

Critical Literacy In An EFL Learning Virtual Course

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present investigation is related to describing how a group of intermediate-level students responds to a pedagogical implementation of critical literacy in an online EFL course at a language institute. The study has a qualitative approach and descriptive level. The sample consisted of six female students, all of them 15 and 16-year-old high school students; with a command of the English language at an intermediate level B1. This study considers four data collection instruments: classroom observations - video recordings and teachers' diaries, semi-structured open interviews with the aim of capturing the representations, thoughts, and conceptions that students have built on social problems through the approach of critical literacy implemented to teach English in a virtual learning environment. Among the main findings is that from the development of multimodal literacy, students achieved more structured knowledge in arguments; also more autonomous learning as well as a clear increase in interaction and consensus among students; finally, the mastery of the sources and the collection of information for learning increased. Overall, participants responded effectively to the development of critical literacy skills, through a gradual and satisfactory learning process.

Keywords: *Critical Literacy; Virtual Learning Environment; Qualitative Approach*

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Alfabetización crítica en un curso virtual de aprendizaje de EFL

RESUMEN

El objetivo de la presente investigación está relacionado con Describir cómo un grupo de estudiantes de nivel intermedio responde a una implementación pedagógica de alfabetización crítica en un curso de EFL en línea en un instituto de idiomas. El estudio tiene un enfoque cualitativo, de nivel descriptivo. La muestra estuvo constituida por seis estudiantes mujeres, todas ellas estudiantes de secundaria de 15 y 16 años; con un dominio del idioma inglés se encuentra en un nivel intermedio B1. Este estudio considera cuatro instrumentos de recolección de datos: observaciones en el aula - videgrabaciones y diarios de los docentes, entrevista abierta semiestructurada con el objetivo de captar las representaciones, pensamientos y concepciones que los estudiantes han construido sobre los problemas sociales a través del enfoque de alfabetización crítica implementado para enseñar inglés en un entorno de aprendizaje virtual. Entre los principales hallazgos se encuentra que a partir del desarrollo de la alfabetización multimodal, los estudiantes lograron conocimientos más estructurados en argumentos; además aprendizajes más autónomos como también en un claro incremento de la interacción y el consenso entre estudiantes; finalmente, se incrementó el dominio de las fuentes y la recopilación de la información para el aprendizaje. Se concluye que los participantes sí respondieron efectivamente al desarrollo de habilidades críticas de lectoescritura, a través de un proceso de aprendizaje gradual y satisfactorio

Palabras claves: *Alfabetización Crítica; Ambiente de Aprendizaje Virtual; Enfoque Cualitativo*

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, young people's lives are bombarded with more information than before, and educators should seriously consider teaching critical literacy skills to students as a defense mechanism against the nefarious purposes of many types of information (Kunnath, 2019). That is, in the era we live in, individuals require sufficient instruction to discern underlying meanings in the context surrounding them and in different areas of life, not just academic ones.

The aforementioned concern, among many others, occupies the reflections and debates of the academy when asking how teacher education programs prepare teachers to participate in critical literacies in their foreign language teaching contexts. Although there is not much research works on the matter at the regional and local level, during the courses taken in the master's program, the reality as teachers and what is significant to teach through language was discussed.

As awareness of critical literacy analysis and multiple literacy theories increases, it is recognized that classrooms coincide with the need to provide meaning to English lessons and students' lives. Multiple studies recommend that teachers receive professional development to authentically integrate critical literacy, and it has been found that teacher communities assist teachers in dealing with specific difficulties of critical literacy (McLaughlin & De Voogh, 2004a; Lee, 2011; Riley, 2015; Stribling, 2008). These contributions foster the consolidation of curricula and micro-curricula in undergraduate and graduate programs that offer teacher training in the EFL area.

Under these circumstances, teachers have a huge responsibility in terms of how they can support society from the classrooms. Clearly, learners need spaces that allow them to confront social realities in order to develop their potential and find ways to overcome the complex social problems they are experiencing. Additionally, students can begin to build from their microcosm that is the school, involving hopeful actions to live in a more just society. In summary, it is not possible to deny the relevance of teaching through the critical literacy model in the Colombian context.

In this sense, it is possible that the objective of describing how a group of intermediate-level students respond to a pedagogical implementation of critical literacy in an online EFL course at a language institute.

