

*NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND CRITICAL LITERACY: ideas for activities in an
English classroom*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to suggest different ways to use new technologies, mainly the internet, in an English teaching environment based on some Critical Literacy principles. New Technologies were chosen as the main tools because they are quite familiar and really attractive for kids and teenagers. The activities are based on Critical Literacy (SHOR; FREIRE, 1987; SHOR, 1999; CERVETTI; PARDALES; DAMICO, 2001; LUKE, 2003; MCLAUGHLIN; DEVOOGD, 2004; ROGERS, O'DANIELS, 2015). Connecting both things, new technologies and critical literacy, we are able to make room for teaching English as a means of promoting citizenship via reflection, transformation and action.

Keywords: *Critical literacy. New Technologies. English.*

1 INTRODUCTION

There is still a strong belief that our appearance, the place we are from, our gender and color seal our fate. Although these characteristics should not define us, this is what happens most of the time. However, this reality can be changed; education has a lot of potential to change people's lives. It is through it that kids can have a better future and make their own destinies. Critical literacy comes out as a way of making changes possible; it is a dream of a new society against the status quo, as proposed by Paulo Freire (SHOR; FREIRE, 1987).

This article⁴ derives from a discipline we attended at a Federal University in

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⁴ *This article is theoretical. It does not come from an empirical research.*

Minas Gerais called “*Novas Tecnologias e Ensino de Língua Inglesa*” in the Languages course. We present some suggestions for activities for English lessons⁵ in order to empower student’s to deal with new technologies and English critically, building on their education, besides teaching the language itself⁶. We begin with an overview of critical literacy in which we describe some principles and presuppositions of it. Next, we discuss the role of new technologies in association with critical literacy in an English lesson. Finally, we present some ideas of activities via new technologies based on Critical literacy.

2 THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 Critical literacy

Critical education probably had its formal beginning in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1974). Freire was concerned with a decolonized, emancipatory and consciousness raising education of the oppressed so that they could be able to fight not only economic oppression, but also, political, psychological and even cultural. Freire criticized the naturalization and common-sense which, according to Luke (2003, p. 3), “is at the heart of critical pedagogies”.

Rogers and O’Daniels (2015) agree that Freire is the first name that might come to mind when it comes to Critical Education, but it should not be the only one. They say that mainly Critical Literacy has been deeply influenced by

social linguistics and literacies (Barton et al. 1999; Street 1985); critical language awareness and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Janks, 2001); sociologies of literacy (Luke 1988; Shannon 1989); and early studies of language, power and representation (Dyon 1993; Gregory and Williams 2008) (ROGERS; O’DANIELS, 2015, online).

The concept of Critical Literacy bear a relation with three areas of inquiry, such

⁵ We considered here a language center teaching environment as there is commonly little room for those suggestions based on developing student’s citizenship rather than just the linguistic part.

⁶ First, we considered the discussion about new technologies as well as the activities we have seen in class. Then, we thought about some connections between those ones with Critical Literacy as we wanted our students to learn beyond the linguistic part. Finally, we discussed about some activities we could use in a language schools in order to promote citizenship and a meaningful way to learn English.

as: “as a bridge to access and transform codes of power, critical literacy as social justice, and critical literacy as dialogic engagement” (ROGERS; O’DANIELS, 2015, online). According to the authors, these areas are overlapped.

There are some presuppositions of Critical Literacy listed by Cervetti, Pardales and Damico (2001) that are worth mentioning: knowledge is ideological rather than neutral or natural; there is no straight correspondence between language and reality; meaning is situated and built upon the historical, social, economic context as well as it derives from different power relations; meaning is also contestable and multiple.

McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004, p. 14-16) also set some principles of Critical Literacy. It

“focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action; (...) it focuses on the problem and its complexity; (...) its strategies are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used; (...) it disrupts the commonplace by examining it from multiple perspectives”. (MCLAUGHLIN; DEVOOGD, 2004, p. 14-16).

