Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito parcial para optar al

título de:

Licenciada en Lenguas Extranjeras

Erika Jiménez Salazar

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Carmen de Viboral

2020

Fostering Students' Critical Awareness of Social Issues Under the Principles of Freire's

Problem-Posing Education

Erika Jiménez Salazar

Practicum and Research Advisor

Carlos Danilo Restrepo Méndez

Magister in Foreign Languages Teaching and Learning

Thesis Advisor

Diana Milena Calderón Vargas

Magister in Foreign Languages Teaching and Learning

Carmen de Viboral

June 2020

Abstract

This action research project aimed at fostering students' critical awareness of social issues through the implementation of Freire's problem-posing principles in an English class. For the purpose of this study, suicide was the social issue addressed. Data were collected by means of different instruments such as surveys, students' artifacts, journals, recordings, class activities and informal conversations. Students were exposed to different activities for six weeks which were developed following the cycle of reflection and action proposed by Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004). After the analysis, the findings showed that lessons framed within problem posing permit learners to become more aware of social issues and promote learners' interaction and participation in the EFL class.

Key words: Problem posing, cycle of reflection and action, social issues, critical awareness

Degree Requirement

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

Acknowledgements

Preface

In the past, when people talked to me about learning a language, I thought it consisted mainly in learning words that should follow a set of rules. In fact, this grammar approach remains in existence in most academic settings when it comes to learning a language. Today, I am totally convinced that this learning/teaching process goes beyond the mere act of understanding a word, a sentence or speech. Learning a language becomes the means to explore (decode) the world through a code that was previously unknown to us. As such, this action research emerged from my interest to show students that learning a language should not be an isolated process but the means to address issues that are more relevant in their lives.

Accordingly, I decided to explore critical pedagogy and problem-posing education in this action research project. I included critical pedagogy because as a language teacher, I think that our main purpose is not to teach a language but through the language. Based on my teaching beliefs, I consider education as the tool to address and problematize issues in the world in order to construct a more equal and fair society which was also the essence of this project. Besides, I contemplated problem-posing principles for addressing English language through problems that were present in students' lives and contexts. In this way, students could reflect and take actions that might help to improve their life conditions and those of the communities they belong to.

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Context

The School

This action research project was developed at *Institución Educativa Barro Blanco*, a public rural school located in Rionegro, Antioquia. This is a mixed institution that offers education from preschool to high-school in a single shift. The mission of this institution is built on providing students with a complete education and fostering values that help them to live in different environments (Institución Educativa Barro Blanco, 2019). Regarding the vision for 2020, Barro Blanco aims at being a leader in inclusive and innovative education and providing students with the necessary tools to achieve their life goals (Institución Educativa Barro Blanco, 2019). This institution follows the socio-critical and inclusive pedagogical model, which aims at the development of competences to live together. Regarding the school community, it consists of 800 students approximately and other 50 people including teachers, psychologists and administrators.

Concerning the facilities and the resources, most of the classrooms of the institution are comfortable for the learning environment. They include big boards and some of them are equipped with TVs. Unfortunately, the classroom where my practicum took place did not have a TV. Moreover, within the framework of the Rionegro Bilingüe program, the school has been provided with different materials to teach English as a foreign language. Among these resources, flashcards, banners, books, games and other educational materials are available. Besides, there are also books and dictionaries in the library. Similarly, the institution also owns the books proposed by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN for its acronym in Spanish). These are the ones that the English teachers of the school follow for the design of the curriculum and the course content for each term.

The Participants

This study took place in an English course for ninth graders taught twice a week in blocks of two hours. It was composed of 32 students, 21 girls and 11 boys whose ages ranged from 13 to 17 years old. 30 out of the 32 students agreed to participate in the project. The majority of them came from low-income families belonging to the socioeconomic strata 2 and 3 (Survey, August 15th, 2019). With respect to the linguistic aspect, these students' English proficiency level was elementary since they were able to construct only simple sentences (Informal interview with the CT, August 26th, 2019). Furthermore, the exposure to the target language was restricted given that most students' contact with the language was limited to the one provided at the school (Survey, August 15th, 2019). Notwithstanding that most students claimed that the English language was difficult, they also considered it was interesting and essential to learn in their lives. (Survey, August 15th, 2019).

