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# English Language Learners Making Sense of Social Issues through A Critical Literacy Cycle\*


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\* Research article.

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how students engage with social problems in their local community through critical literacy in an English as a foreign language class. Using an interpretive, descriptive qualitative action research approach, the researchers examined the social issues in the students' environment through observation sheets, questionnaires, and interviews. The results showed that critical literacy enhances students' reading skills by enabling them to actively connect different texts and determine whether the messages promote or discourage the marginalization of minority groups. The study showed that raising students' awareness of social issues empowered them to identify opportunities for change in their local communities. By overcoming personal and collective barriers and speaking out, students were inspired to seek transformative solutions.

**Keywords:** critical literacy, foreign language, local context, social problems, positioning.

## **Estudiantes de inglés dan sentido a los problemas sociales a través de un ciclo de alfabetización crítica**

### **Resumen**

Este artículo explora cómo los estudiantes se involucran con los problemas sociales en su comunidad a través de la alfabetización crítica en una clase de inglés como lengua extranjera. Utilizando un enfoque interpretativo, descriptivo y cualitativo de investigación-acción, los investigadores indagaron en los problemas sociales presentes en el entorno de los estudiantes a través de hojas de observación, cuestionarios y entrevistas. Los hallazgos revelaron que la alfabetización crítica mejora las habilidades de lectura de los estudiantes al permitirles conectar activamente diversos textos y determinar si los mensajes promueven o desalientan la marginación de los grupos minoritarios. El estudio demostró que, al aumentar la conciencia de los estudiantes sobre los problemas sociales, ellos se empoderaron para identificar oportunidades de cambio dentro de sus comunidades locales. Al superar obstáculos personales y colectivos y alzar sus voces, los estudiantes se sintieron inspirados a buscar soluciones transformadoras.

**Palabras clave:** alfabetización crítica, lengua extranjera, contexto local, problemas sociales, posicionamiento.

## **Les apprenants d'anglais donnent un sens aux problèmes sociaux à travers un cycle d'alphabétisation critique**

### **Résumé**

Cet article sillonne la manière dont les étudiants s'engagent dans les problèmes sociaux de leur communauté au travers de l'alphabétisation critique dans un cours d'Anglais langue étrangère. Utilisant une approche de recherche-action interprétative, descriptive et qualitative, les chercheurs ont étudié les problèmes sociaux présents dans l'environnement des étudiants à travers des fiches d'observation, des questionnaires et des entretiens. Les résultats ont révélé que l'alphabétisation critique améliore les compétences en lecture des élèves en leur permettant de relier activement divers textes et de déterminer si les messages favorisent ou découragent la marginalisation des groupes minoritaires. L'étude a démontré qu'en sensibilisant davantage la conscience des étudiants aux problèmes sociaux, ils s'autonomisent pour identifier les opportunités de changement au sein de leurs communautés locales. En surmontant les obstacles personnels et collectifs et en élevant la voix, les étudiants ont été incités à rechercher des solutions transformatrices.

**Mots-clés:** alphabétisation critique, langue étrangère, contexte local, problèmes sociaux, positionnement.

## **Estudantes de inglês compreendem os problemas sociais através de um ciclo de alfabetização crítica**

### **resumo**

Este artigo explora como os alunos se envolvem com questões sociais em sua comunidade por meio da alfabetização crítica em uma aula de EFL. Utilizando uma abordagem de pesquisa-ação interpretativa, descritiva e qualitativa, os pesquisadores investigaram os problemas sociais presentes no ambiente dos estudantes por meio de fichas de observação, questionários e entrevistas. Os resultados revelaram que a literacia crítica melhora as competências de leitura dos alunos, permitindo-lhes ligar ativamente diversos textos e determinar se as mensagens promovem ou desencorajam a marginalização de grupos minoritários. O estudo demonstrou que, ao aumentar a sensibilização dos alunos para as questões sociais, eles foram capacitados para identificar oportunidades de mudança nas suas comunidades locais. Ao superar obstáculos pessoais e coletivos e ao levantar a voz, os alunos foram inspirados a buscar soluções transformadoras.

