

Towards a Discourse for Criticism in Language Teaching: Analysis of Sociocultural Representations in Mass Media

Hacia un discurso para la crítica en la enseñanza de la lengua:
análisis de representaciones socioculturales en medios de comunicación

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This article states that in order to exercise citizenship with responsibility, language teachers need to popularize a discourse for criticism in which students and teachers transcend tacit knowledge and common sense due to meta-cognition and argumentation and reach systematic knowledge and procedures posed by experts in the different disciplines. As illustrated inside, the source and objective of analysis by means of which this discourse can be contextualized in language teaching is *the language of mass media* and all the sociocultural and signifying practices that it invokes. We conclude that through the analysis of mass media it is possible to educate students with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to interact critically in the world.

Key words: Discourse for criticism, citizenship, public counter-sphere, mass media.

El artículo plantea que, con el propósito de ejercer su ciudadanía, los maestros de lenguas deben popularizar un discurso para la crítica en el cual los estudiantes y los profesores trasciendan el conocimiento tácito y el sentido común mediante la argumentación y la metacognición, y alcancen conocimiento y procedimientos sistemáticos planteados por expertos en las diferentes disciplinas. Como se ilustra en el texto, la fuente y objeto de análisis mediante el cual se contextualiza este discurso en la enseñanza de la lengua es el lenguaje de los medios de comunicación y las prácticas socioculturales y de significación que este provoca. Concluimos que a través del análisis de los medios es posible educar a los estudiantes con conocimientos y habilidades básicas necesarias para interactuar en el mundo.

Palabras clave: discurso para la crítica, ciudadanía, contraesfera pública, medios de comunicación.

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Introduction

Nowadays foreign language learning is a broadly discussed subject in academic settings due to the national policies that aim to have a bilingual Colombia by the year 2019. This discussion is given in the frame of economic internationalization and tries to respond to the demands of the era of globalization and the increasing development of the industries of communication that circulate knowledge in the foreign language.

However, policymakers do not seem to be interested in the complexities of our educational system that has very heterogeneous contexts. These contexts go from those bilingual schools attended by students of middle classes, mainly who have a high socioeconomic status and live in an academic environment due to their parents' educational level. They have opportunities to go abroad and experience the culture of the target language. These students have what Bourdieu (1967) calls *cultural capital* and could have good possibilities of social mobility.

The other group corresponds to those students of public schools. Within this group there is also a wide range of varieties. Students belonging to it do not have the mentioned *cultural capital* because they come from communities that are at risk, with many socioeconomic problems, with an average language exposure time of 3 hours a week without extra practice outside the classroom. They live in a non-academic environment because their parents and relatives are not professional and their socio-cultural environment experience is one of violence, exclusion, discrimination and poverty. Their opportunities to go abroad are scarce or non-existent.

From my point of view, an English teacher in the Colombian context has the ultimate objective of generating the conditions for all students to think, value, and act with responsibility in the exercise of their citizenship, understood as the awareness of the obligations and rights that citizens have in

the public sphere¹. Students and teachers need to be able to have clear positions about the heterogeneous situation described before and manifested in issues of public interest such as displacement, pollution, discrimination, and elections.

A Discourse for Criticism to Achieve the Construction of the Public Counter-Sphere

The thesis that I defend in this article is that in order to exercise citizenship with responsibility, teachers need to popularize a discourse for criticism in which, thanks to meta-cognition and argumentation, students and teachers transcend tacit knowledge and common sense and achieve systematic knowledge and procedures used by experts in different disciplines. In my view, the source and objective of analysis by means of which this discourse can be contextualized in language teaching is *the language of mass media* and all the sociocultural and signifying practices that it invokes. Through the analysis of mass media it is possible to help students think critically i.e. provide them with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to interact in the world they have to live in and enable them to interpret the intention of the messages sent by the industries of communication.

There has been a trend of thinking whose main interest is working for the popularization of the discourse of criticism. For instance, Giroux (1990) states that there are two basic conditions for popular pedagogy to be real: one is having a language of criticism (concepts and meta-concepts to be selective, documented and informed) and the other is having a language of possibility (recognition of opportuni-

¹ The concept of public sphere is taken from Eagleton (2001) and is understood as the collective commitment of citizens with the democratization of society. The public sphere or counter-sphere as he calls it is the association of a documented public opinion able to oppose dominant ideologies with justified reasons.

ties that can give origin to new, alternative projects) and both exist in the context of schools taken as cultural institutions in which the social surpasses the individual and education is considered a public discourse. In the same direction, Gee (1989) states that for literacy to be critical and liberating, students need to be involved in a secondary discourse (additional to the primary discourse commonly learned at schools through formal instruction) that goes beyond instrumental practices and that contests and opposes dominant discourses.