This study also involved my Cooperating Teacher (henceforth CT), my practicum and research advisor and myself, the pre-service teacher and researcher. My CT holds a Bachelor's degree in Languages, English and Spanish, from Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana and a Master's degree in Education from Universidad Católica de Oriente. She has 25 years of experience, six of them at this institution. My teaching practicum and research advisor is one professor from the School of Languages at Universidad de Antioquia. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages Teaching and a Master's degree in Foreign Languages Teaching and Learning. As for me, the researcher, I am a pre-service teacher in the tenth semester of the undergraduate program in foreign languages teaching at Universidad de Antioquia. I hold two years of experience teaching kids, teenagers and adults. My interests regarding language teaching comprise social issues, critical theories, rural education and Freire's pedagogy.

Statement of the Problem

Regardless of numerous attempts to transform the traditional teaching practices of English as a foreign language in the classrooms, memorizing isolated words and repeating grammar rules remain the most prominent teaching approach in language learning (Ur, 2011). Following this grammar-based orientation does not provide spaces for real communication to happen (Krashen, 1982) and might discourage students to critically reflect upon the content addressed in class since the focus is mainly on the form and not on the message (Krashen, 1985). In this regard, Allwright (1984) and Savignon (1972) affirm that not providing students with spaces to communicate and hold meaning prevents them from transferring what is learned in the classroom to the external world and to know how they will perform in everyday situations. As a consequence, students adopt a passive role in their learning process and they do not advocate for the improvement of their own lives and their communities (Freire, 1970).

In this respect, I evidenced the previous scenario in the English course where this action research project was developed since the content of the course was superficially addressed and assessment was grammar focused. As such, most of the lessons were intended to present vocabulary and expressions related to the topics proposed in class by doing drilling exercises, competitions and classwork activities (Journal, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9). For instance, in some cases, students were asked to look for vocabulary and translate it into Spanish. Besides, the assessment component of the course was also about vocabulary, grammar aspects and the number of verbs students could memorize. In this sense, as it was the nature of most of the lessons, students did not have the opportunity to explore, analyze and develop critical reflections on the class content. According to Pennycook (1999), critical language education must focus on issues of "power, inequality, discrimination, resistance, and struggle" (p. 332) that permit students to go beyond

the instrumental and mere form of the language.

Furthermore, the lack of spaces for students to communicate and interact among themselves in the English class was limited. Generally, the teacher was in charge of most of the activities that were presented while the students just listened (Journal, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9). This situation reflects Freire's (1970) concept of banking education where the teacher is seen as the one who possesses knowledge and students as passive individuals who should be taught. As a result, collaborative work was not promoted and different types of interaction were not observed. (Journal, 1, 3, 4, 8, 9). Thus, students were not encouraged to establish real communication and to share their feelings and thoughts during the English class. Drawing upon Van's ideas (1998), interactions among learners allow them to perceive, reflect, act and exchange ideas with the purpose of becoming active learners.

Based on the aforementioned issues and departing from my journals, I consider that critical pedagogy may play an essential role to transform the traditional teaching practices, giving voice to students and empowering them to change their reality (Freire, 1970). Likewise, in line with my teaching beliefs, I consider that education should be the means for students to improve their life conditions, especially in this context where some students face difficult situations such as fear of speaking and domestic violence. Therefore, I decided to propose the principles of Freire's problem-posing education, within the tenets of critical pedagogy, with the aim of fostering students' critical consciousness upon social issues. In this sense, problem-posing education could represent an alternative to shape the vision of teaching and learning a language as a set of grammar rules and vocabulary and to see this process as a means to unveil relations of power, inequality and to promote social change.

Departing from these concerns that inspire this research project, I will present the

theoretical foundations that supported my study. Subsequently, I will introduce the research question and the goals that I proposed to accomplish the main purpose of this project. Then, I will share the actions that I planned and the way they were carried out including the difficulties that I had to face. Finally, I expose the main findings and the conclusions that I reached.

Theoretical Framework

In this section of the report, I first present the concept of critical pedagogy which is the theoretical foundation that guided this action research. Second, I provide some ideas about the relevance of introducing critical pedagogy to language teaching. Third, I define problem posing under the critical pedagogy paradigm and I explain its importance in this study to foster students' critical consciousness of social issues. Fourth, I state the need for exploring problem posing in our context. Finally, I describe the cycle framed within problem-posing principles as the procedure that was followed in this action research.

