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Reading for life: The Critical Literacy and Literature Project at UNLPam (2013-2016)

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Abstract

During the last year in their ELT programme, students face dilemmas which are more philosophical than linguistic in nature. Literature becomes then a fertile ground for reflective thinking; and critical literacy, a suitable approach to engage in novel ways of reading the world and of appropriating the curriculum. In this classroom account, we offer the preliminary results of a pilot study we carried out in the course on literatures in English we taught at the National University of La Pampa (UNLPam) during the second term of 2013. That action was framed in the research project *Critical literacy and literature in English language teacher education*, which we devised for 2013-2016 and of which we also offer a brief description.

Keywords: critical pedagogy; critical literacy; English language teaching; literatures in English; teacher education.

Resumen

Al finalizar sus estudios universitarios, los futuros profesores de inglés enfrentan dilemas de naturaleza más filosófica que lingüística. La literatura se convierte en terreno fértil para la reflexión y la crítica, y la literacidad crítica un modo de abordaje textual que estimula nuevos modos de leer el mundo y de apropiarse del curriculum. Ofrecemos aquí una somera descripción del proyecto de investigación *Literacidad crítica y la literatura en la formación docente del profesor de inglés*, seguida de una narrativa áulica de las actividades que, en el marco de dicho emprendimiento, desarrollamos en el segundo cuatrimestre de 2013 en nuestro curso sobre literaturas en inglés en la Universidad Nacional de La Pampa (UNLPam).

Palabras clave: enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera; literaturas en inglés; formación docente; pedagogía crítica; literacidad crítica.

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DURING THE LAST year in their teacher education programme, students face dilemmas which are more philosophical than linguistic in nature, as they are on the verge of becoming teachers. It is a time in their lives when the initial interest in dominating the foreign language and the institutional mandate that language be competently taught are articulated. It is precisely at this moment that we should propose our students engage in critical ways of reading the world and of recreating values and commitment. Literature becomes then a fertile ground for reflective thinking on who they are and where they are going since, as claimed by Carr and Skinner (2009), "those who aspire to a wider (extended) conception of educational professionalism might as well (if not better) read the works of Jane Austen or Henry James as those of Piaget, Maslow or Vygotsky" (p. 151). It is in this crux where literature and critical literacy come together, and where both teacher educators and students can appropriate the curriculum. We believe this is the only way both could finally be empowered "to become critical thinkers, equipped with problem-solving strategies, poised to challenge those forces in society that would keep them passive" (Brown, 1991, p. 248).

Changes in the directions outlined above are framed in the overall transformations being experienced in the last three decades in the areas of reading, literature, and English Language Teaching (ELT). We have witnessed a shift from a *reading* paradigm, by which the process was understood as a mere linguistic phenomenon, to one of *literacy*, inclusive of the discursive and social elements involved in reading. Literacy is thus considered a way of reading and writing ideology, and the term is often accompanied by the adjective *critical* in an attempt to foster readers' examination of "the key moments where social identity and power relations are established and negotiated" (Comber, 2001, p. 271).

Similarly, literature has experienced an unprecedented expansion both in its object, which adopted new and innovative forms, and in the means that are used for its production, dissemination, and consumption (Eagleton, 1983/1996; Robin, 1993). This new perception of literature, not as an exclusive product of a target culture but as a global phenomenon, opens up a plethora of opportunities for its study, especially those based on reception theory (Iser, 1972; Jauss, 1982). Scholars in favour of that model believe that it is only in the dialectic convergence between text and reader that the literary work truly exists. In ELT, McRae (1991) proposed what he labelled "literature with a small 'l'", an approach to literature closer to life, even as a specialised subject in higher education (pp. 120-125). Recently, this field has undergone "a radical reorientation along new paradigms […] in understanding motivation and acquisition in terms of social participation and identity construction" (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 9). This displacement has taken at least two different directions: (a) a rearrangement of the psycholinguistic model of TESOL into a wider one, inclusive of the social aspects of

education (Holliday, 1994, 2005), and (b) the growth of a critical pedagogy movement within the field of applied linguistics (Pavlenko, 2004; Pennycook, 1994, 2001) based on Phillipson's (1992) claim of linguistic imperialism. It is in this continuous change and transformation of paradigms and in the constant flux of our teaching practice that the critical literacy and literature project at the National University of La Pampa (UNLPam) came into existence.

The Project and Its Context

The changing contexts described above allowed us to propose a reorientation in our approach to teaching literature. In our English Language Teacher Education programme (2009) at the Department of Foreign Languages at UNLPam, the literature curriculum was reduced to only three courses from the five we used to have, and the description of literature itself was freed from its monolithic national boundaries (e. g., 19th century English Literature, 20th century American Literature). The new Literature in English II, which we are currently teaching, belongs in the second term of the fourth year of the course of studies. Even though we had made some sporadic attempts at using critical literacy, it was only by the beginning of 2013 that we decided we were ready to devise a clear plan to teach literature following its tenets.