Having said so, “when we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. All of us grow up and live in local cultures set in global contexts where multiple discourses shape us”. (SHOR, 1999, online). In other words, critical literacy can be understood as an action in which the use of language can make someone aware of his position and possibilities in the world, connecting the individual to the group, the private to the public, the local and the global, rethinking inequality, justice and social relations. When a person is critically literate, she/he is able to reflect upon her/his actions and relations with the world.

2.2 Critical literacy and new technologies⁷

Why is it necessary to develop critical literacy in the language center classroom?

⁷ Some authors such as Gee, in his polemic book “What video games have to teach us about learning literacy” (2003) and also Gillen (2015), to name a few, call this relation between new technologies and critical education- new literacy studies. Due to the length and aim of this article, we will not use or go deeper in this term. Conversely, we aim at using the principles of critical literacy having the technological tool to support to suggest some activities to go beyond the teaching of language in an English lesson.

It is well known that our societies have a long story of prejudice and fight for power, that the minorities have always been segregated and, most of the times, did not have access to education and opportunities to improve their lives. In addition to it, when it comes to English language we know that it has always been reinforcing imperialism via decontextualized teaching which aims just at linguistic developing.

The idea to ally critical literacy and new technologies is related to the impact these new technologies have on our lives. In other words, everything someone does has an impact on society, people living in small or big cities, rich or poor countries can establish contact with others. With all this connection, we could expect people to be more friendly and understanding. However, what we can see online is exactly the opposite. The differences were never so off-showed and the manipulation of entire populations was never so huge.

Because of all these problems and the increase of social inequality and prejudice, critical literacy becomes an essential part of English classes. Teachers should not only focus on the language and its grammar, but also on making their students aware of naturalized representations and standard views of the world. Furthermore, they must empower learners with as much knowledge as possible. In order to do that, they must be critically literate too. It seems to us that a good way of improving students' critical literacy and comprehension of the world is using what connects them to everyone: new technologies and, more specifically, the internet.

As Rogers and O'Daniels (2015, online) advocate "critical Literacy refers to the practice of using technologies (from print to digital technologies) to analyze, critique⁸, and redesign structure that influence daily life". The choice of new technologies relies not only on their appeal to the young, but also, on the fact that online environments are ideological spaces.

Within the technological shift the turn of the century brought some social, cultural and political changes. If we consider the web, we know that "it is far from being world-wide... it is not a culturally neutral or innocent communication landscape open to the literacy practices and values of all global citizens" (HAWISHER; SELFE, 2000 apud GILLEN, 2015, online). The internet was "originally designed to privileged

⁸ The words "critique" and "criticize" are used in this article as synonyms, for didactic reasons, despite the theoretical affiliations each of them imply.

individuals to communicate about war” (HAWISHER; SELFE, 2000 apud GILLEN, 2015, online). Until today it has been a source of division as some individuals still do not have access to it.

Another point to be considered is that “some online spaces that can provide highly motivating spaces for children, can at the same time be critiqued for narrowness in such features as gender prescription or emphasis on consumerism in the interests of multinational corporations” (GILLEN, 2015, online). So, in this way, the critical dimension is paramount to a conscious use of new technologies in education. Developing “the ability not only to use such resources and to participate effectively and creatively in their associate cultures, but also to criticize them, to read and use them against the grain, to appropriate and even redesign them” (SNYDER, 2003 apud GILLEN, 2015, online).

3 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES

Firstly, a good aspect of using new technologies in the classroom is that we offer some guidance for our students to use the internet as a learning tool and also a source of reflection and transformation.

Students could produce their own blogs expressing opinions about trending news. It is their time to express and share their views. Learners can say what they really think about something that happened in the world or even in their neighborhood. If it is something that happened really close to them, they can even play journalists.

A good example is a group of students from Rio de Janeiro. They were in the middle of a war between the police and the drug dealers during Morro do Alemão’s pacification process; they were the only source the media had to inform society about what was happening over there (RÓNAI, 2013). Because of that, they posted everything they could see on a blog and on Twitter. Thanks to the information they provided, the police had more chances to do their job and they could pacify the area, also showing the whole country what was happening. When the conflict ended, they received a sponsorship by a famous TV show, creating a place to work and keep sending the news to their community.