The research study had three specific objectives: implementing a pedagogical approach using ICT tools to enhance critical literacy in English, documenting the teaching and learning processes involved in this implementation, and assessing the learning outcomes to gauge the effectiveness of the pedagogical approach.

This premise becomes even more relevant when considering a study conducted by the United Nations in 2005, which revealed that Colombia has one of the highest rates of violence in the world, and social injustice and inequality are present in people's everyday lives (ACNUR, 2012). Therefore, activities, strategies, and tools aimed at developing students' critical consciousness can be a significant contribution to not replicating these rates of violence within their communities.

Regarding teachers, the contribution of this research is also very significant. On the one hand, it seeks to sensitize them to the benefits of implementing critical literacy to build a more equitable society with their students. On the other hand, it contributes to the professional development of teachers by inviting them to update their teaching practices in a changing world, which requires free, flexible, critical, and emancipatory teaching methods and techniques.

In other words, it could have an impact not only on teachers' awareness of the value of having high-order thinking skills necessary for academia but also provides them with a sense of criticality and agency to address real-life situations. Teachers are not passive subjects, receivers, and fulfillers, but active agents responsible for their future; they generate and strengthen capacities not only in school but also outside of it. (Camacho, Ordoñez et al., 2014). This study aims to encourage teachers to improve their literacy skills so that they can take stances regarding hidden messages and social issues.

In the Colombian context, the results of internal (Saber) and external (PISA) assessments indicate that the majority of students are at the level of literal comprehension when reading texts. A smaller percentage reach the inferential reading level, and a minimum is located at the critical-intertextual reading level. The above applies to reading texts in their mother tongue, as Quiroga, C. (2010) maintains that most students did not even like to read in Spanish.

One of the foundations that underpin this problem description is the analysis conducted in state of the art,

which reveals the gaps, recurring trends, points of convergence and divergence, and issues to be addressed in relation to critical literacy in English teaching. Additionally, the current situation of the aforementioned categories at the national level, why they matter, how they impact the academic community, and the purpose of research in this field will also be discussed.

To begin with, the motivation for this study emerged from realizing the limitations of critical components addressed in English teaching practice. Consequently, it was identified that the critical component was lacking in most class planning and development. Thus, as practicing teachers and researchers, we reflected on the prescribed curriculum and found a strong grammatical tendency and a lack of contextualization of topics with students' realities.

Secondly, through a needs analysis conducted in the course, evidence was collected that students have been learning English with strategies focused on grammar-based approaches. Additionally, they were asked about the topics they would like to discuss in class, and they were interested in social, political, and environmental issues. They also mentioned a preference for topics related to situations they encounter in everyday life.

To illustrate, according to the students' reports, the courses they attended were conventional, and the subject matter taught was based on the textbook contents. The textbooks were the primary source of information. Although students were using technology to take courses, they were receiving the same content and mostly using the same strategies. Therefore, incorporating a CL approach in virtual learning environments is crucial to recognize the students' responses and advancement in their learning process.

In addition, the decision to implement CL in a virtual EFL classroom came up due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the recognition of the high demands of language teaching in ICT, as virtual courses increased as an option for learning a foreign language (Bedoya, 2014).

As EFL teachers, we agree with ideals such as those of The New London group "to see ourselves as active participants in social change, as learners and students who can be active designers, creators of social features" (1996, p. 64). Therefore, we recognize that there is an urgent need to link students' lives with the academic content implemented so that we can move away from the example that Ochoa & Medina (2014)

affirmed: "Students were asked to write a series of sentences using a specific grammatical structure time without providing context or purpose for writing them." This would be the purpose of this study in our virtual classrooms as language teachers and learners. Therefore, we identified the need to rethink English language teaching practices using more critical and liberating approaches, a research concern arose, How do students respond to a pedagogical implementation of critical literacy in an online EFL course?

In other words, the research inquiry focuses on detecting and modifying the learning approaches of students when faced with the implementation of critical literacy in online classrooms. Consequently, this offers insights into the approaches and strategies that educators can utilize in the classroom to integrate critical literacy through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Therefore, this study proposes some significant units and lessons involving multimodal literacy to address social, political, and environmental issues that concern students. Sperry & Baker (2016) argue that educators should increase students' awareness and teach them to critically question media and technology. For this reason, this model could contribute to promoting English language learning beyond literal facilities with useful technological tools to face the needs of the current world.