**Palavras-chave:** alfabetização crítica, língua estrangeira, contexto local, problemas sociais, posicionamento

## Introduction

Nowadays, English is considered one of the most important languages in the world due to globalization and the fact that dominant countries speak it in cultural, economic, and political contexts worldwide (Pineda-Báez, 2004). That is why, in Colombia, elementary, secondary, and tertiary education includes teaching English as a foreign language in their curriculum. In that sense, the Ministry of Education in Colombia has created policies that aim to improve English language teaching in the educational system. For example, Act 115 of 1994, articles 21 and 22, highlights the importance of second language learning. Furthermore, according to the basic standards of competence in foreign languages, Colombians should teach, learn, and use English as a universal language (MEN, 2006). However, the level of English in Colombia is deficient, as shown by the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2020), which ranks a total of 100 countries and territories. Colombia is placed at number 71, confirming the low level of English proficiency.

To address this issue, teachers have implemented methods in the classroom that expose students to the natural use of the English language, thereby increasing student motivation and the development of language skills to prevent low global rankings. However, the teaching of English still focuses primarily on the linguistic features of the language, such as vocabulary and grammar, ignoring the great opportunities and potential that the classroom and students offer to go beyond language skills and focus on issues that may be more relevant to them. This is the case for the national training service institution in Colombia (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, henceforth SENA), a national public institution responsible for training technicians in various areas of the country. In this institution, English teaching mainly focuses on the linguistic level due to the technical perspective of the educational setting, with the main goal being to equip students with the linguistic aspects of the language as a means of communication.

This technical perspective of English teaching is evident in the curriculum of the complementary English courses. Figure 1 presents an example of what is expected from students taking complementary English courses at SENA, illustrating the lack of attempt to involve students' contexts in the main curriculum.

**Figure 1.** Guía de aprendizaje, programa de bilingüismo (Learning guide, Bilingual program) (SENA, 2020)

- Resultados de Aprendizaje Alcanzar:
  - Reproducir en inglés frases o enunciados simples que permitan expresar de forma lenta ideas o conceptos.
  - Identificar formas gramaticales básicas en textos y documentos elementales escritos en inglés
  - Comprender una amplia variedad de frases y vocabulario en inglés sobre temas de interés personal y temas técnicos.
  - Comprender las ideas principales de textos complejos en inglés que tratan de temas tanto concretos como abstractos, incluso si son de carácter técnico, siempre que estén dentro de su campo de especialización.
  - Leer textos complejos y con un vocabulario más específico, en inglés general y técnico.
  - Buscar de manera sistemática información específica y detallada en escritos en inglés, mas estructurados y con mayor contenido técnico.
  - Encontrar y utilizar sin esfuerzo vocabulario y expresiones de inglés técnico en artículos de revistas, libros especializados, páginas web, etc.
  - Relacionarse con hablantes nativos en un grado suficiente de fluidez y naturalidad, de modo que la comunicación se realice sin esfuerzo por parte de los interlocutores.

Additionally, as Figure 2 reveals, English teachers at SENA received the learning guide with specific instructions on what to do and what to teach. Nevertheless, learners deal with a variety of social issues in their everyday lives, which could be very useful to start addressing in the target language. Still, the structurization of content limits the chances of taking advantage of students' experiences and realities or other topics they could be interested in. In fact, from an initial questionnaire, some classroom observations, and discussions with a group of students at SENA, they manifested that some of the issues that they and people in their immediate context face are violence, unemployment, corruption, chauvinism, poverty, lack of opportunities and environmental problems, among others. These topics could serve as triggers to motivate students to take an active role in their English language learning process from a linguistic and a humanistic perspective without underestimating their contexts, which constitutes an invaluable source of learning (Arifi, 2017).

**Figure 2.** Programa curricular de bilingüismo (Bilingual program curriculum), SENA (2020)

♦ Usar vocabulario y estructuras gramaticales básicas en diferentes contextos en inglés según reglas del idioma.

**3.3.9. Food and restaurants - Comidas y Restaurantes**

Participe de una lluvia de ideas acerca del vocabulario de nombres de alimentos que conozca en inglés. Luego, haciendo uso del modelo de conversación elabore una situación en un restaurante y adapte a sus preferencias haciendo uso del vocabulario y las estructuras aprendidas.

**Modal verbs would and will for requests**


<p>What <b>would</b> you like?</p> <p>What kind of dressing <b>would</b> you like?</p> <p>What <b>would</b> you like to drink?</p> <p><b>Would</b> you like anything else?</p>	<p>I'd like the fish and rice.</p> <p>I'll have a small salad?</p> <p>I'd like like cheese, please.</p> <p>I'll have strawberry.</p> <p>I'd like an iced tea.</p> <p>I'll have coffee.</p> <p>Yes, please. I'd like some water.</p> <p>No, thank you. That'll be all.</p>	<p><b>Contractions</b></p> <p>I'll = I will</p> <p>I'd = I would</p>
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Complete this conversation. Then practice with a partner.

