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Fostering Students' Critical Awareness Through Critical Media Literacy

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Abstract

This action-research aimed at fostering student's critical awareness through Critical Media Literacy (CML) by identifying students' perceptions about a particular TV series using the Empowerment Spiral (ES). It was conducted in a public school in El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia with 35 fifth graders. Action strategies included exploration of students' perceptions and assumptions about a TV series. Data gathering instruments included teacher's journal, students' artifacts, and a focus group. Findings referred to four case-participants' improvement on; understanding only the explicit messages through the visual features, the ability of going beyond the visual features of the media text to connect and compare violent issues with their life and becoming critically aware when they started to control their interpretations rather than letting the interpretation control them.

Keywords: Tv Series, critical Media Literacy, critical awareness, perceptions, empowerment Spiral.

Título de proyecto en español: Promover La Conciencia Crítica de los Estudiantes a través de Literacidad Crítica de los Medios.

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This action research project is submitted as a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree in foreign language education (English- French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

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Preface

I am a student of foreign languages teaching program from a public university in Antioquia, Colombia. I am a teacher interested in learning more about the power that media has in society. The desire for this research has originally come from my willingness for researching and writing on finding out how the values and ideologies in the contemporaneity society are perpetuated from a critical perspective and exploring the applicability of critical approaches for language acquisition in young learners in the EFL context. This research study was carried out from late August 2022 to late June in 2023. As a pre-service teacher, I conducted the project in a public school in El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia and I was assigned to observe a group of 35 fifth graders. This research project is mainly addressed to educators, who acknowledge the importance of implicit and explicit messages that media portrays and perpetuates in the society.

Santiago Muñoz Agudelo

El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia, June 30th, 2023

Description of the Context

The institution where this action research project was carried out is a public school located in El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia, Colombia. The school's mission is to provide a comprehensive education with quality, therefore students develop all their human potential, by embracing science, culture, and technicality, which contribute to the formation of ethical men and women, capable of influencing and projecting themselves in the region. As for the vision, by 2023 it will be recognized as a leading educational organization in the region for its innovative offering from the academic and technical aspects; their commitment to work for the improvement of the society, and its responsibility to the ethical and the social.

Concerning the class, it was a 5th grade English class taught once a week in two periods of 55-minutes. Class content was based on a textbook called *Multitareas 4 Libro B* (Greenwich, Norma Ed.). It contained three subjects; Mathematics, Sciences and English, and *Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje* (Basic Learning Rights), established by the Ministry of Education. Lessons were almost entirely based the textbook accompanied by Grammar Translation Method. The assessment tasks used were quizzes taken from the book.

Participants in this study included 35 students, whose ages ranged between 9 and 11. Most of them lived in strata 2 and 3. Students' English proficiency level was basic and their exposure to English was limited. Regarding the Cooperating Teacher (CT), she holds a bachelor's degree in Childhood Education and she believes students learn better by doing.

The major problems that I identified were the overemphasis on lexical grammar activities, and students' lack of problematization and exploration about situations that happen in the class, leading to decontextualized English classes using decontextualized materials.

Statement of the Problem

Class materials are the core of language learning, but it is what we do with the materials that truly matters. Students interact with them; they judge whether the content and the resources used are meaningful for their learning process. After several observations to the group, I noticed that the materials were completely decontextualized.

After COVID 19, the school decided to follow a new textbook as the guide of the courses, therefore, classes were developed strictly following all activities from the book limiting the spaces for the teacher to edit or design her own activities. Subsequently, this entailed a lack of problematization and exploration of certain situations that happened in the classroom. For instance, some students were having a heated discussion about the TV shows they like or watch while the class was being carried out. One student was yelling “¿Quién dijo que no le gusta Pepa Pig para matarlo?”¹ Meanwhile, other students were asking the class to raise their hand if they like certain TV shows. (Observations excerpt, September 22, 2022). When this happened there was no discussion about it in the class, not even the teacher intervened, disregarding situations like this could perpetuate different kinds of values of violence.

Furthermore, when teaching the English subject, the classes, and activities must be designed and developed taking into account the context and interest of the students. This was not evident in this group as the classes were developed based on the book, the materials and activities were pre-configured, they did not consider the students' sociocultural context and interest. Understanding students' sociocultural context as the wider circle of influence, their family and school context, it emphasizes on the proactive participation of the subject with his/her respective surroundings. Due to the lack of

integration of students' wider circle of influence, they did not seem to be engaged or motivated to learn English during the class time, they tended to do other subjects' homework or other activities that had nothing to do with the English classes. (Observation excerpt, August 18, and 25 2022)

Another issue refers to the concept of "language". Language is a communication tool, as such, when learning a foreign language, one must develop the necessary skills to communicate or express our ideas, if we only focus on grammar the communication part will be null. Students showed limitations on the linguistic competences, as well as on critical thinking skills, due to the major emphasis on translation, the audiovisual method, and the use of grammar at its lexical level. Thus, the exercises proposed for this group were too distant from the students, they meant nothing to them, exercises used isolated ideas and content, disconnected to one another and irrelevant to students learning process. For instance, the students worked on activities where they had to spell and translate lists of vocabulary related to the body and the house, during five sessions (Observations excerpt, August 4, 11, 18, and 25, 2022; September 8, 2022). And after, they continued with the list of physical adjectives and their translations (Observation excerpt, September 22, 2022). In most classes students had to translate the lists of words written on the board, in isolation and only related to the already mentioned topics, in which they did not even know the words in Spanish (Observation excerpt, August 18, 2022).