After tracing the research conducted on critical reading in English teaching at the local, national, and international levels and providing a broad and justified formulation of the research question, this chapter will be developed with the following three conceptual lines or categories: 1. Critical Reading with the subcategories of origins and definition, critical literacy in EFL learning, multimodal literacy; 2. the category of Online EFL courses, which explores the trends of autonomous learning mediated by ICT; and finally, 3. the category of pedagogical implementation. It should be noted that the main theorists will be revisited to elucidate concepts under which the analysis of the results will be conducted in a subsequent chapter of this research.

Critical literacy is defined as an approach derived from Marxist critical pedagogy, which advocates for the adoption of critical perspectives toward text. It means that memorizing and repeating lists of words and content excludes the possibility of analysis, reflection, and negotiation of meaning in pedagogical environments, which is a very common practice in English classes and sometimes the only practice

performed to present content.

Taking into account the traces of critical literacy is not new among academics and researchers in educational literacy. However, due to the different theoretical foundations and authors, there is no single definition of critical literacy (Green, 2001). The term "critical literacy" was developed by social critical theorists concerned with dismantling social injustice and inequalities. These critical theorists assert that unequal power relationships prevail, and those in power are the ones who usually choose which truths should be privileged (Coffey, H, 2010).

Similarly, critical literacy has deep roots in the struggle of historically marginalized people to educate themselves. For example, Clark (1990); Freire (1970); Horton, Bell, Gaventa, & Peters (1990). Freire & Macedo (1987) defined critical literacy as a dialectical process that involves not only reading the word but reading the world. It encourages individuals to approach texts in a reflective way to understand working ideologies (Lucas, 2012).

Certainly, critical literacy focuses on the connection between literacy and power (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Another major proponent of critical literacy is Paulo Freire, who promotes the idea that students validate their creativity and thinking skills at the moment of learning instead of adopting all the knowledge they receive as truth. The author refers to education as the exercise of domination that stimulates students' credibility, with the ideological intention (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression (Freire, 1970, p. 65).

Learning: In the field of teaching foreign languages, the implementation of a critical approach involves strategies that can help students critically determine the objective code, culture, and belief system that the language brings with it. This is the main goal of the research study, that students can open their vision and perceptions about their own realities and come to their own conclusions. Additionally, they can challenge their conceptions and move forward to act for greater benefit within their communities.

EFL teaching, like any other language, conveys meaning, intentions, and representations of reality. Therefore, language is the vehicle that serves to shape and reshape society. A critical approach to language teaching should focus on contextual issues and how research seeks to transform the current situation

(Pennycook, 2004). Thus, Ebrahimi & Rahimi (2013) argued that foreign language students should not act as transmitters of foreign thoughts and beliefs to their own culture and it is up to them to explore the latent layers of meaning and perceive the ways in which people try to express their ideologies and thoughts (cited by Rahimi, A. & Askari Bigdeli, R. (2015).

Therefore, teachers can establish a good relationship with their students when they get to know each other better and listen to each other without limits of power. Thus, they see their peers as thinkers and helpers to explore new points of view, and new ways of life, while also developing skills of respect and empathy for those who are different from them.

Likewise, critical literacy promotes communication in the classroom based on the premise that human beings create meaning together because all members of the democratic society of the classroom have a voice, Daniel, M. C. (2008). Consequently, critical literacy empowers students with the possibilities to confront their world with their own voices, where students rely on the target language as a vehicle to present the meaning of life.

On the other hand, online EFL courses have become more popular. Despite, technology has impacted Colombian education a large number of teachers and administrators are hesitant to use virtual learning as part of their programs. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it was evident that most people were complaining about virtual teaching. However, the other side of the coin showed that technologies provide the ability to transmit concepts in new ways that would not otherwise be possible, efficient, or effective, with other methods of instruction.

To be more precise, the indicator of the increase in virtual education reports that the world is changing even in terms of education, and many language students are directing their attention to preferring the effectiveness and convenience of learning from home or anywhere in the world they may be. Beethan & Sharpe (2013) affirm that pedagogy is transforming due to the benefits of information and communication technology (ICT) for living in the 21st century.

In this scenario, we conducted this research considering this definition of virtual education: it is defined by Ossa (2006) as a revolutionary educational model composed of an innovative and flexible curriculum that

generates interactivity in the teaching-learning process due to the technological support offered by telecommunications systems, electronic networks, didactic tools, virtual libraries, and laboratories.