Gee (2002) continues explaining that in order to achieve more documented and informed arguments, this discourse has to popularize the language and procedures used by experts in the evaluation of problems of knowledge. Thus, it requires a meta-language (concepts, values, attitudes) particular of the community using it. In the case of language teaching from a sociocultural perspective concerned with the analysis of cultural manifestations coming from mass media, this discourse would contain concepts such as culture, discrimination, diversity, inclusion, exclusion, bias, fallacies, argumentation, power, hegemony, ideology, identity and difference, among others. This discourse is to be used inside and outside the classroom, in public forums, in research reports, in film clubs, and in any academic practices that contend for the analysis of media.

From this perspective, language teachers should start understanding students' conceptions, ideas, and ways of learning in order to grasp the way students think and their subjectivity in language teaching. Research in this field should be promoted by educational institutions. However, as Bruner (2000) explains, knowing students' ideas is not enough. It is necessary to know what students think about the way they learn and the reasons for doing it. This is the *meta-cognitive gift* that leads students to self-regulate their learning, to be auton-

omous and to monitor the way they learn. This also has an advantage and it is that students think about knowledge, about how it is produced, its logic and they gain skills to identify bias in its production.

Bruner (2000) suggests following a contrastive approach aimed to reach procedures of experts. In the first place, students' common sense, subjectivity, wishes, and affective implications should be approached because that is where systematic knowledge is rooted. As Lipman (1987), Bruner also asserts that children are able to understand abstract issues and to follow logical patterns in order to acquire knowledge.

Traditionally, it has been believed that students learn by imitating adults, by self-initiating practices and by didactic exposure. However, Bruner (2000) highlights another aspect that is very relevant in the construction of a discourse for criticism and cannot be neglected: the importance of interaction, solidarity, collective aims, dialogue and inclusion. This last one is understood as recognition and respect for difference in communities. Teachers and students contending for the creation of a public counter-sphere need to have collective alternative projects. Bruner explains that from very early stages children need to look at their mothers, to interact and to form part of a group. To explain this insight, he reports an experience in the United States in which a group of educators worked with communities at risk and were able to reduce the rates of criminality, raise the intelligence quotient (IQ), and increase inclusion and integration. This was a collective and collaborative project in which students had a clear problem to solve (oil spilling) and they aimed to reach a final product (addressing multinational companies with a proposal) by means of argumentation, collaboration and commitment.

In the previous experience there are three fundamental issues for my proposal: argumentation, collaboration and project-work (Harris, 2003;

Jolibert, 2003; Lipman, 1987; Perelman, 1988; Vygotsky, 1978). The first one has to do with the development of procedures for students to identify fallacies or weak arguments, and to question them with counter-arguments supported by reasons that can be obtained independently or with the help of others. The second is about the cooperation of students working together and encouraged by the wish to achieve shared goals that have to be pursued collaboratively. Finally, the third one deals with students solving a problem that requires the consultation of different sources and the development of a plan with stages and steps that require being followed systematically in order to answer a question or achieve a common goal.

The idea is that by using procedures and a discourse for criticism, teachers and students start varied projects in which debate and reasoning about mass media take place in tolerant, democratic, challenging and demanding environments which pave the way for the creation of a counter-public sphere able to oppose the way in which cultural industries shape ideologies, ways of thinking, and acting.

A Discourse for Criticism in Language Education: The Analysis of Sociocultural Representations in Mass Media

Figure 1 outlines the main strategies suggested in this section in order to implement a pedagogical proposal toward the construction of a critical discourse in language learning and teaching. The diagram shows that without neglecting students' subjectivities, identities and signifying practices, and through critical analysis of socio-cultural representations of mass media, teachers can create discursive practices leading to interaction, collaboration and argumentation that question dominant ideologies and promote democratic, committed and inclusive ways of student thinking.