In conclusion, decontextualized materials for class activities seemed to be the central problem in this context. The implementation of Critical Media Literacy through TV Shows taking into consideration students' sociocultural context could contribute to foster students' critical awareness towards the content found in different TV shows.

Theoretical Background

This section presents a brief conceptualization of the notions that underpin this research project. In the following paragraphs first, I present a definition of Critical Media Literacy (CML), as well as the description of a framework for its implementation, named the Empowerment Spiral. Then, I define the concept of Critical Awareness and finally, I explain the relationship of CML and the use of contextualized material in this context.

Before providing a definition of CML, we must briefly refer to the tradition under which it is developed, Critical Literacy. In his literacy program, Freire (1974) established a relationship between the act of teaching how to read and the awakening of people's consciousness. In this regard, literacy is understood as more than just reading and writing; it entails a focus on the connection between literacy and power (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, as cited in Fajardo, 2015). Shor and Freire (1987) also posit that the focus of critical literacy is on ideology critique and on how the world is portrayed in media, literature, and texts. Additionally, it seeks to question the historical and current privileges and exclusion of groups of people and ideas in mainstream narratives instead of promoting readings about a particular group (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

Having this definition in mind, the development of this project was based on TV shows as the media to be analyzed within the Critical Media Literacy defined by García et al. (2013). They state that CML is "...a progressive educational response that expands the notions of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies and also deepens literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power" (p. 111). Its use is appropriate since

with it, questions about social problems can be posed by judging the media to which the students are exposed in their daily life. (García et al, 2013, p. 112).

Moreover, the purpose of CML deals not only with the critical evaluation of different forms of communication, but it also “focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, resistance, and pleasure” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 62).

According to these authors, when students can understand how media construct people’s meanings and how they influence the audiences by imposing their messages and values, they become critically aware. For this study, this definition was considered in order to explore students’ critical awareness process.

The teaching framework implemented in this research project is called Empowerment Spiral. This framework makes part of CML as proposed by Thoman and Jolls (2003). This spiral consists of four stages intended to organize media literacy learning and teaching in class. According to these authors, this model has proven to be an appropriate process for opening a spiral of inquiry that leads to greater comprehension, critical thinking “and ability to make informed judgments.” (p. 31).

The stages are: (a) Awareness: activities where students make observations and personal connections to media to be conscious of the different types of media they encounter in their lives; (b) Analysis: It implies activities and questions intended to help students to better understand the complexity of an issue, ‘what’ happens in the media producer-audience exchange, and the influence of the ‘construction’ of any media product on the meaning people make of it; (c) Reflection: It encompasses activities and questions

that consider the influence of philosophical, religious, and ethical principles in group decision-making; and (d) Action: In this step, students are given the opportunity to conceive action ideas in the form of activities that represent increased awareness (Thoman & Jolls, 2003).

The selection of TV shows to be used is not random, they are a big part of students' daily life, they are constantly talking about them in school, they are surrounded by TV shows. According to Kellner and Share (2005) students and youth are often more media savvy, knowledgeable, and immersed in media culture. Thus, CML helps students become competent, critical, and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them. According to Thoman and Jolls (2003) what is important to understand is that media literacy is not about 'protecting' kids from unwanted messages. Although some groups urge families to just turn the TV off, the fact is, media are so ingrained in our cultural milieu that even if you turn off the set, you still cannot escape today's media culture. Media no longer just influence our culture; they are our culture.

Another significant concept of this study is Critical Awareness. It is understood as the capacity of explicitly addressing several social problems with a high emotional and political content (Hope, 2012, p. 8). Adding Freire's (1974) notion of being critically aware or 'conscientização' (as the word in Portuguese) is the opposite of being naïve, this means to engage in in-depth analysis of problems, to be able to discuss and reflect, and to reject passive positions. People who become critically aware of their context, their reality, and of their human condition are people who exercise the right of democracy by making their own choices, because "to every understanding, sooner or later an action corresponds" (p. 39).

This notion allows teachers to present to students the pertinent tools and materials for them to be able to see beyond what a 'simple' TV show intends to display. In Kellner and Share's (2005) words "the actual content of media messages in order to question ideology, bias, and the connotations explicit and implicit in the representation." (p. 9). Thus, with these tools students can problematize the situations that are portrayed by these TV shows, such as sexism, racism, and violence. They can also reflect and reject passive positions by making informed choices and relating some of those situations with the ones that used to happen in their daily life (school, home, among others).

The steps proposed to raise critical awareness are: (a) Discussion: It implies that the subject can recognize the otherness, then that he/she can listen to the otherness and that their opinions became arguments by justifying them. The discussion does not have as a purpose getting to an agreement, but the exchange of arguments. (b) Analysis: In this step, the subject tries to look beyond or in depth of a certain theme, this is doable posing questions to the specific theme, and (c) Reflection: We do not learn from experience; we learn from reflecting about an experience Jhon Dewey (1933). Considering these words, the subject that reflects can make conscious the act of thinking, therefore 'Reflection' is the metacognitive process of thinking about a specific theme. The subject puts the action that he/she has been doing it passively in question, that means, he/she reflects about that action to take an active position regarding that specific action. Thus, one always reflects about a specific concept and the reflection always leads us to an action.

