IN THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: IMPLEMENTING CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM[1]

Olga Chaves Carballo
Nuria Villalobos Ulate
Ana Tristana Solano

Introduction

Within the humanistic paradigm, mediators and learners work together to transform their realities and to create a world where both can contribute to the implementation of new ideas, and to strive for human dignity. As challenging as it may seem, the process of implementing critical pedagogy in the English language classroom is not only necessary but a journey worth going through. Therefore, language teaching professionals should develop social justice issues in language classrooms in order for students to become critical thinkers and social reformers. As stated by Freire, "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers (Freire, 1970: 80).

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow." All over the world, students are being trained to learn content, to pass standardized tests, and to abide by oppressive systems. On the contrary, Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy (Shor and Freire, 1987) and his view of schools, as places to challenge the social stratification of society and to encourage the possibilities for social change, is the base of our project. Encouraging leadership, conflict resolution, problem solving, critical thinking and character development skills is instrumental to increase social awareness among young people.

Teachers have a potential to inspire students to transform their lives and contribute to this transformation beyond the classroom. It is our goal for learners to become creators of their own realities and problem solvers of concerns related to human security, human rights, equality, poverty, social justice, violence, weapons, global diseases, racism, and other issues. Indeed, it is vital to promote social justice and create spaces to imagine and contribute to a different, better world.

Three Costa Rican educators would like to share their journey and experiences in their quest to help language students find their inner social advocates. The challenges, controversies and fulfillment derived from this process will be portrayed and explored. It is our goal that by incorporating social justice issues within the academic curriculum of English language courses at Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica, the students can perceive themselves not only as language learners but also as agents of transformation of oppressive social structures.

I. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review Freire's Critical Pedagogy

> A liberating educator challenges people to know
> their actual freedom, their real power,
> Shor and Freire, 1987: 173

For Freire, education is the vital component of humanization; a tool to recognize that reality is a process undergoing transformation and not a fixed unavoidable condition. Freire's humanist and libertarian education highlights the role of educators in the creation of a class that encourages reflection, promotes critical thinking and dialogue, and most importantly, prompts to action. This, to ultimately illuminate the classroom as a place "where students and teachers practice anticipating a new social reality" is our main proposal (Shor and Freire, 1987:185).

For Freire, in order to illuminate reality, a dialogic relationship "where the teacher and the students both have to be learners, both have to be cognitive subjects" (Shor and Freire, 1987: 33) is essential. Dialogue often requires love, humility, faith in human kind, hope, and critical thinking, but teaming intellectual work with collaboration makes it easier for both to travel the path that "integrate[s] the students and the teachers into a mutual creation and re-creation of knowledge" (Shor and Freire, 1987: 8). So, even though the teacher is the one who draws students to explore social issues within their reality, the students' knowledge, life experiences and potential to contribute to change the world too enrich the educators' perspective of the issues being explored.

It is clear then that "liberatory education must be understood as a moment or process or practice where we challenge the people to mobilize or organize themselves to get power" (Shor and Freire, 1987: 34); the kind of power that can transform lives. According to Freire, critical pedagogy seeks reflection, but it also seeks action. However, it does not seek the kind of action that becomes plain activism, but action derived from deep thought (Shor and Freire, 2005: 88). Action, then, becomes a culminating dimension of liberatory education: the possibility to commit to transformation by acting upon those realities that marginalize and oppress others. In this view, "education as the practice of freedom…denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world" (Shor and Freire, 2005: 81). The world is to be transformed by all men and women together.

Nevertheless, English teaching in Costa Rica has continued to resemble what Freire calls banking education. Narrative in nature, "the outstanding characteristic of this… education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transformation power" (Shor and Freire, 2005: 71). Thus, content is emphasized over critical thinking. The main efforts lie on assuring students' command of the language: its pronunciation and grammar, or in training massive amounts of speakers to teach the language, but a much needed liberatory view of language education is very rarely put into practice.

The need for the implementation of critical pedagogy in the English classroom is then clear. An English classroom that ignores the importance of humanist and libertarian principles is providing training for its masses but is neglecting nurturing the potential of each student to become an agent of change in the world. In the words of Shor and Freire, "Our task, the liberating task… is to illuminate reality" (Shor and Freire, 1987: 36).

Holistic education

This new educational era is guided by the humanistic educational paradigm in which learning experiences help students create their own understanding and use knowledge in order to learn how to learn, to solve problems, and to face the challenges of this century.