Bearing in mind that this study aimed at fostering students' critical awareness of social issues, I relied on the critical paradigm since critical tenets focus on the idea of challenging the oppressive conditions existing in the world (Darder, Mayo & Paraskeva, 2017). Drawing on Freire's (1970) ideas, critical awareness refers to a further understanding of the world and it also involves the actions we undertake to transform our reality. Besides, Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) affirm that critical theories are "concerned with the idea of a just society in which people have political, economic, and cultural control of their lives" (p. 77). As a consequence, it is common to find among critical thinkers that the goal of critical pedagogy can only be reached through emancipation and empowerment of the oppressed to improve their life conditions. Indeed, Kincheloe (2008) argues that critical pedagogy aims at transforming the relationships of power and inequality that generate oppression while empowering and humanizing learners.

In this line, Pennycook (1999) also suggests that a critical approach to pedagogy "aims at transformation, a way of shifting pedagogical relations to give students more curricular control" (p. 341). This means, language learning as a collaborative process where learners' context and ideas are considered with the purpose of understanding and reshaping their reality. In fact, Norton and Toohey (2004) express that language learning and teaching are political processes where language does not only refer to the mere act of expression and communication, but it is also a practice influenced by the way learners understand themselves, their social environments and their backgrounds. Similarly, Canagarajah (2002) introduces the idea that "there is no apolitical neutrality of English, therefore it is unwise to overlook the issues of power and social inequality that lie behind English teaching and are manifested frequently in the forms of sexism, classism, and racism in classrooms" (p. 134). This is the reason why embracing the principles of critical pedagogy becomes an important component of EFL classrooms for transforming oppressive and alienating behaviors that people experience in the world.

In this regard, even though critical pedagogy is constituted by several tenets for teaching, the principles of problem posing framed within this paradigm were the ones used in this study. Problem posing was coined by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) who stated that in the educational field the teacher is usually seen as the knowledgeable person depositing decontextualized and meaningless knowledge into passive objects called students. This phenomenon, named banking education by Freire (1970), shows reality to students as "motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (p. 71) and the process of learning from each other is neglected. Hence, as a way to resist banking education and the traditional teaching methods, Freire (1970) proposes problem-posing education as a mutual and collaborative process where the educational act becomes relevant by engaging in problems present in learners' lives.

Within problem posing, problems refer to any generative theme that allows people to reflect upon issues they face in their daily life (Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004).

In the same line, considering the tenets of problem posing, Freire (1970) contemplates dialogue as the basis of education where knowledge is constructed in a constant interaction between teacher and students. This author states that "I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing." (Freire, 1970, p. 15). In this regard, it is important to provide spaces within the classrooms to listen to students' ideas in order to raise their voices considering their social contexts and understanding their realities. Thus, dialogue is the means to make the teaching and learning process more meaningful departing from students' experiences, ideas and concerns.

Building on Aliakbari and Faraji (2011), **"through problem-posing education and questioning issues in learners' lives, students [...] develop a critical consciousness which helps them to improve their life conditions and to take necessary actions to build a more just and equitable society"** (p. 77). Considering this principle, bringing meaningful and relevant content to students' life experiences is essential. Viewed in this way, the curriculum design should be built in such a way that learner's needs, contexts and both their difficulties and strengths are included (Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004). For doing so, problem posing has been presented as a cyclical process and different cycle models have emerged. Even if critical pedagogy does not contemplate methodologies or approaches, different authors have explored some procedures that assemble its core principles. For instance, two studies in Medellín were conducted following Wallerstein and Auerbach's cycle (2004) and positive results were reached. In both studies, the researchers concluded that although using problem posing can be challenging, critical reflection

and meaningful learning can be achieved (Vélez 2016; Sierra, 2017).

The cycle of reflection and action used for this study was proposed by Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004) and it consists of four stages. In the first stage, called description and problem definition, students are presented with a familiar situation and they start coding and discussing around that issue based on prompting questions. In the second stage, personalizing, students relate the situation that was presented to their own experiences and identify how similar or different these situations are compared to those of their peers. Analyzing the social context, which is placed in the third stage, students examine the rationale of that situation and start thinking about possible solutions for those issues that affect the whole community. The last stage of the cycle is named developing strategies for action where the praxis take place. Students propose feasible alternatives to tackle those situations while reflecting on what they learned in the whole process and how they can use it in their own lives and context.