Secondly, internet is a great tool when it comes to exercise critical literacy. Students are able to find the news on different websites, from different points of view. This can enhance their capacity of identifying divergent opinions and the ideas behind them. To reflect upon the choices made when writing the news (images; language; position in the page...). With this practice, learners may develop their own opinions, not just copying others, maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, they will not be influenced to do what the elite wants, but what they really want to do. Moreover, students could create their own line of thought, creating a possibility for discussion in the classroom.

For instance, teachers can bring varied texts from distinctive websites and ask students to work together, exchanging ideas and creating meaning. This can be used to work with many distinct subjects, such as gender equality, social inequality, racial and religious prejudice, etc. It could be an outstanding moment to intensify students' awareness of how our society is structured and why there is this tendency to believe that truth is one sided or that it is natural.

Another suggestion for interaction based on discussion is the use of social media. There is no need to do something big and elaborated. It can be a simple regular practice, and learners may create a group to talk to each other. With this type of activity, they can establish connections and explore a range of interpretations about the same subject.

Students, for instance, can have a Facebook Group to talk about their classes, tests, show extra material, among other activities. They can also use Twitter to talk about something they saw during class. Those things will probably make them feel more accepted and also connected.

However, teachers must pay attention to the feedback and organization of these activities. According to Brown (1999, p. 23), "teachers need to be very aware of their own ideological stances and take care not to impose these on their learners". Besides, they must understand that, as students come from distinctive backgrounds, they may not accept the concept of critical literacy easily. This is the reason why "a critical approach needs to become a regular part of classroom practice, not simply a question of a few random activities done on an irregular basis with particular texts" (BROWN, 1999, p. 25).

Many times, teachers forget the power they have in hands. So, they must be careful when teaching, to avoid causing the opposite of what critical literacy is. If they do not observe their attitudes, instead of helping students raise their awareness and consciousness, they may impose their beliefs to them. Consequently, the objective of making learners critical citizens is completely compromised.

What is more, if teachers establish a relationship of comprehension and cooperation, students tend to trust them a lot. And that is exactly where the danger relays, because it is very easy to convince someone to believe in whatever you want if that person trusts you. So, not only teachers, but also the school and coordinators must pay a lot of attention to what happens in the classroom and analyze how knowledge is being built and how teachers are coordinating the activities.

Besides that, it is essential to know students and understand them. For instance, if the teacher identifies that it is necessary, he “may need to provide more support to learners in the form of vocabulary, main ideas and so on, so that they can focus on ideological aspects” (BROWN, 1999, p. 25). When the teacher knows the students, it is easier to identify problems and potentialities, enabling her/him to take advantage of her/his students’ strengths in favor of the learning process.

Another important aspect to be analyzed is that not only advanced level students should develop their critical literacy, but also students with a lower level of proficiency. Simple activities, such as describing pictures and answering questions about them, or watching short videos, can have a huge and positive impact on the learning process and can be used to improve literacy. In other words, there is no need to wait until students get proficient on the language to start developing it. What it is at stake here is the choice of material and the questions to raise student’s awareness and lead them to reflect upon some controversial themes as well as proposing some actions in their own community, for example.

Another idea for activities in class, regarding the environment could be: students could take photos of some positive and negative aspects regarding environmental protection in the area they live. This is one of the transversal themes posed on the National Curricular Parameters (BRASIL, 2010). They could post their photos on their Facebook groups or any other social media students know. Teacher can work with some

lexis to describe their pictures so that they can post and describe them in English as well as comment on their classmates' photos in English. Then, they can work on some solutions to the posed problems. What can they do as individuals to work out those problems? What actions they can take in their own communities? Students can engage in real projects in their communities to help protect the environment and to raise their communities awareness to do so. Lastly, they can present their ideas using any technological resources they can to the whole group. Reflection, transformation and action are focused here.

Another good suggestion is using online or printed magazines and the publicity you find inside of it. For example, the teacher could start, in lower-level groups, using, simply, some pictures. In this way, students would not feel worried about understanding, focusing only on producing meaning.