The purpose of humanistic education is to provide a foundation for personal growth and development so that learning will continue throughout life in a self-directed manner (De Carvalho, 1991). With this perspective, Universidad Nacional believes in this humanistic paradigm and its curriculum follows the principles of equality, sustainability, well-being and gender which permit human development. The language courses at this university have been designed with this integrated view of education. Therefore, learners experience classes full of opportunities to develop language skills through activities that incorporate real-life situations and the principles mentioned above. These courses also follow the basic objectives described by Gage and Berliner (1991):

• promote positive self-direction and independence (development of the regulatory system)
• develop the ability to take responsibility for what is learned (regulatory and affective systems)
• develop creativity (divergent thinking aspect of cognition), curiosity (exploratory behavior, a function of imbalance or dissonance in any of the systems) and an interest in the arts (primarily to develop the affective/emotional system).

There is a variety of ways in which teachers can implement the humanist view towards education. They should:

• allow students to have a choice in the selection of tasks and activities whenever possible.
• help learners set realistic goals.
• have students participate in group work, especially cooperative learning, in order to develop social and affective skills.
• act as facilitators for all the communicative activities.
• be role models to foster learners' positive attitudes, beliefs and habits.

When educators and learners comply with this view of teaching and learning, they will develop values of understanding, respect and tolerance. This humanistic perspective guides students to achieve language goals in a more social and emotional environment.

Nowadays, humanity is immersed in a kind of world where reality is transformed daily; this demands new methodologies and strategies in language teaching for a more wellrounded education, which can satisfy the needs of the learners to adapt to the new changes and challenges of this century. Since the holistic paradigm in education views learners as creators of the learning process, they are constantly participating in activities for interrelation, exchange of knowledge, dialogue and reflection. In fact, students take part in learning experiences which stimulate their senses and pleasure to feel as active participants of their own learning. Students need to create their own learning together with their emotions, passions and inspirations in order to generate and regenerate ideas.

They learn from the acts of auto organization and auto construction of knowledge which help them develop the feeling of achievement in acquiring a foreign language, discovery of interests and freedom in using their own learning styles.

Learning experiences in the holistic paradigm

The holistic paradigm leads to learning experiences which are enjoyable, meaningful, engaging, life enriching and useful. They also have a specific purpose for language development and improvement, motivation, attitude change, interaction and creativity.

According to Gutiérrez, learning experiences have the following characteristics:

-they are part of life such as events, facts, anecdotes, testimonies, and others
-they stimulate all senses
-they must be enjoyable as moments of satisfaction, accomplishment and fun
-they must develop interest and emotions
-they must create and recreate relations with the context
-they must be related to personal implications
-they must help transform reality (Gutiérrez, 2003: 46-47).

Humanity has begun a new era that surpassed the old paradigm of fragmentation, control, regulations and schedules. Holistic education is essentially a democratic education, concerned with both individual freedom and social responsibility. It is education for a culture of peace, for sustainability and ecological literacy, and for the development of humanity's inherent morality and spirituality. In a holistic environment, imaginative and original learning experiences allow students to enjoy self-creation since they take an active role in the learning process. As stated by Morin, "the human mind opens to the world. The opening to the world is revealed by curiosity, interrogation, exploration, search, and passion to know and learn" (Morin, 2003: 45). Holistic learning is organized around relationships among students and their environment while empowering them to engage in the teaching/learning process. Stack (2008) summarizes that holistic education:
• is concerned with the growth of every person's intellectual, emotional, social, physical, artistic, creative and spiritual potentials
• is a quest for understanding and meaning. Its aim is to nurture healthy, whole, curious persons who can learn whatever they need to know in any new context
• recognizes the innate potential of every student for intelligent, creative and critical thinking
• recognizes that all knowledge is created within a cultural context and that the "facts" are seldom more than shared points of view. It encourages learners to critically approach the cultural, moral and political contexts of their lives
• values spiritual knowledge. Spirituality is a state of connectedness to all life, honoring diversity in unity. It is an experience of being, belonging and caring .

Learning occurs when the pedagogical process is "meaningful for students just when there is a reconfirmation of the complex system of the brain/mind" (Assmann, 2002: 40). Within this new paradigm, learning has become life; as a result, learning experiences help transform reality that turns into an atmosphere of freedom and love for learning, according to Gallegos (1999).

The highest function of education is to bring about an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life as a whole." Krishnamurti

According to Greene, "we are looking for a future social vision of a community more humanistic, more pluralistic, fairer and happier" (Greene, 2005:101). Holistic education teaches human development to create integral and global learners whose life expectations will make a better world to live in. They also promote learning for living, for being a holistic individual who views life with enthusiasm, curiosity and love for learning.