Within this cycle, Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004) suggest some activities that can help to foster students' critical awareness of social issues and to promote interaction among themselves, which are the two main purposes of this study. These activities involve multiple learning modalities to be implemented along the cycle. For promoting students' critical awareness, dialogues, videos and other visuals, questions, real life situations, role plays and reading and writing tasks can be included. As for enhancing students' interaction, strategies such as dialogues, pair work, and conversation circles that promote spaces where students can be more willing to participate, reflect and convey meaning of the content addressed in class can also be implemented. In relation to the linguistic part, these two authors argue that it is addressed throughout the whole cycle but usually in an implicit way (Wallerstein & Auerbach, 2004).

To close this section, it is important to highlight the advantages that problem posing can

bring to the classroom. For instance, problem posing can be contemplated as a way to address issues other than linguistic that may have an impact on students' lives and social environments. In this sense, even if problem posing might bring numerous benefits for promoting spaces for reflection on social issues and to promote interaction among the school actors, it has not been widely explored in the specific context where this action research took place. Indeed, through problem posing, language teachers can propose courses that serve both language development and consciousness-raising considering the educational act as a collaborative process mediated by certain circumstances.

Research Question

How may the implementation of Freire's problem-posing principles foster students' critical awareness of social issues?

Objectives

General Objective

To explore how the implementation of Freire's problem-posing principles may foster students' critical awareness of social issues.

Specific Objectives

- To implement problem-posing principles encouraging students' critical reflection upon social issues.

- To analyze how problem-posing strategies give voice to students in class discussions.

- To examine how lessons framed within problem-posing education impact students' life experiences and context.

- To provide students with the necessary linguistic features to perform in the English classes.

Action Plan

To accomplish the aforementioned objectives, I conceived an action plan that had a duration of nine weeks. The actions were mainly focused on addressing two social problems, suicide and violence, suggested by the participants as some of them were experiencing these situations in their surroundings. As for the development of the actions, each issue would be addressed following the cycle of reflection and action proposed by Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004). In this sense, lesson planning was thought in a way that each stage proposed within this cycle could be covered: identification and problem definition, personalizing, analyzing the social context and developing strategies for action. Bearing in mind that two social issues would be addressed, this cycle would be repeated twice.

Accordingly, one week would be devoted to each stage. To begin with, I would socialize the project. Then, for the first stage, activities that permitted to familiarize students with suicide and violence would be proposed in both cycles. For instance, visuals such as videos and images would be included. Afterwards, to identify how those situations were connected to their lives, students would narrate stories involving their life experiences. Subsequently, in order to explore how those problems were affecting their social contexts, interviews with relatives and friends would be conducted. Finally, with the aim of proposing possible solutions to those situations as a means to contribute to a more equitable and tolerant society, a campaign would be carried out. After these two cycles, the project would be finished with a reflection and a focus group during the ninth week.

In line with those actions, data would be gathered through different instruments: (a) Journals were written every single lesson to record information during class activities that could be useful for the study; (b) An informal conversation to collect baseline data that would reveal

students' first impressions towards the two problems to be addressed; (c) Students' artifacts as a source to collect their ideas, opinions and perceptions; (d) Recordings of class discussions to gather relevant information for the project; (e) A focus group at the end of the research to explore the impact of the project on students' lives and social environments.

Development of Actions

The initial action plan that I suggested was divided in two cycles and it was thought for nine weeks. However, due to the pandemic (Covid–19) that spread around the world, only the first cycle could be implemented. Moreover, although this initial moment was supposed to last four weeks, it took six weeks instead because some classes were canceled.

As I proposed in my action plan, I socialized the project with my students and I told them that it would be developed with the two social issues that they had suggested. In the same week, I carried out an informal conversation to collect baseline data. Through this activity, I intended to gather information regarding students' perceptions with respect to suicide and violence as the social problems they considered were affecting their surroundings. After collecting the baseline data, we started addressing suicide as the social issue present in students' lives. For doing so, each stage of the cycle of reflection and action proposed by Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004) was introduced through different activities:

Description and Problem Definition

This stage was performed during the first and the second week. Students became familiar with suicide by means of different texts (images, videos, comic strips) related to this issue. In groups, students analyzed one of these texts based on prompting questions. They had to include a description of the situation, feelings, reactions and reasons to behave in that specific way. This activity, that aimed at eliciting students' perceptions about those situations representing this

problem, was developed in class with my help but they had to complete it at home. To finish this stage, each group shared their analyses with the rest of the class.