Ultimately, regarding class materials, it is considered as the core of language learning since they are the means in which the students can easily interact with the target language. According to Tomlinson (2012) materials are any resource used to facilitate

language learning such as course books, videos, graded readers, flashcards, and games. These materials can be informative because they inform the student about the target language, instructional since they guide the learner through independent practice, experiential as they provide the learner with experience of the language in use, eliciting because they stimulate the learner to use the language, and exploratory because it helps the learner to discover things about the language (p. 143). Implementing CML allows teachers to use contextualized material in class, which in this context is non-existent. The use of decontextualized material hindered the problematization and exploration of common situations that happened in this classroom, hence the need to the implementation of the contextualized materials framed under the CML perspective.

Moreover, language teachers have the responsibility to present adequate material to learners. In a language learning environment, it is important to present input and material that is connected to the language level of the learners, their socio-cultural context, and their interests. Thus, the teacher is in charge of selecting, using, and adapting the right materials. Tomlinson (2012) argues that teachers are material developers who are constantly evaluating, adapting, replacing, and finding effective ways to implement them in class, as well as considering the materials as part of a whole. Similarly, Maley (2016) affirms that materials are part of the context in which language learning takes place, which also includes beliefs and policies. Hence, any material designed or adapted must go further than the language itself, the approaches we consider more suitable to teach, and the role of the student and the teacher (p. 1).

Therefore, the implementation of Critical Media Literacy through TV shows provides pertinent and contextualized tools and materials for students to be critically aware

about the explicit and implicit messages they are watching. The goals and the actions that were developed in this study for achieving objectives are described in the following section.

Research Question

How can the use Critical Media Literacy through TV series foster fifth graders' critical awareness?

Objectives

General Objective

To explore how the use of Critical Media Literacy through TV series foster fifth graders' critical awareness.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify students' perceptions about a particular Tv series called Pablo Escobar and the messages it presents.
2. To examine how the Empowerment Spiral stages influence students' perceptions about TV series.
3. To evaluate how the Empowerment Spiral help students become critically aware.

Action Plan

To answer the research question stated for this project, three actions were developed over a period of four months, following the four stages suggested by the Empowerment Spiral. The first action, 'awareness', was the development of activities where representations of students' ideas were presented by surveys, drawings, discussions, and

written exercises, focused on exploring students' assumptions about 'violence' and the representation of Colombia in national and international TV shows, particularly TV series. The second action, 'analysis' was done through the CML key questions, to put the TV series under the magnifying glass throughout open-ended questions, games, drawings and comparisons aiming at helping students to understand how producers or media creators' strategies might influence a person's meaning-making. The third action included the combination of the two last stages 'reflection' 'and action', it was the creation of students' proposals of alternative representations of Colombia that are given by a specific TV series and reflections to offer students' spaces to reflect on their own assumptions about the messages included in the media they consume and how these can shape their ideas and perceptions about an issue. Besides, regarding the linguistic aspects developed in the classes, several activities to practice and reinforce students' language use were applied.

Data was collected by means of teacher' journals, students' artifacts, audio recordings and one focus group. Journals were written and codified weekly, students', audio recordings and interviews were transcribed and codified; finally, the students' artifacts were scanned and analyzed.

Development of Actions

The four participant-cases chosen for this project represent a homogeneous sampling (Patton, 2015) referring to a selection of cases that are very similar to study and the characteristics they have in common. These cases chose different TV shows for the discussions, and the violence factor was a common characteristic in all the TV shows.

As part of the first action, ‘awareness’, I explored students’ assumptions about media texts, particularly, TV shows-TV series- through questions and discussions. In that exploration, students answered questions and discussed about different live-action and animated TV series, namely, Merlina, Dragon Ball Z, and Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal. In addition, students presented their arguments on the reasons why they like those TV series, they used the verbs ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ to support their simple ideas. In the final part of this action, students also expressed arguments on their reasons why the TV series they chose was better than the others.

The second action, ‘analysis’, was developed after discussing and getting to an agreement on one single TV series “Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal”. We analyzed this live-action TV series using the CML five key questions proposed by the Empowerment Spiral, as follows; Who is the main character of the TV series, and what kind of person is he? How does the main character gain power and influence throughout the series? What challenges or obstacles does the main character face, and how does he overcome them? What impact does the main character’s actions have on the people around him, both positive and negative? What can we learn from the main character’s story about the importance of making good choices and taking responsibility for our actions? How do you think the story of Pablo Escobar relates to the idea of power and its impact on individuals and society? What strategies could the main character have used to avoid some of the negative consequences of his actions? What message do you think the TV series is trying to convey about the dangers of seeking power at any cost?

The questions were presented in a didactic way; with games, with interactive questionnaires, with interactive characters and with images presented in Power Point slides to make the questions easier and more appealing for the students. The purpose of this action was that students identified issues represented in the messages of the TV series, such as violence, sexism, prostitution, and drug consumption. The questions, as said before, were presented in different modalities, but they all had in common that the students always had to answer and support their ideas with arguments. Thus, this, often, led to a process of self-reflection where the students had to struggle with their assumptions and the ideas that they extracted from the discussions in other classes. Due to time constraints, in the discussions, we often created six groups to help them better organize their ideas about a particular question. Then, each group chose a spokesperson to express their groups' argument to the rest of the class, that way all groups' ideas were heard. For this activity, I taught my students some expressions to give simple opinions.

