

40 years of democracy in Argentina: A decolonial didactic sequence about our last dictatorship in the English class at Social Work College

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Abstract

This classroom account delves into a decolonial didactic sequence carried out in 2023 within the subject English II, corresponding to the fourth and final year of Social Work College. The sequence was developed in answer to a call made by the *Dirección General de Cultura y Educación* (DGCyE) to address the 40th anniversary of the restoration of democracy in Argentina with the purpose of remembering the victims from the illegal repression of the last *coup d'état* and celebrating democratic values through active citizenship. The article also discusses the difficulty educators find when intending to deal with Argentinian matters in English, with regards to identity construction and the selection of materials in the target language.

Key words: Social Work, Argentinian history, human rights, active citizenship, identity, situated knowledge

Resumen

Este relato áulico describe y reflexiona acerca de una secuencia didáctica decolonial realizada en el año 2023 dentro de la asignatura Inglés Nivel II, correspondiente al cuarto y último año de la Tecnicatura de Trabajo Social del Instituto Superior de Formación Docente y Técnica N° 53, “María Ester Tommasi”. La secuencia se desarrolló en respuesta a un llamado realizado por la Dirección General de Cultura y Educación (DGCyE) para abordar el 40 aniversario de la restauración de la democracia en Argentina con el propósito de recordar a las víctimas de la represión ilegal del último golpe de estado y celebrar los valores democráticos a mediante una ciudadanía activa. El artículo también analiza las dificultades que encuentran los educadores al intentar abordar temas argentinos en inglés, en lo que respecta a la construcción de identidad y la selección de materiales en la lengua meta.

Palabras claves: Trabajo social, historia argentina, derechos humanos, ciudadanía activa, identidad, conocimiento situado

Introduction

Every year, different mottos based on significant historical events appear in official documents from *Dirección General de Cultura y Educación* (DGCyE), a governmental organism in charge of financing, administering and supervising state-run or subsidised privately run teaching practices in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Last year’s motto was “2023 Year of Democracy in Argentina”, 2023 marking the 40th anniversary of the restoration of democracy in our country. In 1983, after almost eight years of military dictatorship, a president could be voted for again.

During the dark years that preceded the recovery of democratic rights, tens of thousands of people were tortured and killed because of political reasons. Most of their

bodies were discarded in common pits or thrown from planes to the Río de la Plata or the Atlantic Ocean in what is known as *death flights*. In 1979, the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla, *de facto* president from 1976 to 1981, said: “They are not dead, nor alive, they are missing”.

Those people whose lives were taken by state terrorism and whose bodies have not been found have been called *desaparecidos*. It was with the twofold purpose of remembering the victims from the illegal repression of the last *coup d'état* and celebrating democratic values through active citizenship that the DGCyE invited teachers from all the different educational levels to commemorate that date by addressing the topic transversally in all subjects.

As Vilarinho Pereira Borelli et al. (2020) state, “it is important to reflect on the types of knowledge we privilege in our lessons” (p. 305), as well as their sources because they reflect the interests they serve. Privileging local or regional topics for discussion in the English class subverts traditional practices where English speaking-cultures are in the centre. Thus, the margins become the centre.

From my experience, some teachers of English possibly find it difficult to tackle Argentinian historical dates for two main reasons, by no means exhaustive. The first one is a special sensitivity, or identity threat, with respect to using English to discuss local matters, when we are still claiming part of our territory, appropriated by England. The second one is more concrete: the lack of materials in English about us. For the time being, some of the most interesting materials in English—in my opinion—designed by EFL Argentinian teachers are gathered in the book *Celebrating our Heritage*¹ (Cooper, 2009), which was published to honour the bicentenary of 1810 May Revolution.

This handbook collects lesson plans on dates such as Flag Day or San Martín's Memorial Day for Kindergarten, Primary and Secondary school. However, it still holds a colonial perspective, proven, for example, by the focus on the figure of Columbus and by the omission of the American genocide for 12th October. It is necessary to clarify that the name of the aforementioned holiday officially changed one year after the publication of the book from Race Day—*Día de la Raza*—to the Day of Respect for Cultural Diversity—*Día del Respeto a la Diversidad Cultural*—with decree 1584/2010².