Based on this, the total e-learning model does not integrate any face-to-face meetings because the contents, evaluations, and tutorials are done virtually. In the context of language teaching, there are many advantages to teaching and learning virtually. For example, some studies have reported evidence that students seem highly motivated when learning languages with computers (Bedoya, 2014).

This is because technology is part of everyday life, and they feel they are doing something with what they are learning. Virtual tools (chat, wikis, web pages) constitute an important aspect of teenagers' daily life, as they often use technology for different purposes (tasks, entertainment, communication) (Ochoa & Medina, 2014).

From this point of view, another advantage of virtual learning is that students have the possibility to improve the practice of the target language in a confidential environment, and more equitable participation among students (Warschauer, 1997). The use of digital tools and websites is viable to get students' participation at the same time and make them part of the class on their own.

For example, twenty students register their opinion on a specific topic and submit the recording through Nearpod. This means that the teacher obtains twenty synchronous responses, whereas in class, in the same five minutes, a teacher will listen to or have students speak for only two minutes in two turns, with only two students speaking.

In asynchronous online communication, students have more time to plan, compose, revise, and edit their texts, as well as opportunities to read and reflect on their interlocutors' texts (Warschauer, 2005, p.106). Language learners have access to review their class recommendations, which provides a second encounter with the topics reviewed in class, they can go back and forth, and repeat what teachers and classmates have said.

Moreover, they can make all necessary changes before submitting an activity and can use an infinite amount of digital resources to do so, which is not possible in a face-to-face class without the use of technology. Despite the multiple adventures offered by ICTS, we must also be aware of their possible limitations and

the best ways to optimize this responsibility (Vacca Yakelin, 2014).

In conclusion, there are new possibilities that challenge the traditional ways educators do their work. Several studies reveal that teachers and future teachers are not indifferent to technology, in fact, they show a positive attitude and appreciate the advantages it can provide for themselves and their students.

In addition, Autonomy in virtual learning: Virtual learning environments have increased due to several benefits and advantages in terms of convenience for students and teachers who are learning and working from home, respectively. In addition, it promotes effectiveness in learning due to the constant use of multimedia that allows language students to boost their learning.

Progress in the virtual classroom is, in fact, the result of students' commitment and the responsibility they have acquired for autonomous learning. Students, in their freedom of choice, have selected a virtual program that gives them more opportunities to select what and how they want to learn. They are able to design their own individual learning plan and try to improve as quickly as possible.

Likewise, students become more responsible and independent when they join virtual learning. This confirms the findings of recent studies that virtual learning environments foster learner independence. In the same vein, Lu Hou & Huang (2010) suggest that students be encouraged to apply individual decision-making techniques as a result of actively participating in ICT learning experiences.

Overall, it is easy to observe that when students are in charge of their learning process, they develop intrinsic motivation to make decisions that favor their learning. In this case, the use of technology to achieve the individual plan that students compete in will be paramount. Technological tools foster authenticity and access to encounters that students can have with the target language in an EFL context, which would not be possible in conventional or non-technological classroom environments.

Furthermore, recent studies suggest that the virtual learning environment is perceived by students as a useful tool that offers a safe learning environment that allows them to deepen their knowledge and improve their communication skills beyond the limits of their classrooms.

The use of technology for language learning is a useful resource to move students to receive knowledge but also discover and construct knowledge on their own. Castro Sánchez & Chiniro Alema (2011) said that ICT

contributes to transforming a teaching environment into one that is more student-oriented. This is an objective that could be achieved through the use of VLE, where students can re-watch recorded classes, can solve activities at their own pace and when they have availability.

The purpose of education is to increase students' concern and passion for learning, improve what they have learned, and advance as a process for life. Autonomy and the use of technology for educational purposes lead to learning beyond official class hours.

In conclusion, autonomy refers to the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981, p.3). Students can do this because they are not passive entities, as they can control the learning process (Schunk, 2012). Therefore, it is possible to recognize the great importance of students' autonomy and motivation to be at the center of their learning.

METHODOLOGY

According to the features of the study, it is framed in the qualitative paradigm. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) state that a qualitative paradigm is a research approach that is used to explore complex social phenomena, where the emphasis is on understanding and interpreting human behavior and experiences in their natural settings. This approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of the research topic by focusing on the social context and the meanings people attach to their experiences. In the context of this study, we intend to analyze a group of intermediate students' process to develop critical literacy in a virtual EFL learning environment. Through the qualitative paradigm, the teacher researchers explore the complex social phenomena surrounding the students' experiences in this virtual learning environment. In this study, we developed an understanding of how a virtual learning environment promotes students' critical literacy development.