The proposal is that mass media comprise the text which gives context within the classroom. In addition, the symbolic, ideological and subtle complexity of its messages makes it worthy of analysis. This methodology has the purpose of identifying stereotypes, biases, fallacies, and prejudices. It also allows going to denotative, connotative and ideological levels of interpretation about marginal cultural manifestations so that students and teachers can build social, alternative projects.

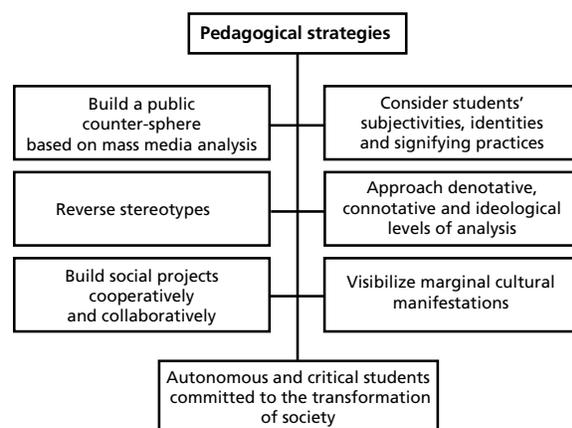


Figure 1. Towards a discourse for criticism in language classrooms.

This paper proposes using mass media for the text to be analyzed and meaningful context to provoke critical analysis in language learning and teaching processes. But, why mass media? Because in mass media the symbolic and the political are connected and through them it is possible to understand the way students feel, think and act; that is, students' identity. If a public counter-sphere with an alternative proposal for education is able to appeal to students' subjectivities, affective implications and signifying practices, it can constitute a strong political force in the field of education (Eagleton, 1984). Critical thinking is a source for teachers and students to defend themselves against the manipulations of mass media and to

react conscientiously, but also it is a tool for identifying students' signifying practices (Bernstein, 1996; Gee, 2005; Gee & Allen, 2001).

Consequently, students require analytical tools to question and read these texts critically. The procedures include reversing stereotypes by means of transcoding and approaching denotative, connotative and ideological levels of analysis; designing social and interdisciplinary projects that will allow students to work collaboratively; and selecting materials that introduce alternative cultural manifestations in the classroom.

Hall (2003) states that the terrain of cultural studies to which media analysis belongs is an open field for teachers as intellectuals to contribute to the democratization of society. This is due to the fact that recalling Gramsci's words (1976), "in a bourgeois democracy, hegemony is accomplished by means of persuasion and consent of the marginal or contesting groups of society and not only by force and authority of the dominant classes" (p. 80). Therefore, it is argued that cultural industries have to consider the reactions, preferences, and identities of marginal communities in order to be hegemonic in Gramscian terms. In this sense, Fiske's contributions (1987) toward the theory of reception are valid. He explains that television audiences are not passive and participate actively in the cycle of communication; they are consumers but with their reactions, they circulate meanings, and can even become producers. In language learning, the agency of students is evidenced when they select the language and style they want to use to present their arguments. In many cases, they have to contest or struggle with academic discourses and choose their own rhetoric or style, thus constituting themselves performatively through discourse (Canagarajah, 1999).

Hall (2003) illustrates this situation with the reversal that British producers had to make on

the decision of ending with the series *Cagney and Lacey* (Barbara & Barbara, 1982) because, supposedly, one of the characters promoted lesbian behaviour. The women's movement in Great Britain campaigned against this measure because they loved seeing women playing the roles of men and the series continued being broadcast. As such, there are different manifestations of audiences e.g. slash literature that lead producers to respond to audience preferences. Hall (2003) and Van Dijk (1997) also suggest different procedures for identifying and reversing stereotypes or false generalizations about given communities as they are presented in popular culture (films, publicity, television, press, internet, etc.). One is trans-coding or re-signifying previous beliefs that students may have.

For example, in a language class the problem of racism in the United States can be approached by appealing to denotative and connotative levels of the language. Appendix 1 illustrates other methodological proposals or language teaching activities that can be used in the language classroom to put into practice a socio-cultural perspective on language teaching. Students are provided with images of black people taken from different sources that entail elements of history, geography, and culture as they are presented in mass media. For example, with the analysis of the images of black people in photography such as the ones presented in the British Press (Hall, 2003) in films such as *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) on television and in advertising, students start describing them denotatively by referring to the explicit elements in those artifacts. Then, in a process of argumentation, students describe them connotatively, reporting on contextual elements, emotions, meanings of images, etc., and, finally, they have to reach the ideological level in which they have to identify political elements related to power relationships and their consequences for society.