Students are considered as a whole: needs, interests, motivation, and their wish to succeed. Also, it sets high expectations for students as able of accomplishing goals and objectives. In fact, the purpose of holistic education is to prepare students to meet the challenges of living as well as academics.

Teachers often search for more effective ways to improve their classes, motivate the students, and appeal to a range of different approaches and methodologies. Within the new

humanistic paradigm, the proposed learning-teaching process stresses the use of information from theories of multiple intelligences, cooperative learning, constructivism, communicative language teaching and neuro-linguistic programming. These approaches view learners as creative and critical thinkers who use their own learning styles, develop metacognitive skills and use their great potential for success. Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process and this results in a more satisfaction towards the class.

Cooperative learning has been a successful teaching strategy used to motivate students work in groups since they find more support, help, correct themselves, work with enthusiasm and improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Learners need to learn to develop social skills to respect different points of view, to express themselves, to develop critical thinking skills about topics related to their reality and the world. They also need to develop empathy to become socially aware individuals who understand what others feel and suffer.

II. Explanation of the project and methodology
a. TSA objectives, procedures and assignments

The mission of the *Think, Share, Act project* is to create social awareness in students at Universidad Nacional so that they feel the need to become change agents. Its main objective is to make both, teachers and students of English as a Foreign Language, conscious of taking the responsibility and challenge of not only teaching and learning the basic language skills, but using them to make a difference in this world.

The TSA project requires professors to previously plan their classes to be able to incorporate the necessary evaluation and methodology. Besides, they need to prepare themselves by reading a lot about social justice and looking for materials that can be useful in classes and at the Awakening Gatherings. Finding their inner social advocates is essential for professors since they are the ones encouraging students to become change agents and in order to do this, they need to be good role models to follow.

Since the beginning of the semester, students participating in the TSA project are told what they have to do. By working in subgroups, students need to reflect on current situations in communities, schools and families and come up with a social issue they would like to take action on. Then they have to do research on it in different sources and design a proposal with a possible action plan to implement the possible ways to make a change. Students are asked to choose a name for their projects, a logo and a slogan that can identify their main objective.

While working on their projects, students need to document their participation in the different activities through pictures, video clips, notes, interviews, surveys, etc. With all this material, students create a documentary in which they narrate their experiences, challenges and insights. These documentaries are in English and they last about ten minutes. All of them are presented at the closing ceremony to be held at the end of the semester and to which all participating students and professors are invited.

Besides making the documentaries about their social projects, students also participated in the different activities done in class through discussions and written reactions after listening to songs, watching movies, reading articles, and so on. During the semester, they always had an opportunity to share what they were doing in their projects and to get their classmates' help and support. Because of this, the growth of social conscience in students was pretty big. It was not the professors telling students all they had achieved, but it was the students themselves noticing it.

b. Description of students

The students participating in the *Think, Share, Act project* during the first semester of 2009 were from different courses, programs and majors:

-Integrated English I: english teaching in the elementary school major

-integrated english for other majors II: international relations major

-pronunciation vowels: Diplomado

The students in two of the groups were in their first year of college while the other ones in their second year, but it was only the second English course they took. For this reason, their level of English was low but it definitely improved during the four months of classes. Despite of how different the courses were, the teaching and learning of social issues was possible as well as the evaluation, which varied according to the dynamics and methodology of each course.

c. Description of the projects

Along the semester, students had to write a proposal about their final projects with diverse information which guided them through the process. The procedure to work on their social projects was the following:

Procedure

1. work in groups of 4

2. reflect on current situations in your community, classroom, school, neighborhood, family.

3. choose the issue you would like to take action on

4. do research on the issue you chose. Look for information about similar issues on the internet, newspapers, interviews, documentaries, movies, songs, pictures, magazines, books, etc.

5. make a portfolio with all the material you use and produce during the project (pictures, movie clips, handouts, notes, interviews, recordings, websites, etc.)

6. design a proposal with solutions to this problem

7. take action: implement the possible ways to make a change. Organize your community, classroom, school, neighborhood, family; create a video; create a website/blog; write an article for a local newspaper. Document your participation in these activities. You must be able to prove you took action

8. present the final project to the audience with a documentary of about 10 minutes. Be prepared to share experiences, challenges, insights and suggestions.

The proposal should look like this:[2]:

- **Project Name:** Choose a name for your project. This name can be anything you want, make sure it relates to what you pretend to do.
- **Project Name:** _____
- **Project Location:** List the name of the city, town, community, neighborhood, or school where you plan to carry out your project.
- **Project Location:** _____
- Issue: Select the kind of issue this project will address.
- **Problem Statement:** What specific problem will your project address?
- Statement: _____

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[2] Taken from Suvanjieff, Ivan and Dawn Lifford Engle (2008) *PeaceJam: A billion simple acts of peace* (New York: Puffin Books) 16.