The research design is the case study, which is a type of case study that aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its natural context (Yin, 2003 p. 23). Specifically, the study examines the response of intermediate-level students in Cali, a capital city in western Colombia, to the implementation of critical literacy pedagogy in an online EFL course. The type of case study applied to this study is instrumental. An instrumental case study is designed to provide insights and understanding about a specific phenomenon in

a particular context. This type of case study is appropriate when the researcher intends to use the findings to improve a particular situation, inform practice, or generate practical knowledge (Stake, 1995). For this study, we consider the previous concept as the one to achieve the goal of this research which focuses on exploring the critical literacy process that students go through in a virtual EFL environment. An instrumental case study design allows us as teacher researchers to gather detailed information about the specific phenomenon. Furthermore, instrumental case studies typically involve a small number of cases and emphasize detailed data collection and analysis. This design aligns with the research question, which focuses on a specific group of four students at the intermediate level. Therefore, an instrumental case study design would be the most appropriate to answer this research question and to inform practice.

The study population is made up of high school students who have chosen to learn English virtually as a complementary option and come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. The study sample is made up of six students who accepted our invitation to participate in this study. They were 15 and 16-year-old high school students. The participants were all women, their command of the English language is at an intermediate level B1. They are from different socioeconomic levels in Cali and Medellín. They take classes virtually because they have tried face-to-face instruction and it did not meet their expectations, so they try virtual learning and have been taking classes in this modality for more than a year. These students are part of a group with one hour class on weekdays. In addition, they were similar in age and had the same level of English proficiency, intermediate level.

This study considers four data collection instruments: classroom observations - video recordings, and teachers' journals, open semi-structured interviews with the aim of capturing the representations, thoughts, and conceptions that students have built on social issues through the critical literacy approach implemented to teach English in a virtual learning environment. This section will define each instrument and how it will be implemented in the study. Participants were under eighteen so we provided them with a letter of consent to obtain permission from their parents to collect data from video-recorded lessons, class discussions, and interviews. Participants' names were changed and they were informed that they could withdraw from the research study when they wanted without facing any consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study states critical literacy “as not only a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life, as we know it” (p. 50, as cited in Molden, 2007). As such, English lessons may offer learners the possibility of asking, disagreeing, and assuming positions in real life issues inside the classes and not just repeating sentences out of context. It is also the possibility of familiarizing learners with the foreign language taking into account their feelings and views as well as the way they make sense of themselves and their communities. At this point, it is relevant to highlight that politics of daily life, unequal power relationships, and sociopolitical systems to which students belong are inseparable from the act of teaching (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) as cited by Rahimi, A. & Askari Bigdeli, R. (2015). In its broadest sense, critical literacy invites questioning power relationships, from the head of the school to the president of the country, as Van Dijk (2001) agrees on the relevance of studying how power, domination, and social order are imposed, reproduced, and controlled through discourse, and the need to be questioned from the classrooms not matter what subject area is being taught.

To explore learners’ experience in the virtual EFL course, students answered a survey through Google Forms, they sent answers after class, so they can take time to respond freely. The survey consisted of eight open questions about which methodology for learning English they have been part of as students, and how classes were developed before and during the virtual EFL course. Also, which reading and writing activities they used to do and what types of text they regularly read. Also, the teacher talked to them about their answers and validated that learners have received little instruction related to a critical literacy stance during their process of learning English. Furthermore, the questions aim to gather possible suggestions to include and enrich the curriculum ideas teachers had in mind to move English classes towards a critical literacy structured teaching. Where the curriculum proposed incorporated students' concern and sympathy about what and how they wanted to learn.

Each unit contains the same structure. They were divided by four main phases; warming up activities, presentation of the topic, practice, and production. Each unit has a main objective from the critical literacy stance and the communicative approach. Thus, the three units were planned in the order of importance

students gave to each topic. The first unit was related to depression, the second unit was about cyberbullying and the third one was about changes in teenagers. They were concerned about these issues and they really wanted to be well-informed about what these topics really are and how to deal with these problematic issues in their families and communities.

We were collecting students' opinions and artifacts during the implementation of the units. Additionally, we were interviewing them at the end of each unit to gather their impressions about how the English class has been developed and what we can learn to keep or stop doing for the next units and phases of classes.