Personalizing

This stage was carried out during the second and the third week. In this phase, students wrote a story of a relative, a friend, an acquaintance or themselves who had experienced a similar situation to the ones that were presented in the previous stage. Moreover, they had to write a reflective text to express their opinions about how suicide affects themselves and their social environments. Although they had to do this task at home, the linguistic elements and some examples were provided during the lesson. Next class, before collecting their homework, I asked students to exchange their reflections with their classmates. This dynamic was implemented in order to share students' pieces of writing and to provide feedback among themselves in terms of grammatical issues.

Within this stage, another activity was proposed. We watched a video called *Suicide Attempt Survivors Bust Myths About Suicide | Truth or Myth.* In this video, people who had attempted suicide exposed their insights about eight different myths that have been created in society related to suicide. After watching the video, we played a game and, similar to what it was presented in the video, students would say whether they considered it was a truth or a myth and why. This activity intended to examine their points of view regarding those ideas and beliefs that are socially constructed concerning certain social issues.

Analyzing the Social Context

With the aim of exploring the perceptions that people in students' context and community had about suicide, interviews were conducted during week four and five. First, I explained to students how to do an interview and I provided some examples. Second, in groups of three,

students had to design a maximum of four questions to examine people's ideas about the causes, reasons and possible solutions to this issue. Each student within the group was in charge of interviewing a person. Third, I explained to students how to report the information that they gathered. Students worked in the same groups and they assembled all the answers without repeating information. Finally, they wrote a general conclusion departing from the data that they collected.

Developing Strategies for Action

The last stage of this cycle was implemented during weeks five and six. Based on all the stages that we had covered and the collected information, I asked students to arrange in the same groups of the previous stage to think about five possible alternatives to challenge this social problem. Besides, they created a hashtag or a slogan inviting people not to think about suicide as a solution to their problems. I provided feedback to each of the groups and they were ready to design the posters. With the idea of doing a campaign in the school in mind, students designed very creative and appealing posters in order to prevent these situations in their contexts.

At this point, the campaign and a reflection related to the first cycle were the steps to follow. However, due to the virus, classes were canceled and students were not allowed to go back to school. Moreover, students were sent on vacation for a month and a half while the virus could be controlled. After this time, the situation was still very serious and the government decided to continue with classes in the distance modality. Given this situation, I had to wait a couple of weeks while the school organized a new calendar to work under this methodology. As a consequence, I could only meet with students at the end of April and, after reviewing what we had done, I asked students to write the reflection. These pieces of writing were done based on two prompting questions to explore what they had learned during this cycle.

Data Analysis

During the development of this action research, different data collection instruments were employed. Among those instruments, journals, recordings, informal conversations and students' artifacts were gathered. Journals were written every class accompanied by a reflection. Furthermore, recordings and informal conversations were transcribed. In relation to students' artifacts, they were grouped in different categories and information that had similar ideas was assembled. Once all these data were organized, the analysis of the information took place.

In order to analyze these data, I uploaded all this information into the computer program for examining qualitative data called Atlas.ti and I continued to code all the documents. For doing so, I took some codes based on the theory supporting my study and some other codes that emerged from the gathered documents. In this regard, I followed a thematic analysis which consists of identifying, examining and reporting patterns that will be carefully interpreted later (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, I coded the information three times and, in each attempt, different memos were written to elicit the most relevant information responding to the purpose of my study. Departing from these results, I proceeded to seek for common patterns among those codes in order to organize them in categories.

Findings and Interpretations

The purpose of this action research was to explore how the implementation of problem-posing principles may foster students' critical awareness of social issues. With this goal in mind, the four categories below emerged after carefully analyzing the gathered data: (a) Fears and risks when addressing suicide; (b) In the process of becoming more aware of suicide; (c) The role of each individual within their communities to face suicide; (d) Including critical pedagogy without leaving aside the linguistic aspect.