Server: What \_\_\_\_\_ you like to order?  
 Customer: I \_\_\_\_\_ have the spicy chicken.  
 Server: \_\_\_\_\_ you like rice or potatoes?  
 Customer: I \_\_\_\_\_ like rice, please.  
 Server: OK. And \_\_\_\_\_ you like anything to drink?  
 Customer: I \_\_\_\_\_ just have a glass of water.  
 Server: Would you \_\_\_\_\_ anything else?  
 Customer: No, that \_\_\_\_\_ be all for now, thanks.

Later

Server: Would you \_\_\_\_\_ dessert?  
 Customer: Yes, I \_\_\_\_\_ like ice cream.  
 Server: What flavor \_\_\_\_\_ you like?  
 Customer: Hmm, I \_\_\_\_\_ have strawberry, please.



Fuente: Richards, J. (2012)

Consequently, this research project aimed to integrate an eclectic approach to teaching English by integrating linguistic features with issues that arise from the everyday social problems in which students live. In the same vein, this paper will answer how students make sense of the social problems in their local context through a critical literacy cycle in an EFL class.

### Theoretical Framework

Since the research aims to integrate the social problems experienced by SENA students from the perspective of critical literacy, it is necessary to establish a theoretical base that take these aspects into account. In addition, students are expected to express

their positions when participating in class, so the theories of positioning and critical thinking become fundamental to this study.

### ***Critical Literacy***

Paulo Freire (2020) marked a stage that prompted many educators of that time to think and reflect, making significant changes in a routine and traditionalist education that he referred to as “banking.” The roots of this active formation can be traced back to post-colonial Brazil in the second half of the 20th century (Mayo, 1995). Paulo Freire was the pioneer of critical literacy and proposed an education in which the school experience would necessarily engage in a dialogue with everyday life to achieve linguistic and political literacy. It was an educational practice where the learners’ political and human self-awareness, as well as the development of their national and personal identity, were the cause and consequence of the educational process, synonymous with freedom (McLaren, 1999).

According to Morgan (1997), critical literacy seeks to understand how texts and their discourses work to represent reality and define what is necessary for us and how we can engage with those texts, their intentions, and the various debates they encompass. Similarly, Vásquez (2017) emphasized that “critical literacy focuses on unequal power relations —and issues of social justice and equity— in support of diverse learners” (p. 2). Consequently, the content of critical literacy should originate from the lives of the participants and communities. Likewise, literacy processes should incorporate questions related to their lives as a starting point for dialogue. According to these approaches, critical literacy provides ways of thinking that enable us to discover social injustices and inequalities, allowing us to identify interests, highlight disadvantages, and become agents of social change (Vásquez, 2017).

Landkammer (2018) identified three stages of literacy. The first stage is generating words, where the teacher selects words related to the learners’ daily lives and breaks them down into syllables; this implies that the teacher knows learners’ realities and understands contextual aspects that could be relevant to their learning. The learners then recombine the syllables to form new groups and words. These generated words need to have some connection to the lives of those learning to read and write, partially avoiding the danger of the literacy process becoming a simple exercise in domination. The second stage is codification, which involves representing the reality in which the learners live. This representation can sometimes refer to a part of that reality and sometimes to the entirety of it. For example, the word “fishing” could be encoded as a photograph of a fishing boat in action, while the word “tree” could represent all kinds of trees. The third stage is decoding, where the coding is analyzed, allowing the reality to be read and critically examined. According to Landkammer (2018), through this model, the learners can read and write texts, but more importantly, they can read their reality and intervene in it.

### ***Positioning Theory***

Positioning theory is a particularly appropriate conceptual and methodological framework for studying interaction in educational settings for two reasons. First, it assumes that all interaction is discursive or narrative, and second, it recognizes that interaction is a dynamic, fragmented, and contextual phenomenon. The proposals of positioning theory can be seen as being articulated by two axes. On one hand, there is people interaction, and on the other hand, there are the narratives that are constructed within that dynamic. These axes provide coherence and meaning to positioning, which is understood as the construction of narratives that shape a person's actions in a way that is intelligible to themselves and others, with the participants in the narrative having specific roles and locations.