Finally, the last action focused on students' 'reflection-action' process. I combined the reflection stage and the action stage in one single stage because the 'act of reflection' put us into an active position regarding the theme we were reflecting to. This means that reflections are always towards an action because they change us from point A (passive position) to point B (active position). The purpose was to reflect about the development of the previous activities and the issues present in the TV series and to identify how their assumptions and points of view about the representations of Colombia changed over that time or if they stayed the same. This activity was developed in groups of six students, they created some posters with two representations of Colombia, one referring to what Pablo Escobar TV series showed and another one referring to what they would like to see.

The students and I brought some newspapers and magazines to create the poster. After the students presented the poster in front of the whole class, we had a discussion answering some questions and explaining their decisions about the chosen images. This last action enclosed different possibilities for students to discuss analyze and reflect about the representations and messages that the TV series Pablo Escobar: El Patrón del Mal portrays. In terms of language, students used nouns and adjectives to describe the images to help the viewer understand the poster better.

Data analysis

I analyzed the data using the 5 stages proposed by Burns (2010): assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. I assembled the data in folders in OneDrive, I wrote journals using a Word file; I scanned students' artifacts using a printer to transform the files in .jpg. files and I transcribed the audio recordings in a Word file. Then, I uploaded all the data in the Software *Atlas.ti.* to start creating and collecting codes, I used the 'sub-coding' and the 'process coding' recommended by Saldaña (2013). I organized the codes from the *Atlas.ti* in an Excel file to find patterns, connections and create categories that resulted in themes to later build interpretations (case to case to focus on the individual findings). Finally, I reported the outcomes from the most relevant to the least relevant aspect of the project.

Findings and Interpretations

This study aimed at fostering students' critical awareness through Critical Media Literacy, particularly through TV series. This section presents and illustrates findings through the stages of the Empowerment Spiral using the data of four cases-participants:

Ace, El Intelectual, Mona Lisa, and El Pana. Analysis revealed three findings namely, Students Understanding Only the Explicit Messages of the Media they Consume through the Visual Features TV Series Portrays as Shocking and Appealing, Students Started to Go Beyond the Visual Features of the Media Text to Connect and Compare Violent Issues from the TV Series with their Immediate Surroundings and Students Started to Become Critically Aware by Controlling their Interpretations of what they Saw and Heard in the TV Series Rather than Letting the Interpretation Control them.

Students Understanding Only the Explicit Messages of the Media they Consume through the Visual Features the TV Series Portrays as Shocking and Appealing

Data analysis revealed that the activities related to the awareness stage of the Empowerment Spiral, permitted the participants to understand the explicit messages that Pablo Escobar TV series portrays, referring strictly to shocking and appealing images of that media text. This understanding could be possible thanks to the possibilities students had to listen and recognize the others to carry out a discussion about their favorite TV series. During this stage, it was possible to identify that students were able to discuss about the media by justifying their opinions, listening to other's opinions, and understanding these opinions. In this stage the participants only focused their attention on the visual features of the TV series, the images that called their attention and produced an effect on their perception of the media. To illustrate, in a class discussion, to the question Why do you like those TV series? (Pablo Escobar, Merlina, Dragon Ball), they responded:

Ace: Pablo Escobar porque es muy buena y actúan muy bien

El Intelectual: A mí me gusta Dragon Ball por tanta destrucción que dan, tantos poderes y más que todo porque Gokú y Vegeta se enfrentan a adversarios mucho más poderosos utilizando fases y eso que el ultra instinto no es una fase, es un estado, es un estado.

Mona Lisa: Merlina porque me encantó su baile y sus acciones.

El Pana: Profe yo iba a decir que porque era de acción, pues Pablo Escobar, porque era de acción y porque mataban, pero ya dijeron eso¹ (Journal entry, February 21st, 2023)

This excerpt shows that during the awareness stage, participants' answers mainly addressed the graphic and visual media content, meaning, the images that they found appealing. This understanding was the core of their answers, they did not go beyond what the TV series presents in terms of implicit, but explicit messages. In their answers they were just grasping the surface of what a TV series represents, that is the visual factor. For instance, three of the four answers were mentioning the 'action' which means that the shocking images were the ones they enjoyed the most. Adding to this, the arguments to justify their points of view were simplistic and poor due to the lack of supporting ideas for strengthening their arguments. They expressed those ideas and when they were asked for more information or more supporting ideas, they could not add more information. According to Freire (1974), the notion of being critically aware is the opposite of being naïve, this means to engage in in-depth analysis of problems, to be able to discuss and reflect, which did not happen here, because they were not engaging in in-depth analysis of the topic, they were just grasping the surface of what a TV series portrays.

¹Ace: Pablo Escobar because it is too good, and it has very good acting.

El Intelectual: I like Dragon Ball for all the destruction, all the powers and above all because Gokú and Vegeta face enemies, way more powerful than them, using phases, but the ultra-instinct is not a phase, it is a state, a state.

Mona Lisa: Merlina because I love its dance and its actions.

El Pana: Profe I was going to mention that it was for the action. I am talking about Pablo Escobar, because it was about action and because the murdering, but they (classmates) already mentioned that.

During this same stage, the participants carried out a discussion where they had to argument about why that TV Series, they had selected in the previous activity deserved to be the one to work with along the project. The participants arguments to the question why do you think the TV series you choose is better than the other one? were:

Mona Lisa: Merlina es la mejor porque tiene, porque es de acción, se trata de acción [...] miedo y de acción miedo y misterio y merlina también por dentro es fría, seria y muy buena en combates.

El Intelectual: ...porque Gokú es alegre es combatiente y sabe mucho sobre combate [...] así Dragón Ball no sea un anime de misterio, de terror ni nada de eso, pero es un anime de peleas.

