, and Hamilton (2012) assert that the development of visual literacy encourages students to provide their insights and criticize visual texts in their daily lives such as websites, publicity, announcements, novels, TV shows, among others. Therefore, this represents the possibility to bring reflection to a new scenario where the teacher could turn to videos, movie excerpts, and

music videos not only to analyze them with a critical eye and debate multiple situations and problems in context, but also to appeal to materials closer to students' realities, likes, and preferences.

Conclusions

The current study was intended to foster critical thinking skills among children by means of visual literacy activities with static images. Through the analysis, I found strong evidence that critical thinking skills can indeed be fostered employing images selected purposefully. The students' understanding, analysis, and evaluation skills were developed throughout the course, which was confirmed at the end by the results obtained in the production activity, where students were able to propose coherent and meaningful solutions to a particular problem, demonstrating a high level of application and creation skills development. I consider this finding relevant for young learners to raise awareness of the inequality in our society and question the status quo. I believe that the promotion of critical thinking in education is relevant since it may represent a starting point to become agents of change.

Another relevant aspect in this process was the role of the teacher, which proved to be crucial to carry out the research process successfully. The teacher must not only select the images and design the questions accurately but also cope with difficulties that may appear in the way, such as learners' foreign language constraints or limitations in terms of communication derived from virtual teaching. Here is where the teacher must look for alternatives such as allowing the use of the learners' first language for them to be able to convey their ideas and thoughts more clearly in relation to the images they are exposed to.

Finally, students' participation was also fundamental since it was the core of the strategy implemented. Both images and questions should encourage students to actively participate.

However, in this research some factors that may have discouraged learners from taking part in the proposed activities emerged, such as not understanding the images or not being able to express their thoughts in the foreign language. In this regard, listening to their classmates was the key for reluctant students to become active participants in these activities, contributing to the construction of knowledge together.

Reflections

This practicum was a huge challenge from the beginning since I could not carry it out in a public school as initially intended. I was given the opportunity to conduct this study at Idiomas UdeA where I was working at the time. Nevertheless, courses there were adapted to virtual modality, which represented to me an additional obstacle to reach the proposed objectives because of the limitations in terms of interactions I could come across in a virtual platform.

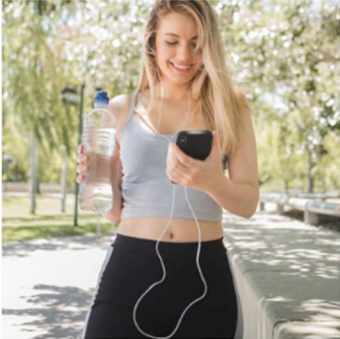
Despite all the aforementioned difficulties, I think that my commitment as a teacher and as a researcher, as well as the advisor's support during the whole process, were essential to reach successful results. To me, it was very rewarding to realize at the end of the course that my students were able to improve their skills to analyze images from a critical standpoint, the same as creating and producing meaning on their own. However, the most gratifying part was that they found the activities proposed meaningful and enriching for their lives.

I invite further student-teacher researchers to see difficulties as an opportunity to learn and become even better practitioners. Coming across an obstacle in our way could stand for a great opportunity for us to leave our comfort zone and think about alternatives and solutions that may be handy in our future professional practice. Listen to those who are experienced and do not lock down yourself into your own paradigms. Remember that there is always something new to learn in this beautiful profession we have chosen.

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Appendix A



Appendix B

Situation-Changing Task

1. Check the following images and write the situations you identify in them.

d. **Situation:** el problema del niño puede ser que su familia cayó en la pobreza y a él le toque hacer malabares en la calle para conseguir dinero



2. Choose one of the images and write a short text explaining a possible solution that you as a professional (doctor, engineer, footballer, etc.) can propose to change that situation. Make a drawing that represents your proposal.

* Eligió la imagen d*

Yo cómo psicóloga le daría una cita gratis en el psicólogo al niño y le preguntaría cuál es la verdadera situación, cómo se siente al tener que hacer malabares en las calles por qué trabajar el y no sus padres, y darle un poco de dinero para que ya no tenga que trabajar tanto



<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Outstanding</u>
<u>The student:</u>			
<u>Is able to make connections between previous and new knowledge (Understanding).</u>			X
<u>Is able to split information into several components to establish connections among them (Analysis).</u>			X
<u>Is able to make judgements based on criteria and evidence (Evaluation).</u>			X
<u>Is able to put into practice the information for some purpose (Application). Is able to reorganize the knowledge and information in a coherent way to produce new knowledge (Creation).</u>			X
Observations and comments			
In the first section of the activity, Luciana was able to identify the problem, describe the situation and hypothesize on the reasons why it is happening. From the perspective of her desired profession, she was able to evaluate the juggler boy's image, proposing meaningful and coherent actions to tackle his situation. Her drawing depicts a boy thinking or worried and a woman listening and taking notes, perfectly connecting with the solution she proposed.			

Appendix C

Situation-Changing Task

1. Check the following images and write the situations you identify in them.

b. **Situation:** the problem is that the kids have education but don't have a good school and implements for study.



2. Choose one of the images and write a short text explaining a possible solution that you as a professional (doctor, engineer, footballer, etc.) can propose to change that situation. Make a drawing that represents your proposal.

My solution is for the situacion b: my solution is create a new program that has a very good precision front the weather and environment in the zone, that permite a good design of a estructure in the school and a good school can be created. But for the utensils I creat a app with all topics that the kids must learn thats don't need WIFI because all information is downloaded in the app.



<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Poor</u>	<u>Fair</u>	<u>Outstanding</u>
<u>The student:</u>			
<u>Is able to make connections between previous and new knowledge (Understanding).</u>			X
<u>Is able to split information into several components to establish connections among them (Analysis).</u>			X
<u>Is able to make judgements based on criteria and evidence (Evaluation).</u>			X
<u>Is able to put into practice the information for some purpose (Application). Is able to reorganize the knowledge and information in a coherent way to produce new knowledge (Creation).</u>			X
Observations and comments			
In the first section of the activity, Carlos was able to connect the images to previous knowledge and come up with a detailed description of the situation portrayed in each one of them. Besides, he was able to judge the quality of the education that children in image b are receiving, based on the facilities and resources shown in this picture. Finally, he was able to apply the information collected to propose a coherent solution regarding the problem that represents the poor infrastructure of the school and the students' lack of resources. His drawing represents an application for students to work without an internet connection.			