For Harré (2015), episodes are the fundamental units that make up social reality and structure the encounters and social interactions that result from them. These episodes group different sequences of interaction into a coherent whole with meaning and significance. In each episode, there are two essential elements. The first element is position, which refers to the relationship established between an "I," an "other," and an audience. This relationship is not static; it is negotiated, changes, and adapts to the opinions of others. In short, it is dynamic and transforms through interaction. The second element is positioning. The complex interplay of positions and their negotiation inevitably produces a position. This position serves as a plane of understanding that gives meaning to the interaction taking place within each episode. It is contextualized and exists solely within the episode itself. It develops concurrently with the episode and is immanent, arising from the actions that unfold within it. The notion of positioning is characterized, above all, by understanding positions as relational processes that are constituted through interaction and negotiation with other people. Positions can be seen as the subtle threads that weave the fabric of social interaction, forming the basis of our interactive situations.

### ***Critical Thinking in English as a Foreign Language***

Critical thinking was defined by Facione (2015) as a deliberate and self-regulatory judgment that encompasses cognitive skills such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation, along with affective dispositions such as questioning, perseverance, and flexibility. Learning goes beyond simply acquiring and reproducing knowledge; it requires mastery, transformation, and the application of knowledge, involving multiple mental operations and establishing meaningful connections. In this sense, deep learning surpasses mere knowledge acquisition and entails profound understanding.

High quality thinking is necessary to achieve this type of learning, which involves critical, creative, and metacognitive thinking (Piaget, 1981). The development of critical thinking in higher education is particularly important for the training of future professionals, as it equips graduates with skills and abilities that facilitate in-depth analysis of the problems they encounter in their professional work, enabling

them to provide practical and effective solutions. Critical thinking is a unique way of thinking that enhances the quality of one's thinking by examining with the structures inherent in the thought process. It is highly valued as an approach to thinking that promotes better adaptation to the environment (Sasson et al., 2018).

### **Research Method**

The research design used in this study is based on an interpretive epistemological model that emphasizes the contribution of all stakeholders involved in the education of students. The qualitative approach with a descriptive design was chosen to explore complex human phenomena and alternative methods of understanding. Additionally, a pragmatic epistemological approach and an action research design were adopted to investigate how students engage with social problems in their local context through a cycle of critical literacy in an English as a foreign language class (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2020). The research methodology aimed to assess students' participation and responsibility, develop an action plan based on critical literacy, implement the plan, analyze students' positions, and interpret their perspectives on social problems.

Ethical considerations were an integral part of this qualitative study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure that they were fully aware of the research objectives, procedures, and potential risks or benefits. Researchers maintained confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms and ensuring that individual identities could not be revealed. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Researchers also obtained ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and to protect the welfare of participants.

Data collection instruments aligned with the research methodology and aimed to gather comprehensive and insightful information about the students' positions and experiences. Students' artifacts, such as written assignments and projects, provided tangible evidence of their understanding and application of critical literacy concepts. Classroom observations allowed researchers to capture dynamics, engagement, and changes in attitudes or deeds over time. Semi-structured interviews provided a platform for students to express their perspectives and reflect on personal growth. Questionnaires captured quantitative data on perceptions, attitudes, and engagement. By utilizing these instruments, the researchers gathered diverse data, enabling a holistic exploration of students' positions, experiences, and critical literacy development.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches facilitated a deeper understanding of the impact of the intervention and the students' engagement with social issues in their local context. It allowed for a comprehensive analysis of students' positions and experiences, contributing to a robust investigation.

The research took place within the educational setting of SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje), which is an institution in Colombia dedicated to providing vocational and technical education. SENA offers a range of programs, including

complementary, technical, and technological courses, aimed at equipping students with practical skills and knowledge to enhance their employability. SENA's educational programs prioritize practical learning experiences and emphasize the development of skills that are relevant to the job market. By providing opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to acquire valuable vocational skills, SENA plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and contributing to social and economic progress in Colombia.

The participants in this study were students between the ages of 18 and 30 who were enrolled in a specific course at SENA. The course consisted of 18 students, comprising eight men and ten women. It is important to note that most of these students come from vulnerable social backgrounds and have seized the opportunity to continue their education at SENA as a means of improving their prospects. The objectives of this research were twofold: first, to explore how students relate to social problems within their local context, and second, to investigate the impact of a cycle of critical literacy within an English as a foreign language class. By engaging in this research, the aim was to gain insights into the students' perspectives, their participation, and their sense of responsibility in addressing social issues within their communities.