El Pana: Pues Pablo Escobar es mejor porque pelea contra el cartel de Cali y trafica marihuana, cocaína, perico y ya ² (Journal entry, February 28th, 2023)

This excerpt shows that in this stage, the participants answered the question with the same factor that is 'action'. However, in this discussion two of the students talked about the characters of the TV series, they gave a brief description of how the main characters of the TV series were and they ended up linking the characters with the 'action' factor again. Besides, they talked about the genres in the TV Series, which also related to how 'action' played a heavier role in their perception of the media.

Data also attested that these discussions and answers in the classroom were only possible when students knew that they had a positive and safe space for saying what they were thinking without the pressure of having any type of punishment, penalty, disciplinary

² Mona Lisa: Merlina is the best because it is about action [...] fear, mysterious. Besides, the character is cold, serious and she is Good at fighting.

El Intelectual: ...because Gokú has joy [...] Dragon Ball it not a horror anime or a mysterious one but is a fighting anime.

El Pana: Pablo Escobar is the best because he fights against the Cali cartel and he deals with marihuana and cocaine, that is it.

correction, or low grade. To illustrate, in a class discussion I noticed how some students were afraid to talk about their preferences for Pablo Escobar TV series thinking that the teacher would punish them. Until some students said to a classmate “hágale que no lo van a regañar” (Journal entry, February 21st, 2023). Thus, they assumed that Pablo Escobar TV series is forbidden for them, for their age or that the TV series is just bad for everyone due to its visual content. Giving any case, this shows how they understand the explicit messages that the TV series portrays and when they noticed that I was not there to punish them, but to listen to them, they started to talk about the reasons why they liked that TV series.

According to Thoman and Jolls (2003) what is important to understand is that media literacy is not about ‘protecting’ kids from unwanted messages, but about helping students become competent, critical, and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them.

Students Started to Go Beyond the Visual Features of the Media Text to Connect and Compare Violent Issues from the TV Series with their Immediate Surroundings

Data analysis demonstrated that the activities related to the analysis stage showed how the participants were able to go from watching and identifying only the visual features of the media text to connect the events happening in the TV series with their life by analyzing the media text through questions. The participants recognized that Pablo Escobar TV series represented Colombia’s reality and they connected those representations to their life. As seen in the discussion held in the focus group, where they provided answers to the question Do you think that the series show the reality of Colombia? Why?

Ace: Sí, porque en Colombia todavía hay narcotraficantes, digamos, encontraron en estos días puras drogas en Medellín y también hay muchos políticos que se roban la plata.

El Intelectual: En esa serie sí pasó y todo pasó muy malo, pero ahora Medellín es un lugar muy lindo, Bogotá, todo Colombia es lindo por toda su cultura y sus paisajes, pero eso sí, sigue siendo un lugar muy peligroso, no tan peligroso, pero ahora mismo es mejor que cuando existía Pablo Escobar.

Mona lisa: Cuando yo he estado a mí sí me parece que en Medellín sí hay comunas donde hacen cosas malas, entonces Medellín no es muy bonito que digamos, mi opinión es que lo que pasó en la serie sí es verdad y hasta cosas peores, pues hoy en día no pasa tanto como pasó en los tiempos de Pablo Escobar, pero sí siguen pasando cosas así [...] ósea, que Colombia ya no tiene nada de nada con la violencia, obviamente sigue teniendo, pero ya no tan fuerte

El Pana: Yo diría que, pues, antes Colombia en los tiempos de Pablo Escobar era, muy fuerte por así decirlo, a todo el que veían, a todo lo que se moviera lo mataban y eso, en cambio en lo que la serie mostraba no era tan violento como lo que en verdad pasó en Colombia y algunas cosas de la serie, algunas no pasaron, pero muchas de esas sí.³ (Focus Group, March 28th, 2023)

This piece of evidence shows that the students agreed on the claim that the series did a good job representing the Colombia of Pablo Escobar's Era. Besides, they said that today's era is still a violent era, not as much as the past one but violence is still present in our day-to-day lives. In these answers we could observe how the students have started to make connections of what they have lived or experienced with the messages that Pablo Escobar Tv series was showing. Besides, they used those connections to support their answers. Freire (1974) states that people who become critically aware of their context, their reality, and of their human condition are people who exercise the right of democracy by making their own choices. Hence, the participants were starting to create that critical

³ **Ace:** Yes, because in Colombia there is still drug dealers, let us say, in these days they have found a lot of drugs in Medellín, also there are many politicians that steal the money

El intelectual: In that TV series did happen bad things, but nowadays Medellín is a nice place, Bogotá, the whole Colombia is nice due its culture and its landscapes, but yes, it is still a dangerous place, not so dangerous as before, but still.

Mona lisa: When I have visited Medellín it has comunas where people do bad things, so Medellín it not very nice, my opinions is that what the TV series showed is true and even worst things, but nowadays those things do not happen so often [...] Colombia still has violence, not as stronger as before, but still.

El Pana: I would say that in Escobar's era violence was so stronger, everyone was killed, and the TV series did not show all the violence as happened in the reality.

awareness about their reality by recognizing that the Pablo Escobar TV series represents that reality and by connecting the events of the TV series to their lives.

During this stage they had to compare some images and answer questions related to some puzzles about the Colombia of Pablo Escobar's Era and today's Colombia. (See images of the puzzles [here](#)). The images used were not randomly chosen but were ideas that I collected from the previous class discussions. To exemplify the discussion in class, students answered the question What image do you think represent Colombia in a better way? Why?