We wrote a research project, *Critical literacy and literature in English language teacher education*, which we framed around three research questions:

1. To what extent are our students provided with the cultural and linguistic resources necessary for them to engage with texts critically?
2. How can critical literacy be applied to literature classes?
3. In what ways can a critical approach to literary texts and an emerging teacher identity be articulated? (Basabe & Germani, 2013a)

We focused on the design of a series of experiences which, without disregarding the more usual approaches to the teaching of literature (Carter & Long, 1991; McRae, 1991), would integrate those derived from a linguistic reading of the literary texts (Birch, 1989; Durant & Fabb, 1990; Toolan, 1998) with those advocating for critical reading (Shor, 1999; Wallace, 2001, 2005) and for the creation of open spaces of debate and enquiry (Andreotti, Barker, & Newell-Jones, 2006). Despite the fact that the first stage of the implementation of the project had elements of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), at the moment of putting the suggested activities into practice, our approach to the methods of data collection was definitely qualitative. They included ethnographic observation, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to achieve

greater triangulation and to secure validity and reliability.

In this classroom account, we offer only the preliminary results of a pilot study we carried out in the second semester of 2013. That was the first time in which Literature in English II was taught since our ELT programme was modified in 2009. Due to that change, only three students, Dana, Juan, and Malvina, could take the subject[1]. They had taken two previous courses in literature in their teacher education programme, but they reported to have no clear engagement with literary experiences before university, either in English or Spanish. The professor in charge of the subject had been tenured for ten years and specialised in education and had a longer relationship with the students than the rest of the chair, having already been their tutor for two other subjects. The other teacher educator, specialised in Phonology and Literature, had arrived after a long leave of absence and had taught literature as an assistant for about ten years. The teacher assistant had been in the chair for two years. As there were only six people on the course, an intimate and productive working relation was fostered between us.

Results

We firstly focused on a careful selection of the literary texts to be used, their arrangement around thematic areas, and a suitable design of tasks involving critical literacy. We tried to choose literary works which, due to their provocative nature, would lead to self-interrogation and self-growth. As for the activities, based on our reading of Frost's (1920) *The road not taken*, for example, we had a fruitful discussion with our students about the choices and dilemmas they faced on the eve of their becoming teachers. Also, suggested to us by their informal conversations around the issues, we devised a writing task in which students were put in the position to judge Smith's action at the end of Sillitoe's (1959) *The loneliness of the long-distance runner* in comparison with that of George Milton in Steinbeck's (1937) *Of mice and men*. Finally, we proposed a form of assessment in which they were in charge of selecting and performing their favourite scene in the plays they were assigned. As an additional task, we asked them to write the script of a critical encounter between two characters from different plays.

As regards data collection, we made between 10 and 15 class observations and we gathered class documents. In addition, we had an individual interview with each of our students halfway through the course and a focus group when the course was over. We read and coded the data on the basis of our knowledge of qualitative methodologies (Denzin, 1989; Gibbs, 2007; Rapley, 2007). We presented a preliminary version of our results at a national convention (Basabe & Germani, 2013b). Here we offer a glimpse of those findings using the headings that naturalistically emerged from our coding.

Roles and Relationships

Some years ago, in an informal conversation with our students, one of them posited that he expected literature to teach them "things that were valuable for life." Gradually, we decided to shift from a cultural/historical approach to one fostering personal growth (Carter & Long, 1999). Thus, we arranged the texts selected for the course on the basis of the human relationships they portrayed. Our classes turned then into discussions not only about literature but also about the human issues that are its matter: selfhood, gender, parenting, teaching and learning, among others. As a group, our students drew sociograms based on the personal relationships among characters in the plays we read, in which they tagged feelings and power relations. This led them not only to analyze the bonds and conflicts present in the texts but also to create and recreate the social and personal ties among them through patient teamwork and careful reflection.

At first, the students felt surprised and even slightly uncomfortable at the critical tasks we proposed to them, and they found it difficult to express their viewpoints freely and engage in debate when they disagreed with each other. As Juan stated in an interview, "one offers an interpretation and nobody dares to expand on it or answer back to it". In fact, there developed a teacher-student interaction paradigm for most of the classes because the students were often reluctant to play a more active role or because the teachers fell back into traditional teaching models. But, as the group grew into "a critical community" with a common and explicit objective: "the critical assessment of a text" (Wallace, 2005, pp. 92-94), they managed to stay focused, think hard, and work as a team, reaching fruitful instances of debate and enquiry. In an interview, Juan reported that he found the approach "more practical, [since] one comes closer to interpretation and realizes one can read on their own," and Dana stated that she had enjoyed the possibility of "having choices and going beyond literature." As teachers, we were able to gradually lose our fears and to become co-participants in the construction of knowledge.