The interventions consisted of eight- two hours lessons that focused on social issues in the students' local context. Topics included poverty, low income, unemployment, racism, cultural discrimination, fear of diversity, conflict, violence, robbery, gender violence, physical harm, and emotional harm. The first lesson aimed to challenge common assumptions in the local context, while the second lesson encouraged the exploration of multiple viewpoints. The third lesson focused on social issues, and the fourth lesson emphasized taking action and promoting social justice. The fifth lesson aimed to increase understanding of socio-political systems, while the sixth lesson encouraged looking at issues from multiple perspectives. The seventh lesson involved challenging norms or routines, and the final lesson focused on taking action to promote social justice.

In lessons seven and eight, students described their workplace activities, questioned norms or routines, and identified job opportunities based on their skills. They took action to promote social justice by designing a flyer showcasing the company's services to potential customers and describing their co-workers' activities in the workplace. Additionally, they wrote a summary that considered essential skills for job applications. Short interaction activities based on class readings were conducted to facilitate discussions about their ideal positions.

In this study, the collected data underwent a rigorous analysis process guided by the thematic criteria established in the research methodology. Qualitative data analysis included steps such as data preparation, revision, and transcription into text form. The data were organized based on identified themes and concepts derived from the research objectives. Categories were systematically created and labeled, facilitating the

identification and retrieval of relevant data. An in-depth examination of the labeled and coded data was conducted, with researchers scrutinizing patterns, recurring themes, and noteworthy findings. The researchers employed an interpretive lens throughout the analysis, making inferences, drawing generalizations, and developing hypotheses. The analysis involved constant reflection, iterative examination, and the application of theoretical frameworks. Through this dynamic and creative analysis process, the research team extracted knowledge from the heterogeneous data, contributing to the existing body of knowledge. The rich understanding gained from the analysis shed light on the students' perspectives, development of critical thinking, and engagement with social issues following the critical literacy intervention. The analysis also provided insight into the efficacy of the research methodology employed (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2020).

### ***Findings and Discussion***

The main category that emerged after analyzing the data gathered through the different instruments was students' positioning toward social issues, which includes some sub-categories: Awareness of social issues as an opportunity to change the reality of the country, reflecting and taking action, and empathy: a challenging path to follow (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Analysis of results

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Main Categories</b>	<b>Sub-categories</b>
How do students make sense of social issues of their local context through a critical literacy cycle in an EFL class?	Students' positioning toward social issues	Awareness of social issues as an opportunity to change the reality of the country Reflecting and taking action Empathy: A challenging path to follow

### ***Students' Positioning Toward Social Issues***

#### ***Awareness of Social Issues as an Opportunity to Change the Reality of the Country***

Students correctly participated in the pedagogical intervention, where lesson plans were designed through critical literacy to analyze students' social issues and perspectives in the English classroom that affect their lives in their local contexts. For example, one student expressed the following in the pedagogical intervention:

We have always faced unemployment in the city, and we do not have so many opportunities to get a job. The pandemic has caused a devastating crisis that has made businesses go bankrupt and disappear. The

government should support the people by creating job opportunities for young people because these young people are easily seduced by gangs in the city and end up getting involved in criminal activities. (Field note, student 4, May 20, 2022)

Student 7 interestingly stated the following when they were asked about some of the causes of unemployment in the city:

Apart (student referring to the pandemic) from what is obvious to everyone, I think that we sometimes do not know how to organize our job profiles, I mean, prepare ourselves for the demands of the employers. Sometimes we study some technical and technological courses that are not in demand, so we will not have so many opportunities to get hired by the companies of the city. Additionally, I think that the Venezuelan crisis has affected us drastically because many Venezuelan citizens work for very low salaries, I do not want to be racist, but they should not be doing that if they are going to work. First of all, they have to do it legally and for a decent wage. I think that the government should control that because it is something that is not affecting Cali, but other cities that have become the homes of the Venezuelan people. (Field note, student 7, May 27, 2022)

As reported in the intervention, the students were confronted with serious issues that affected them directly, which prompted some of them to go a step further and create change in their local context.

One of my classmates got sick and tired and joined “La Primera línea” to fight for their rights, have job opportunities, and ensure everyone has the same chances to succeed. (Observation notes, student 3, June 3, 2022)

As evidenced by students’ responses, young citizens from low-income groups probably lack civic knowledge and confidence and are the least likely to have access to democratic decision-making procedures. This is related to insufficient educational opportunities to develop the critical thinking necessary to understand democracy and participate in collective decision-making processes. As a result, many young people are likely unable (or discouraged) to constructively express and advocate for their own interests, concerns, and needs, increasing structural maladjustment patterns and cultural and direct violence in their society.