Ace: Profe, yo creo que las dos, porque aún se recolecta café y cocaína entonces sí

Mona Lisa: Profe aquí sí la de Petro porque es el actual presidente de Colombia entonces sí, Galán ya es del pasado, una Colombia pasada, pues Petro es presidente porque la violencia ha bajado, sino lo hubieran matado la verdad

El intelectual: la renovada porque en ese atentado murió mucha gente y antes en la renovada trabajan personas, padres, madres y así.

El Pana: Profe, yo no soy Petrista, pero obvio la de Petro, porque al menos a él no lo mataron y lo dejaron ser presidente ⁴ (Journal entry, March 21st, 2023)

This piece of evidence shows how the students started to connect the values that Pablo Escobar TV series portrays and compared them with their current and closest context by analyzing the messages of the TV series through images as Thoman and Jolls (2003) state. When people analyze messages, they can examine the design of the message's form,

⁴ **Ace:** I think that both because people still collect coffee and cocaine.

Mona Lisa: Here the Petro one because he is the current Colombian president, Galan is from the past, a past Colombia and Petro is president because the violence has decreased if not, he would have been murdered.

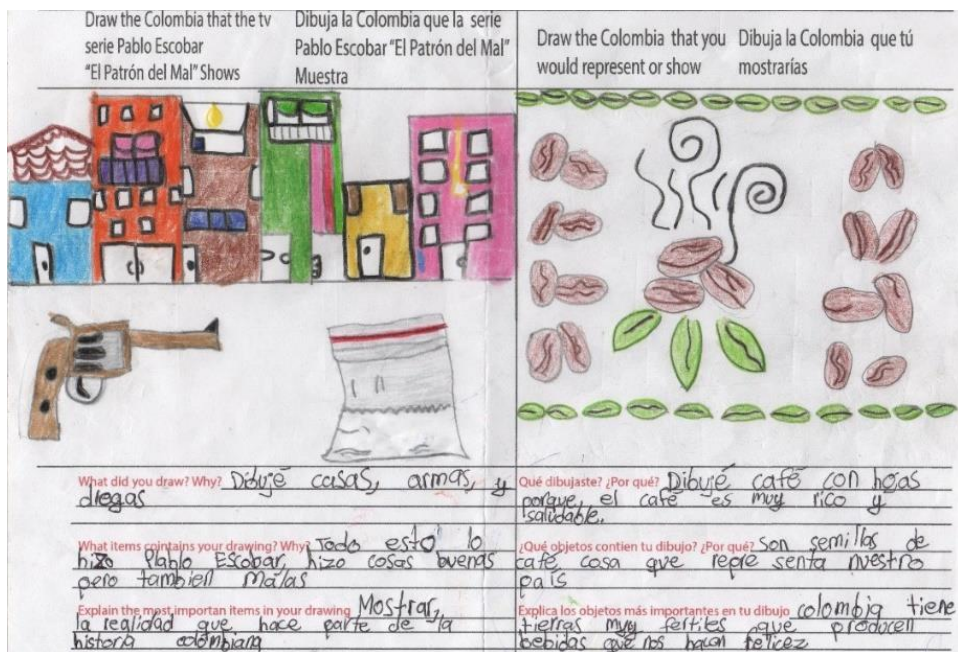
El intelectual: The new one because in the attack many people died. Plus, in the new one many fathers and mother work.

El Pana: I am not Petrista, but for sure the Petro one because at least he was not killed and he could be president.

structure and sequence by using artistic, literary, social, political, and economic concepts to understand the context in which the message occurs. Students were taking the visual format and going beyond to the superficial state as they were doing it in the previous stage. With the help of the activities and the questions of the analysis stage students started to know that those visual features had messages attached to them and they were connecting those messages to their life by comparing the values that those messages portray and the values that the current Colombia may portray. Furthermore, we also watched a trailer of Pablo Escobar and students had to draw the representation that the trailer made of Colombia and the representations that they would show or like to see, when having the opportunity.

Figure 1

Representation of Colombia done by El Intelectual. March 28th, 2023



Note: Column A shows the drawing of the Colombia that is seeing in the TV series and Column B shows the Colombia that the participant would like to see on TV.

This piece of evidence shows how El Intelectual decoded the trailer watched and summarized it with a drawing. On the left side, he drew houses, guns and drugs, which was the message sent in the media text. He also added that the reason for his drawings was because Pablo Escobar did some good and bad things. Hence, El Intelectual was not taking for granted the moral role that the TV series was giving to Pablo Escobar's character, that is a bad one. Thoman and Jolls (2003) state that when people evaluate messages, they can relate messages to their own experience and make judgments about their veracity, quality and relevance. In the right side of the drawing, he drew some coffee plants stating that coffee is delicious and healthy, he also added that Colombia has fertile lands because they produce drinks that make us happy. This shows how he was comparing the 'product' that he would like to cultivate, that is, coffee instead of cocaine. Additionally, during this Analysis stage in a class activity, I asked Mona Lisa Do you think that watching all that violence affects people? And she responded:

Mona Lisa: No, porque uno mismo toma sus decisiones y una serie, no, no maneja la vida de uno, o bueno, mentiras que sí porque al uno obsesionarse por eso se le empieza a meter en la cabeza y empieza a hacerle daño a las personas y creer que eso es normal. ⁵ (Journal entry, March 21st, 2023)

This excerpt shows that during this stage, in Mona Lisa's answer at the beginning she claimed that a TV series could handle one's life. However, she reflected immediately and changed her discourse by saying that if people watch too many violent TV series they will normalize that violence and start doing those violent actions. This excerpt shows how

⁵ **Mona Lisa:** No, because one takes their own decisions and a TV series could not handle one's life. However, reflecting on that if one gets obsessed with a TV series, it sticks in one's head and one starts to damage to people and thinks that is normal.