Fears and Risks when Addressing Suicide

Both, at the beginning and at the end of the research project, there were some participants who considered that being more informed about these types of problems could have negative effects. On the one hand, my CT was curious because students chose that topic and concerned regarding the consequences that this project could have on students' behaviors. On the other hand, some participants expressed that although they would be more knowledgeable about this theme, this information could also lead people to think about committing suicide (Informal conversation, February 13th; Students final reflection on the first cycle, May 4th). Despite these beliefs, the World Health Organization (2014) and Freire (1970) highlight the importance of addressing sensitive topics related to students' contexts since they can learn how to perform in similar situations in their lives. Therefore, due to the panic that speaking about suicide generated in this project, some stages of this study were guided by the psychologist of the school.

Nevertheless, during the development of this project both my CT and students engaged in the activities that were proposed. For example, after seeking support from the psychologist, my CT was quieter with the resources and lessons that were brought to the classrooms. Furthermore, some of the participants who were also anxious about the negative implications that this project may have recognized the importance of understanding this problem. In this sense, when implementing projects that involve sensitive topics, we should be very cautious and responsible with the information that we are going to share. Viewed in this way, the participants may feel more confident and they can take advantage of these spaces for reflecting upon different issues in our context.

In the Process of Becoming More Aware of Suicide

Thanks to the different resources, activities and discussions that took place during the

implementation of the project, students could identify the actual impact of suicide on their lives. In this respect, Aliakbari and Faraji (2011) affirm that posing problems that are inherent to students' lives in the EFL class provides them with a deep understanding of issues that surround their social environments. Regarding the issue that was being addressed in this project, students expressed that suicide can affect any person, reason why the whole society should work together to challenge these problems. This piece of writing taken from the final reflection on the first cycle evidences what I exposed before:

> "In this first part I learned that suicide cannot be seen indifferently or as something that only happens to others […], that only young people do it or that suicide is for weak people who do not know how to face their reality or that it is for   crazy people […]. I learned to identify possible suicidal behaviors, that there are ways to avoid it and that a person with these problems can recover with a lot of support […]. Nobody is oblivious to this social problem, it affects all of us, either directly or indirectly […]. The cause of suicide is almost always loneliness or rejection, it takes a lot of support and self-love to overcome it; and we must support each other, accept ourselves and avoid prejudices, inequalities or injustices to reduce this problem." (Students' final reflection on the first cycle, May 4th, Translation by the researcher).

The previous excerpt reflects that some students started to recognize elements related to suicide as a social problem and how this issue damages our society. For example, they realized that suicide does not only affect teenagers or people with mental disorders. Moreover, they familiarized with some causes and strategies to tackle this problem. In this respect, Freire (1970) states that bringing problems that relate to students' lives, identifying the causes and acting on one's reality is the process through which teachers and students develop their critical awareness

of issues that affect their surroundings. That is why providing spaces for discussing and reflecting upon problems like suicide represents an alternative to deal with these issues.

Apart from acquiring a deep understanding of this social problem, students manifested that talking about social problems in their social contexts is highly important. For the purpose of this study, learners acknowledged the relevance of deciphering different myths and taboos that are created about suicide and expressed that being exposed to this information may help to avoid this type of situations (Informal conversation, February 13th; Students' final reflection on the first cycle, May14th). Based on Freire's (1970) ideas, once people become aware of those complex situations in their contexts, they can also undertake actions regarding those issues to transform their realities. Thus, it is important to deconstruct the stigma that talking about suicide instead of preventing this problem will trigger people to do it. In my opinion, the lack of information may be one of the reasons why problems like suicide increase every day.

Furthermore, this study provided students with strategies to face suicide and support people in their social contexts. According to Wallerstein and Auerbach (2004) "problem-posing gives people the opportunity to express opinions and feelings, to push against barriers in their lives, and to take actions" (p. 31). Certainly, most of the participants expressed that the information they were exposed to during these months taught them that they can always find a solution to problems without considering suicide. Moreover, students argued that they are more prepared to tackle certain issues such as suicide within their communities thanks to these spaces of reflection and discussion that were promoted in the English class. The passage below presents the ideas previously exposed:

"I believe that what I have learned so far about suicide as a social problem contributes to my life and my surroundings as a blow to reality, desire and hope to move forward

because since I was eleven years I have suffered from depression and anxiety, fear of

frustration. I remembered that in those first days I had to visit the psychologist because

without having reasons I thought about committing suicide, but I did not like to talk about

it. Therefore, in this project that we have talked about suicide, it is excellent to learn more

about it, learn more and know how this problem is a reality" (Students' final reflection on

the first cycle, May 4th, Translation by the researcher)

Although in this project we could only address one social problem, it is evident in this

excerpt that students considered that their experience in this study benefited themselves and

people around them. In this respect, learners had the opportunity to familiarize and identify

different alternatives to face this issue and to help other people within their contexts thinking

about committing suicide. In line with this idea, Freire (1970) affirms that when people are more

knowledgeable of social problems, they become more committed to their communities.