Different projects about the diversity of language in Anglo-speaking countries and in Colombia can give origin to alternative projects that deal with the problem of identity and difference.

In this context, the analysis of cultural manifestations of mass media, the heterogeneity within and across schools can be managed by taking advantage of the contact that all students have with the views and perspectives that circulate on television, radio, publicity, newspapers and all those sources of mass media that Hall (2003) calls *popular culture*². To enable students to be critical of all the messages that mass media are permanently sending is a teacher's obligation that we cannot neglect. The information coming from these sources is a medium with which to contextualize language topics by making them meaningful and attractive.

A didactic trend that has had great importance in the implementation of foreign language learning programs is the project-work methodology (Harris, 2003; Jolibert, 2003). This practice encompasses a sociocultural perspective because it focuses on meaning and language use rather than on form. This approach facilitates an interdisciplinary perspective because different subject matters are taught in the foreign language, and transversal projects that integrate a problem of knowledge can be introduced. For example, the problem of pollution could be seen from different disciplines, such as social studies, sciences and language; consequently, multiple sources have to be consulted and reported inter-textually.

In this sense, the selection of pedagogical material for language teaching and for any area of knowledge has ideological and political implications. Whether teachers are aware or not of these implications, any time they select given material

they are opting ideologically. In her article about the construction of identity in bilingual schools, Truscott (2002) reports that children in bilingual schools have stereotyped views about British, American and Colombian citizens.

They believe that the British are polite, educated, red-haired, and drink much tea, and Americans are superficial and their views about Colombians are quite negative (irresponsible, not very honest, etc.). These perceptions might be the consequence of stereotyped instruction understood as the repeated false generalization of partial features of those people who shape a hegemonized ideology³, considering no other possibility than the values fostered by the people with power in the society.

A proposal towards bilingualism should take into account varied material and those marginal manifestations should be fore-grounded because the messages that circulate among the industries of communication and that are received massively by our students are partial, biased and homogenized. They belong to and represent the dominant ideology. Students face them spontaneously and most of the time are permeated by their influence and repeat uncritically what the media show. Mass media have a double function: cognitive and ideological. With mass media people are informed (cognitive level), but they are also persuaded, manipulated and led to feel a particular way (ideological level). It is necessary to incorporate the possibility to contrast and make visible what mass media hide.

For example, commercial movies from Hollywood should be contrasted with alternative expressions that show how minorities in Anglo-speaking countries live, feel and value. For instance, Tamahori

² Popular culture is understood as artifacts produced industrially and that are received massively by social groups (Hall, 2003).

³ The concept of ideology as it is being used in this paper is that of Van Dijk (1999). It has to do with the principles upon which beliefs, social representations and ways of interpreting the world are constructed.

(1994) portrays the life of a marginal community in the movie *Once Were Warriors* (about the Maoris in New Zealand). Other examples are those of Parker (1999) in *Angela's Ashes*, about poor people in Ireland; or Lee (1989) in *Do the Right Thing*, a controversial movie about racism in the United States. This kind of stories can be useful to question students' perspectives and reverse stereotyped views that have been shaped by the dominant ideology shown in commercial movies.

Additionally, music and its juvenile varieties can be another source of analysis. Language classrooms have to be open to students' likes and expectations and debates and discussions about them so that students are invited to bring, present, analyze and defend their favorite bands in front of their classmates, regardless of the genre they choose. The rest of the class must tolerate and respect their classmates' preferences.

Some activities that can be implemented in language classrooms from a socio-cultural perspective have to do with the use of the ability that Lomas (1999) calls *semiological competence*; that is, reading images and interpreting the polyphonic and polysemic messages of mass media, mainly publicity. He suggests that teachers should unfold a methodology to identify aspects such as denotation and connotation. It means starting from the descriptive, general level of explicit elements in images. At this level, consensus is easily reached. Students are given an image of publicity and have to enumerate the general and evident characteristics. For instance, some features could be an evening dress or a woman wearing make-up who is slim, beautiful, etc. And then they have to go to the stage of the connotative level in which students are to express their feelings and emotions towards the pictures and give the conventional value assigned by our culture to those elements; for example, the evening dress means 'elegance' and the make-up, vanity.