Mona Lisa talked about the normalization of the violence and the influence that a TV series can have in a person's life. According to Kellner & Share, 2007 when students can understand how media construct people's meanings and how they influence the audiences by imposing their messages and values, they become critically aware.

Students Started to Become Critically Aware when they Started to Control their Interpretations of what they Saw and Heard in the TV Series Rather than Letting the Interpretation Control them

Data analysis evidenced that the activities related to the Reflection-Action stage, showed how the participants started to become critically aware by controlling their interpretations of what they saw and heard in the media text instead of allowing the interpretation to control them. The activities done during this stage helped them to go from just watching the visual features of the Pablo Escobar TV series to interpret the messages and to represent those messages through images. To illustrate, in a class discussion where students shared the meanings of the images they had chosen for their poster; these were their impressions.

Ace: Acá hay destrucción, destroy, digamos en la época de Pablo Escobar, la gente salía y la mataban, puros carrobombas y eso, Drug dealer es secuestrados, habían secuestrados en esa época porque había mucha violencia la mayor parte asesinatos, assassins, estos asesinatos ocurrían mucho porque Pablo Escobar salía, y como ya todo el mundo sabe cogía una pistola y mataba a las personas entonces acá muestra como unos policías y unos médicos atendiendo a la persona herida.

El pana: Aquí pusimos varias imágenes, esta parte es solamente de deporte, que sería, Pablo Escobar era hincha del Medellín, pero le gustaba nacional, acá tenemos la camisa del Medellín y la camisa de Nacional, una imagen de un ciclista porque en la serie pues una vez los sicarios de Pablo Escobar se disfrazaron de ciclistas, aquí es como un accidente, como un carrobomba, los carrobombas de Pablo Escobar explotaban día tras día, aquí tenemos pues el dinero, money, porque a Pablo Escobar le pagaban en dólares, pues, por la mercancía. Tenemos un periódico, news, que es donde lo publicaban diariamente, teníamos pues aquí un paro por lo de Pablo Escobar, por las explosiones y todo, esta es la cárcel, la cárcel donde metían a todos los sicarios de Pablo Escobar, esta son las urgencias, urgency, que cada día llegaban

heridos por las explosiones y estos son los derrumbes también por las explosiones y aquí una banderita de Colombia.

(Ace and El Pana were talking about the Pablo Escobar side in the poster)

El intelectual: La Colombia actual tiene [...] deportes más libres y futbol de mujeres, en este tiempo el teatro se volvió algo muy bueno, en este tiempo la gente ya está ayudando a la gente que no puede hacer cosas por sí mismos y ya han construido edificios nuevos y ya.

(El intelectual was talking about the Current Colombia side)

Mona Lisa: Porque eran las imágenes que más se referían, las que más representaban a Pablo Escobar y a la Colombia actual.

(Mona Lisa was talking about the difference between the Colombia of Pablo Escobar Era and the current Colombia) ⁶ (Journal entry, May the 2nd, 2023)

This excerpt shows that during this stage the participants at the moment of searching an image that they thought could represent Pablo Escobar TV series and the Current Colombia were interpreting these events. I provided them with newspapers and magazines to do the activities, but they asked me if they could bring images from their home. Hence, the images that they were thinking about were better to represent the TV series and the Current Colombia. This is a big step to becoming critically aware. As Kellner

⁶ **Ace:** Here we have destroy, in Escobar's era people were killed and there were bomb cars. Drug dealer is kidnapping, there were kidnappings in that Era due the violence and the assassins, these murders happened because Pablo Escobar took his gun and killed people and here there are policemen and doctors healing a hurt person.

El pana: Here we put several images, this part is about sports that is Escobar was fan of Medellín, but he liked Nacional, here we have their football t-shirts, an image of a cyclist due to in the TV series a hitman costumed about this, here we have a bomb car accident, here we have money, for the dollars that Escobar earned with the drugs, here we have a newspaper where the news about Escobar were published every day, here we have a traffic jam because of the explosions caused, here we have the jail where the hitmen of Escobar were put, here we have emergency where each day many people were hurt due to the Escobar's attacks and this is the Colombia flag.

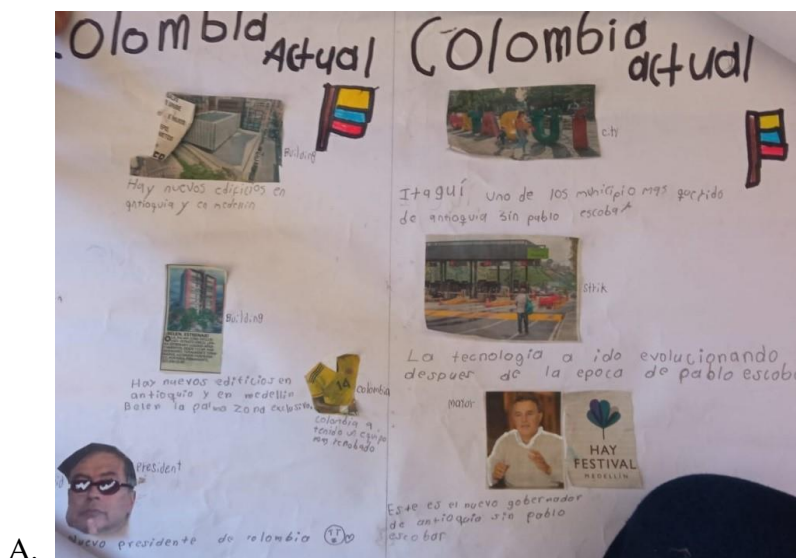
El intelectual: The current Colombia has sport, free sports and feminine football, nowadays the theater's plays became something really good, nowadays people help to other's and there are new buildings.