Therefore, the participation in this project invited students reflect upon suicide and how this

issue affects many people around the world.

The Role of Each Individual Within their Communities to Face Suicide

By means of this action research, students had the opportunity to understand themselves

and their role inside their communities concerning suicide. This idea is related to critical

pedagogy core principle asserting that the learning and teaching process becomes relevant when

learners can engage and understand problems that are present in their lives. In this sense,

students recognized that suicide is a complex issue that can occur due to our attitudes and actions

towards other people. Similarly, they also acknowledged that suicide is not necessarily the

consequence of an illness but it takes place due to different circumstances that affect the physical

and emotional well-being of people at some point in their lives. The fragment that I present

below represents the ideas previously stated:

"I learned that many people see this topic as a game, that this is only done by people who are sick, when the truth is not like this, this is caused by ourselves, we make a person feel less only as a game when we do not really know how it feels, they do it due to depression or because they do not have other way out, this topic is very sensitive, I think that everyone should learn more about suicide. " (Students' final reflection on the first cycle, May 4th, Translation by the researcher)

This passage presents the opinion of a student who invites people not to ignore suicide as a social problem and highlights the importance of being more informed about these situations. This claim is an invitation to educate ourselves about these problems since any individual in society can be both the victim or the offender. As such, it is important to conceive spaces in the educational field to understand students' realities and not to keep the instrumental aspect as a focus of education. According to Freire (1970), education has the power to transform people and their way of being in the world with the aim of construing a more equitable society. This means that these types of projects inspire students to become active agents in their social contexts and to reflect upon the role that they play in society which is line with critical pedagogy ideas of emancipation and empowerment.

In the framework of critical pedagogy, this action research allowed to establish a dialogue where the teacher and students could exchange their ideas, experiences and thoughts. As a result, the interest students had in addressing these topics caused an impact on the passive role that they had before implementing this study. In this regard, my CT shared her impression regarding a vivid discussion about suicide myths that took place in a lesson. She told me: "I had never seen these students participating as they did it during this lesson. It was incredible" (Journal Entry,

February 24th). As it is noticeable in this fragment, this project provided spaces for students to take a more active role in their learning process conceiving education as a process where learners' voices are heard. Based on Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) ideas, when teachers permit students to make choices and collaborate in their learning process, learners feel more engaged and participation is more likely to increase.

Including Critical Pedagogy Without Leaving Aside the Linguistic Aspect

Promoting students' critical awareness inside the English class does not mean that the linguistic component of the language has to be disregarded. As such, although the focus of critical language education is centered on exploring, understanding and challenging social problems that surround learners' environments, linguistic issues can be included as well (Pennycook,1999). In the passage below, one student expressed their ideas about the impact of this project on her learning process:

> "I think it is very important, since it shows us possible solutions to this social problem and it can help us in case we have close people who are going through this, it also helps us a lot in the English subject since we can enrich our vocabulary, understand a text more fluently without needing to know the meaning of each word and learn the different types of tenses" (Journal entry, May 20th, Translation by the researcher)

This excerpt invites to reflect upon the role of education not only as a means to train students on certain areas but to link all this information with their needs and contexts. For instance, within this project, students had the opportunity to address the grammatical and linguistic themes suggested for ninth graders while they were also learning and reflecting upon suicide as a social problem that was part of their reality. Thus, we should consider an educational system that permits students to develop strategies to perform in different situations in their lives.

Conclusions and Suggestions

This action research project had the aim of exploring how the implementation of Freire's problem-posing principles may foster students' critical awareness of social issues. At the end of this process, it is possible to conclude that the participants in this action research are in the process of becoming more aware of certain social issues such as suicide. Besides, although some of them were concerned about the possible effects of addressing suicide in a society where different myths and taboos have been created regarding this problem, they recognized that they acquired more strategies to tackle this issue. Likewise, learners expressed that the information they were exposed to during this project is very useful to help people within their communities considering suicide as a solution to their problems.