Lander (2000) points out that, since colonial times, widely imposed Eurocentric epistemologies have been based on the parameters of universality, neutrality and objectivity, with the consequent invalidation of other kinds of knowledge and manners of knowing. “As a way of challenging this epistemic model, decolonial thinking advocates a geo-body-politically localized knowledge” (Grosfoguel, 2010 in Vilarinho Pereira Borelli et al., 2020, p. 307). I want to recover this decolonial concept of knowledge and show how it was enacted in a higher education experience.

I took the *geo-body-politically localized* conception of knowledge into consideration at the moment of choosing to deal with state terrorism in my English class in Social Work College. First, I chose this topic to respond to the **political call** of remembrance of those who were tortured, killed and made to *disappear*, in an attempt to get their silenced voices back. Second, I chose it with the **category of the body** in mind: the students' and the educator's bodies going through a shared learning experience that moves them/us as historical beings or rather, as embodied histories; and, unavoidably, the still missing bodies of those who were exterminated. Third, I chose it to privilege **situated knowledge** with roots in different territories going from Argentina to the Latin American region, reinforcing identity construction processes. Within this situated knowledge,

¹ Cooper, P. (2009). *Celebrating our Heritage: 200 years, 200 ideas*. Richmond Handbooks for teachers. Santillana.

² <https://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/170000-174999/174389/norma.htm>

students' future role as social workers, which involves taking responsible action and standing for human rights in their immediate communities, was also taken into account. Such is the rationale behind the development of the following didactic sequence.

Context

The state-run tertiary level institution where this didactic sequence was carried out —*Instituto Superior de Formación Docente y Técnica* (ISFDyT) N° 53— is located in Glew, Almirante Brown, in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. The present didactic sequence was taught to Social Work senior students in the English II class. As is expressed in the Curriculum Design (CD) for Social Work for the province of Buenos Aires, English is meant to aid future professionals in the comprehension of written texts related to their specific field (DGCyE/DES, 2006, p. 21).

There were 41 students in this heterogeneous group, most of whom came from vulnerable backgrounds. The fact of having undergone difficult life situations, or still going through them, has a strong correlation with the career path they opted for since their studies allow them to develop a sense of empowerment that they will eventually resort to in order to empower others in such hardships. The students' learning trajectories were feeble, to the point that some of them finished secondary education much later than expected. Their level of English was basic but it was the development of strategies to read texts in English that was necessary for them. In order to negotiate the interpretation of textual meanings we resorted to Spanish, their mother tongue.

The topic of the didactic sequence I will describe below is closely related to Social Work, since, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 2014:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (<https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>)

Even though the topic I selected as the axis in this sequence is culturally bound, it deals with general concerns: the deprivation of human rights, which are at the core of the social work profession, and with living within democratic values, which gave origin to the discipline. As is stated in *Human Rights and Social Work: A Manual for Schools of Social Work and the Social Work Profession* (UN, 1994), “social work originates variously from humanitarian and democratic ideals.” (p. 4).

Objectives

The objectives of the didactic sequence I will share in this article were:

- To access authentic materials in English about social issues of local and regional relevance, in contrast with the usual coursebook texts in English about English-speaking power centres;
- To develop reading strategies and discursive awareness to ease the reading comprehension process;

- To deal with linguistic forms which are present in the written texts explored: Past Simple tense in the Active and Passive voice and discuss agency and accountability;
- To consolidate transdisciplinary knowledge (in this case, *state terrorism in Argentina and Latin America* —content from Social and Political History, subject from 3rd year³);
- To strengthen identity construction at regional, national, local, institutional, group and personal levels through the target language in relation to their mother tongue.

Materials

While it is hard to find teaching materials about Argentina in English, it is even harder to find authentic texts. Given this situation, real life happens to be a good source to find compelling resources. Through social media, I learned about Brian Carlson, a US artist who lives in Burzaco, two railway stations away from the location of our college building. He paints portraits of *the disappeared* and has a digital memorial project entitled *Aparecidos* on his official webpage⁴. Not only did I use information about the origins of his project from his formal website, but also some of his informal —though deep— Facebook posts, a genre that students frequent. I also extracted a text from an authentic book that is a compilation of biographies of women around the world who have stood out against unfairness. I made use of another biography, authentic in content though unpublished, whose authors were former students from Social Work. A literary text, originally in Spanish but now available in English too, was shared as an aesthetic and bonding experience towards the end of the sequence.