Through the stories of the students during the implementation of the sessions, it was possible to show that violence is present and that it can manifest itself in different ways, all of them dangerous and of great impact since it violates fundamental rights and the quality of life of those who are at risk or who are its victims. Despite its harmful effects, young people recognize that certain types of violence are not completely recognized as such, so they are not reported to the competent authorities so that the necessary measures can be taken to prevent their occurrence. It is about economic, psychological, and patrimonial violence, invisible violence that, among

other effects, threatens the autonomy, dignity, and integrity of those who suffer it, with women being the main victims.

The awareness of the social problems that affect these young people, through the application of the dimensions of critical literacy, such as the questioning of multiple points of view and acting and promoting social justice, made it possible to establish that everyone agreed on what general awareness campaigns are needed to prevent and educate about other less obvious types of violence, such as gender-based psychological, economic and patrimonial violence:

Campaigns must report on the characteristics, impact, and consequences of silence in the lives of victims of violence, especially when it comes to women or those at risk. (Observation notes, student 13, June 17, 2022).

It was recognized that some students indicated that through clear and simple messages that refine the concepts related to silent gender violence, this scourge could be attacked, or more broadly, preventive work is required to promote changes in macho attitudes in favor of those based on empathy, that allow men to be part of the process.

The messages not only focus on raising awareness and reflection but also invite citizens to take measures to stop this violence, such as psychological violence when women are exposed to degrading treatment, insults, ridicule, threats, and blackmail, economic violence when the man exercises control over the woman's economy, violating her independence and her life project, among others.

During lesson 3, students discussed social media's influence on society and the high unemployment rates. A remark from a student was quite appealing as he mentions that:

People study for degrees and invest a lot of money, and then they see that their investment in education does not translate into a well-paid job, that they end up doing something quite different from what they studied, like YouTubers. (Observation notes, student 12, June 3, 2022).

On the same line of thought, another student assured that,

Nowadays, young people don't want to study and get the necessary skills for the jobs available on the market because they now want to be YouTubers. (Field notes, student 14, June 3, 2022).

Perceptions of social media and unemployment were mixes, with some students arguing that social media is an excellent strategy for reducing unemployment rates because it facilitates entrepreneurship by allowing people to easily advertise their products at low cost. However, some students were neutral about the correlation between unemployment and social media.

In the lesson plan, we started discussing the effects that unemployment causes on their community and society in general. Some students did not know specific reasons why the levels of unemployment had increased. Students watched a YouTube video called “Unemployment rate reaches record high in Colombia.”

This was new for me since I was somewhat unaware of the sociopolitical aspect and its influence on many of our problems. For example, we discussed unemployment’s causes and consequences in a session. Among many aspects, I was struck when a colleague mentioned that the government should generate employment policies that favor unemployed people since, in many places, they require experience of two years, and if they don’t give us opportunities, how are we going to gain experience? (Google Form Questionnaire, student 8, July 15, 2022)

Students understood that one of the reasons why the unemployment rates are among the highest in Latin America is because there is little support for small and medium-sized businesses. When students were asked what actions should be taken to reduce the rate of unemployment in Colombia, some of them said that,

Encouraging entrepreneurship is essential to deal with the crisis, but more than that is to support each other, buy products from the corner shops, local farmers, and not big companies who buy products from the farmer at meager prices and sell them at high prices. (Google Form Questionnaire, Student 18, July 17, 2022)

Students’ ability to think about others reflected their awareness that every decision they made could affect their lives and the life of others. For example, when students began researching the effects of unemployment on society, they linked unemployment to poverty, crimes such as robbery, violence, and an increase in the number of street vendors.

### ***Reflecting and Taking Action***

In developing the lessons on unemployment, the students were asked to identify the most common jobs in their local context. They used search engines such as Google and Mozilla to start researching the potential companies they could work for. They also began to map their local areas for the companies that might need their job profile. After identifying these companies, the students were asked to design a poster that would showcase the most relevant jobs in their area. By tackling the topic of unemployment in this way, students were made aware that they need to take action to change the situation they are going through. They considered quite relevant the fact that they were the ones mapping their communities for opportunities that might match their job profile.