Mórtola (2001) includes the ideological level in this analysis. At this stage, students can approach issues regarding female roles in society, sex, gender or male chauvinism, for example. It is important that, depending on the proficiency level of the students and their socio-cultural backgrounds, the teacher has to grade the complexity of the task, select the language items to be used, determine a scoring system coherent with the methodology and the complexity of the task. If necessary, code switching can be used with beginners but without losing the perspective that the most important issues in the activity are meaning, language use and cultural awareness.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a comparative approach to media discourse that starts from students' personal views, feelings and emotions and continues with analysis and interpretation of mass media contents. Students may thus develop critical thinking skills and tolerance towards opposing views. This process fulfills one of the main responsibilities of education: giving students strong social and participatory skills to react, interpret and make reasonable decisions in a society that demands selective citizens with autonomy of opinion.

The insights presented imply a view that language classrooms must go beyond teaching the four communicative skills. Teachers are to create a democratic environment for all students in which a participatory model of language, didactics and culture that takes mass media representations as sources of information and analysis is implemented. For this reason, an academic approach to media discourse is necessary to understand its language and look at its contents critically, with the view that the overall education of our students for language teaching cannot neglect this responsibility.

Throughout this paper we have defended the idea that teaching a language is teaching a culture, a way of living, acting and valuing, and our responsibility as English teachers is to create a trend of thought that can counteract instrumental perspectives in language teaching and contribute to the transformation of society and the generation of alternative projects. This can only be achieved by working collectively and collaboratively, making real Freire's assertion (1989) that every educative act is also political, which in this context means that instrumental views in language teaching have been proved insufficient and more integral perspectives committed to the transformation of society are required.

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Appendix 1: Language Teaching Activities in a Sociocultural Perspective

Thesis Statement

Language learning can be promoted by means of critical analysis of mass media representations. Taking them as a source in language teaching facilitates the creation of discursive practices leading to critical thinking, interaction, collaboration and argumentation about the sociocultural aspects of language.

1. Stereotypes:

a. Revealing Stereotypes (Mórtola, 2001).



- Instruction: Describe the groups that appear in the images.
- Who are these people?
- Where do they live?
- What is their daily routine?
- Where do they work or study?

b. Reversing Stereotypes (Hall, 2003; Mórtola, 2001)



Questions to transcode, reverse and denaturalize: stereotypes

- At denotative levels: What elements are there in the scene?
- At connotative levels: What do they mean to me?
- At ideological levels: What values and ideologies do they transmit?

2. Production of Media (Mórtola, 2001; Gee, 2005):

- a. Writing the front page of a newspaper and reflecting on the differences among students' versions. Students are invited to analyze and produce media. Students identify foregrounding and backgrounding strategies in discourse production.



- b. Persuasive Strategies: Repetition, Omission, Substitution

Students are invited to identify the reasons some aspects are repeated, others are omitted or substituted in media production.



3. Writing Biographies:

What do the gazes, gestures, clothes and body postures say about women?



a. Instruction for Writing Biographies

- Write a brief biography of the women in the images. Talk about their professions, studies, free time activities, favorite music and TV programs.
- Then, the teacher compares the different biographies produced by students, writing down on the board the repeated features.
- Why are there many similarities in the biographies written?

4. Argumentation (Lipman, 1987):

This methodology has the purpose of identifying stereotypes, biases, fallacies, prejudices. It is achieved by going to connotative and ideological levels of interpretation passing through denotative ones.

Controversial argument with frequent students' stereotypes about black people. Black people are guilty of violence in the United States, they are good at sports but low performers at schools, very good lovers, they are lazy and that's why they rob, kill and destroy in order to survive.

a. Strategies for Argumentation in an Oral Debate

- Elicit points of view and opinions: Why do you think this scene is particularly interesting? Is it striking for you? Why?
- Clarify and reformulate: What you mean is..., what you are saying is that..., correct me if I am wrong...
- Explain points of view: At which point in what you have said would you emphasize?
- Interpret: If what you say is correct, how would you explain that...
- Be coherent in the use of concepts: Previously, when you used this term, you said that... didn't you use it differently?
- Identify presuppositions: Aren't you taking for granted that..., what you are saying is based on the belief that...?
- Unveil fallacies: Isn't there a contradiction in what you are saying?... that's not a real reason...
- Ask about reasons: Why do you think so? Could you provide an argument to support your affirmation?
- Examine other alternatives: Some people think that..., what would you answer if someone suggests that...?