Lesson sub-themes

As our college facility has recently been named after María Ester Tommasi, an Argentinian teacher and social worker who was made to disappear in 1976 due to state terrorism, and Carlson has painted her portrait, the first lesson from this proposal was about her. The second lesson was about Carlson's global memorial project; the third one, about the Mirabal sisters and their role against the Dominican dictatorship; and the fourth one, about the kidnapping of pregnant women and the appropriation of babies during the Argentinian dictatorship, as well as the disappearance of a child's uncle in the Uruguayan dictatorship.

Development of activities

We began by reading Tommasi's biography in English, an informative text that had been elaborated by 4th year students in 2019 (Appendix 1) after an interview held in Spanish with her brother. I place special value on this text because there is almost no information about María Ester on the internet, so it is original and rich in content. At the same time, using this resource was a way to show students that they can be authors themselves. The activity done with that text was a fact file completion (Appendix 2), and students were asked to extract essential words or phrases from the text. Then, we looked at Carlson's portrait of María Ester on his webpage⁵ and the students had to browse the explanation of his artistic project in English (Appendix 3) to answer, in Spanish, certain questions also formulated in Spanish (Appendix 4). The activity for the first text was to be solved in English because it did not imply producing a new message, just taking the

³ In 4th year the students do not have History.

⁴ <https://www.losaparecidos.com/sobre-about/>

⁵ <https://www.losaparecidos.com/?s=Mar%C3%ADa+Ester+Tommasi>

terms from the given biography, and because the text was simpler than the second one, which was authentic and more linguistically challenging. That is why that second task was meant to be done in our mother tongue, as an act of *translanguaging* (Lasagabaster and García, 2014), to reduce the cognitive load and to work at the comprehension level, which is the focus of this class.

In our following lesson we went back to Carlson's explanation of the origins of the project to pay attention, this time, to form. As it provides a historical recount of the events that led to the *Aparecidos* memorial, most of the text is written in the past tense, so we analysed how affirmative sentences are constructed by noticing verbal regularities and discussing concrete instances of irregular past forms. We systematised the linguistic information into a chart and went on to complete it by finding other verb examples in María Ester's biography. We also read a brief Facebook post in English made by Carlson (Appendix 5), which was an invitation to go to his *Aparecidos* free art exhibition made in Burzaco, a town near Glew, where the college building is located. The exhibit was on during last April and the students were encouraged to visit it because of its cultural value, its contribution to the identity construction of the institution, as María Ester's portrait was being displayed, and its openness to interinstitutional community bonding, essential in social work to interact with other social agents, since the exhibition was carried out in the *Espacio de la Memoria*⁶ facilities.

In the third lesson of this sequence, we dealt with The Mirabal sisters, three young Dominican women who fought against dictator Raphael Trujillo and were murdered by his men, who made the crime look like a car accident. The life story of "the Butterflies" (as they were nicknamed) was extracted from *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*⁷, a book which has a hundred biographies of women who took action to build a fairer world. It is worth highlighting that, as most Social Work students are female, I choose materials which represent them. After discussing the general meaning of the biographical piece, the students had to put the main events —expressed in the Past Simple tense— in chronological order and spot some statements which had true information that was not present in the original text or its peritext (Appendix 6). It was important to take a little distance from the Argentinian situation to get some perspective and understand dictatorships as a broader phenomenon.

In the fourth lesson we shared another Facebook post in English by Brian Carlson (Appendix 7), which referred to women who were kidnapped during the last dictatorship in Argentina and to what happened to those who were pregnant and their new-borns. The text was short but it was so straightforward and potent that it allowed for a sensitive conversation in Spanish. Then, we went on to analyse the way in which it was expressed, mainly through the use of the passive voice. The main ideas were written so as to get clear examples of passive voice constructions and their active counterparts for the students to be able to compare and contrast their variations in meaning and structure. We also addressed agency and responsibility and how mass media often resort to the passive voice to soften or avoid responsibility by blurring the agent.

We finished the didactic sequence with a literary text, a home-made *kamishibai* version of the book *My uncle is coming tomorrow* (Appendix 8), by "Pantana", whose real name is Sebastián Santana Camargo. This Uruguayan author, and illustrator, tells the story of a child who is eagerly waiting for the arrival of his uncle, who eventually never makes it since he was abducted by the military forces. The narrative is full of unfulfilled

⁶ <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/derechoshumanos/sitiosdememoria/espacios>

⁷ Favilli, E., & Cavallo, F. (2016). "The Mirabal Sisters". In *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*. Penguin Random (pp. 146-147).

expectations that leave a sour taste in the mouth and gaps of indeterminacy that the audience must complete in order to understand what is *not* being said. The purposes of this activity were to have a shared aesthetic experience, to connect the round off of the sequence with its beginning through the Arts and to co-construct meaning while reading between the lines and combining both the verbal and the visual messages.