- **Research:** Do research about the causes and possible actions you can take. Summarize the research your group did.
    *Did you read news articles or books on the issue?
    *Did you interview experts/other people?
    *Did you observe the problem yourselves?
    *What facts or data did you gather?

Root: Cause of the Problem: What have you learned about the causes of the problem?
Causes: _____

Action Plan: Tell in detail what you plan to do.
    *What exactly is your group going to do?
    *What are the goals for this project? Tell us about your service goals (what you hope to accomplish) and your learning goals (what you hope to learn).
    *What is your plan to make this happen? Tell us step by step what you plan to do.
    *How do you plan to keep the project going? Is this project going to last for weeks, months, or longer?
    *How do you think this project will make a difference?

III. Challenges faced during the journey

Working on a social project is not easy, especially when it is the first time doing it. For this reason, there are several challenges that professors and students have to face while becoming part of the *Think, Share, Act project.* First there are the students among themselves; they need to maintain good interpersonal relations and show respect and tolerance towards each other. Besides, through self-reflection learners need to become leaders who are able to deal with conflict resolution. While working on the projects, students' sensitivity of social issues increased as well as their appreciation of life, family and opportunities. Therefore, students demonstrated a commitment towards their social concerns which was shown by fundraising and constant help, even after the semester was over and students were no longer required to do anything for the course.

In terms of the professors, they need to provide a lot of guidance and maintain a good communication with the students through the whole semester. Students' expectations of an English course are usually learning how to listen, read, write and speak in that language; however, they rarely think they will do something to make a difference in the world. It is then the professors' responsibility to motivate and encourage students to understand how learning English should be more than being able to communicate in it. All this creates a strong bond between the professors and the students, the first ones becoming role models to be followed.

Since the *Think, Share, Act project* was created and carried out for the first time this year, there were many challenges the professors had to face. One of the most difficult ones was the funding this project required. After having asked for sponsorship to different important companies in Costa Rica, one of them, Café Britt, provided us with the necessary refreshments for the second *Awakening Gathering.* Moreover, financial support was requested from different departments at Universidad Nacional and two of them gave us a positive answer. With this, besides the refreshments provided, during the closing ceremony students received a participation certificate along with a pin from the university. Other challenges faced were getting the support from the administration and faculty and the collaborative teaching needed since all professors at the TSA project need to agree on the evaluation and methodology to be used in their courses.

IV. Data Collection Techniques

In order to carry out this project, several qualitative research methods were used. The following is a description of the data collecting process: instruments and techniques.

i. Observations

The professors kept a record of the students' work by asking them to give oral presentations and talks about their projects in class as well as through e-mails. The students showed pictures and video clips of their work; they were given continuous guidance through the whole process in order to work as a team in their own subgroups which allowed them to build better interpersonal skills and important values such as tolerance and leadership.

ii. Written Reports

In writing classes, the learners also kept blogs where they included information about their projects. They gave vent to their creativity to narrate their experiences and the learning process. In addition, they constantly worked on their blogs by adding photos and a description of their initiatives.

iii Awakening Gatherings

Throughout this process, extracurricular activities in the form of gatherings have awakened students to discover, while learning and practicing English, their inner advocates and to share and reflect on the actions of exemplary young people. In these *Awakening Gatherings,* students talk about their projects, they also watch movies, learn about other initiatives that raise social awareness and then discuss their impact on their lives.

iv. Documentaries

The students were required to make a documentary of about 10 minutes with their experiences, challenges, insights and suggestions about their work. In their videos the students introduced themselves, commented on their efforts and contributions and discussed their challenges and accomplishments. Finally, in the closing ceremony, students enthusiastically participated in the presentation of the documentaries they created using programs such as *Windows Movie Maker*. For most students this first semester, it was the first time they ever made a video, so this provided them with a lot of challenges but satisfaction at the same time. A feature that makes the TSA a remarkably special and successful project is the joy with which students' effort and work is celebrated at the end of their journeys and the feeling of togetherness, family, and community that this generates. One example of a project documentary can be found in: http://www.youtube.com/user/ThinkShareAct

v. Questionnaires

At the end of this first semester, students were asked to fill out a survey about the experience of working on the TSA project. Most of them, 90% of 60 students, expressed their satisfaction and motivation in carrying out a project like this. Indeed, the TSA project has had a tremendous impact on professors and students who have been involved in it due to the fact that they have changed their lives by empowering themselves to help others and contribute to change society. Also, now they live appreciatively for what they have everyday and also sympathize with others who need their generous contributions.