During all phases of the classes, warming up activities, presentation of the content, practice and production students were encouraged to bind what they were learning in the class to themselves as human beings. For doing so, we used the Freebody and Luke model, Kempe (2001) shows an approach to develop more critical classroom practice. Critical Literacy requires according to Kempe(2001) a) to build awareness of how texts are constructed and how these constructions position the reader. b) to relate what is new and familiar. c) to bind literacy with students' interests and needs. d) to identify values and whose interests they serve. e) to challenge taken-for-granted readings. f) to discuss roles, relations, stereotypes, and expectations.

The data collected was analyzed using the procedures from the grounded framework, which suits the systematic and yet flexible procedure to collect and analyze data that constructs theories confined to such a source of information (Charmaz, 2006). That is to say that the interaction and observation with the students in the pedagogical intervention encompass the process of synthesizing information through qualitative coding.

This process is carried out by the researchers comparing the data to find categories. For doing so, the researchers interpret data in terms of codes, which will become categories. After that, we decide whether the categories fit in with the aims of the study. Finally, the examination of data determines what is relevant to the research project.

With the purpose of ensuring the validity of the analysis, methodological triangulation was utilized, with three instruments on the same object of study. In order to contrast the information gathered without relying only on one method. Thus, We validated the interviews, transcripts of classroom observations, and artifacts.

For the first stage, Strauss & Corbin (1990) suggest open coding, from which descriptive results emerge. We began the open coding process by going over the semi-structured interviews, transcripts of classroom observations, teacher's journals, and artifacts. We collected data and analyzed it simultaneously. This allowed us to make the necessary changes in the pedagogical implementation and in the process of data collection.

Afterward, we read the data collected line by line in several opportunities to find information which were potentially significant to answer the research question. Once commonalities were identified, different colors were selected to label each code that was recurrent along the data. Considering we used a Word document in google docs, we created codes adding comments and colors, as shown in the illustration below.

In relation to the category contributing to the texts from a critical perspective. According to the data analyzed, participants challenge the texts considered in the different discussions, they go beyond the literal sense as they make connections with their daily life issues. Students used multimedia to design comic strips and posters as a strategy to express their stance about topics that guided the course. This means that after the discussion participants gained knowledge to deliberate on them in an academic environment, they inquired and searched for theoretical support on these issues aiming to make their own points and related them with their personal experiences.

Related to the needs analysis given at the beginning of the course, the teacher researcher along with the participants negotiated the topics to be developed: changes in teenagers, cyberbullying, and depression. On the other hand, identifying the participants' learning styles which were mainly focused on audiovisual tools and the use of technology. That is why they were exposed to multimodal texts during the course. Essentially, multimodal pedagogies empower students to go beyond verbocentric and typographic views of language and communication. (Álvarez, J. A., 2016) due to Critical literacy, by definition, entails learner engagement with texts and multiple modes of information (Luke, A., 2012 as cited in Cho, H., 2015). According to that, participants did not only read lineal texts, they also were exposed to videos from Ted lessons and regular videos they might find on social media, blogs, and YouTube content. They read excerpts by famous celebrities, and articles from the New York Times and search their own sources on the internet as well.

“New information and communication technologies (ICT) can serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to raise awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on mutual understanding, tolerance and dialogue”. (Elsner, D., 2011)

During the process, it was evidenced that students realized how they have accepted some ideas or opinions as absolute truths without being informed about different perspectives on an issue. Participants agreed on the way they have been influenced by other people's thoughts or beliefs. However, leading the participants to go beyond requires a well-planned process. Thus, Critical literacy fosters children and young people to be able to read information to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them. (Curriculum for Excellence, Literacy across learning: principles and practice, The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019)” as cited in Blixen, T. B., & Pannell, J., 2020. Students exhibited that they challenge accepted beliefs and valued the importance of reading critically from different perspectives. Concerning the analysis of different texts carried out in class, students assumed a position of validating the information from different sources. Students revise what they believe, read, and listen to make decisions about the reliability of the information. Participant 3 explained that she should not believe or accept any idea just because she read or watched it, as it is not proof that it is truthful. Participants value the process of constructing knowledge about the topics discussed and not only considering the literal meaning of the texts. They became aware that they must search for reliable sources to build solid knowledge about any topic. “In particular, children and young people not only need to be able to read for information: but they also need to be able to work out what trust they should place in the information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them. (Curriculum for Excellence, Literacy across learning: principles and practice, The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence, 2019)” as cited in Blixen, T. B., & Pannell, J., 2020. Hence, students were aware of the importance of validating information from different sources and confronting the authors’ viewpoints. In this way, they develop ideas to go beyond their previous beliefs and promoted the need of being informed for building their projects. In fact, students noticed that they were developing literacy in EFL by inquiring about the social issues addressed in the

course. Likewise, they reflected on those topics that motivated their interest to disrupt their beliefs. The following samples present evidence:

I would like to respect that she has another ... religion because like everyone can have a different religion and it shouldn't affect anybody because of that, like at the end like we're all the same... yes and you see the people on social media like happy and everything but actually you don't know what happened, you don't know like you don't know if they're like really happy or if you're sad you don't know

In the same train of thought, students demonstrated how they were forming an opinion and felt free to communicate their ideas. We evidenced how their voices were amplified and validated in the classroom. Students felt they had a voice that made their points to the texts discussed in class and they expressed the importance that their life reflections are appreciated and involved as relevant contributions in the discussions. Furthermore, the interactions in class generate an environment for students to learn from their peers. So, when students can socialize and discuss topics they come up with new ideas and knowledge about the topics. Specifically, Critical literacy promotes communication in the classroom that is based on the premise that human beings create meaning together because all members of the democratic classroom society have a voice, Daniel, M. C. (2008, p. 26). Accordingly, Critical literacy empowers students with the possibility to face their world with their own voices. In the following samples, we can observe how participants were forming opinions and freely participated to convey their thoughts related to the social issues discussed:

Watching in the media that um you have to have like 90-60-90 or something like that, and if you go to Instagram or I don't know like to all the social media that by now exist, um... they are always showing you like... you have to be with really tiny hips or you have to have hips, or if you need to have boobs, or something like, that and they are always like telling you something that it's not completely true. (Interview-P3 06-22)

On the other hand, students' products revealed they were well-documented with trustful sources of information so, they engaged objectively with their audience during the presentation of the different

projects. Essentially, students were provided with information from different stances as well as they researched by themselves to critically analyze and understand their reality, so they become part of the transformation of society” (Freire, 1970, as cited in Gutiérrez, C., 2015, p. 180). As Samacá Bohórquez states, you can identify the sources of power, recognize your own position in relation to power, and understand the political nature of what you learn, you can develop your own social actions.” (2012 p. 205/12). In the next samples, we can observe the process students went through with the topics that lead them to take a critical position and spread their thoughts.

Students carried out different research assignments to inquire about the social issues discussed in class. They investigated the topics to broaden the information from the class and found cases of people who have been involved in issues of depression, cyberbullying, and teenage changes. Afterwards, they read and analyzed the information gathered by themselves and the sources considered in class.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, participants responded effectively to the development of critical literacy skills, through a gradual and satisfactory learning process. In the name of the pedagogical implementation, ICT tools and multimodal literacy strategies were used with the purpose of facilitating the promotion of critical literacy in the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. In addition to involving topics that served to open discussions, provoke inquiries, analyze situations, draw conclusions, and propose alternatives to the social issues discussed.

The study demonstrates that the ability to adapt to new and diverse learning environments is a significant strength of the participants. By replacing physical spaces with virtual learning spaces, the traditional institutionalized structures that have historically segmented the educational system based on age and level have been replaced. As a result, learning can now occur in any temporal or spatial context, without an officially designated location or predetermined timeframe. This study highlights that any time or space has the potential to be adapted as a suitable learning environment, thereby creating new opportunities for individuals to engage in learning activities.

Furthermore, the multimodal pedagogical implementation not only facilitated a greater understanding of information but also empowered students to deal with critical issues, stating their positions once they inquired about them. This means that learning processes such as deductive and inductive analysis, attention, memory, and synthesis, among others, were favored thanks to the presentation of information in different forms and media. In this context, the role of the teacher is crucial in promoting the development of critical thinking skills. The teacher creates a learning environment that encourages students to question, analyze, and challenge power structures. They guide students to examine issues from multiple perspectives, providing them with opportunities to engage with challenging texts and making connections to their personal experiences. Therefore, the teacher acts as a facilitator and guide, supporting students as they develop their critical literacy skills and become active, engaged learners, leading to a deeper understanding of information.

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