Identity and Personhood

At the beginning of the course, Dana and Malvina tended to frame their readings of literature exclusively in a religious context, and Juan mostly in academic contexts. When we asked them to list five books they considered valuable for their lives, for instance, the two girls mentioned *The Bible*, and Juan hesitantly referred to Poe. In the creative writing activities in which they were requested to make value judgements on certain characters, they would tend to identify with those that fell within their comfort zone, and they would usually think it inappropriate to support life choices that might not necessarily conform to their views on society. As the course advanced, only Malvina tried more personally "involved" readings and dared consider more challenging possibilities. "Literature has the capacity to reflect my feelings, to tell stories which

are similar to mine," she enthusiastically stated in an interview, "to make me think about and understand others." From our observations and document analysis, we deduced that, while Malvina ventured into more personal readings, Juan became good at identifying conflicts and sometimes at working out the linguistic subtleties of a literary text. Throughout the course, though, Dana tended to continue condemning characters on moral grounds and to very often find refuge in a predictable analysis that seldom dared to plunge into the critical.

Even though they were able to identify the literary traits of a text, the students often had difficulties in sharing their findings in ways other than description and exposition. When carrying out tasks that positioned them in a teaching role, for example, they showed a strong tendency towards lecturing rather than eliciting responses or discussing ideas. In our focus group, they expressed their concern with the complexities of teaching literature and language in general, an issue we also shared. In the observations of our own classes, we also noticed our inclination to present and lecture and the anxiety we experienced when leaving our controlling position. We believe these feelings result not only from the intricacies of our role but also from the instability stemming from a critical approach.

Critical Attitudes

We expected our students to already possess the linguistic and cultural resources necessary to fully apprehend a literary text. However, they tended to disregard the representational nature of literary experience and to avoid conscientious text work, due, in Malvina's words, to their "lack of tools." Yet, they did use a series of specialized analytical categories, such as gender, race, and class, in order to read literature. Malvina once acknowledged, "I read literature as if it were theory." We inferred that this could be the result of a habit of interpreting texts from a theoretical perspective rather than from a more linguistic/aesthetic or personal stance, an issue that—we strongly believe—we should be critically addressing in English language teacher education.

In order to foster a more personal and critical engagement with literature, we tried to frame tasks in view of the students' interests, to promote diverse and alternative readings, and to encourage them to create their own questions and put forward their own dilemmas. They responded by engaging critically with the instances of creative writing we suggested to them and integrating literature with other forms of expression and sources of information (e. g., their own drawings and posters, videos and pictures from the Internet, etc.) that they individually related to the texts. The students realised that, if they were allowed to make their own choices and support them critically, they felt empowered and able to enjoy literature at a more personal level. Thus there is only one person and one situation in which literature comes to be true: the reader and the

processes of literacy.

Further Suggestions for Critical Practice

Our experience of critical literacy left us with a feeling of satisfaction due to the fruitful, though limited, results we had. Here we offer a list of suggestions that we judge worth applying if we want to foster critical thinking and practice:

- Make the methodology and the reasons for its use explicit from the start. This will lead students to understand what is expected from them and to prevent their getting lost in the process.
- Create safe classroom contexts in which everybody's knowledge and viewpoint is respected and in which everybody has the right to express their opinion.
- Combine thought-provoking literary texts dealing with a similar topic but representing diverse perspectives.
- Give students the chance to share with the class the literature they read and to select texts and approaches as a way to cater for different styles and interests.
- Offer opportunities for creative writing, such as retelling narratives from the point of view of another character or taking a moral stand on the events of stories. Chances should also be given to transform literary texts into other visual, linguistic, or performed artefacts, such as posters, paintings, video clips, sketches, or poems.
- Connect literature with the students' lives, honouring their personal experiences and their social context through activities that generate significant interest.
- Foster teamwork and peer evaluation. Encouraging students to share their views promotes solidarity and collaborative learning.
- Redefine assessment. A critical approach should be accompanied by an evaluation that coherently reflects the practices carried out during the course, that requires them to take a position, and that, if possible, sparks action.

We should acknowledge that many of these suggestions were already outlined in the basic literature we introduced at the beginning of this account. We thought it worth reconsidering them now that we are speaking from our own experience of critical literacy.

The greatest effects of the adoption of a critical literacy approach to teaching literature

lie in the redefinition of our and our students' roles and relationships. Critical literacy puts a strain on teaching. Through its use in the classroom, we learn to be critical, but we also learn about the pain of the criticism that is directed at us and to the apparent stability and correctness of our teaching practices. Critical literacy also allows the personal into the classroom. As co-participants in the building of knowledge we have to accept we have not got all the answers. We may not even have the right answers—if indeed there are any. Therefore, critical literacy is problem posing but never problem solving. If, as we did, we give it an opportunity and we practise it conscientiously, it will fit the curriculum, and theory will come its way. In our case, we have chosen a version of critical literacy that, not so much in the direction of its social effects (Comber & Kamler, 1997), focuses on the personal and on the ways we become who we are. We are still wondering about the political dimension of our enterprise, though, and on whether it will have a strong impact on a population that may not feel themselves marginalised. Yet, by the end of our project we hope to find answers to those queries. We expect our version of critical literacy to confidently connect our classrooms not only with literature and teaching but, as our students demand from us, with meaningful learning and, above all, with things that are valuable for life.

Note

1. Pseudonyms were used so as to ensure anonymity. Consent forms are available upon request. In November 2013, participants were presented with a preliminary version of the results, with which they mostly agree.

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