The impact of this project has gone beyond expectations since both professors and students want to continue the journey to dedicate their time to those social causes that deserve to be changed and to be better. There is a deep commitment to continue pursuing for what their hearts are claiming to do: to become advocates of social injustice and to make the difference by

contributing with our immeasurable efforts to change unprivileged realities into a more dignifying way of living.

Survey on students' reactions and attitudes towards the TSA Project
1. What did this project mean to you?
2. How did you commit to this project?
3. What efforts did you make?
4. How did this project help you improve your English skills?
5. Would you like to continue doing this kind of project? Why?
6. What kind of satisfaction do you feel about the completion of this project?
7. Should all the students from UNA get involved in this kind of projects? Why?
8. Have you ever participated in a project like this? Which one?
9. How much English did you learn through this project? Why?

Students' insights
"I think that TSA project its important and necessary for the world and makes sense in us to do something important for our communities; and also put in practices the values that the Universidad Nacional proclaim", Carolina.

"I am really grateful with my teacher for giving me this opportunity to change the world even a little bit and I really hope that other students can live this experience because is excellent to help people and give them love!!!!", Sofía

"I enjoyed with the social project, so it was a different and new experience. It helps us to grow up as person and to think in other people. Moreover in the final ceremony, I understood about the people's needs and the social reality and the most important part that I can help them. But this social project is only the beginning of the new style life in our university", Hazel.

"This project was the difference in this semester, and of course I love it, I think that work with children, specially when you know that the children come from broken homes or problematic families and you can do something for them, is amazing, I have never felt something like that and I wish that we could keep working with this because for me was an amazing experience for me, and I am sure my classmates loved it too" Jonathan.

"The social project "Remembering our grandpas" also improves my writing skills and besides it enhances my speaking skills. But the most essential thing; it made me a better person. Worked with old people taught me values, taught to be patient, to appreciate the life that I have, to believe that I can make a difference in people's life and taught me things that nobody could ever teach me in a class, I just can learn it by myself. So after finished this project I felt very pleasant and satisfied because of all the laughs and happy faces that the elders showed us that our effort and dedication really worth it". Priscilla.

"So we are now in the end of this semester and is the correct moment to think about all new knowledge. One was the concept about Social Justice. Thanks the project TSA, I learn so much about this concept and the better example is explaining the project Recycling Life", Rafael.

"I learned about how little attitudes and activities can make the difference and have an impact in people life, especially in the kid's one. I think that this project make a difference not only in the children and their families life, because of the activities we did, it was more impressive to them how to women, one of them in a wheelchair is capable to get involved in a community despite the physical disabilities" Mariana.

"I think the TSA project had an enormous value, not only to see the needs of others but to feel them. It taught us that with little, we can do a lot. It was worth it, I love the TSA!", Verónica.

Social Project: a Lesson of Life

In this semester, in the English course, the teacher told us that we should made a social project. In the beginning I did not want because I thought I did not have time for to do it, but, when my classmates and I were planning the activity I thought that it was a good experience. When we began to go to San Rafael and we began to know the kids, I was thinking "This very different experience for me" because I did not like the kids in these age and I was talking with some kids and they told a lot of family's problems and why they need to go there. In this moment I learned that the university is not just for study a career, moreover, is for grow up as a person, María José Jara.

Concluding Remarks

The fact that the project includes co-curricular activities, on-going fieldwork in the students' chosen social justice projects and the use of technology appeals to the students and provides them with tools that empower them to, as the project's name points out not only think, or share but most importantly act.

By carrying out different social projects, language learners go beyond the traditional expectation of achieving the English skills to just communicate. Students turn into more sensitive human beings who commit to make the world a better place to live by helping others.

The Think, Share Act project started with the inspiration of becoming agents of change in the field of education by looking forward to changing students' attitudes toward a way of becoming social advocates. First of all, professors have become aware of social justice concerns in their realities. Then, they have to conduct research from different sources to become more knowledgeable of such issues and to develop sensitivity and awareness of needs for justice, human rights and values of equity, tolerance and respect, among others.

Professors need to incorporate this kind of social justice projects in their course syllabus. They need to give students guidance of the whole process which consists on first identifying their interests and concerns about social issues that they identify in their surroundings. Then, the students have to conduct research and fieldwork to collect information on what they can do to help and finally, they need to come out an action plan to be carried out as a way to improve that reality. In order to do so, students need to work as a team in their own subgroups which allows them to build better interpersonal skills and important values such as tolerance and leadership.

"My final words of advice to you are educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is battle for freedom. It is the battle of reclamation of human personality".

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