This made not only me but also my colleagues take a more active role in dealing with the problems we encounter every day. What I rescue is the

fact that we not only talk about the problems in our beautiful city, Cali, but also go deeper into the causes and consequences, as well as discuss and formulate possible actions to take. (Student artifact, student 2, July 1, 2022).

They understood that sometimes there are opportunities. However, they are the ones who should take action and prepare for the challenges they will face as the become experts in their fields.

People should be not only aware of social problems but also be able to see beyond that and stop complaining about everything. We know that inequality and job opportunities are terrible in our country, but the reality is that people are not well-prepared and somehow lack some skills that big companies and employers are looking for. Therefore, they should start thinking about improving their profile by taking courses and seminars, as nowadays, they are many resources to enrich our knowledge. (Field notes, student 1, July 1, 2022).

Student 13 replied during a class conversation to the commentary of student 1 by asserting that.

Some people are well-prepared, and experts in the field are not hired because many factors underlying the hiring process do not necessarily focus on the skills people have. They sometimes hire people that are not suitable for the job. The reason why they are hired is that they are friends with the boss of the company. (Observation notes, July 1, 2022)

Students' remarks revealed their attitudes toward certain issues and how different their opinions could be from one another. At the end of the session, students suggested that they felt free to express their opinions and that by analyzing their contexts, the causes and effects of the current issues, they would be more aware and empowered not only to reflect, but to take the necessary steps to approach or look for a change, a solution.

Students associated the high unemployment rates with the decrease in demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many small and medium-sized companies to close. The low demand is associated with the lack of opportunities for students to access high-quality education programs to allow them to empower them to begin their own businesses and create jobs. Some students asserted that the government's strategy is to limit access to education so they can control the population more efficiently by keeping them in misery.

Students also linked unemployment to depression. They had heard and demonstrated how friends, relatives, or even themselves had fallen into depression due to the lack of economic resources because they did not have a job to meet their basic needs. In contrast, a few students did not link unemployment to depression. They

say it is just a mental health issue that should be treated by a professional. Students' opinions towards the social issues tackled during the sessions provided a space for reflection, analysis, and, more importantly, an opportunity to know each other as a member of their communities and the significance they play as social individuals.

Without a doubt, it was an unusual activity, especially because talking about the problems we are experiencing and that we young people have now means not only experiencing them because it is up to us, but also allowing us to rethink our actions in the face of them. (Google Form Questionnaire student 17, July 16, 2022)

In many cases, poverty generates or deepens the social problem of young people due to the abuse of toxic substances, whether they are permitted or prohibited (tobacco and alcohol) or illegal (marijuana, cocaine, pseudoephedrine, or any psychotropic substance) are sometimes used for the first time by an individual to feel pleasure or well-being. From promoting the dimension of critical literacy and breaking the common, the students managed to carry out an analysis. They made their points of view known, reaching a consensus on this subject since before the individual decides to consume a substance, it is because he needs to feel accepted, and loved and forget about more serious problems that plague them. The use of toxic substances definitely affects the individual physically, mentally, and emotionally. In the school context, it manifests itself, among other things, in absenteeism, lack of interest in educational work, or in the isolation of the person.

The economic situation has never been as difficult for all Colombians as it is now. Notably, in the youth context, due to the lack of opportunities and the closure of national and foreign companies due to the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many families were left without a livelihood from one moment to the next. This situation has caused families and each of their members to have to adapt to living in precarious conditions. In some cases, this situation has been overcome by the university student, and he has sought a source of support without abandoning his studies. However, in other cases, it has caused desertion to seek an economic income, or else disapproval because the exhausted young person, when a working day ends, the last thing he has in mind is to sit down to study.

### ***Empathy: A Challenging Path to Follow***

The feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, fear, and risk are subjective evaluations that people make by combining multiple pieces of information from the world around them and themselves. Biological, psychic, and even chemical aspects influence the feeling of insecurity that a person experiences.

After carrying out the implementation of the contents, the students, in general terms, showed a negative attitude (they did not want to do something) and were defiant, at least sometimes. Notably, students were often angry and irritable and lost their cool when basic conflicts arose in school or everyday life.

It is easy to see that they are easily annoyed listening to life stories; it is inferred that they argue with authority figures and often refuse to follow the rules. Likewise, it was possible to show that some students blame others for their mistakes and deliberately annoy others. This oppositional behavior generates behavioral problems in family relationships. The usual everyday frustrations—ignored instructions, arguments, explosive outbursts—build up over time, and these negative interactions damage the parent-child relationship and reinforce hostile behavior patterns.