The experience

As the teacher who led this didactic experience, I have realised that the linguistic and discursive features analysed can be likewise taught through the exploration of other materials and topics but it was focusing on our history and our latent wounds —as a country and as a region— what made the whole difference. The stated objectives on the negotiation of situated meanings, the analysis of form in context, the development of reading strategies for the specific course of study and the construction of self and shared identity/ies were accomplished, all of which intended to enact a decolonial practice.

I perceived that the sub-themes revolving around the core issue of state terrorism and the return to democracy were meaningful to the students as they were related to their professional or personal lives. Professionally, as future social workers, they were (and are) especially sensitive to social issues which they will eventually act upon to help restore the rights that the subjects in need were deprived of. Personally, it touched them in direct and indirect ways. There were two pregnant women in our group, so dealing with female abductions and the appropriation of the babies of those who were pregnant was particularly moving. The same happened with two other students whose relatives had been made to disappear in our last dictatorship; after the *kamishibai* story read-aloud, they approached me and told me, with tears in their eyes, that their fathers were still missing. Another student, who was the class representative in the student-centre and acted as a bridge between the rest of the class and me through WhatsApp, uploaded a photograph of the *kamishibai* to the WhatsApp state reading: *¡Hermosa cursada con la profe de inglés! Movilizando sentipensares* (Beautiful lessons with our English teacher! Moving thoughts and emotions). Somehow, this student summarised the full didactic sequence with that blended noun in Spanish, *Sentipensares*, which merges feelings, critical thinking and the plurality of viewpoints from our geo-bodily-political and historical experiences.

Conclusions

The 40th anniversary of the recovery of democracy in our country was a historical opportunity to talk about ourselves in the English class, becoming protagonists instead of remaining observers or consumers of extraneous contents determined from a Euro-centric perspective. Throughout the reflection on the planning and the implementation of the didactic sequence depicted above, I managed to arrive at some conclusions: The teaching of English as a subject within an Argentinian Social Work College, where it is a foreign language, should be bound to the discipline, situated and decolonial. It should be related to social issues and social action, as well as based on human rights. It should attend to the present, local and regional context and its historicity. Finally, it should also be respectful and invigorate our own identity and idiosyncrasy without imposing external ways of being and behaving through materials which do not represent our culture. I hope these classroom-based generalisations might be of worth in other contexts.

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Appendix:

1. María Ester Tommasi's biography:

María Ester Tommasi.

She was born on 28th January in 1952. Her father worked at YPF and her mother was a housewife. She had a brother. His name is Juan. They lived in Adrogué. She studied to be a teacher. She worked in Longchamps, at school n° 33 and in San Vicente, at school n° 1. She saw children's needs in those schools and decided to be a Social Worker to help create a better world. The military police forces kidnapped her from her house on 6th March, 1976. She was 24 years old then. Her remains were never found.

BIOGRAPHY RECONSTRUCTED
BY 4TH YEAR STUDENTS
COHORT 2019.



2. Fact file to complete while reading the biography above:

Name(s):	
Surname:	
Date of birth:	
Family:	
Hometown:	
Job/Occupation:	
Dream:	
Date of kidnapping:	
Place of abduction:	
Age:	

3. Information from *Los Aparecidos* Art Memorial Project Webpage:

In 2007, I was invited to participate in a human rights exhibition and symposium in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The work I had recreated there, at the Centro de Cultura de Recoleta

was a large-scale interactive piece called “The Handwriting on the Wall,” and dealt with violence against women, world-wide.

At the time I knew nothing about Argentina or its history and consequently, prior to the trip, I researched violence against women in Argentina. These readings led directly to information about the time period of state violence, 1976-1983, when approximately 30,000 citizens were abducted, tortured, murdered and most of them disappeared under the orders of the civic-military junta then in power. Of course, a large percentage of these were women and 65% were under the age of 25.