Mona Lisa: Because these images were the ones that better represented Pablo Escobar and the Current Colombia.

and Share (2005) state, CML helps students become competent, critical, and literate in all media forms so that they control the interpretation of what they see or hear rather than letting the interpretation control them. With this activity students were being encouraged to reflect on their own moral, ethical, and spiritual concerns related to media representations and to perfect their communications skills by presenting or sharing those interpretations. This, to take their place as citizens of a democracy and empowered members of a global media culture by being critically aware. Another evidence from a class activity where students had to present a poster about the representations of Colombia in the Pablo Escobar era and in the Current Era, El Pana shared his poster with these images.

Figure 2

Comparisson of the Representation of Colombia done by El Pana. May 2nd, 2023





Note: Picture A shows the poster of the participant's interpretation about the current Colombia and Picture B shows the Colombia that is seeing in the TV series.

This piece of evidence shows the selection of images taken by El Pana. The images that he chose for the Pablo Escobar era and the Current Era were the ones he believed represented better these Eras. There are many images related to the scenes of the TV series and to the life of El Pana. However, I want to focus on how he drew the Colombian flag in both sides because both descriptions were about Colombia. Nonetheless, in Pablo Escobar's era he decided not to paint the flag, we can infer that he was thinking about the darkness and obscurity that era brought to many people. Thoman and Joll (2003) state that when people create or communicate messages, they can 'write' their ideas, using words, sounds and/or images effectively for a variety of purposes, and they are able to make use of various technologies of communication to create, edit and disseminate their message. In this case, the drawing that El Pana did send a powerful message of how Colombia lacked their colors because all the violence that Pablo Escobar's Era caused.

Conclusions and Implications

This research had the purpose of analyzing how the implementation of Critical Media Literacy (CML) through the Empowerment Spiral in an EFL classroom helped students to become critically aware of the messages that they see in the media. I could conclude that these strategies helped students go from understanding only the explicit messages through the visual features to going beyond the visual features of the media text to connect and compare violent issues with their lives, they also became critically aware when they started to control their interpretations rather than letting the interpretation control them. In addition, CML through the Empowerment Spiral played a supportive role in students' language acquisition process in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure.

Furthermore, this research project entailed some implications for teachers' practice in similar contexts. First, teachers need to believe that Critical Media Literacy and critical approaches are worth trying in elementary school to help the students, at the beginning of their formation, to insert them in the process of being and becoming critically aware. To reach this purpose, teachers need to open free and safe thinking spaces in the classroom for students not to feel oppressed, obliged, hindered, or punished when expressing their thoughts. This leads to include the students' opinions and assumptions in the class, opinions, and assumptions that, with enough time, can be questioned in classroom discussions, hence, these opinions and assumptions become the content for class activities.

Second, teachers who are willing to use the Empowerment Spiral to analyze media content need to be aware that planning the lessons will become a changing process that comes together with how the students model the project throughout the time. Teachers need

to pay attention to the little changes that the students may have and adapt the lessons to grab that new content that the students are emanating.

Third, teachers who want to implement critical approaches must not satanized the mother tongue of the students, given that, when discussing, the students often feel that they do not have the tools to discuss in the learning language. Therefore, we cannot castrate students' thoughts by obligating them to use the target language. Teachers must progress, little by little, especially in the critical approaches, the linguistic tools for the students to feel that they can have a discussion in the learning language.

This action research project provides a better understanding of the impacts of activities regarding critical analysis of media content in an elementary EFL classroom. In future projects that follows similar context I suggest that the teacher takes a similar role as their students, that is, a deconstructing role. As teachers we also need to put into question our practice and the content we teach, if not we are just other 'truth' carriers and the only thing that we are doing with our students is to move them from one dogma to another one.

Reflection

After finishing this challenging process at the university, I feel satisfied with myself and the result of my work. This process has been an invaluable experience for me as a teacher and researcher.

Regarding the research project, I feel comfortable with it, I did not have the opportunity to research what I wanted because the participants were the ones that decided on the 'problem' or the input to research about. Despite this, I enjoyed the process, I had the chance to read and learn a lot about Critical Media Literacy. Plus, the opportunity to implement all the theory that I have read was interesting because I could question the theory and verify if it works or not.

My experience in the institution where I did the practicum was nothing but joy. My cooperating teacher was kind and helpful, she recognized my work and enjoyed the classes along with the students. The two graders where I taught were also kind, I think that they were the ones that enjoyed this process the most and I feel happy with the process we had as a whole group. We learned a lot and we are now subjects more aware of media.

My life at this university has helped me to grow as a person and as an individual able to think, to question and to reflect on the things that are given to us as natural or common. The experience during these years has been a life changer. I did not expect to learn all the things I have learnt in the university.

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