From empathy, it was possible to get the students to act and promote social justice through examples of practical situations that made clear the need to be empathic since it is the basis of building trust with others and, therefore, is one of the pillars of personal relationships.

This somehow creates awareness and empathy in all of us, making us more aware of our ability to propose and address our own problems. (Semi-structured Interview, student 15, July 22, 2022)

With the hustle and bustle of everyday life, we often forget that our lives are enriched to the extent that we develop harmonious relationships with other people and with our environment. The students understood this, recognizing that empathy helps establish healthy relationships in both personal and work life, helping our stress levels decrease and our daily tasks flow more easily. As a result, we are filled with two-way learning possibilities.

I find it interesting not only to try to understand the problems from my point of view but also to put myself in the place of the other and see reality as they interpret it, which leads us to tolerance and to take joint actions. We understood that it is necessary to put aside resentment and that empathy serves as a way of understanding the other's problem, which can also be my problem, and seeking solutions. (Semi-structured Interview, student 7, July 22, 2022)

This perspective allows us to consider some objective elements that everyone can perceive and that influence this. These aspects are: the information spread about the presence of aggressive people and the actions carried out by them against the physical integrity and property of the community; second, the information disseminated about the protection available to the community, that is, the security system, which includes mechanisms, measures, surveillance personnel, communication networks, etc.; thirdly, the widespread interpretations of this information. But to these basic components, it is necessary to add other general aspects that influence the evaluation of the previous ones and are also shared. One is made up of the stability of the situation, especially in the economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions, since sudden changes or risk situations in these fundamental aspects of daily life influence creating what can be called a general feeling of security or risk.

Thus, the outcome of the activities, in this sense, allowed the students to realize that they can turn each encounter with the other into an opportunity to approach new perspectives to expand their knowledge and to grow as human beings.

This has made not only me, but also my colleagues, take a more active role in dealing with the problems we face every day. What I find interesting is the fact that we not only talk about the problems in our beautiful city of Cali, but also go deeper into the causes and consequences, as well as discuss and formulate possible actions to take. (Semi-structured Interview, student 4, July 27, 2022)

Curiously, perhaps because the ego gets in the way or because we do not give importance to knowing ourselves, it is common for us to have a hard time developing empathy.

Students were consistent that one of the main reasons why the rates of unemployment in the city and in the country are caused by the employers who demand experienced personnel. One student said:

It is sad when you invest time and money to get the best quality education, and after graduating, you must wait months or even years to be hired due to the fact that employers require people to have previous experience. (Semi-structured Interview, student 2, July 27, 2022)

Students called for a policy change that demanded employers provide candidates to be hired without experience in the field. The discussion about not requiring experience elicited varied reactions. For example, student 9 remarked:

If I were an employer, I would love to have the best and most experienced employees, and I would not hire an inexperienced candidate. (Field notes, July 8, 2022).

Student 3 replied:

What about opportunities? We should give people a chance to succeed, a chance to show themselves the qualities they have, and they can contribute to the company. (Observation notes, July 8, 2022)

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the data analysis reveals that the pedagogical intervention focusing on critical literacy and analyzing social issues had a positive impact on students' awareness of problems in their local contexts. Students expressed concerns about unemployment, violence, and the influence of social media. They recognized the challenges of finding job opportunities, called for government policies supporting the unemployed and promoting entrepreneurship, and expressed skepticism about the fairness of the hiring process. Divergent opinions emerged regarding social media's

influence on society and unemployment, with some students seeing it as a platform for entrepreneurship and others perceiving a shift towards content creation.

The intervention deepened students' understanding of social problems and their interconnections. They recognized the links between unemployment, poverty, crime, and mental health issues. Students acknowledged the importance of taking action and proposed solutions such as supporting local businesses and improving their job profiles through education and skills development. Additionally, the analysis emphasized the significance of empathy in addressing social issues. Students explored the impact of violence, substance abuse, and insecurity, recognizing the need for empathy to foster trust, healthy relationships, and social justice.

Overall, the data analysis shows the success of the pedagogical intervention in engaging students in critical thinking and reflection. It empowered them to analyze their local context, express their concerns, and propose solutions. The students' active participation and evolving attitudes toward social issues indicate the effectiveness of the intervention in promoting awareness, empathy, and a sense of agency among the student population. By equipping students with the tools to understand and address social problems, the intervention has the potential to contribute to positive change in their lives and communities.

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