While in Buenos Aires a group of academics and artists were invited to take a private tour of ESMA, the School of the Naval Mechanics, a war college that during the time of the junta had been used to “process” nearly 5000 of the abducted to their deaths. The buildings were empty at that time and an historian took us through each, explaining where the hooded prisoners had arrived, where they were shackled to one another on the floors of attics, which basement rooms tortures were conducted in, the infirmary where babies were delivered, given away to military families and the mothers then executed, etc. For me the tour was a profound experience.

I resolved at that time, in ESMA, to create a memorial to the desaparecidos and to return one day to Argentina and exhibit it, at ESMA if possible. I had no idea how I could do this but promised the desaparecidos that one day it would happen.

I read all I could in English about the junta, the state terrorism and, as well, about the significant US participation in and support of what became a six-nation orchestrated prolonged action of state terrorism. The research was horrifying and frankly shaming as the US not only know about what was happening in these countries but the US State Department had regular updates from security sources in Latin America, the perpetrators as to exactly what was taking place. Nonetheless the dictators and military leaders were assisted with funds, with communication technology and, indeed, a large number of the worst offenders in Latin America had received training in the infamous School of the Americas, now called WHINSEC.

For five years I was involved in teaching as well as various other social commentary art works and projects but, by 2012, many things in life had altered for me and 1 January of that year I began the first of the portraits, that of Juan Carlos Abachian, a desaparecido from La Plata, AR. I have not stopped since that day, the memorial grows like a garden of memory and in the ensuing years until now has been exhibited 37 times in 4 countries, including Argentina, Uruguay, Spain and the USA.

During these years, the memorial has expanded and includes images of many groups I consider to be victims of state terrorism in one form or another, or victims of state terrorism from other countries. In 2022 and currently, I am adding portraits of Iranians and Palestinians, for example. Other groups include primarily black victims of police violence (US) massacred school children (from the US), political prisoners, murdered environmentalists, and murdered journalists. I have yet to upload many of these images and, as of this date, only one third of the portraits are online.

Physically the memorial is designed to be portable, able to adapt to any venue or site, and accessible for reproduction online under a creative commons copyright, the memorial comes to the people it serves. This web-site, becomes yet another iteration, the on-line memorial, making these images, brief stories when available, and links to yet more information accessible in a single searchable location. All images are available for downloading and reproduction for use in memorial purposes or demonstrations and if higher resolution images are necessary these may be requested via e-mail.

As you visit this memorial at Los Aparecidos.com, it is my hope that you will feel some of what I did. Looking at the faces of the victims, as I poured over their photos for years, I want you to see their youth, their vibrant lives, their beauty, all of which was most cruelly taken from them. I hope that the dynamics of state terrorism will become apparent to you, for the way to best honor the victims is to work to ensure that this history does not repeat itself and when it does, wherever it does, to dissent these crimes against humanity, to educate against them and to demand justice and truth.

I chose the name “Aparecidos” to suggest “the appeared, or re-appeared,” a symbolic act of defying the sadistic aim of the perpetrators to disappear these individuals. In another sense

however, I hope it is a call to each of us, to Appear ourselves, to insist upon ethical behavior, to speak truth to power, to aid the repressed and to demand justice for the persecuted.

Click on any portrait to see their personal page and information or search by name.
Welcome to “Aparecidos.”

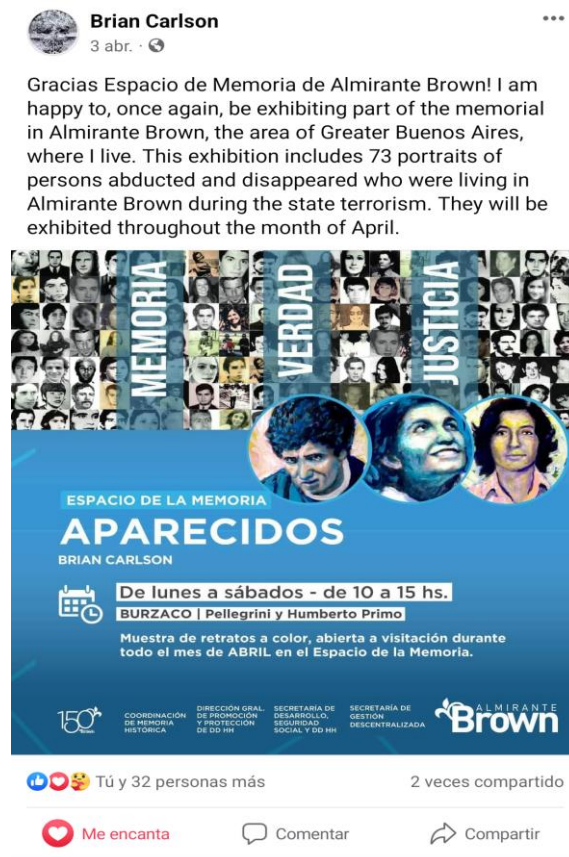
Brian Carlson
2023
Argentina

4. Reading comprehension task based on the previous text:

Encuentren las respuestas a las siguientes preguntas en el texto introductorio y explicativo de Brian Carlson de su página y exhibición “Los aparecidos”.