Regarding English language, this project allowed students to explore a social issue present in their surroundings while the content suggested for ninth grade was covered at the same time. During the development of the project, students were exposed to different linguistic aspects which were presented and reviewed throughout the research study. As such, this action research permitted learners to take part in lessons that covered grammar features and other formal aspects of the language while they were also exploring different concerns that we face in our daily life. In this regard, this study showed that learning the formal aspects of the language can be combined with other content that contributes to the understanding of students' realities.

In addition, this action research entailed some implications in the teaching practices, not only in the EFL classrooms but in the educational context in general. First, this project revealed that it is highly important to consider students' needs, likes and dislikes when proposing the content to be addressed. In this sense, students will feel more motivated and interested in class activities. Second, to engage in problem posing it is crucial to think about education based on

dialogue. This means, students' ideas, concerns and thoughts are considered and the learning process is co-created and not imposed. Finally, this project showed that taking into consideration students' ideas and concerns enhanced their interaction and participation

      This study is an example of the positive impact that problem posing may have in the EFL classrooms to foster students' critical awareness of social issues and to promote interaction. This pedagogy, coined by Freire, provides students and teachers with a deep understanding of the world and invites them to transform their realities. Although we could not undertake actions to share this project within the different contexts that students belong to, I would propose for future research to explore the impact of this type of projects at the community level. As such, I would suggest to continue implementing this pedagogy with other social problems that affect society in general. Moreover, I would recommend exploring problem posing in other subjects so that reflection upon social issues can be constructed from different fields.

Reflection

After having finished this challenging process at the university, I feel very satisfied. This experience had an invaluable contribution to both my life as a teacher-researcher and to the context where I conducted my teaching practicum.

Regarding my process as a teacher-researcher, I can state that although this research was demanding and challenging, it was also very comforting and rewarding. This adventure showed me once more that being a teacher is not only transmitting information, it is rather a collective construction mediated by different contexts, events and individuals. My teaching practicum was the opportunity not only to put in practice what I learned at the university but also to acquire new insights about this profession and the challenges we face in the educational settings. Moreover, I identified that being a teacher and a researcher is a good combination to tackle inequalities and unfair conditions in the world. As such, both my learning process at the university and my practicum allowed me to realize that being a teacher is a profession that we construct every day.

Concerning the context where I conducted my teaching practicum, I consider that this project had a positive impact. I feel truly happy with the results of this action research and its impact on students' lives. Knowing that the participants in this study are more aware of certain issues that prevent us to live in a more supportive and peaceful society means to me that it has been a worthwhile project. Departing from my experience, I would like to emphasize on the importance of doing research in the educational field which may help to identify and advocate for students' needs, problems and difficulties.

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Appendix A: Questions to analyze the texts in the first cycle

➢ What is the context of the depicted situation?

➢ How do people feel?

➢ Why do people behave in this specific way?

➢ How does this situation affect the people who are involved?

➢ How would you feel if you were involved in a situation alike?

➢ Are you familiar with similar situations in your context?

➢ What could we do to avoid this type of situations?

Appendix B: Stories and reflections about suicide

Suicide is a topic the many do not like to talk about and without a bouth is a painful situation that not only affects a person but a whole group of people around them. most are caused by harassment, violence and physical agression that is experienced in the different social environments in which we coexist. the levels of stress and agresion, insecurity and vulnerability that the experienced on a daily basis undermine the mental health of all individues, especially the majority of young people who report experiencing high nivels of anxiety over the expectation of a promising future. and the pressure of adults for cover a series of standard activities that ensure a better Future.

1. One night, I was talking to a group of friends by messages, and they had learned that a common acquaintance who had committed suicide, so they told me: The reason for their suicide is unknow for a log time, although the had tongues say that it was becquse of harassment within his family.

2. I seens to me that It is a very difficult subject to deal with the world openly since some controversy can be generated, but people should know and know more about this problem so that they can help someone who goes through this and that people who do not face These situations understand others and do not say things such as trying to get attention.

Appendix C: Posters created by students to carry out the campaign against suicide