With this kind of approach, students might feel more comfortable to do the task. Focused on the meaning of the pictures, this activity can be used for a speaking class. Probably, students will think by themselves and talk about something important without even noticing it. Of course, once again it depends on the teacher to choose a topic they can talk about. Because, even using pictures, if the docent chooses a very demanding subject, students may feel frustrated. Moreover, if the topic does not encourage students to think by themselves, it is a useless activity, because it did not accomplish its purpose.

Then, as learners' language proficiency improves, the language used to describe the pictures can get more challenging, fomenting deeper discussions. And it might be a good moment to start using magazines or, even, posts from the internet. Commercials can be a good source of debate and consciousness raising as we are not used to interpreting them deeply. Some questions could be: Who is the target audience? How is it represented? What is your opinion about it? What is omitted in the commercial? How would you redesign this commercial? What interests do it serve?

Also, another good idea is selecting pictures, news and videos about subjects close to students' reality. If they live at communities or near them, learners can talk about their own lives and, discuss about them, thinking about how they can improve their life style and the place where they live. Students can compare their realities to the realities shown on TV or internet videos regarding communities in their city or country.

What does it reveal? How are those realities portrayed? Do you agree with that? Does the TV, internet video portray the truth? Is there one truth to be portrayed?

It is interesting to remember that the activities cannot be something random, they must be connected to students' lives. In addition, teachers can go even further with these tasks. For example, debates can be created and, if some students disagree while others agree, they must try to understand why, noticing that there are different ways of living, opinions and that they can enrich our society, our discussions. Teachers can create a debate club which can happen once a month or once a week. The class can be divided into two teams and they can even record it for future use.

Another great task that connects everything already presented here would be the creation of interviews with other students from different classes about the topics in focus. An online newspaper or blog can be created, presenting points of view from different people and also helping to share students' ideas. Living and knowing the difference makes us more respectful of it.

Last, but not least, when teaching family members, the teacher could take the chance of talking about the existent families. What is a family for you? Are the families all the same? Should they all be the same? The idea here is to call student's attention to the fact that family is a social construction, as well as many other structures in society. So, in this way, there is no neutral or natural concept of family. Diversity should be more than welcome but if students believe that the things are already stated and there is just one sided truth, nothing could be done.

4 CONCLUSION

It is possible to see that there is a great variety of ways to make room for critical literacy in the classroom, especially, using new technologies. Our idea is to share some activities we designed in the light of Critical Literacy, in order to raise people's awareness of who they are and their position in the world, empowering them to feel capable and powerful to change their realities. We do not aim to present recipes of activities, on the contrary, we desire to promote inspiration so that these activities may trigger some ideas to teach English critically in your own context as promoting critical

literacy takes into consideration the context of the students, teacher, place they study, their agendas, for instance.

To sum up, we are convinced that critical literacy is the right path to follow in the English teaching classroom. Because more than learning a second language, students are learning how to reflect upon their ideas and beliefs, express themselves, understand that there are divergent opinions in the world, and they are fruitful. Furthermore, they are taking control of their destinies and positioning themselves in society, being capable of going after their desires and aspirations.

NOVAS TECNOLOGIAS E LETRAMENTO CRÍTICO: ideias para atividades em uma aula de língua inglesa

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é sugerir maneiras diferentes de se usar as novas tecnologias, notadamente a internet, em um ambiente de ensino da língua inglesa baseadas em alguns princípios do Letramento Crítico. As novas tecnologias foram escolhidas como principais ferramentas por serem algo familiar e bastante atrativo para crianças e adolescentes. As atividades são baseadas no Letramento Crítico (SHOR; FREIRE, 1987; SHOR, 1999; CERVETTI; PARDALES; DAMICO, 2001; LUKE, 2003; MCLAUGHLIN; DEVOOGD, 2004; ROGERS; O'DANIELS, 2015). Dessa maneira, ao aliar as novas tecnologias e letramento crítico, nós abrimos espaço para o ensino da língua inglesa como um meio de se promover a cidadania através da reflexão, transformação e ação.

Palavras-chave: Letramento crítico. Novas tecnologias. Língua inglesa.

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