- 1) ¿Cuál fue la temática de la primera muestra de carácter interactiva de Carlson en Argentina?
- 2) ¿Qué lugar de Buenos Aires lo invitaron a recorrer junto a otros artistas? ¿Cómo impactó eso en su arte?
- 3) Habiendo nacido y vivido la mayor parte de su vida en EEUU, ¿qué opinión tiene de su país de origen después de todo lo que investigó acerca del período de la última dictadura militar en Argentina?
- 4) ¿Cuándo, finalmente, realizó el primer retrato para “Los aparecidos”?
- 5) ¿Qué metáfora emplea para describir este proyecto?
- 6) ¿Qué otros retratos ha estado incorporando para crear conciencia y memoria colectiva en estos últimos años?

5. Carlson’s Facebook post /Invitation to the *Aparecidos* exhibition:



Brian Carlson
3 abr. · 🌐

Gracias Espacio de Memoria de Almirante Brown! I am happy to, once again, be exhibiting part of the memorial in Almirante Brown, the area of Greater Buenos Aires, where I live. This exhibition includes 73 portraits of persons abducted and disappeared who were living in Almirante Brown during the state terrorism. They will be exhibited throughout the month of April.

MEMORIA VERDAD JUSTICIA

ESPACIO DE LA MEMORIA
APARECIDOS
BRIAN CARLSON

De lunes a sábados - de 10 a 15 hs.
BURZACO | Pellegrini y Humberto Primo

Muestra de retratos a color, abierta a visitación durante todo el mes de ABRIL en el Espacio de la Memoria.

150 años
COORDINACIÓN DE MEMORIA HISTÓRICA
DIRECCIÓN GRAL. DE PROMOCIÓN Y PROTECCIÓN DE DD HH
SECRETARÍA DE DESARROLLO, SEGURIDAD SOCIAL Y DD HH
SECRETARÍA DE GESTIÓN DESCENTRALIZADA
ALMIRANTE BROWN

👍👍👍 Tú y 32 personas más 2 veces compartido

👍 Me encanta 💬 Comentar ➦ Compartir

6. Reading comprehension and critical thinking task on the Mirabals' biography:

1- Put the events in order.

- A. They didn't surrender. ____
- B. People called them "The Butterflies". ____
- C. Raphael Trujillo took power in 1930 but faked a democracy with puppet presidents for three decades. ____
- D. The Butterflies inspired the Dominicans to end the dictatorship. ____
- E. They organised a movement against the dictator. ____
- F. He killed three of them (Patria, Minerva and María Teresa) on November 25th, 1960. ____
- G. The Mirabal sisters started to fight for freedom. ____
- H. In 1999 the United Nations established the 25th November as an international day to eradicate violence against women. ____
- I. To stop them, he imprisoned and tortured them. ____

2- Is there any new piece of information in the statements which was not present in the text? Which?

7. Carlson's Facebook post on women abducted during the last dictatorship, children born under captivity and appropriated by military families, and the role of Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo:

Brian Carlson
Facebook post
16th April, 2023.

Pregnant women who were abducted were often kept alive until they delivered, then they were murdered and disappeared. (...)

Many children born in captivity were given to military families, to be raised with the "right mindset". Consequently, there are many 38-45 year olds in Argentina that know they were adopted but not, most likely, that they were born in torture and detention centers, that their mothers were murdered and that the people who raised them might well have been their mother's captors, torturers... but certainly were members of the military supportive of the state terrorism. Many of these persons, who were children, have been reunited with the remaining members of their families, thanks to the work of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the mothers...of murdered daughters and sons.

8. The kamishibai reading of "My uncle is coming tomorrow, story written by Sebastián Santana Camargo:

["My uncle is coming tomorrow", by Pantana](#)